

DESCENTS

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A FRIEND ONCE told me about the time he was buried in an avalanche. He was cross-country skiing—in disregard of all the avalanche alerts broadcast statewide—with two friends in the Colorado Rockies. It was a warm, bright day—the kind of day you paint your nose white with zinc-oxide and roll up the sleeves of your sweater and shout out to the wilderness for the sheer joy of hearing your voice echoing from the cliffs around you. The kind of day, also, when water melts from the upper surface of the snow, leaving a fragile, glassy latticework which anything—the wind, a footstep, a shout—can bring down. If this happens on a slope, the whole upper crust will start sliding, pulling the lower layers along with it; and if it's a large enough avalanche, it will haul into its roiling descent anything in its path: trees, cars, houses, ski lodges.

Fortunately, the avalanche my friend saw coming toward him that day was a small one. But it was also wide—too wide to escape. He stood in the middle of a large sloping meadow, and in a matter of seconds the meadow was foaming downward around his knees; then he was moving with it, trying to ski it, then merely trying to stay on top by swimming, his skis and poles knocking him in the head and body as he went under, fought to the surface again, and then went under a last time as the flow finally stopped.

Anybody watching a scene like this can only imagine that the victim is senseless with panic. But more often than not there is a surprising admixture of curiosity and calm that overcomes one at such times. So my friend said he felt, and I believe him.

He had been swimming and slashing at the snow to regain the surface; then the snow stopped. It held him spread-eagle, and he pulled in his arms and legs and pushed them out again to make a small cavity for breathing. He started digging, clawing with his hands. But what is fluid in descent becomes hard-pack a few minutes after coming to rest.

It also occurred to my friend that he might be digging the wrong way. What if he was upside down? He put his hand in front of his mouth to see if he could feel, in the dark, which direction his saliva would fall. When he felt it drop on his forehead and dribble into his hairline, he pulled in and

crossed his arms, drew in his legs, tucked his head, and hung there in the cold dark, and waited.

One of the last things he saw before he was buried was one of his companions just coming out of a grove of trees, not yet in the meadow, and therefore out of the way of the avalanche. The whole time my friend hung there upside-down he told a story to himself about how his friend was hurrying back to town for help.

Two hours later he was jabbed by a pole in the back. There were voices. Then there was light. His feet had been two inches beneath the surface.

I often recall this story at the moment when I first think of sitting down to write, and though it seems important to know, I can't tell, as often as I've examined the occurrence, which comes first, the images of that story or the urge to write. Probably they occur at the same time. But however it is, when I finally sit down I'm never sure if the white paper before me is a snowfield waiting to collapse and start sliding or an avalanche that has already come to rest, the body waiting to be discovered just beneath the surface. And so the words are tentative at first, unfelt. A loud voice could bring the whole thing down. Too strong a jab could do injury. I feel what I think the snow must feel being shaped by the wind into overhanging cornices. I come as far as the middle of the field, and it's as though I were not there.

Nothing's accomplished without a risk; nothing's known. And to have come this far at all is madness—especially when I consider that my friend may have made his story up. One can only shrug—which starts the whole thing rolling again. And who can tell but that if the snow starts rolling, a body won't rise to the surface, saved, as you go under?

About 17,000 years ago, near what is now Lascaux, France, lived tribes of Cro-Magnon hunters. The population of France around that time hovered precariously around 2,000 to 3,000. The glaciers were retreating and the continent was warming up. The large herds were withdrawing northward. Once plentiful game was now scarce. Up to that time the painting of animals on the walls of caves had been mostly stick-figure affairs surrounded by spears, arrows, and darts. The emphasis was on the kill. But suddenly—perhaps in an attempt to create, through sympathetic magic, what they didn't have—the artists evolved a style of representation that was more exact than ever before.

The only thing that had saved the pictures through the 17,000 years of their existence was their inaccessibility. The Cro-Magnon artist apparently felt that for his magic to work, to create a real animal, he had to crawl deep into the bowels of the earth and paint its image on a cold, dark wall. If one has the heart for it, one can view these paintings today in the caves around Lascaux. The entrances are usually small and the passages narrow, but suddenly one finds oneself surrounded by pictures of what the Cro-Magnon

needed most: buffalo, cattle, horses, reindeer, all delicately featured, beautifully shaded, frozen in their stampede across the walls.

The cave I've thought most about you must enter on your back, feet-first, through an opening smaller than a manhole. You slide down about ten feet into a pit just large enough for crouching. It's pitch black when you turn out the flashlight, and the outside world is only a whisper of wind at the cave's mouth. You leave even that sound behind when you squeeze through a small horizontal crevice and crawl on your stomach over the cool, moist floor until you reach a bend in the passage, then another, and then a dead end. If you turn over on your back, you can see, just above your face, the figure of a red and black galloping horse.