

THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL WALL

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall was designed by Maya Lin to honor U.S. troops who fought and died in the Vietnam War. Installed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the memorial wall is made up of two intersecting pieces set into the ground, ranging in depth from 8 inches at their outside edges, to 10 feet in the center, where the two sections of the wall meet. More than 58,000 names of the dead and missing are etched into the polished black granite in the chronological order in which they died or disappeared. At first, the wall generated controversy because, though it made no statement about the divisive war, its stark design was created by a twenty-one-year-old Asian student at Yale University and was perceived by some as an insensitive memorial to those who had died. Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It" is based on his service as a correspondent in the war for which he was awarded a Bronze Star. His reflections on

the wall offer a different take from the way it was initially received. Among his dozen poetry collections is *Dien Cai* (1988), often cited as one of the best poetry collections about the war.

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA (B. 1947)

Facing It 1988

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night slanted against morning. I turn
this way — the stone lets me go.
I turn that way — I'm inside the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away

the names stay on the wall.

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.

The sky. A plane in the sky.

A white vet's image floats closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.

He's lost his right arm

inside the stone. In the black mirror a woman's trying to erase
names: No, she's brushing a boy's hair.