

STANDING AT THE WALL

By Michael Ventura

March 29, 1991

In Washington, D.C., the day is cold, the air is still and the sun is warm. On afternoons like this, in late winter in the East, you can stand still for hours in the light without freezing. I have stood a long time now, at this black wall. I don't know what I expected to find at the Vietnam Memorial. But after a Gulf War in which men who died behind the lines in traffic accidents were given heroes' burials, in which soldiers who met token resistance for 100 hours are called "greater" than those who spent months and years facing the fiercest guerilla fighters of our century; and with President Bush pushing the notion that in Vietnam it was our loss, rather than our policy, that stained us, and that the Gulf War redeems that loss – it seems time to stand here.

But it seems shameful, too, to stand so inadequately, unable to think or feel, only to stare.

If you face the Washington Monument at the foot of the reflecting pond, then the Lincoln Memorial is directly behind you, up long flights of steps; the Potomac River is down a gentle slope on your right; the Vietnam Memorial is just on your left. The Capitol Dome is not far in the distance, and you can see the Jefferson Memorial, about a 20-minute walk across the park. The last time I stood here was in the spring of 1970, in the huge demonstration to protest the bombing of Cambodia. A few days before, demonstrators like us had been killed at Kent State. It seemed possible that anything might happen. They might kill us all.

Squads of policemen on motor scooters (looking a little silly; the scooters seemed too small for them) drove forward on both sides of the pond, swinging their nightsticks to clear the area. I was afraid, trembling, but I was frightened even more at how I'd feel if I ran, so I stood, waited to be hit. But it was as though I was invisible – a formation of scooter-police drove straight at me as I shook, yet none of them looked at me, and the nightsticks they were swinging in circles never touched me. They passed, and I watched down the pond where they beat others. Then suddenly, it seemed, I was the only one around. And I felt, at that moment, almost as baffled and useless as I feel now at this memorial. I don't mean in any way to equate my little episode with the experience of combat; it's just that here I was again, after another war we were powerless to stop.

"Nothin', all for nothin'," a woman in her 60's says as she and her friend slowly walk past me, looking at the wall. Another woman pushes a man in a wheelchair. He wears a jacket and tie, is about my age. The left side of his face is paralyzed, and he seems to have the use only of his right arm and hand. In that hand he holds a bouquet of flowers. The woman takes it from him and places it at the base of one section of the wall. With the flowers is a yellow piece of paper on which five of the more than 50,000 names are awkwardly printed. Quickly the woman wheels the man away. Perhaps the five died in the same action in which he was wounded. Perhaps this is the anniversary.

One of the vets who tends the wall comes with a ladder. With him are a gray-haired man and woman of about 50 with a redheaded boy of about 20. The gray-haired man is apparently a vet too. The wall-tender goes up the ladder, finds a name and does a pencil-

press of the name on a sheet of paper; then he comes down the ladder and goes to hand the paper to the gray-haired man. But the man gestures toward the boy and says, "Give it to him." The boy takes it. It is his father's name. Nobody knows how to act. They are trying not to be solemn. They take pictures. The real event is going on beneath their behavior; you can hear it in the strain of their voices.

A little later, at another place on the wall, a boy of about 10 calls his mother over. "Mom! Mom!" She comes and shushes him. He covers one letter of someone's last name with his thumb. "Mom, if it's spelled like this, it's my name."

Only when I step back to photograph the wall do I begin to appreciate the genius of its creator, Maya Yung Lin. For you cannot photograph it, not really. There is no angle through which you can see it whole through a lens unless you're standing so far off that the picture would be meaningless. Even with advanced equipment, if you're close enough to see that names are inscribed, you're too close to contain the whole; if you contain the whole, you can't tell from the photograph alone what it really is. So the wall defies deconstruction and transmission by any other medium. You can't take it home with you. You have to experience it to know it, and you can keep only as much as you've experienced.

It's not so much a tombstone or a monument as a grave. The top of the wall is at ground level. The path slopes down, so that to experience the wall you must descend. Thus, the wall coaxes everyone into the same ritual of descent, a ritual that the psyched can't help but recognize. American manners are becoming more crass and rude by the year, but here there is decorum – a decorum demanded by the wall itself. People speak softly here. They can do and say very private things in public while strangers gently project an acceptance that makes for no embarrassment. I cannot tell you what alchemy of design accomplishes this, but I can testify that it's like no other place in America. Here it's all right to cry. It's not threatening to stand beside a stranger. Even to talk to oneself. Nor is laughter out of place. The wall draws one onto another ritual; almost everyone, at some point, can't help laying hands on its cool surface, feeling names like the blind.

Reminiscent, I suddenly realize, of the monoliths in 2001, the wall takes all this in, absorbing the energy, increasing its power every day with every visitor. But the masterstroke is its sheen. It's not merely a wall or a gravestone; it's a mirror. Looking at the roll of Vietnam dead, you are looking at yourself – so clearly you could comb your hair or adjust your makeup if you chose. It reflects not only you, and those near, but the Capitol dome, the Washington Monument, the lawn, the trees, the jets and the helicopters taking off in the distance. On its surface death meets life, the past meets the present. What was, doesn't accuse; what is, doesn't apologize. But this is one place in America where they face each other, like it or not, beyond cant, revision and lies.

Yet even as I am humbled and stunned by Ms. Ying Lin's creation, realizing that as an American work of art it far surpasses any other of my lifetime; even as the names of the dead seem to come to life in the reflection of my own face, my own body – I know that, through this wall, they are demanding of me a response, and I don't know what to say to them. I feel in my bones that they don't care whether or not I write about this, and perhaps they don't even care whether the country goes to hell now. History isn't their problem anymore. But it's as though they demand something of everyone who stands before them, and they demand it now, as you stand here.

And what can I give them? What can I say? “Thanks for dying for bullshit”? “Thanks for being so good and brave and young that old men who never deserved your loyalty could deceive you unto death”? I feel like I’m insulting them just by standing here and that is the last thing I wish. Is all I have for them simply whatever poor blessing one stranger can give another? I practically run from the place.

Then up the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, to stand before that gargantuan statue. It’s hard to believe Lincoln would have approved of this sculpture.

© *Copyright by Michael Ventura. All rights reserved.*