

BREAKING THE CRUST

I find the pull of open spaces strong enough to lead me away from warmth

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY TOM MURPHY

IN THE FALL OF 1985, about six months after I had skied across Yellowstone Park alone for the first time, a woman called me from Los Angeles. Someone had told her about my 14-day trip and she said she was interested in doing a Hollywood film about it. She had a lot of questions. I told her some of the stories: wading

the Snake River half naked at 5 degrees, sleeping in snowbanks under a thin tarp at 35 below zero, traveling three days during a major blizzard through wild country without a map or compass, hearing my own heartbeat any time of the day or night, and no communication or rescue plan if I got hurt.

She was intrigued as I told her stories for about 45 minutes. Then she asked me if I ever thought I was going to die. I said “no.” She said “thank you” and hung up.





I knew what I was doing was dangerous, but I never felt panicked or was overcome with fear. I grew up with the cold, I knew where I was, or at least had a pretty good idea, even when that three-day blizzard shrank visibility to 100 yards.

“Hmm, that was interesting,” I thought. I considered what I had said about not fearing for my life, and yes, I was telling the truth. I never did panic and think “Oh, no, I might die right now.” I could have truthfully said there were many creative ways I could have died on that trip. I crossed several large and steep snow fields on Big Game Ridge and dozens of smaller ones all along my route, where avalanches occur on their own and a person on skis could easily have triggered millions of pounds of snow to boom down the slope, breaking and burying me.

I traveled in the cold, sometimes with the wind pushing and pulling the heat out of me. I slept in extreme cold on two half-inch foam pads on top of six to ten feet of snow, with only a sheet of coated nylon the thickness of a cheap napkin stretched over my head. If I had ever become too cold to warm myself, there was no place to get help. I fell a dozen times with a 70-pound pack on my back, sometimes driving me into the snow, where I could have been impaled on a buried stick. Even a badly sprained knee or ankle would have immobilized me, and with the weather so thick, no one would have been able to fly over and find me. My tracks would have disappeared so no one could have followed me, and no one would even have started to search for a week or two. I crossed the Yellowstone River on maybe two inches of ice with open water upstream and downstream. If I had fallen through, the water would have carried me downstream with tangled skis on my feet.

There were no animals out there that I had any concerns about. The ones I saw were surprised to see me. Ravens and magpies, coyotes and maybe bears would have been excited



to find my body as it melted out of a snowfield in the spring.

While I was negotiating the route, constantly considering my choices and paying attention to eating and hydrating and staying warm, I knew what I was doing was dangerous, but I never felt panicked or was overcome with fear. I grew up with the cold, I knew where I was, or at least had a pretty good idea, even when that three-day blizzard shrank visibility to 100 yards.

The trip took an extreme amount of effort. I carried nearly half my body weight on my back, breaking as much as sixteen inches of powder across more than 100 miles in the first nine days in the most isolated part of Yellowstone, climbing brutally steep Big Game Ridge, then the Continental Divide and Dunraven Pass.

Through all this, the only real doubt I had was the plodding reality of the great physical demands on my body. I was probably doing the equivalent of running



Tom Murphy
as a boy.

a marathon every day for two weeks, then lying down to sleep in a walk-in freezer. I couldn't leave anything outside my little shelter at night because so much snow fell that I wouldn't be able to find it in the morning.

I never thought I was going to die, though it could have happened. I don't know if the movie lady thought my honesty made me too egotistical or that my answer meant "no it really wasn't that difficult a trip." But I never heard from her again.

I GREW UP ON A 7,500-ACRE CATTLE ranch in western South Dakota near the forks of the Cheyenne River. The prairie is hot in the summer and cold in the winter. When I was a kid, temperatures stayed below zero for weeks at a time. The wind blows most of the time, making it worse. Still, I learned early that I could not only survive it, I could travel and work in it as long as I paid attention to

the cold's push against my skin and clothes.

Dad had a garage but never heated it. When the temperature fell below zero the pickup often would not start. Neither would the tractors or the small gasoline engines we used to pump drinking water for the cattle. Six and a quarter miles of native grassland separate the ranch's east fence from the west fence, so cattle were scattered miles apart. If the vehicles did not start, we had to get to the cattle on foot or horseback to care for them.

My dad owned at least a half dozen saddle horses while I was a kid. I don't like horses very much because to me they always meant work, often in the cold. While sitting on a horse, my feet were immobile in the stirrups, or if I rode bareback, they just dangled in the cold air. The heat from the horse's body didn't provide much benefit. I was stuck up in the air, freezing. I thought it was better to walk. It was slower

but I could stay warmer that way.

I moved cattle on horseback in this cold, I ran around on foot in it, I milked cows in it, I chopped ice from stock tanks and stock dams with a single bit ax, I threw loose hay with a pitchfork and seventy pound hay bales with hooks, and fixed barbed wire fences. I walked for hours some days, searching in the cold and wind for sick calves hiding in little patches of brush. I overhauled carburetors on half-horse gasoline engines with my bare fingers while the water trough next to me carried six inches of ice. I did that kind of work because that's what it took to operate a cattle ranch. I would not have sought out this kind of work if I had the choice at the time, but it showed me I could do a lot of work under difficult conditions. It was normal for me and I thought everyone did similar things.

I have never been intimidated by winter.

According to a genetic DNA test I am 85 percent Norwegian. Maybe I am the biologically coded beneficiary of the cod fishermen who survived sitting in little wooden boats in the cold, salty spray of the dark northern sea.



S NOW ON THE RANCH ALWAYS DRIFTED, most deeply on the downwind sides of ridges. Sometimes the crust on the snowdrifts would be so hard you could cross it on horseback.

One of my winter jobs was to chase calves on foot to the feed troughs after being dropped off from my dad's 1951 blue Chevy half ton pickup. I would run across a 600-acre pasture through drifts and shatter the cold, dry grass with my small, numb feet in thin leather boots inside flimsy 4-buckle overshoes.

When dad picked me up at the troughs after I had persuaded one small bunch of calves, he would ferry me out in another direction to retrieve another dozen or so. They all seemed to resist the fact that it was time to eat oats and alfalfa each morning.

The pickup's pathetic heater couldn't warm my toes before I had to jump out into the cold again. It would be hours before we returned to the house. I took off the overshoes in the back porch and clumped into the dining room. Sitting close to the black cast iron woodstove, I would unlace the thin work boots with hard sponge rubber soles and expect my numb toes to tumble out of my socks like pale little dice. I rubbed my toes with my cold hands, my nose dripping, getting as close to the hot stove as I dared, cautious because accidentally touching hot

registers and stoves had left me branded before.

It took a long time to get the warmth to penetrate my flesh. When my toes came back to life it felt like they were being pinched in fencing pliers. I could not make the pain stop once it started. Rubbing my skin and manipulating my toes seemed to provide no relief. I would cry in pain and frustration and a little fear that it would never stop. The heat from the stove seemed to be the demon that was causing the torture. I walked around a little, trying to get my blood to carry the cold away and bring heat from someplace else. My feet were like foreign stumps, removed from my control, so I had to hang onto the back of a chair to keep from falling

I was told as a little kid that there was such a thing as hell, and it was hot. If there is such a thing as hell I knew then that it was cold. This experience was repeated many times and the anticipation was miserable too, because once my feet got numb, I knew how the brutal dance would unfold. I don't know why this severe frost bite as a kid didn't ruin my feet. They rarely get cold now, even during the thousands of days I've spent in sometimes severe cold. As long as I can move around a little, I don't need much clothing in winter. If I have to stand or sit in the cold, I get chilled and need bulky down coats and thick socks and boots.

According to a genetic DNA test I am 85 percent Norwegian. Maybe I am the biologically coded beneficiary of the cod fishermen who survived sitting in little wooden boats in the cold, salty spray of the dark northern sea. I find the pull of open spaces strong enough to lead me away from warmth. Fortunately, I am tolerant enough of the brutal cold to mostly ignore it for the rewards I find in the complex beauty outside.

AS A WILDLIFE AND NATURE photographer, I want my work to be as informed, true, and complete as I can make it. To do that, I need to understand the natural world by participating in it in all seasons as completely as I can. I need to be near the edge of survival since my subjects are sometimes at that same edge. I want to know where I am in the context of the universe. What are the truths of nature? They exist in beauty distilled from an openness to possibility, to truth, and to knowledge. By illustrating and thus informing others of the existence of the

ARMSTRONG SPRING CREEK
The O'Hair Ranch

A world class spring creek located just 50 miles north of Yellowstone Park in Paradise Valley.

Join us for some of the best fly fishing Montana has to offer! Reservations Required
Off Season Rates start Sept. 15th

8 Miles South of Livingston, Montana
Call Judy at (406) 222-2979
Email: Judy@huntchimneyrock.com

Makes a great Christmas gift

wild, I hope to validate its importance and show others some of the incredible majesty of this small globe we share.

Winter is the most interesting season to me because it is the limiting season. Everything is struggling to survive. Many hibernate for months or migrate to less severe climates. I want to understand the ones who stay. In order to understand the other seasons, I need to first understand winter. In some ways, life in spring, summer and autumn can coast along, get fat, rest in the sun or shade, welcome rain, and sleep in comfortable warm places.

How do animals endure and survive when it is so cold, in the dark with so little food, and when it is difficult even to walk? Who are these survivors, how do they do it, and why do they make the choices they make? Plants also have their own survival mechanisms for winter that are just as complex and intriguing as those of animals.

To begin to understand all of this, I felt I had to experience it in a truly engaged way. I decided to travel for weeks at a time through the snow, sleep on the snow, face the cold wind, wait through the fifteen hours of darkness, and then get up and move, in a blizzard if one came along. And I've done it many times, usually alone, which should give me at least an inkling of what it is like to survive the five months of high

mountain Yellowstone winter. One of the rewards, in addition to living through some difficult experiences, was to learn that I can thrive in this marvelous place. The silence is so clear I can hear my own heart beating. The stars are so bright and thick that I can travel with only their light. The shadows cast by a full moon pull my curiosity. Wildlife seems surprised to encounter me out in their winter world, and I wish to reassure them that all I want is an understanding of their lives, not a disruption of their own journey.

Cold is the absence of heat, but it feels like the presence of some powerful force, a spirit that envelops me and lays its broad, sharp breath across my skin searching for spaces in my clothes to pull my heat into that absence. It is never malicious or cruel, yet its honest undistracted power will prevail over the careless or the unlucky. I am humbled by the power of the absence of heat, the way it forces a constant dance that must be learned carefully and well.

Silence is another absence that defines winter in Yellowstone. The modern human world is a profoundly noisy and distracting place. Most of Yellowstone is significantly quieter than the places where most people live. The absence of sound is a relative thing. People go to Yellowstone and encounter a place where they hear the soft sounds of nature; birds in the distance,



Help us preserve the Yellowstone you love for generations to come.
Join our community today at Yellowstone.org/forever

Official Nonprofit Partner of Yellowstone National Park

406 | 848 | 2400 |    

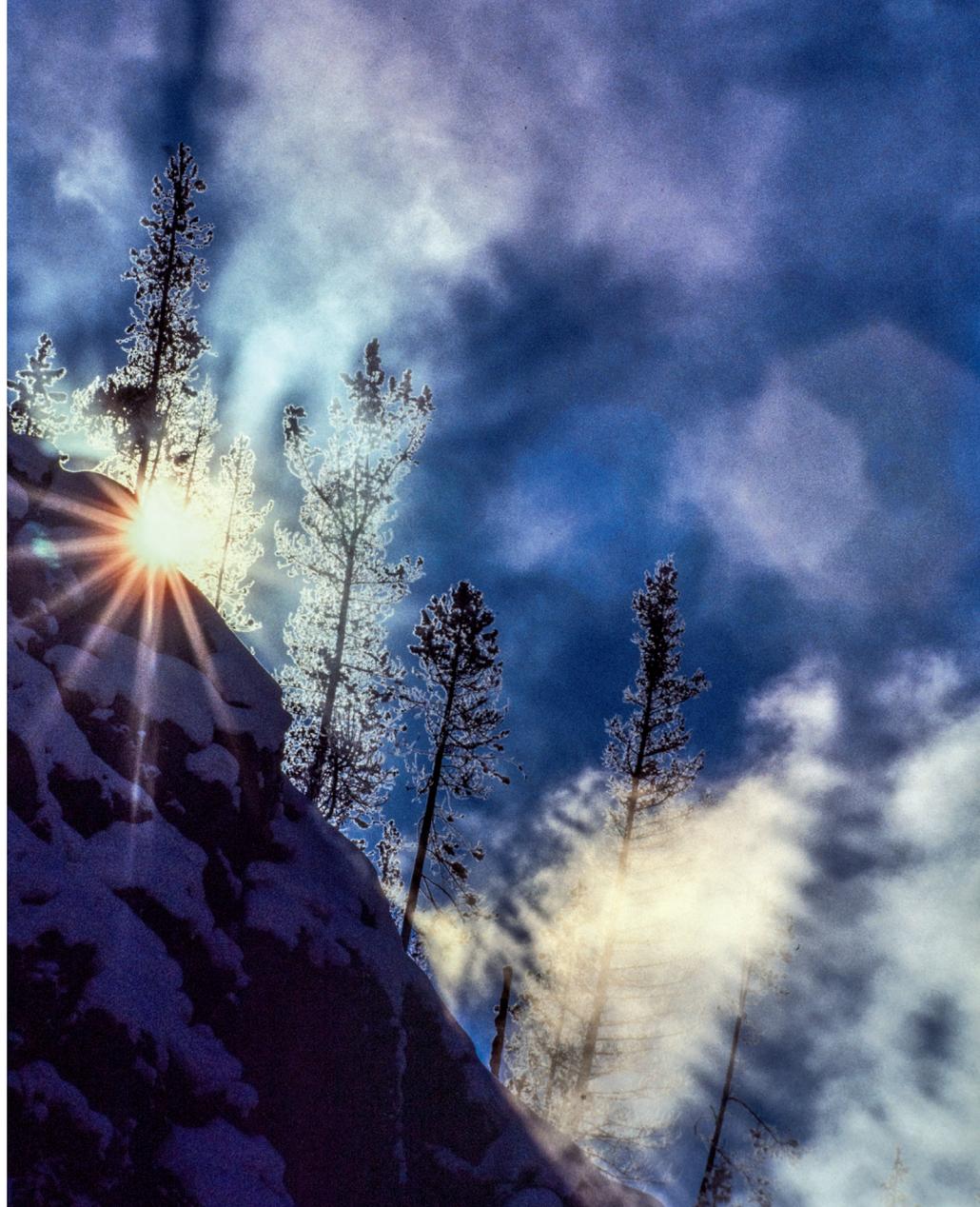
aspen leaves twisting and tapping together, stalks of grass brushing against each in a light breeze, and maybe a small stream tinkling and bubbling nearby. These experiences cause most of us to remark how quiet it is. Yet this scene would be noisy compared to a calm night on Big Game Ridge in February when there is no audible sound at all, until a wind comes up and rocks the cold brittle trees and pushes ice crystals to hiss along the surface of the snowdrifts. Maybe a coyote barks and yips at something. Mostly there is absolute winter silence except for the close sounds of my breathing, the fabric of my clothes or sleeping bag rustling and brushing against some small object, and, most surprising of all, the sounds of my clothing or bedding rubbing my ears or the skin on my head. When do we notice that in our daily noisy lives? I try to imagine what creatures must think, who live in nature's silence, when they encounter us and all our noisy activities.

Skiing is just a method of travel I use to put me into places where new questions may appear, sometimes questions I did not know existed a few minutes earlier. It keeps me open to searching for answers. There is always something to see and learn.

Skiing is a graceful dance on a narrow slippery platform. I am floating on water that is frozen and filled with so much air that it has turned white and sometimes I feel like I am close to being airborne.

As my feet slip past each other, I sense the inconsistencies in the snow or notice when one ski sinks slightly more than the other, sticks slightly, or slips back unexpectedly. I pull back to even my stride or adjust my center of balance with pressure on the appropriate pole. If one pole sinks deep in an air pocket, I shift my hips and knees ahead to keep the point of balance moving cleanly along. I lose a little momentum from the partial loss of power from that pole, but I keep my balance with efficient motion.

The constant subconscious adjustments are part of the rhythm of being in contact with myself and with the space I am occupying. The space is not just the point I am in at any one instant, it is the arc of my life, my motion through the wild, quiet, unforgiving and powerful universe of snow, cold, trees, hillsides, and steep mountain faces. All this could pull the breath out of me, but also it gives me the sense of my own power and weakness and a rightful reason to be. I have my own validation, given to me by my struggles to see how the earth carries me.



The earth is the only completely honest force I have ever encountered. Sincere contact with this honesty gives me the opportunity to see the heart of God, the heart of life, and the heart of love. The mountains are infinitely bigger than anyone. It takes all of anyone's effort to get completely into them under just our own humble muscle power. There will be only a little left of someone's ego after a week. You will leave the best part of your heart there if you go to learn. You will learn about mountains, you will learn about time, you will learn about patience, you will learn about limitless space, you will learn about cold, you will learn about silence, you will learn about wind, you will learn about the power of the sky as it looks down on the mountains, you will learn about the reach of the universe, you will learn about darkness, you will learn about the movement of water, you will learn about the steadiness of gravity, you will learn that everything is bigger than yourself, that you are something, but only a small part of something. ■