

Ardent Before We Go

for A. V.

Marco Yan

the hand in my back pocket shouldn't shiver
just as the lone glow the lamppost holds
shouldn't be redder than the moon tonight

5 but down we walk this alley the dives on one side
a congregation of night's acolytes on the other
cigarettes lit ashes before the shutter gates

how the buffet of smoke doesn't stick to
our skin how our sweat sets like the sweet
loam of spring we perch on the steps decide

10 we're juvenile we burn bright fast
ready to be in the thick of mischief
which button to lose who knows

15 even the plastic cup dropped in the gutter
cradles a lime wedge rolls salaciously
the rim wet gleaming with waste

beer-blazed shirt fragrant with hops
and the leftover rot from Pier 3 I stand
flippant in the face of Eros and profess

20 my earthly dread you see so tenderly
and ask voice incorruptible *are you afraid of*
falling asleep? my eyes on the stars coursing

through the city's capillaries *I can't help it*
how to surrender if not with candor
misgivings and then an urge to lean in

25 for a moment there is a violet haze overhead
grounding the melodrama of neon signs
the revelers linger the wraiths envy us

30 this little aliveness we're kindling here
our foreheads touch better let them watch
let them wonder let them fear now look away

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Glossary

Line 2	lamppost	a tall pole with a light at the top; a street light.
Line 5	congregation	a group of people assembled for religious worship
Line 5	acolyte	a person assisting a priest in a religious service or procession
Line 6	shutter gates	a type of door or window shutter consisting of many horizontal slats
Line 9	loam	a fertile soil of clay and sand containing humus
Line 9	perch on	to set or balance someone or something on
Line 10	juvenile	for or relating to young people
Line 11	mischief	playful misbehaviour, especially on the part of children
Line 14	lime wedge	a piece of lime
Line 14	salaciously	in a way that causes or shows a strong, often unpleasant interest in sexual matters
Line 15	rim	the outer edge of a wheel, on which the tyre is fitted
Line 15	gleam	to shine brightly, especially with reflected light
Line 17	rot	decay
Line 18	flippant	not serious about a serious subject, in an attempt to be funny or to appear clever
Line 18	Eros	the Greek god of love
Line 20	incorruptible	morally strong enough not to be persuaded to do something wrong
Line 21	course	to flow quickly or in large amounts
Line 22	capillary	a very thin tube, especially one of the smaller tubes that carry blood around the body
Line 23	candor	the quality of being honest and telling the truth, especially about a difficult or embarrassing subject
Line 25	haze	heat or smoke in the air
Line 27	reveler	someone who dances, drinks, sings, etc. at a party or in public, especially in a noisy way
Line 27	wraith	a spirit of a dead person

In-class activities

1. Pre-reading writing task:

Write a catalogue of details related to the urban setting; focus on the visual and tactile imagery (e.g. the colors, the movements, the pulse of the city). Make sure that every item is literal and concrete by resisting abstractions as much as possible. The list generated can easily be the backdrop of your poem.

“Ardent Before We Go” began with specific details: the lamppost, the alley, the steps, the cigarettes, the plastic cup in the gutter, the neon signs, etc. With a rich background, anything—even love—could happen.

2. While-reading task:

Read the poem aloud and notice how the sounds of each line/stanza operate. Are there words which share the same vowels (assonance)? Are there internal rhymes? Are there recurring consonant sounds (consonance and sibilance)? How do sounds affect the poem?

“Ardent Before We Go” is driven by sounds. Sometimes, the sounds may even change the image of the poem. For instance, the last word of stanza 5 was not “waste” in actuality; it was supposed to be “dirt” or “dust”, particles of impurities. However, for the sake of the music, “dirt” has to be replaced by a more general term “waste”, and the result is the internal near-rhymes of “waste” and “blazed” of the subsequent line.

If you are writing your own poems, try reading the lines aloud and see if words of similar sounds can help inform the imagery you want to create.

3. Post-reading discussion task:

Some people say that love is one power to resist death. How far do you agree with this statement? In what way can love be a force to ward off death?

You can begin this discussion in relation to the instances where these two forces are mentioned in the poem. What is the speaker’s attitude towards death? How is death challenged in the poem?

Writing prompt: A Generous Catalog of Particular Things

1. Love, again, is attention, which can be translated into how intently we look at things we are attracted to. The city is beautiful not because we say it is; such beauty resides in the incessant grunts of bus engines, the pastel walls of aging buildings, the pigeons by a satellite dish, silent as gargoyles. Tautological as it may sound, the specific things that a cityscape allows to happen compose the city.
2. As writers, we don't work with brushes or colors; what we use, instead, is words and the meanings they carry. In order to communicate one's love for a city, one ought to deliver the images in their head to the readers, with as little loss as possible. A perennial trick which poets employ is to generate a catalog of concrete details. Think Marcus Jackson's "First Warm Morning, Amsterdam Avenue—"a spry deliveryman stacks boxes / of blueberries, carrots complete / with green mane..." Think Marilyn Chin's "Urban Love Poem"—"Gingko, vomit-eater of the metropolis, / city's oxygen, small men's shadows...".
3. Now write a list of things you've encountered in the city you love, things which have left a mark on you, from your own perspective. Stay away from abstractions and high-sounding diction at first. Look carefully and clinically at those moments/scenes/objects, and revisit them if you have to. If there is love, it will show itself in your descriptions
4. After you have around twenty items on your list, read them aloud, shuffle them, and notice the pulse in the flow of those vivid descriptions. Whatever you want to say to/about the city, it's already there. Revise the poem around that center. Be carried away