Loss in Love and War

Losing a loved one is one of the hardest things an individual has to go through in this life. This issue appears several times in *Pleasure Dome* by Yusef Komunyakaa in relation to romantic relationships and war. Two of his poems that contribute to this idea are “We Never Know” and “Translating Footsteps.” The characters both lose someone dear to them, either in a romantic way or friendship. “We Never Know” depicts a soldier finding his fellow warrior at the end of his life. “Translating Footsteps” shows the end of a couple’s emotional relationship. Komunyakaa himself has dealt with these events throughout his life and can relate to the characters in his writing. As a war veteran, “He served in the United States Army from 1969 to 1970 as a correspondent, and as managing editor of the Southern Cross during the Vietnam [W]ar, earning him a Bronze Star” (“Yusef Komunyakaa”). As Komunyakaa has experienced, both poems explain how the characters react to their unfortunate situations and the emotions that occur while coping. The kind, tender voices in both narrators show the true caring nature both have towards their fallen loved one. Komunyakaa connects “We Never Know” and “Translating Footsteps” through the use of metaphors.

Komunyakaa uses many metaphors throughout his writing to establish a common ground. In “We Never Know” Komunyakaa writes, “He danced with tall grass/for a moment, like he was swaying/with a woman” (Komunyakaa lines 1-3). The quick movement of the narrator’s colleague is compared to two individuals dancing, idealizing the fluent movement of
the soldier’s fall. The author also writes in “We Never Know”, “When I got to him,/a blue
halo/of flies has already claimed him” (Komunyakaa lines 5-7). The “blue halo of flies” explains
to the reader that the individual has for sure lost their life in a creative, less dramatic way. This
gives the reader an insight on the narrator’s outlook on his colleague’s loss, which is more soft
and beautiful than angry or depressing. The shock of the situation plays a big role in the way he
acts and this is the first time the narrator really knows his friend has passed. Towards the end of
the poem the narrator says, “I slid the wallet into his pocket/& turned him over, so he wouldn’t
be/kissing the ground” (Komunyakaa lines 15-17). The comparison of the dead man lying faced
down, “kissing the ground”, allows the audience to realize the respect the narrator has for his
friend. The narrator sees the fallen soldier as sweet and innocent, in efforts to try and soften the
harsh reality of the war itself. He realizes that the soldier was not deserving of losing his life.
Komunyakaa strategically places these metaphors in “We Never Know” to communicate to his
audience the effects of losing a loved one during war and how individuals handle the loss.

“Translating Footsteps” follows the pattern of the previous poem, but in a diverse
approach. In the next example, the narrator says:

“Some things refuse translation:
The way I place my hands under
Red silk to hear
A thin-skinned drum; language of growing grass; tombed treaties forgotten like lamps
Left to burn in a ghost town” (Komunyakaa lines 7-13).

The main character compares his lover’s heart to a “thin-skinned drum”, portraying the sound
her heart makes. To the main character, this sound is very soft and something he enjoys. The
“language of growing grass” represents the lack of communication between the broken couple,
as growing grass is slow and doesn’t make a sound. “Tombed treaties left to burn in a ghost
town” are describing the promises that have and will be lost as the relationship comes to an end
to be forever forgotten. These word choices are used to give a more detailed look into the
narrator’s thoughts in the heat of the argument and its aftermath. Later in the poem Komunyakaa writes:

“Each pause a clock inside stone…

Digital, monumental as grain, of wheat. Translate this mojo song, footsteps
In a midnight hallway” (Komunyakaa lines 14-18).

The “a clock inside stone” refers to the silence that both individuals encounter after the
argument. Both parties realize the relationship is coming to an immediate end. The narrator feels
as if time and reality is moving slow. “This mojo song” and “Footsteps in a midnight hallway”
give another example of the tense and distinct silence that will continue to occur between the
man and woman. In an interview with G.F Mitrano, Komunyakaa describes songs in this way:

“Well, I think of the music as a point of departure, the moment of awareness. And perhaps music
is also the sounds of life. If one thinks about laughter, how it can shift and drift into cries—cries
of pain, of pleasure” (Mitrano). This shows the character is now aware of the struggles this
breakup with bring him in the future and that pain that will come along. His emotions are flaring
and the past is flooding back to him in one big jumble, wishing he could fix what’s broken. The
main characters in both poems experience traumatic loss, just in two totally different ways. The
main characters suppress their feelings rather than fully dealing with physical, mental, and
emotional pain. Using these metaphors, Komunyakaa tries to paint vivid images in the
audience’s head that will last throughout these two examples.
There is much significance in the usage of metaphors throughout “We Never Know” and “Translating Footsteps”. The word choice in both these examples are important. William Baer describes the word choice of Komunyakaa in this way: “Komunyakaa himself, keenly aware of both the social and artistic obligations of the writer, has claimed that "language is what can liberate or imprison the human psyche" and that "we are responsible for our lives and the words we use"” (Baer). Komunyakaa uses specific language to connect to the emotions of the reader and allow them to begin to imagine how the characters in the poem feel. The description given through both examples tells the reader what goes on in real people’s head during a time of hardship in the loss of a loved one. They both show Komunyakaa working on overcoming the emotions of a traumatic situation. “We Never Know” shows how Komunyakaa’s view of war changed through personal experience. Being a part of the Vietnam War, the author has witnessed terrible tragedies. Over time, Komunyakaa has had too much time to reflect on the murders of his friends and how they affected him. He describes how it feels to watch someone you love die right in front of your eyes and the thoughts that flow through the witness’ mind. Komunyakaa, in this poem, is writing to cope with the images that he sees inside his head every day. “Translating Footsteps” is a more related issue to the normal population. Relationships come and go every day and there’s nothing that can change that fact. Komunyakaa, in this poem, is relating to as many people as he can. The author is showing the audience that the mixed emotions they have bottled up are normal and shared with many others. The dramatic changes in a breakup hurt and cause humans to do unusual things. Komunyakaa once stated, “We have to embrace many points of view in order to keep ourselves whole” (Mitrano). Softening the content and comparing the disturbances to more relatable instances, as in “Translating Footsteps”, help Komunyakaa get the desired message across to the reader.
Komunyakaa’s poetry uses word choice and patterns that allow him to connect two completely different situations by the pain the characters experience. Each line is strategically placed to give the reader a unique scene inside their head. “We Never Know” and “Translating Footsteps” have dark meanings described through more optimistic metaphors. Komunyakaa, in his poems, wants the reader to always see the brighter side of a pessimistic situation. The author wants the audience to realize that there is a time and place to express your emotions, which he does through writing. “We Never Know” and “Translating Footsteps” have two separate themes, yet Komunyakaa finds a common ground by appealing to the reader’s emotions through metaphors.
Works Cited


