

This excerpt from my 2026 memoir *Skirmishes with Patriotism* was first published in *Military Experience and the Arts* 19, Fall.

**“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.