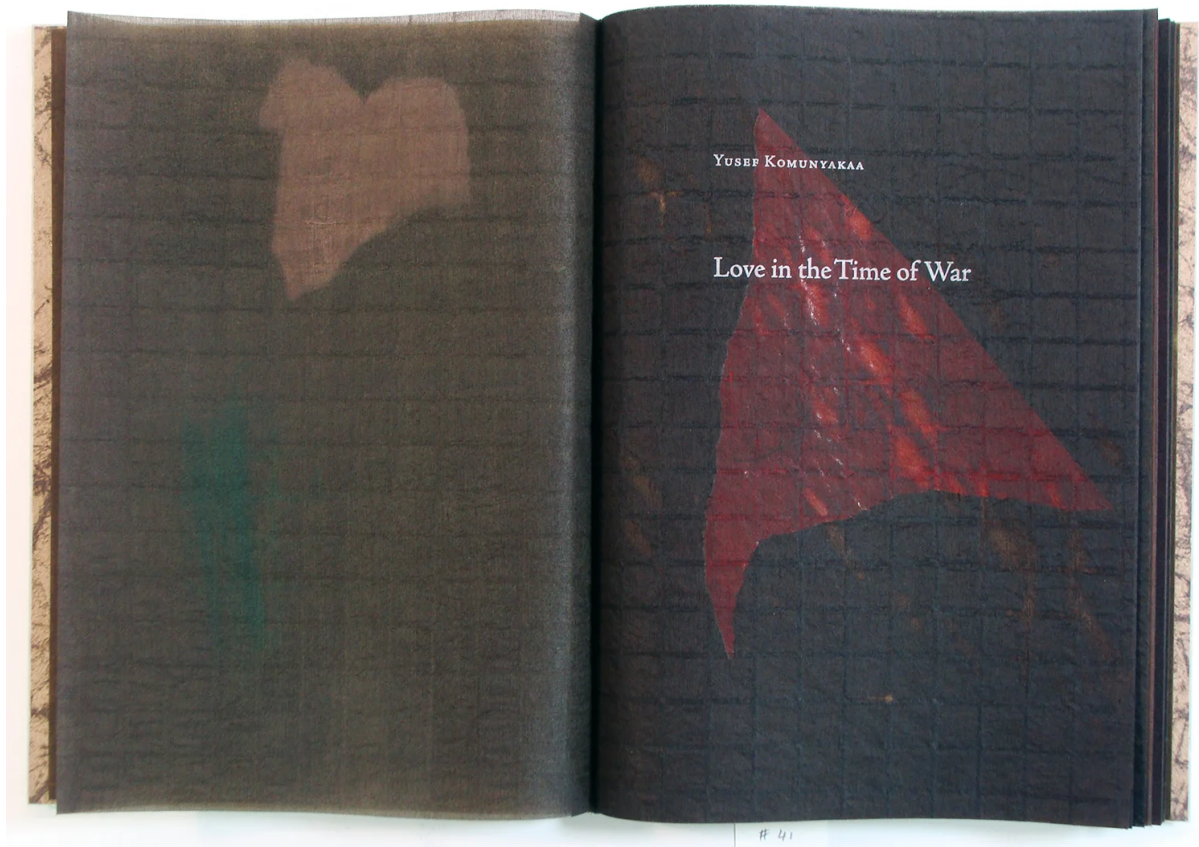


Old / Horses / War / & Love / Stare / Across / The / Sonnet / Floor

A Review / of Yusef / Komunyakaa's / Love in the / Time of War

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I went to the Jack Ginsburg Centre for Book Arts looking for love. They told me my quest was too vague, too expansive, that what I wanted could be found in multiplicities of form, of suggestion.

The way a page turns, for example, the physical act, that was enough for love to come streaming up my fingertips. But lying among the selection of books was a subtle thing, encased in aluminium, shy when compared to some of the tomes that sat around it. I was attracted, ready to flirt. Blocky gaps and etchings were carved into its silver casing, revealing a



woody paper's texture underneath. I got the impression of camouflage, but almost as some ancient artifact, the gaps in the frame resembling clouds. I thought I was prepared.

Opening the book, I found a stark contrast to its binding. Each page presents a separate sonnet, printed in shining silver ink on hand-dyed silk fabric. I felt as if I were handling some thin and vital autumn leaf, the scraps of a dead lover's dress, that the page would wither if I held it too long. So began my descent into Yusef Komunyakaa's *Love in the Time of War*, a book that I now consider, undeniably, a seminal text on warhood, humanity's history with combat, and our history with love. The book works, in form, content, and construction, to draw inseparable connections between these constants in human history, and Komunyakaa spends the length of it almost working out this idea, repetitively considering it, over and over, all through his use of the meditative and mediating container that is the sonnet form.



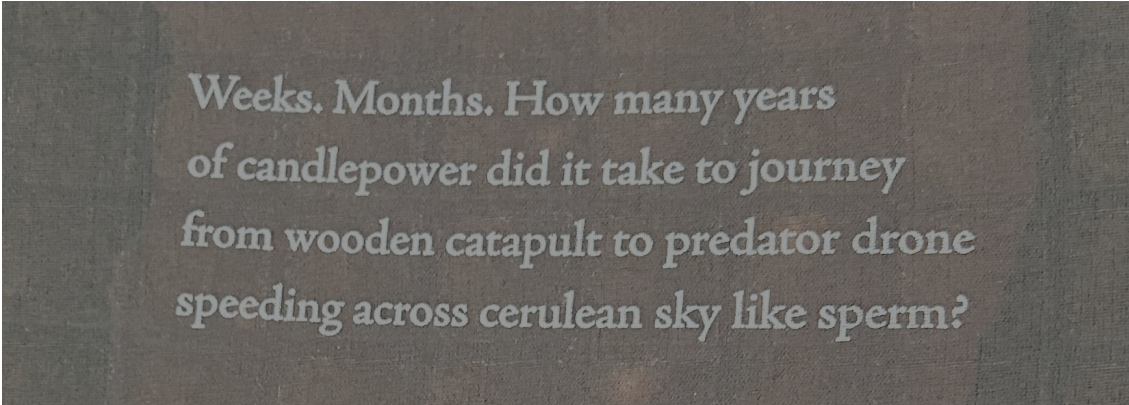
Komunyakaa's sonnets begin in deep history and travel through time, stalling for fragments where war and love rage on in an unending dance. The first poem begins with a list of ancient weaponry, tools of war:

The jawbone of an ass. A shank
braided with shark teeth. A garrote.
A shepherd's sling. A jagged stone
that catches light & makes warriors
dance to a bull-roarer's lamentation.
An obsidian ax. A lion-skin drum
& reed flute. A nightlong prayer
to gods stopped at the mouth of a cave.

There is a vivid sense of antiquity, innovations in combat and culture flooding forward alongside one another, the first arms race. The second half of the sonnet threads this voracious appetite alongside ancient acts of love, where lingering somewhere within the relentless violence there are signs of the first vulnerabilities:

The warrior-king summons one goddess
after another to his bloodstained pallet.
If these dear ones live inside his head
they still dress his wounds with balms
& sacred leaves, & kiss him
back to strength, back to a boy.

Consider the following quatrain:



*Weeks. Months. How many years
of candlepower did it take to journey
from wooden catapult to predator drone
speeding across cerulean sky like sperm?*

Here, war has the swiftness of erotic desire, and moves its actors, possessed, toward, toward, toward an unfound finality, gaining, with each step, a tighter grip on the perfection of their actions—the woman who finds herself understanding her lover more and more intimately with each day that he spends in her arms and the titans of military industry inventing new and more fine-tuned weapons of murder are not as far apart as it might seem at first glance. We get better at having sex with someone the longer we attune to their bodies and idiosyncrasies in a not dissimilar way to how we get better and better at descending on villages from the sky with remote controlled guns. Komunyakaa not only shows, through his focus on love, what is at stake in times of war, doesn't just paint war and love as undying constants in our histories, but works, with a vicious sensitivity, to blur the lines completely, to expose the shared patterns of action that line each phenomenon, that make them almost inseparable.

And so the collection arcs across shards of human history, ranging from protohumanity to the Epic of Gilgamesh, from a Mameluke slave's first born arriving on horseback to a dolphin, trained by a Navy Seal, swimming with explosives strapped to her body, bloodthirsty warriors tender to the whims of their mother, a kamikaze pilot diving into a warship with the geisha fan of his first and last woman on his mind. Moving through these pages feels like the unveiling of some ancient strand of DNA, feeling the two forces of your primordial inheritance, love and war, awaken.

The construction of the book communicates Komunyakaa's concerns on its own. The pages give off a vivid sense of antiquity (I was reminded, throughout my readings, of papyrus, rice papers, linen), and this, coupled with the aluminium, blocky and modern, camo on the binding, only emphasises the book's experience as a text out of time, from both deep history and the future. More effective than this is the construction's mimicry of the book's content—how the earthly, almost romantic, fragility of its pages is hidden behind a solid aluminium exterior, resembling the vulnerability that is the warrior's flesh, that is his love, and the hard, penetrable, armour it is buried beneath.

That said, the sonnet form is key. It is one of the oldest, most enduring forms of poetry, and its subject matter is, traditionally, about love. In these ways, it mimics and empowers the content of

the poems, but Komunyakaa doesn't stop this shallowly. For him, the sonnet is an operative tool more than it is a form defined by a set of unbreakable rules. At times, for example, his poems completely disregard the sonnet's constraints on meter, his lines are often either too short or too long, and don't rhyme at all. Again, there is the interplay of antiquity and modernity: It is clear that these poems are certainly sonnets—they are always fourteen lines, are always constructing an argument or handling an idea that is then always affected by a volta which transforms the built argument through poetic insight. Still the other discrepancies in the constraints show a sensitivity on Komunyakaa's part to the nature of his subject matter. Just as his willingness to return to an antique form mimics his turn back to ancient history, the actual content, and the way it defies the traditions of the sonnet, show that these poems have been written in an age where history, like form, does not have a single face but is instead at the will of the one handling it. To capture what he is considering, Komunyakaa has to take history, and thus form, in his hands.

Komunyakaa began writing *Love in The Time of War* soon after the United States invaded Iraq on the 20th of March, 2003—the day I was born. Seeing his country launch, yet again, into military violence, the poet was drawn to consider its perpetual return, its fatal inevitability, and the intimate consequences of war's march through time. There are deep resonances here with another poet, Terrance Hayes, and his book *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin*, which Hayes began writing a day after Donald Trump was elected—producing a sonnet a day for the next two years and planning to do so until the end of his presidency. Feeling similarly provoked by Donald Trump's election as Komunyakaa was by the invasion of Iraq, Hayes used the sonnet form as a mechanism to repeatedly investigate and consider American racism, American politics, American love, and American culture. Each poem, then, in some way, is always addressed to Donald Trump or with a spiritual, political, distillation of Donald Trump and his era in mind:

I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,
Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame.
I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat
Grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.
I lock your persona in a dream-inducing sleeper hold

While your better selves watch from the bleachers.
I make you both gym & crow here. As the crow
You undergo a beautiful catharsis trapped one night
In the shadows of the gym. As the gym, the feel of crow-
Shit dropping to your floors is not unlike the stars
Falling from the pep rally posters on your walls.
I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart.
Volta of acoustics, instinct & metaphor. It is not enough
To love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed.

Reading these two collections alongside one another, we arrive at an understanding of the sonnet as a tool for deep consideration. Komunyakaa and Hayes arrived at the form, again and again, seeking to answer the same question, turning it over, flipping it upside down, always in search of a deeper insight, a new angle, another shard to make sense of the whole. The sonnet, through its generative form as an argument builder and volta, served as a way to investigate these questions.

To conclude, Yusef Komunyakaa's *Love In the Time of War* investigates the age-old relationship between love and war, and manages to trace how deeply intertwined the pair have been as the two great constants of human history. Each poem, touching on a different era of humanity, works to draw these connections independent of the others—but as an extended practice, Komunyakaa's use of the sonnet for an entire collection allows him to ask the same question over and over and continue to arrive at new answers. Additionally, the shared form gives each poem a sense of relation to one another, a sense of timelessness in the experiences depicted, almost containing, like the human form, love and war in the same box standing next to the same box standing next to the same box.

Bibliography:

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