

LESSON FOR TIM SEIBLES'S "KEROSENE"

About the Author

Tim Seibles, a recent Poet Laureate for the state of Virginia, is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Body Moves*, which was later reissued as a Carnegie Mellon Classic Contemporary, and *Fast Animal*, winner of the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Prize and nominee for the 2012 National Book Award. His honors also include fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and an Open Voice Award from the National Writers Voice Project. Seibles is known for his captivating reading voice. He is also a legendary teacher of poetry, having taught high school in his early years and later in the MFA program at Old Dominion University as well as in Cave Canem's fellowship program. The Poetry Foundation describes Seibles's work as "[approaching] themes of racial tension, class conflict, and intimacy from several directions at once in poems with plainspoken yet fast-turning language."

Poem

"Kerosene"

after the L.A. riot,
April '92

In my country the weather—
it's not too good At every bus stop anger
holds her umbrella folded her
face buckled tight as a boot Along the avenues
beneath parked cars spent
cartridges glimmer A man's head crushed
by nightsticks smoke still
slides from his mouth Let out wearing
uniforms hyenas rove in packs
unmuzzled and brothers strain inside
their brown skins like something wounded
thrown into a lake Slowly
like blood filling
cracks in the street slowly the
President arrived his mouth
slit into his face Like candles seen
through thick curtains sometimes
at night the dark citizens occur to him

like fishing lamps along
the black shore of a lake like moths
soaked in kerosene and lit

A Word about the Poem

Seibles's "Kerosene" is a poetic master class in context and disruption of that context, thus allowing the poem to feel as disconcerting as racial violence truly is. Seibles establishes a time and a place (the Los Angeles riots of 1992), but writes the poem in a way that stretches to so many other civil rights violations and instances of racial violence in the United States and beyond. Accessible imagery and standard sound techniques give way to unexpected twists and turns that force readers to reread and reconsider. The discussion questions and writing exercise below flow out of these ideas and encourage students to understand the full *experience* of Seibles's "Kerosene."

Backgrounds

History: Rodney King and the Los Angeles Riots

The inscription after the title clearly marks the poem as responding to the riots in Los Angeles in 1992. Those riots arose in response to the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers who had been put on trial for beating Rodney King, an African American who had led police on a car chase. A bystander had taped the beating and released the video to the public, sparking national outrage at the violence witnessed on the tape. The acquittal became a symbol for many of the racial divides that still existed in America 30 years after the Civil Rights movement.

For further historical background, read this article and view photos from NPR (<https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots>) or view this short video from *Time* (<https://time.com/4245175/rodney-king-la-riots-anniversary/>).

Etymology: The word "riot" likely came from Latin, "rugire," meaning "to roar." In the 1520s in England, the term "run riot" was used in reference to hunting hounds following the wrong scent, an interesting connection considering the symbolism of the hyenas in "Kerosene."

Discussion Questions

The "spent / cartridges" are the first evidence of violence in the poem. How do you think the description of their "glimmer" complicates the tone?

What political and societal concerns arise when we learn that the "man's head [has been] crushed / by nightsticks"?

What does the description of the hyenas suggest they represent?

What makes the "brothers strain inside / their brown skins"?

What is the speaker's attitude toward the President? How does our understanding of that attitude develop as particular descriptions are added? How do line breaks and spaces impact that development?

What is the emotional impact of the last line?

“Kerosene” can be challenging to read because of its enjambment, lack of punctuation, and the way that portions of phrases are split by spaces. How do you think this might impact the meaning of the poem? How might that disruption influence the reader to experience the poem beyond merely reading it?

The poem is decidedly in response to the riots in Los Angeles in 1992. How might the poem speak to issues of race, social justice, and violence beyond that particular event? Is the poem written in such a way as to make it more timeless?

Connections

Black Lives Matter: The more recent Black Lives Matter movement also sprang from an acquittal relating to violence against African Americans, specifically the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin (as well as other high-profile deaths that happened shortly thereafter). However, instead of the deadly riots such as those seen in Los Angeles in 1992, the Black Lives Matter movement spawned mostly peaceful protests, serious debate in the public and political spheres, response from the arts community, and calls for legislative change and more oversight and accountability of police officers. For a quick overview of the Black Lives Matter movement, see this report from NBC News:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ml7eHX9u4Q0>

Song Connection: The song “Glory” by John Legend and Common, featured in the movie *Selma*, is a hopeful yet realistic portrait of the struggle for equal rights and freedom for African Americans. The song alludes to Civil Rights figures such as Rosa Parks and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as well as the Black Lives Matter movement. The song is both a celebration of the peaceful power of so many great leaders, yet also a reminder that the struggle for freedom continues. Hear it here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUZOKvYcx_o

Writing Activities

Write a reflection on how violence complicates racial disharmony in the United States.

Write a poem about something chaotic or tumultuous, from anything as simple as a hectic day to something as emotionally complex as a car accident, or perhaps best of all, another instance in world history when human rights abuses were met with direct confrontation. Use Seibles’s style of disrupting enjambments, lack of punctuation, and phrases split by spaces to heighten the chaotic nature of your content.

Other recommended reading / viewing / listening for Tim Seibles:

Books:

Body Moves. Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2013.

Buffalo Head Solos. Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 2004.

Created by Kyle Vaughn
<http://www.kylevaughn.org>
kylev75@gmail.com

Fast Animal. Etruscan Press, 2012.

Hammerlock. Cleveland State U Poetry Center, 1999.

Kerosene. Ampersand Press. 1995

“Commercial Break: Road Runner, Uneasy”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf7lFXqerd0>

“Faith”: <https://poets.org/poem/faith>

“First Kiss”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dv9sgFHS2Do>