

# Writing an I-Do-This-I-Do-That Poem

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**T**HIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, I wrote an off-hand little poem about my developing family life (my perennial subject) that I still enjoy reading, and that I'm grateful to have. It records a tiny but interesting tremor of feeling, a little landmark in my relationship with my wife, that, without this poem, would probably be long forgotten. For me, this poem is like a tiny snapshot that, when I squint at it hard, puts me into the head of my younger self.

We went more rapidly through the courtship and newlywed stage than most young people do now, and were soon (just over a year after our wedding) engaged in child rearing. Obviously, the birth of our daughter was inspiring. But this little moment of feeling occurred later, when our son was on the way:

## **The Quiet Years of Ordinary Objects**

This pretty maternity blouse for example—  
\$16.95 with pastel embroidered flowers  
Around the neck. Washable.  
I pass it while heading for Botolph's  
Where they sell expensive, arty jewelry  
But nothing I haven't already given you  
Except a hand silk-screened card  
With a pastel rainbow and a pale yellow sun.

Back at the Stork Shop the salesgirl and I  
Speculate on your probable size.  
"Her first?" she asks.

"No, second."

She gives me the blouse in a bag.

Later, at home, with you off  
To evening class, the afternoon sun  
In silver pajamas, our daughter bathed  
And singing herself to sleep  
I find a gift box from Gilchrist's in the closet  
Pack it with tissue paper, fold the blouse carefully  
With the rainbow card on top  
And write something shamelessly corny  
Like: For my sunlight, my rainbow—  
Happy Birthday . . . and sign it  
Alan. Though we're beyond names.

I'm glad I have this poem, preserving that momentary frisson I experienced when hesitating over signing the card—a moment of feeling, trapped like a fly in amber. But I don't remember writing it. What if any models did I have in mind? What gave me the idea of starting a poem by recording the price of a maternity blouse?

It seems clear to me now that the poem was actually an example of mimicry. I was writing a type of poem I knew quite well: what Frank O'Hara once referred to as his "I-do-this-I-do-that" poems. Ironically, our lives couldn't have been more different.

O'Hara was urban and gay, I was a suburban dad with a wife and child and another on the way. But since I had been a teenager, I'd always admired O'Hara's eloquent and interesting ways of conveying his (sometimes tempestuous and complicated and often amusing) feelings.

O'Hara's "Steps" expresses the exuberance of being in love, something that most adolescents have already experienced. Perhaps it's interesting—or maybe it isn't—that O'Hara was in love with the dancer, Vincent Warren. In some ways he's like anyone who's just "fallen" for someone. As we all know, the world looks quite amazingly different when we're first in love, and one of the ways O'Hara draws us into his feelings is to show us how his city world (particularly Central Park) looks to him at this moment:

### 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 and 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 rivaled 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<sup>1</sup>

Included in a volume called *Lunch Poems*, "Steps" follows O'Hara's movements (and thoughts) during his lunch hour. The poem is unpunctuated, made of what we'd call run-on sentences, as if to convey O'Hara's velocity as he goes about his city life. I guess we could call it a "narrative of feeling," a phrase that my teacher, Helen Vendler, used to describe the lyric poem in general.

Not all the poems in *Lunch Poems* (often written very quickly on O'Hara's office typewriter when he returned from lunch) are about joyful feelings. "The Day Lady Died" is his elegy for Billie Holiday, known as "Lady Day." In this poem, stopped in his tracks by

<sup>1</sup>"Steps" from *Lunch Poems* ©1964 by Frank O'Hara. Reprinted with permission of City Lights Books.

the headline announcing her death from a drug overdose, O'Hara remembers what might have been the last time he heard her sing. According to his friend, the poet Kenneth Koch, who was with him that evening, she wasn't well even then, and thus could only "whisper":

### 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<sup>2</sup>

One of the innovations O'Hara introduced was the rendering of brand names, store names, names (first names) of friends or even his bank teller!—mixed together with famous authors' names, modern and ancient. The poem suggests that daily things (in retrospect) are lit by an impending disaster. (Here's exactly where I was, and what I was doing, when the Towers were hit, etc.) But notice that O'Hara is stopped dead—stopped on his way into the john, that is—by the power of Holiday's whispered voice, and, just as important, this is enshrined in a memory—as though he's been catapulted out of the busy rush of city lunch hour to an unforgettable moment when her singing made time seem to stop.

In "Steps," O'Hara concludes by declaring his love; in "The Day Lady Died," he suggests his feelings by telling us the effect Holiday's singing had on his body, forgetting to pee, or even to breathe.

### Writing an I-Do-This-I-Do-That Poem

To give students a taste for writing this sort of poem (and to help them understand that poetry can be written in colloquial language), you can suggest that they try a poem like O'Hara's. His method is simple: think of a moment of feeling that you've had that day, and make that the ending of the poem. Then go back and write all the details you can think of that led up to this moment. Encourage students to put in the names of friends, the titles of things that matter to them, and local place names—just as O'Hara did. Some students may notice O'Hara's use of the second person in "Steps"—first addressing the city, and then his beloved—and, without your saying anything, mimic it. (O'Hara famously once said that he wanted a poem to be between two people rather than two pages.) Tell them to write quickly, the way O'Hara did during his lunch hour, though still putting their poems into lines (as much or as little in a line as they want).

<sup>2</sup>"The Day Lady Died" from *Lunch Poems* ©1964 by Frank O'Hara. Reprinted with permission of City Lights Books.

So much of teaching isn't what we say, but how we act. By writing with your students you'll be showing them that writing is something you yourself love to do, and, also, that there's nothing sacred about the moment of composition.

Perhaps this assignment (which of course can be done every single day of a person's life!) might be better for the afternoon than the morning, since by afternoon one has had time to have more feelings? If you're working in the morning, I suppose it would be sensible to allow the students to write about the day before. But discourage them from going back further in time, since they're not likely to be able to supply such a rich collection of seeming trivia.

This poem can be written in ten or fifteen minutes—in fact, it should be written quickly to allow accident to help, the way the abstract expressionist painters O'Hara loved used the splashing and dripping of paint. Then allow time for anyone who wishes to read his or her poem aloud to the group. However, especially because these are poems about feeling, allow the students *not* to read, if they choose not to. Even those who don't read can talk about whether the small narrative details they selected, seemingly at random, seem to prefigure the feeling they're leading up to, the way “Miss Stillwagon, first name Linda I once heard,” could just be random fact, or a name that suggests a hearse.

## Some General Advice

I strongly suggest that you, as teacher, must write this kind of poem at least once, but preferably a number of times, before you'll be able to tell your students to do it with any confidence. You can tell them you've tried the assignment yourself, and, if you want, give them a general idea of the feelings you found yourself identifying, or the events you recorded. If you found something hard about writing this poem the first or even second time you tried it, you can report that too.

Should you actually read your poem to them? Up to you. But if your poem is very good you may intimidate them. And if it's not, what have you gained? The important thing to share with them is that mimicking another poet's work doesn't mean you'll sound

like that poet. Most likely, especially if you've been writing a while, your own voice will come through loud and clear.

Some students may be stuck for ideas, and you may need to walk around and help them get started. Did you have a strong feeling today? How about yesterday? But if you do in-class writing frequently, they will come to trust the process and get started without any fuss. If you're able to write another I-Do-This-I-Do-That poem while the students are writing theirs, this may help them write, since so much of teaching isn't what we say, but how we act. By writing with your students you'll be showing them that writing is something you yourself love to do, and, also, that there's nothing sacred about the moment of composition. You're willing to try at any time. 🍷

*For more poetry exercises you might want to explore during National Poetry Month in April, go to [www.twc.org/magazine/supplements/](http://www.twc.org/magazine/supplements/)*

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