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## **"The Need Gotta Be": Image and Integrity in Yusef Komunyakaa's Poetry**

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## MICHAEL THEUNE

### *"The Need Gotta Be": Image and Integrity in Yusef Komunyakaa's Poetry*

*Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems* by Yusef Komunyakaa. Wesleyan University Press, \$35.

*Talking Dirty to the Gods* by Yusef Komunyakaa. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$13.

Images are unruly. Unlike the moral sententiae that preceded them as poetry's matter, images do not so much refer to generally agreed-upon or understandable ideas as enact a power. Pound calls an image "a radiant node or cluster," "a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing." The powerful image creates two main problems for poetry. First, since sovereign things do not readily agree with one another, how can images be joined or orchestrated, that is, how can a poem be made out of them? Second, keeping in mind that the sovereign disdains the utilitarian, can poems focused on the image be used in the service of specific critique, of specific moral and political agendas? The surrealist phenomenon can be understood in part as an admission of the difficulty of addressing these problems fully. The surrealists, those image-makers par excellence, addressed these problems largely by sidestepping them, by venerating chance and automatism as constructive methods, and by taking up as their cause only a fairly amorphous opposition to a general bourgeoisie.

The struggle between the power and play of images and moral engagement also is the central, ongoing, and unresolved struggle in, the glory and the trouble of, Yusef Komunyakaa's work. Throughout his career—one that spans well over twenty years and includes the publication of over a dozen books—Komunyakaa has been and remains a poet for whom the image is of central importance, but he also has been and is a poet of specific witness. Though not a poet given to pronouncing judgments, Komunyakaa often crafts images not only for their own power but also to uncover and shed light upon

subjects important to him and to his time, especially the treatment—indifferent and violent, aesthetic and political—of blacks in America and in service to America in the Vietnam War. Still, the unruly image holds great interest for Komunyakaa; it is a constant subject in his *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*. Komunyakaa states, “I feel writers are like reservoirs of images.” Recalling his childhood during which he used to listen to the radio and sing along but with his own words, Komunyakaa states, “It seems I was already reaching for an imaginative voice by merging acquired images with those culled from experience (an untutored surrealism).” Komunyakaa’s adult creations also try to provide an active field for the play of images; he states, “I think about the poem as layered with images,” and he wants in his poetry “a collage/ montage effect propelled by a certain fluidity.” Elsewhere, Komunyakaa states, “I wanted the images to do the work—I wanted to avoid statement, if possible.”

Komunyakaa’s use of the unruly image works best when applied to the incidents and events in human life that are inherently unruly, the transports and raptures, the confusion and madness, of love and war, enacting passionate, nearly Ovidian metamorphosis. In “The Heart’s Graveyard Shift,” the mind reels in its outcast state, crazed with images: “Between loves / I crave danger; the assassin’s cross hairs / underline my point of view. // Between loves, / with a pinch of madness tucked under / the tongue, a man might fly off the handle / & kill his best friend over a penny. / His voice can break into butterflies / just as the eight ball cracks / across deep-green felt, / growing silent with something unsaid ...” *Dien Cai Dau*, the title of Komunyakaa’s book that deals most with his experience as a soldier in Vietnam, translates as “crazy,” and in Komunyakaa’s war poems, unruly images are engaged not only to represent the insanity of war but also to enact the insanity war causes, its traumatizing damage. “You and I Are Disappearing” recounts a horror of war, the vision of a girl on fire, from a mind that cannot shake it:

... she burns like a piece of paper.  
 She burns like foxfire  
 in a thigh-shaped valley ...  
 She burns like oil on water.  
 She burns like a cattail torch  
 dipped in gasoline ...  
 She burns like a shot glass of vodka.  
 She burns like a field of poppies  
 at the edge of a rain forest ...  
 She burns like a burning bush

driven by a godawful wind.

“Report from the Skull’s Diorama” investigates the psychological warfare waged against black soldiers, noting how the soldiers were not only attacked with war’s conventional weapons but also with “red-bordered / leaflets” that told the soldiers “VC didn’t kill / Dr. Martin Luther King.” This poem roams with its images, moving from “Dr. King’s photograph / comes at me from White Nights / like Hoover’s imagination” to “a field of black trees / stakes down the morning sun” and “chopper blades / knife-fighting the air” to “[t]he silence etched into their skin,” and it is fitting that it does so; the poem is the work of damaged, dented memory, concluding as the “gunship / flies out backwards ... with the leaflets / clinging to the men and stumps, / waving ... across the years.”

The paradox, though, regarding Komunyakaa’s treatments of love and war is that these poems are those in which Komunyakaa often has something to say, a statement to make, or, at least, they have unique situations to explore, new perspectives—including that of the black soldier—to report from. “Facing It,” perhaps Komunyakaa’s finest and most famous poem, is image-driven, containing lines such as, “My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey, the profile of night / slanted against morning,” and “Names shimmer off a woman’s blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall.” However, for all its images, the poem is absolutely situated; it takes place at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and its imagistic leaps are a tribute to the literal and figurative reflective power of the Memorial. “Facing It” is also more than this: many of its images make clear Komunyakaa’s concerns with race. The poem’s first line states that it is Komunyakaa’s “black face” that “fades” into the Memorial’s reflecting wall. Additionally, Komunyakaa is made subject to invisibility when the “pale eyes” of “[a] white vet’s image” “looks through [his].” Komunyakaa recognizes how the reflective surfaces of Memorial and memory depend “on the light / to make a difference.” In his writing on Vietnam, Komunyakaa changes the light so that something new, shades of greater complication and difficulty, can be seen, and “Facing It,” *Dien Cai Dau*’s final poem, like the summation of an argument, helps to make this clear.

An indication, perhaps, of the statements being made in the poems of love and war is Komunyakaa’s greater use of narrative when it comes to constructing poems on these subjects. For example, “My Father’s Love Letters” tells the story of how Komunyakaa helped his father write love letters to his wife, who had left him after being abused. The poem employs chronological narrative to create the scene and to structure the poem’s images so that they might

relay the event's odd energy. The poem's images are not merely layered but are used in part to show how love struggles to emerge from rough machinery, and to literally give weight to the waiting for a next word:

His carpenter apron always bulged  
 With old nails, a claw hammer  
 Looped at his side & extension cords  
 Coiled around his feet.  
 Words rolled from under the pressure  
 Of my ballpoint: Love,  
 Baby, Honey, Please.  
 We sat in the quiet brutality  
 Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,  
 Lost between sentences ...  
 The gleam of a five-pound wedge  
 On the concrete floor  
 Pulled a sunset  
 Through the doorway of his toolshed.

Employed dramatically and strategically, that gleaming wedge is not only a powerful image but also the precise symbol of the father's efforts to channel mysterious forces.

Komunyakaa, it seems, often does have something to say, and often it takes more than just imagistic layering to say so. So why does he talk the way he does about his poetry, stressing the image over the roles of narrative and argument in the structuring of his poetry? Following on the heels of Symbolism's "art for art's sake" and reaching a pinnacle of popularity in MacLeish's dictum that a poem "should not mean but be," the image came to power during a time entranced with the idea of poetry's autonomy. As a result, the image has come to be the fleeting logo of autonomy. This is especially important for Komunyakaa, who wants to distance himself from any type of "service literature." In *Blue Notes*, he states, "Up until recently, black Americans wrote a service literature, and that service literature had everything to do with defining the essence of blackness ... What happened recently ... is that for the first time black writers have the freedom to delve into their own individuality ..." For Komunyakaa, individuality means license; he states, "Everything doesn't have to be seamless, things can be disconnected, or at least seem disconnected." Additionally, he "learned from jazz that [he] could write anything into a poem." Although Komunyakaa recognizes a guide to his layering of images—he states, "need is the motor that propels the words

down the silent white space”—that guide, that need, seems to be more the poet’s than the reader’s. In “Blue Light Lounge Sutra for the Performance Poets at Harold Park Hotel,” Komunyakaa aims the declarative refrain—“the need gotta be / so deep”—at the performers.

But the need has to be for readers, too. Although Komunyakaa states that “the most exact kind of communication is when the reader or listener isn’t being guided through the poem” and that, rather than usher the reader, he is “trying to activate participation,” the reader must be convinced, seduced, that is, made to need their experience of, their participation in, the poem. In a conversation between Komunyakaa and William Matthews published in *The Georgia Review* as “Jazz and Poetry: A Conversation,” it is Matthews who suggests that there may be limits to autonomy, that there are rules to improvising, especially in poetry. After noting jazz musician Charles Mingus’s words—“Can’t improvise on nothing, man; gotta improvise on something”—Matthews states:

Words have conventional meaning, and so something’s being proposed—to the reader at least, and in many poems to an implied listener, some second character of the poem beside the one we usually call “the speaker.” Is it believable or not? Interesting or not? There are issues of persuasion and consent raised by any given poem that I believe are important sources of improvisation in the writing of poetry.

Often in Komunyakaa’s work a crisis occurs when it comes to the reader’s need. “What Counts” recounts an emotional moment Komunyakaa had while leafing through a poetry anthology and reading the names of departed friends, “counting the dead faces / I’d known. Two Roberts— / Hayden & Duncan. Dick / Hugo. Bill Stafford & / Nemerov.” Although the incident was obviously significant for Komunyakaa—the poem begins in tears: “I thumb pages, thinking onion / or shreds of garlic / flicked into my eyes”—the poem never accumulates, never becomes more than a confused gushing for readers. It concludes:

Anne’s haze-eyed blues  
at dusk in a bestiary  
behind her ‘reference  
work in sin.’ If we were  
ever in the same room,  
it isn’t for the living  
to figure out. Unearthly

desire makes man & woman  
 God's celestial wishbone  
 to snap at midnight. Pages  
 turn on their own & I listen:  
 Son, be careful what you  
 wish for. Do I want my name  
 here, like the x's in the eyes  
 of ex-lovers? I'm thankful  
 for the cities we drank  
 wine & talked about swing  
 bands from Kansas City  
 into the after hours  
 under green weather  
 in this age of reason.

Nothing links the poem's details. What does William Stafford have to do with the brief meditation on heterosexual desire? What is particularly reasonable about an age that includes unearthly desire? What counts? There is no way to tell. The poem is a kind of skull's diorama, but a diorama that has as its audience only the poet's mind.

In Komunyakaa's lesser work, poems too often are merely dioramas of each other, an unstructured intermingling of their elements. Consider "Touch-Up Man":

I playact the three monkeys  
 carved over the lintel of a Japanese shrine,  
 mouthing my mantra: I do  
 what I'm told. I work  
 from Mr. Pain's notecards;  
 he plants the germ of each idea,  
 & I'm careful not to look  
 at his private secretary's legs  
 as I turn the harvest through the dumb-mill  
 of my hands. Half-drunk  
 with my tray of bright tools,  
 I lean over the enlarger,  
 in the light table's chromatic glare  
 where I'm king, doctoring photographs,  
 airbrushing away the corpses.

With its allusive reach, its speaker who has to work for someone more powerful, its prohibition against looking at that more powerful man's woman—a prohibition that provided the title for Komunyakaa's *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*—and its concern regarding the lies of history, there is much here that connects this poem to Komunyakaa's other work. However, though the elements that comprise "Touch-Up Man" may be connected to his interests and experiences—Komunyakaa was a war reporter and so may have witnessed the touching up of facts—neither a structural nor a deeply, morally inquisitive integrity holds this poem together. And, as nothing other than a belief in the author's good faith makes it necessary that the various elements of "Touch-Up Man" be incorporated in the way they are in the poem, the poem makes for slight, slighting reading.

The problem with his new and collected poems, *Pleasure Dome*, as a volume, is that it contributes to the sense that Komunyakaa's work is largely a scattered, psychological diorama. In their individual volumes, Komunyakaa's books often are divided into sections, thus adding a sense of structure—albeit an external structure—to the image-driven poems contained within. However, in *Pleasure Dome*, all sections have been eradicated, and thus the poems can seem even more a kind of amorphous mental mass. The title perhaps hints at this problematic situation. While it correctly suggests that there are pleasures—and, indeed, poetic pleasures—to be found within its pages, *Pleasure Dome* also indicates the central shortcoming of some of Komunyakaa's work. Poetry's most famous pleasure dome is Coleridge's, as he constructs it in "Kubla Khan," laying the foundation for that "stately pleasure-dome"; however, in the prose preface to "Kubla Khan," Coleridge makes clear that the mere fragment that follows should be viewed and judged "rather as a psychological curiosity, than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits."

Because it does not reveal a new understanding of Komunyakaa's work—no wondrous surprises are waiting to be found, for example, in the poems that were not included in Komunyakaa's selected poetry, *Neon Vernacular* ("Touch-Up Man" was in fact selected for that volume)—and because it may in fact problematize that work, *Pleasure Dome*, one assumes, has been published to sum up the past to make way for the future, to mark a turn in Komunyakaa's work, to announce that something new is happening. An initial glance at *Talking Dirty to the Gods* reveals a work that seems very different from Komunyakaa's previous publications. The book consists of 132 poems, all composed of four quatrains. Although this new form could indicate a new approach to the composition of poems—the repetition of the sixteen-lined poems seems to allude to a sonnet sequence—it does not. The poems themselves are similar to their



predecessors, created not so much, like sonnets, out of argument, but again largely by layering images.

The combination of the centrality of image and somewhat strict form—the poems’s meters are not as regular as the line count—has an appealing effect on some of the poems, making them seem like curios, miniature baroque artifacts with eccentric details and flourishes. In large part, because many of the poems in *Talking Dirty to the Gods* have small things—such as insects, idols, sex toys, tools, lures, insidious torture devices—as their subjects, this result is good because it is fitting. The little poems themselves radiate with the odd energy of their little object-subjects. In “The God of Land Mines,” Komunyakaa makes a Fabergé egg out of land mines:

He sits on a royal purple cushion  
Like a titanic egg. Dogs whimper  
& drag themselves on all fours through dirt  
When a breeze stirs his sweet perfume.

He looks like a legless, armless  
Humpty-Dumpty, & if someone waves  
A photo of an amputee outside the Imperial  
Palace in Hue, he’d never blink.

When he thinks doors, they swing open.  
When dust gushes on the horizon  
His face is a mouthless smile.  
He can’t stop loving steel.

He’s oblong & smooth as a watermelon.  
The contracts arrive already signed.  
Lately, he feels like seeds in a jar,  
Swollen with something missing.

The fact that this poem is so well-crafted is what, in part, makes it so frightening. This particular land mine has not yet been detonated, remaining as one of the many that still wreak havoc well after treaties are signed.

The four-quatrain form also underscores the ugliness, the phantasmagoria, in many of the poems, making their freakishness and terror all the more chilling by placing it, as in the poem “Toxic Waste,” in a pleasant setting:

Do they still say overseas  
You can sell anything to an American?

He asks. His glass eye  
Almost winks as he shifts

His prosthesis. I'm an unabridged  
Fucking definition of modern war.  
He used to declare to his freshmen  
Before riddling them with brilliance

& sobriety. Hamlet  
To Sophocles, Ma Rainey  
To Emily Dickinson, Kierkegaard  
To Red Cloud. Between bold sips

Of Merlot, an old friendship  
Flares as if ten years were ten days.  
An exquisite memory lives on & on:  
The beautiful dead lover we share.

Though "Toxic Waste" may be another, mysterious glimpse into the author's life, here the glimpse is suggestive, not frustrating. Although, as its title suggests, "Toxic Waste" is about damage that has a tendency to spread, the poem's tight form contains the spill and allows the poem's power to arrive not through a barrage of images but through understatement. The distance created by time from war and the distance created by form from content create a new vision, a new possibility: war itself may be that "beautiful dead lover."

"Necropolis," a poem about archaeology's grave robbing that leads to the cold storage of wonders, concludes with an image of "relentless loot / Roll[ing] off riotous conveyor belts." The poems in *Talking Dirty to the Gods* not only employ that relentless loot for its subject matter but also are that loot. The book itself is a kind of *wunderkammer*, a closet of wonders found in exploration, collecting the strange souvenirs of Komunyakaa's journey. Or, in his own terminology, the volume is a diorama, an objectification and organization of Komunyakaa's interests. Its best poems, however, never settle for allowing the past to stay the past; instead, in them, the past is present and, therefore, relevant and of interest. "Eros" is one more poem that embodies Komunyakaa's longstanding interest in the relation between desire and suffering; however, this interest has been updated. In earlier poems, Komunyakaa investigated the relationship between the military-industrial complex and the sex industry. In "Eros," the god is no longer a horny G.I. but is instead a sex tourist in Bangkok, living well—"Eating succulent prawns & squid /

Spiced with red peppers & lemongrass”—and enjoying the godlike status his wealth creates: “Eros throws / A kiss to the teenage prostitute, / & touches the wad of greenbacks / Nestled against his groin.” Komunyakaa’s concern with the experience of black Americans continues in the poem “The Goddess of Quotas” in which that goddess reminds readers that it was not that long ago when DuBois sat “[a]t the back of the bus,” when signs read, “No Dogs // Kikes Dagos Spics Niggers,” when her heart “was divided by a rope / That halved a rock & roll dance hall.” Later, in “The Goddess of Quotas Laments,” Komunyakaa again combines images to clearly take a strong political stand, suggesting the ongoing need for affirmative action initiatives: “George Wallace is dead. / Few recant as he did, dropping / Skeins & masks, but I still see / The army of dragon’s teeth // He planted like Cadmus of Tyre.”

The references to antiquity work so well because there is an idea that they support and that supports them: they indicate the continuous presence in human life of seemingly in- or super-human powers. However, *Pleasure Dome* also includes poems that really have antiquity and its systems of myths as their central concern, and thus, without any relevance, any need, seem insignificant. Poems such as “The Centaur” and “Hermaphrodite” stay so close to their myths, using such precise mythic language—Chiron, Atalanta, Theocritus, “nymph,” “Hermes & / Aphrodite,” Salmacis, Hermaphroditus, “chimera,” and “Janus- / Headed alchemists”—that it is impossible to figure out what the poems are doing. They are too confusing to be allegorical and too precious to be mythic. The slight wordplay in titles such as “Or, God in Godzilla” and “Hydraulics”—the title of a poem that includes in it reference to Hercules, the killer of the hydra—indicates the slight poems that follow them.

In “Improvised Symmetry,” an essay in *Blue Notes*, Komunyakaa investigates the use of the phrase “uneven and flawed” to evaluate poetry. He states:

Still, today, that critical phrase is with us, but it never fails to dismay me when I see it in print. What does it really mean? Is it like saying a suite of songs or a medley should be performed at the same tempo or that a dress must be cut from the same piece of silk? Is the human brain supposed to function like a fleshy metronome, with no highs or lows, with hardly any tonal or emotional or structural variance? ... Or is each poem an experience in itself—with strengths and flaws?

In terms of their quality, Komunyakaa’s poems are very uneven; he has written

terrific poems, bad poems, and poems running the gamut between. However, the main flaw of his poems is not that they are uneven but that they are often too even. When considered en masse, the poems, the “experience[s]” that Komunyakaa’s constant image-layering creates can be flat. What in the poet’s mind may seem a storm can seem to readers as repetitious as a metronome. Komunyakaa’s imagistic jolts quickly become static when not channeled via a particular structure created for a particular purpose, a need, in a particular poem. His best poems are those that, seen against the backdrop of his whole work, appear uneven because they take on a particular task, investigating a specific emotional state or a specific situation. They are the poems that agree with Paul Nougé when he claims in “The Forbidden Images,” from *Le Surrealisme au Service de la Revolution*, that “It is not enough to create an object, it is not enough for it to be. We must show that it can, by some artifice, arouse in the spectator, the desire, the need to see.” Only in this way are his image-driven poems the type Komunyakaa wants: strong poems, connected to the aesthetic trends of his day, but also poems that might reveal and move, poems in service—even if subtle service—of revolution.