

that alcoholism is for Native Americans a subject as “sensitive” as for the Anglos. It is a problem in both cultures.

Orange’s Warriors are vehicles for Vizenor’s satire of the whites’ religion. Wearing neckties, even though they are uncomfortable, to create a good impression and get the grant money, they reflect the excessive concern of whites with physical appearance. Harold, who “speaks like an evangelist” to impress the foundation board of directors, uses elaborate and convincing language, similar to the speech of some religious leaders when trying to collect money from their disciples. The white man’s religious discourse is, in fact, the real issue criticized here.

Words such as “potted,” “miniature,” and “espresso” are used to criticize the whites’ industrialized and materialistic world. Used to describe such unreal things as potted oranges and coffee trees, miniature orange marmalade, and pinch bean espresso, they are a catchy subterfuge to fool the whites. Native Americans make use of whites’ own marketing words to trick them.

Humor in Native American literature, so well represented by Vizenor’s *Harold of Orange: A Screenplay*, is a theme that deserves much more attention and study.

—FLAVIA CARREIRO, *Fitchburg State College*

#### WORKS CITED

- DeLoria, Vine. “Indian Humor.” *Nothing but the Truth: Indian Humor*. Comp. John Purdy and James Ruppert. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001. 39–53.
- Foley, Jack. “Interview with Gerald Vizenor.” *Mythosphere* 1 (1999): 304–14.
- Herring, Roger D., and Sandra Meggert. “The Use of Humor as a Counselor Strategy with native American Indian children.” *Elementary school guidance and counseling* 29.1 (1994): 67, 10.
- Vizenor, Gerald. “Harold of Orange: A Screenplay.” *Nothing but the Truth: Indian Humor*. Comp. John Purdy and James Ruppert. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001. 591–619.

#### Komunyakaa’s FACING IT

Although most readers encounter Yusef Komunyakaa’s poem “Facing It” in an anthology, a close reading of the poem should be informed by its original context as the final poem in *Dien Cai Dau*,<sup>1</sup> a carefully designed volume about the Vietnam war. “Facing It” (63) describes a black veteran’s visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. The unique visual properties of the memorial—the way it simultaneously absorbs and reflects light to create an illusion of depth behind the surface of the stone—provide Komunyakaa with a striking image of the troubling depths of memory and the way the past

and present interact in the mind. However, the fleeting images on the surface of the wall assume depth and symbolic significance only when read in the context of the other poems in the volume.

The memorial provides a liminal space where past, present, and future meet, where the living come to commune with their memories of the dead and veterans come to assess their losses. The names of the dead are inscribed on its surface at just the point where the outside world touches the weird world of images that seem to live within the stone. All of the images in “Facing It” work on the literal level to describe the experience of standing before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, but they also evoke images from previous poems in the collection to suggest the uncontrollable flood of memories that washes over the speaker as he faces the wall of highly polished black granite. As he looks at his own reflection and those of other visitors, he reflects on his experiences in Vietnam. The poem’s title works in a number of ways. The speaker is “facing” his memories of the war and struggling to maintain his composure: “I said I wouldn’t, / dammit: No tears” (lines 3–4). He also puts his face on the monument, at least for a moment, adding a human element to the cold black stone.

The poem’s opening lines show how elusive all of these images are, as the present moment dissolves into the past: “My black face fades, / hiding inside the black granite” (1–2). The speaker’s blackness threatens to render him invisible, recalling Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the persistent racism that black soldiers endured, even as they fought for their country (a theme that runs through several poems in *Dien Cai Dau*). Images of faces are also common in the collection, and all of them add to the resonance of these lines, but the most striking example comes from a prose poem called “One Legged Stool” (42) in which a black prisoner speaks to his Vietnamese guard, recalling the stares of “rednecks” who hated to see him in his uniform: “I’d be sharper than sharp. My jump boots spit shined till my face was lost in them. [ . . . ] My brass, my ribbons, they would make their blood boil.” His uniform makes him visible, and he uses it as a weapon against the “rednecks,” but at the same time, the image of his face fading in his boots suggests that all they see is the uniform, not the man inside it. He compares the face of his guard at the window to “a white moon over Stone Mountain,” and says, “All I have to go back to is faces just like yours at the door.” The speaker in “Facing It” describes a similar experience as he stares at the memorial: “A white vet’s image floats / closer to me, then his pale eyes / look through mine. I’m a window” (25–27). The image of the white vet looking through the speaker’s eyes might suggest that, for a moment at least, their shared experiences make it possible for them to share a point of view, as one looks through the eyes of the other. But if the poem is read in the context of the book as a whole, where black and white soldiers live in different worlds in spite of the dangers they

share, it is evident that the speaker remains invisible to the white veteran. As a black soldier puts it in “Tu Do Street” (29) as he is denied service in a segregated bar in Saigon, “We have played Judas where / only machine gun fire brings us together” (15–17).

As the speaker looks into the memorial, struggling to understand his past, his own reflection becomes elusive and enigmatic. “My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey, the profile of night / slanted against morning” (6–8). Clouded by the tears in his eyes and the names on the memorial, his reflection seems to represent the man who fought in Vietnam. The “profile of night / slanted against morning” suggests a divided self, still mired in the nightmarish experiences of Vietnam even as he emerges into the light of a new day. The reflection is “like a bird of prey,” recalling previous poems in the collection that compare the combatants to birds, but also suggesting how the past preys on the present.

Visitors to the memorial often touch the names of loved ones, as though they were just out of reach behind the surface of the stone. Photographers have contrived images showing soldiers in combat fatigues reaching out to return the gesture, but when the speaker in “Facing It” touches the name of one of his fallen comrades, all he sees is “the booby trap’s white flash” (18) the moment of his death. The memorial’s promise of a chance to commune with the dead is merely an illusion, another trick of the light. “Names shimmer on a woman’s blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall” (19–21). The wives and girlfriends whom the soldiers left behind figure prominently in *Dien Cai Dau*. In “Facing It” the roles are reversed, as women remember the men who they will never see again.

Several images in “Facing It” appear to be little more than disconnected observations that intrude on the speaker’s consciousness as he looks at the memorial, but for readers of the entire volume, they are charged with meaning:

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird’s  
wings cutting across my stare. (22–23)

Throughout *Dien Cai Dau* images of birds represent both lovers left behind and the enemy soldiers who interrupt erotic reveries with sudden violence. For instance, in “Thanks” (44) the speaker expresses gratitude to an unnamed force for “deflecting the ricochet” (9) while he 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” (11–14). In “Camouflaging the Chimera” (3) soldiers who are “slow dragging with ghosts [. . .] with women left in doorways / reaching in from America” are “content to be a hummingbird’s target” while they aim “at dark-hearted songbirds” (10–14). When an overly zealous lieutenant is murdered by a member of his platoon, the grenade blast is compared to “a hundred red birds released from a wooden box” (“Fragging” 16, lines

32–33). By the time a reader reaches “Facing It,” birds have become highly charged symbols that unite the seemingly opposite forces of love and violence, physical intimacy and aggression.

Reflecting on his craft, Komunyakaa has written, “I hope for a last line that is an open ended release. [. . .] I search for a little door I can leave ajar” (*Blue Notes* 37). The final lines in “Facing It” invite the reader into the poem to participate in the creation of meaning:

[. . .] In the black mirror  
a woman’s trying to erase names:  
No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair. (29–31).

The overwhelming desire to erase names, to bring the dead back to life, is juxtaposed with the mundane action of brushing a boy’s hair. Who is this woman? Is she the mother of a dead soldier recalling his childhood and the many small gestures of love that passed between them? Or is she a soldier’s wife, who has brought their son to visit the memorial and see his father’s name on the cold, black stone? As the final line in a volume of poems that assault the reader with all of the folly and horror of war, it does provide a release, a glimpse of the love that sustains the next generation, even if it cannot save them from experiencing war for themselves.

—THOMAS F. MARVIN, *Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis*

#### NOTE

1. All poems quoted are from Yusef Komunyakaa, *Dien Cai Dau*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1988).

#### WORKS CITED

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage, 1972.  
Komunyakaa, Yusef. *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*. Ed. Radiciani Clytus. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000.

#### Silko’s CEREMONY

Critic Shannon Zamir claims that the mining scene at the conclusion of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* is based not on American Indian sources but on T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (407). Zamir suggests that the sacrifice of Harley is reminiscent of Western Grail narratives, in which the hero must witness a horrible physical death and heal himself by refusing to participate in