

Candace Black

Professional Vet

My father told me this story: his buddy Frank convinced him to go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. I say “convinced” because ever since its construction my father had talked derisively of the Memorial. “Pretty hypocritical,” he’d say, “to build a memorial *now* after they abandoned the war.” Or he’d say, “I don’t need to go to any memorial. I carry one around in my heart.” So Frank must’ve been very persuasive.

But as they approached it, they had to walk past a knot of vets. You’ve probably seen them on TV. Looking like older versions of their ’70s selves—long hair, beards, wearing bits and pieces of their old uniforms—they station themselves near the west end of the long Reflecting Pool, selling tee-shirts and POW flags, distributing post-traumatic stress syndrome literature. My father calls these people professional vets: former soldiers who won’t put the war behind them, who blame the war for everything wrong in their lives, who have no identity other than that of a Vietnam vet. He was fuming, but he’d prepared himself for them and avoided making eye contact.

And then, as he and Frank got closer to the Memorial, they passed a man who was leaving. According to my father, he was weeping and his beard was soaked with tears and snot. The man was wearing a service jacket with a ship’s name on it and my father says he knew that ship had never seen combat. He says he was so enraged by this man’s emotions—unearned, by his reckoning—that he wanted to throttle him.

My father did not continue on to the Memorial.

How different, my visit to the Wall. I was in D.C. late one December, attending the Modern Language Association annual meeting in order to interview for positions at two universities. The interviews were over and I was free until my flight back to Minnesota. Early one morning I successfully navigated the underground Metro system to the Mall. The weather was drizzly and cool, such a pleasant change from the frigid temperatures I’d come from, and as I climbed the steps up from the Metro station, I felt so good about my situation—alone, unencumbered, two children home with my husband—that I decided to walk

the long way to the Wall, which I knew from my map to be somewhere near the Lincoln Memorial. I had been to D.C. once before, in the summer of 1966, and had visited all the major tourist attractions then, so my only interest in the Washington Monument, as I walked toward it, was how its point kept appearing and disappearing in the mist. The morning was lovely and quiet, and as I turned west toward the Lincoln Memorial I appreciated all the grand white structures looming off in the distances.

As I walked along the side of the Reflecting Pool, I kept glancing toward a gentle rise, and grew more and more certain that the Wall was just beyond it. I also noticed that I was trembling. By the time I reached the intersection of sidewalk, I abandoned all thoughts of stopping first to see if Lincoln was still as huge as I remembered him and went straight to the Park Service kiosk. My trembling had turned into serious shaking, and when the ranger looked up, I was barely able to blurt out the only name I knew for sure to be on the Wall: Ronald Dodge.

I am not related to this man. I never even knew him. But my mother's cousin Jimmy had married his widow, Jan. In 1965, when Jan and I first met, Ron, a pilot, was already missing in action. Their marriage had been pretty much on the rocks before he'd gone to Vietnam, but Jan was active in the POW-MIA cause, even going to Paris during the peace negotiations. When Jan became family, Ron Dodge did too.

As I walked to his name on the east wedge of the wall, I passed gifts left by friends and loved ones: cartons of cigarettes, flowers, photographs, six-packs of beer, little notes tucked into the seams of stone. It was quiet. Other visitors stood in silence or whispered, alone or in little knots of embrace. There were so many names. So many dead. By the time I found Ron Dodge's name, I had to wrap my arms around myself to keep my shaking, radiating out from my belly in waves, under some control. And once I was finally at my destination, I was no different from anyone else. I reached out and traced the letters with my fingers. I stood for a long time just touching his name, weeping. Eventually I asked a Park Ranger to make a rubbing. As I watched him, I saw my face reflected in the black granite: an observer, and yet mixed up with all those names. Eventually I left. I'm sure I passed some people who were on their way to the Memorial. They no doubt noticed my emotional state and assumed I was mourning a loved one. Well, they were wrong, but they were also right.

Ron Dodge was just my ticket in, the one name I knew to get me past the wall of names to the names of individuals. I wasn't mourning him. I was mourning the entire war, but I was also weeping for what might have been, how easily my father's name could've been etched into that stone. Perhaps I have become one of those professional vets my father despises. Vietnam has been one of the shaping

experiences of my life, even though I never fought there, and especially because my father did, twice. It affected my culture, my country, changed the way more than one generation thinks about politics and war. It's in my bloodstream and I can't ignore it. When my father complains about professional vets, I try not to respond to his anger but to listen for what's behind it. I'm waiting for the right time to point out that he has not put the war behind him any more than they have. His personalized license plates name his first tour's division, battalion and battery; they proclaim his identification with that one year in his life coming and going. How is that different from the guy who wears his cammy jacket? Or the daughter who struggles to find words that will explain her welter of emotions—love, anger, pride, shame, fear—connected to her father?

I used to think that my father, in his refusal to go to the Wall or talk about Vietnam, was trying to ignore the past, in the same way that, when he enlisted in the Marines and left Kansas in 1950, he stopped talking about his family and never initiated contact with them again. But of course it is more complex than that. He *does* talk about Vietnam, but only with a select few: other warriors who've been there and who speak his language, who don't need explanations or history lessons, and who agree with him about why they were there and how the war should've been fought, who agree with him about honor and blind obedience and chain of command—all those bedrocks of a life he chose. If I, knowing no one who died in Vietnam, broke down crying at the Wall and during the writing and re-writing of this paragraph, how would he face the grief he's been repressing all these decades? And how could he not face it, in front of that dark, glassy mirror?

And yet, he would find, as I did, that the Wall would take him in. Black absorbs heat; absorbs, far out in space, all matter. It is more than the color of mourning. In mediaeval Christian art, black stood for penitence, and the Wall does take in all our apologies, our regrets, our contrition and shame and guilt for surviving while thousands did not. But, as in alchemy, black can represent the beginning stages of all processes. The darkness is always pregnant with possibility, with potential for growth and movement. I think the Wall would take my father in, if he could use his courage—the courage that got him through three combat tours—to face himself in front of it.

I don't want to go to the Wall with him. I'd like to be there, to witness it, in my writerly way. But if we went together I would cry and my father would comfort his daughter and it would end up being about me. I have to wish my father walking toward it just after dawn, passed by a solitary runner or two. The season is neither too warm nor too cold, so he doesn't think about leaving soon in order to get out of the weather. He's not alone, but the other visitors are men his age, whose quick glances of assessment or postures, even if stooped by age, let him know they are

“lifers” too. And he doesn’t have to ask at the kiosk for the location of any names. He just starts at the tip of the west wall, trailing his fingers, like reading Braille, across the stone panels that grow to just over ten feet and then angle east and decrease in size. As he comes to his friends, or the boys he lost, he touches them once again, tenderly.

CANDACE BLACK’S first book of poetry, *The Volunteer*, was published by New Rivers Press in 2003. She teaches at Minnesota State University, Mankato and is working on a memoir about growing up in the U.S. Marine Corps.