

Frank O'Hara (1926–1966)

### **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.

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### **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

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### **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

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**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

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**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.