

THE POCKET POETS SERIES

LUNCH
POEMS

by

Frank O'Hara

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LUNCH POEMS

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Frank O'Hara

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CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
San Francisco

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PREFACE

It's hard to believe that almost fifty years have passed since *Lunch Poems* exploded on the literary scene. Re-reading them, I remembered how conservative and formal most contemporary American poetry was at the time, except for the Beats, who had only recently arrived (the book, in fact, ends with a poem dedicated to Allen Ginsberg). No other poetry collection of the '60s did more to shatter the congealed surface of contemporary academic poetry.

Freed from his MoMA desk job for an hour or so at lunchtime, O'Hara wanders the streets of midtown, free-associating about trips he has taken, including a recent one to Spain on MoMA business, on which I accompanied him, and to Paris, where he has many friends: "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," or places he never went to at all: Singapore, Tokyo, Harbin, in "Mary Desti's Ass," a title whose meaning I discovered accidentally in a bookstore, namely a book called *Isadora Duncan's End* by Mary Desti.

Most people wouldn't have known that reference and it doesn't matter. Frank's disabused enthusiasm

carries the reader to a marvelous half-fictive universe where we bump elbows with Lana Turner, Billie Holiday, Rachmaninoff, and the Mothers of America, whom he urges: “let your kids go to the movies! . . . They may even be grateful to you/ for their first sexual experience.” Horrors! To compound this unthinkable suggestion, O’Hara even gets away with using the word “fuck” more than once, and yet he’s no macho spewer of hard truths, but a kind, inquiring, deeply curious and attractive youngish man, passing a few minutes of speculative rumination before heading back to the office, like all of us.

—John Ashbery

City Lights

ALMA

*“Est-elle almee? . . . aux premieres heures bleues
Se detruira-t-elle comme les fleurs feues. . . .”*
— Rimbaud.

1

The sun, perhaps three of them, one black one red, you know,
and her dancing all the time, fanning the purple sky getting
purple, her fancy white skin quite unoriental to the dirty child-
ren’s round eyes standing in circles munching muffins, the cock-
roaches like nuggets half hid in the bran. Boy! how are you,
Prester John? the smile of the river, so searching, so enamelled.

2

What mention of the King?
the spinning wheel still turns,
the apples rot to the singing,
Alceste on winter sojourns

is nice at Nice. Wander,
my dear sacred Pontiff, do dare
to murder minutely and ponder
what is the bloody affair

inside the heart of the weak
dancer, whose one toe is worth
inestimable, the gang, the cheek
of it! it’s too dear, her birth

amidst the acorns with nails
stuck through them by passionate

parents, castanets! Caucasian tales!
their prodigality proportionate:

“Sacred Heart, oh Heart so sick,
make Detroit more wholly thine,
all with greeds and scabs so thick
that Judas Priest must make a sign.”

Thus he to bed and we to rise
and Alma singing like a loon.
Her dancing toenails in her eyes.
Her pa was dead on the River Gaboon.

3

Detroit was founded on the great near waterways next to Canada which was friendly and immediately gained for herself the appellation “the Detroit of Thermopylaes,” a name which has stuck to this day wherever ballroom dancing is held in proper esteem. Let me remind you of that great wrist movement, the enjambement schizophrene, a particularly satisfying variation of which may be made by adding a little tomato paste. Great success. While in Detroit accused of starting the Chicago fire. Millions of roses from Russians. Alma had come a long way, she opened a jewelry shop, her name became a household word, she’d invented an arch-supporter.

How often she thought of her father! the castle, the kitchen-garden, the hollihocks and the mill stream beyond curving gently as a parenthesis. Many a bitter tear was shed by her on the boards of this theatre as she pondered the inscrutable meagerness of divine Providence, always humming, always shifting a little, never missing a beat. She guested one season at the height of her nostalgia with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet in *Salammbô*; her

father seemed very close in all that oriental splendor of bamboo and hotel palms and stale sweat and bracelets, an engagement of tears. In the snow, in her white fox fur wraps, how more beautiful than Mary Garden!

4

Onward to the West. "Where I came from, where I'm going. Indian country." Gold. Oh say can you see Alma. The darling of Them. All her friends were artists. They alone have memories. They alone love flowers. They alone give parties and die. Poor Alma. They alone.

She died,
and it was as if all the jewels in the world had heaved a sigh. The seismograph at Fordham University registered, for once, a spiritual note. How like a sliver in her own short fat muscular foot. She loved the Western World, though there are some who say she isn't really dead.

1953

City Lights

ON RACHMANINOFFS BIRTHDAY

Quick! a last poem before I go
off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!
Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
playing the horn? Thundering windows
of hell, will your tubes ever break
into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;
I'm a child again when I was really
miserable, a grope pizzicato. My pocket
of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter's pencil,
amethyst, hypo, campaign button,
is the room full of smoke? Shit
on the soup, let it burn. So it's back.
You'll never be mentally sober.

1953

City
Lights

POEM

I watched an armory combing its bronze bricks
and in the sky there were glistening rails of milk.
Where had the swan gone, the one with the lame back?

Now mounting the steps
I enter my new home full
of grey radiators and glass
ashtrays full of wool.

Against the winter I must get a samovar
embroidered with basil leaves and Ukranian mottos
to the distant sound of wings, painfully anti-wind,

a little bit of the blue
summer air will come back
as the steam chuckles in
the monster's steamy attack

and I'll be happy here and happy there, full
of tea and tears. I don't suppose I'll ever get
to Italy, but I have the terrible tundra at least.

My new home will be full
of wood, roots and the like,
while I pace in a turtleneck
sweater, repairing my bike.

I watched the palisades shivering in the snow
of my face, which had grown preternaturally pure.
Once I destroyed a man's idea of himself to have him.

If I'd had a samovar then
I'd have made him tea
and as hyacinths grow from
a pot he would love me

and my charming room of tea cosies full of dirt
which is why I must travel, to collect the leaves.
O my enormous piano, you are not like being outdoors

though it is cold and you
are made of fire and wood!
I lift your lid and mountains
return, that I am good.

The stars blink like a hairnet that was dropped
on a seat and now it is lying in the alley behind
the theater where my play is echoed by dying voices.

I am really a woodcarver
and my words are love
which willfully parades in
its room, refusing to move.

1954

City Lights

ON THE WAY TO THE SAN REMO

The black ghinkos snarl their way up
the moon growls at each blinking window
the apartment houses climb deafeningly into the purple

A bat hisses northwards
the perilous steps lead to a grate
suddenly the heat is bearable

The cross-eyed dog scratches a worn patch of pavement
his right front leg is maimed in the shape of a V
there's no trace of his nails on the street a woman cajoles

She is very old and dirty
she whistles her filthy hope
that it will rain tonight

The 6th Avenue bus trunk-lumbers sideways
it is full of fat people who cough as at a movie
they eat each other's dandruff in the flickering glare

The moon passes into clouds
so hurt by the street lights
of your glance oh my heart

The act of love is also passing like a subway bison
through the paper-littered arches of the express tracks
the sailor sobers he feeds pennies to the peanut machines

Though others are in the night
far away lips upon a dusty armpit
the nostrils are full of tears

High fidelity reposed in a box a hand on the windowpane
the sweet calm the violin strings tie a young man's hair
the bright black eyes pin far away their smudged curiosity

Yes you are foolish smoking
the bars are for rabbits
who wish to outlive the men

1954

City Lights

2 POEMS FROM THE OHARA MONOGATARI

1

My love is coming in a glass
the blood of the Bourbons

saxophone or cornet
qu'importe où?

green of glass flowers *dans le Kentucky*

and always the same handkerchief
at the same nose of damask

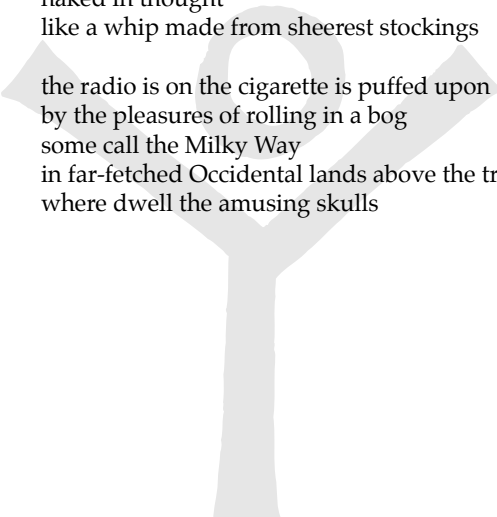
turning up my extravagant collar
tossing my scarf about my neck

the Baudelaire of Kyoto's never-ending pureness
is he cracked in the head?

2

After a long trip to a shrine
in wooden clogs so hard on the muscles
the tea is bitter and the breasts are hard
so much terrace for one evening

there is no longer no ocean
I don't see the ocean under my stilts
as I poke along



hands on ankles feet on wrists
naked in thought
like a whip made from sheerest stockings

the radio is on the cigarette is puffed upon
by the pleasures of rolling in a bog
some call the Milky Way
in far-fetched Occidental lands above the trees
where dwell the amusing skulls

1954

City Lights

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 Masina, wife of
Federico Fellini, è *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 as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan 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.

1956

City Lights

CAMBRIDGE

It is still raining and the yellow-green cotton fruit looks silly round a window giving out on winter trees with only three drab leaves left. The hot plate works, it is the sole heat on earth, and instant coffee. I put on my warm corduroy pants, a heavy maroon sweater, and wrap myself in my old maroon bathrobe. Just like Pasternak in Marburg (they say Italy and France are colder, but I'm sure that Germany's at least as cold as this) and, lacking the Master's inspiration, I may freeze to death before I can get out into the white rain. I could have left the window closed last night? But that's where health comes from! His breath from the Urals, drawing me into flame like a forgotten cigarette. Burn! this is not negligible, being poetic, and not feeble, since it's sponsored by the greatest living Russian poet at incalculable cost. Across the street there is a house under construction, abandoned to the rain. Secretly, I shall go to work on it.

1956

City Lights

POEM

Instant coffee with slightly sour cream
in it, and a phone call to the beyond
which doesn't seem to be coming any nearer.
"Ah daddy, I wanna stay drunk many days"
on the poetry of a new friend
my life held precariously in the seeing
hands of others, their and my impossibilities.
Is this love, now that the first love
has finally died, where there were no impossibilities?

1956

City
Lights

THREE AIRS

to Norman Bluhm

1

So many things in the air! soot,
elephant balls, a Chinese cloud
which is entirely collapsed, a cat
swung by its tail

and the senses
of the dead which are banging about
inside my tired red eyes

2

In the deeps there is a little bird
and it only hums, it hums of fortitude

and temperance, it is managing a foundry

how firmly it must grasp things! tear them
out of the slime and then, alas! it mischievously

drops them into the cauldron of hideousness

there is already a sunset naming
the poplars which see only, watery, themselves

City
Lights

3

Oh to be an angel (if there were any!), and go
straight up into the sky and look around and then come down

not to be covered with steel and aluminum
glaringly ugly in the pure distances and clattering and
buckling, wheezing

but to be part of the treetops and the blueness, invisible,
the iridescent darkneses beyond,

silent, listening to
the air becoming no air becoming air again

1958

City Lights