SEEKING SURPRISES: AN INTERVIEW WITH YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA *by Durthy A. Washington.*

AS HE APPROACHES THE PODIUM and pre pares to share his poetry with the small but select group gathered at CU-Colorado Springs University Center, he is the epitome of the erudite poet and scholar. Dressed in the academic version of "business casual" —jeans, collarless shirt, and conservative blazer — he seems relaxed as he smiles, surveys the room, and adjusts his sheaf of papers. And as he begins to read, his low, mellifluous voice infuses each syllable with a distinctive, lyrical quality:

I am five,
Wading out into deep
Sunny grass,
Unmindful of snakes
& yellowjackets, out
To the yellow flowers
Quivering in sluggish heat.
Don't mess with me
'Cause I have my Lone Ranger
Six-shooter. I can hurt
You with questions
Like silver bullets.

The lines are from "Venus's-flytraps," the first poem in his book *Magic City* which explores his childhood in Bogalusa, Louisiana, a small southern town of 14,000, seventy miles north of New Orleans. As he reads several more poems — some new, some old, some not yet published — his audience sits spellbound, mesmerized by his masterful images, candid commentaries on the beauty and horror of the human experience.

But for Yusef Komunyakaa — winner of the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry — this merging of extremes simply reflects his surrealistic perception of reality. "I see all those things happening in the same frame," says Komunyakaa (whose Islamic name translates to "Joseph the Compassionate"). "If I had the talent to paint pictures, I could still see weaving all those things together."

MUCH LIKE TONI MORRISON'S novels, Komunyakaa's poems "transcend the line of demarcation between the sacred and the obscene," especially those that deal with his experiences in Viet Nam. As one *New York Times* reporter observes in his review of Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* (Vietnamese for "crazy American soldier"), the book "renders a kind of experience so extreme it seems to forbid a merely esthetic response. His poems are an effort to explain something morally incoherent. . . . He renders war as if it were still present. (*New York Times Book Review,* Sept. 24, 1989).

Dr. Alexander Blackburn, Komunyakaa's former University of Colorado at Colorado Springs English professor, concurs. In a letter recommending his former student for an honorary doctoral degree, he describes Komunyakaa's writing as having "stunned readers into an increased awareness of the truth which rages 'behind the eyes' of all those who have suffered from prejudice and war, 'the psychological terrain that makes us all victims.'"

The recipient of numerous awards, including the prestigious Kingsley-Tufts Award and the William Faulkner Prize, Komunyakaa is the author of nine books of poetry which have been translated into six languages and published in more than one hundred literary journals and twenty anthologies. For his extraordinary literary achievements and "the recognition his work has brought to Colorado," Komunyakaa received the honorary degree Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Colorado during commencement exercises held May 18, 1996.

Komunyakaa's visit to the Colorado campus marked a milestone in his academic and literary career, for it was there that he began to explore his career as a writer. Having recently received his discharge from the Army following a tour of duty in Vietnam, where he received the Bronze Star for heroism under fire, Komunyakaa enrolled at UCCS in 1971. As a student, he helped found the campus newspaper, then called *Montage,* and the campus literary magazine, *Riverrun.* Komunyakaa graduated from UCCS in 1975 with a bachelor's degree in English and sociology and went on to earn a master's degree in creative writing from Colorado State University, graduating in 1978. While at CSU, he experienced two events that would prove to be major turning points in his literary career: his thesis, a collection of original poems titled *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory,* was accepted for publication, and Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks introduced him to a large audience as "the best young black poet in America." Komunyakaa credits much of his success at CSU to English professor William Tremblay, whom he fondly refers to as "my moral barometer."

Upon graduating from CSU, Komunyakaa went on to earn a second master's degree from the University of California-Irvine, where, he recalls, "I was quite taken with the students and the critical community." Upon his graduation in 1980, he began a teaching and writing career that progressed from an instructorship at the University of New Orleans to a professorship at the University of Indiana, including the Holloway Visiting Professorship at the University of California-Berkeley. Currently, Komunyakaa serves as a Professor of English Professor with the University of Indiana's Master of Fine Arts program.

Presumably because he refused to define him-

Komunyakaa Speaks Out

Far from the stereotype of the aloof intellectual, Komunyakaa is open and easy to talk to. And once I get used to being in the presence of a renowned poet who sounds like Lou Rawls, I begin to relax and ask him questions on a variety of topics to which he provides insightful and candid answers.

On His Vietnam Experience: It took me 14 years to write about it. *[Both Toys in a Field and Dien Cai Dau focus on his Vietnam experience.]* We chose not to know what was happening in Vietnam. I was very angry that I had been sent there. I admire some of the peasants. I come out of a peasant society as well. I admire their work and the hope within the context of their diminished lives.

On Racism: We are experiencing a systematic rolling back of victories won in the 1960s and 70s. Drugs are systematically aimed at the black communities. There's a war going on. What has to happen (is that) black people have to take back their communities, and it will have to involve confrontation. We also need to highlight the works of those who are doing positive things. . . .

On the writing process: I think of writing as a "healthy obsession." I can write anywhere. I might start with 150 lines and systematically cut it back to 40 lines. I hone the poem to its essential imagery. . . . I usually work on 3 projects at once. *[Komunyakaa is currently working on three books: Pleasure Dome (an excavation of black history);* Thieves of Paradise ([an exploration of prehistoric peoples]; and a third book, as yet untitled.)

On his advice to aspiring writers: Write about what's closest to you. Do not wait for inspiration. If one waits for inspiration, one has already been defeated. Read everything, because there is an intricate connection between reading and writing. Not just poems, but also journals and especially science writing, which tends to combine beauty and horror. And write everyday.

self as strictly a "black poet" and failed to embrace the rhetoric of the Black Power movement of the '60s and '70s, Komunyakaa's early works received little critical or public recognition. As Poet Laureate of the United States Robert Hass points out, Komunyakaa is "a writer who has quietly gone his own way, not cashed in on literary fashion, and made a sustained and disciplined body of work that brings a new voice to African American writing and a powerful moral intelligence to the English language for all of us."

Komunyakaa's poetry is marked by a distinctive style that merges historical perspective and personal experience with bold creative techniques borrowed from the world of the jazz musician and the realm of the surreal. An avid jazz afficionado, Komunyakaa admits that his work — which features a distinctively lyrical, rhythmic quality — has been profoundly influenced by artists such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. As one critic points out, "Komunyakaa's best poems are jazzy and improvisational, razor-sharp pieces that tell us more about our culture than any news broadcast." (*Bloomsbury Review,* Nov./Dec. 1993) He also cites surrealism as playing a major role in his artistic development, especially the works of French poet Andre Breton, hailed as "the father of surrealism," and West Indian poet Aimé Césaire, who used surreal language to deal with the reawakening of black racial awareness. (The surrealists sought to express unconscious thoughts and feelings in their works and believed that, by tapping into our subconscious, we could access a secret place "where all that is apparently contradictory in our everyday lives and consciousness will be made plain.")

Other writers who had a major impact on his works include James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. "Baldwin is very important to me. He's one of the first writers I read. His appearance is important to me. He looked so much like people I grew up with. And he had such a vibrant mind that could embrace so many ideas. He could transport the reader through the texture of his language. I thought that was sheer bravery." And as he points out in *Swing Low,* "I remember being struck by the surprise of his (Hughes') poetry and that it was so close to a spoken diction, with a kind of blues, metric shape. It was so immediate, and it touched my existence in a complete way."

It is this sense of "seeking surprises" that pervades his own poetry and fosters his creativity. As he explains, "I tend to just look through my work and find surprises. If I don't have surprises, poetry doesn't work for me. What gives my poetry its surprising element is that I have not systematically planned out in a directed way what I am going to say.

"It is a process of getting back to the unconscious."