

PERKY EDGERTON

Catalpa Tree in January, 2023
Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 31.5 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST

SAGE MARSHALL

Powder Daze

Life on the slopes

After that day on Jones Pass, I smelled like my father, how he used to smell, when he still smelled like home. Gasoline. Sweat. And that something else, what makes us us.

He rode an old Suzuki to his job in Manhattan for twenty years before we moved to Colorado. Twenty years brapping through traffic to work as a physical therapist for a ballet company, all the while pining, I'm sure, for the mountains. I've never thought of him as patient, though he must have been, to wait so long to return to Telluride, a town of two thousand in the San Juans, where he had ski-bummed and worked part-time at the medical center in his twenties.

When I was little, we spent the winter holidays there. I learned how to ski when I was three. Soon, my brother, Luke, and I would rip through the Enchanted Forest together. It's a maze, routes webbing down the mellow slope of a pine forest. Dad cruised through the slightly open area in the middle of the run as Luke and I careened off mini-jumps to the side, each blazing our own path down—an early taste of freedom.

It didn't take long for Luke to careen past me. Even then, I wanted to check the landing before sending off the jump, wanted to make that one last turn before pointing the tips down. Luke, three years my junior, never had that problem.

My father was in his midfifties by the time we finally made the move out West full-time. I was eight, young enough to fall in love with the mountains, yearn to leave them, and then yearn to return.

I was twenty-three when I made my way back. I'd gone to college in Connecticut, all the while pining for the mountains. I spent my first year after graduating mostly back in Telluride, though I traveled as much as I could. Then, after an intense lockdown with my family at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I moved with my girlfriend, Bela, to Boulder, a small city nestled against the foothills and not too far from real mountains. It was supposed to be "the best of both worlds"—the comforts of the city and the freedom of the mountains. I worked as a freelance writer. I wrote about music for Denver's alt-weekly and reviewed outdoor gear for magazine companies. I could pay rent and still have time to ski and fish. I wanted to make it as a writer, to be around journalists and poets

who cared about writing. In other words, I wanted to be around young adults who cared about more than powder days, while still being able to ski powder days when I could. Yes, even then, I understood the contradiction.

That winter in Boulder, I also worked part-time at a ski shop for the extra income and because I didn't have many friends there and didn't know of a better way to make them during the pandemic. At the shop, I rented skis and tuned them when our customers returned them all scratched up. I sharpened dulled edges. I grinded the ski bases down, removing the surface marks. And then I P-Texted the deeper gashes—holding a blowtorch to plastic, which became molten and dripped into the open wounds. If the gash was deep enough, I did a “core shot repair.” I cut out the damaged base material with a box cutter, cleaned the area with a metal brush, and filled it with two-ton epoxy, which took two days to cure. Then I ground the ski's base back smooth, scarred, yes, but smooth enough. Finally I ironed on wax, baked deep, scraped clean, and the ski was fully tuned.

During my time off, I began learning how to back-country ski with my coworkers. This meant learning about avalanches. How a concave slope is less likely to slide but if it does rip, the whole thing goes at once. A convex slope will slide more readily, but the avalanche won't propagate as far. Avalanche danger depends on how well the layers of snow have bonded to each other, new upon old upon new. As with anything, the danger is buried in the transition—

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For most, ski towns are places for vacation, relaxation, après-ski. But to make a life there, you must fall in love with both the culture—partying hard—and the thrill of skiing, or some other extreme mountain activity like paragliding or rock climbing. This kind of life can prove short.

When I was nine, my ski instructor, Tim, encouraged me to “send” my first cliff before he died while learning to fly an airplane. Soon after, Hoot, a boy a few years older than I, was caught and crushed under a snowcat while skiing after hours at the park. And then, a couple of people were buried in avalanches each winter. I was young and didn't know them well, but living in a town of two thousand people, I usually knew of them. Like Cedar's older brother, Abel. Contrary to popular belief, these people

did not die because they ran out of oxygen but because the moisture of their own breath created a film of ice in the snow, and the CO₂ of their exhales asphyxiated them. Or they were already dead from blunt force trauma when the slide stopped.

A phrase we like to throw around in mountain towns is “death wish.” Most deaths are accidents—no one wants to choke on their own breath. But, the thinking goes, to put yourself in such a situation requires being attracted to the ledge in the first place. Well. Perhaps it's true.

And not just because of the adrenalin.

In places like Telluride, people commit suicide at a greater rate than in the rest of the country. In the middle of that winter I lived in Boulder, Hannah, a young, ever-smiling ski bum I knew peripherally, killed herself. A local wrote on Facebook to Hannah, after she died and was presumably in a heaven of sorts where she could still ski, “turn up the stoke sweet Hannah. And send it.” In this case, the heaven was skiing, the brutal irony being that in this world, it wasn't enough.

In 2018, Kelley McMillan reported on the issue for *National Geographic* in a story titled “Here's Why Ski Towns Are Seeing More Suicides.” I read the story with a morbid fascination. At the time, I was at college in Connecticut. A place without skiing, or at least the kind of skiing I knew. It was a place where I felt I could transcend my small-town past. We had intellectually engaging classes and smart students. I read every word of every book that my professors assigned and turned in essays that they gave high marks, as though that would solve everything. At the time, the campus politics were such that the word “privilege” was a status marker, a hierarchy of visible traumas.

Those with it needed to acknowledge their privilege, which is important. But the drawback we never openly acknowledged was that it focused so intensely on the surface. And trauma—the past—is often connected to the surface but it's also buried beneath it.

On the surface, snow makes the whole world glisten. But that doesn't always matter. McMillan reports on four self-inflicted deaths in Telluride that occurred in the span of a few months, while I was away at college. She makes sure to note that one of the victims was “a 46-year-old skier widely regarded as one of the best riders in the San

Juans.” Presumably, she included the last bit to show that being a good skier is not a solution and may in fact, be part of the cause. At the very least, you can't out-ski suicide—

To check avalanche conditions, you can examine the crust, but then you must probe what's beneath it. You must dig a pit and look at how the layers hold—or don't—when you put pressure above. And then you must take what you've learned and extrapolate it to the entire snowpack, while also remembering that this kind of extrapolation can never account for the changing conditions depending on the slope, direction, and altitude you encounter as you tour through the backcountry.

McMillan posits several reasons why suicides are so prevalent in ski towns and the Rocky Mountain region more broadly: A culture of individualism. Easy access to guns. Lack of mental health care resources. Isolation. Income disparity, especially between the second homeowners and local workers, compounded by the booms and busts of a seasonal economy. The transient nature of ski towns, through which young people cycle. Substance abuse. Altitude's effects on the brain. And the “paradise paradox”—living in a place where you are supposed to feel happy (privilege) but feel even more isolated when you don't. Most of the suicides occur during spring, what we call mud season. The long winter ebbs. The ski season ends. And the brief purpose of “shredding pow” melts.

I'd long known the desire to kill oneself, but I didn't understand the draw of death-defying sports for most of my life. As I grew older, I skied on the resort and rode my bike on flowing single-track trails—not the downhill courses with gapped jumps. For a ski town, that's tame. I didn't risk avalanche terrain or lead trad climbing routes, where if you place one cam incorrectly, one fall could spell the end. I focused instead on ice hockey. I risked brain damage but not death. It was a sport that I quit during my sophomore year of college, and by the time I moved to Boulder, I hadn't played competitively for six years, each of those years trying to fill the void of purpose, mainly with writing. But it just wasn't physical enough. I turned to skiing.

There is a beautiful simplicity to it, shredding pow. Days when the snow piles silent overnight and you rip through it hooting. The world is soft. You never touch the

icy bottom beneath, even when you fall. But powder, like all good things, goes fast, especially at ski resorts. Powder days are also the days when you will spend the most time idling in lift lines. Most mountains will get skied out in a matter of hours, which is why so many venture into the backcountry. There, you can find powder for days after a storm because it's harder to get to and you must risk your life to do it.

This is what gets you killed—pow fever. When you ski avalanche terrain, you are supposed to think more scientifically, to “manage risk.” But the risk will be there, always, and how much you take on depends on your risk tolerance. The phrase makes it seem like something quantifiable, but it's not. It's more of a feeling in the gut combined somehow with your understanding of the snowpack. And the strength of your fever.

* * *

In February, I took a trip to Jackson, Wyoming, with Bela and a buddy from the ski shop, Rob. In Colorado, it had been a “low tide” season so far. There was snow but not heaps of it. Meanwhile, Jackson Hole had been getting hammered. And Rob had lived there before and knew the mountain well. It was one of the only towns I'd ever heard of that had extreme terrain akin to Telluride.

Bela grew up in the Boston area and learned how to ski at Jay Peak, one of the better resorts in Vermont. She surprised me with how good she was when we first skied together back in Telluride. She was not fearless, but she was willing to send hard runs and go fast enough to keep up with me and my friends, who'd grown up on one of the steepest mountains in North America. I fell in love with her head over heels. She was two years younger than I and had spent that year working at a bakery after graduating college majoring in computer science and realizing she did not want to be a coder. She pined for more fulfilling work but was unclear on what it would be. So, she ran a cash register and skied.

Rob was a former ski bum. He was a SoCal boy who had moved to Boulder for college and stayed. He used to ride a motorcycle until one summer, he put it down and broke his femur. He figured he better recover fast. That November, he moved to Jackson, where he skied Teton Pass and drank at the Stagecoach. It was a “full send” recovery.

He figured there was no better way to test that a leg's healed than skiing on it every day. He worked for the mountain operating the resort's infamous tram before getting a job at a restaurant, where the pay was higher and the hours better suited for days on the slopes. But, by the time we went to Jackson together, the accident had already been a few years back.

Now, Rob and I spent most of our days putting ski boots on people who didn't know how or want to do it themselves. He had been taking a prereq class for flight school but gave up on it. He toyed with the idea of getting his real estate certificate or, better, working for a ski company. But he also talked about moving away back to the mountains, but this time to a newer ski town, one of the few that still wasn't as well known as Jackson. This kind of thinking is common in many ski towns, most of which have become too expensive and too crowded. Too many damn tourists, though they're the ones with the money, that buy up homes that they occupy for only one or two weeks each year. Well. For that week in February, that would be us. The irony wasn't lost on us, nor would it stop us.

The drive out was hell. We hit Laramie to find out I-80 was closed indefinitely because of weather, the wind so strong it would flip semitrucks like sleeping cows. We took the back way with my 4Runner. Gusts ripped snow onto the road, which whipped fiercely against our windshield as we slowly drove up through Medicine Bow and Caspar. Our skis, which were clamped into the ski rack on top of the SUV, rocked so hard I worried the wind would break the rack entirely. Parts of the drive I couldn't see the white line marking the edge of the road. It took us nearly thirteen hours, but we made it.

Bela and I stayed at the Motel 6, where we cooked spaghetti on a hot plate most nights.

Bela's brother, Rafa, met us there and stayed in the room next door. He'd flown in from New York. He was a software engineer for a hedge fund that traded futures of commodities, corn, soy, crops. I never understood it, but it did give Rafa the dough to buy a dope new snowboard before the trip. He pined for travel, adventure, and had talked of quitting his job for as long as I knew him.

Rob crashed with India, who lived in a condo complex outside of Jackson Hole Marketplace, the town's main

grocery store. Indigo jumped on him and wrapped her legs around his torso when they greeted each other. She was a friend from SoCal. Rob referred to her as "homegirl," which was how he referred to most women.

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The next morning, we hit the resort. The plan was to ski it for five days straight. The mountain had received a whopping 172 inches of snow, the third snowiest month the resort had ever recorded. We caught the last week of the good stuff.

Bela, Rafa, and I met Rob and his buddy Heath in the line for the Bridger Gondola and immediately started shredding pow, what Heath called Rocky Mountain smoke. In the East Coast and West Coast, the snow is wetter and heavier. But in the Rockies, it's light and dry. We skied Woolsey Woods, a tree run adjacent to the gondola, where pockets of snow had been wind-loaded throughout the night. We hooted and hollered without caring, our shouts swallowed because we skied right past them.

"Why don't we have this in Colorado?" Rob said at the bottom of the run. He was the first down. He's a big guy and ripped hard, fast.

"I don't know," I said, unable to wipe the grin from my mouth. "I mean, we do, just not this year."

* * *

The snow kept coming the rest of the week. The mountain was firing. It got nuked each night and we woke up to freshies each morning. We explored the steep mountain, which Bela, Rafa, and I had never been to. Rob and his friends humored us. Heath was one of our steadiest skiing partners. He was close with Rob. They'd met on opening day the year Rob ski-bummed in Jackson. But unlike Rob, he'd stayed, for over six years now. Heath rocked extra-long, extra-fat Völkl powder skis and didn't use any poles, because he'd broken his thumb early that season by clipping a tree midair. He skied well regardless.

"I'm not even really that sendy," he told Rafa and Bela one day, though this statement confused them. It was a matter of perspective. Heath was damn sendy for most skiers, bopping off ten-foot cliffs and decent-sized side hits without checking the landing. But the people who live in Jackson aren't "most skiers." Regardless of its

increasingly posh reputation, it's still one of the gnarliest ski towns in the world—and home to some of the most fearless skiers.

Heath smiled and laughed easy. He was close friends with India, who had hooked him up with acid when he first visited Rob in Cali. He cracked stupid jokes and laughed at them when we didn't. He skied during the mornings and worked at a Mexican joint in the evenings, where he hooked us up with free guacamole and two-for-one margaritas, but he couldn't drink with us because he was on probation. The cops had caught him with a bagful of weed pens. He didn't say why he'd had so many. He talked about cliffs he'd hit in years past, referring to each one by its nickname, and how the Friday before we arrived had been "bonkers deep." But a pall hung over him. His buddy who worked in the park crew had died the week before we arrived, buried in an avalanche.

"It's fucked up, man," Heath said. "We've been hitting that same cliff for years and it never ripped."

The slope gave out on the landing, all at once. He was gone when his friends dug up his body. No one seemed to say his name aloud, though the park crew wrote "Be Like Mike" in blue ink across the landings of the jumps in the resort's small park. The temporary monument was soon covered by a fresh layer of snow.

Bart was one of Rob's other homies. He was sponsored, which is what we say when ski companies give you free shit because they want people to see you using it. Bart was a snowboarder and ripped hard. The slang for snowboarding is different than skiing. The correct term for Bart's riding was "steezy." Bart knew half of the people on the mountain. When we first met him, he called out to one of his other buddies, hugged him, and began to weep. Then he turned his head toward the mountain and wiped the tears away with his coat sleeve.

"I can't fucking believe it," he said. His friend nodded and looked down. Then Bart changed the subject.

"Where are you skiing?" Bart asked.

"Oh, we're heading out," said his friend. Not a week after one of their close friends died, he was carrying a backpack loaded with a beacon, shovel, and probe, ready to get back at it. Out of the gates and into the sidecountry. The mountain had been firing, but now it was mostly skied out. Yes. Pow fever.

"Be careful out there, dog," said Bart. "Shit's serious right now . . . I . . . I worry about you, dude. You're always pushing it, you know what I mean, and well—"

"Don't worry, man," said his friend. "We're just heading out to Rock Springs. Just an easy lap. Real mellow."

"Okay, man. Have fun out there."

They hugged again and Bart returned to us smiling, no sign of the tears that had momentarily warped his face. After living for eight-plus years in Jackson, Bart hated lift lines. So, we skied Teton Chair, which was on the side of the mountain that most people don't ski. It's a bit less steep and the snow was not quite as dry, but Bart still found plenty of rocks to bomb off of.

Bart looked like he was in his early thirties. He rode hard but was already an elder in Jackson, his face leathery from years of high-altitude sun. He wore a beanie, not a helmet, from which a long raggedy blond flock of hair flowed. He swore to the regenerative power of elk antler velvet, a banned substance in most professional sports leagues. He was a cook and had been one of Rob's coworkers when he lived in Jackson. Bart was a big nickname guy. His name on Instagram was Dick Fart Bart. He called Rob Slob Nob Rob.

Bart had also developed his own slang. He'd use the phrase *big girl*, a play on the more commonly used phrase *big boy*. He'd say, "That's a big girl run," or, "I went big girl off that cliff earlier this year." His Instagram handle read: "big girls only." And so, I'll say that Bart was a big girl on the slope. He rode fast enough to make it difficult for me to keep up on skis, which is a feat that no snowboarder I've skied with had ever done. Rafa, who was used to being one of the best riders on the mountain in the East Coast, could only keep up long enough to see Bart air the lip at the beginning of each pitch and vanish.

Later that day, Bart went into town to go to work. Rob and I decided to venture out to Rock Springs on our own. He'd skied that zone back when he lived in Jackson. Before heading out the gate, we checked to make sure our beacons were working.

Rock Springs is considered sidecountry. I'd told Nina, one of the managers at the ski shop back in Boulder, about our plans to ski Jackson Hole's sidecountry. Nina grew up in New York City and had moved out West to become a ski bum. She was the oldest person working at the ski shop, in

her early seventies. She preferred hanging out with a raggedy bunch of twenty-somethings to sitting in an office. She'd broken her leg the year before and was struggling to recover her confidence on the slopes, though she was still soundly in charge at the shop.

"You know what I say about the sidecountry?" she said. "It's where people can watch you die in an avalanche from a ski lift."

I shrugged off Nina's comment, knowing she'd skied her fair share of sidecountry in her day. But what she said stuck somewhere in the back of my mind, and I got jittery as Rob and I tightened our boots before dropping in on the first pitch. Well. We made it down safely.

Except for one short face, Rock Springs is not steep enough to pose any real avalanche danger. We rode down a gully loaded with small rocks and tree stumps, ripping through Rocky Mountain smoke, descending together, suspended in snow waist deep.

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Assessing avalanche danger in the field is so complicated that for most people it seems to come down to instinct. And to make matters worse, people are afflicted with what psychologists call confirmation bias or a nonevent loop, meaning when you fuck up and get away with it, you come to believe that you didn't fuck up in the first place. You can ski the same dangerous slope ninety-nine times and it might not rip until the hundredth. And because it doesn't, you dupe yourself into believing that the risks you're taking aren't so great. This is why many people that get into avalanches, or have gun accidents, are often the ones with the most experience.

Adventure sports and partying go hand in hand. Both are reckless. Both lead toward an edge—destruction. And both are intense—the feeling of skiing a gnarly line and riding the waves of a psychedelic trip are not so different. The intensity is not a side effect, it's the draw.

During my senior year of college, I struggled with alcohol after years of getting fucked up without anything particularly bad happening. I started losing control, not just in how much I was drinking but in how I was acting when drunk. I became angry. Like the kid with anger issues I used to be. Like my dad used to get when I was young, yelling and stomping. I threw a knife at a friend's

wall after she ran out of beer. And then I woke up the next day having totally blacked it out, until she told me about me. I started fearing myself, but I didn't stop, I wouldn't stop. I drank and drank with my friends because that's who I was, who I was with, and where I was from. Until then one night, I lost control entirely, screamed at Bela next to the marble-beamed library where I spent my nights reading. Then I was sober. Mostly because Bela told me I had to stop. And stopped with me.

Sobriety was good and bad. I was sharp, in control, and lonely, even though Bela was sober, too. Oddly enough, my friends back in Telluride were more supportive than my college friends had been. I suspect this was both because they loved me more than my college friends and because, growing up in Telluride, they'd seen and experienced the destruction that booze could cause. Even so, I was no longer one of them, not truly. And I didn't do a very good job of seeking out a sober community, which would've meant leaving my existing communities more fully. If anything, I am someone who becomes attached to the communities I'm in. I like to call this loyalty, but I do not think it's necessarily noble.

To commit to sobriety for real, I would've had to make it a part of me, which I was either too embarrassed to or just didn't want to do. In the twelve-step program, the first step is admitting that you are powerless over alcohol. For me, that obscures the point. My problem was not just the booze, it was myself, the anger I'd always harbored. The second step is to "believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." There would've been some freedom in believing this, just as there's a false freedom to engulfing oneself in religion. But I didn't like the way that it would've decentered and simplified my issues. This may be necessary for some, but that wasn't quite what I was struggling with. I was not powerless over alcohol, I was powerless over myself when hammered, and sometimes, still, when sober. Not quite addiction.

Nonetheless, I was drawn back. Nearly a year and a half after I quit, I drank again. It was beer on the Fourth of July of the first summer of the COVID pandemic. I'd been living at home in Telluride for several months during the worst of lockdown, like many people in their early twenties, unmoored and moored both. I was proud of myself for my sobriety, though it proved temporary. And I was ashamed

of myself for drinking again, getting tipsy off one beer, the dullness returned. I felt somehow realer because of it. I was still somewhat distanced from my friends, not through abstinence but moderation, but I was closer.

Since then, I'd been drinking weekly, though not with the same abandon I'd once had. I hadn't blacked out. I'd yet to throw another knife at a wall or become angry enough to lose control, though I was scared I would. Confirmation bias applies to more than just skiing.

One might expect that most deadly avalanches occur in the steepest, most treacherous terrain, but they don't. Avalanche danger is highest on moderate slopes, typically between thirty-five and fifty degrees. On flatter slopes, gravity doesn't exert enough force for the slope to release. On steeper slopes, whatever is going to slide has already likely gone in small sluffs. What this means is that the risk for avalanches is also highest on the terrain that is the most fun to ski.

Gentle slopes don't let you build up enough speed to really rip. Extremely steep slopes are difficult and require kangaroo-style jump-turns to descend. Moderate slopes allow for flow.

In Jackson, Rob drank breakfast, pounding Modelos while riding the chairlift. When I met him, he'd quit drinking for several weeks, but his resolve had faded when the first snow fell. Now, he was chugging beers throughout the day. I refrained from drinking while skiing; the exhilaration of the descent was enough. But drinking while skiing is common. Most of my friends do it. As my buddy Tristan once told me: "It makes you looser, freer. There's nothing more fun than jumping off shit when you're hammered."

Though Bela, Rafa, and I didn't drink with Rob on the mountain, we did afterward. After a brief après-ski at the Motel 6, we hit the town for a couple more. February 2021, it was one of the first times Bela and I had gone inside a bar or restaurant since the start of the COVID pandemic. Until then, we'd played it safe, avoiding unmasked indoor spaces with strangers almost entirely. After the initial lockdown, daily life had become a game of personal risk assessment, compounded by the fact that the decisions we made could affect the health of those around us.

But by the time we went to Jackson, the pandemic had dragged on for almost a year.

During that trip, we'd already crossed thresholds we hadn't before, driving into another state, staying in a hotel, and hanging out with Rob and his friends, all of whom had already contracted and recovered from COVID. And besides, the danger that COVID posed to us paled in comparison to the other risks we were taking on the slopes, shredding serious gnar.

On the fourth day of the trip, Bart decided to head out for the first time since Mike died. Rob and I tagged along, while Bela and Rafa stayed inbounds with Heath, who wasn't ready to head out yet, though he would be soon.

Other than confirmation bias, another human factor in avalanched anger is "acceptance." Less experienced backcountry travelers will often mindlessly accept the decisions of the more experienced ones. For instance, the first time I ventured into the backcountry back in Colorado, I accepted whatever decisions Rob and his friend Rio made when they took us on a short tour through low-angle trees of an area called Caribou Ranch. It was nothing particularly sketchy, at least as far as I knew, but all my avalanche knowledge came from a book called *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*.

Well. According to the book, in an ideal scenario, everyone in the group feels comfortable speaking up when they sense danger. But newer backcountry skiers don't always know if the danger they're sensing is real or if they're just scared because they're scared. And they don't want to appear chicken. So they say nothing.

That day, Rob and I would've skied whatever Bart wanted to ski. Bart's buddy Blake tagged along. We went out the same gates Rob and I had gone out earlier in the trip, but instead of skiing the mellow and predictable terrain dubbed Rock Springs, we boot-packed for an hour to reach a zone called Four Pines. Bart assured us that it was pretty mellow.

After we went out the gate, we boot-packed directly up a steep slope. As we trudged, it was hard to be nervous. I was preoccupied with trying to keep up, stuffing my layers into my backpack as we rose, steaming, into the upper reaches of the Tetons. Toward the top, we passed a group of grizzled geezers, beaming as they prepared to descend. We bumped fists with them as we went by. Seeing them gave me some small measure of solace, that you could ski the Jackson backcountry and grow old—and keep shredding.

Soon, we stood atop an unnamed and untouched chute. The valley of Jackson spread out beneath us. For the moment, it felt like everything was both right there at our fingertips and beyond the horizon. It was a sunny day, and the snow had relented for about forty-eight hours, giving the snowpack just enough time to stabilize before the next storm rolled in. I tightened my ski boots and took a deep breath.

“You wanna open it up, Rob?” asked Bart. He was being generous. Though he’d led us to the spot, he offered us first tracks. Rob demurred. First tracks also meant the first chance of triggering a slide. Bart nodded, whooped, and dropped.

“There’s nothing big beneath the chute,” Blake told us as Bart descended, meaning that there weren’t any big cliff bands or terrain traps. “If it starts to rip, just point ‘em down.”

He was explaining that we could try to outrun a slide. The books emphasize that this isn’t always possible, not something you can rely on when dry-slab avalanches can travel over 200 miles per hour. But it doesn’t mean it’s totally impossible. I’d seen skiers outrun slides, swerve off to the side right at the last minute, on YouTube. But I didn’t want to get into anything close to that kind of situation. I fidgeted with my ski poles.

Rob dropped in and quickly made it to the safe point beneath the chute and to the side of it. And then I called my drop-in, held my breath, and pointed my skis down. I struggle to describe that moment, flowing, flowing down. The chute was steep enough to ski—ski fast—but not so steep that I had to check my speed. There was no time to look back and check for a slide, and so I streaked down, breathless, to where the chute opened to a wider slope, and I banked off to the right, floating through untouched power. Then I stopped, sank down to my waist in the snow, and waited for Blake to join us.

After that, we “party skied” the rest of the mountain, forgoing the one-at-a-time method required for risky terrain. Bart bombed off several cliffs. He tumbled and the deep snow caught him, forgiving. He rose, eyelashes littered with white. And then sent the next one. Rob and I followed him off a double, two drops in quick successions, the kind of terrain I would only ever follow someone into. The powder cushioned each landing. And then we were down. We pulled a sharp left and, within minutes, were back on the

resort like nothing had happened. Relief and joy washed over me as I fist-bumped Bart while riding the chairlift.

I’d never understood why people skied backcountry, until suddenly, I did. It hooked into me. The first real rush. It’s the same as how I didn’t understand why people did drugs when I was younger and then one day, I did.

In Ernest Hemingway’s “Cross Country Snow,” Nick Adams says, “There’s nothing really can touch skiing, is there. The way it feels when you first drop off on a long run.”

“Huh,” says his buddy George. “It’s too swell to talk about.”

I called my dad before we left Jackson from the grocery store. The next storm had rolled in, and we skied back on the resort that next day, getting in some final soft turns in what would prove one of the last real storms of the winter. My dad has mellowed with age. Not just his temper, but the way he skis. He used to rock old plastic Scott boots, refusing to get new ones made with current technology. He’d wear a knit hat and sunglasses, instead of a helmet and goggles. It used to embarrass me, his stubborn refusal to fit in. But now, I appreciate it, his resolve to live in his own time, however untenable. And that he was a strong enough skier to do so and still keep up. But recently, he’s started wearing modern ski boots and a helmet, though he still rocks sunglasses, not goggles, on sunny days.

“Well, did you ski Corbet’s?” my dad said. Corbet’s Couloir is one of the steepest runs on any resort in the world. It drops from a sheer cornice at the top of Rendezvous Mountain.

“No,” I told him. Bela and Rafa had been intent on skiing the couloir and also incredibly nervous about it. “We made it up to the top of the tram twice, but the ski patrol had closed the run both times.”

“Oh, that’s a bummer,” he said. “I skied Corbet’s back in my day.”

“You did?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “If I remember right, you need to make one turn and pray you catch an edge.”

He was right. The crux of Corbet’s was the first turn. I struggled to imagine him turning aggressively enough to lay an edge in the steep, icy terrain. Now, he stuck to groomers. His favorite run back in Telluride is a blue called Peek-a-Boo, which he loves for its pitch—how it’s almost perfectly level from side to side. This affinity for groomed

runs is natural to aging skiers, aging knees. When he fell in love with the mountains in the eighties, he must have been different. Perhaps more like the person I am now.

* * *

I smelled like my father. Gasoline. Sweat. I’ve often hated the ways I am becoming like him—our anger, stubborn pride, and selfishness. But he loves the mountains, and so do I.

It was in the evening about a month after the trip to Jackson. That day, Rob and I hit Jones Pass. It was the middle of March. The season had neared the end but not yet reached it. We heaved Rob’s old two-stroke Ski-Doo off of the trailer. Rob had bought the sled for \$800 and put several hundred more into it. He tended to spend more time futzing with it than riding it. This could prove dangerous, even life-threatening when you are miles from your car, stranded amid snow-laden mountains—and bitter cold. Rob was planning on selling it and using the funds to get a dirt bike or, perhaps, pay rent. He already had a couple of potential buyers lined up but had been putting them off. Our outing was the last hurrah.

It took Rob a while to start up the sled, but he got it going. I held a rope behind the snowmobile. He dragged me up the mountain, the sled brap-brapping in the morning air. My hands burned from the effort of holding on as we cruised past the trail’s snowshoe and Nordic ski traffic, and up.

Rob’s sled ran “like a champ,” as he put it. It ripped uphill despite our combined weight and its old age. A guided snowcat skiing operation had been up in the area the day before, and a snowcat had plowed the trail smooth, which meant we could take Rob’s sled higher than he’d ever taken it before. There, we found a headwall with two steep chutes with only a couple of lines arching down them. Rob offered me first tracks, and I took him up on it. We bumped fists, and I traversed higher to the far chute. I looked out and saw Rob had already made it to the bottom of the run on his snowmobile, where he waited for me, drinking “breakfast.” By then, the snowpack had solidified from earlier in the season. The avalanche risk was considered moderate by the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. Still there but fading, I stepped into my skis and steadied myself, mapping out the first descent in my head, then pointed down.

The life of a ski bum is, among other things, a big fuck you to the nine-to-five corporate career path. A ski bum prioritizes skiing above all else, or play over work. When you’re on the mountain, you are a child again, out with your buddies, likely drinking like a teenager while you’re at it. Another term we throw around in ski towns is Peter Pan. To be a ski bum, you must choose a snow-laden Neverland.

I grew up in a ski town and I hope to call one home again. But I’ll never be a true ski bum. For one, I’m not good enough to be a professional skier, and even if I were, I’d already be considered old in my late twenties. Instead, I’d need to work odd jobs and spend as much time on the mountain as possible. To work at a restaurant in the evening, like Heath, to ski during the day. The other option would be work on the mountain as a lifter, as a ski instructor, or on the park crew. These jobs allow you to spend a lot of time on the mountain, but you will be tending to tourists and not shredding. I can’t imagine myself spending years working odd jobs, like at Crystal Ski Shop, which provided company and cash but did not leave room for ambition. There is a certain ambition to making that one perfect line on a powder day, sure, but it’s so fleeting, impossible to capture. And once you do, it’s felt in the moment and then gone. Which is why, I think, people in ski towns are drawn to the edge again and again.

Hunter S. Thompson shot himself in the head in Aspen. Ernest Hemingway, my all-time favorite, shot himself in the head in Sun Valley, another ski town. The year Rob and I took his snowmobile up to that north-facing headwall on Jones Pass, twelve people died in avalanches in Colorado, tied for the state record. As Heather Hansman puts it, in her 2021 book *Powder Days*, “there is heavy responsibility here, and the consequences of these mountains are real.”

It’s something we try hard to ignore, but I can’t.

I don’t want to become a person who drinks at the bar till I puke and black out, to indulge my self-destructive tendencies. I don’t want my life to be defined by the highly masculine world of skiing, like it was once defined by ice hockey. Having a girlfriend is already a step-away Neverland. But it’s more than just spending time with Bela that distances me from full-time ski bums.

Becoming a nonfiction writer is not easy. It requires one part living—having something to write about—and another part, well, writing. In a sense, it means holding

two worlds at once, the one here on the page, the other out there in the world. It requires experiencing each one as fully as you can in the moment, sure, but never fully committing. And both require time. There is value in striving for balance, here, though it's difficult. After all, the moderate slope is the one most likely to rip.

There's melancholy to this, in holding several realities next to each other, knowing you will never be able to live one of them completely. It can be hard to find the satisfaction.

Hansman, again: "My heart gets sore, sometimes, for the lives I didn't live."

But there's a beauty in this, too, I remind myself. To hold different experiences together and see what happens. To find the right balance, make flowing turns instead of dropping, sharply, down the slope—

And hopefully the weak layers do not collapse but hold.

There is a form of confirmation bias that is basically the opposite of a nonevent loop: When a gun is introduced early in a play or movie, you expect it to go off later, and you keep watching to see why and how it does. It's a deeply embedded narrative convention that builds suspense—waiting for the gun to go off—and satisfaction when it does. But life does not always follow such simple conventions.

Several years and counting since our trip to Jackson Hole, I've still managed to control my alcohol consumption without abusing it. I struggle with depression, and still, occasionally, suicidal thoughts, but I don't think I'm close to the edge. I no longer work at a ski shop. That summer, I became an editor for a hunting and fishing magazine, which offered more stability than freelancing and meant I could still take adventures in the outdoors while also working towards becoming a better writer. I am not a powder hound but ski powder days when I can. None of my friends has died in avalanches, including Rob, whom I haven't skied with in a long time, nor Luke, my first ski partner, who recently purchased his first backcountry ski kit. The "gun" has yet to go off. The nonevent loop continues.

Knock on wood.

"Cross Country Snow" begins with two young men, Nick and George, dropping into a run in the Swiss Alps: "On the white below George dipped and rose and dipped out of sight. The rush and the sudden swoop as he dropped down a steep undulation in the mountain side plucked

Nick's mind out and left him only the wonderful flying, dropping sensation in his body. He rose to a slight up-run and then the snow seemed to drop out from under him as he went down, down, faster and faster in a rush down the last, long steep slope."

Well. The story ends just before two friends part ways, perhaps for good, though they dream of "just bumming it together." George is off to college, and Nick, back to the U.S. to have a baby with his partner. Responsibilities are pulling them away from the slopes and each other.

But the story ends before the skiing does. "They took down their skis from where they leaned against the wall in the inn," writes Hemingway. "Nick put on his gloves. George was already started up the road, his skis on his shoulder. Now they would have the run home together."

That day in mid-March, when Rob and I skied a north-facing headwall on Jones Pass, much of the snow was slushy with spring. But somehow, we'd stumbled upon a pocket of power.

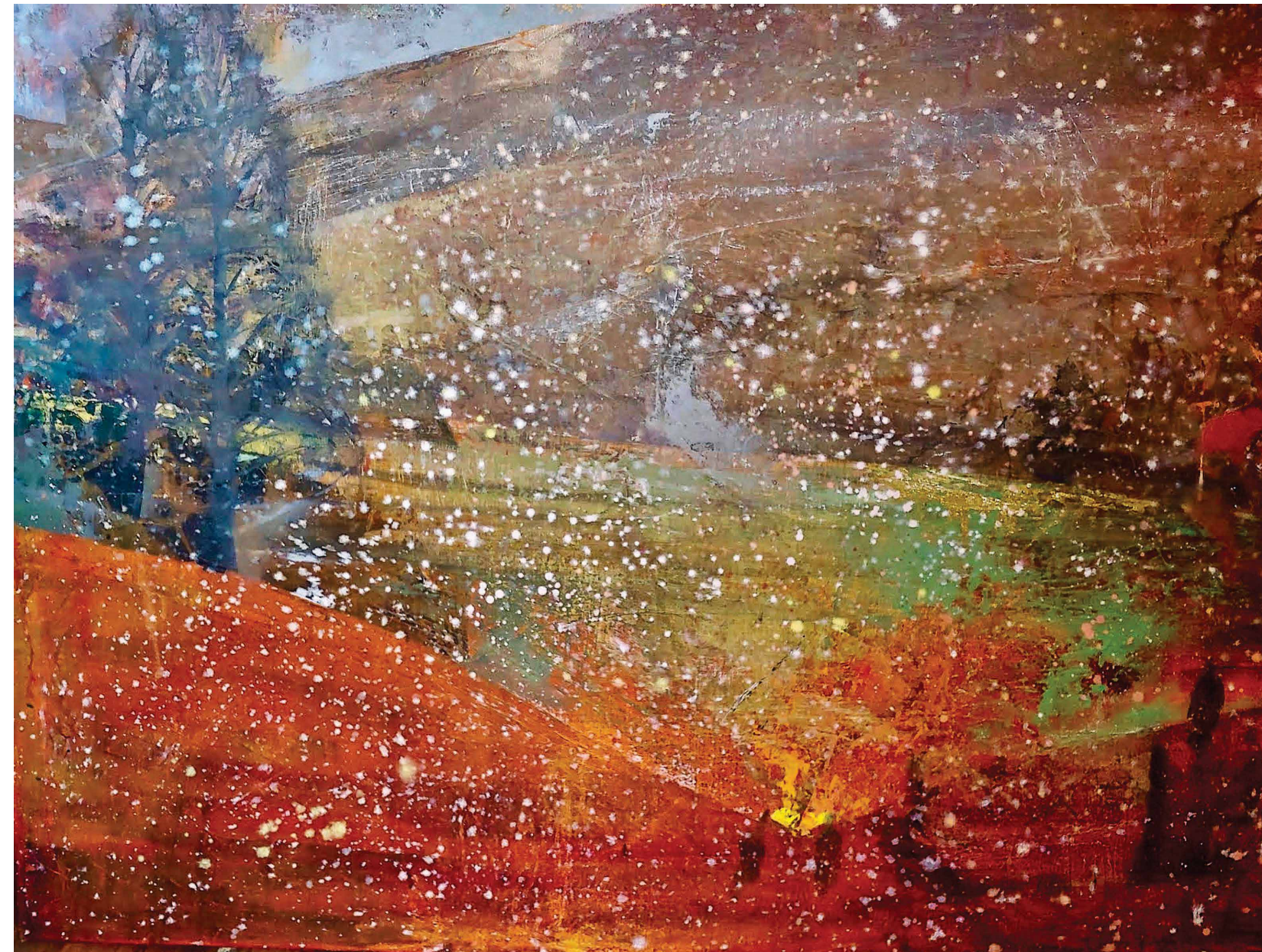
We skied the same two chutes over and over. We shuttled each other up the slope and met again down at the base. Each time we carved a new line down the mountain both similar to and different from the ones we had skied before.

In the late afternoon, the sun tinged the mountainside orange then pink. Rob brap-brapped the snowmobile back to the truck one last time before he sold it. I followed on my skis, flowing down the skin track, the cool wind whipping against my cheeks. The snow that had melted that day was already beginning to freeze anew. It smelled like it did after a summer monsoon in the mountains, wet pine needles, mud, and then the gasoline fumes of Rob's old Ski-Doo, rising like breath.

Sage Marshall is an essayist, poet, and journalist. His creative essays have been published in journals such as *The Missouri Review*, *Sport Literate*, and elsewhere. His work was named notable in *The Best American Essays 2021*. He's a contributing writer and former editor for *Field & Stream*. His nonfiction manuscript "The Barbs" delves into the intersections of ice hockey, the outdoors, the American West, boyhood, violence, and masculinity.

PERKY EDGERTON

First Snow, 2023
Oil on canvas, 31.5 x 41.5 in.



COURTESY THE ARTIST