

## Having a Coke with You

By Frank O'Hara

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

[1959]

## Why I am Not a Painter

By Frank O'Hara

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.

[1956]

## The Day Lady Died

BY FRANK O'HARA

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

[1964]

Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died" from *Lunch Poems*. Copyright © 1964 by Frank O'Hara. Reprinted with the permission of City Lights Books.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1995)

## Frank O'Hara

1926–1966



Frank O'Hara was a dynamic leader of the "New York School" of poets, a group that included [John Ashbery](#), [Barbara Guest](#), [Kenneth Koch](#), and [James Schuyler](#). The Abstract Expressionist

painters in New York City during the 1950s and 1960s used the title, but the poets borrowed it. From the beginning O'Hara's poetry was engaged with the worlds of music, dance, and painting. In that complex of associations he devised an idea of poetic form that allowed the inclusion of many kinds of events, including everyday conversations and notes about New York advertising signs. Since his death in 1966 at age forty, the depth and richness of his achievements as a poet and art critic have been recognized by an international audience. As the painter Alex Katz remarked, "Frank's business was being an active intellectual." He was that. His articulate intelligence made new proposals for poetic form possible in American poetry.

He was born Francis Russell O'Hara in Baltimore, Maryland, to Russell J. and

Katherine Broderick O'Hara but moved at an early age to Grafton, a suburb of Worcester, in central Massachusetts. While growing up, he was a serious music student and wished above all to be a concert pianist. He took courses at the New England Conservatory. O'Hara writes: "It was a very funny life. I lived in Grafton, took a ride on a bus into Worcester every day to high school, and on Saturdays took a bus and a train to Boston to study piano. On Sundays, I stayed in my room and listened to the Sunday symphony programs." After service aboard the destroyer USS *Nicholas* in the South Pacific during World War II, he entered Harvard (Edward Gorey was his roommate), first majoring in music but changing to English and deciding to be a writer. His first published work was some poems and stories in the *Harvard Advocate*. While living in Cambridge, O'Hara met poets Ashbery, who was on the editorial board of the *Advocate*, and V. R. "Bunny" Lang. In 1956 O'Hara was one of the original founders of the Poets Theater in Cambridge. On occasional visits to New York, he met Koch and Schuyler, as well as the painters who were likewise to be so much a part of his life, notably Larry Rivers, Jane Freilicher, Fairfield Porter, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, Michael Goldberg, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Jackson Pollock. He was the first of the young New York Poets to write regular art criticism, serving as editorial associate for *Art News*, contributing reviews and occasional articles from 1953 to 1955. He had a long association with the Museum of Modern Art in New York, beginning as a clerk at the information and sales desk in the front lobby, later becoming an assistant curator at the museum and an associate curator of painting and sculpture in 1965, despite his lack of formal training. He was an assistant for the important exhibition, "The New American Painting," which toured eight European cities in 1958-1959. This exhibition introduced the painters of the Abstract Expressionist movement to European audiences. The title of the exhibition was changed when Donald Allen used it as the title of his anthology *The New American Poetry*. While employed by the Museum of Modern Art, O'Hara was the curator or cocurator of nineteen exhibitions. He was an active and articulate spokesman for the new painting inside the major collecting museum in New York. He performed his administrative and curatorial duties surrounded by ceaseless conversation about art, poetry, music, and dance.

O'Hara's work was first brought to the attention of the wider public, like that of so many others of his generation, by Allen's timely and historic anthology, *The*

*New American Poetry* (1960). It was not until O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* was published in 1965 that his reputation gained ground and not until after his sudden death that his recognition increased. Now his reputation is secure as an important and even popular poet in the great upsurge of American poetry following World War II.

During his lifetime O'Hara was known as "a poet among painters," part of a group of such poets who seemed to find their inspiration and support from the painters they chose to associate with, writing more art reviews and commentary than literary opinion. O'Hara published only two book reviews: one of poetry collections by friends Chester Kallman, Ashbery, and Edwin Denby; the other of John Rechy's *City of Night*, 1963. His own art criticism, the major portion of which has been collected as *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (1975), helped to encourage the painters he liked best and maintain the public awareness of them, although in itself it is nowhere as brilliant as, for example, [Rainer Maria Rilke's](#) writings on Auguste Rodin or Charles Baudelaire's on the Salon of 1846. Professional critics found O'Hara's criticism too subjective and lacking in the disciplines of critical analysis. Hilton Kramer was particularly critical of O'Hara's book *Jackson Pollock* (1959), claiming that the excessive praise and poetic writing spoiled the discussion of the paintings. O'Hara's poetry itself is most painterly, making the best judgment of painting while participating in the actual techniques of abstract art.