

Urban Love Poem

Marilyn Chin

1)
Condominium, stiff bamboo,
refuses to bend in the wind,
squats in the sinking earth
like a thin-hipped dowager.
5 You arrange the amenities
and we pay the rent. So, please,
don't fall as civilizations fall
in the comfort of night.

2)
10 Gingko, vomit-eater of the metropolis,
city's oxygen, small men's shadow,
your gentle bark can't protect you now.
One pellicle, another, falls
on the land of your displacement.
Where is the Yellow Emperor who nurtured you?
15 Where is your birthplace,
the Yangtze, the Pearl?

3)
Hong Kong, San Francisco, San Jose,
the path through the "Golden Mountains"
is a three-tiered freeway. Look up:
20 it suspends where no prophet can touch.
A quick fix in your veins; a white rush in my mind—
you cry, "Mei Ling, Mei Ling, once
we could've had everything:
the talent, the courage, the wherewithal."

4)
25 Oh, the small delectables of day:
persimmons from Chinatown,
a stroll through the Tenderloin
with the man I love.

30 *My darling, please, don't be sad.
I've parked my horse
in this gray, gray sunrise
to gather sweet crocuses and jonquils
for you.*

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Glossary

Line 1	Condominium	A big apartment building
Line 4	Dowager	An old, widowed woman of high social rank who has inherited her husband's property
Line 5	Amenities	Facilities that make one's life more pleasant and comfortable
Line 9	Ginkgo	A Chinese tree that is able to survive garbage and pollution
Line 9	Metropolis	A large, important city
Line 12	Pellicles	Outer layers that cover surfaces
Line 13	Displacement	The situation in which people are forced to leave the place where they normally live
Line 16	The Yangtze	Cháng Jiāng, the longest river in China
Line 19	Freeway	A wide road for fast-moving traffic
Line 20	Prophet	A person who says things that will happen in the future
Line 24	The wherewithal	The money necessary for a particular purpose
Line 25	Delectables	Things that are highly pleasing or delicious
Line 26	Persimmons	Very sweet orange fruits from China
Line 27	The Tenderloin	A neighbourhood in downtown San Francisco
Line 32	Crocuses	Small yellow, white or purple spring flowers
Line 32	Jonquils	Yellow or white flowers

About the poem

Suggested by the title, the poem is indeed a love poem—one that is dedicated to the good old days in San Francisco. The speaker takes a nostalgic look at the city, where many Chinese immigrants gathered and settled down. San Francisco served as a seedbed of a better standard of living for these outlanders. Through the use of imagery, the speaker muses about the relationship between the bustling city and the immigrants who lived there: the stiff condominiums resemble the strong and determined Chinese people, while the ginkgo trees also suggest their resilience in the face of adversities. The city was a place for the Chinese to achieve success (or to have “everything”), yet it was also where small, sweet things happened between a couple. The speaker’s memories of the persimmons, the slow and relaxing walks with her lover and the flowers she got will continue to fill her with nostalgia for San Francisco.

For more about the poem, visit [here](#).

In-class activities

1. Warm-up:

Bring in images of artefacts of “love” for Hong Kong or a city of your choice. If possible, bring in the actual objects (e.g. food items, old stamps, cassette tapes, CDs, concert or movie ticket stubs...a mix of the present and the past is also good) and let students touch them to arouse their interests. Prepare to explain to students the back stories, slowly leading to how you, as a teacher, think the love for a city can be defined.

Also invite students to bring in images or objects and share the reasons behind their picks with the class. Categorize the images and objects, if possible. This helps consolidate the knowledge for students, when it is their turn to write their own “urban love poems.”

2. Before reading the poem:

Stimulate students’ thinking about how the love for a city can be defined. Answers will definitely vary. Broaden the discussion with these angles:

(i) The love can be a connection between an individual and the city.

(ii) When you say Hong Kong, or any city, do you mean its space, history, or the people from there?

(iii) Or do you mean your family, friends and ancestors who have been living there for so long that they have become an inseparable part of the city?

(iv) Is it possible that you are merely loving a particular place in the city? If so, what is that place about? And why the special connection?

(v) Can we interpret “love” as a mix of “love and hate”? Ambiguities and conflicts are fun to work with in poetry writing and reading.

3. Reading the poem:

The poem is written in sections. Teachers can divide the class into groups, and assign a particular section to each of them. This allows the class to co-build the knowledge of the work without being overwhelming. Or assign the whole piece to capable students who may work individually or with a partner. Ask students to

(i) summarize each section in their own words,

(ii) take note of the emotion(s), and/or the shift of which,

(iii) as well as highlight words, phrases or images that jump out while they are reading.

WRITING+

By just looking at the students' annotations, less capable ones should be able to follow the poem, while the actual annotations could reflect the whole class's understanding of the work. Teachers can fill in information gaps after eliciting class knowledge.

Listen to Marilyn Chin's reading of her own work twice, if possible. Ask students if they have picked up anything new from her voice or performance.

4. Discussion on the poem:

Teachers are free to adopt a small-group discussion mode, if necessary. Who is the "you" in the poem? Who is the addressee? Does the poem sound like an appeal, an accusation, a confession, or a dedication? Circle all proper nouns in the poem. What do we know about the speaker's background? Also cover the term "[allusion](#)," if necessary. Why is the second stanza of section 4 in italics? Who is speaking in that stanza? Good poems are captivating because they are able to hook us with conflicts. Bad poems only present their readers a mono-layer of emotions. Ask students to examine the pairing of noun phrases in the first three lines of section 2 to make this point evident. This will also allow us to understand better the condition of the setting in the poem, as well as what the speaker is pressed against and how she feels about the place.

Engage the whole class with the concept of [imagery](#). Examine how the poem appeals to the readers through the construction of different types of images. Take section 4 as an example. The "persimmons" form a gustatory image (about the taste), while the contrasting colors of the "gray, gray sunrise" and the flowers are examples of visual images. Imagery speaks to us primarily through the five senses. Teachers can ask the class to analyze imagery in other sections of the poem.

Writing prompts

1. Modelling on “Urban Love Poem,” ask students to make a list of noun phrases and proper nouns that can illustrate their love (or love WITH hate) for a city they feel immensely for. These nouns have to be chosen with strong reasons.
2. Invite students to write down pop song lyrics, lines from pop movies, and/or slangs that go viral on the Internet. Juxtapose them with classical texts to generate a weird mix of past and present. Cross all temporal, linguistic and cultural boundaries to generate original yet playful language.
3. Ask the students to think about choice of speaker and addressee, if they are to write their own urban love poems. Do they want to use the first-person “I”? Or do they want to get detached a little bit by using the second-person narration (i.e. the author speaking to him/herself through the use of “you”)? Or do they want to speak as the city? Shifting the narrative angle sometimes opens up imagination and remove writers’ block.