I returned to Everest the following year. This time I was to film a documentary for the PBS science series NOVA. Accepting the assignment was, for me, as much about coming to terms with the 1996 disaster as it was about filmmaking. Many of the survivors had sworn they would never return to Everest. But the question remained, Was I done with Everest, too?

In all honesty, I had my reservations, but they weren't about climbing itself. I was disheartened at the circus the media had made of the tragedy over the past year and deadly tired of being pestered to provide its cameras and columns with ghoulish facts or critical observations. I longed for the moment I could leave Everest peacefully, unencumbered by tragedy, feeling that special kinship with the mountain and the people I knew who had climbed it. But in the spring of 1997, I was still unreconciled with the events of that dreadful season.

I brought with me some of the same climbers who'd been with me on the summit of Everest in May 1996, including Ed Viesturs and two of the same Sherpas, Jangbu and Dorje. I was also taking Pete Athans, the four-time Everest climber who had helped bring Beck Weathers down the previous year. The documentary, entitled "Everest: The Death Zone," was about the deleterious effects of high altitude on the human body, especially on brain functions. I was to be not only the filmmaker, but also a guinea pig for a battery of medical and cognitive tests to be conducted at various altitudes.

This year the climbing was more difficult for me. I'd lost my hunger for the summit, and had to call on a completely different part of my psyche to move upward. There was nothing instinctive or natural about being there. It's not as if I were trying to get back on a horse, as I'd done in my youth when I'd fallen off rock climbs in Colorado. I hadn't fallen in 1996. This was about salvaging my idea of the mountain.

I wasn't alone in my ambivalence; we all seemed to be wondering just what, apart from the assignment, we were doing there. None of us wanted the 1996 tragedy to be our lasting impression of Everest. And yet none of us could figure out how to resolve the memory.

Worse, we seemed destined for another year of disasters. Once again our team established camps up to the South Col, surrounded by international expeditions and too much traffic. The pattern of deaths began all over again. Mal Duff, an expedition leader who'd been on Everest the year before, died of a heart attack at Base Camp. There were more storms and more deaths over on the northern, Tibetan side. A helicopter crashed at the base of the mountain. The pilot, Lt. Col. Madan K.C., who'd so heroically evacuated Beck Weathers and Makalu Gau, was lucky to survive the crash. Then a Sherpa plunged down the Lhotse Face.
So once more we lay awake in our tents, listening to the jet stream swirl around the summit with its low, menacing hum. We'd been ready to make our summit bid since the first week of May, and by May 18 we were ready to go home. Perhaps it had been a mistake to come, after all.

As a way to laugh off our dark mood we conceived of a high-altitude twelve-step support group, Everest Anonymous. Ed had been to Everest nine times. This was Pete's thirteenth trip, and my eleventh. The rationale was simple. The human mind tends to blur negative or painful experiences, even vows never to return to the mountain. But when you're sitting before a cozy fire in Boston or London, it's tempting to say, Oh, sure, I'll go back to Everest. Everest Anonymous members promised periodic telephone calls to remind you of your pledge never to return to the place.

The jet stream moved north the next day. On May 22, Ed and I set off for the top again. Last year we'd turned back rather than risk becoming entangled with the crowds of climbers heading up the mountain. Once again we faced the prospect of a tangle of climbers on summit day. There were two inexperienced teams shadowing our team, one Canadian, one Malaysian. So, hoping to avoid any possible imbroglio, we decided to leave even earlier than usual, at ten o'clock that night.

The mountain shimmered under the beam of a full moon. Not needing my headlamp, I climbed following my shadow cast on the snow. During the post-monsoon season following the disaster of 1996, foul weather had prevented any expeditions from going above the South Col. That meant we were among the first teams to revisit the final slopes in 1997.

Except for Scott's body, still wrapped with a pack and rope the way Anatoli had left him, the summit slopes were mercifully free of the tragedy. When we reached the South Summit, Rob had disappeared from sight, shrouded by a tall drift formed around his body. Andy Harris and Doug Hansen may lie near him, though we'll probably never know.

By the time we reached the South Summit the sun had risen. Near the base of the Hillary Step we found the last vestige of the 1996 disasters, the body of Bruce Herrod, the photojournalist who'd been with the South African team.

Bruce was hanging upside down near the bottom of the Hillary Step, like Captain Ahab lashed to his White Whale. Evidently he'd slipped toward the end of his rappel. He'd taken the precaution of clipping his figure-eight rappel brake into the fixed rope, but something had gone amiss. We hoped he'd hit his head and been spared a long struggle to right himself again. His arms hung downward and his mouth lay open. His skin was black from exposure. I didn't look at him for long. Like the entire grim season we'd all been a part of a year ago, the corpse seemed a grotesque public spectacle.

Unnerved, I climbed on around Bruce, leaving him roped in place for the time being. We
soon reached the summit, one year to the day since Ed and I had last scaled it, and immediately went to work videotaping and conducting the cognitive tests. We spent a precious forty minutes here on top of the world, in the wind and bitter cold. For me, the purpose of the tests was more than science. I was seeking clues to the behavior that cost the men lying not far from here their lives. These were things I needed to know—and knew I might never fully understand.

There was one last piece of business to take care of on the way down. Before leaving for the summit we’d been in communication with Sue Thompson, Bruce’s girlfriend in England. She had asked us to search for Bruce’s camera or at least retrieve some memento from his body if we found him. A year before I couldn't bring myself to take Rob Hall's ice axe even as a keepsake for his unborn daughter, and I'd come to regret it. This time I was determined to find something for Sue.

By the time I descended the Hillary Step, I learned that Pete had sifted through the personal effects in Bruce's pack on the way up. Given the ferocity of the winds at that level, it was a minor miracle that the pack was still attached to his body. More remarkable, one of the pockets yielded up a small camera.

Pete had then cut the rope suspending Bruce with his Swiss army knife, and Bruce’s body had plummeted from view. A slice of the blade, and the final casualty of the 1996 disasters vanished into the abyss.

We finished the descent and said our goodbyes.

I still felt unfulfilled; incomplete. Then, a few months later, Sue sent me a copy of a photo Bruce had taken on the final day of his life. It was a self-portrait, taken on the summit, and may be the most poignant summit shot ever taken. In it Bruce is bending over, looking into the camera an arm's length away. You can tell that he's put considerable care into the shot. He's framing his own face while still capturing the final few feet of the pyramid behind him, with its array of survey prisms and prayer flags. The sun is low, the sky an unearthly blue; it's the hour of golden light. He's taken his oxygen mask off, and his teeth gleam white in his black beard.

You can see the fatigue in his face. But behind the tiredness is a clear expression of triumph, even joy. And therein lies the eternal tug of Everest, the sense of unworldly adventure that brings sober men and women halfway around the world and out into the midnight snows to climb its majestic heights.

I recognized something very familiar about this scene; yet I also felt an acute sense of displacement. I've always looked to the sky, the snow, the clouds for that light. I've climbed to the highest reaches of the planet in search of it. But when I looked closely into Bruce Herrod's eyes, facing his own camera lens, I saw what I might have known all along, and it is this: The risk inherent in climbing such mountains carries its own reward, deep and abiding, because it provides as profound a sense of self-knowledge as anything else on earth. A mountain is perilous, true; but it is also redemptive. Maybe I
had dimly understood this when, as a rootless boy, with no earthly place to call my own, I deliberately chose the iconoclast's rocky path of mountain climbing. But in this moment of pure clarity I realized that ascending Everest had been, for me, both a personal declaration of liberty and a defiant act of escape. Now, suddenly, I felt an inexpressible serenity, a full-blooded reaffirmation of life, on Everest's icy ridges.

At last, I was ready to descend the mountain and go home.

Cover photography by Greg Lowe.