Classic Poetry Series

Frank O'Hara
- poems -

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Frank O'Hara (27 March 1926 – 25 July 1966)

Francis Russell "Frank" O'Hara was an American writer, poet and art critic. He was a member of the New York School of poetry.

<b>Life</b>

Frank O'Hara, the son of Russell Joseph O'Hara and Katherine (née Broderick) was born on March 27, 1926, at Maryland General Hospital, Baltimore and grew up in Grafton, Massachusetts. He attended St. John's High School in Worcester. He grew up believing he had been born in June, but in fact had been born in March, his parents having disguised his true date of birth because he was conceived out of wedlock. He studied piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston from 1941 to 1944 and served in the South Pacific and Japan as a sonarman on the destroyer USS Nicholas during World War II.

With the funding made available to veterans he attended Harvard University, where artist and writer Edward Gorey was his roommate. Although O'Hara majored in music and did some composing, his attendance was irregular and his interests disparate. He regularly attended classes in philosophy and theology, while writing impulsively in his spare time. O'Hara was heavily influenced by visual art and by contemporary music, which was his first love (he remained a fine piano player all his life and would often shock new partners by suddenly playing swathes of Rachmaninoff when visiting them). His favorite poets were <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/arthur-rimbaud/">Arthur Rimbaud</a>, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/st-phane-mallarm-2/">Stephane Mallarme</a>, <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/boris-pasternak/">Boris Pasternak</a> and <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/vladimir-vladimirovich-mayakovsky/">Vladimir Mayakovsky</a> While at Harvard, O'Hara met John Ashbery and began publishing poems in the Harvard Advocate. Despite his love of music, O'Hara changed his major and graduated from Harvard in 1950 with a degree in English.

He then attended graduate school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. While at Michigan, he won a Hopwood Award and received his M.A. in English literature in 1951. That autumn O'Hara moved into an apartment in New York City with Joe LeSueur, who would be his roommate and sometime lover for the next 11 years. It was in New York that he began teaching at The New School.

Known throughout his life for his extreme sociability, passion, and warmth, O'Hara had hundreds of friends and lovers throughout his life, many from the
New York art and poetry worlds. Soon after arriving in New York, he was employed at the front desk of the Museum of Modern Art and began to write seriously.

O'Hara was active in the art world, working as a reviewer for Artnews, and in 1960 was Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions for the Museum of Modern Art. He was also friends with the artists Willem de Kooning, Norman Bluhm, Larry Rivers and Joan Mitchell.

In the early morning hours of July 24, 1966, O'Hara was struck by a dune buggy on the Fire Island beach. He died the next day of a ruptured liver. O'Hara was buried in Green River Cemetery on Long Island. The painter Larry Rivers, a longtime friend and lover of O'Hara's, delivered the eulogy.

Poetry

While O'Hara's poetry is generally autobiographical, it tends to be based on his observations of New York life rather than exploring his past. In his introduction to The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, Donald Allen says that "Frank O'Hara tended to think of his poems as a record of his life is apparent in much of his work." O'Hara discussed this aspect of his poetry in a statement for Donald Allen's New American Poetry: "What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don’t think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them." He goes on to say, "My formal 'stance' is found at the crossroads where what I know and can't get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred... It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time."

His initial time in the Navy, during his basic training at Sampson Naval Training Center in upstate New York, along with earlier years spent at St. John’s High School began to shape a distinguished style of solitary observation that would later inform his poems. Immersed in regimented daily routine, first Catholic school then the Navy, he was able to separate himself from the situation and make witty and often singular studies. Sometimes these were cataloged for use in later writing, or, perhaps more often, put into letters and sent off to home. This skill of scrutinizing and recording during the bustle and churn of daily life would, later, be one of the important aspects that shaped O’hara as an urban poet writing off the cuff.
Among his friends, O'Hara was known to treat poetry dismissively, as something to be done only in the moment. John Ashbery claims he witnessed O'Hara “Dashing the poems off at odd moments – in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime or even in a room full of people – he would then put them away in drawers and cartons and half forget them.”

In 1959, he wrote a mock manifesto (originally published in Yugen in 1961) called Personism: A Manifesto, in which he explains his position on formal structure: "I don't ... like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.'" He says, in response to academic overemphasis on form, "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it." He claims that on August 27, 1959, while talking to LeRoi Jones, he founded a movement called Personism which may be "the death of literature as we know it."

He says, "It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings toward the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person."

His poetry shows the influence of Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Russian poetry, and poets associated with French Symbolism. Ashbery says, “The poetry that meant the most to him when he began writing was either French – Rimbaud, Mallarmé, the Surrealists: poets who speak the language of every day into the reader’s dream – or Russian – Pasternak and especially Mayakovsky, for whom he picked up what James Schuyler has called the ‘intimate yell.’” As part of the New York School of poetry, O'Hara to some degree encapsulated the compositional philosophy of New York School painters.

Ashbery says, “Frank O'Hara's concept of the poem as the chronicle of the creative act that produces it was strengthened by his intimate experience of Pollock's, Kline's, and de Kooning's great paintings of the late '40s and early '50s and of the imaginative realism of painters like Jane Freilicher and Larry Rivers.” This interaction between poet and painter is most evident in the poem, "Why I am Not A Painter", in which O'Hara compares the process of writing a poem called "Oranges" with a description of his friend Mike Goldberg's creation of a painting entitled "Sardines". Neither work in the end contains a reference to its
O'Hara was also influenced by <a href="http://www.poemhunter.com/william-carlos-williams/">William Carlos Williams</a>. According to Marjorie Perloff in her book Frank O'Hara, Poet among Painters, he and Williams both use everyday language and simple statements split at irregular intervals. Perloff points out the similarities between O'Hara's "Autobiographia Literaria" and Williams's "Invocation and Conclusion." At the end of "Autobiographia Literaria," the speaker says, "And here I am, the center of all beauty!/writing these poems!/Imagine!" Similarly, Williams at the end of "Invocation and Conclusion" says, "Now look at me!" These lines show a shared interest in the self as an individual who can only be himself in isolation. A similar idea is expressed in a line from Williams's "Danse Russe": "Who shall say I am not/ the happy genius of my household?"

<b>In Popular Culture</b>

In the 2011 film Beastly, the lovestruck main characters read O'Hara's poem Having a Coke with You aloud to each other.

In season 2 of the television series Mad Men, a character reading O'Hara’s collection of poetry, Meditations in an Emergency appeared in the first episode, and again in the last episode which also used its title as the episode title. In the twelfth episode of season 2, Don Draper finds a copy of Meditations in an Emergency in Anna Draper's home in California.

In the season 1 episode of the HBO series Bored to Death entitled "The Case of the Missing Screenplay", the main character loses a screenplay written by Jim Jarmusch about the life of Frank O'Hara.
1951

Alone at night
in the wet city

the country's wit
is not memorable.

The wind has blown
all the trees down

but these anxieties
remain erect, being

the heart's deliberate
chambers of hurt

and fear whether
from a green apartment

seeming diamonds or
from an airliner

seeming fields. It's
not simple or tidy

though in rows of
rows and numbered;

the literal drifts
colorfully and

the hair is combed
with bridges, all

compromises leap
to stardom and lights.

If alone I am
able to love it,
the serious voices,
the panic of jobs,

it is sweet to me.
Far from burgeoning

verdure, the hard way
in this street.

Frank O'Hara
A City Winter

1
I understand the boredom of the clerks
fatigue shifting like dunes within their eyes
a frightful nausea gumming up the works
that once was thought aggression in disguise.
Do you remember? then how lightly dead
seemed the moon when over factories
it languid slid like a barrage of lead
above the heart, the fierce inventories
of desire. Now women wander our dreams
carrying money and to our sleep's shame
our hands twitch not for swift blood-sunk triremes
nor languorous white horses nor ill fame,
but clutch the groin that clouds a pallid sky
where tow'rs are sinking in their common eye.

2
My ship is flung upon the gutter's wrist
and cries for help of storm to violate
that flesh your curiosity too late
has flushed. The stem your garter tongue would twist
has sunk upon the waveless bosom's mist,
thigh of the city, apparition, hate,
and the tower whose doves have, delicate,
fled into my blood where they are not kissed.

You have left me to the sewer's meanwhile,
and I have answered the sea's open wish
to love me as a bonfire's watchful hand
guards red the shore and guards the hairy strand,
our most elegant lascivious bile,
my ship sinking beneath the gutter's fish.

3
How can I then, my dearest winter lay,
disgorge the tasty worm that eats me up
falling onto the stem of a highway
whose ardent rainbow is the spoon's flat cup
and in the vilest of blue suited force
enamored of the heated needle's arm
finds the ministrant an own tongue's remorse
so near the blood and still so far from harm,
thus to be eaten up and gobbled down
volcanoes of speedometers, the strike
that heats the iris into flame and flow'res
the panting chalice so a turning pike:
    you are not how the gods refused to die,
and I am scarred forever neath the eye.

4
What are my eyes? if they must feed me, rank
with forgetting, in the jealous forest
of lustrous blows, so luminously blank
through smoke and in the light. All faint, at rest,
yet I am racing towards the fear that kills
them off, friends and lovers, hast'ning through tears
like alcohol high in the throat of hills
and hills of night, alluring! their black cheers
falling upon my ears like nails. And there
the bars grow thick with onanists and camps
and bivouacs of bears with clubs, are fair
with their blows, deal death beneath purple lamps
and to me! I run! closer always move,
crying my name in fields of dead I love.

5
I plunge deep within this frozen lake
whose mirrored fastnesses fill up my heart,
where tears drift from frivolity to art
all white and slobbering, and by mistake
are the sky. I'm no whale to cruise apart
in fields impassive of my stench, my sake,
my sign to crushing seas that fall like fake
pillars to crash! to sow as wake my heart

and don't be niggardly. The snow drifts low
and yet neglects to cover me, and I
dance just ahead to keep my heart in sight.
How like a queen, to seek with jealous eye
the face that flees you, hidden city, white
swan. There's no art to free me, blinded so.
A Quiet Poem

When music is far enough away
the eyelid does not often move

and objects are still as lavender
without breath or distant rejoinder.

The cloud is then so subtly dragged
away by the silver flying machine

that the thought of it alone echoes
unbelievably; the sound of the motor falls

like a coin toward the ocean's floor
and the eye does not flicker

as it does when in the loud sun a coin
rises and nicks the near air. Now,

slowly, the heart breathes to music
while the coins lie in wet yellow sand.

Frank O'Hara
A Step Away From Them

It's my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust.

On
to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S
CORNER. Giulietta Maina, wife of
Federico Fellini, &eacute; bell' attrice.
And chocolate malted. A lady in
foxes on such a day puts her poodle
in a cab.

There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full of life was full, of them? And one has eaten and one walks, past the magazines with nudes and the posters for BULLFIGHT and the Manhatten Storage Warehouse, which they'll soon tear down. I used to think they had the Armory Show there.

A glass of papaya juice and back to work. My heart is in my pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

Frank O'Hara
The Sun woke me this morning loud and clear, saying "Hey! I've been trying to wake you up for fifteen minutes. Don't be so rude, you are only the second poet I've ever chosen to speak to personally

so why aren't you more attentive? If I could burn you through the window I would to wake you up. I can't hang around here all day."

"Sorry, Sun, I stayed up late last night talking to Hal."

"When I woke up Mayakovsky he was a lot more prompt" the Sun said petulantly. "Most people are up already waiting to see if I'm going to put in an appearance."

I tried to apologize "I missed you yesterday." "That's better" he said. "I didn't know you'd come out." "You may be wondering why I've come so close?" "Yes" I said beginning to feel hot wondering if maybe he wasn't burning me anyway.

"Frankly I wanted to tell you I like your poetry. I see a lot on my rounds and you're okay. You may not be the greatest thing on earth, but you're different. Now, I've heard some say you're crazy, they being excessively calm themselves to my mind, and other crazy poets think that you're a boring
reactionary. Not me.

Just keep on
like I do and pay no attention. You'll find that people always will complain about the atmosphere, either too hot or too cold too bright or too dark, days too short or too long.

If you don't appear
at all one day they think you're lazy or dead. Just keep right on, I like it.

And don't worry about your lineage poetic or natural. The Sun shines on the jungle, you know, on the tundra the sea, the ghetto. Wherever you were I knew it and saw you moving. I was waiting for you to get to work.

And now that you are making your own days, so to speak, even if no one reads you but me you won't be depressed. Not everyone can look up, even at me. It hurts their eyes."
"Oh Sun, I'm so grateful to you!"

"Thanks and remember I'm watching. It's easier for me to speak to you out here. I don't have to slide down between buildings to get your ear.
I know you love Manhattan, but you ought to look up more often.

And always embrace things, people earth sky stars, as I do, freely and with the appropriate sense of space. That is your inclination, known in the heavens and you should follow it to hell, if necessary, which I doubt.
Maybe we'll
speak again in Africa, of which I too
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem
in that brain of yours as my farewell."

"Sun, don't go!" I was awake
at last. "No, go I must, they're calling
me."
"Who are they?"

Rising he said "Some
day you'll know. They're calling to you
too." Darkly he rose, and then I slept.

Frank O'Hara
Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul

It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering
if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch
ah lunch! I think I am going crazy
what with my terrible hangover and the weekend coming up
at excitement-prone Kenneth Koch's
I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems
at Joan's studio for a new book by Grove Press
which they will probably not print
but it is good to be several floors up in the dead of night
wondering whether you are any good or not
and the only decision you can make is that you did it

yesterday I looked up the rue Frémicourt on a map
and was happy to find it like a bird
flying over Paris et ses environs
which unfortunately did not include Seine-et-Oise

which I don't know

as well as a number of other things
and Allen is back talking about god a lot
and Peter is back not talking very much
and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth's
although he is coming to lunch with Norman
I suspect he is making a distinction
well, who isn't

I wish I were reeling around Paris
instead of reeling around New York
I wish I weren't reeling at all
it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured

we are all happy and young and toothless
it is the same as old age
the only thing to do is simply continue
is that simple
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do
can you do it
yes, you can because it is the only thing to do
blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues
the Seine continues

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the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all
the Bar Américain continues to be French
de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus
Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)
and Irving Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes
and so do I (sometimes I think I'm 'in love' with painting)
and surely the Piscine Deligny continues to have water in it
and the Flore continues to have tables and newspapers
and people under them

and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy
we shall be happy
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything
continues to be possible

René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it

Frank O'Hara
Animals

Have you forgotten what we were like then
when we were still first rate
and the day came fat with an apple in its mouth

it's no use worrying about Time
but we did have a few tricks up our sleeves
and turned some sharp corners

the whole pasture looked like our meal
we didn't need speedometers
we could manage cocktails out of ice and water

I wouldn't want to be faster
or greener than now if you were with me O you
were the best of all my days

Frank O'Hara
Ann Arbor Variations

1
Wet heat drifts through the afternoon
like a campus dog, a fraternity ghost
waiting to stay home from football games.
The arches are empty clear to the sky.

Except for the leaves: those lashes of our
thinking and dreaming and drinking sight.
The spherical radiance, the Old English
look, the sum of our being, "hath perced
to the roote" all our springs and falls
and now rolls over our limpness, a daily
dragon. We lose our health in a love
of color, drown in a fountain of myriads,
as simply as children. It is too hot,
our birth was given up to screaming. Our
life on these street lawns seems silent.
The leaves chatter their comparisons
to the wind and the sky fills up
before we are out of bed. O infinite
our siestas! adobe effigies in a land
that is sick of us and our tanned flesh.

The wind blows towards us particularly
the sobbing of our dear friends on both
coasts. We are sick of living and afraid
that death will not be by water, o sea.

2
Along the walks and shaded ways
pregnant women look snidely at children.
Two weeks ago they were told, in these

selfsame pools of trefoil, "the market
for emeralds is collapsing," "chlorophyll
shines in your eyes," "the sea's misery
is progenitor of the dark moss which hides
on the north side of trees and cries."
What do they think of slim kids now?

and how, when the summer's gong of day
and night slithers towards their sweat
and towards the nest of their arms

and thighs, do they feel about children
whose hides are pearly with days of swimming?
Do they mistake these fresh drops for tears?

The wind works over these women constantly!
trying, perhaps, to curdle their milk
or make their spring unseasonably fearful,

season they face with dread and bright eyes,
The leaves, wrinkled or shiny like apples,
wave women courage and sigh, a void temperature.

3
The alternatives of summer do not remove
us from this place. The fainting into skies
from a diving board, the express train to
Detroit's damp bars, the excess of affection
on the couch near an open window or a Bauhaus
fire escape, the lazy regions of stars, all
are strangers. Like Mayakovsky read on steps
of cool marble, or Yeats danced in a theatre
of polite music. The classroom day of dozing
and grammar, the partial eclipse of the head
in the row in front of the head of poplars,
sweet Syrinx! last out the summer in a stay
of iron. Workmen loiter before urinals, stare
out windows at girders tightly strapped to clouds.
And in the morning we whimper as we cook
an egg, so far from fluttering sands and azure!

4
The violent No! of the sun
burns the forehead of hills.
Sand fleas arrive from Salt Lake
and most of the theatres close.

The leaves roll into cigars, or
it seems our eyes stick together
in sleep. O forest, o brook of
spice, o cool gaze of strangers!

the city tumbles towards autumn
in a convulsion of tourists
and teachers. We dance in the dark,
forget the anger of what we blame

on the day. Children toss and murmur
as a rumba blankets their trees and
beckons their stars closer, older, now.
We move o'er the world, being so much here.

It's as if Poseidon left off counting
his waters for a moment! In the fields
the silence is music like the moon.
The bullfrogs sleep in their hairy caves.

across the avenue a trefoil lamp
of the streets tosses luckily.
The leaves, finally, love us! and
moonrise! we die upon the sun.

Frank O'Hara
As Planned

After the first glass of vodka
you can accept just about anything
of life even your own mysteriousness
you think it is nice that a box
of matches is purple and brown and is called
La Petite and comes from Sweden
for they are words that you know and that
is all you know words not their feelings
or what they mean and you write because
you know them not because you understand them
because you don't you are stupid and lazy
and will never be great but you do
what you know because what else is there?

Anonymous submission.

Frank O'Hara
At Joan's

It is almost three
I sit at the marble top
sorting poems, miserable
the little lamp glows feebly
I don't glow at all

I have another cognac
and stare at two little paintings
of Jean-Paul's, so great
I must do so much
or did they just happen

the breeze is cool
barely a sound filters up
through my confused eyes
I am lonely for myself
I can't find a real poem

if it won't happen to me
what shall I do

Frank O'Hara
At Night Chinamen Jump

At night Chinamen jump
on Asia with a thump
while in our willful way
we, in secret, play

affectionate games and bruise
our knees like China's shoes.

The birds push apples through
grass the moon turns blue,

these apples roll beneath
our buttocks like a heath

full of Chinese thrushes
flushed from China's bushes.

As we love at night
birds sing out of sight,

Chinese rhythms beat
through us in our heat,

the apples and the birds
move us like soft words,

we couple in the grace
of that mysterious race.

Frank O'Hara
Autobiographia Literaria

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

Anonymous submission.

Frank O'Hara
Ave Maria

Mothers of America
    let your kids go to the movies
get them out of the house so they won't
    know what you're up to
it's true that fresh air is good for the body
    but what about the soul
that grows in darkness, embossed by
    silvery images
and when you grow old as grow old you
must
    they won't hate you
they won't criticize you they won't know
    they'll be in some glamorous
country
they first saw on a Saturday afternoon or
    playing hookey
they may even be grateful to you
    for their first sexual experience
which only cost you a quarter
    and didn't upset the peaceful
home
they will know where candy bars come
    from
    and gratuitous bags of popcorn
as gratuitous as leaving the movie before
it's over
with a pleasant stranger whose apartment
    is in the Heaven on
    Earth Bldg
near the Williamsburg Bridge
    oh mothers you will have made
the little
    tykes
so happy because if nobody does pick
them up in the movies
they won't know the difference
    and if somebody does it'll be
    sheer gravy
and they'll have been truly entertained
either way
instead of hanging around the yard
   or up in their room hating you
prematurely since you won't have done
   anything horribly mean
   yet
except keeping them from life's darker joys
   it's unforgivable the latter
so don't blame me if you won't take this
   advice
   and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in
   front of a TV set
   seeing
movies you wouldn't let them see when
   they were young

Frank O'Hara
Call Me

The eager note on my door said "Call me,"
call when you get in!" so I quickly threw
a few tangerines into my overnight bag,
straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and

headed straight for the door. It was autumn
by the time I got around the corner, oh all
unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but
the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk!

Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late
and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a
champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie!
for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was

there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that
ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it. There are few
hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest
only casually invited, and that several months ago.

Frank O'Hara
The white chocolate jar full of petals
swills odds and ends around in a dizzying eye
of four o'clocks now and to come. The tiger,
marvellously striped and irritable, leaps
on the table and without disturbing a hair
of the flowers' breathless attention, pisses
into the pot, right down its delicate spout.
A whisper of steam goes up from that porcelain
urethra. "Saint-Saëns!" it seems to be whispering,
curling unerringly around the furry nuts
of the terrible puss, who is mentally flexing.
Ah be with me always, spirit of noisy
contemplation in the studio, the Garden
of Zoos, the eternally fixed afternoons!
There, while music scratches its scrofulous
stomach, the brute beast emerges and stands,
clear and careful, knowing always the exact peril
at this moment caressing his fangs with
a tongue given wholly to luxurious usages;
which only a moment before dropped aspirin
in this sunset of roses, and now throws a chair
in the air to aggravate the truly menacing.

Frank O'Hara
Chinamen Jump

At night Chinamen jump
on Asia with a thump
while in our willful way
we, in secret, play

affectionate games and bruise
our knees like China's shoes.

The birds push apples through
grass the moon turns blue,

these apples roll beneath
our buttocks like a heath

full of Chinese thrushes
flushed from China's bushes.

As we love at night
birds sing out of sight,

Chinese rhythms beat
through us in our heat,

the apples and the birds
move us like soft words,

we couple in the grace
of that mysterious race.

Frank O'Hara
I am ill today but I am not
too ill. I am not ill at all.
It is a perfect day, warm
for winter, cold for fall.

A fine day for seeing. I see
ceramics, during lunch hour, by
Mir6, and I see the sea by Leger;
light, complicated Metzingers
and a rude awakening by Brauner,
a little table by Picasso, pink.

I am tired today but I am not
too tired. I am not tired at all.
There is the Pollock, white, harm
will not fall, his perfect hand

and the many short voyages. They'll
never fence the silver range.
Stars are out and there is sea
enough beneath the glistening earth
to bear me toward the future
which is not so dark. I see.

Click here to view the painting this poem was written about:
Jackson Pollock's "Number 1 (1948)"

Frank O'Hara
Five Poems

Well now, hold on
maybe I won't go to sleep at all
and it'll be a beautiful white night
or else I'll collapse
completely from nerves and be calm
as a rug or a bottle of pills
or suddenly I'll be off Montauk
swimming and loving it and not caring where

—

an invitation to lunch
HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT?
when I only have 16 cents and 2
packages of yoghurt
there's a lesson in that, isn't there
like in Chinese poetry when a leaf falls?
hold off on the yoghurt till the very
last, when everything may improve

—

at the Rond-Point they were eating
an oyster, but here
we were dropping by sculptures
and seeing some paintings
and the smasheroo-grates of Cadoret
and music by Varese, too
well Adolph Gottlieb I guess you
are the hero of this day
along with venison and Bill

I'll sleep on the yoghurt and dream of the Persian Gulf

—

which I did it was wonderful
to be in bed again and the knock
on my door for once signified "hi there"
and on the deafening walk
through the ghettos where bombs have gone off lately
left by subway violators
I knew why I love taxis, yes
subways are only fun when you're feeling sexy
and who feels sexy after The Blue Angel
well maybe a little bit

—

I seem to be defying fate, or am I avoiding it?

Frank O'Hara
For Grace, After A Party

You do not always know what I am feeling.
Last night in the warm spring air while I was
blazing my tirade against someone who doesn't interest
    me, it was love for you that set me
afire,

    and isn't it odd? for in rooms full of
strangers my most tender feelings
    writhe and
bear the fruit of screaming. Put out your hand,
isn't there
    an ashtray, suddenly, there? beside
the bed? And someone you love enters the room
and says wouldn't
    you like the eggs a little
different today?
    And when they arrive they are
just plain scrambled eggs and the warm weather
is holding.

Frank O'Hara
Having A Coke With You

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as still as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

I look at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and anyway it's in the Frick which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together the first time and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism just as at home I never think of the Nude Descending a Staircase or at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as carefully as the horse

it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I am telling you about it

Frank O'Hara
Homosexuality

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping our mouths shut? as if we'd been pierced by a glance!

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment of a very long opera, and then we are off! without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."

It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can in the rain. It's wonderful to admire oneself with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous, 53 rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good love a park and the inept a railway station, and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day, and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world."

Frank O'Hara
In Memory Of My Feelings

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets. He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.

My quietness has a number of naked selves, so many pistols I have borrowed to protect ourselves from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons and have murder in their heart!

Though in winter they are warm as roses, in the desert taste of chilled anisette.

At times, withdrawn, I rise into the cool skies and gaze on at the imponderable world with the simple identification of my colleagues, the mountains. Manfred climbs to my nape, speaks, but I do not hear him, I'm too blue.

An elephant takes up his trumpet, money flutters from the windows of cries, silk stretching its mirror across shoulder blades. A gun is "fired."

One of me rushes to window #13 and one of me raises his whip and one of me flutters up from the center of the track amidst the pink flamingoes, and underneath their hooves as they round the last turn my lips are scarred and brown, brushed by tails, masked in dirt's lust, definition, open mouths gasping for the cries of the bettors for the lungs of earth.

So many of my transparencies could not resist the race! Terror in earth, dried mushrooms, pink feathers, tickets, a flaking moon drifting across the muddied teeth, the imperceptible moan of covered breathing, love of the serpent!

I am underneath its leaves as the hunter crackles and pants and bursts, as the barrage balloon drifts behind a cloud and animal death whips out its flashlight, whistling and slipping the glove off the trigger hand. The serpent's eyes redden at sight of those thorny fingernails, he is so smooth!

My transparent selves
flail about like vipers in a pail, writhing and hissing
without panic, with a certain justice of response
and presently the aquiline serpent comes to resemble the Medusa.

Frank O'Hara
The opals hiding your lids
as you sleep, as you ride ponies
mysteriously, spring to bloom
like the blue flowers of autumn

each nine o'clock. And curls
tumble languorously towards
the yawning rubber band, tan,
your hand pressing all that

riotous black sleep into
the quiet form of daylight
and its sunny disregard for
the luminous volutions, oh!

and the budding waltzes
we swoop through in nights.
Before dawn you roar with
your eyes shut, unsmiling,

your volcanic flesh hides
everything from the watchman,
and the tendrils of dreams
strangle policemen running by

too slowly to escape you,
the racing vertiginous waves
of your murmuring need. But
he is day's guardian saint

that policeman, and leaning
from your open window you ask
him what to dress to wear and
to comb your hair modestly,

for that is now your mode.
Only by chance tripping on stairs
do you repeat the dance, and
then, in the perfect variety of
subdued, impeccably disguised, 
white black pink blue saffron 
and golden ambiance, do we find 
the nightly savage, in a trance.

Frank O'Hara
Lines For The Fortune Cookies

I think you're wonderful and so does everyone else.

Just as Jackie Kennedy has a baby boy, so will you--even bigger.

You will meet a tall beautiful blonde stranger, and you will not say hello.

You will take a long trip and you will be very happy, though alone.

You will marry the first person who tells you your eyes are like scrambled eggs.

In the beginning there was YOU--there will always be YOU, I guess.

You will write a great play and it will run for three performances.

Please phone The Village Voice immediately: they want to interview you.

Roger L. Stevens and Kermit Bloomgarden have their eyes on you.

Relax a little; one of your most celebrated nervous tics will be your undoing.

Your first volume of poetry will be published as soon as you finish it.

You may be a hit uptown, but downtown you're legendary!

Your walk has a musical quality which will bring you fame and fortune.

You will eat cake.

Who do you think you are, anyway? Jo Van Fleet?

You think your life is like Pirandello, but it's really like O'Neill.

A few dance lessons with James Waring and who knows? Maybe something will happen.

That's not a run in your stocking, it's a hand on your leg.

I realize you've lived in France, but that doesn't mean you know EVERYTHING!
You should wear white more often--it becomes you.

The next person to speak to you will have a very intriguing proposal to make.

A lot of people in this room wish they were you.

Have you been to Mike Goldberg's show? Al Leslie's? Lee Krasner's?

At times, your disinterestedness may seem insincere, to strangers.

Now that the election's over, what are you going to do with yourself?

You are a prisoner in a croissant factory and you love it.

You eat meat. Why do you eat meat?

Beyond the horizon there is a vale of gloom.

You too could be Premier of France, if only ... if only...

Frank O'Hara
Mayakovsky

1
My heart's aflutter!
I am standing in the bath tub
crying. Mother, mother
who am I? If he
will just come back once
and kiss me on the face
his coarse hair brush
my temple, it's throbbing!

then I can put on my clothes
I guess, and walk the streets.

2
I love you. I love you,
but I'm turning to my verses
and my heart is closing
like a fist.

Words! be
sick as I am sick, swoon,
roll back your eyes, a pool,

and I'll stare down
at my wounded beauty
which at best is only a talent
for poetry.

Cannot please, cannot charm or win
what a poet!
and the clear water is thick

with bloody blows on its head.
I embrace a cloud,
but when I soared
it rained.

3
That's funny! there's blood on my chest
oh yes, I've been carrying bricks
what a funny place to rupture!
and now it is raining on the ailanthus
as I step out onto the window ledge
the tracks below me are smoky and
glistening with a passion for running
I leap into the leaves, green like the sea

4
Now I am quietly waiting for
the catastrophe of my personality
to seem beautiful again,
and interesting, and modern.

The country is grey and
brown and white in trees,
snows and skies of laughter
always diminishing, less funny
not just darker, not just grey.

It may be the coldest day of
the year, what does he think of
that? I mean, what do I? And if I do,
perhaps I am myself again.

Frank O'Hara
Am I to become profligate as if I were a blonde? Or religious as if I were French?

Each time my heart is broken it makes me feel more adventurous (and how the same names keep recurring on that interminable list!), but one of these days there'll be nothing left with which to venture forth.

Why should I share you? Why don't you get rid of someone else for a change?

I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.

Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don't I? I'm just like a pile of leaves.

However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes--I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless i know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally _regret_ life. It is more important to affirm the least sincere; the clouds get enough attention as it is and even they continue to pass. Do they know what they're missing? Uh huh.

My eyes are vague blue, like the sky, and change all the time; they are indiscriminate but fleeting, entirely specific and disloyal, so that no one trusts me. I am always looking away. Or again at something after it has given me up. It makes me restless and that makes me unhappy, but I cannot keep them still. If only i had grey, green, black, brown, yellow eyes; I would stay at home and do something. It's not that I'm curious. On the contrary, I am bored but it's my duty to be attentive, I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth. And lately, so great has _their_ anxiety become, I can spare myself little sleep.
Now there is only one man I like to kiss when he is unshaven. Heterosexuality! you are inexorably approaching. (How best discourage her?)

St. Serapion, I wrap myself in the robes of your whiteness which is like midnight in Dostoevsky. How I am to become a legend, my dear? I've tried love, but that holds you in the bosom of another and I'm always springing forth from it like the lotus—the ecstasy of always bursting forth! (but one must not be distracted by it!) or like a hyacinth, "to keep the filth of life away," yes, even in the heart, where the filth is pumped in and slanders and pollutes and determines. I will my will, though I may become famous for a mysterious vacancy in that department, that greenhouse.

Destroy yourself, if you don't know!

It is easy to be beautiful; it is difficult to appear so. I admire you, beloved, for the trap you've set. It's like a final chapter no one reads because the plot is over.

"Fanny Brown is run away--scampered off with a Cornet of Horse; I do love that little Minx, & hope She may be happy, tho' She has vexed me by this exploit a little too.--Poor silly Cecchina! or F:B: as we used to call her.--I wish She had a good Whipping and 10,000 pounds."--Mrs. Thrale

I've got to get out of here. I choose a piece of shawl and my dirtiest suntans. I'll be back, I'll re-emerge, defeated, from the valley; you don't want me to go where you go, so I go where you don't want me to. It's only afternoon, there's a lot ahead. There won't be any mail downstairs. Turning, I spit in the lock and the knob turns.

Frank O'Hara
Melancholy Breakfast

Melancholy breakfast
blue overhead blue underneath

the silent egg thinks
and the toaster's electrical
  ear waits

the stars are in
"that cloud is hid"

the elements of disbelief are
very strong in the morning

Frank O'Hara
Morning

I've got to tell you
how I love you always
I think of it on grey
mornings with death

in my mouth the tea
is never hot enough
then and the cigarette
dry the maroon robe

chills me I need you
and look out the window
at the noiseless snow

At night on the dock
the buses glow like
clouds and I am lonely
thinking of flutes

I miss you always
when I go to the beach
the sand is wet with
tears that seem mine

although I never weep
and hold you in my
heart with a very real
humor you'd be proud of

the parking lot is
crowded and I stand
rattling my keys the car
is empty as a bicycle

what are you doing now
where did you eat your
lunch and were there
lots of anchovies it
is difficult to think
of you without me in
the sentence you depress
me when you are alone

Last night the stars
were numerous and today
snow is their calling
card I'll not be cordial

there is nothing that
distracts me music is
only a crossword puzzle
do you know how it is

when you are the only
passenger if there is a
place further from me
I beg you do not go

Frank O'Hara
If I rest for a moment near The Equestrian
pausing for a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower Shoppe,
that angel seems to be leading the horse into Bergdorf's
and I am naked as a table cloth, my nerves humming.
Close to the fear of war and the stars which have disappeared.
I have in my hands only 35c, it's so meaningless to eat!
and gusts of water spray over the basins of leaves
like the hammers of a glass pianoforte. If I seem to you
to have lavender lips under the leaves of the world,
I must tighten my belt.
It's like a locomotive on the march, the season
of distress and clarity
and my door is open to the evenings of midwinter's
lightly falling snow over the newspapers.
Clasp me in your handkerchief like a tear, trumpet
of early afternoon! in the foggy autumn.
As they're putting up the Christmas trees on Park Avenue
I shall see my daydreams walking by with dogs in blankets,
put to some use before all those coloured lights come on!
But no more fountains and no more rain,
and the stores stay open terribly late.

Frank O'Hara
My Heart

I'm not going to cry all the time
nor shall I laugh all the time,
I don't prefer one "strain" to another.
I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
some aficionado of my mess says "That's
not like Frank!", all to the good! I
don't wear brown and grey suits all the time,
do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
often. I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart--
you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

Frank O'Hara
On Seeing Larry Rivers' Washington Crossing The Delaware At The Museum Of Modern Art

Now that our hero has come back to us in his white pants and we know his nose trembling like a flag under fire, we see the calm cold river is supporting our forces, the beautiful history.

To be more revolutionary than a nun is our desire, to be secular and intimate as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile and pull the trigger. Anxieties and animosities, flaming and feeding on theoretical considerations and the jealous spiritualities of the abstract the robot? they're smoke, billows above the physical event. They have burned up. See how free we are! as a nation of persons.

Dear father of our country, so alive you must have lied incessantly to be immediate, here are your bones crossed on my breast like a rusty flintlock, a pirate's flag, bravely specific and ever so light in the misty glare of a crossing by water in winter to a shore other than that the bridge reaches for. Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.

Click here to view the painting this poem was written about: Washington Crossing The Delaware"
Personal Poem

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
shaker the last five years my batting average
is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases, then
we go eat some fish and some ale it's
cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville
we don't want to be in the poets' walk in
San Francisco even we just want to be rich
and walk on girders in our silver hats
I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
back to work happy at the thought possibly so

Frank O'Hara
Poem (At night Chinamen jump)

At night Chinamen jump
on Asia with a thump

while in our willful way
we, in secret, play

affectionate games and bruise
our knees like China's shoes.

The birds push apples through
grass the moon turns blue,

these apples roll beneath
our buttocks like a heath

full of Chinese thrushes
flushed from China's bushes.

As we love at night
birds sing out of sight,

Chinese rhythms beat
through us in our heat,

the apples and the birds
move us like soft words,

we couple in the grace
of that mysterious race.

Frank O'Hara
Poem (Hate Is Only One Of Many Responses)

Hate is only one of many responses
ture, hurt and hate go hand in hand
but why be afraid of hate, it is only there
think of filth, is it really awesome
neither is hate
don't be shy of unkindness, either
it's cleansing and allows you to be direct
like an arrow that feels something

out and out meanness, too, lets love breathe
you don't have to fight off getting in too deep
you can always get out if you're not too scared

an ounce of prevention's
enough to poison the heart
don't think of others
until you have thought of yourself, are true

all of these things, if you feel them
will be graced by a certain reluctance
and turn into gold

if felt by me, will be smilingly deflected
by your mysterious concern

Frank O'Hara
Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!)

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

Frank O'Hara
Poem ["Khrushchev is coming on the right day!"

Khrushchev is coming on the right day!

the cool graced light

is pushed off the enormous glass piers by hard wind

and everything is tossing, hurrying on up

this country

has everything but politesse, a Puerto Rican cab driver says

and five different girls I see

look like Piedie Gimbel

with her blonde hair tossing too,

as she looked when I pushed

her little daughter on the swing on the lawn it was also windy

last night we went to a movie and came out,

Ionesco is greater

than Beckett, Vincent said, that's what I think, blueberry blintzes

and Khrushchev was probably being carped at

in Washington, no

politesse

Vincent tells me about his mother's trip to Sweden

Hans tells us

about his father's life in Sweden, it sounds like Grace Hartigan's

painting Sweden

so I go home to bed and names drift through my

head

Purgatorio Merchado, Gerhard Schwartz and Gaspar Gonzales,

all

unknown figures of the early morning as I go to work

where does the evil of the year go

when September takes New York

and turns it into ozone stalagmites

deposits of light

so I get back up

make coffee, and read François Villon, his life, so dark

New York seems blinding and my tie is blowing up the street

I wish it would blow off

though it is cold and somewhat warms

my neck

as the train bears Krushchev on to Pennsylvania Station
and the light seems to be eternal
and joy seems to be inexorable
I am foolish enough always to find it in wind

Frank O'Hara
The eager note on my door said, "Call me," so I quickly threw a few tangerines into my overnight bag, straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and headed straight for the door. It was autumn by the time I got around the corner, oh all unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk!

Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie! for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it. There are few hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest only casually invited, and that several months ago.

Frank O'Hara
POEM EN FORME DE SAW

I ducked out of sight behind the saw-mill
nobody saw me because of the falls the gates the sluice the tourist boats
the children were trailing their fingers in the water
and the swans, regal and smarty, were nipping their "little" fingers
i heard on swan remark "That was a good nip
though they are not as interesting as sausages" and another
reply "Nor as tasty as those peasants we got away from the elephant that time;"
but i didn't really care for conversation that day
i wanted to be alone
which is why i went to the mill in the first place
now i am alone and hate it
i don't want to just make boards for the rest of my life
i'm distressed
the water is very beautiful but you can't go into it
because of the gunk
and the dog is always rolling over, i like dogs on their "little" feet
i think i may scamper off to Winnipeg to see Raymond
but what'll happen to the mill
i see the cobwebs collecting already
and later those other webs, those awful predatory webs
if i stay right here i will eventually get into the newspapers
like Robert Frost
willow trees, willow trees they remind me of Desdemona
i'm so damned literary
and at the same time the waters rushing past remind me of nothing
i'm so damned empty
what is all this vessel shit anyway
we are all rushing down the River Happy Times
ducking poling bumping sinking and swimming
and we arrive at the beach
the chaff is sand
alone as a tree bumping another tree in a storm
that's not really being alone, is it, signed The Saw

Frank O'Hara
Rhapsody

515 Madison Avenue
doctor to heaven? portal
stopped realities and eternal licentiousness
or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables
swinging from the myth of ascending
I would join
or declining the challenge of racial attractions
they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)
while everywhere love is breathing draftily
like a doorway linking 53rd with 54th
the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s
of midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too, of Holland

where is the summit where all aims are clear
the pin-point light upon a fear of lust
as agony's needlework grows up around the unicorn
and fences him for milk- and yoghurt-work
when I see Gianni I know he's thinking of John Ericson
playing the Rachmaninoff 2nd or Elizabeth Taylor
taking sleeping-pills and Jane thinks of Manderley
and Irkutsk while I cough lightly in the smog of desire
and my eyes water achingly imitating the true blue

a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle
multi-faceted insight of the fly in the stringless labyrinth
Canada plans a higher place than the Empire State Building
I am getting into a cab at 9th Street and 1st Avenue
and the Negro driver tells me about a $120 apartment

"where you can't walk across the floor after 10 at night
not even to pee, cause it keeps them awake downstairs"
no, I don't like that "well, I didn't take it"
perfect in the hot humid morning on my way to work
a little supper-club conversation for the mill of the gods

you were there always and you know all about these things
as indifferent as an encyclopedia with your calm brown eyes
it isn't enough to smile when you run the gauntlet
you've got to spit like Niagara Falls on everybody or

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Victoria Falls or at least the beautiful urban fountains of Madrid
as the Niger joins the Gulf of Guinea near the Menemsha Bar
that is what you learn in the early morning passing Madison Avenue
where you've never spent any time and stores eat up light

I have always wanted to be near it
though the day is long (and I don't mean Madison Avenue)
lying in a hammock on St. Mark's Place sorting my poems
in the rancid nourishment of this mountainous island
they are coming and we holy ones must go
is Tibet historically a part of China? as I historically
belong to the enormous bliss of American death

Frank O'Hara
Sleeping On The Wing

Perhaps it is to avoid some great sadness,
as in a Restoration tragedy the hero cries 'Sleep!
O for a long sound sleep and so forget it!'
that one flies, soaring above the shoreless city,
veering upward from the pavement as a pigeon
does when a car honks or a door slams, the door
of dreams, life perpetuated in parti-colored loves
and beautiful lies all in different languages.

Fear drops away too, like the cement, and you
are over the Atlantic. Where is Spain? where is
who? The Civil War was fought to free the slaves,
was it? A sudden down-draught reminds you of gravity
and your position in respect to human love. But
here is where the gods are, speculating, bemused.
Once you are helpless, you are free, can you believe
that? Never to waken to the sad struggle of a face?
to travel always over some impersonal vastness,
to be out of, forever, neither in nor for!

The eyes roll asleep as if turned by the wind
and the lids flutter open slightly like a wing.
The world is an iceberg, so much is invisible!
and was and is, and yet the form, it may be sleeping
too. Those features etched in the ice of someone
loved who died, you are a sculptor dreaming of space
and speed, your hand alone could have done this.
Curiosity, the passionate hand of desire. Dead,
or sleeping? Is there speed enough? And, swooping,
you relinquish all that you have made your own,
the kingdom of your self sailing, for you must awake
and breathe your warmth in this beloved image
whether it's dead or merely disappearing,
as space is disappearing and your singularity

Frank O'Hara
Song (Did You See Me Walking By The Buick Repairs?)

Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs?
I was thinking of you
having a Coke in the heat it was your face
I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's
I was thinking of you
and down at the railroad tracks where the station
has mysteriously disappeared
I was thinking of you
as the bus pulled away in the twilight
I was thinking of you
and right now

Anonymous submission.

Frank O'Hara
Song (Is It Dirty)

Is it dirty
does it look dirty
that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty
that's what you think of in the city
you don't refuse to breathe do you

someone comes along with a very bad character
he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very
he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes

that's what you think of in the city
run your finger along your no-moss mind
that's not a thought that's soot

and you take a lot of dirt off someone
is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
you don't refuse to breathe do you

Frank O'Hara
Spleen

I know so much
about things, I accept
so much, it's like
vomiting. And I am
nourished by the
shabbiness of my
knowing so much
about others and what
they do, and accepting
so much that I hate
as if I didn't know
what it is, to me.
And what it is to
them I know, and hate.

Frank O'Hara
Steps

How funny you are today New York
like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime
and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the left

here I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days
(I got tired of D-days) and blue you there still
accepts me foolish and free
all I want is a room up there
and you in it
and even the traffic halt so thick is a way
for people to rub up against each other
and when their surgical appliances lock
they stay together
for the rest of the day (what a day)
I go by to check a slide and I say
that painting's not so blue

where's Lana Turner
she's out eating
and Garbo's backstage at the Met
everyone's taking their coat off
so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers
and the park's full of dancers with their tights and shoes
in little bags
who are often mistaken for worker-outers at the West Side Y
why not
the Pittsburgh Pirates shout because they won
and in a sense we're all winning
we're alive

the apartment was vacated by a gay couple
who moved to the country for fun
they moved a day too soon
even the stabbings are helping the population explosion
though in the wrong country
and all those liars have left the UN
the Seagram Building's no longer rivalled in interest
not that we need liquor (we just like it)
and the little box is out on the sidewalk
next to the delicatessen
so the old man can sit on it and drink beer
and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day
while the sun is still shining

oh god it's wonderful

to get out of bed

and drink too much coffee

and smoke too many cigarettes

and love you so much

Frank O'Hara
The Day Lady Died

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don't know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

Frank O'Hara
The eager note on my door said "Call me,"
call when you get in!" so I quickly threw
a few tangerines into my overnight bag,
straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and

headed straight for the door. It was autumn
by the time I got around the corner, oh all
unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but
the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk!

Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late
and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a
champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie!
for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was

there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that
ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it. There are few
hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest
only casually invited, and that several months ago.

Frank O'Hara
To The Film Industry In Crisis

Not you, lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals
with your studious incursions toward the pomposity of ants,
nor you, experimental theatre in which Emotive Fruition
is wedding Poetic Insight perpetually, nor you,
promenading Grand Opera, obvious as an ear (though you
are close to my heart), but you, Motion Picture Industry,
it's you I love!

In times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love.
And give credit where it's due: not to my starched nurse, who taught me
how to be bad and not bad rather than good (and has lately availed
herself of this information), not to the Catholic Church
which is at best an oversolemn introduction to cosmic entertainment,
not to the American Legion, which hates everybody, but to you,
glorious Silver Screen, tragic Technicolor, amorous Cinemascope,
stretching Vistavision and startling Stereophonic Sound, with all
your heavenly dimensions and reverberations and iconoclasms! To
Richard Barthelmess as the 'tol'able' boy barefoot and in pants,
Jeanette MacDonald of the flaming hair and lips and long, long neck,
Sue Carroll as she sits for eternity on the damaged fender of a car
and smiles, Ginger Rogers with her pageboy bob like a sausage
on her shuffling shoulders, peach-melba-voiced Fred Astaire of the feet,
Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of mountain-climbers' gasping spouses,
the Tarzans, each and every one of you (I cannot bring myself to prefer
Johnny Weissmuller to Lex Barker, I cannot!), Mae West in a furry sled,
her bordello radiance and bland remarks, Rudolph Valentino of the moon,
its crushing passions, and moonlike, too, the gentle Norma Shearer,
Miriam Hopkins dropping her champagne glass off Joel McCrea's yacht,
and crying into the dappled sea, Clark Gable rescuing Gene Tierney
from Russia and Allan Jones rescuing Kitty Carlisle from Harpo Marx,
Cornel Wilde coughing blood on the piano keys while Merle Oberon berates,
Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling through Niagara Falls,
Joseph Cotten puzzling and Orson Welles puzzled and Dolores del Rio
eating orchids for lunch and breaking mirrors, Gloria Swanson reclining,
and Jean Harlow reclining and wiggling, and Alice Faye reclining
and wiggling and singing, Myrna Loy being calm and wise, William Powell
in his stunning urbanity, Elizabeth Taylor blossoming, yes, to you
and to all you others, the great, the near-great, the featured, the extras
who pass quickly and return in dreams saying your one or two lines,
my love!
Long may you illumine space with your marvellous appearances, delays
and enunciations, and may the money of the world glitteringly cover you
as you rest after a long day under the kleig lights with your faces
in packs for our edification, the way the clouds come often at night
but the heavens operate on the star system. It is a divine precedent
you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!

Frank O'Hara
To The Harbormaster

I wanted to be sure to reach you;
though my ship was on the way it got caught
in some moorings. I am always tying up
and then deciding to depart. In storms and
at sunset, with the metallic coils of the tide
around my fathomless arms, I am unable
to understand the forms of my vanity
or I am hard alee with my Polish rudder
in my hand and the sun sinking. To
you I offer my hull and the tattered cordage
of my will. The terrible channels where
the wind drives me against the brown lips
of the reeds are not all behind me. Yet
I trust the sanity of my vessel; and
if it sinks it may well be in answer
to the reasoning of the eternal voices,
the waves which have kept me from reaching you.

Frank O'Hara
Today

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
the stuff they've always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They're strong as rocks.

Frank O'Hara
You are so serious, as if
a glacier spoke in your ear
or you had to walk through
the great gate of Kiev
to get to the living room.

I worry about this because I
love you. As if it weren't grotesque
enough that we live in hydrogen
and breathe like atomizers, you
have to think I'm a great architect!

and you float regally by on your
incessant escalator, calm, a jungle queen.
Thinking it a steam shovel. Looking
a little uneasy. But you are yourself
again, yanking silver beads off your neck.

Remember, the Russian Easter Overture
is full of bunnies. Be always high,
full of regard and honor and lanolin. Oh
ride horseback in pink linen, be happy!
and ride with your beads on, because it rains.

Frank O'Hara
Why I Am Not A Painter

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.
"Sit down and have a drink" he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. "You have SARDINES in it."
"Yes, it needed something there."
"Oh." I go and the days go by
and I drop in again. The painting
is going on, and I go, and the days
go by. I drop in. The painting is
finished. "Where's SARDINES?"
All that's left is just
letters, "It was too much," Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

Frank O'Hara

www.PoemHunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive
Yesterday Down at the Canal

You say that everything is very simple and interesting
it makes me feel very wistful, like reading a great Russian novel does
i am terribly bored
sometimes it is like seeing a bad movie
other days, more often, it's like having an acute disease of the kidney
god knows it has nothing to do with the heart
nothing to do with people more interesting than myself
yak yak
that's an amusing thought
how can anyone be more amusing than oneself
how can anyone fail to be
can i borrow your forty-five
i only need one bullet preferably silver
if you can't be interesting at least you can be a legend
(but i hate all that crap)

Frank O'Hara