

Where are the happy integers of inventory?

Call the one sandal, abstract and nostalgic:
Glove of the first baseman, it folds like night

Or night's daring bird feeding on amber insects.

The circulations of blood in the snow tree
Remind me of the woman we lost.
The sea rises behind us, at our backs.
Mr. Enos Slaughter¹ didn't die

In Nebraska, of drink. In the snow tree a sick,
Whiter angel picks its teeth.
Errors of snow in water, our names . . .
You were wrong, Rafael. The stars,
Violent at their tea,

Were the last children to learn the arithmetic
Of memory.

1. Baseball player (b. 1916).

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA b. 1947

Yusef Komunyakaa wrote the most acclaimed book of American poetry about the Vietnam War, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), the title meaning "crazy" in Vietnamese. Having served in Vietnam in 1969–70 as a reporter for and editor of the military newspaper *The Southern Cross*, Komunyakaa, decorated with the Bronze Star, allowed the war to settle in memory for fourteen years. At this distance, he could distill the complexities of America's most controversial war—American indifference and empathy for the Vietnamese, cross-racial tension and camaraderie between whites and African Americans. Like Wilfred Owen and other modern war poets, Komunyakaa is attentive to major experience and to shared political history. "My belief is that you have to have both," he remarked in an interview, "the odyssey outward as well as inward" (*Callaloo*, 1990).

Like the speaker who peers through a nightscope at eerily ghostlike figures in "Starlight Scope Myopia," Komunyakaa sees the war as distant and yet insistently present in the minds of the war's participants and observers. Touching a name carved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial triggers a sudden memory in "Facing It": "I see the broody trap's white flash." On the wall's mirrorlike surface, memory bumps up against sight, the dead invade the present, and the self is interpenetrated by the surrounding world. The poem, like the wall, crosses and blurs lines of historical, racial, and political division. Time and space are similarly layered in Komunyakaa's poems inspired by jazz, such as "February in Sydney," in which the past erupts from beneath the protective sheen of the present.

Komunyakaa's poetry also cuts across different levels of diction, from biblical idiom to journalistic reportage, African American vernacular to high-art lyricism. Komunyakaa's remark in *Callaloo* about Melvin Tolson applies with equal force to his own work: "he brings together the street as well as the highly literary into a single poetic context in ways where the two don't even seem to exhibit division—it's all one and the same." Syncopating short, jagged lines, enjambling and coiling syntax, building musical resonances through assonance and alliteration, Komunyakaa crafts poems that have surprisingly quick turns of sound and sense. He mimics the sudden riffs, twists, and mannered elaborations of jazz improvisation, in the long tradition of African American poets who have mined jazz and the blues for poetry, from Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown to Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka and Michael S. Harper.

Komunyakaa was born James Willie Brown Jr., on April 29, 1947, in Bogalusa, Louisiana, not far from New Orleans. He changed his name for religious reasons, adopting Komunyakaa from a grandfather smuggled, according to family legend, on a banana boat from Trinidad. His father was an illiterate carpenter, remembered with anger and affection in "My Father's Love Letters." After returning from Vietnam, Komunyakaa received his B.A. from the University of Colorado in 1975, his M.A. from Colorado State University in 1979, and his M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine, in 1980. He has coedited anthologies of "jazz poetry" (1991, 1996) and published a volume of essays and interviews. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* and, in 2001, published *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*. He teaches at Princeton University.

Starlight Scope Myopia¹

Gray-blue shadows lift
shadows onto an oxcart.

Making night work for us,
the starlight scope brings
men into killing range.

The river under Vi Bridge
takes the heart away

like the Water God
riding his dragon.
Smoke-colored

Viet Cong²
move under our eyelids,

lords over loneliness
winding like coral vine through
sandalwood & lotus,

¹ Nearsightedness. *Starlight scope*: electrical instrument that uses light from the night sky to improve nocturnal vision.

² Shortened name of the Viet Nam Cong San, the

Communist military forces supported by North Vietnam against South Vietnam and the United States in the Vietnam War (1955–75).

inside our lowered heads
years after this scene

ends. The brain closes
down. What looks like
one step into the trees,

they're lifting crates of ammo
& sacks of rice, swaying

under their shared weight.
Caught in the infrared,
what are they saying?

Are they talking about women
or calling the Americans

*beaucoup dien cai dau?*³
One of them is laughing.
You want to place a finger

to his lips & say "shhhh."
You try reading ghost talk

on their lips. They say
"up-up we go," lifting as one.
This one, old, bowlegged,

you feel you could reach out
& take him into your arms. You

peer down the sights of your M-16,
seeing the full moon
loaded on an oxcart.

Tu Do Street⁴

Music divides the evening.
I close my eyes & can see
men drawing lines in the dust.
American pushes through the membrane
of mist & smoke, & I'm a small boy
again in Bogalusa: *White Only*
signs & Hank Snow.⁵ But tonight

I walk into a place where bar girls
fade like tropical birds. When
I order a beer, the mama-san
behind the counter acts as if she
can't understand, while her eyes
skirt each white face, as Hank Williams⁶
calls from the psychedelic jukebox.
We have played Judas⁷ where
only machine-gun fire brings us
together. Down the street
black GIs hold to their turf also.
An off-limits sign pulls me
deeper into alleys, as I look
for a softness behind these voices
wounded by their beauty & war.
Back in the bush at Dak To
& Khe Sanh,⁸ we fought
the brothers of these women
we now run to hold in our arms.
There's more than a nation
inside us, as black & white
soldiers touch the same lovers
minutes apart, tasting
each other's breath,
without knowing these rooms
run into each other like tunnels
leading to the underworld.

1988

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

15

3. Very crazy. The phrase, used often to describe the American soldiers, is a combination of Vietnamese (*dien cai dau*) and French (*beaucoup*). France had a long colonial presence in Vietnam until 1954.

4. Street bustling with life.

gon, the capital of South Vietnam and site of the U.S. Army headquarters during the Vietnam War.

5. American country singer (1914–1999). Bogalusa: town in Louisiana where Komunyakaa spent his childhood.

6. American country singer and composer (1923–1953).

7. One of the twelve disciples, Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

8. under siege by the North Vietnamese army for several months in 1968. Dak To: city in northwest South Vietnam that, in 1967, was the site of one of the war's most violent battles.

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.

1958

February in Sydney

Dexter Gordon's tenor sax
 plays "April in Paris"
 inside my head all the way back
 on the bus from Double Bay.
Round Midnight,⁹ the '50s,
 cool cobblestone streets
 resound footsteps of Bebop¹
 musicians with whiskey-laced voices
 from a boundless dream in French.
 Bud, Prez, Webster, & The Hawk,²
 their names run together riffs.
 Painful gods jive talk through
 bloodstained reeds & shiny brass
 where music is an anesthetic.
 Unreadable faces from the human void
 float like torn pages across the bus
 windows. An old anger drips into my throat,
 & I try thinking something good,
 letting the precious bad
 settle to the salty bottom.
 Another scene keeps repeating itself:
 I emerge from the dark theatre,

9. Bertrand Tavernier's 1986 movie about expatriate jazz musicians in 1950s Paris, starring jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon (1923–1990) and named after a composition by jazz pianist Thelonious Monk (1917–1982). "April in Paris": jazz standard. *Double Bay*: neighborhood in Sydney, Australia.

1. Style of modern jazz developed in the 1940s and 1950s, characterized by harmonic exploration

and fast-paced flurries of notes drawn from the chromatic scale.

2. *Round Midnight* was loosely based on the lives of pianist Bud Powell (1924–1966) and saxophonist Lester "Prez" Young (1909–1959), who worked in Europe late in their careers, like influential saxophonists Ben Webster (1909–1973) and Coleman "The Hawk" Hawkins (1904–1969).

passing a woman who grabs her red purse
 & hugs it to her like a heart attack.
 Tremolo.³ Dexter comes back to rest
 behind my eyelids. A loneliness
 lingers like a silver needle
 under my black skin,
 as I try to feel how it is
 to scream for help through a horn.

25

30

1989

My Father's Love Letters

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax⁴
 After coming home from the mill,
 & ask me to write a letter to my mother
 Who sent postcards of desert flowers
 Taller than men. He would beg,
 Promising to never beat her
 Again. Somehow I was happy
 She had gone, & sometimes wanted
 To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
 Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"⁵
 Never made the swelling go down.
 His carpenter's 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.
 I wondered if she laughed
 & held them over a gas burner.
 My father could only sign
 His name, but he'd look at blueprints
 & say how many bricks
 Formed each wall. This man,
 Who stole roses & hyacinth
 For his yard, would stand there
 With eyes closed & fists balled,

5

10

15

20

25

30

3. Rapid alternation between two or more notes.
 4. Béni brewed by the Jackson Brewing Company,
 New Orleans.

5. Recording by jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams (1910–1981).

Laboring over a simple word, almost
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

1992

LORNA GOODISON

b. 1947

Lorna Goodison is one of the most gifted heirs of the pioneering West Indian poets Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, and fellow Jamaican Louise Bennett, dubbed by her the "mother of the Jamaican language." Born a generation later, Goodison writes poetry that straddles the divide between Creole verse, as exemplified by Bennett's quarelous street vendor in "South Parade Peddler," and visionary rhetoric, as in Walcott's "Season of Phantasmal Peace." All such idioms are possible for Goodison, none of them alien. In her poetry, the liquid turns between Standard English and Creole are supple, quick, barely visible. Fluent in different linguistic and rhetorical registers, she interweaves the discourses that a colonial education rigidly segregates.

Goodison, who recalls a colonial childhood in which she "spoke two languages," one at home and one at school, one from the colonizer and one from the colonized, is unassuming in her explanation of her facility in composing code-switching poetry. "Some things I think of in standard English and some in Creole," she explained to an interviewer; she is neither afraid of literary English nor ashamed of Creole and thus refuses to be "contained" by "just one language." Forced to recite Wordsworth's "Daffodils" even though she "had never seen one," she nevertheless credits Wordsworth along with other British writers, with helping to open her "inward," imaginative eye.

For Goodison, Jamaica's cultural heterogeneity is recorded most obviously in its multifarious place names: "There is everywhere here," she quips in the poem "To Us, All Flowers Are Roses"; along with the Ashanti name Accompong and the Amerindian Arawak, "there is Alps and Lapland and Berlin / Armagh, Carrick Fergus, Malvern / Rhine and Calabar, Askenish." Likewise, Goodison's poetry freely embraces a range of cultural and linguistic inheritances, whether European, Caribbean, or African.

Goodison describes her own ancestry as mixed, declaring, "It all belongs to me." "My great grandfather was a man called Aberdeen, who obviously came from Scotland. And my great grandmother came from Guinea, and because they had a mating and produced my grandmother, who looked like an American Indian—I have relatives who look like Egyptians and my son is an African prince—all of it belongs to me" (1988 interview). In some of her poems, Goodison has self-mockingly adopted the persona of the "mulatta," but with an intercultural delight that stands in marked contrast to the torment of "mulatto" poems such as Walcott's "A Far Cry from Africa."

Goodison sees her personal history of racial and cultural hybridity as exemplifying a broader experience. Her poems about the genesis of her "family's history," she says of works such as "Guinea Woman," suggest "everybody's family history in the colonial experience, a Jamaican experience." Goodison thinks back through the lives of women in particular, reclaiming aspects of past experience that have traditionally been marginalized, including the lives of Afro-Caribbean slaves and domestic servants. The character portrait is often Goodison's imaginative vehicle for individualizing and reentering history, as in "Annie Pengelly" and "Turn Thanks to Miss Mirry." She denounces specific injustices of Jamaican colonial history—enslavement, rape, torture, incarceration—but yet offers a nuanced treatment of, for example, the white mistress of the slave girl Ann

Pengelly, exploring the parallels between racial and gender oppression. Sometimes, she bestows a voice upon a legendary historical figure, such as a great Jamaican Maroon leader and warrior in the poem "Nanny," who surrenders sexual dependency to become mother to a nation. If Goodison's poetry fearlessly crosses boundaries between languages and cultures, some of her poems explore life in the interstices between genders. In "On Becoming a Mermaid," she returns to a Western archetype and imagines the metamorphosis of woman into water nymph, a change that liberates her from sexual boundaries, yet confines her within her own body.

Goodison's poetry engages a rich field of sensual experience. An accomplished painter, she melds colors with taste in poems such as "Hungry Belly Kill Daley." Delighting in what she calls, in the title of a poem, "The Mango of Poetry," she connects the pleasures of art and poetry with the pleasures of food. Her poetry is highly musical in its cadences, sometimes shifting tempo with the speed of jazz improvisation, from staccato to langor to chanted exuberance. Mercurial shifts in voice, person, and diction help sustain the propulsive momentum. In the complex inner life of a poem such as "Sam Chi Chi Lala," disparate aspects of the poet's experience flow together—a cold North American autumn with West Indian hurricanes, monastic prayer with Caribbean superstition, even Mary, Queen of Scots with reggae and Sufism.

Goodison was born on August 1, 1947, in Kingston, Jamaica, to a lower-middle-class family, her father a telephone line worker, her mother a seamstress. Congested city life marked her youth, but trips to the Jamaican countryside fired her imagination. From her schooldays, she names *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, edited by W. B. Yeats, and Walcott's *In a Green Night* as formative influences. After school, she studied art both in Jamaica (1967–68) and in New York (1968–69). In Jamaica, she worked as an illustrator, artist, teacher, and cultural administrator. In 1986–87, she was a fellow at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, and since 1991, she has taught creative writing both in the United States, at the University of Michigan, and in Canada, at the University of Toronto. Among other awards, she has won a Commonwealth Poetry Prize (1986) and the Musgrave Gold Medal from the Institute of Jamaica (1999).

On Becoming a Mermaid

Watching the underlife idle by
you think drowning must be easy death
just let go and let the water carry you
away and under
the current pulls your bathing-plaits loose
your hair floats out straightened by the water
your legs close together fuse all the length down
your feet now one broad foot
the toes spread into
a fish-tail, fan-like,
your sex locked under
mother-of-pearl scales
you're a nixie¹ now, a mermaid
a green-tinged fish/fleshed woman/thing
who swims with thrashing movements
and stands upended on the sea floor

1. Water nymph.