Dreamy Observation: Impermanence, Importance and Idealized Life in “A Step Away from Them”

At first, “A Step Away from Them” seems to offer only a collection of snapshots of everyday happenings in NYC that Frank O’Hara saw on his way during his lunch break, with no particular importance placed on any particular event or image. However, it quickly becomes clear that what is really important is the very randomness and transience of each image. Everything is brimming with motion and life in O’Hara’s eyes, all the more so because of the recent deaths of three of his friends. Rather than being overpowered by grief, O’Hara instead gains a heightened awareness of every detail of his surroundings. In his poem, “A Step Away from Them,” O’Hara shows the reader snatches of seemingly random objects, yet his rosy representation of city life displays his new appreciation for the equivalent importance and ephemerality of everyday things.

O’Hara searches for the good in even unpleasant things, and finds interest and glamour in even the most ordinary interactions. The manual “laborers” seem mysteriously attractive with “dirty / glistening torsos,” even while they feed themselves “sandwiches / and Coca-Cola” (4-6), and the polluted smoky air of NYC is a “waterfall [that] pours lightly” (17). O’Hara also seems to reject the negative racial stereotypes of his time in his mention of both Puerto Ricans and “Negro[es]” (18). The “Negro stands in a doorway” complete with a “toothpick” (18-19) just like the stereotypical image of a African American male in the city, but his interaction with the girl is completely innocuous. Despite the taboo nature of any romantic interactions between black and white people at this time, and popular fears of African-American men seducing white women, the girl clearly initiates the interaction, and he only smiles in response. She is not simply any girl – she is blond, she is a chorus girl, and she is the very image of a pretty, independent white girl. However, the whole situation appears harmless enough in O’Hara’s eyes, and the only sign of tension is the man’s “agitating” (19). Similarly, although Puerto Rican immigration had just peaked a few years previously, instead of degrading them, O’Hara comments that their very presence makes the avenue “beautiful and warm” (35), despite the presumed uncomfortable heat of the day. In several places in the poem, O’Hara lends a certain romantic shine to his descriptions of New York City life.

This romanticization continues as O’Hara switches from observing everyday, gritty working class occurrences to looking at luxury, although he does not shows no signs of favoring events associated with the wealthy over the lunch of construction workers, and even seems to find such indulgence ridiculous. In fact, O’Hara’s phrases seem to grow even more fantastic and disjointed when he is reminded of his favorite actress, Giulietta Massina, by the name of the burger restaurant, “JULIET’S CORNER” (27-28). The readers are thrown between images of neon lights, cheeseburgers, Italian films, chocolate malted, and “A lady in foxes” putting “her poodle / in a cab” (30-32), with little or no association between them. Most of the lines in the poem are enjambed, with seemingly random line breaks, to emphasize that one thought flows straight into another. The laborers earlier in the poem have “yellow helmets / on,” which O’Hara speculates “protect[s] them from falling / bricks” (6-8). O’Hara plays with us with the line break between “falling” and “bricks” – at first we wonder, ridiculously, if the helmets are meant to protect them from a tumble off the building, although the idea that the helmets will protect them from falling bricks is hardly less absurd. After all, if there were really such a danger of falling bricks, others on the sidewalk would be similarly endangered. The world that O’Hara is describing is not reality; it is a NYC of O’Hara’s imagination, filled with both the ridiculous and harmless, full of fascination and its own peculiar beauty.

O’Hara also vividly depicts the constant movement of everything, despite the heat of a New York City summer day. From “cats playing in sawdust” (14), to the Times Square sign, which “blows smoke” in a “waterfall” (16-17), every image is dramatically paired with a verb, more reminiscent of a film clip than a still snapshot. Even the cabs, stuck in traffic, are unconventionally and ambiguously described as “hum-colored” (2), bringing to mind the image of the taxis as a mindless swarm of bees flowing through the city in a coordinated dance, while simultaneously hinting at the cabs’ “humdrum” nature. Alternatively, the word “hum” could indicate the thrum of the engines, making the noise of activity a visible sign of the cabs energy and movement, even in the apparent stillness of New York City traffic. Despite the oppressive heat of the day, which causes the construction workers to “glisten” (5) with sweat under the “hot” (11) sun, everything remains in continuous motion, so that even the seemingly still “languorous” Negro standing “in the doorway” must also be “agitating” (18-19). Although it is the lunch hour, the time when most have paused their work to eat, life and motion continues.

The passage of time is further emphasized when “Everything / suddenly honks” (21-22) in a moment which marks a dramatic change in tone and a slow movement toward more introspective thoughts. The traffic jam in Times Square causes O’Hara to see the time on the big clock, and he becomes intensely aware of this particular moment and of the time that has already passed. Both the traffic jam and the time remaining in his lunch break are limited, just as the time in the lives of his friends was limited, and the remaining time in his own life is limited. When O’Hara looks at “bargains in wristwatches” (13), he is further emphasizing the passing of time – although he may be able to shop for cheap timekeepers, he cannot buy more time for any price.

When O’Hara’s attention at last happens to drift to thoughts of the friends that he has lost, the line breaks and rhythm seem completely random, as they do everywhere else in the poem, yet perhaps this very irregularity is intentional. When O’Hara begins to talk of his friends, he does not begin in a new line, much less a new stanza. Instead, we follow his stream of consciousness, and watch as his attention drifts inwards, as though into a dream, where he can interpret the oppressive heat as beauty and warmth, and the smoke as a delicate “waterfall” (17), and where he is distant enough from his feelings to accept once again that his friends are gone. By presenting the loss of his friends as only another item on his list of random thoughts, O’Hara shows that he is not morose, or caught up in grief – memories of his friends simply drift into his mind from time to time. This mask of complete acceptance only slips when he asks, “But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” (37-38). In the only moment of doubt and insecurity and only concession to his grief, he wonders whether the earth can be as full of interest and vitality as his life was when they were alive, and asks how he can go on without them, in a world comparatively emptier. Although the deaths have taught O’Hara the importance of appreciating limited time and life still available to him, he must also accept that he is now “A Step Away from Them,” and they will never return.

Who are the “they” in the title, and what is the significance of being “A step away”? If “they” are all the people he sees on the street as he walks to find lunch, perhaps he is a step away from them because of his grief, which is preventing him from interacting and connecting with those around him. The closest O’Hara comes to personal interaction is buying his lunch; otherwise, he simply observes from afar, so perhaps the title comments on his role as a passive eyewitness. However, if we assume that “they” are his friends who have died, then he is both a step away from them, since he can no longer interact with them, and a step away from death itself. After considering the friends he has lost, O’Hara is suddenly struck by the evidence of destruction and violence around him, from the “Manhattan Storage Warehouse, which they’ll soon tear down” (42-43), to the “posters for BULLFIGHT” (41) and the weaponry in the “Armory Show” (44-45). He understands that we are only a step away from death, at all times, and reacts to this knowledge by choosing to focus on every moment and pull everything he sees into sharp focus.

O’Hara does not dwell on this dark subject matter, however, and quickly begins to pull himself away by referring to himself in the third person. Although he has used ‘I’ to refer to himself in the poem up to this point as he narrates the things around him, when he wishes to distance himself from his own thoughts he refers to himself as “one” (39), which also serves to emphasize his separation and loneliness. There is someone who has eaten and is walking, someone who is having these thoughts, but he tries to “step away from” this entity by literally referring to himself in the third person. O’Hara puts his heart away again, in his “pocket” (48) in the form of a book of poems by Pierre Reverdy, and washes the thoughts away with a glass of fresh “papaya juice” (46). His heart is external, not inside his body, and embodied, not by his own poems, but by those of another – perhaps this represents yet another “step away” that O’Hara has taken from his own grief. The papaya juice itself was then a novel import into the United States, and in the 1950s was exotic, new and fresh. After all of the talk of death, destruction and violence, the line break visually delineates that he is mentally putting these negative thoughts aside, and going on to new, fresh things.

Like “cats playing in sawdust” (14), we are all surrounded by and living in the debris and memories of things that have already passed away. The penultimate line, “and back to work,” reinforces that life is cyclical – he will have another lunch break, and another day of work, although yesterday will always be taking another “step away.” For O’Hara, the closeness of death and the awareness of change and decay have led to a curious relationship with his surroundings – he is more focused on the world around him, yet is only capable of passively observing the world through a rose-colored lens. The world’s very inherent impermanence leads him to absorb his surroundings with a particular voracity, yet his grief has made him remain distant, barely interacting with the world that he contemplates. Although O’Hara is able to put his “heart” back in his “pocket” and leave behind his lunchtime philosophy, the seemingly arbitrary list of images leaves the reader to wondering whether we should give equal importance to “bargains in wristwatches” (13) as we do to our own grief, or to human interaction. In “A Step Away from Them,” O’Hara discusses both the ephemerality and ceaseless movement of life and the importance of focusing on the immediate present.