

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

POETRY
HEAVEN

Parts 2, 3

"I am interested in how beauty and terror are in the same frame—that you can place them side by side and that they create a certain kind of tension."

Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana in 1947, Yusef Komunyakaa was the first black man to win a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1994). A Vietnam veteran, he did not write about the war until more than a decade after returning to the United States. He has published nine books of poetry and teaches at Princeton University.



© LYNN SAVILLE

When was the last time
you were a window,
and how did it feel?

কবিতা

History Lessons

1

Squinting up at leafy sunlight, I stepped back
& shaded my eyes, but couldn't see what she pointed to.
The courthouse lawn where the lone poplar stood
Was almost flat as a pool table. Twenty-five
Years earlier it had been a stage for half the town:
Cain & poor white trash. A picnic on saint augustine
Grass. No, I couldn't see the piece of blonde rope.
I stepped closer to her, to where we were almost
In each other's arms, & then spotted the flayed
Tassel of wind-whipped hemp knotted around a limb
Like a hank of hair, a weather-whitened bloom
In hungry light. That was where they prodded him
Up into the flatbed of a pickup.

2

We had coffee & chicory with lots of milk,
Hoecakes, bacon, & gooseberry jam. She told me
How a white woman in The Terrace
Said that she shot a man who tried to rape her,
How their car lights crawled sage fields
Midnight to daybreak, how a young black boxer
Was running & punching the air at sunrise,
How they tarred & feathered him & dragged the corpse
Behind a Model T through the Mill Quarters,
How they dumped the prizefighter on his mother's doorstep,
How two days later three boys
Found a white man dead under the trestle
In blackface, the woman's bullet
In his chest, his head on a clump of sedge.

3

When I stepped out on the back porch
The pick-up man from Bogalusa Dry Cleaners
Leaned against his van, with an armload
Of her Sunday dresses, telling her
Emmett Till had begged for it
With his damn wolf whistle.
She was looking at the lye-scoured floor,
White as his face. The hot words
Swarmed out of my mouth like African bees
& my fists were cocked,
Hammers in the air. He popped
The clutch when he turned the corner,
As she pulled me into her arms
& whispered, *Son, you ain't gonna live long.*

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

Thanks

Thanks for the tree
between me & a sniper's bullet.
I don't know what made the grass
sway seconds before the Viet Cong
raised his soundless rifle.
Some voice always followed,
telling me which foot
to put down first.
Thanks for deflecting the ricochet
against that anarchy of dusk.
I was back in San Francisco
wrapped up in a woman's wild colors,
causing some dark bird's love call
to be shattered by daylight
when my hands reached up
& pulled a branch away
from my face. Thanks
for the vague white flower
that pointed to the gleaming metal
reflecting how it is to be broken
like mist over the grass,
as we played some deadly
game for blind gods.
What made me spot the monarch
writhing on a single thread
tied to a farmer's gate,
holding the day together
like an unfingered guitar string,
is beyond me. Maybe the hills
grew weary & leaned a little in the heat.
Again, thanks for the dud
hand grenade tossed at my feet
outside Chu Lai. I'm still
falling through its silence.
I don't know why the intrepid
sun touched the bayonet,
but I know that something
stood among those lost trees
& moved only when I moved.

Facing It

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.

mga tula

Questions

1. Why give thanks for a "monarch/ writhing on a single thread/ tied to a farmer's gate"?
2. How could a white vet lose his right arm inside the stone?
3. What are the history lessons in "History Lessons"?

Activities

1. Make a list of moments when you had the feeling of being eerily protected. Describe what these moments have in common.
2. With music, dance, or visual images create an experience which illustrates "Facing It."
3. Describe how your experience of "History Lessons" changes when you have access to sections 2 and 3, which were not on the videotape.

Yusef Komunyakaa, "Thanks" and "Facing It" from NEON VERNACULAR © 1993 by Yusef Komunyakaa, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England. "History Lessons" from MAGIC CITY © 1992 by Yusef Komunyakaa, Wesleyan University Press, by permission of University Press of New England.