

## FORGET ME NOT

Part catharsis, part paean to Alex Lowe, part valentine to Conrad Anker, part motherly explanation to her sons, artist Jennifer Lowe-Anker shares her most personal thoughts in a long-awaited memoir

Written by Todd Wilkinson



INTO THE DAWN  
2000  
CATTLE MARKER ON RAG PAPER  
29.75" x 22"  
JENNIFER LOWE-ANKER

An existential truth: When a human being is proclaimed to be the best at something in the world, there is, from that moment forward, only one direction the person can go. Getting to the summit of an endeavor is the metaphor our society uses to define success but seldom do we divine the wisdom found in a retiring descent.

The story that I am about to mention reads like a modern Greek tragedy, a tale in which a vaunted hero, gifted with enormous natural talent, a workaholic's penchant, and bestowed with cult worship celebrity, challenges mountains. He is considered nearly immortal and conscientious, yet he is toppled by what any objective person would call an act of God. By failing to make the journey home, he forces his loved ones to resolve the question: "Why?"

This, however, represents merely an introduction to the life and legend of the late great Montana alpinist Alex Lowe. In an attempt to reconcile Lowe's untimely death by avalanche on Tibet's Shishipangma in 1999, the fallen hero's best friend, Conrad Anker — who was beside Lowe in the airy Himalayan wilderness on the day he died — returns to the West heartbroken, finding mutual consoling in his surviving widow and the couple's three young sons in Bozeman.

Astoundingly, Anker and Jennifer Lowe find love and marry. Not only does Anker become, arguably a more attentive, less distracted husband and father, but also he adopts the Lowe boys as his own.

In her new and long-awaited memoir, *Forget Me Not*, Jennifer Lowe-Anker, a writer, artist and wife of two mountaineers, takes a real-life emotionally charged tale of personal mourning and transforms it into a more powerful parable that qualifies, elegiacally, as one for the ages.

At the time Lowe died on October 5, 1999, he was touted as the premier mountaineer on Earth. He had become an icon to young, outdoor-crazed Americans because here was a professional, engaged in an extreme sport, following his bliss. Part of Lowe's added mystique was his fortune in attracting a string of lucrative commercial sponsorships, a passport that sent him to far-flung exotic peaks around the globe, his

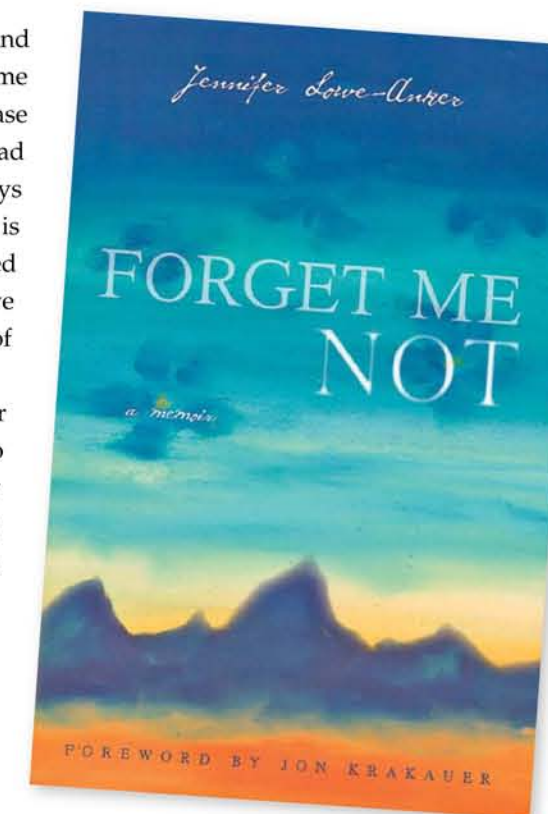
"YOU REMAIN IN MY HEART ALWAYS  
AND I WILL DO NOTHING THAT JEOPARDIZES  
MY SAFE RETURN TO MY FAMILY.  
INFINITE LOVE, ALEX"

— A wireless note sent from mountaineer Alex Lowe to his wife, Jennifer, while he was scaling Pakistan's Great Trango Towers prior to his death three months later on Tibet's Shishipangma in 1999.

passion for living large and dangerous; and, back home at his Craftsman-style base camp in Bozeman, he had a devoted family always waiting for him. There is no disputing that he adored them, and to some, Lowe was the personification of a man who had it all.

The fact that he, Anker and David Bridges (who also died in the epic snow slide on Shishipangma) were climbing for fun when fickle tragedy struck is uncanny.

So, too, were the enigmatic circumstances surrounding Anker. Earlier that same spring, Anker, also a celebrated alpinist had been among a climbing team that found the body of George Mallory on the slopes of Everest. Mallory had famously disappeared with Sandy Irvine in 1924 while in pursuit of being the first to climb



BOOK COVER ART JENNIFER LOWE-ANKER

*After Alex's death, the Lowe house was garlanded by strings of Tibetan prayer flags and there was a massive communal memorial service held in the college basketball arena in Bozeman that brought together neighbors and the living deans of climbing.*

the planet's tallest summit.

Until Anker stumbled upon Mallory's remains, the elusive explanation of what had happened to him represented perhaps THE seminal mystery in adventure lore.

Three months later, Anker was the person who made the painful phone call to Jennifer Lowe with the devastating news that made primetime TV reports.

Lowe's body was never recovered. Part catharsis, part paean to Alex, part valentine to Anker, part motherly explanation to her sons — each forming the corner of a meditation — *Forget Me Not* is a read that gives the public answers to voyeuristic speculation and wondering. Lowe-Anker draws upon a trove of poignant letters the couple exchanged during Lowe's ceaseless travel. She crafts an intimate portrait of her husband and the ironic circumstances that led Anker to their doorstep.

Today, theirs is a clan still in a state of healing. The family is involved in a number of global humanitarian and environmental causes, including support for a climbing school in Central Asia promoted under the auspices of the Alex Lowe Charitable Foundation.

In their living room in Bozeman, surrounded by photos of Lowe and Anker, and Jennifer's distinctive paintings rendered in livestock markers, she shares a picture of herself, Anker, and youngest son, Isaac with the Dalai Lama when his Holiness went to Washington, D.C. to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor from President George W. Bush.

During a recent visit to Bozeman by presidential candidate Barack Obama, Jennifer gave him a small piece of rock carried down from the summit of Everest by Anker.

As is the bittersweet truth of families who dwell in the shadow of famous people, little is usually revealed or known about the stoic spouse who provides sustenance and support on the home front.

After Alex's death, the Lowe house was garlanded by strings of Tibetan prayer flags and there was a massive communal memorial service held in the college basketball arena in Bozeman that brought together neighbors and the living

deans of climbing. Out of respect for their suffering, few wanted to intrude upon the private space of Jennifer and her boys. Gossip swirled in the aftermath, in magazines like *Outside*, of a budding romance between Lowe and the cerebral Anker.

Lowe-Anker's book lets the compassionate and the curious into the family's struggle, on her terms. Besides the sweet poetry of her writing, *Forget Me Not* is a ponderance about the choices we all make; a reflection on the tradeoffs between pursuit of fame versus the toll on family; material wealth versus spiritual well-being; and the bittersweet paradox that, from out of unspeakable trauma, the hope of deeper meaning and solace for survivors can sometimes prevail.

In a moving passage, Lowe-Anker looks back:

*"It was his character, his pure magnetism that drew people to him," she writes. "Alex was on fire for life."*

*"There's not enough time in this life to do everything," he used to say. "If only there was more time."*

*"I read my letters from Alex many times since his death, knowing that he often wrote to reassure me but also to reassure himself that he would come home. 'I always come home,' he once told me. 'What if you die in the mountains?' I asked him, and his answer was, 'I won't, because to die would be to fail as a climber. Staying alive is the first rule. Besides, I have too much to live for.'"*

*"'Right,' I persisted, 'but what if you do die in the mountains?'"*

*"Just throw me into a crevasse?" he said and grinned."*

NOT LONG AGO, Big Sky Journal sat down for a conversation with Jennifer Lowe-Anker and her husband, Conrad Anker, at their Montana home.

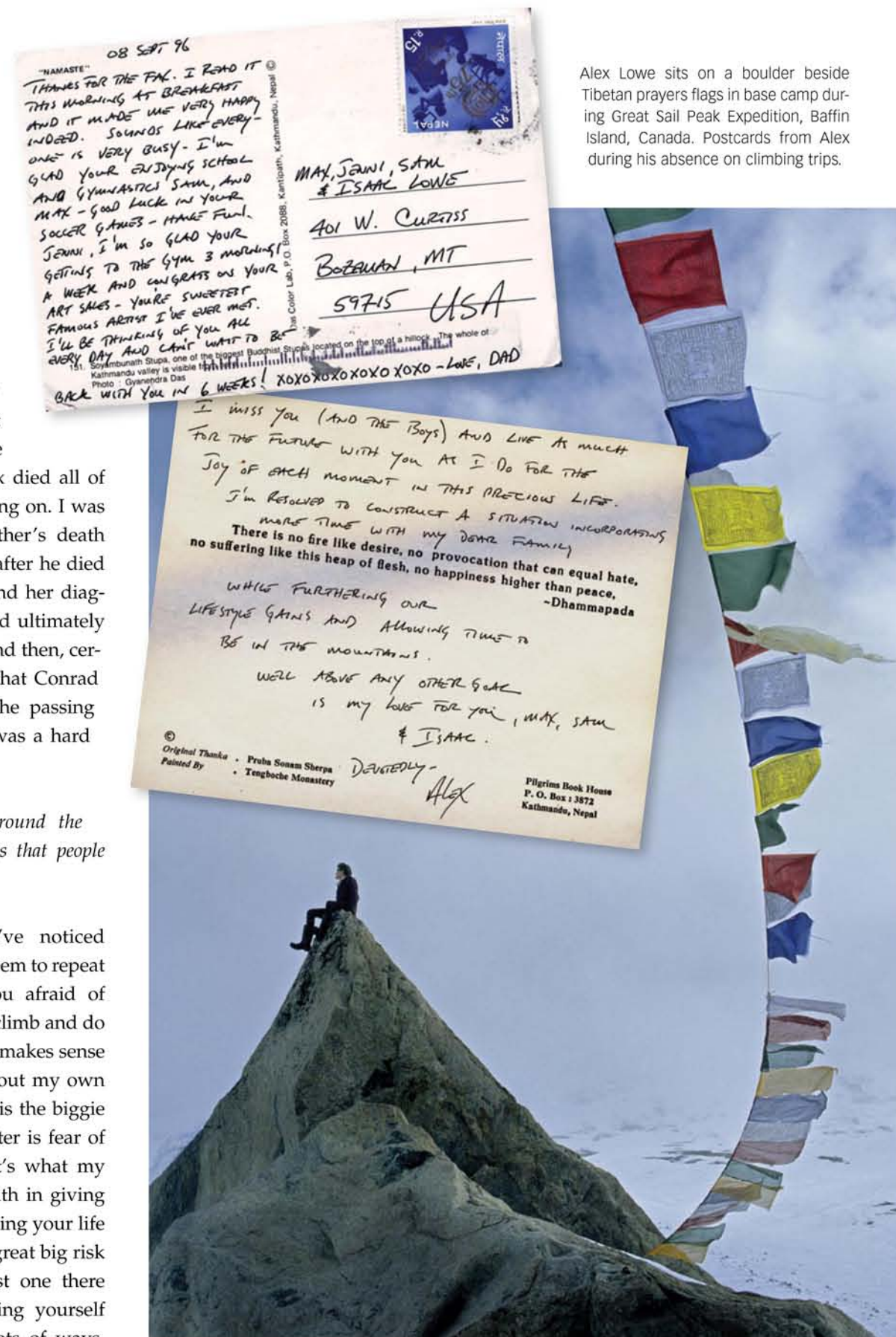
**BIG SKY JOURNAL:** *You struggled with how to tell the story. You considered enlisting some of Alex's friends and others to possibly serve as ghostwriters. But you realized you needed to go it alone and part of it involved not over-glorifying Alex but bringing him down to earth.*

**JENNIFER LOWE-ANKER:** Others could have

written about Alex, but I had all of these letters. They were so personal. I wanted to be able to show more depth to the soul of this man and who he was, and to not just portray him as the hero that everyone thought he was. I felt like it was my story to tell and that I needed to assume ownership of it. But it was a tough process and it took me a while to muddle through, because after Alex died all of these other things were going on. I was also dealing with my mother's death that happened right away after he died and then came my sister and her diagnosis with breast cancer and ultimately her death two years ago. And then, certainly, there was the grief that Conrad was going through with the passing of close family friends. It was a hard few years.

**BSJ:** *As you travel around the world, what are the questions that people want to have answered?*

**LOWE-ANKER:** I've noticed that most of the questions seem to repeat themselves. Like: "Are you afraid of having Conrad go out and climb and do you still climb yourself?" It makes sense that they want to know about my own level of fear. Fear of dying is the biggie for all of us, but even greater is fear of losing those we love. That's what my book is about, the blind faith in giving yourself to someone and living your life with them and taking that great big risk called love. It's the biggest one there is. Because it means making yourself vulnerable to be hurt in lots of ways.



Alex Lowe sits on a boulder beside Tibetan prayer flags in base camp during Great Sail Peak Expedition, Baffin Island, Canada. Postcards from Alex during his absence on climbing trips.

GORDON WILTSIE



LOWE-ANKER COLLECTION

The Lowe-Anker family on top of Alex Lowe Peak, formerly known as peak 10,031 located in the Hyalite Mountain ranger near Bozeman, Mont.

*Conrad is a very different man than Alex. It's been really good for me to be with him. It has opened up my eyes to other things in my life and more possibilities.*

BSJ: Conrad returned from Shishipangma carrying the added psychic weight of being a witness to Alex's death. What influence did that have on the two of you getting together?

LOWE-ANKER: I think that initially there was a strength of bond with Conrad having been there and me wanting to get as close to the actual moment of Alex's death as I could. He lived it. Somehow, I felt that Alex had been on the other side of the world and so far away. He had been the most important person in my life, but the event of his death was somewhat abstract. With Conrad, we were both so emotional and shaken and living in our own worlds of grief. In a way, Conrad was one of the only people who understood what I felt like. We were calling and visiting with each other pretty much every day. I think it was just a natural thing that love followed. Today, we have seven years of marriage together under our belt.

BSJ: A lot of people are curious about that. Your relationship seems almost archetypal.

LOWE-ANKER: I have grown to know the person Conrad was because when he and Alex went off climbing together, I didn't know him well. I've realized what a compassionate soul he is. He did the ultimate thing for his friend, which was to show up and be here for us when others might not have done it. For him to say to himself, "My God, Alex is gone. These boys are going to need to know a man — the man who was their father's best friend." That was a huge thing. But then he became part of our lives. He has this very intense side to himself. He is a compassionate person who wants to do good things for the world and then there is this other part that is silly and whimsical. The climbing comes somewhere in between. Conrad is a very different man than Alex. It's been really good for me to be with him. It has opened up my eyes to other things in my life and more possibilities. What do you think of that, dear? You've never heard me describe you like that.

CONRAD ANKER: I think for Jenni to see me brought a sense of closure. Because I had been at the scene of

the accident and having no body, there was just this aura of Alex's disappearance. I was as close as one could get to his death and see it with the eyes of a survivor. Alex and I had never talked about the possibility of dying and what would happen. I was awakened to the reality of how it's very different when you are a climber with a family.

BSJ: Conrad, you wrote a book about finding Mallory and in 2007 stood on top of Everest for the second time as part of a documentary in which you retraced Mallory's and Irvine's footsteps into the clouds where they disappeared. It was a dream of yours to get the film made.

CONRAD ANKER: Humans have a physical need for discovery. That's why we are the widest ranging species on this planet. Second is the fact that we cover more square miles. Climbing is a way of exploring, to go out on a cliff and challenge yourself. Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay [who are credited with being the first to summit Everest] were two of the last great terrestrial explorers but what made them great is how they gave back to humanity after they came down from the mountain.

BSJ: Jenni, you were a climber and you and Alex spent dates together going up pitches. What Conrad is talking about isn't a foreign concept.

LOWE-ANKER: Climbing is a mentally and physically challenging way of taking you down to a small place where you exist just in that moment. You have to be paying sharp attention to what you're doing. It shrinks the massive world and makes it go away. You're focused on the very pure moment and coordinating your body with your mind. You have to do the right thing or you can get into trouble.

BSJ: Every sport has its own breed of athletic hedonists.

LOWE-ANKER: Certainly there are hedonistic climbers. Alex was one. He was more hedonistic than Conrad is.

CONRAD ANKER: With regard to athletic hedonism,

Everyone wonders how we face that, but there is no answer. You just have to live life and not think about it. When it happens, you just have to deal with it the best way you can.

CONRAD ANKER: For me, a lot of the questions surround the question of "Why do I still climb?" If I get that question, clue number one is that the person who asks it is not going to understand why I do it.

LOWE-ANKER: They ask me not only if Conrad still climbs, but does he climb as hard as ever and I say "yes" and "no." He definitely has tempered what he does because he has a family to think about. He knows the anguish we went through losing Alex, because he was part of it. He felt the grief firsthand.

CONRAD ANKER: Do I think about my family responsibility? Yes, of course. I'm now a middle-aged guy and I think of climbing in terms of assessing objective risk. Going

into the mountains, you examine what the risk is. If there's a hanging serac, I may not go there. The objective is putting yourself in a place where, if there's going to be an accident, it is by act of God rather than through any calculated mistake you might make. There are some elements you have some control over and other things you don't.

BSJ: Has your calculus changed in assessing how much time you're going to spend away on expeditions versus being here with your family?

CONRAD ANKER: It has. I travel less than Alex did and I do less climbing trips. This morning, I said to Sam [Anker's second eldest adopted son who is going to be a junior in high school in the fall of 2008] that we have 104 weekends before you graduate from high school. He said: "I can't wait," and I said, "Well, that's only 104 and it's not a lot from an adult's standpoint. I want to make the most of every day I have with the boys. To me, my time with them is special.

*All Alex needed, even at 40 years old, was the hint of someone in the wings challenging him and he would train more. He said he had to be physically better. He set a very high standard for himself. I am able to look back and see what he had going.*



Alex Lowe and Conrad Anker exchange a high-five atop Rakekniven spire Filchner Mts., Queen Maud Land, Antarctica.

you see it in hunting and hunting could be considered a metaphor for any sport. Some hunters want the biggest trophy or the biggest animal they can bag. Or they want the fastest car or the biggest house. When you are a young hunter, risk and dying are just part of the game. Young hunters have this idealized notion of the heroic mythic death or the need to boast about how they brought down the woolly mammoth. Climbing is like the mythical hunt, but for me it has always been experiential, not about a race or a prize. You can't describe what that means. There are no climbing television shows on cable to show you. When you are an older hunter, your attitude changes and you become more reflective. When I am out with climbers who are 15 years younger, the guest always gets to climb first. I enjoy watching them know the euphoria that

comes with the sense of discovery of going up a route without any previous knowledge of it. I think it is our duty to train the young hunters and be mentors to them.

**BSJ:** *Alex was renowned for his physical prowess, his legendary one-fingered pull ups and his ability to set speed records, for example, in going up and down the Grand Teton several times in a single day or his swift scaling of Aconcagua in Argentina. He was a bonafide, self-effacing rock star.*

**LOWE-ANKER:** He wanted to be the best, he was driven to be the best and he made it there. He never believed he was the best in the world though he knew he was right up there. I often wonder what it would have been like for him to transition into this place in life where you are [she says, looking at Anker]. It could have been hard for him, could have been very difficult. Even his parents recognize that. But he was also a sensitive observer and you see it in his letters.

**CONRAD ANKER:** It's part of the ball of knowledge. The transition [to a slower life and fewer expeditions] would have been really tough for him. All he needed, even at 40 years old, was the hint of someone in the wings challenging him and he would train more. He said he had to be physically better. He set a very high standard for himself. I am able to look back and see what he had going. The amount of time he spent climbing, on one end of it, wasn't polite to Jenni and the kids. He was gone more than I was and I was climbing full time. I was on expedition nine months of the year, but Alex had a family. Some of the climbs he would do around here were without a rope. You would never have known that he had three kids he was responsible for.

**BSJ:** *Some might characterize that as being irresponsible.*

**CONRAD ANKER:** There's a double standard in our society. If you go into risk because it's your duty, then you are a hero. But if you do it for your fun, then you are vilified, especially if it's a fringe sport, extreme this or that. If you're a fireman or a soldier, you're never questioned about the level of risk. In both of those professions, you enter into risky settings on your own accord.

**BSJ:** *Are your sons, Max, Sam, and Isaac climbers?*

**LOWE-ANKER:** They've been out some and have spent a little time climbing in the gym with their friends but for the most part, they are not interested in it the way that Alex and Conrad have been. They obviously are familiar with the climbing culture and they know the risks. Conrad and I are very conscious about allowing them to find for themselves what they like to do and steer them in the direction of

what they have talent at. They are finding their own paths. Isaac — the youngest son — has declared that he wants to be a naturalist and Bozeman writer David Quammen has taken him under his wing. He brings him little presents from his travels and he and his wife, Betsy, enabled him to meet Jane Goodall. He also went to a lecture by E.O. Wilson. Although he was only in fifth grade, he took notes and wrote a little report and gave it to his class without being solicited to do so. He said his classmates needed to know this stuff.

Max is finding his own way, too. And when we went to Antarctica, we were very aware of the enormous carbon footprint we created by going down there. To help compensate, Sam made this little movie. He dragged a camera around and got five or six hours of footage which he edited down to 10 minutes and made a very passionate film. This was before Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* came out and Sam said global warming was real. When he premiered it down in Telluride, someone in the audience challenged him and asked, "How do you know global warming is real?"

GORDON WILTSIE

*I think my voice was always there in my paintings and in a strong sense of self from having been raised in Montana and having an affinity for this wild place I call home.*

Sam, who was just 13 at the time, said: "Well, I can see it and all of the scientists who have been in Antarctica their whole lives have said they've never seen it that warm." Conrad and I are incredibly proud of the boys for wanting to make a positive difference in their world.

**BSJ:** *An essential backdrop to the storytelling in your book is the natural world, a force that brought you and Alex together, that keeps you bonded with Conrad and is ever-present in the identity of your family. How did this voice of a naturalist emerge?*

**LOWE-ANKER:** I think my voice was always there in my paintings and in a strong sense of self from having been raised in Montana and having an affinity for this wild place I call home. My grandmother was largely responsible for that

and hopefully you get a sense of her in the book. Nature has been a place of solace.

**BSJ:** *Back in the early 1990s when Alex was away ascending some distant peak you would be at home, sometimes with one of your sons sitting on your lap, as you created another painting. You've gained a national reputation as an artist who portrays colorful and whimsical wildlife scenes and have collectors across the country. How has your work evolved?*

**LOWE-ANKER:** It has definitely changed. The trip to Antarctica opened doors to a different subject matter. I featured penguins in a few pieces and expanded to Arctic animals to draw attention to species that in my mind were suffering because of our impacts. Some of my work has

gotten a little more political. One piece, titled *Buffalo Bills*, portrays Yellowstone bison and the names of laws that have been passed and it hangs, on loan, today in the interior office of Senator Max Baucus in Washington, D.C.

**BSJ:** *For a family that seems perpetually in motion, how do the Lowe-Ankers achieve balance?*

**LOWE-ANKER:** Well, Conrad goes to yoga [she says, laughing].

**CONRAD ANKER:** I feel like there needs to be a physical exercise component. Whenever the kids are getting anxious, we kick them outdoors and tell them to take a run.

**LOWE-ANKER:** But he doesn't crack the whip on himself quite enough, though [again, she says, laughing]. No, he does get out and ice climb when he can up Hyalite [south of Bozeman]. And I love hiking with my girlfriends. Last win-

ter, I skied about 25 times, both alpine and cross-country.

**CONRAD ANKER:** When I'm home, because I'm a morning person, I make breakfast for the boys and deliver coffee to Jenni in bed.

**LOWE-ANKER:** We cook together and eat together as a family. It's our ritual.

**CONRAD ANKER:** A good family life equals to being a good person. We are sticklers about getting the family together for slow-cooked homemade meals. And on Sunday nights we invite guests over and talk about things happening in their lives and the world.

**LOWE-ANKER:** We realize not all families can manage that. Not all families live the way we do, but it's important for us. It's our way, after what we've been through, to have a grounding place. **BSJ**

