HUDSON
RIVER
MUSEUM

A Poem Doesn't Need to Be Explained

Ages: 11–18 (Grades 6–12)

Inspiration: Frank O'Hara (American, 1926–1966). *Having a Coke with You*, written in 1960 and excerpted below.

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil

Background information:

Frank O'Hara was an American writer, poet, **curator**, and art critic. He was a leading member of the **New York School**, an informal community of American poets, painters, dancers, and musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City.

O'Hara's poetry is **autobiographical** and casual in form, almost like a journal entry. It tends to be focused on his observations of New York life and his relationships with people in his communities. His writing was deeply influenced by the artworks of **Abstract Expressionist** painters, and it feels spontaneous instead of very carefully written.

Excerpt of *Having a Coke with You*

> 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

Full poem text is available here.

Procedure:

1. Silently read the excerpt from O'Hara's poem *Having a Coke with You*. Note any words, phrases, or descriptions from the poem that stand out to you. If you like, read these words, phrases, descriptions, or lines aloud. Ask yourself the following questions:
   - What do you notice about the poem's structure?
   - What do you notice about its grammar?
   - What do you notice about its rhythm or flow?
   - How does it feel to read the poem silently and/or to read sections aloud?
2. Social distancing has affected all of us in significant ways. Write your own poem inspired by O'Hara's poetic form in response to a community or personal relationship that you want to celebrate. (If you completed the "Representing My Own Community" activity, you could even write a poem in response to your abstract collage!) Begin by freewriting, or writing without constraint. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, rhyming, or a chronology in your words.
   - What comes to mind when you think of the community or relationship you've depicted through collage, or that is part of your life?
   - What emotions do you feel?
   - What memories do you have of people or places that are part of this community?
   - What details about the built environment can you include if it is a community that meets or gathers in a physical space?
   - What details can you include if the community is virtual, on social media, or otherwise found online or in digital format?
3. This freewrite can be your poem, or you can return to it to reorganize lines, phrases, words and/or to add further details and descriptions.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your poem and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #SelfInTheCity, and tag the Museum.

Summertime Performances at Untermyer Gardens by Bridget McCormick

Sitting in an alcove at Untermyer Gardens
The sun is usually hot even at this time of the day
When it starts to slip behind the Palisades. But there are pockets of shade
Keeping us cool before the show starts. The dancers stretch behind the columns
The two winged creatures atop have a better view than we do
But it doesn't matter when anywhere you look nature is performing
You can't miss it. Flowers and leaves, vines and trees twisting around
And the bubbling sound of the streams filling the pauses between songs