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An age that has no criticism is either an age in which art is immobile, hieratic, and confined to the reproduction of formal types, or an age that possesses no art at all.

Oscar Wilde
ONE MORE SMOKE BY THE FIRE
Sharon Holder-Coleman

It was my first time to go back since her death. Living 2,000 miles away had made it easier to pretend it had been a mistake and that she would still be there. I even learned to black out that unexpected telegram and its contents, which had caused my heart to pound in my ears.

Now, as I walked through the quiet village, I felt a surge of grief and frustration I had stifled for so long, I could not pretend anymore. The silence of the street was ominous as I approached the corner. I thought back to the other times I had walked down this backroad, my step quickening in anticipation, when, finally abandoning any form of dignity, I would bound in through the front door waiting to be greeted by that smile. Her smile. Auntie’s.

This time my steps were slow as I turned the corner. I kept my head down, eyes fastened on the joints in the concrete. I was afraid to look up, afraid because I did not know what I would do when I saw the empty house. I watched my feet walking as I ran my hand along the low rough wall.

Suddenly, my fingers reached the cool surface of the old, rusty wrought iron gate. I raised my head slowly. The house was a grim silhouette against the evening sun. Purple and gray shadows streaked across the sky, signaling the approach of twilight.

The brown paint on the doors and windowsills was grimy and chipped, the gray walls impassive. The little lawn was overgrown and shrubs grew in wild profusion. Throughout the yard, patches of dandelions and pink wild flowers sprouted defiantly in disarray.

I followed the pebbled path to the back of the house. The vegetable garden of which she had been so proud was now tangled and choked with weeds. I stepped over to the window and peered in. I caught my breath when I saw her old rocking chair. It was pulled up by the window as if she had just gotten up to leave the room for a minute. There were still ashes and cinders in the grate of the old broken stove, with
the old blackened poker lying across the top. Family pictures and paintings had been removed from the walls. The room looked cold from neglect and disuse.

But I remembered this house when it was filled with warmth and life. As a child I would burst in, shrieking gleefully from room to room. Her face would beam as she followed me, her ample frame moving quickly to bounce me on her knees and her dark brown eyes would twinkle as she ushered me towards the pantry. Once I was settled, she would proceed to stuff my face with goodies and fill my ears with news of the village and everyone within a twenty-mile radius, her gray hair bobbing as she stressed her disapproval of the riffraffs and ill-bred juvenile delinquents of the village.

And then, in later years, just the two of us would sit by the fire as she told me of my father's youthful misadventures. He was clearly her favorite of six brothers and sisters. There were other times when she would dress me up in her old clothes, and we would sneak a smoke of tobacco in the absence of my disapproving parents. Should we hear their footsteps in the hall, we would quickly throw the tobacco in the fire like two old, retired veterans. And sometimes she would throw me a conspiratorial wink as she instigated controversy with a seemingly innocent remark to some unsuspecting victim.

I stared harder into the window trying to see her. I wanted to hug her, smell her tobacco once more. I wanted to say, "You see Auntie, you were wrong. I told you, you would still be here just like the veteran you are when I came back."

But now all I do is stare at an empty house, hoping for one more chat, one more smoke by the fire.
CYCLE OF FIRE
Doug Warren

Retelling History’s story
We take up a tune we have learned.
Generations reliving past glory.

Years pass without much notice, barely felt. Centuries merge
Retelling History’s story.

Great men attempt to foray
into time’s tapestry in printed word
Generations reliving past glory.

In the earth’s memory man has hardly started his reign, but he has been heard
Retelling History’s story.

Can we survive without worry?
The power of the atom burns.
Generations reliving past glory.

Conquest and power make us surly.
Fingers on the red button, priorities blurred.
Retelling History’s story
Generations reliving past glory?
I loved Tommy in his sandbox, 
freshly packed with afternoon 
storm, and we little nymphs 
winged and horned, chastened 
patches of golden mud, 
rolling, rocking, hurling, 
heaving, panting, we played.

Resting, we perched on plastic 
rowned and grandly glowed, 
trusts intact, warm and fuzzy, 
ared our momentary interests, 
innocence of two distinct forms, 
parated by fine similarities.

A moment’s careful study, new 
comfort crept in, smooth and clear. 
Ve made mud of spires and mountains 
in calm, even strokes, and beamed 
right as harbor beacons — 
hat’s how I knew I was magic.

Later, much later, inhibitions 
ntact, Jesse blew yname and waved his 
wand, slickly greased, packed 
in perfumes and peacock 
umes, forever

ollowed and pleasantly 
othered by packs of honey ees pursuing wolves 
pursuing honey ees — I

waited my slot and strutted
my stance, took my shot at hot blind lust. Planted in the dark of his Chevy cave, he stabbed at the beast in my groin.

Rollingrockinghurlingheavingpanting — he played for a moment then lay for a moment and went away — that's how I lost my magic.
I heard my ex-husband’s didactic voice as I stood, indecisive, before an overwhelming selection of wines.

“Red with beef, white with chicken and fish,” he was saying. He had a rule for every occasion.

Of course he wasn’t really there. I was standing alone in aisle ten, brightly lit and crowded with Friday night shoppers wielding polite red plastic baskets or vindictively plowing through with full-size four-wheel carts.

“C’mon, Raymond,” I said to myself, “loosen up.”

We had been married for seven years. But not too long ago Raymond had left me, presumably for someone who really appreciates the marriage of white Zinfandel with Pacific Cod. I looked forward now to getting more, having some fun. I chose a fine looking bottle of Texas blush and set it in my basket.

Nine checkout registers were open, but the longest line was at the express lane. I stopped there and looked around. (You never know when or where a meaningful encounter might occur.) I scanned the crowd to the rhythm of the cashier’s tap-dancing fingers.


“That be all?” she asked.

A preoccupied customer mumbled ambiguously in response.

“Out of ten.” Blip. . .blip. . .blip-blip. “One-eighty-four is your change. Paper or plastic?”

No reply.

“Have a nice evening . . . How’re you this evening? This be all?” Blip.

“Mmmmmhhmm.”

Blip, blip. “Three-thirty-nine. Have a nice evening.”

I had always wanted to jump from a plane. The very idea had driven Raymond nuts. There was nothing to stop me now. Sky-diving. Hot-air ballooning. White-water rafting. Any hyphenated sport I could think of was now mine alone.
I turned to look around but quickly averted my eyes so as not to appear too interested. Directly behind me stood an opportunity of meaningful proportion, a man with that certain aura—a type I would love to encounter. He wore neatly pressed gray slacks and a comfortable old sweater. He had wavy, dark brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses. I pictured him as the beleaguered head of an under-staffed department at a major museum in the city. Yes, a meaningful career. What problems he must face. The poor man. Surely an understanding word was called for here; I tried to think of something to say.

Ahead of me a slender young man in a mauve gabardine shirt shifted his weight impatiently, holding a large, flimsy box of fresh pastries.

"I should have come by earlier," he whispered to his companion. "Look at this crowd." His friend, a pale man with short, neatly parted hair, looked upward, rolled his eyes, and sighed dramatically.

"I told you, but you wouldn't listen—as usual."

A gray-haired woman waited quietly between us, hunched over in her heavy, out-of-season overcoat. Her full attention was locked on a lurid photograph of Liz Taylor, obese and disheveled, gracing the cover of the National Enquirer. We all moved forward.

I turned to Mr. Meaningful behind me.

"Liz has her problems, hasn't she?" I tried to sound casual.

"What?" he said, startled. My eyes fell to the items he held in his hand—three packs of odor-eater shoe-liners, two cans of Spam and a box of Tampax (Super-Plus).

"Never mind," I said. I turned back.

The cashier waved the box of pastries over the magic green light. "You know I've never tried these," she said. "What are they like, anyway?"

"Well, they're crispy—they're deep fried," said the man in the gabardine shirt. "And they're sweet, of course, covered with powdered sugar. Very rich. But just wonderful,
Cannen Anderson

really... simply sinful."

"Uh, huh," she responded, preoccupied. With a glance at her watch she punched a series of keys with one hand. "Six­ninety-five. I've seen them before... always wondered."

"Well, we're having a party. Come on over—you can try one," said Gabardine Shirt's friend over his shoulder, and the two laughed together, hurrying toward the automatic door.

"I wouldn't crash that party," the cashier remarked with a wink to her next customer, the gray-haired woman in front of me. She waved a frozen chicken over the green light. "I know what kind of party they like." Blip­blip. "Four­oh­one. Do you have a penny?"

Mrs. Gray­hair dug for change in her purse without responding.

(I wouldn't mind crashing that party, I thought. In fact, I wished they'd asked me. I'd bet there'll be dancing at their party. I used to dance like crazy, before you­know­who came into my life.)

Looking up, I noticed a man in a bright green running suit rolling up to the end of the line. A blue­handled mop protruded from his cart, along with five four­packs of toilet paper and a bouquet of fresh flowers. His plans for the evening were not as obvious as some. He leaned on his cart, both forearms resting on the handle, one foot propped on the bottom rung, and rolled the cart ever so slightly back and forth as he hummed to himself. I wondered if the flowers and the mop were a combination gift. Wouldn't someone be surprised.

The cashier waved my bottle of wine and a TV Guide across her green light. I held out a five dollar bill and waited for change.

"Three cents. Paper or plastic?"

He was ugly as all get out, but he seemed happy enough—the man with the mop, that is. And why not, after all, sing along with the song that's playing? You can't jump from a plane after work on every Friday. "Paper," I said, "It's so much more useful the second time around."
"Have a nice evening," the cashier said without looking. I hoisted my paper sack into the crook of my arm and headed for the door, meeting a stream of people coming in, each oblivious to all others.

A bland face stared vacantly back at me in the dark glass of the door. I lifted one eyebrow and watched a small smile fight to form itself as I passed through. Outside, a quiet white moon had just pushed itself up behind the bare, empty branches of the trees across the street. The night air was cool and clean. I turned around and went back into the store. Thought I'd get me a full dozen bright daffodils. My favorite at this time of year.
THE BAG LADY
D'Anne Luetge

A sluggish scow swamped by racy speed boats,
sleeks yachts motoring to work,
    I ferry against the upstream flow.
Sweat in my eyes,
    lids lower the boom;
salty river currents stream
down my bowed spine, a bent mast.
My breath, the air thick cotton blanket,
    the breeze cut off like a shut port-hole;
gods, it’s only morning!

Struggling, hurrying to quiet back water,
mismatched shoes barge across shifting potholes;
arms strain, lifting, lowering a wheeled chest.
I scull by merchant fleets catering exotic dishes
and ports selling expensive wares,
    seek for alleyways,
inlets to hidden coves to restock supplies.

Once in safe harbor I inspect metallic holds,
    force their abalone lids open searching
    for hidden pearls.
Salad wilts among spaghetti, cold meat sauce,
    congealed fettucini,
    green islands rising from a sea of last night’s servings.
Fish heads swim in ebbs of flat soda,
    fried chicken wings, trimmed ships’ sails;
rice and potato skins encrust the bones.
Styrofoam buoys greasy fries;
    cheese sticks to hamburger crusts,
    tar once melted, now
    hard barnacles glued to a keel.
Corks bob in open wine bottles,
    flotsam in an empty ocean;
Pooling drops left in whiskey and beer bottles
create a sailor's brew:
the flavor harsh...the effects numbing.

I stash each meal in separate bags
and anchor them to the chest's grid.
Thus replenished, I hunt for treasure:
glittery tinsel catches the dazzling early colors,
  rainbows chasing a storm-swept night;
discarded sweaters ward dank chills;
colored caps and bright paper,
  awards for another successful navigation
through the dark;
a broken bat, a splintered fence post, belaying pins
  protect my property from pirates:
glass bottles
  of clear turquoise of kelp or sunrise pink.
  for every Lady needs something pretty.

Wire mesh encases the discoveries,
jewels discarded by the unknowing.
My treasures no one else finds or sees;
  only I know their secret; they speak to me, calling.
I must find them,
  find them before they're taken away, stolen
by the city.
Pirates who appear twice weekly,
large metal barges loudly proclaim their theft
  as their claws scoop the bins,
emptying blindly into their gullet,
  leaving only acrid black smoke
and oil slicks on the ground.
PRAYING HARD

Gary Beck
AND —  
Walter Hobdy

Each moment devoted to
The moment last is
Another moment past.
No wonder we’re behind

AFRICAN -AMERICAN PUDDING  
Walter Hobdy

reds, yellows, blacks, greens,
juicy wedges, sweet half moons,
ripe watermelons.
ONCE UPON A TIME
Alec thought: *This is just like in the the movies; it’s so unreal. I feel like Tom Cruise shooting a film on location in Palm Beach!* The analogy had some basis in fact; people had often told him he looked like Tom Cruise, only taller, and he was standing in the side vestibule in the largest Catholic Church in Palm Beach, Florida—one of the main actors in the biggest wedding that town had seen in years!

He ran his index finger along the white tux shirt collar. It felt a little tight. Jason, Sarah Jean’s younger brother and his best man, touched him on the elbow. “O’kay, now,” he whispered. Alec straightened his back, pulled down on the bottom edges of the black silk tux jacket and nodded. *Lights. Camera. Action!*

The Monseigneur was smiling as he and Jason stepped across the marble floor to just one side of the center of the railing. Alec could feel the stiff manila envelope containing a check for $250 that Stewart, his future father-in-law, had given him to hand the priest after the service as a “donation” for his kindness. He winced inwardly again realizing how that was another expense he or his family should be taking care of. But, already his mom had told him she had had to take a loan on her insurance policy to pay for the trip down from New York, her dress, and, especially, the rehearsal dinner last night.

He felt himself smile broadly—partly because he knew there were probably over five hundred people watching him and he had to keep up the image and partly in flash-back remembrance of the dinner last night and how much fun it had been. There had been almost ninety people there at Roal’s—Palm Beach’s most exclusive restaurant. There were only ten bridesmaids and escorts, but his mother-in-law-to-be had insisted that all of her out-of-town guests be invited. He was sure he could have bought a car with the money it cost. But he’d told his mom he’d help pay for it and his father, who had flown in from Texas on Friday afternoon, had said he’d contribute the cost of the invitations. If only his family still
had the money they once had when his grandfather had been alive! He realized the smile was fading and he forced it back again.

The first of the bridesmaids and escorts were coming down the aisle, each couple taking a step, pausing, taking another step. He focused in on Chris, his own sister who looked absolutely beautiful in pink brocade, her auburn hair cascading down to her shoulders. He was sure glad Nancy Jean, his future mother-in-law, had insisted on having Mr. Michael come to the house late that afternoon and do all the women’s hair. Too bad his mom didn’t take up the offer to come over and have her’s done, too. His gaze panned to the left and saw her sitting in the front row, her short graying brown hair, all-over curls in that easy-to-take-care-of style she liked. She looked o.k., even if the dress wasn’t an exclusive design. It was a good color for her and made her look slimmer than she actually was. She was smiling broadly and her eyes were glistening. Everybody said he had her mouth and smile and he could see she was still a handsome woman in spite of all the hardships she’d been through in the last ten years since she’d divorced his dad. The way she looked you’d think she approved of all this and was genuinely happy for him. Well, she knew how to keep up the right image, too. She had been unbelievably gracious last night when she discovered that Nancy Jean had placed her and the few members of the Robbins family who had come down for the event off to the side so that Stewart, Nancy Jean, Alec and Sarah Jean and the rest of the Westins could have the center table. He had been determined not to let anything spoil the affair and had had a wonderful time. He’d had a bit more champagne that he should have and had wanted Sarah Jean to come back to his apartment that night. But she insisted they could wait one more night; after all, for appearances sake they hadn’t been living together for the past six months while they had been taking instruction from the Monseigneur, having all the parties and getting ready for the wedding.

Alec turned his head back to the front for a panoramic
view of the huge church. With over two hundred lighted candles, the Cathedral did look stunning—just like a movie set. He was glad that Sarah Jean and Nancy Jean had decided on an evening wedding. It was so much more elegant.

With the thought of Sarah Jean, right on cue, with the swelling sound of organ music, she appeared at the far end of the aisle—the longest aisle in Palm Beach County. The French imported gown with the five-foot train made her look like a vision from a Cecil B. Demille film. Her blonde hair—though not natural, but looking so—was perfect with the large, soft, pink and white floral bouquet she held. She was smiling at him as she stepped slowly and majestically toward him, her radiant face framed in the antique lace of the veil.

He was so very happy. He felt this was the most important moment of his life. Alec was really beginning the life he should have been born to. He was joining one of the richest families in Palm Beach. After their honeymoon in Bermuda, he'd be reporting to work at Westin Investments as a new associate, he and Sarah Jean would move into an apartment just off Worth Avenue and they'd jump into a social whirl that was like nothing on earth. He knew he had the intelligence and certainly the charm and good looks to fit right in and be successful—both in business and socially. It's what he always wanted. And it was worth the sacrifice. It might be regrettable his Aunt Gloria and her Hispanic common-law husband hadn't been invited to the wedding and that Nancy Jean and Stewart had made it perfectly clear that after the wedding they didn't want anything to do with his mom and her casual lifestyle or the rest of the family. Maybe time would heal the wounds. His mom had come to the wedding in spite of the fact that only a few of the rest of her invited relatives had attended the affair. Even his dad, to whom he had not spoken to in over a year, had come with his second wife, Sandy. He did wish Sandy had worn something more appropriate; the loud floral splash, low-cut dress was not becoming on someone her age nor appropriate for this kind of wedding. But, it was o.k.; they'd probably not see them either for a long, long
time. His father had started a new life for himself in Texas and Nancy Jean was not very likely to encourage much contact with them either. Sure, it was worth the sacrifice. In fact, it wasn’t even a sacrifice.

Just at that moment, Sarah Jean reached him and he took her arm. She smiled warmly up to him. He knew she loved him with every fiber of her body. After all, when Nancy Jean had told her she couldn’t marry someone who had in his family Hispanics and sinful people who were living together, refusing to get married and had illegitimate children, Sarah Jean had stood up to her mother and told her she wasn’t marrying the family, she was marrying Alec. When she vowed she and Alec would elope, if necessary, and the Westins realized she really meant it, they capitulated, allowing them to announce their engagement. Sure, Sarah Jean loved him and he knew, in time, he’d learn to love her just as much. At least he knew they were good in bed together and they looked good together! They got along fine. And, besides, just think of all she brought him—a dowry of social acceptance and financial gain impossible to measure!

They turned toward the altar, following the Monseigneur up the steps. In Alec’s imagination he pulled back the memory camera for a long shot of the scene: two absolutely beautiful people, flanked by five attractive couples on each side of them in this magnificent Cathedral in the most sumptuous wedding of the season in Palm Beach, Florida. It was just like a movie. But it was real!
THE WALK
(Main Street, Houston)
Dorothy Campbell

Dark beaten faces
hang low
with dread and remorse
as pain-filled pasts
spew from wrenching guts.
Yellow eyes and
stained mouths
scar the walls and define lives
blended with stale beer
urine and vomit.

And I?
I just stand there
Begging the wind
to blow
around MY space.
GARBAGE COLLECTORS
Gloria Milton

Trash adorns city
hedges like bright Christmas lights
on manicured trees. . .

Trash, picked up by men
and women in fancy cars,
perform sex for fees. . .

Trash, flowing through veins
of the young, old, black and white,
quiets anguished pleas. . .

We all look and no one really sees.
Miss Ev addresses her husband, Joseph, dead 25 years.

They said our street had gone to slum, 
but I wouldn’t move, until toward Christmas
I was shopping when someone broke the glass pane
in the door. He found I don’t keep much
but what I need, and had my purse with me.
After that I gave in, hard as it was,
and up to now I’ve felt safe here,
although you never saw this house.

When I moved I kept the fountain pens
you wrote sermons with, and the picture of Jesus
form the last insurance calendar
you brought home. One night at the old place
I woke thinking you had come in late
from a revival in Scotland or Metter,
and you leaned over, your brown eyes still burning.

Tonight I woke and knew you’d found me here.
The house was all smoke, and waves of fire beat
the way you used to read Leviticus or whip Virginia.
I couldn’t see, but somehow got her number.
She said crawl to the door, get outside,
she’d call the fire department and send Bill over,
but I’ll stand here inside the screen door,
my finger on the latch, until he comes.
A churning column — a wave.
A nameless pounding surf — floating away.
THE CANARY ISLANDS
Cristina Fernandez

The volcano gave you birth,
seven children in the ocean.
You live by the coast of Africa,
feeding from lava and
drinking water from the sea.
Five centuries ago
you surrendered to the
Kingdom of Castilla.
Pirates, Admiral Nelson
and even Christopher Columbus
visited your shores.
but you remain unnoticed
because after all,
you are still little children in the ocean,
by the coast of Africa.
BRUISES
Joy Breckenridge

I see you
somewhere beyond
the colors of ignorance,
unsafely hidden
under a thin coating
of indifference.
Yet, beneath
your functional smile,
I believe,
an innocence endures,
as if hoping for some magic
which will reduce
the anger to tears
as it transforms
the madness of a moment
into a lifetime’s compassion,
relieving your pain
and giving back
your childhood.
CLASS PHOTO
Gilbert M. Bazo

Frozen smiles
Fresh faces spiced with time
poured under glass.

THE APPLE
Gilbert M. Bazo

Child of a blossom
grows and matures with the clan.
Picked at its prime.
Produce.
I can't figure out why mirrors don't like me. Oh, don't get me wrong. I haven't given up hope. I believe I'll find one some day. Mirrors are just like people, you know. Each one has a different personality. Some of them are small and aren't too happy about it. They find vengeful pleasure in showing only the worst parts of me. They know that I hate it too. Then there are the comedians at the fun house. They taunt and tease me by stretching me eight feet tall or five feet wide. Some of them are especially evil when they show me as a wonderfully slender and petite young lady. Then there are the long ones hanging on my doors at home that show all of me wherever I am. They don't let me hide or suck in anything. The worst one of all the mirrors is the cracked mirror in my mother's garage. There is one long crack that runs from the top right-hand corner to the bottom left-hand corner. I hate this mirror most of all, and it hates me. It is the only one that shows me, inside and out. It knows me. True friends don't lie.
MR. BANKS?
*David Rogers*

Sometimes I think you are a dullard
A man with no spark at all
Other occasions cause me
to think you a man whose mind
o’erweighs his body - a brain trapped
in too small a casing, as it were

Your talents are too large, I suspect,
to be wasted on small things

Mere entertainments are for lesser men
my friend
You have the seed of greatness in you
and an obligation to nurture it

You will be happy either way,
but you may leave the world a
greater place if you dig in
And put your weight behind your brain
Come - leave behind as quick
lesser things
And move on to your soul’s ambition
catching sure your talent’s grace
and make your world a finer place
TO SPEAK OF BLOOMS
Dorothy Campbell

They say a poem
should speak
of love
of flowers
and happy moments
so I write
this poem
in celebration
of all the children
who sang and marched
for love of country
and lay
in final relief
in their
red pool.
I write this poem
in celebration
of all the beautiful
red blossoms
sucking
the nectar
from their
earthy mounds
and decorating
the South African
landscape
with their red,
Blood-red
bloom.
"Come on out to the desert, man, we can have a ball," Tom told me, bubbling over with enthusiasm, "we can climb all the great pinnacles in Utah and have the whole place to ourselves." If I was a little skeptical it was for a couple of good reasons: 1. The month was January, an unpredictable time of year for an inhospitable part of the country. 2. Tom Cosgriff was an expert rock climber who tended to forget that I was a beginner and might not be able to keep up with him. But, what the hell, I thought, life is too short to pass up opportunities. I called in sick to work and packed my gear.

Our first target would be Castle Rock, a 500-foot spire in the Utah quadrant of the Four Corners area. Better known by climbers as Castleton Tower, it sits atop a 1000-foot-high ridge and overlooks a valley which resembles a lunar landscape. One of the few pinnacles in the country that is not on Indian or private land or in a national park, Castleton's 6656-foot summit is dwarfed by the nearby 12,000-foot peaks of the La Sal mountains. Castleton Tower, listed in the Sierra Club Publication Fifty Classic Climbs of North America, was first climbed during a two-day siege beginning September 15, 1961 by Layton Kor and Huntley Ingalls. In Kor's book, Beyond the Vertical, he describes the pair's feelings that morning as they approached their quarry, "... our excitement grew. This was not only an unclimbed tower, but a new area; nothing quite like the mystique of being the first to reach an untouched summit."

Kor's words echoed in my brain as my Nissan 4X4 groaned its way over the mud-and-snow-packed road leading to Castleton's base. But as we donned our packs I couldn't shake my fear—fear that I had been sucked in by somebody else's enthusiasm and was now in over my head.

The approach hike to Castleton, a scramble up a 45° scree (sloping pile of dirt and rocks which have broken away from the cliff over the eons), turned out to be nearly as arduous as the climb would later prove to be. With every step we would
sink halfway to our knees in the loosely-packed sandstone. Two-thirds of the way up, wheezing and gasping for more of the thin mountain air, I believed I understood what it must have been like for Reinhold Messner when he became the first person to climb Mt. Everest without supplemental oxygen.

Tom arrived at the base of the tower long before me and was chomping at the bit to start climbing. I was ready to die. I roped up in silence, secretly hoping that a thunderstorm would materialize in the next ten minutes and cancel our plans. I looked around hopefully, but there wasn’t as much as a wisp of a cloud in clear blue sky. We would have to climb.

Naturally, Tom led the first pitch of the climb while I belayed him (held the rope to prevent his fall should he lose his footing). He made rapid progress by using the tiny foot and handholds and soon disappeared around a corner and onto a ledge. He anchored himself to the rock and yelled out, “You’re on belay, start climbing.” Much to my surprise, I found the climbing rather easy although an occasional glance backwards to the rocky slope several hundred feet below reminded me of the ever-present danger. I soon joined Tom on the ledge and we prepared to push on.

The next two pitches were much like the first, jamming hands and feet in cracks to gain a few inches, “chimneying” up through wider cracks, and “stemming” (technique where climber plants one foot on either side of a crack) up on still wider ones. Climbing was slow but secure. Then we came to the last pitch—the crux of the whole climb.

It looked like a giant boulder had been super-glued onto the side of a sheer wall and split apart, leaving a 18-inch-wide, overhanging crack through which we would have to slog our way. Climbing up it would be akin to ascending a backwards-leaning ladder without the benefit of the rungs for handholds.

Tom made it look easy. He wriggled up through the chimney like a caterpillar and was soon directing me, “Come on up, it’s simple.” But it wasn’t that simple. Try as I would, I just could not get my body far enough into the chimney to
get any purchase on the rock. I told Tom to slack off on the rope while I tried to figure out a new approach.

Then it came to me. I would lieback it! (Liebacking is a technique where the climber has feet pressed against a wall and his hands in the crack, pulling in opposition. It is very strenuous and unsecure technique but is conducive to fast climbing.) I pulled myself into the crack, lay back, and slithered my way up and soon joined my companion on the airy summit.

A mean-looking storm was approaching so we didn’t have much time to stand around but I just had to gawk at the view for a while. We had just climbed a peak which by modern-day climbing standards could be rated only as moderately difficult but would probably be the “pinnacle” of my climbing career. We slapped high fives, fired off a couple of snapshots, and prepared for the descent. Before we left I signed our names into the summit register (a dog-eared spiral notebook in a waterproof can), “Tom Cosgriff and Phil Smith—Kor-Ingalls route up. Thunder booming—we’re outa here!”
Here I sit sewing on a button and thinking of my grandmother. I watched her thread her needle and sew fine seams by hand and wished I had her skill.

She made cup towels out of flour sacks (I got some) and patchwork quilts - not for pretty (they weren't), but to keep cold Virginia winters at bay.

She would have smiled at my nine stitches in time. I haven't seen her in 20 years.

their summer coats turn inside out
stars of ruby and gold
VIETNAM MEMORIAL  
Sharon Holder-Coleman

Carved from the earth this man-made rift,  
Gaping wounds send thoughts adrift.  
Carved from the earth this man-made rift,  
Deep cut names engraved to stay.  
Carved from the earth this man-made rift,  
A somber tract for a nations park.  
Carved from the earth this man-made rift,  
In memory of our nations loss.  
Carved from the earth this man-made rift,  
A graphic view of human loss.

LEAVES  
D'Anne Luetge

upon their earthly return, raked into mountains,  
a cheery spark ignites their colors  
a bright flame