

POET IN GRIZZLY GULCH

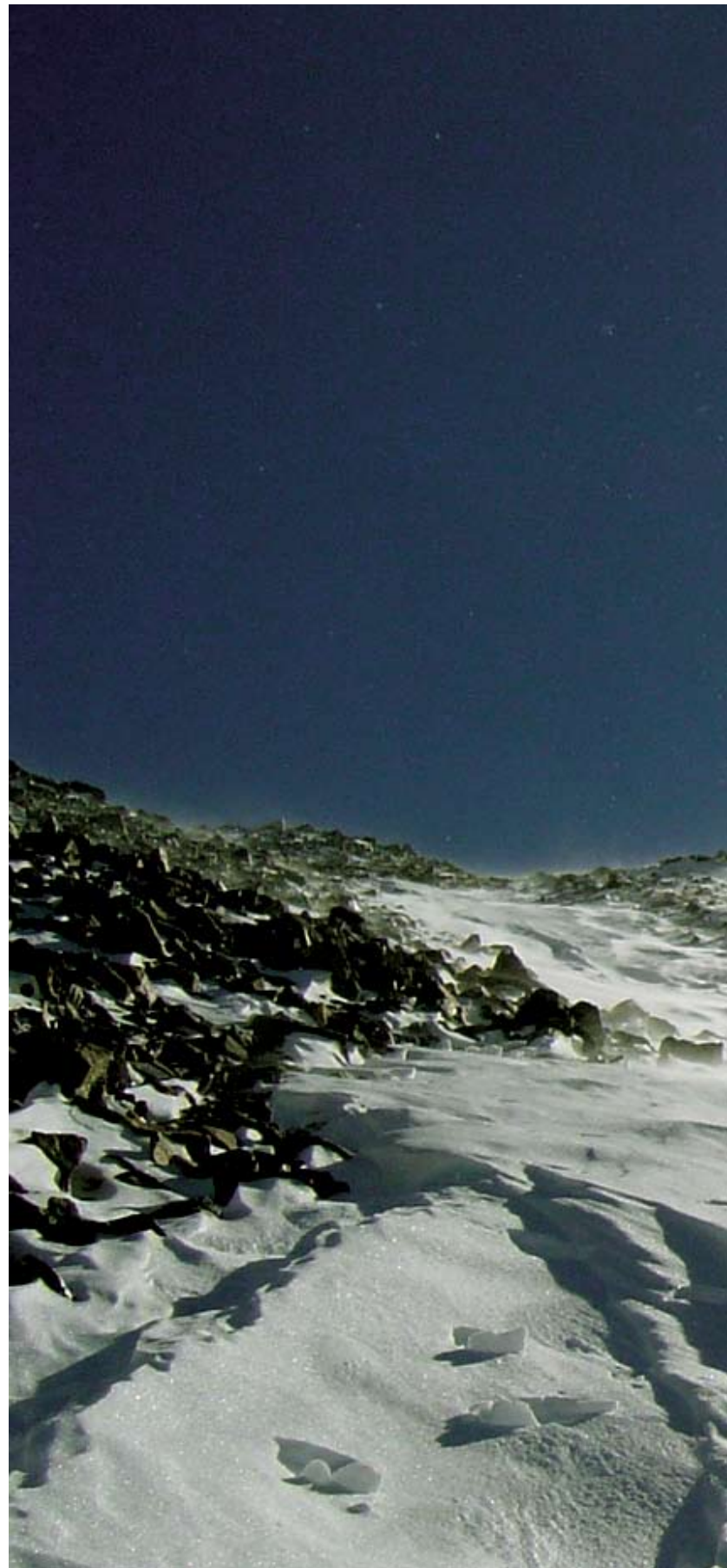
*An expedition to the heart
of the wild country*

By Michael Sowder • Photography by Faye O'Connor

WHEN THE TRAIL traverses a slope beneath an avalanche chute, our guides begin yelling out instructions: "We'll send you across one at a time," Ted Roxbury, the younger of our guides, says. "That way, if an avalanche takes one of you, the rest of us will be able to find you." We've just huffed it up a steep rise in backpacks and snowshoes, with two people pulling sleds, and on our way up, Ted tested our avalanche transceivers as we filed by him.

The mountains tower above us, dark spruce and Douglas fir standing watch, rising from nearly vertical slopes. It's my first time in this part of the Wasatch Range. Driving up through Little Cottonwood Canyon to the Alta Ski Resort, where our trip began, I was surprised at the number of posted warnings about avalanche danger, the number of road-closing gates I had to drive through. And right now the high steep ridges, peaks, and cones around us would be breathtakingly beautiful, except that a big snowstorm's swallowing the mountains and us with them. Heavy snow's been forecast with 90 mph winds on the ridges, 70 mph in the canyons—well past the 35 mph threshold for designating a

Unlike the Chinese, people in Western civilization feared the wilderness until relatively recently. New England Puritans would have had a hard time understanding why people, such as Neil Rosenberg (right), hike willingly into the "howling wilderness" in the middle of winter.







I CAN'T IMAGINE WHERE WE COULD PITCH A TENT WHEN I CAN'T EVEN KEEP BOTH FEET ON THE TRAIL. WE LOCATE A SPOT BELOW ON A SLOPED RAVINE, SHELTERED BY A STAND OF FIRS. I HAVE LONG LOVED THE SUBALPINE FIR COVERING THE HIGH MOUNTAINS OF NORTHERN UTAH, BUT I HAVE NO IDEA HOW MY LOVE OF THEIR SHELTER WILL INCREASE OVER THE NEXT FEW HOURS.

storm a "blizzard." Already the snow's coming in sideways—when it's not shooting straight up the canyon walls. I think to myself, what in the world are we—am I—doing out here in this kind of weather?

Introduced to the outdoors by my father, I've been a backpacker most of my life. Like so many of us today, I'm instinctively drawn to mountains and have wanted to take that experience to a higher level. Getting a late start at 51, I've come on the first two days of a seven-day mountaineering expedition course with Alaska Mountaineering Guides and Climbing School, Inc. (AMG). We're on our way to Grizzly Gulch to practice mountaineering skills. After two days, the other four students will spend an afternoon ice climbing in Provo Canyon and then attempt an ascent of 13,063-foot Wheeler Peak in Nevada. I'm disappointed I can't do the whole trip, but with two small boys at home and being in the middle of the semester at Utah State University, where I'm a poet and professor, I've reconciled myself on this trip to just getting my feet wet—or, I should probably say—iced.

The other thing that's brought me here, fueling my desire to climb farther, higher into the mountains is a lifelong love of mountain poets—especially the Chinese—wandering Tang and Sung Dynasty recluses like Tu Fu, Li Po, Wang Wei, who lived in remote mountains as Taoist or Buddhist monks or hermits seeking the Tao—"the Way"—in wild places. So into my backpack went a book of Chinese mountain poems. The other imprudent thing I've brought along is a cracked rib—fruit of a skiing spill. This I failed to mention on AMG's medical-disclosure form. I'm hoping now the rib won't give me any trouble.

WILL FENN PULLS A SLED, heading out across the slope. Will is our other guide and is 30-something, but within a minute, he looks like an old ghost, bent

In the right kind of blizzard, winter campers can get fatally lost within a stone's throw of their tents. Students Brian Kaut, left, and Neil Rosenberg, right, learn the ropes from guide Will Fenn of the Alaska Mountaineering Guides and Climbing School, which is based in Alta.

over in the haze of flying snow. When he's halfway across, Ted signals for Marian, one of the students, to go. Marian Richard's a 48-year-old engineer for Lockheed Martin Space Systems out of Sunnyvale, California. Self-described as "a short, Asian woman," she's come on the course with her friend, Faye O'Connor, a bright, energetic redhead who works for Lockheed as an animation engineer, "drawing cartoons of mechanical things," she says. In summers, they do month-long backpacks in the Sierras. They seem like sisters, sharing a friendship apparently based on laughter. As Marian heads across the slope, I realize I'm getting cold and start stamping my feet and swinging my arms. When she reaches the spot where Will's waiting, Ted signals for me to go ahead, and I start across the slope.

Back at "the bunker"—the basement office of AMG in Alta—Will and Ted had explained how to survive if caught in an avalanche. We stopped packing our packs and stood amidst a clutter of gear strewn all over the floor, sleeping bags, food, clothes, climbing helmets, ice axes.

"Think of swimming. Try to get your pack off, swim to the surface, and stay there, using your arms. If you're pulled under, cup your hands around your mouth and make a pocket of air for breathing after you've been buried."

I remembered a *National Geographic* article I'd read that explained how the snow of a big avalanche tends to congeal into something like cement. Being told to swim in that element reminded me of those flight attendants who say, "in case of a water landing, your seat cushion can be used ...," but really meaning, "if we crash into the water, the aircraft will explode into flames, but if you find you've been thrown clear of the wreckage and there's a seat cushion floating nearby ..."

AMG was begun in 1992 by Sean Gaffney and Darsie Culbeck, and today, with a winter office in Alta and year-round offices in Alaska and Mexico, it sends expeditions out all over the world, from Denali to Patagonia to Nepal and Asia. Everyone in the organization is fit, strong, and bright—traits arising from a life of doing what one loves, I imagine. In the next two days, I'll learn what incomparable guides Will and



Being colder than you ever were before, with night coming on, can bring the world into new focus—and heighten the value of friendship, as poet Michael Sowder (center) found, with (from left) Brian Kaut and Neil Rosenberg.

Ted are. They've climbed all over the world, Ted having done a 90-day wilderness trek in Patagonia, climbing, backpacking, sea kayaking. Will began his career as a forest ranger but, becoming disillusioned with government bureaucracy, found infinitely more rewarding a life of leading people into icy wildernesses.

As I traverse the slope, I use my ski poles to keep the wind from blowing me off my feet. I try to focus on moving forward, one step at a time, rather than imagining how my cupped hands could possibly hold enough oxygen for me to breathe; how cold and dark those minutes in an avalanche would be. I lean into the wind, make it to the firs, and get a high five from Marian.

SNOW-LADEN GUSTS LITERALLY LIFT ME off the ground, after another hour or so more of climbing. We've come out of the protection of the forested canyons onto an exposed ridge that rises towards the crest of Grizzly Gulch. I remember the forecast—90 mph winds on the ridges. I step forward and the wind moves me, shifts my body a step to the right. It's unsettling, a little dance with the devil, I think. Soon, Will stops and yells over the wind that it's time to look for a campsite. I look where he's pointing but only see fields of flying snow. I can't imagine where we could pitch a tent when I can't even keep both feet on the trail. We locate a spot below on a sloped ravine, sheltered by a stand of firs. I have

long loved the subalpine fir covering the high mountains of northern Utah, but I have no idea how my love of their shelter will increase over the next few hours.

When we reach the site, everyone starts dropping their packs. Ted yells, "Don't put anything down that isn't attached to your pack." Immediately I find out why.

Anxious to get a down vest out of my pack, I unhook my climbing helmet from my pack and set it down on the ground. It's almost instantly buried. In 20 minutes, all the packs will be under snow.

Our first order of business—grab shovels and dig out an area for the tents. Will and Ted set up poles to mark the perimeter of camp outside of which we'll not be allowed to go without our avalanche transceivers. Ted heads down to the next stand of firs to start digging our cooking-and-eating shelter. He takes Faye with him. The rest of us—Marian, Brian Kaut, Neil Rosenberg, and I—help Will with the tents. As Will unfolds the first one, the wind nearly rips it out of his hands. We grab it and stake the corners down with ice axes and then start threading poles through the tent sleeves.

Will looks up at me and yells, "We don't take people out in conditions like this."

I'm colder than I've ever been, and while I've done my share of winter camping, this blizzard is something altogether different. "You guys are getting a real taste of what can happen on Denali or one of the big mountains," Will says.

Once the tent's standing, we make "dead men" to secure it—pieces of cloth filled with snow, tied with cord and buried,



the other end tied to the tent. *Dead men.* Ominous terminology. And to make them, *you have to take your gloves off.* Under our big mountaineering gloves—which seem like jousting gloves completing a set of armor—we all wear thin polypropylene gloves, and when I take the big gloves off and begin fiddling with the snow and dead men, my fingers start feeling like I’ve submerged them in a cooler full of ice. In fact, my whole body feels strangely cold, my toes numbing.

I look around and see that I’m not outfitted like everyone else. Standing in my hiking boots, I see Brian’s wearing massive climbing boots with dials for tightening rather than laces. He’s an ex-marine from Omaha, Nebraska. A little taciturn. He once spent two weeks on a glacier in Greenland with his outfit. He says he’s got on something called “micro puff” long underwear. Everyone’s wearing a down coat. Not me.

I bought a bunch of gear on Ted’s recommendations but ended up not bringing it. Out for just a couple nights, as a seasoned backpacker I figured my usual backpacking, skiing, snowshoeing clothes would suffice. So I’m layered in a Gore-Tex shell, down vest, fleece jacket, fleece pullover, and mid-weight long underwear. For bottoms, mid-weight underwear and thin Gore-Tex pants.

My gear’s inadequate. I just hadn’t anticipated these conditions.

WHILE MARIAN AND BRIAN CONTINUE burying ‘dead men,’ Neil and I work on the next tent. Neil, a tall friendly Chicagoan, says his

mother’s Filipino and he’s not sure he’s got genes for this cold. I’m starting to worry about hypothermia. My thoughts seem to be moving in slow motion. (For one thing, I don’t remember I have fleece bottoms in my pack.) I tell myself: *Don’t face the wind. Even when working.*

When the tents are up and secured, we toss our bags and clothes inside, always a key moment for me in inclement weather. Now, if it comes to it, we can crawl in our bags and sleep through whatever slings and arrows the storm has in store for us. Arranging my gear, I remember nature philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore’s observation that the true joy of camping arises from making safe, domestic spaces in the midst of a dangerous wilderness. I set my headlamp and poems at the head of my bag and look forward to some quiet time reading the Chinese mountain poets after everyone’s asleep.

This love of mountains that so many of us feel is actually a fairly new phenomenon in the Western World. Before the 18th century, great tracts of wilderness were known as *wastes, deserts.* New England Puritans called it all a *howling wilderness*—home of devils, wolves, and Indians. The Chinese, in contrast, have revered such places since before just about anybody. Maybe by the end of the 18th century, Europeans had been looking at Chinese scrolls and porcelain long enough for some of that reverence to sink in. For whatever reason, Westerners began to perceive the beauty that seems unmistakable today, even in a blizzard like this.

Or maybe, because of a blizzard like this. The 18th century shift in attitude toward wilderness resulted in people actually

I THINK OF THE OLD TAOIST POETS LIVING IN THE HIGH MOUNTAINS OF CHINA AND WONDER HOW TU FU, IN A SMALL, COLD HUT IN A BLIZZARD, COULD WRITE OF THE SNOW FALLING LIKE CHERRY BLOSSOMS, OR OF RIDING A SNOW-COVERED HORSE AS RIDING A GREAT WHITE BIRD—HOW HE MAINTAINED A POETIC SENSIBILITY IN A FREEZING WORLD. MY SHIVERING HAS TAKEN ON LARGE SHAKING MOVEMENTS.

seeking out wild landscapes to have “sublime” experiences in nature, part of a cultural phenomenon sometimes called “the cult of the sublime.” Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* clarified for these seekers the difference between “the beautiful” (as in flowers, quilts, butterflies) and “the sublime” (as in cataracts, peaks, lightning storms). He wrote that what makes a vista “sublime” is its possessing some element of *danger, terror in it*.

WE’VE HAD THE BRIEFEST OF BREAKS when Will calls us to gather outside for some practice in avalanche rescue. I unzip the door of the tent and stick out my head into the furious wind where the onslaught of icy snow stings my face like a thousand darts or biting flies, and I think how nice it’d be to snuggle into my bag, rather than embrace the sublimity howling here outside. Sublime landscapes, Burke reminds us, are best appreciated from a situation of personal safety.

I get out and take my turn, pretending one of my new friends has been buried under a slope of icy cement. I learn the techniques for managing the danger, and about the very limited time we would have to save each other: 10, or maybe 20 minutes.

Then, Ted’s muffled voice echoes up from the ‘Mid. “Lunch!”

The group shelter Ted and Faye have dug becomes my favorite spot in camp, after my sleeping bag. Short for “Megamid,” a tarp made by Black Diamond, the ‘Mid’s suspended from a central vertical pole down over a snow pit. I step down into a trench and duck in under the flap of the ‘Mid. Five-foot deep and 10 feet in diameter, the pit has a fine bench carved out of the wall running all the way around. In the center, a 3-foot high counter of snow has been left standing. It’s spread with bagel sandwiches. I’m shivering, disappointed we’re not having a hot lunch. But Will starts melting snow, heating water for hot drinks. He hands me the bag of drink mixes, and I rifle through them pondering what to have.

“Take your favorite, first.” Ted says. “Next time, when that’s gone, you take your next favorite, then your next. That way you always get your favorite.”

I pour chocolate mix into my bottle and Will fills it with steaming water. Soon everyone’s inside, circled around on the bench, eating sandwiches, joking about the food Will should have brought or brought too much of, too little chocolate, too much mustard.

Will says, “Let’s talk about how cold we’re feeling, on a scale of one to 10. At 10 you’d want your clothes off. At one, you’re in need of medical intervention.” Everyone seems pretty okay, sixes and sevens. I’m thinking “five” but say “six” to leave room for things getting worse, though I don’t really want to see what “three” feels like.

“Remember, it’s easier to stay warm than to get warm. So if you start to feel too cold, do something sooner rather than later,” Will says.

We talk about why we’re there, what we’re hoping to get out of the course. Faye’s scheduled to climb Denali in May. Marian feels called by the beauty of the mountains, but wants to move into it all a little more slowly. Everyone has their own reasons. I talk about my love of mountains, of writing about nature, of mountain poets, though my mouth is having a little trouble forming the words correctly.

ALL SUBLIME VIEWS HAVE BEEN WIPED OUT when we’ve trudged, after lunch, to an adjacent slope to practice something called fixed belaying. I can see close stands of trees, the gray outlines of ridges. I buckle on my climbing harness (which means taking off my gloves, something I swore I would not do again), and we all attach ourselves to a common rope, about 20 feet apart. We begin traversing a slope on which Ted has affixed carabineers. We move from one to the next, yelling, “Hold!” then as we move past the carabineer, “Climbing!” The snow’s thigh-deep in places.

Before long, I’m cold again, colder than before. I’m starting to shiver. Neil’s feet are hurting. Ted shows him how to stand and swing a leg to get more blood into his feet. I still haven’t remembered my fleece bottoms.

Then thunder begins. Wild flashes of lightning lighting up the flying snow. Big booms, one after another. I can’t believe the blizzard’s being ratcheted up with thunder and lightning.

I can't see the sky, but every so often, *Boom!*, and then the snow in front of me lights up like white neon. I've never been in a snowstorm like this. Will and Ted cut the belaying lesson short. They seem worried, too.

We hurry back to our tents and dig out the walls the snow has been burying and then head back to the 'Mid. Ducking in, I'm the first one there. I sit down on the snow bench where I can't stop shivering. My legs are the weak link. They feel like fish packed on ice. I still haven't remembered the fleece pants. I'm alone, anxious for something warm to eat or drink. I think of the old Taoist poets living in the high mountains of China and wonder how Tu Fu in a small, cold hut in a blizzard, could write of the snow falling like cherry blossoms, or of riding a snow-covered horse as riding a great white bird—how he maintained a poetic sensibility in a freezing world. My shivering has taken on large shaking movements. Is this what it's like to freeze to death?


Sublimity. Danger. We're drawn to it. But survival trumps it. The word, "sublime," suggests going up toward a limit or threshold. But here I feel only a contraction, a hunkering down. We may seek transcendence, but as the famous American poet Robert Frost says in his poem, "Birches," we want to climb "toward heaven" and then come back down, because "earth's the right place for love." Or, in other words, undergoing transcendence requires the body. Death obviously isn't the point. And to stay alive, we depend on each other. I think of how often Tu Fu and Li Po left poems on the walls of each other's hermitages.

Will ducks into our hideaway, gets a stove going, and soon the steady hiss sounds better than a love song. I drink ice water, since hydration combats hypothermia, as Will says, even with ice. Soon, everyone comes in. Will hands me a hot cider mix. "This will make you feel better." It's as if he were my

father or something. I mix it with glee. Ted hands Will a pan of chopped onions and Will starts sautéing. *Sautéing!* I remember what a climbing friend once told me on a winter backpack in the Smokies when the cold froze the water on our toothbrushes before we could get them in our mouths: On some trips, when somebody heats up a package of Lipton stroganoff and mixes in tuna from a can and hands it to you in a bowl, it just about brings tears to your eyes.

After a dinner of steaming spaghetti, and more good talk—grizzly encounters; instructions about ice climbing; Ted teaching us an astonishing number of knots, which I love—I say I'm ready to turn in. Will fills bottles with hot water for the bottoms of our sleeping bags. Crawling into the tent I share with Neil and Brian, I'm surprised at how much snow covers the floor. It will be there in the morning. In my clothes bag, I find my cotton long johns, a luxury, and then the fleece pants. Good for a pillow now.

In the morning, I wake at 5 o'clock as usual. I reach up to adjust my wool cap and find it encased in ice. Luckily, I wore two. Today, we're scheduled to do courses in fixed-point belaying, companion-arrest, rope-work, more knot tying, and crevasse rescue. But breakfast isn't until 7 o'clock, so I'm nestled in my bag, writing in my tiny journal, reading poems of Han Shan, the Sung Dynasty recluse whose name means "Cold Mountain," for the place of his hermitage.

He says the way of the Tao is the way of balance. "My quilt is the dark blue sky / a boulder makes a fine pillow / Heaven and Earth can crumble and change." I lie back thinking how, even though we've left our homes behind, the danger at the heart of sublime nature leads us to create again a makeshift family that can carry us farther into the wild than we could otherwise go, and ties us to each other with a cord that remains in memory, enriching our lives, long after the trek is over. 

WHO TAKES THE COLD
MOUNTAIN ROAD
TAKES A ROAD
THAT NEVER ENDS
THE RIVERS ARE LONG
AND PILED WITH ROCKS
THE STREAMS ARE WIDE
AND CHOKED WITH GRASS
IT'S NOT THE RAIN THAT
MAKES THE MOSS SLICK
AND IT'S NOT THE WIND
THAT MAKES THE PINES MOAN
WHO CAN GET PAST THE
TANGLES OF THE WORLD
AND SIT WITH ME
IN THE CLOUDS
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