Yusef Komunyakaa: “Facing It”

What happens when metaphor meets a monument?

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Maya Lin was about as far removed from the Vietnam War as anyone could be, and at just 21, seemed an unlikely candidate to design a prominent national memorial. Lin—a senior undergraduate architecture student at Yale—had studied Scandinavian cemetery design in Denmark and was fascinated by what she called “the architecture of death.” After seeing a bulletin announcing an open competition for a Vietnam memorial to be erected in Washington, D.C., she submitted her design—and won, beating out 1,420 others.

In a statement accompanying her entry, Lin envisions the experience of seeing the Wall for the first time:

. . . the memorial appears as a rift in the earth—a long, polished black stone wall, emerging from and receding into the earth. . . . Walking into the grassy site contained by the walls . . . we can barely make out the carved names upon the memorial’s walls . . . seemingly infinite in number. . . .

The individual names of more than 58,000 dead or missing, etched into the stone, make a sobering sight, but what Lin couldn’t have anticipated is the profound effect the Wall would have on veterans themselves. And on one in particular: the poet [Yusef Komunyakaa](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=3823).

From 1969 to 1970, Komunyakaa served in Vietnam as a correspondent and managing editor for the military newspaper *Southern Cross*, work that earned him a Bronze Star. Though he spent much of his tour of duty in the field, witnessing combat and reporting about it, Komunyakaa did not begin to write poems about Vietnam until 14 years after he had returned home.

In 1984, Komunyakaa began to reflect on his experiences—although his decision to write about Vietnam wasn’t entirely deliberate. In “[Facing It](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=177382),” only the second poem he’d written in retrospect about Vietnam, Komunyakaa’s response to his war experience is deeply shaped by his visit, a year earlier, to Lin’s memorial. Inspired by the monument, Komunyakaa confronts his conflicted feelings about Vietnam, its legacy, and, even more broadly, the part race plays in America. It’s not hard to see why the poem has been recognized by [R.S. Gwynn](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=2814) (and many others) as “the most poignant elegy that has been written about the Vietnam War.”

The poem begins with the reflection of Komunyakaa’s face dissolving into the polished black stone as he stares into it for the first time:

My black face fades,  
hiding inside the black granite.

As an African American, Komunyakaa acknowledges that his “black face” isn’t the only thing that hides in the darkness of that granite. Like a slate on which history has been indelibly etched, the stone and Komunyakaa’s face bear witness to the war’s casualties. The poet’s residual anger about the war and his ambivalence about surviving it are also just under the surface:

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.

As the speaker struggles to keep his feelings in check, his frustration is obvious from the caesuras that start and stop the lines, jerking the poem along. As the poet moves between end-stopped lines (“No tears.”) and enjambed ones (“My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey. . . .”), the reader can see the poet struggling with his own resolve and ambivalence. Despite anticipating the emotional reaction he might have—“I said I wouldn’t”—to facing “it” (the Wall itself, but also the war and his role in it), the poet tries to maintain composure, but is split: both “stone”—stolid, wary, and restrained, as if such vigilance could dam the flood of emotion he feels—and yet also “flesh”—human, fragile, and vulnerable.

Rather than being contradictory, this acknowledgment of his dual identity (of being both “stone” and “flesh”) reveals the extremes of his consciousness. It also allows the poet to see his own mortality, so clear in the tombstone-like face of the memorial. It is his “own reflection,” after all, that eyes him, in whose vision he’s trapped, and from which he must split in order to break free:

                                   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.

As its prisoner, his only escape is to turn away from the Wall. But no matter where he turns, his reflection is unavoidable. He’s inside “again, depending on the light to make a difference.” Komunyakaa’s carefully chosen line breaks here manifest his struggle by mirroring his restlessness and hesitation. When the speaker “turn(s),” the line does too; as readers, we’re on the edge of our seats to see where he’ll go.

There is no such hesitation when he comes to those 58,022 names, though: that specific number, so assured, solid, and inescapable on its end-stopped line, isn’t open to interpretation. In that catalog and its indifferent tally (which has only increased since Komunyakaa first visited, now standing at 58,261, with the most recent name added in 2009), he can’t help but see the specter of a fate he himself eluded:

I touch the name Andrew Johnson;  
I see the booby trap’s white flash.

In touching a single name, Komunyakaa gives the impersonal number a concrete identity. As a soldier from the poet’s hometown of Bogalusa, Louisiana, Johnson represents a personal connection to the public memorial. But he also shares the name of the 17th U.S. president, who succeeded Lincoln and denied freed slaves equal protection under the law by vetoing the Civil Rights Bill in 1866. It didn’t pass until nearly 100 years later, in 1964, just as the war in Vietnam was getting under way. The punishing irony of black Americans fighting and dying alongside white soldiers whose civil rights they did not yet fully share doesn’t escape Komunyakaa, so aware at the poem’s beginning of his own “black face” fading into the monument’s stone.

Here, Komunyakaa’s images alternate ambiguously between beauty and violence:

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.

The “shimmer” of names on a blouse, the ephemeral beauty of brushstrokes that “flash” (in contrast to the booby trap’s “white flash”)—these could represent moments of quiet contemplation at the Wall, but Komunyakaa’s meditations are cut short by the bird’s wings and the threat of the “plane in the sky.” Earlier in the poem, Komunyakaa depended on the stone to “let him go”; this woman walks away of her own accord, leaving the names behind in ways that Komunyakaa cannot. His gaze is uninterrupted, until the bird’s wing intervenes by way of flash and flashback: reflecting the mirrored surface of the granite and the sky, caught in fragments between the jungles of Vietnam and the National Mall. It’s unclear in which context (past or present) we’re meant to see that sky and that plane. Just as the Wall is deliberately positioned between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial to lend it historical context, Komunyakaa’s images and fragmentary syntax help suspend the action between now and then:

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.

No longer “stone” or even “flesh,” Komunyakaa becomes a “window” through which the white vet can also see the past and present. When Komunyakaa writes, “his pale eyes / look through mine,” he seems to dissolve further; no longer stone nor flesh, he becomes simply a “window” through which another vet looks—both because the vet isn't really looking “at” Komunyakaa and because he too has experienced war firsthand: he has seen what Komunyakaa has seen. But is the vet’s arm truly lost, or is it merely a trick of the light, like the poem’s final image?

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

The speaker mistakes the woman’s gesture for a futile attempt to remake the past, but then changes his mind, and ultimately sees her act for what it really is: an act of motherly tenderness. His subtle self-recrimination here (“no”), more regretful and forgiving than the poem’s volatile first one (“I said I wouldn’t / dammit”), represents an important, and redemptive, turning point at the poem’s end: an acknowledgment of the complexity of human emotions required to confront this difficult period in history. As many visitors to the monument continue to affirm, equal measures of compassion and forgiveness are also integral to the process of coming to terms with the war’s legacy.

Like Maya Lin, whose goal in creating the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was to “strip things down, not so that they become inhuman, but so that you need just the right amount of words or shape to convey what you need to convey,” the spare simplicity of Komunyakaa’s poem ultimately lays bare the consequences and costs of the war. And like Lin’s monument, it too is a testament to the power and importance of reflection.