Yusef Komunyakaa's powerful and unique style of using succinct, but meaningful, phrases, as well as his efficacious use of poetic devices, are clearly evident in two of his earlier poems "1938," from Lost in the Bonewheel Factory (1977), and "Translating Footsteps," of Dedications and Other Darkhorses (1979). Printed together in 2001 in Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, these poems also share the consequences of cold hearts. However, nothing ties these two random selections as the common thread of symbolism of colors into repeated theme. The poet unifies the works through the colors of gray, white, red, black, yellow, green, and blue while incorporating different settings, different points of view, and different depth of background knowledge required for full interpretation. Komunyakaa, as a painter on paper, uses colorful imagery to strum the reader's heartstrings with his brilliant presentation of the tragic state of a cold and buried heart.

Angela Salas, in her recorded studies on Kumunyakaa's poetry in Flashback Through the Heart, notes that the poet "deploys a painter's eye in seeing and animating" scenes of loss (Salas 62). In the first two lines, "1938" displays splendid imagery in Komunyakaa's description of an airplane, using a colorful metaphor punctuated with the poetic devices of alliteration: "Granite-colored gulls unlocked their wings" (Komunyakaa"
Komunyakaa adds to the unity of his poems by selecting precise words which have a dramatic effect reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe and which add an emotional timbre to the passage. Airplanes are a dull gray, signifying that a depressing and sad situation is impending. Only an avid history buff would fully comprehend the poem's setting of airplanes and parachutes in 1938. Questions about the setting begin, but answers are not spelled out. Research becomes necessary for most readers. Indeed, in Paris in 1938, the situation was disparaging. A young Jew named Herschel Grynzspan, in frustration over the mistreatment and isolation from his parents, shot a low-level Nazi at the German embassy, becoming the scapegoat for Hitler's "Night of the Broken Glass," two days later. Jews and their businesses were savagely attacked supposedly in retribution for Grynzspan's actions, but could not hardly have been the roots of the apparent racism and hatred (Martelle 1). "1938" tells of the cold heart of not only the Jewish youth, but also of the cold hearts of the Nazis.

In "Translating Footsteps," Komunyakaa continues his focus on cold hearts. He again uses the term "granite" (line 4) in speaking of the moon, for the same depressing effect as in "1938." This poem also speaks of a sad and somber situation of a romantic break-up. Unlike "1938," "Translating Footsteps" does not require any research to uncover the common thread of unrequited or unreturned love in which a heart is buried to keep from being broken again. It is very intriguing that the poet uses the color gray in the beginning of two random poems to set the mood.

The poetry of Komunyakaa does not use white as a symbol of innocence, purity or enlightenment - as is commonly used by other writers. White takes on a more ominous interpretation. Similarly, the color white is used in both poems, by referring to
ghosts and tombs. In "1938," ghosts are mentioned in line 4: "Ghosts ducked through." Line 6 uses white again in referring to a "calcium tomb." White is used in lines 12 and 13 of "Translating Footsteps" when speaking of broken promises - "tombed treaties forgotten like lamps left to burn out in a ghost town" (Kumonyakaa 50). Clearly, Komunyakaa is using the color white for the symbol of ice and death. In "Translating Footsteps," he is speaking of an emotional abandonment and death of a dream. "1938" is expressing literal death as well as the icy, cold dead hearts in people who were alive as in "Translating Footsteps."

Red is the next color used in both poems. In "Translating Footsteps," the "red silk" of the blouse of the speaker's former lover speaks of romantic times in their former relationship. "1938," in the final line of the first stanza describes each night as a "red machine (Komunyakaa 61)." Here, red is symbolic of aggression and blood, as the realization comes home that the setting could be war. Furthermore, "red machine" forecasts a loss of a true humanity or conscience of mercy and kindness. Research confirms that the use of red is aggression and the gore of blood. Paris, in 1938, was one of the few places in the world where parachutes were manufactured. At this same time, Paris was home to the German Embassy, represented by the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler, whose seething racism and unrelenting focus of Jewish expatriation or extermination is no secret (Martelle 2). "Granite-colored" planes within a "red machine," having a "raw brain" is quite a menacing image, enhanced with "ghosts" and "calcium tombs," in "1938." The imagery is foreboding. The use of the same colors in "Translating Footsteps" is not so much foreboding as it is sad - with talk of "granite moon," "red silk," and "tombed treaties" in "a ghost town."
Another color used by Komunyakaa in both poems is black. "Translating Footsteps" speaks of "footsteps in a midnight hallway" in lines 17 and 18, as well as the speaker's "windows painted basement black" in line 20. "Basement black" alludes to no sunlight whatsoever, and "midnight" is the darkest part of the night. Black is symbolic of deep sadness and regret, as well as death - death of a relationship. Death of a relationship is probably the deepest pain one can experience. Black is used to symbolize hopelessness in Komunyakaa's poetry.

Yellow is used in both poems, as well. The second stanza of "1938" stars with the words: "You were cornered in the granary" (line 9). A granary is where grain is stored - grain usually being thought of as yellow. Yellow, in Komunyakaa's poetry, symbolizes ideas and impending death. "1938" stored these ideas in a "raw brain" (line 10) - ideas of aggression which bring forth death. Interestingly enough, "Translating Footsteps" explains that the pause between heartbeats and footsteps is "monumental as a grain of wheat" in lines 15 and 16. Again, yellow symbolizes ideas, as well as approaching death and decay - the grain of wheat, as an idea, had so much huge potential as a seed, but has died and not met the possibilities envisioned by the lovers before the decision to part.

Komunyakaa does not use green in his poetry to mean life, but in unexpected and nontraditional ways, as he uses all the colors. In "Translating Footsteps," the poet speaks of a few things which cannot be translated. One of these is spoken of in line 11 - the "language of growing grass." In line 3 of the same poem, the term "potted plant" symbolizes life obstructed or contained, almost like controlled, in contrast to the growing grass with roots into the earth. Her love for him was limited and would not continue to grow. "1938" alludes to a life of starvation for the Jews under Naziism in lines 11 and 12.
"a moneysack of hunger growled." Again, green is not the joyful color of everlasting life and love in this poem either.

Both poems use blue in their imagery, but not in the usual peaceful and calm context of most authors or painters. To Komunyakaa, blue symbolizes pain, like bruising. In the next line, Komunyakaa uses personification in "1938" as the "water screams," heightening the suspense of the location, understanding that the parachutes are being dropped into water. The snorting "blue horse" of line 11 is anything but peaceful, but it intends to bring forth suffering. "Translating Footsteps" talks about the "blues harp" in the last stanza, alluding to the sadness he embraces as he locks away his heart.

As skillfully as an artist at an easel, Yusef Komunyakaa brushes the colors through his poems adding unity and a depth of meaning not possible with poetic devices and symbolism. Komunyakaa says this of a poet’s purpose: "a sort of unearthing has to take place; sometimes one has to remove layers of facades and superficialities. The writer has to get down to the guts of the thing and rediscover the basic timbre of his or her existence" (Ashford 2). In his case, the symbolism of colors run as a striking and sturdy common thread throughout "1938" and "Translating Footsteps," strengthening their themes of buried and cold hearts with a clear imagery which renders them emotionally and literally memorable.
Works Cited


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