

We walked for several minutes in the crisp, bright autumn air through a large park and, awestruck, passed by the Lincoln Memorial. Not far from there, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial site came fully into view. My first impression was that the memorial was embedded in a place of great natural beauty. As I neared the Wall, I was drawn to the mirror-like quality of the polished black stone, which reflected the surrounding landscape. I stood at the center of the memorial and saw my own reflection before me, as well as that of the trees, the lawn and the sunlit sky behind me. As I read the inscription at the apex of the monument, I was overcome by the heartbreaking dignity of its words:

THE NAMES OF THOSE WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES AND OF THOSE WHO REMAIN MISSING ARE INSCRIBED IN THE ORDER THEY WERE TAKEN FROM US.

But I was also on a mission: to find the name of Francisco, whose death I had witnessed thirteen years ago. I clutched a piece of paper on which I had written the number of the panel where his name was located. As I walked toward my objective, clusters of names were framed within the reflection of my body, and I felt as though they were somehow a part of me. When I finally found Francisco's name, a flood of memories and painful emotions washed over me.

The gruesome scene I had witnessed thirteen years before had, since then, seemed like an unreal dream sequence. But seeing his name and running my fingers over the inscribed letters gave me final validation that what I had seen was not a dream. I had really watched this man die, killed by enemy fire at Lai Khe on June 13, 1969. The shock, revulsion and sadness that I had repressed for all those years resurfaced in an onslaught of tears and inaudible sobs that lasted for several moments. At first, I felt self-conscious as I wiped my eyes with my handkerchief. But I soon noticed that others, many others, were going through the same process that I was, and I no longer felt embarrassed.