Facing It

SUMMARY

My black face blends in as if it's hiding inside the blackness of the granite memorial. I told myself I wouldn't, damn it—I told myself I wouldn't cry. I'm tough as stone, but I'm also only human. The faint reflection of my own face peers back at me like a bird on the hunt as the darkness of nighttime edges against the dawn's light. When I turn a certain way the stones release my reflection. But when I turn another way, I'm right back inside the stone of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial—whether or not I'm trapped inside the stone depends on the light. I scan the 58,022 names of soldiers who died in the war, almost expecting to find my own name written there in letters as ephemeral as smoke. I touch the name Andrew Johnson and suddenly see the bright explosion of a hidden bomb. The names on the memorial ruffle back and forth in the reflection of a woman's shirt, but then she walks away and the names remain stationary on the wall. Images slash through the reflection like brushstrokes, including a red bird as it flies across my vision. I also see the sky and a plane flying through it. And then the reflection of a white veteran appears in the stone, appearing to float forward as his light-colored eyes look directly through me like I'm a window. He lost his right arm in the war. And in the dark reflection of the stone I see a woman who looks like she's trying to erase the names of dead soldiers, but upon closer inspection I realize she's only brushing a boy's hair.

THEMES

THE TRAUMA OF WAR

A veteran of the Vietnam War, the poem's speaker visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Painful memories overwhelm the speaker as he stares into the dark reflection of the memorial and sees—in his mind's eye—troubling images from his time in the war. That these memories are so visceral and immediate suggests the immense impact of wartime horror on soldiers, and implies that their trauma lingers long after they've returned home.

While looking at the memorial, the speaker is assaulted by disturbing memories. For instance, looking at a certain name causes him to see the "white flash" of a booby trap—an image he seems to have witnessed in the past and now has to deal with again. The speaker also faces other forms of charged imagery, as he looks at the reflection and sees a plane cutting across the sky. Given his experience in the war, it's implied that the plane's appearance evokes memories of active battle zones and the chaos of warfare. With such thoughts assaulting him as he faces the memorial, the speaker's experience in the war feels very immediate and real, thereby demonstrating the long-lasting impact it has had on him.

This impact is made especially clear in the speaker's interaction with the war memorial itself. "I turn / this way—the stone lets me go," he says. This is a description of what happens to the speaker's reflection in the memorial when he turns away from the stone—a description that seems to imply that he wants to avoid thinking about the war altogether. However, the idea that the stone "lets [him] go" is significant because it suggests that the memorial has power and control over him. In keeping with this, if the speaker turns the other way, he suddenly finds himself trapped "inside" the memorial, and this undoubtedly makes it impossible for him to stop thinking about his traumatic memories, which clearly still hold sway over him.

While the speaker appears unable to put his war-related trauma behind himself, the rest of the world moves on without a problem. "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall," the speaker says, illustrating the discrepancy between the outside world's indifference and the speaker's own trauma. The image of the soldiers' names superimposed upon the reflection of the woman's blouse momentarily makes it seem like the rest of society is—like the speaker—still mourning the loss of so many lives. But when the woman walks away, the speaker is once more left alone with the names and, in turn, his grief. In other words, the world continues no matter what happens, but the speaker and other soldiers still shoulder the weight of their trauma—a dynamic that only exacerbates their lingering suffering.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-31

"FACING" EMOTIONAL PAIN

The speaker's experience at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial can be seen as an effort to "face" his trauma, with the implication that doing so may be cathartic. At the same time, the speaker struggles to accept the lingering reality of his grief, promising himself he won't cry and trying to remain stoic and composed. As the speaker attempts to both acknowledge his pain and deny it any power over him, the poem presents a struggle between vulnerability and strength. Both qualities, the poem ultimately suggests, are part of the complicated process of "facing," and potentially overcoming, trauma.

The speaker wants to stay strong in the face of great sadness but struggles to do so from the start. "I said I wouldn't / dammit: No tears," he tells himself, implying that he's trying—perhaps unsuccessfully—not to cry while looking at the memorial. He then reassures himself with the phrase, "I'm stone," which hints at the speaker's determination to be emotionless and tough—a determination that doesn't last long, since the speaker then admits, "I'm flesh." In this way, the speaker grapples with his own vulnerability, wanting to be indifferent to his own pain but ultimately unable to ignore his grief. He doesn't want his sadness and pain to get the better of him, but also seems to understand that this is just part of being human—of being made of "flesh" and not "stone."

As such, the poem implies that grief is an inescapable part of confronting trauma. The speaker's trip to the memorial thus provides him with an opportunity to work through his pain: though memorials are built to honor the dead, they are also meant to help survivors gain a sense of closure, giving them a space to grieve their fellow soldiers and process their own harrowing experiences.

This, in turn, is exactly what the speaker does when he stands before the dark stone and looks at the 58,022 names: he grieves. Looking at the memorial, he "half-expect[s]" to find his own name written "in letters like smoke." This suggests that he feels as if a part of himself truly *did* die in Vietnam. Confronting his grief, then, also means confronting the loss of part of himself—of the man he was before the war.

And yet, the image of his name being written "like smoke" implies that any actual evidence of his time in the war will soon drift away and disappear completely. His pain and grief, then, are in fact a kind of memorial in their own right—the only lasting memorial the speaker has, for better or for worse. The poem then ends on an ambiguous note, unclear as to whether the speaker ends up benefiting from visiting the memorial. What's clear though, is that the experience *has* helped him at least begin to "face" his trauma.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-5
- Lines 8-12
- Lines 14-18

THE BLACK VETERAN EXPERIENCE

The poem subtly reflects the fraught racial backdrop of the Vietnam War, in which American troops were fully integrated for the first time. Many Black Americans put their lives on the line abroad even as their own country continued to deny them many basic dignities and freedoms at home. The war memorial, the poem implies, overlooks this important detail, neglecting to acknowledge the specific experiences of Black soldiers. This ultimately leads to a feeling of invisibility in the poem, as the speaker—himself a Black veteran—feels like a white veteran standing behind him can look directly through him. The country's unwillingness to interrogate its mistreatment of Black soldiers suffuses the poem with a sense of injustice that only adds to the speaker's grief.

The speaker says that his "black face fades" when he looks at the memorial, making it seem like his face is "hiding inside the black granite." In one sense, this image serves as a way for the speaker to illustrate that he loses himself in the raw emotional power of the memorial. Yet this is also a metaphor for invisibility; the speaker hints that the sacrifices Black soldiers made in the war went essentially ignored by the United States, which continued to treat them as second-class citizens (in fact, Black soldiers were even denied the same level of benefits and treatment as white veterans upon returning from Vietnam). The speaker feels invisible as he stares at the memorial. And if he feels this invisible even though he's still alive, then it's fair to say that the Black soldiers who lost their lives in battle have become even *more* invisible, even if their names are now written on the memorial.

In keeping with this, the speaker's eyes fall on the name Andrew Johnson, whom the speaker seems to have watched die in an explosion. Yet the name also obviously evokes the 17th president of the United States. Johnson came to power after Abraham Lincoln's assassination, going on to veto the Civil Rights Bill of 1866 and thereby depriving Black people of a number of fundamental rights, many of which wouldn't be passed until the Civil Rights Act of 1964—about halfway through the Vietnam War. Black people in the Vietnam War put their lives on the line for almost a full decade before the United States even acknowledged its own racist policies.

Notably, Andrew Johnson was also the name of a young Black soldier from Yusef Komunyakaa's hometown who died in action in Vietnam. In turn, the appearance of Johnson's name represents both the speaker's attempt to mourn a fellow Black soldier *and* the pervasive, inescapable racism that has marred America's history. This, therefore, highlights the ways in which the country's racist legacy overshadows the struggle of Black soldiers, as young Black men like Johnson gave their lives in Vietnam for a country that never treated them equally back home.

It is because of this historical injustice that the speaker feels like a "window" when a white veteran looks straight through him in the reflection of the memorial. Although the two men share the harrowing memory of war, the white veteran fails to recognize the speaker's pain, instead looking beyond him. What's more, the speaker has already noted that he feels trapped inside the "black granite," but the white veteran has only "lost his right arm / inside the stone," suggesting that society has made it easier for white veterans to move on from the war by providing them with benefits to which Black soldiers

weren't given equal access. Because society at large fails to acknowledge the racial dynamics that make moving on from the war even harder for Black veterans, then, soldiers like the speaker are left to quietly grapple not only with trauma, but also with an entire history of mistreatment.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 14-21
- Lines 25-31

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

My black face ...
... stone. I'm flesh.

"Facing It" is a poem that deals with war-related trauma and the act of confronting painful emotions. But it is also a poem that addresses racism and the ways in which American society fails to properly acknowledge the sacrifice Black soldiers made in the Vietnam War. The first line highlights the way that the poem approaches the topic of race, as the speaker clarifies right away that he is Black. He says, "My black face fades / hiding inside the black granite."

As the poem progresses, it will become clear that the "black granite" belongs to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. At this point, though, readers are only told that the speaker loses the sight of his own reflection inside a slab of dark stone and that this experience seems to trigger intense emotion. "I said I wouldn't / dammit," the speaker says, going on to tell himself, "No tears." These words indicate that the speaker has tried to prepare himself to deal with emotions that clearly end up getting the better of him. After all, the mere fact that the speaker reminds himself of his determination not to cry suggests that he has already begun to tear up.

The speaker's assertion in line 5 that he is "stone" presents readers with the metaphorical idea that the speaker has literally become one with the dark stone of the memorial. On another level, though, this statement is also an indication of the speaker's desire to stand strong in the face of great emotion. The speaker wants to be as unmovable as stone, yet he immediately goes on to say, "I'm flesh." He recognizes that he is, in the end, human and, therefore, subject to all the vulnerability and emotional sensitivity that comes along with the human condition.

These opening lines establish the poem's musicality as well. For example, the very first line contains the alliteration of the soft /f/ sound while also featuring the assonant long /ay/ sound:

> My black face fades

The combination of these sounds subtly smooths out the second half of this line, whereas the first half of the line sounds clipped and rhythmic with the speaker's use of the /b/, /l/, and /ck/ sounds in the word "black." By using these contrasting sounds, then, the speaker imbues the opening line with a push-and-pull rhythm that is both pleasing and chewy, both coaxing readers through while also forcing them work their way through a certain feeling of muscularity within the words themselves.

The speaker also uses assonance to emphasize the long /i/ sound in line 2:

> hiding inside the black granite.

Once again, this bolsters the musicality of the speaker's language. Later, "granite" is echoed by the word "dammit" in line 4, creating an internal slant rhyme.

All in all, then, these opening lines are striking and attention-grabbing because of their rich, textured sound, which elevates the speaker's language and, in this way, conveys his emotional and reflective state of mind.

LINES 6-8

My clouded reflection ...
... slanted against morning.

The speaker continues to describe his own reflection in the "black granite." In line 6 ("My clouded [...] eyes me"), he notes that the reflection is "clouded," once more indicating that it's hard for him to make out his own image. In a way, it's as if he is trying to find himself (in a spiritual or emotional sense) in the stone, using this moment as an opportunity to search for some kind of self-recognition.

Unfortunately for the speaker, though, the only kind of self-recognition he gains is the sense that he is "like a bird of prey." This simile compares him to a dangerous bird that hunts animals with its impressive eyesight and large talons. With this in mind, it comes to seem that the speaker is afraid of himself or sees himself as menacing, perhaps because he doesn't want to succumb to his own emotions but knows that he's unable to keep them at bay.

On another, more contextual note, the speaker briefly clarifies that it is dawn, saying, "the profile of night / slanted against morning." This imagery suggests that the light surrounding the speaker is murky and somewhat undefined, since night is just beginning to edge away and daylight hasn't fully set in yet. In the same way that the speaker's reflection is hard to make out in the "black granite," then, the surrounding world is still plunged in the sort of light in which it's difficult to distinguish one thing from another. This, in turn, only exacerbates the speaker's sense of disorientation while staring at the dark stone.

The consonant /k/ sound is prominent in lines 6 and 7, giving this section an abrasive clicking sound:

> My clouded reflection eyes me
> like a bird of prey [...]

This sound is ominous and harsh, conveying the sense of fear or trepidation the speaker feels when looking at his own reflection. However, the consonant /l/ sound also runs throughout these lines, rounding them out a bit:

> My clouded reflection eyes me
> like a bird of prey, the profile of night
> slanted against morning.

The /l/ sound is a lot mellower than the /k/ sound, so it balances out the general effect of these lines. As a result, the speaker's tone remains calm and subdued even if there's also a certain amount of emotional agitation couched within the language—an emotional agitation that speaks to his uneasiness with facing the stone.

LINES 8-13

> *I turn ...*
> *... make a difference.*

In this section, the speaker clarifies that he's standing in front of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The memorial exists in real life in Washington, D.C., and consists of two slanted walls that meet each other at different angles. The walls are made of black granite that is glossy and reflective, and they bear the names of the soldiers who died or disappeared in the Vietnam War.

As the speaker stands before the memorial, he notices that turning one way makes his reflection vanish from the stone. The language he uses here is especially meaningful, as he says, "I turn / this way—the stones let me go." The idea that the stone *lets* him go implies that it has power over him. This, in turn, personifies the stone, casting it as something that has agency and, moreover, an apparent desire to trap and control the speaker. Surely enough, then, when the speaker turns in a slightly different direction, he suddenly finds himself trapped "inside" the memorial.

The speaker goes on to say that whether he's trapped in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial depends "on the light." This implies that the only thing keeping him from feeling encased in the stone is ultimately out of his control, since the surrounding light of dawn isn't something he has the power to change. This, however, is a rather strange idea. After all, whether his image appears in the memorial has just as much to do with *perspective* as it has to do with light. The speaker himself says that he only needs to turn one way or the other in order to manipulate where his reflection appears (or doesn't appear). And yet, he gets hung up on the idea that the surrounding light—which he can't control—is what determines the stone's ability to ensnare him. Consequently, it becomes clear that he feels a lack of agency and is unable to control his own perspective on both the outside world and his resulting emotions.

This section contains a fair amount of sibilance, giving the lines a soft hissing sound that is pleasant and musical:

> [...] I turn
> this way—the stones let me go.
> I turn that way—I'm inside

The repetition of the /s/ and /z/ sounds in these lines creates a whispery quality that, above all, is satisfying to the ear. It also adds a swishing sense of movement that ultimately emphasizes the rhythm on display here. The long, assonant /o/ sounds of "stones" and "go" adds to that rhythm as well.

In keeping with this, the speaker uses caesuras in lines 9 and 10 ("this way [...] I'm inside"), as each em dash inserts a pause after the phrases "I turn this way" and "I turn that way." This mimics a rocking sensation, as if the speaker is swaying back and forth, thereby tipping in and out of the memorial's reflection. In this regard, the speaker manipulates the pace of the poem in order to further illustrate what it feels like to stand in front of the memorial.

LINES 14-18

> *I go down ...*
> *... trap's white flash.*

Still looking at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the speaker says he scans the 58,022 names of fallen soldiers. This is a good reminder of the vast number of Americans who died or disappeared in combat, something that serves as an emotional backdrop for the entire poem. In the aftermath of this incredibly bloody war, the speaker is left to reckon with the unique trauma of having survived when so many others died.

The idea that the speaker almost expects to find his own name written on the memorial implies that he feels like a part of him really did die in the Vietnam War. Even though he technically survived, it's clear he hasn't moved on from his terrible experiences in combat. And yet, there is nothing to memorialize this pain.

To illustrate this, the speaker presents the image of his name written "in letters like smoke," a simile that evokes a sense of impermanence. Indeed, the speaker perhaps feels that there's no evidence in the surrounding world of his involvement with the war and the resulting trauma. To that end, his pain is the only real reminder of his time as a soldier, but this is a personal thing that goes unrecognized by the rest of society.

But just because the speaker's pain is only recognizable to him doesn't mean it isn't still overwhelming and intense. For example, the speaker suddenly sees the "white flash" of a booby

trap when he touches the name Andrew Johnson on the memorial. This implies that the speaker knew this man, who seems to have died in an explosion during the war. That the speaker is assaulted by such a visceral image after merely touching Johnson's name indicates the extent to which he is still dealing with extraordinarily intense forms of trauma, ultimately demonstrating that living through such horrific war-related circumstances makes it very difficult to move on with life as a survivor.

The mention of Andrew Johnson is a reference to Yusef Komunyakaa's actual life, since Johnson was a soldier who grew up in Komunyakaa's hometown and subsequently died in the Vietnam War. However, the appearance of the name Andrew Johnson is also an allusion to the 17th president of the United States, who became president after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

Among other things, President Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which sought to define citizenship and, in doing so, finally grant rights to Black people who were either born in the country or brought to the U.S. by enslavers. The bill eventually passed in 1870 despite Johnson's veto, but this attempt to shoot it down is illustrative of the country's general hesitancy to grant fundamental human rights to Black Americans—a hesitancy that was still very much alive until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was passed nine years after the start of the Vietnam War.

As such, the appearance of Andrew Johnson's name in the poem is a reminder that Black Americans went to fight for the U.S. almost a full decade before the country sought to rectify its racist policies. All in all, then, Andrew Johnson's name not only symbolizes the speaker's personal experience of having lost a fellow soldier, but also gestures toward the fact that so many Black Americans gave their lives for a country that continued to subject them to terrible mistreatment—a dynamic that only continued when Black soldiers returned from the war, since white veterans received far more benefits than Black veterans.

LINES 19-24

Names shimmer on ...
... in the sky.

In lines 19 through 21 ("Names shimmer [...] on the wall"), the speaker undergoes a moment of confusion as he sees the names of dead soldiers begin to "shimmer on a woman's blouse." Of course, what's really happening is that a woman is standing next to him and her reflection has superimposed itself over the names on the wall, thus making it look like the names are fluttering along with her blouse, which is presumably ruffling in a light breeze.

For a moment, it seems as if this image is an indication that society is mourning alongside the speaker. To the speaker, seeing the names "shimmer" on the woman's blouse feels like a merging of his own grief and the surrounding world, which so often seems indifferent to such pain.

However, the woman soon walks away and, unsurprisingly, "the names stay on the wall." This sudden delineation between the woman and the names reaffirms the speaker's feeling that the outside world has moved on from the Vietnam War. When the woman walks away, the speaker is left alone with the names of the dead soldiers and, in turn, with his grief and trauma. Although the superimposition of the woman's blouse on the names momentarily seemed like an optimistic indication that the speaker isn't alone with his suffering, he now sees that he is, indeed, alone. Consequently, this entire sequence serves as a metaphor for American society's ability to move on from harrowing events of the Vietnam War—events that have left individual people absolutely devastated, ultimately grinding their lives to a halt while the world at large carries on without a care.

At this point, the speaker sees the reflection of a bird, and this prompts him to think of an airplane flying across the sky. This imagery is particularly charged because it suggests that ordinary things like birds conjure war-related visions like airplanes swooping through the sky—an image the speaker surely beheld while fighting in the Vietnam War, since there were quite a few bombardments during the war. And this once again illustrates the extent to which the speaker's war-related trauma has stayed with him, seemingly cropping up in multiple different ways as the rest of the world goes along like normal.

These lines are particularly sibilant, spotlighting the /s/ and /sh/ sounds along with the /z/ sound:

> Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
> but when she walks away
> the names stay on the wall.
> Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
> wings cutting across my stare.
> The sky. A plane in the sky.

In particular, the /sh/ and /s/ sounds create a swishing, shuffling sound that evokes the speaker's experience of watching the names "shimmer" along with the woman's blouse. This ends up bolstering the imagery of this section, as the sound and texture of the speaker's language matches the highly visual subject.

The speaker also uses diacope to repeat the word "names":

> Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
> but when she walks away
> the names stay on the wall.

This has the effect of spotlighting the importance of the names written on the memorial, emphasizing just how attuned the speaker is to them. The speaker uses repetition again in line 24, saying, "The sky. A plane in the sky." By repeating "the sky," the speaker turns the attention of the poem outward, thereby

highlighting the discrepancy between his own lonely trauma and the indifferent outside world.

LINES 25-29

A white vet's ...
... inside the stone.

As the speaker continues to look at the memorial, he sees the reflection of a white veteran who is now approaching. As this white veteran gets closer to the memorial, he appears to "float" toward the speaker, and then he seems to look *through* the speaker. "I'm a window," the speaker says, offering up a metaphor for the sense of invisibility he experiences when confronted with this white veteran, who overlooks the speaker's presence in the same way that American society has overlooked the great sacrifice Black soldiers made for their country in Vietnam.

As mentioned elsewhere in this guide, white veterans were given access to far more governmental benefits after the war than Black veterans. When the white veteran seems to look through the speaker as if he's nothing more than a window, then, readers see the extent to which the suffering of Black veterans has gone ignored—even by fellow soldiers who because of their whiteness have ultimately prioritized their own war-related trauma over that of their Black comrades.

Looking at the white veteran, the speaker notes that he has "lost his right arm / inside the stone." This image is ambiguous, but it seems likely that the speaker is once again talking about the way the reflections appear in the glossy surface of the memorial. If this is the case, then this image once again highlights the differences between the experiences white and Black veterans had after coming home from Vietnam; whereas the memorial has only trapped the white veteran's right arm, it has enveloped the speaker's entire face. Accordingly, this image is a metaphorical representation of the fact that American society's racist policies have made it easier for white veterans to move on from the war, while Black veterans like the speaker are still thoroughly entrenched in their trauma because they don't have access to the same kind of resources that might help them address their suffering.

The speaker's use of caesuras in these lines gives the section a slow and contemplative sound:

> closer to me, || then his pale eyes
> look through mine. || I'm a window.

The caesura between the phrase "closer to me" and "then his pale eyes" adds a certain amount of drama and anticipation to this sequence of events, as the speaker pauses before continuing to describe what the white veteran does after he approaches. The caesura after the phrase "look through mine" also creates space in the line and, in doing so, allows the phrase "I'm a window" to stand on its own. As a result, the metaphor of the speaker as something that the white veteran looks through becomes particularly pronounced.

The assonant /oh/ sounds in "window" and "stone" subtly connects these words. Because of this, readers are invited to think about the difference between the speaker, who feels invisible, and the memorial itself, which is solid and impossible to see through. In fact, the memorial even reflects images *back* to the speaker. This contrast recalls the speaker's desire at the beginning of the poem to be strong and emotionless like the stone itself. "I'm stone. I'm flesh," the speaker says in line 5, indicating that no matter how much he wants to be unmovable and solid like stone, he is a human being who inevitably feels things and has to deal with emotion. Now, at the end of the poem, the speaker once again highlights the differences between himself and the stone by presenting himself as a window, and the assonant /oh/ sound helps underline this distinction by connecting the words "window" and "stone."

LINES 29-31

In the black ...
... a boy's hair.

The poem ends with the speaker looking at the memorial and once again catching sight of somebody's reflection. This time, the speaker momentarily thinks that the woman he sees reflected in the "black mirror" of the granite is actively trying to erase the names on the wall.

This is a charged image for two reasons:

1. First, it's obvious that any veteran would be appalled to see somebody trying to erase the names of fallen soldiers from a wall commemorating their deaths.
2. Second, the mere act of erasure is particularly laden with meaning because of the sense of invisibility the speaker feels as a Black veteran living in a society that has failed to properly recognize the sacrifices Black soldiers made for the United States despite the country's racism.

At the same time, it's also arguable that trying to erase names from a war memorial isn't necessarily an act of malice, but an emotional (if unrealistic) attempt to undo all the death and destruction of the war. For the speaker, this would perhaps be a very understandable, relatable thing to do, since it's clear that the speaker himself surely wants to reverse all the loss he has had to deal with as a veteran—losses that continue to haunt him, as evidenced by the fact that seeing Andrew Johnson's name elicited the traumatic memory of an explosion.

Regardless of whether the speaker finds the idea of erasing names from the memorial abhorrent or understandable, it becomes clear in the poem's final line that the woman isn't actually trying to do this. "No," the speaker says, "she's brushing

a boy's hair." Suddenly, this redirects the focus of the poem, turning it outward so that the speaker acknowledges the surrounding world instead of losing himself to disturbing thoughts about his most traumatic memories.

In this way, the poem ends on a surprisingly uplifting note, as the speaker seems to rejoin life in the present. And yet, this image also emphasizes once again that the rest of society is capable of going along like normal even while the speaker is suffering. In turn, this final line isn't quite as uplifting as it might seem, since it reinforces the idea that the speaker is alone with his emotional pain.

The last line is particularly musical, as the speaker uses the alliterative /b/ sound:

> No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

This gives the line a strong sense of rhythm, the /b/ sound bouncing along in an assured and memorable way. This pairs with the speaker's repetition of the /sh/ sound in the words "she's" and "brushing," which smooths out the line by adding this hushed, connective syllable. Even if the final image of the poem isn't as happy as it might seem at first, then, the last line still sounds pleasant and musical, ultimately making the speaker's tone sound passionate and emotional.

SYMBOLS

THE WAR MEMORIAL

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial represents American society's recognition of the sacrifice so many soldiers made for their country by dying on the battlefield. This, at least, is the memorial's ostensible function on the surface. It actually ends up symbolizing something else for the speaker—namely, the fact that Black veterans like himself *haven't* received recognition for their sacrifices. The list of names on the wall does very little in the way of memorializing the speaker's pain.

Rather than recognizing a certain part of himself (or a part of his experience) in the memorial, the speaker literally has troubling seeing himself in the reflection of the stone, as his "black face fades" into the "black granite." This, in turn, is a representation of how the specific experience of Black soldiers has been rendered all but invisible by American society, which doled out support and resources to white veterans in the aftermath of the Vietnam War without doing the same for Black veterans.

To further underscore this idea, the speaker says, "I'm a window," noting that a white veteran standing nearby doesn't even register his presence while looking at the memorial. In this regard, the poem presents the memorial as something that, at least for Black veterans, symbolizes a sense of invisibility just as much as it stands for any kind of memorialization.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-21
- Lines 25-31

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The alliterative moments in "Facing It" help the speaker intensify the sound of the language, often giving it a rhythmic and passionate quality. In line 1, for example, the quick succession of the gentle /f/ sounds in "My black face fades" makes this opening line sound pleasing but also assertive and urgent, thereby hinting at the intensity of the speaker's emotional state.

Later, in lines 11-13, the /v/, /m/, and /d/ sounds all alliterate:

> the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
> again, depending on the light
> to make a difference.

Most notably, the strong /v/ sound places emphasis on two of the poem's most important words, which ultimately clarify the surrounding context: "Vietnam Veterans." The /m/ and /d/ sounds, on the other hand, simply enhance the musicality of this section, making it sound muscular and contoured by infusing the lines with blunt, rhythmic sounds.

For another example, look to lines 18-21:

> Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
> but when she walks away
> the names stay on the wall.

The /w/ sound defines these lines, appearing multiple times and generally lending the section a vaguely wobbly sound that aligns with the speaker's feeling that the names are gently moving back and forth. The alliterative /sh/ sound in words like "shimmer" and "she" add to this sense of shuffling and swaying.

There are, of course, a number of other moments of alliteration throughout "Facing It," most of which work in ways that are similar to the ways outlined above. On the whole, the speaker uses alliteration to both carve out important words and enrich the poetic sound of the language, essentially creating a textured and cohesive effect that is satisfying and melodic.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “face,” “fades”
- **Line 7:** “prey,” “profile”
- **Line 9:** “this,” “the”
- **Line 11:** “Vietnam,” “Veterans,” “Memorial”
- **Line 12:** “depending”
- **Line 13:** “make,” “difference”
- **Line 14:** “down,” “58,022”
- **Line 15:** “find”
- **Line 16:** “letters,” “like”
- **Line 18:** “booby,” “white”
- **Line 19:** “shimmer,” “woman's,” “blouse”
- **Line 20:** “but,” “when,” “she,” “walks”
- **Line 21:** “wall”
- **Line 22:** “Brushstrokes,” “bird's”
- **Line 23:** “wings,” “stare”
- **Line 24:** “sky,” “sky”
- **Line 25:** “white”
- **Line 26:** “me”
- **Line 27:** “mine,” “window”
- **Line 29:** “black”
- **Line 30:** “names”
- **Line 31:** “No,” “brushing,” “boy's”

ASSONANCE

The assonance in "Facing It" elevates the speaker's language, granting it a more poetic sound and emotional tone. Take, for example, lines 2 through 4, which feature the long /i/ sound alongside an /a/ sound:

> hiding inside the black granite.
> I said I wouldn't
> dammit: No tears.

Line 2 is especially assonant, since the phrase "hiding inside" contains two very obvious instances of the /i/ sound. The /ah/ sound in "granite" also connects with the /ah/ sound in "damnit" in line 4, knitting together this section with assonance, making the moment all the more striking.

Another notable moment of assonance comes in line 18, when the speaker uses the /ee/ and /ah/ sounds:

> I see the booby trap's white flash.

This assonance makes the language in this line sound harmonious, as the /ee/ sound cuts through the first half of the line before the /ah/ sound links the words "trap" and "flash." In both cases, the assonant sounds stand out quite a bit, and this makes the line itself hard for readers to skip over—in turn calling attention to the intensity of the speaker's traumatic flashback to the war.

In other moments, the speaker simply uses assonance in quick bursts as a way of enhancing the poem's musicality. For example, the phrase "floats / closer" in lines 25 and 26 ("A white [...] pale eyes") includes the assonant /oh/ sound, which briefly repeats in the two words before fading away again. In turn, the speaker manages to quickly intensify the image of the white veteran's reflection and thew ay it suddenly hovers toward the speaker. In this way, assonance helps accentuate especially significant moments throughout the poem.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “face,” “fades”
- **Line 2:** “hiding,” “inside,” “granite”
- **Line 3:** “I”
- **Line 4:** “dammit”
- **Line 5:** “I'm”
- **Line 6:** “My,” “eyes”
- **Line 7:** “like,” “profile,” “night”
- **Line 9:** “stone,” “go”
- **Line 10:** “I'm,” “inside”
- **Line 11:** “Veterans,” “Memorial”
- **Line 12:** “again,” “depending”
- **Line 13:** “make”
- **Line 14:** “58,022,” “names”
- **Line 15:** “expecting,” “find”
- **Line 16:** “my,” “own,” “letters,” “like,” “smoke”
- **Line 18:** “see,” “booby,” “trap's,” “flash”
- **Line 19:** “Names”
- **Line 20:** “away”
- **Line 21:** “stay”
- **Line 23:** “my”
- **Line 24:** “sky”
- **Line 25:** “floats”
- **Line 26:** “closer,” “eyes”
- **Line 27:** “mine,” “I'm,” “window”
- **Line 30:** “erase,” “names”

CONSONANCE

"Facing It" is filled with consonance. All this consonance enriches the poem's sound, making it feel dense and thickly patterned throughout. For example, take lines 6 and 7, when the speaker repeats the hard /c/, /l/, /p/, /r/, and /d/ sounds:

> My clouded reflection eyes me
> like a bird of prey, the profile of night

Like most lines in "Facing It," this is a very dense cluster of consonant sounds. Still, certain sounds stick out amongst the others because they are particularly strong. For instance, sounds like the hard /c/ and /k/ in "clouded," "reflection," and "like," are especially noticeable, as is the /pr/ sound in the words "prey" and "profile." On the whole, sounds like these make this section sound tightly packed and contoured, and this heightens

the poetic feeling of the speaker's language.

Elsewhere, the speaker uses the consonant /d/ sound to infuse lines 12 through 15 with sense of solidity and sturdiness:

> again, depending on the light
> to make a difference.
> I go down the 58,022 names,
> half-expecting to find

This has the general effect of intensifying the speaker's tone, making it sound blunt and somber—an effect that matches the speaker's mood and tone.

As noted in the alliteration entry of this guide, the /w/ sound winds its way through lines 18 through 21:

> I see the booby trap's white flash.
> Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
> but when she walks away
> the names stay on the wall.

As previously mentioned, this creates a wobbly sound that goes well with the image of names fluttering back and forth with the woman's blouse as it blows in the breeze. This /w/ sound also pairs well with the consonant /sh/ sound that appears in words like "flash," "shimmer," and "she." Whereas the /w/ sound has a rounded quality, the /sh/ sound makes a sizzling kind of hiss that one might argue is reminiscent of the sound of a fast and sudden flare or "flash" created by a small explosive device. With this in mind, it becomes clear that the speaker's use of consonance enables him to not only create musical passages, but also mimic certain sounds that are relevant to the subject matter at hand.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "face fades"
- **Line 2:** "hiding inside," "granite"
- **Lines 3-4:** "wouldn't / dammit"
- **Line 4:** "tears"
- **Line 5:** "stone," "flesh"
- **Line 6:** "clouded reflection"
- **Line 7:** "prey," "profile"
- **Line 8:** "slanted against," "turn"
- **Line 9:** "stone lets"
- **Line 10:** "turn"
- **Line 11:** "Vietnam Veterans"
- **Line 12:** "depending"
- **Line 13:** "difference"
- **Line 14:** "down," "58,022"
- **Line 15:** "half-expecting," "find"
- **Line 16:** "letters like smoke"
- **Line 17:** "touch"
- **Line 18:** "booby trap's white flash"
- **Line 19:** "Names shimmer"
- **Lines 19-20:** "woman's blouse / but when she walks away"
- **Line 21:** "names stay," "wall"
- **Line 22:** "Brushstrokes flash"
- **Lines 22-23:** "red bird's / wings cutting across"
- **Line 23:** "stare"
- **Line 24:** "sky," "sky"
- **Line 28:** "lost"
- **Line 29:** "inside," "stone," "black mirror"
- **Line 30:** "woman's"
- **Line 31:** "brushing," "boy's"

SIBILANCE

The poem's sibilance softens its language throughout while also acting as a kind of connective tissue between certain words and phrases. For example, take the first two lines:

> My black face fades,
> hiding inside the black granite.

This repetition of the sibilant /s/ (and related /z/ sound, as one might read in "fades") gives the lines a gentle and slippery sound that balances out the intensity of harder consonant sounds like /k/ and /d/.

A similar thing happens in lines 8 and 9, when the speaker uses the sibilant /s/ to imbue the language with a loose, swaying feeling:

> slanted against morning. I turn
> this way—the stone lets me go.

The hissing /s/ keeps these lines from feeling too rigid, giving the language an almost lisping quality that feels dynamic and smooth. In turn, the language itself reflects the speaker's back and forth movement as his reflection shifts in and out of the memorial.

Other forms of sibilance also appear in "Facing It." For instance, the /sh/ sound (which is often included in the definition of sibilance) is integral to the sound of lines 5 and 6.

> I'm stone. I'm flesh.
> My clouded reflection eyes me.

The subtle shushing sound that appears in "flesh" echoes in the word "reflection," infusing the two lines with a subdued quality that ultimately matches the speaker's meditative mindset as he observes himself in the memorial's reflective stone.

The /sh/ sound is also noticeable in lines 18 and 19:

> I see the booby trap's white flash.

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse

As discussed in other sections of this guide, the repetition of this /sh/ sound in this moment creates a flowing, whooshing sound that gives rise to a sense of gentle movement. And it is this kind of gentle movement that the woman's blouse makes as the speaker stares at its reflection in the memorial. Once again, then, the use of sibilance leads to a feeling of gentle momentum that keeps the poem from sounding choppy or rigid—an important thing, considering that the poem otherwise contains so many muscular and angular moments of consonance.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "face," "fades"
- **Line 2:** "inside"
- **Line 3:** "said"
- **Line 4:** "tears"
- **Line 5:** "stone," "flesh"
- **Line 6:** "reflection," "eyes"
- **Line 8:** "slanted," "against"
- **Line 9:** "this," "stone," "lets"
- **Line 10:** "inside"
- **Line 11:** "Veterans"
- **Line 13:** "difference"
- **Line 14:** "names"
- **Line 15:** "expecting"
- **Line 16:** "letters," "smoke"
- **Line 17:** "Johnson"
- **Line 18:** "see," "trap's," "flash"
- **Line 19:** "Names," "shimmer," "woman's," "blouse"
- **Line 20:** "she," "walks"
- **Line 21:** "names," "stay"
- **Line 22:** "Brushstrokes," "flash," "bird's"
- **Line 23:** "wings," "across," "stare"
- **Line 24:** "sky"
- **Line 25:** "vet's," "floats"
- **Line 26:** "closer," "eyes"
- **Line 28:** "He's," "lost"
- **Line 29:** "inside," "stone"
- **Line 30:** "woman's," "erase," "names"
- **Line 31:** "she's," "brushing," "boy's"

REPETITION

Repetition adds to the poem's musicality while also placing emphasis on important words. This is exactly the effect that takes hold when the speaker repeats the word "black" in the first two lines:

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.

The speaker's use of diacope in this moment adds a rhythmic beat to these lines, since the word "black" is strong and percussive with its thudding /b/ sound and its harsh /ck/ sound. Perhaps more importantly, though, this repetition draws attention to the fact that the speaker is Black and that he feels as if he has lost his own face in the dark stone of the memorial. In turn, repetition helps spotlight the metaphorical implications of the speaker's sense that he has become invisible to himself while looking at the memorial.

In another instance of repetition, the speaker uses an anaphora (and antithesis) to highlight the fact that his reflection changes depending on how he moves:

[...] I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

This anaphora adds a feeling of consistency to this section, ultimately enhancing its rhythm in a way that reflects the speaker's back and forth motion.

Elsewhere, repetition appears in less obvious ways. For instance, the speaker sprinkles the word "names" four times throughout lines 14 through 21, thereby reminding readers why, exactly, the speaker has come to the memorial in the first place: to reflect upon and pay homage to his fellow soldiers who died in the Vietnam War. Repetition enables the speaker to not only accentuate the poem's rhythm and highlight important words, but also keep the poem on track by ensuring that readers don't forget—ami all the abstractions and imagery—that the speaker has these thoughts while standing before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "black"
- **Line 2:** "black"
- **Lines 8-9:** "I turn / this way"
- **Line 10:** "I turn that way"
- **Line 14:** "names"
- **Line 17:** "name"
- **Line 18:** "flash"
- **Line 19:** "Names"
- **Line 21:** "names"
- **Line 22:** "flash"
- **Line 24:** "The sky," "the sky"

CAESURA

The caesuras in "Facing It" control the pace and rhythm of the poem, forcing readers to slow down ever so slightly instead of racing through the lines. This serves an important function, since many of the lines are so short. For instance, it would be easy to read a four-word line like line 5 very quickly, but the

speaker's use of a caesura invites readers to stop and reflect upon what he has said:

> I'm stone. || I'm flesh.

This pause breaks up the line, segmenting it into two halves. It also creates a clipped rhythm that lends itself to the delivery of short declarative sentences like "I'm stone" and "I'm flesh." What's more, the pause between these two phrases gives readers the opportunity to fully take in the fact that the speaker wants to be as emotionless as stone but is ultimately forced to admit (after a brief moment of thought) that he is, in reality, human.

Similarly, the caesuras in lines 8 through 11 divide phrases from each other in a way that reigns in the speaker's rhythm and pacing:

> [...] I turn
> this way— || the stones let me go.
> I turn that way— || I'm inside
> the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

The caesuras after the phrases "I turn this way" and "I turn that way" create pauses, but they also insert little pockets of space in the lines, as if actually giving the speaker time to turn in each direction. As such, the caesuras add to the sense of motion inherent to this moment.

Another way the speaker uses caesuras is as a tool to quickly end one thought and transition to the next. Of course, this still creates a pause, but it also enables the speaker to shift between different images. Consider, for instance, how he uses the following caesura in line 22:

> Brushstrokes flash, || a red bird's
> wings cutting across my stare.

At first, the speaker presents the abstract image of "brushstrokes flash[ing]" by, but then he inserts a caesura and goes on to modify this image, saying that these "brushstrokes" are actually the wings of a red bird as it flies through his field of vision. Accordingly, this caesura isn't just a brief pause, but a way for the speaker to amend what he has said.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "dammit: No"
- **Line 5:** "stone. I'm"
- **Line 7:** "prey, the"
- **Line 8:** "morning. I"
- **Line 9:** "way—the"
- **Line 10:** "way—I'm"
- **Line 12:** "again, depending"
- **Line 22:** "flash, a"
- **Line 24:** "sky. A"
- **Line 26:** "me, then"
- **Line 27:** "mine. I'm"
- **Line 29:** "stone. In"
- **Line 31:** "No, she's"

METAPHOR

"Facing It" is a very metaphorical poem, especially because the speaker frequently uses imagery that is charged with figurative meaning. For example, the speaker says in line 19 that "names shimmer on a woman's blouse." By saying this, he presents an image laden with meaning, suggesting that the names of dead shoulders are fluttering in the wind along with a woman's shirt. This, in turn, represents the speaker's desire for the outside world to grieve alongside him; if the names on the memorial have imprinted themselves upon this stranger, perhaps it's a sign that the rest of society hasn't actually moved on from the tragedy of the war. However, the woman soon walks away and "the names stay on the wall," proving to him that he is alone with his war-related trauma.

Other metaphorical moments in the poem are more straightforward, like when the speaker says "I'm stone" in line 5. This suggestion that he is made of rock hints at his yearning to be emotionally stable, apparently wanting to feel nothing while he stands strong like a heavy, inanimate object. Of course, the speaker isn't *actually* stone—something he himself acknowledges in the very next phrase, admitting that he's "flesh" and, in doing so, indicating that he isn't as capable of fending off painful war-related emotions as he'd like to be. Later, the speaker describes himself as a "window," altering the metaphor of himself as a stone once more in order to communicate the extent to which the outside world fails to recognize his pain.

There are also moments in the poem when it's not quite clear if the speaker is being literal or metaphorical. For instance, the image of the white veteran that appears in lines 28 and 29 is difficult to parse, as the speaker says, "He's lost his right arm / inside the stone." Given that this man is a veteran, it's quite possible that he *actually* lost his arm in battle and that the speaker's assertion that he lost it "inside the stone" is just a way of saying that the war is responsible for having dismembered him.

However, the speaker has already talked about how his own reflection in the memorial changes depending on which way he turns; although the stone "lets" him go if he turns a certain way, it also completely swallows him if he looks at it from a different angle. Therefore, it's also possible that the speaker is trying to indicate that the white veteran is standing in such a way that only his right arm is reflected in the memorial. And if this is the case, it would serve as a metaphor for the fact that it is easier

for white veterans to move on from war-related trauma than Black veterans (since the country has given them access to more support). Whereas the entirety of the speaker is trapped in the reflection of the memorial, only one part of the white veteran remains in the stone.

On the whole, then, the use of metaphor and imagery in "Facing It" isn't always clear cut. Rather, the speaker presents somewhat abstract images that are open to interpretation, and this invites readers to engage with the poem on a deeper level.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I'm stone."
- **Lines 7-8:** "the profile of night / slanted against morning."
- **Lines 10-12:** "I'm inside / the Vietnam Veterans Memorial / again"
- **Lines 19-21:** "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse / but when she walks away / the names stay on the wall."
- **Lines 22-24:** "Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's / wings cutting across my stare. / The sky. A plane in the sky."
- **Line 27:** "I'm a window."
- **Lines 28-29:** "He's lost his right arm / inside the stone."
- **Lines 29-31:** "In the black mirror / a woman's trying to erase names: / No, she's brushing a boy's hair."

SIMILE

There are two notable similes that appear in the poem. The first comes when the speaker looks at his reflection in the memorial in lines 6 and 7:

> My clouded reflection eyes me
> like a bird of prey [...]

This comparison of the speaker's reflection to a bird of prey—a predatory bird with sharp talons and a fearsome beak—suggests that the speaker sees himself as ominous and menacing. After all, the fact that his reflection looks to him like a ferocious hunting bird known for its impressive eyesight implies that he's afraid he might go after himself in some kind of frightening way. In turn, it seems likely that the speaker knows he is holding onto traumatic emotions and that the act of visiting the war memorial will force him to confront the parts of himself he has kept hidden away for so long.

The poem's second simile can be found in lines 14 through 16, when the speaker says:

> I go down the 58,022 names,
> half-expecting to find
> my own in letters like smoke.

By envisioning the image of his own name scrawled out on the memorial in "letters like smoke," the speaker uses a simile that conveys a sense of impermanence, since letters written in smoke would obviously drift away and become invisible.

The fact that this image occurs to the speaker suggests that he feels like there's no evidence of the sacrifice he made by putting his life on the line in the Vietnam War. Whereas the dead soldiers at least have their names written in stone to memorialize their suffering, the speaker has nothing, and this simile helps underscore this lack of recognition.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "My clouded reflection eyes me / like a bird of prey"
- **Lines 14-16:** "I go down the 58,022 names, / half-expecting to find / my own in letters like smoke."

ALLUSION

The speaker makes two simultaneous allusions when he mentions Andrew Johnson in line 17, saying, "I touch the name Andrew Johnson / I see the boob trap's white flash."

Taken in combination with the image of an exploding booby trap, readers can conclude that the speaker knew this soldier named Andrew Johnson, since he seems to associate the name with a specific incident. Indeed, this is an allusion to Komunyakaa's own life, as he knew a soldier named Andrew Johnson who grew up in his hometown and died in the Vietnam War.

As mentioned elsewhere in this guide, though, the appearance of Andrew Johnson's name is also an allusion to the 17th president of the United States. Andrew Johnson became president after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865. Although he took over for Lincoln, who passed the Emancipation Proclamation that sought to free all enslaved people, Andrew Johnson was actually quite racist. In fact, he sought to withhold a number of human rights from Black people, doing so by vetoing the Civil Rights Act of 1866. An important part of this act was the introduction of the 13th Amendment, which specifically outlawed slavery.

Thankfully, the Civil Rights Act of 1866 ended up passing without Johnson's approval, since a two-thirds majority of the chambers overrode Johnson's veto. All the same, though, the fact that Johnson tried so hard to veto the act is hard to overlook, ultimately associating him with the racist desire to ensure that Black Americans remained disempowered in the aftermath of slavery.

In the context of the poem, then, the speaker's mention of Andrew Johnson reminds readers of the racist history of the U.S. In turn, readers will perhaps stop to reflect upon the fact that (despite the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1866) racist and segregationist polices were still in effect long after Black Americans started fighting for their country in Vietnam. Unfortunately, though, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial doesn't manage to acknowledge this dynamic with its list of the 58,022

names of soldiers who died in the war, therefore leaving the speaker to sort through these troubling thoughts on his own.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "I go down the 58,022 names"
- **Line 17:** "I touch the name Andrew Johnson"

VOCABULARY

Bird of Prey (Lines 6-7) - A predatory bird with exceptional eyesight and fierce talons.

Profile (Line 7) - The outline of an object or person as viewed from the side.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Line 11) - A memorial to the US soldiers who died or were lost in the Vietnam War. The memorial is in Washington, D.C. and consists of two black granite walls that meet at the center to form the shape of a wide V. Their sides are reflective and, as the speaker states, display the names of over 58,000 Americans.

Andrew Johnson (Line 17) - Andrew Johnson was a Black soldier from Yusef Komunyakaa's hometown of Bogalusa, Louisiana. Johnson died in the Vietnam War, and the implication in the poem is that the speaker saw this happen. Andrew Johnson was also the name of the 17th president of the United States. President Johnson took over the presidency after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

Booby trap (Line 18) - A hidden or concealed contraption that looks unassuming but actually contains an explosive device that, once tampered with, detonates.

Vet (Line 25) - A shortening of the word "veteran."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Facing It" is a 31-line poem that doesn't adhere to any specific poetic structure. The speaker uses both long and short lines to create an unfolding effect that ebbs and flows with the subject, and the overall lack of form allows the poem to remain loose and free-flowing. As a result, the inconsistent structure of "Facing It" matches the speaker's reflections about the Vietnam War, which are meditative at times and vividly intense at others.

METER

Written in free verse, the poem lacks any kind of formal meter. This allows the speaker to create a rhythmic feel that is constantly evolving. Rather than adhering to a set formula for each line, the speaker varies how many syllables he uses, alternating between lines with just four syllables and lines with as many as 10. What dictates the rhythm of the poem isn't a specific metrical pattern, but simply the sound of the speaker's language, which achieves musicality and even a certain rhythmic pulse through the use of poetic devices like alliteration, consonance, and assonance. By carving out certain sounds, then, the speaker manages to achieve a distinct, propulsive sound while also retaining the loose, unstructured of free verse.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem does not follow a rhyme scheme. Instead of adhering to a set pattern of rhymes, the speaker uses various poetic devices within the lines themselves to create a similar—but less obvious and structured—sense of cohesion. For example, line 1 ("My black face fades") features the assonant /ay/ sound in the words "face" and "fades." This, of course, doesn't actually create a *rhyme*, but it *does* lead to a certain feeling of connection that is similar to the kind of unified sound that rhyme schemes often lend to a poem. Later, the internal slant rhyme that occurs between the word "granite" in line 2 and the word "damnit" in line 4 gives the opening an even more musical sound. In this way, the speaker's use of repetition and poetic devices like assonance makes up for the poem's lack of a rhyme scheme, ultimately giving the words a musical sound without sticking to a formulaic pattern.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Facing It" is a Black man who fought in the Vietnam War. Upon visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the speaker feels as if his own face blends in to the "black granite" of the stone—a sensation that indicates a feeling of invisibility as a Black American soldier in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. At first, the speaker wants to resist the pull of his emotions, reminding himself that he promised not to cry. However, it seems that this is an impossible task, as the memorial prompts visceral memories of the war, ultimately causing the speaker to not only shed tears, but also to relive traumatic wartime experiences.

"Facing It" is generally understood to have been inspired by Yusef Komunyakaa's first time visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Komunyakaa himself fought as a young man in the Vietnam War and has spoken publicly about how he didn't write about this experience until 14 years after coming home. Given this information, then, it's fair to conclude that Komunyakaa is the speaker of the poem, which is from his perspective and marks a significant moment in his attempt to process war-related trauma.

SETTING

The poem takes place at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in

Washington, D.C. As the poem indicates, the memorial bears the names of 58,022 American soldiers who died or were otherwise lost in the Vietnam War. Constructed in 1982, the memorial is made up of two sloping walls of black granite that meet at an angle in the middle, where they are at their highest point. This creates a stunning and overwhelming representation of just how many Americans lost their lives in the war.

In terms of the time period in which "Facing It" takes place, it's obvious that the poem is set at some point after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, meaning that it is set after 1975. Given that Komunyakaa has said it took him 14 years to write about the war, it's probable that this poem takes place in 1984, since he came back from Vietnam in 1970. This means that the poem plays out a little less than a decade after the end of the war, when the US was still reeling from the conflict while also beginning to move on—something the speaker himself can't do quite as easily.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Yusef Komunyakaa published "Facing It" in 1988 as part of his poetry collection, *Dien Cai Dau*. The book's title means "crazy" in Vietnamese, a fact that aligns with the collection's subject.

Dien Cai Dau was the first of Komunyakaa's books to focus on his experiences as a soldier in the Vietnam War. The book also included "Camouflaging the Chimera," another of Komunyakaa's well-known poems about the war. As the story goes, Komunyakaa found himself unable to write about Vietnam until after he visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, an experience that led to the composition of "Facing It" and, in turn, the rest of the poems in *Dien Cai Dau*.

Although Komunyakaa himself was unable to write about the Vietnam War until years after it ended, many other poets had been focused on the war for a long while by the time "Facing It" was published. To that end, "Facing It" belongs to a long tradition of war poetry that specifically centers around conflict in Vietnam, including the poems "What Were They Like?" and "Life at War" by Denise Levertov, "May, 1972" by James Schuyler, and "This War" by Philip Levine. Komunyakaa's work is also read alongside other Black American poets whose work explores race in America, including Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni.

By 1988, the vast majority of popular poetry was written in free verse, and many poets were working in experimental forms that pushed the boundaries of poetic structure. In fact, this had been happening since the 1950s and '60s, meaning that by the time Komunyakaa published "Facing It," it certainly didn't stand out due to the lack of a set meter or rhyme scheme. Rather, the thing that distinguishes the poem from other poetry in that period is that it interrogates race in the context of the Vietnam War; whereas most poets writing about Vietnam focused solely on the trauma and violence of the war, "Facing It" combines these concerns with a meditation on racial injustice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The United States sent troops to fight in the Vietnam War in 1965, at which point the conflict had already been raging for 10 years between South Vietnam and the communist forces of North Vietnam. Technically speaking, an agreement was reached in 1973 that called for a cease fire and a withdrawal of American troops, but fighting resumed quickly after the majority of American forces left the region. Then, in 1975, North Vietnam triumphed over South Vietnam, successfully establishing a communist state. This, in turn, is a significant detail, since U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was mainly an attempt to stop the spread of communism.

All of this is to say that the vast amount of resources the U.S. put into the Vietnam War ultimately did nothing to bring about the intended outcome. This is largely why the war itself was so unpopular amongst American citizens, who were at the time undergoing a cultural revolution that centered around strong anti-war sentiments. In the years after the war, it became increasingly clear even to people who had ardently supported the American military that the war was fought in vain, especially since the country ultimately had nothing to show for its sacrifice of over 58,000 American lives.

"Facing It" takes place in these post-war years, as the speaker visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s. The memorial itself was built in 1982 by the architect Maya Lin. Needless to say, its purpose was to memorialize the names of the many Americans who gave their lives for their country, ultimately creating a place for veterans to grieve their fellow soldiers. To this day, the memorial attracts roughly 3 million visitors per year.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Vietnam Veterans Memorial — Learn more about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. (https://www.vvmf.org/About-The-Wall/)
- Komunyakaa on Violence and Racism — Listen to Yusef Komunyakaa speak about the valorization of violence alongside the role racism plays on the U.S. national psyche. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2IPGG_eEhEw)
- The Vietnam War — A wealth of information about the Vietnam War in an accessible, well-organized format. (https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/vietnam-war-history)

- Yusef Komunyakaa Reads "Facing It" — Listen to the author read "Facing It" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=90yxqlVrLP8)
- Komunyakaa's Biography — For more information about Yusef Komunyakaa, take a look at this overview of his life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/yusef-komunyakaa)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Facing It*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 Jul 2020. Web. 11 Sep 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Lannamann, Taylor. "*Facing It*." LitCharts LLC, July 8, 2020. Retrieved September 11, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/yusef-komunyakaa/facing-it.