

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

The Still Pilgrim Ponders Two Birches

*I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more.
—Robert Frost, "Birches"*

Late evening sun sets the birch on fire.
Not the same tree I climbed as a child,
each branch fitted to my small arch,
the paper-thin peelings of white bark,
rough to my fingers, soft in my hands,
skin upon skin upon skin. No words
of warning could keep me away.
And then it was gone one day,

its ugly stump stuck in our yard
reminder of all we had lost—
my father, who died that same spring.
Naked the spot, steep the cost
to give up all and every thing.
My birch is full of birds who sing.

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The Still Pilgrim Faces the Wall

*Vietnam War Memorial,
Washington D.C.*

Stone cold amid a field of snow
fifty thousand names carved in black granite,
whispering here where the bleak wind blows
calling to every last man. It
stands stark, our holy wailing wall,
unspeakable loss spoken here,
sons who once walked straight and tall,
fathers whose burdens mothers bear.

It draws us in, its dark grave wake
rippling beneath the winter sky.
What can we give, we who take
our breaths before these men who died?
Our shadows frozen, thrown on stone,
turn away, leave them alone.

The Still Pilgrim's Insomnia

At 2:02 sleep bid me adieu,
booked passage on an early train,
caught a cab, jumped a jet and flew,
left me alone in the mid-night rain.

At 3:03 sleep is my enemy.
It texts me to promise its return.
Wide-eyed I wait expectantly.
Night after night. I never learn.

At 4:04 sleep's at my door.
I've locked and latched it. Shut it tight.
Sleep's sweet less become my more.
Dazed I doze and wait for light.

At 5:05 the humming hive
awakes, and sleep sleeps by my side.