

## Yusef Komunyakaa

*Memories of the traumatic events of the war in Vietnam are the source of the poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa in Dien Cai Dau, a collection of poems chronicling his experiences as a journalist in Vietnam, which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1994. "Tunnels," "Hanoi Hannah," "You and I Are Disappearing," "2527th Birthday of the Buddha," "Prisoners," and "Facing It," Komunyakaa's response to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., are from this volume. "Nude Interrogation" was included in Thieves of Paradise (1998).*

### TUNNELS

Crawling down headfirst into the hole,  
he kicks the air & disappears.  
I feel like I'm down there  
with him, moving ahead, pushed  
by a river of darkness, feeling  
blessed for each inch of the unknown.  
Our tunnel rat is the smallest man  
in the platoon, in an echo chamber  
that makes his ears bleed  
when he pulls the trigger.  
He moves as if trying to outdo  
blind fish easing toward imagined blue,  
pulled by something greater than life's  
ambitions. He can't think about  
spiders & scorpions mending the air,  
or care about bats upside down  
like gods in the mole's blackness.  
The damp smell goes deeper  
than the stench of honey buckets.  
A web of booby traps waits, ready  
to spring into broken stars.  
Forced onward by some need,  
some urge, he knows the pulse  
of mysteries & diversions  
like thoughts trapped in the ground.  
He questions each root.  
Every cornered shadow has a life  
to bargain with. Like an angel  
pushed against what hurts,  
his globe-shaped helmet  
follows the gold ring his flashlight  
casts into the void. Through silver  
lice, shit, maggots, & vapor of pestilence,

he goes, the good soldier,  
on hands & knees, tunneling past  
death sacked into a blind corner,  
loving the weight of the shotgun  
that will someday dig his grave.

## HANOI HANNAH

*Ray Charles!* His voice  
calls from waist-high grass,  
& we duck behind gray sandbags.  
"Hello, Soul Brothers. Yeah,  
Georgia's also on my mind."  
Flares bloom over the trees.  
"Here's Hannah again.  
Let's see if we can't  
light her goddamn fuse  
this time." Artillery  
shells carve a white arc  
against dusk. Her voice rises  
from a hedgerow on our left.  
"It's Saturday night in the States.  
Guess what your woman's doing tonight.  
I think I'll let Tina Turner  
tell you, you homesick GIs."  
Howitzers buck like a herd  
of horses behind concertina.  
"You know you're dead men,  
don't you? You're dead  
as King today in Memphis.  
Boys, you're surrounded by  
General Tran Do's division."  
Her knife-edge song cuts  
deep as a sniper's bullet.  
"Soul Brothers, what you dying for?"  
We lay down a white-klieg  
trail of tracers. Phantom jets  
fan out over the trees.  
Artillery fire zeros in.

Her voice grows flesh  
 & we can see her falling  
 into words, a bleeding flower.

“YOU AND I ARE DISAPPEARING”

—*Björn Håkansson*

The cry I bring down from the hills  
 belongs to a girl still burning  
 inside my head. At daybreak  
     she burns like a piece of paper.

She burns like foxfire  
 in a thigh-shaped valley.  
 A skirt of flames  
 dances around her  
 at dusk.

    We stand with our hands  
 hanging at our sides,  
 while she burns

    like a sack of dry ice.

She burns like oil on water.  
 She burns like a cattail torch  
 dipped in gasoline.

She glows like the fat tip  
 of a banker's cigar,  
     silent as quicksilver.

A tiger under a rainbow  
 at nightfall.

She burns like a shot glass of vodka.

She burns like a field of poppies  
 at the edge of a rain forest.

She rises like dragonsmoke  
 to my nostrils.

She burns like a burning bush  
 driven by a godawful wind.

[ 2527<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY OF THE BUDDHA

When the motorcade rolled to a halt, Quang Duc  
 climbed out & sat down in the street.  
 He crossed his legs,  
 & the other monks & nuns grew around him like petals.  
 He challenged the morning sun,  
 debating with the air  
 he leafed through—visions brought down to earth.  
 Could his eyes burn the devil out of men?

A breath of peppermint oil  
 soothed someone's cry. Beyond terror made flesh—  
 he burned like a bundle of black joss sticks.  
 A high wind that started in California  
 fanned flames, turned each blue page,  
 leaving only his heart intact.  
 Waves of saffron robes bowed to the gasoline can. ]

PRISONERS

Usually at the helipad  
 I see them stumble-dance  
 across the hot asphalt  
 with croaker sacks over their heads,  
 moving toward the interrogation huts,  
 thin-framed as box kites  
 of sticks & black silk  
 anticipating a hard wind  
 that'll tug & snatch them  
 out into space. I think  
 some must be laughing  
 under their dust-colored hoods,  
 knowing rockets are aimed  
 at Chu Lai, that the water's  
 evaporating & soon the nail  
 will make contact with metal.

How can anyone anywhere love  
 these half-broken figures  
 bent under the sky's brightness?  
 The weight they carry  
 is the soil we tread night & day.  
 Who can cry for them?  
 I've heard the old ones  
 are the hardest to break.  
 An arm twist, a combat boot  
 against the skull, a .45  
 jabbed into the mouth, nothing  
 works. When they start talking  
 with ancestors faint as camphor  
 smoke in pagodas, you know  
 you'll have to kill them  
 to get an answer.  
 Sunlight throws  
 scythes against the afternoon.  
 Everything's a heat mirage; a river  
 tugs at their slow feet.  
 I stand alone & amazed,  
 with a pill-happy door gunner  
 signaling for me to board the Cobra.  
 One day, I almost bowed  
 to such figures walking toward me,  
 & I can't say why.  
 From a half-mile away  
 trees huddle together,  
 & the prisoners look like  
 marionettes hooked to strings of light.

## NUDE INTERROGATION

*DID YOU KILL ANYONE OVER THERE?* Angelica shifts her gaze from the Janis Joplin poster to the Jimi Hendrix, lifting the pale muslin blouse over her head. The blacklight deepens the blues when the needle drops into the first groove of "All Along the Watchtower." I don't want to look at the floor. *Did you kill anyone? Did you dig a hole, crawl inside, and wait for your target?* Her miniskirt drops into a rainbow at her feet. Sandalwood incense hangs a slow comet of perfume over

the room. I shake my head. She unhooks her bra and flings it against a bookcase made of plywood and cinderblocks. *Did you use an M-16, a hand-grenade, a bayonet, or your own two strong hands, both thumbs pressed against that little bird in the throat?* She stands with her left thumb hooked into the elastic of her sky-blue panties. When she flicks off the blacklight, snowy hills rush up to the windows. *Did you kill anyone over there? Are you right-handed or left-handed? Did you drop your gun afterwards? Did you kneel beside the corpse and turn it over?* She's nude against the falling snow. Yes. The record spins like a bull's eye on the far wall of Xanadu. Yes, I say. *I was scared of the silence. The night was too big. And afterwards, I couldn't stop looking up at the sky.*

### 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

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