

“Panel 35W Line 9”

by Tad Tuleja

*In memory of Antanas Prizgintas, a fellow high school wrestler
whom I never knew and who died in Vietnam in 1968.*

The Wall I imagine as an obelisk fallen, so that from afar it is a cloud hugging the earth, breaking at midpoint so the edges yearn to join what cannot be repaired. A shattered plinth, dark glass lying, the phantom dreams of the vanished sooty black, like Aztec stones seizing victims' hearts.

I approach it as a traveler from a misremembered galaxy. It is smaller when I reach it than I had imagined, so that I must bend, squint against a nonreflecting sun, go down upon my knees to locate the panel, gentle my finger into the letters like Thomas probing fearful the side of his Lord.

What does that darkness reveal? The echo of a voice I cannot recall, the grunting of guileless boys rolling on a mat, practicing as the Spartans practiced in the ways of war. We wrestle, the boy and I, in a space long forgotten, as I move from darkened sunlight into a New Jersey graveyard.

In a trim field of smaller stones, the earth sworn to resurrection, I lay my flowers on the stone that knows his name and for a moment he is no longer a numbered sacrifice but a smile in the long-ago clatter of a high school workout room. His hands reach for me in welcome or in challenge.

From fifty years ago to this soundless moment, I lay the flowers down and mouth a prayer, the Lord's Prayer we murmured before each meet, so we would not break our bones or the bones of others. These are the flowers too that are laid at The Wall, in sorrow and oblivion, too late for unbreaking.

Tad Tuleja is a folklorist and songwriter with interests in the Western, honor cultures, and the mythology of violence. He holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Texas, has edited two anthologies on military culture for Utah State University Press, and received a Puffin Foundation artistic development grant for his song cycle “Skein of Arms.” He has published scholarly essays on yellow ribbons, Barry Sadler’s “Ballad of the Green Berets,” and World War I trench songs. His poems and short prose pieces have appeared in *Consequence*, *The Road Not Taken*, *Adirondack Review*, and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. In the ones he is currently preparing for a collection entitled *Songs of the Radiant Earth*, he aspires, in Joseph Conrad’s phrase, “to make you see.” Under the musical alias Skip Yarrow, Tuleja performs his songs on www.skipyarrow.com and on You Tube.