

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Visions of the City in Poetry

Nicholas J. Haddad · Wednesday, January 22nd, 2020


A 3rd-generation Los Angeles native, an admired poet, journalist, historian, tour guide and teacher, Mike Sonksen, a.k.a Mike the PoeT has developed a series of nonfiction essays and poetry in his book from Writ Large Press, *Letters to My City*. It is truly important to understand his vision as a current creator because of his spectacular ideals that compare and contrast the once-upon-a-time to the contemporary city of Los Angeles.

The spirit of *Letters to My City* is genuinely captured in two of his most important pieces. The first poem, “I am still alive in Los Angeles!” is a creative piece that defines the city of LA as a place of innovation, growth, sustainability, memories of the past and the present:

I am still alive in Los Angeles from festivals to funerals, baby showers to weddings, each generation ever more beautiful reality is ever musical — throngs of people mix and match creating the patchwork mosaic of multicultural souls coming together to call LA home.

The community is a poem in progress called Los Angeles.

The second piece, which is the last in *Letters to My City*, acknowledges the current generation of individuals harmonizing and defining fresh movements, a motivation to “pound the pavement, fight the good fight, bridge the divide, grow something, put people over profit, celebrate the present...” because “...we are the movement” (Sonksen, 199).

 As a friend and student of Mike Sonksen, first-hand, it is clear that his wisdom and compassion has granted a tremendous amount of inspiration. He has paved an avenue of enthusiasm and symbolizes high credibility as a mentor. Day one, we are kings and queens of his encouragement to discover our purpose and fulfill personal endeavors. These are the very reasons for my creative impulses to arise at the forefront and deliver the following detailed analysis of Sonksen’s piece “[The Riots Were the Week Before My Prom](#).” This poem wedged itself in the back of mind as connections of his life relate directly to mine.

Reading poetry is like peeping-a-tom through the eyes of a vulnerable individual; Vulnerable meaning transparent. A transparency that teaches through experience. Even though this x-ray vision, superpower is an intimate conversational experience (with self) for the creator, familiarities could become that of the reader too. Poetry, personally speaking, should have diversity and fulfill

amplitudes of uniqueness. Diversity could be accomplished through word choice or maybe a selection of poetry styles thrown into a hat and jumbled together just before pulling-out the magic, white bunny. It truly depends on the artist's perspective.

In the poem "The Riots Were the Week Before My Prom, Sonksen introduces the uniqueness of the magic, white bunny where the traditional style of the villanelle is used, but distorted ever so slightly and jumbled with a thorough rhyme scheme. This generates a uniqueness that becomes an enjoyable encounter. Villanelles typically have three-line stanzas followed by a final quatrain. The stanzas have repeated last lines and for the poem, the pattern occurs in alternation at the end of each stanza with the final quatrain using both of the alternated lines by inserting them in the last two lines of the quatrain. Sonksen also includes a rhyme scheme that ties everything together: *A B A A B A A*.

Sonksen utilizes his voice by memorializing the place most often, which represents his "salvation"; his means of escape. Sonksen's connections to place and the metaphors he uses to describe them are satisfying. With careful analysis of his poem I have uncovered some things that have a positive outlook on many negative situations. Sonksen begins with his first repeated line, "The Riots were the week before my prom."

This line is simple but makes a heavy statement. The riots that are most likely being reflected on are the 1992 LA riots, otherwise known as the Rodney King Riots. These are on the list of some of history's worst riots to ever occur in California alone. The third line of stanza 1, "Southern California was a time bomb" suggests the dangers of these riots and needed action. In stanza 2, Sonksen continues by saying "Race relations warring like Vietnam." People living in the same communities exposed aggression toward each other. The metaphorical connection of the communities and "warring like Vietnam" was catchy because the war in Vietnam had just ended in 1975. There are some interesting tones occurring throughout the piece as well.

Sonksen goes through moments of hardship and following, he sheds light through positive energy. As an example of this, stanza 3 line 1, Sonksen mentions "...mindfulness like Thich Nhat Hanh." [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist who discusses non-violent solutions to conflict. This connection between Hanh and the context of the poem was diplomatic and heartfelt. It is important to have faith and Sonksen exhibits this through his selection of word choices and metaphors.

Another really interesting line that Mike Sonksen delivers, "Tired citizens needed a new song – All the broadcasts played nonstop frustration." Sonksen is chiseling such small detail into this poetry. He says that the people hear nothing but aches and pains during this time of adversity. It appears he is sympathizing with the communities who were involved in these riots that built up a momentum of their own; killings, theft, vandalism, destruction. All of these elements become the "frustration" and the people want light, "a new song," something that strays away from these calamities.

It is important to be aware of the small change hidden at the end of the poem. Sonksen originally used the alternating lines, "The Riots were the week before my prom – Southern California was a time bomb." There is some displacement in the final line, "Southern California *is* a time bomb." This piece is no longer in past-tense, it becomes the present which really generates the question: Will Southern California ever fail to be a time bomb?

This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 22nd, 2020 at 12:08 pm and is filed under [Poetry](#)

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