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Frank O'Hara in Transit

CAL REVELY-CALDER

The poetry of Frank O'Hara (1926–66) takes place in the routes of New York City, both above and below the ground. This essay looks at the characteristics of his poetic lines, and some of the ways they invest themselves in each other, interacting complexly through rhymes and line breaks that we may struggle to negotiate. Then, broadening outwards to consider urban topographies and the experience of inhabiting the avenues of Manhattan, it discusses how the lines of a poem might relate to the lines of a subway system or street grid, and considers how O'Hara's poetry opens our attention, and our generosity, to the aspects of a cityscape that we habitually overlook.

I. MANHATTAN DREAMT

In the streets of New York, Frank O'Hara would listen to things that were no longer there.

> Vaguely I hear the purple roar of the torn-down Third Avenue El
> it sways slightly but firmly like a hand or a golden-downed thigh
> normally I don't think of sounds as colored unless I'm feeling corrupt
> concrete Rimbaud obscurity of emotion which is simple and very definite[1]

To follow these lines, which open his poem "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," requires us to fall into line with an opaque way of seeing and hearing. What this "I" notices first is the Third Avenue El, torn down four years before the poem was written, and with it the sound of its "purple roar," a noise impossibly full of colour.[2] As with Rimbaud's 'Voyelles' – "A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu"[3] – we're presented with familiar objects that gather strange associations, qualities that should be seen and not heard. O'Hara's writing, here and elsewhere, is immediately enthralled by the way it's haunted. Absences hang in the air, sounds and visions, non-things; images

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[1] From Frank O'Hara, "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," in O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, intro. John Ashbery (hereafter *CP*) (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 331.

[2] The last sections of the Third Avenue El were removed in 1955; "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" is dated 11 August 1959. See *CP*, 544.

[3] Arthur Rimbaud, "Voyelles," in Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 134.

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of what is or has been transitory, and might be so again. Brad Gooch's biography calls O'Hara a City Poet, a title conjuring images of *flânerie* and smoothness, life in the vivid present;[4] yes, all of this is there on the surface, but in these lines, which are both moving ("sways slightly but firmly") and moved ("obscurity of emotion"), there are deeper pools of transience, which redouble themselves as we look, and look again. As they run on, the lines seem to develop several different paces; they're charged with experience in excess of their sense data, or our responsive sense-making, as we become multiply invested in the scene, and try to see with our ears and hear with our eyes.

O'Hara's verse often poses the urbane against the urban by asking the reader, who can travel through his lines at times and speeds of their own, to linger over the temporalities involved in acts of reading. In this poem, for instance, a present-tense vision assumes the shape of things past. The Third Avenue El had been the last elevated train standing, after the growth of New York City's subway system made overground trains obsolete, a hindrance to the prospects of real estate. O'Hara moved to New York in 1951, four years before this El came down, eight years before "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" was written. So his poem tells us about a plausible personal memory: we hear the ghost of a sound, a colourful drone which still has life in it, swaying "lightly but firmly," making you feel its spectral bulk even as you're aware it's an illusion. The motions are gently toned by their adverbs – "slightly," "firmly," "normally" – the recurrent l's marking time, pushing their lines this way and that, with a rigour at once playful and, itself, firm. Line breaks temper the pace, too: without punctuation, blank spaces take the weight, and force us to wonder, at each drop, whether "it" is the "El" or the "roar"; whether "normally" has the mood of qualification or consequence; whether "corrupt / concrete" is one phrase, or the limits of two. These lines, alive, about lines, torn down, have an imaginative sway that folds you into their haze by making you remember what you might never have known, making you dream, with Frank, whether you realize it straight off or not, about how it feels to ride the El, or perhaps, for you, the subway, making you wonder which line you're on, and thus drawing attention, as so much of O'Hara's poetry does, to the question of why something so everyday, say an urban railway system, or being more generally in transit through a city, ever holds our attention at all.

The second stanza ups the tempo in a flood of participles:

> With the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves thundering and shaking
> aims its aggregating force like the Métro towards a realm of encircling travel
> rending the sound of adventure and becoming ultimately local and intimate[5]

[4] Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
[5] Frank O'Hara, "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," in *CP*, 331.

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Penning these lines, O'Hara might have had certain El rides or subway trips in mind, ones of a "local and intimate" nature; this would make "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," as its acrostic form suggests – the complete thing spells out VINCENT WARREN, his lover's name – a piece of erotic kitsch, spinning synaesthetic beauty out of a drab daily grind. It's not to diminish the poem's effect, and certainly not to mistake it, if we think of the poem as a camping up of everyday transit, even as we come away from it affected or touched. Both a life in love and a subway commute are differently "local and intimate." This is what makes the everyday prone to evanescence, as well as a matter on which human worlds depend. Our memories linger like multiple exposures; every time we recall something, it's a fresh conjuration of the past, involving the emotional temperaments of both then and now. A remembering poet is no longer exactly the poet they remember, and their poem, alive to time, may not feel only one way about itself. Andrea Brady describes O'Hara's *Second Avenue* as living in "a dramatically perpetuated present tense … the poem strains to keep up with its presentness, as if anything drawn from the past has already fallen prey to the clarificatory sickness of memory."[6] Time past has sunk (already) into time present, which, as we introspect after the fact of reading, turns out (already) to have become time past again.

To be mindful of this temporal sway could itself become sickening; perhaps, at its fullest, pathologically maddening. Or, on the other hand, it could suddenly shed its weight and seem like a game. This would suit the kind of poet who titled a volume *Lunch Poems* because he'd dash something off on a typewriter after lunching – if you trust "Personism: A Manifesto":

> It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents.[7]

This "very exciting movement" makes the point, serious in its parody, that large artistic claims are often as much to do with mouthing off for the benefit of the room as with staking out critical positions. "I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have. I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve."[8] And, a little later,

[6] Andrea Brady, "Distraction and Absorption on Second Avenue," in Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery, eds., *Frank O'Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 59–69, 64.

[7] Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," in *CP*, 499.

[8] Ibid., 498.

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As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it.[9]

For those inclined to use "Personism: A Manifesto" as some form of analytic key to the forms of O'Hara's poetry, this charming man probably seems infuriating. It's a confident, unabashed performance, though a performance struck through with sincerity; as Geoff Ward has suggested, "the aim of the joking is to deflate pretentiousness, but even 'Personism' shows an exceedingly *driven* commitment to art."[10] "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve": it's hard to accept that O'Hara was ever inattentive to "rhythm," but the offhandedness of the declaration suits his own skill. In his poems, the overt often appears with subtlety. Take the opening lines of "In Memory of My Feelings" –

> My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
> and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.
> He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.[11]

– the seductive effect of which depends upon the rhythm's stateliness and elegance being skilfully intertwined, and just perceptibly enough to nudge you into being aware of it. To be a spectator, for this poem as in the theatre, is to be implicated blurrily in the performance, both watching the play and playing the watcher. Or, moving at a quicker pace, the dizzied swing of "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?[12]

The line breaks sometimes plunge giddily on, and sometimes hold themselves unsteadily up; they slyly imitate the half-caffeinated, half-drunk voices that they push and pull apart. Some of the midline hitches – "hands of others, their and my" – demand pauses for breath which frustrate the voice,

[9] Ibid.
[10] Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 39, original emphasis.
[11] Frank O'Hara, "In Memory of My Feelings," in *CP*, 252.
[12] Frank O'Hara, "Poem," in *CP*, 244–45.

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and force upon us the simulation of a gasp, or a pant. As Anne Stillman writes of O'Hara's "Having a Coke with You," his verse

> incites voice and resists being vocalised. The lines stretch the immediate present, and, as if by a trick of time, it is their length that shows you how things go by so fast. One strange thing about hearing the poem read aloud is that, while it stays in an electric present tense, it can't help but sound as if it's in the past, and so becomes more than a mere adulation upon the momentary by also being an elegy for the present.[13]

The street speeds of "Poem," like the remembrances of "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," are just this: richly double-minded "elegies for the present." They seem both longer and shorter than their own moments, and the reader, kept electrically close, is carried through O'Hara's poetic contours at several speeds at once.

II. SOJOURNS IN AN ORGANIZED FORM

Above, I introduced three lines as opening "the second stanza" of "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming." The term comes naturally, but how do we navigate the borders that demarcate stanzas in a poem which only has two such units? In this poem, the white space separating the blocks of verse, one of seven lines and one of six, is *sui generis*: as you try to negotiate the gap, there's no comparable break against which to judge its particular leap. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* has this to say:

> Stanzas are sequential: they are identified as such by the intervals and by the other units of lines (often isomorphic with the first stanza) before and after them. They are periodic, guiding the reader alternately through a sojourn in their organized lines, then through the suspensions of stanzaic intervals.[14]

Difference, then, is defined by contrast: how you depart from one unit and arrive at the next. Enough regularity, and the shapes begin to arrange themselves under the sign of the Stanza Form. But while "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" invites some form of pause, "suspension," or alteration of speed, it doesn't tell you how significantly to alter it, or in what way. As elsewhere in O'Hara's poetry, the reader is caught up by exactly what the poems are, in one sense, all about: direction, transit, pauses in a moving city. We stop to look at what's around, and try to get a handle on our orientation. There's a great difference between taking a "sojourn in … organized lines" and taking,

[13] Anne Stillman, "Frank O'Hara and Urban Pastoral," *Cambridge Quarterly*, 40, 4 (Dec. 2011), 375–85, 380.

[14] "Stanza," in Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, chief eds., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, fourth edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1357–59, 1357.

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say, a walk in them, a wander, or something else. And you might go for a sojourn in an organized form – say, the grid system of Manhattan – while also showing someone – say, a reader – what your trip conjures up; the intimately playful thought we can take from O'Hara's strolling lines is that we can walk both in them and with them, and it might be difficult to tell which sense is setting the pace.[15]

Take, for instance, "Meditations in an Emergency," which speaks about expanse, openness and movement even while forcing you to stop and consider its unexpected shape:

> I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.
>
> Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don't I? I'm just like a pile of leaves.
>
> However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life.[16]

The ambivalence of being in a park and needing to know there's a subway nearby, so you can dive out of the marvellous light and head somewhere else, seems fitting for these lines: missing the line endings of their companion pieces, they strike us as not-quite-poetry, not-quite-prose. There would be enough quick and mutually incompatible solutions, if needed, to such a problem of definition. Call this a poem because it's in a book titled *Collected Poems*, or (originally) a slim volume called *Meditations in an Emergency*, full of other things that look reassuringly like poems; or call it prose, because it doesn't look like those other things and is justified to the right-hand margin; or call it a prose poem, because O'Hara knew nineteenth-century French verse well ("concrete Rimbaud obscurity"), which was where the *poème en prose* was born.

The shiftiness needn't be a problem, unless you happen to be a bookshop, but can be understood as a constitutive characteristic of lines that are concerned with open space, undergrounds, and the navigation of a cityscape at speed. One way of better grasping this might be born from reconsidering what a line is, and how we make our way along it, and where we're going. The answer might sound like common sense – "the end of the line, of course" – but to follow a poetic line from the left-hand side to the right-hand side isn't the same thing as walking to a destination, or riding an El

[15] For more on the "step" as an aspect of O'Hara's thought and poetics see David Herd, "Stepping Out with Frank O'Hara," in Hampson and Montgomery, 70–85.

[16] Frank O'Hara, "Meditations in an Emergency," in *CP*, 197.

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to the terminus. Walking in a city, you can quit and go home, without knowing for certain, as you will if there are thirty unread lines visible in front of you, what kind or how much of a specific something you'll miss – something which another heart so wanted you to see. Each line break alters the motion, its pace, its sense of momentum and direction. If the cross-pollination of poetry and prose makes "Meditations in an Emergency" ambiguously both a sequence of stanzas and a sequence of lines, it's apparent that various kinds of regularly irregular thing will be going on in its blank spaces, and that you can expect something simultaneously a little like what you know, and a little outside your comfort zone. Christopher Ricks uses the phrase "pregnant silence" for the noiseless blank at a line ending:[17] "pregnant" for the expectation, as it forces upon you at least the pause required to drop down a line and skip back to the left, like an optical typewriter realigning itself. The silence is full of something, but there's some way to go before we hear exactly what. O'Hara's suspensions are more than periodic brakes upon cruise-controlled poetry; each one makes clear that the phrases either side are full of different paces, actual and possible, determined in part by how you understand the depth of white space – every subtle modulation and recalibration of tone that haunts a given break – and in part by the contents of the lines themselves, the sounds that fill time between voids.

His words never stay put. They shift around, clamour for attention and reach for your eyes and ears, telling you to slow down even as you try to slide past. Their mixed messages flash out in "John Button Birthday":

> Now I have taken down the underwear
> I washed last night from the various light fixtures
> and can proceed.
>
> And the lift of our experiences
> together, which seem to be legendary. The long subways
> to our old neighborhood the near East 49th and 53rd,
> and before them the laughing in bars till we cried,
> and the crying in movies till we laughed, the tenting
> tonight on the old camp grounds! How beautiful it is
> to visit someone for instant coffee![18]

The lines have your attention in their sights even as they try to bear you over the breaks between them, and across that odd midline, interline gap between "proceed" and "And." Semi-split by a gap and a conjunction, it suggests two partners starting to dance but not quite touching hands. (We talk of a dancer

[17] Christopher Ricks, "William Wordsworth 1: 'A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines'," in Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 89–116, 90.
[18] Frank O'Hara, "John Button Birthday," in *CP*, 267–68.

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as having "good line" not when her body forms neat, defined geometries, but when the whole effect of her shape falls into place.) The spectacle of architecture flickers all around this poem, too, structure again balanced against a smoothness of motion. The underground subways; the transitory "tenting"; the "light fixtures" overhead, somewhere behind or above or beyond this writing; and the double meaning of "lift," as both emotion and elevator – all are combined in a poetic blueprint that poises reminiscence on the cusp of fantasy. Such a blurred cityscape, with its bars and movie theatres, resembles the Third Avenue El of "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," luminous and faint by turns. These are the workings not only of memory but of desire, which now fastens upon the object it seeks and then loses sight of it, but never closes its eyes. The light flooding down from the uncovered "light fixtures" illuminates this poem like the corrupt colours of the "purple roar" and the "golden-downed thigh": a teasing but intensely felt synaesthesia which makes a look and a listen each less than half the story. Drifting from sense to sense, O'Hara's lines make an inward turn to look at what they hear, and see what's more meaningfully there for being less literally, less plainly, remembered.

Some details, though, stay down-to-earth, and anchor matters in Manhattan. For example, take the line "our old neighborhood the near East 49th and 53rd": 326 East Forty-Ninth was O'Hara's address from 1955 to 1957.[19] You can't help being transported, even in dreams, to specific patches of ground. "Rhapsody" charts the same curious time travel, asking you to move along and stop to observe at the same time:

> 515 Madison Avenue
> door to heaven? portal
> stopped realities and eternal licentiousness
> or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
> your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables
> swinging from the myth of ascending
> I would join[20]

515 Madison Avenue was the building O'Hara passed between 1959 and 1963 on his way to work, walking a few blocks after catching the Lexington Avenue subway uptown. If you know his address over these years too – 441 East Ninth Street[21] – and where he worked – the Museum of Modern Art – then it's not hard to plot his daily route, for in Manhattan's grid system a course can be snapped into shape with just a few markers. But as soon as they've taken your hand, his lines pull you astray, up into a dream-city where "lianas" are

[19] See Gooch, *City Poet*, 247.
[20] Frank O'Hara, "Rhapsody," in *CP*, 325–26.
[21] See Gooch, 324.

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"elevator cables" and the great art deco door of the DuMont Building at 515 Madison is a "door to heaven," a "portal" to "eternal licentiousness." This has its ear and eye on pasts and futures: the "cables swinging / from the myth of ascending" resurrect, with a buzz of visual static, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*.[22] Set O'Hara's lines alongside these from "Atlantis," the final section of Crane's great New York poem:

> Forever Deity's glittering Pledge, O Thou
> Whose canticle fresh chemistry assigns
> To wrapt inception and beatitude, –
> Always through blinding cables, to our joy,
> Of thy white seizure springs the prophecy:
> Always through spiring cordage, pyramids
> Of silver sequel, Deity's young name
> Kinetic of white choiring wings … ascends.[23]

Cables ascending, a mythic swell, and eyes that see not only the shapes of mere things, but those of things to come. Compare how, at "eternal licentiousness," O'Hara's "Rhapsody" suspends its pace for a time, while thumbing towards "the jungle of impossible eagerness." O'Hara, a Catholic schoolboy, knew what he was doing, playing on different tunes of sensual delight, sketching a heaven full of earthly pleasures – or the other way around. But then, as Jonathan Lethem points out, "*anytime* you trouble to actually picture heaven it's a joke about vagueness, blandness and boredom, fluffy clouds and zithers."[24] O'Hara's poem is sincerely cartoonish in the way the Talking Heads song "Heaven" is, the song which prompts Lethem to make that remark: "Heaven," another tune born in Manhattan, skirts around the edge of dream-kitsch by presenting its setting as both transcendent and banal:

> when this kiss is over . it will start again
> it will not be any different . it will be exactly the same
> it's hard to imagine . that nothing at all
> could be so exciting . could be this much fun
> heaven . heaven is a place
> a place where nothing . nothing ever happens[25]

[22] Brian M. Reed notes that O'Hara knew Crane's work well, and he makes the case for a number of other Crane allusions in O'Hara's poetry, though not the above lines from "Rhapsody." See Brian M. Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 195–224.

[23] Hart Crane, *The Bridge*, in *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, ed. Waldo Frank (New York: Liveright, 1946), 1–58, 57–58.

[24] Jonathan Lethem, *Fear of Music (33 ⅓)* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 93, original emphasis.

[25] Talking Heads, "Heaven," from *Fear of Music* (Sire Records, 1979), track 8, transcription mine.

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In the version on *Fear of Music*, there's the strangest echo to David Byrne's voice, suggesting a depth it's hard to measure; this imaginary "place" floats out of focus in what Lethem calls "the eerie fullness of [the song's] shallows."[26] Throughout "Heaven" the lyrics turn "nothing" into an event, the "this much fun" that's already outstripping a paraphrase. In all its uncanny self-catchings and repetitions, and the blankness of "it's hard to imagine," the song conjures a moment of imaginative pressure, folding a real place, "heaven," which is also "a bar," into a place always slightly beyond prosaic description – which, as O'Hara's "Rhapsody" and "John Button Birthday" show, sweeping through their dreams, is one of the reasons you're being told about all this here, in lines both caught by time and loose with it. The poems move at several paces at once, and turn your eyes severally aside, both in contradiction and in play.

III. UNDERGROUND LINES

Assembling a poem which walked in different zones, under different masks, was what Crane sought too with *The Bridge*. This involved descending into the subway, the nightmare underworld of New York, the place everyone went (and still goes) without thinking – where travellers might have to become thoughtless just to bear it:

> Or can't you quite make up your mind to ride;
> A walk is better underneath the L a brisk
> Ten blocks or so before?
> …
>
> And so
> of cities you bespeak
> subways, rivered under streets
> and rivers … In the car
> the overtone of motion
> underground, the monotone
> of motion is the sound
> of other faces, also underground –
> …
>
> The phonographs of hades in the brain
> Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love
> A burnt match skating in a urinal – [27]

Riding repeatedly back and forth under the East River as he wrote this section, Crane had eyes like O'Hara's. For instance, the "urinal" gestures lightly at the male toilets you could once find at most Manhattan stations; like Crane,

[26] Lethem, 89.

[27] Crane, 49–51.

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picking up sailors in Brooklyn bars, O'Hara used the subway for brief encounters in the mid- to late 1950s.[28] (Witness the closeness of "perverted acts in pastures" and a "handy" subway in "Meditations in an Emergency.") A frissonless repetition saturates Crane's underground acoustics: you can't miss the insistently uninteresting notes of "overtone," "motion," "monotone," "motion" again, "sound" picking up "underground," anticipating another "underground," each phrase taking up a new sonic clatter as blank as the last one. Sound repeats itself, bores us, echoes away. This captures the subway's hollowness, its emptiness, its ability to transport you somewhere, in fact its whole purpose in doing so, while presenting identikit landscapes, stations all built the same, formatted the same, in concrete and ceramic tiles, grey after black after grey, from tunnel to tunnel, fused into one long infernal corridor that "re-winds itself" – and plays it all again.

Heavy sounds and thickened pauses have their place in O'Hara's acoustic, too, as in these lines from "A Classical Last Act":

> Bang! bang! bang! and it is just like the
> subway: we've at last found an empty car,
>
> open doors are swaying for miles ahead, and
> the conductor's in a perfect tantrum, eh?[29]

With three bangs, the poem performs a jump cut, transforming the last acts of a stage performance into a journey home from the theatre. And yet, because we have to visualize, and aren't presented with literal visuals, the relation of fiction to everyday grime soon becomes uncertain. These bangs could equally be a gun firing in the empty subway car, with its eerie swaying doors. (Next to that menacing sound, we might remember that O'Hara had a bit part role in Daisy Aldan's 1955 film *Once upon an El*, where he pretended to throw himself in front of an oncoming train.[30]) Once again his verse seems shifty and precarious, always slipping away and running parallel to whatever scene we manage to picture. With each line break there's a change in tack: "just like the" yanks us into the world below; "found an empty car" waits for its next move but stops at the mystery of "open doors," impossibly stretching for "miles," "swaying" like the condemned El-train of "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming"; finally, "and" hooks us up with a conductor on the scene, emerging from nowhere, or from the line breaks, which might, disquietingly, be the same thing. Crane's lines staged the same dramatic anticipation: "the phonographs of hades in the brain" – are what? – "Are tunnels." And "love" – a verb? A

[28] See Gooch, 196–97.
[29] Frank O'Hara, "A Classical Last Act," in O'Hara, *Poems Retrieved*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2013), 39.
[30] See Gooch, 436.

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noun? – A "burnt match." We're thrown over the hitches, and keep looking back to see that we may have located ourselves in error, at places that look familiar but reveal themselves as never known. Our mislocations, we realize, could be the consequence of thinking we recognize our environment better than we actually can.

And to travel through a city is always to be prey to that doubleness, that feeling of certainty alchemically twinned with doubt. There are forever delays, traffic lights, queues, diversions; we get lost, we find the wrong place, we miss what was sought. These are the possibilities of the unexpected, built into our urban expectations. Between each line, each corner, there's a new suspension, and memories of other lines and corners might only show you all the ways in which you've got the transitions wrong, and might do so again. Every encounter with a new moment of transit is, under one aspect, the place to sense another imperfect future. Normally this uncertainty goes without saying, and especially without thinking; as with the time-loops of poetic memory that Andrea Brady describes, the cyclical repetitions of urban travel could, under intense scrutiny, give you only a painful self-consciousness. To attend to the subway, to give it full attention as if it were the kind of thing that often invites such a gaze – a landscape, outdoors, picturesque in sunshine – would be, immediately, to make yourself aware that you'd ignored this space before, and that the failure to see what was so frequently around you had been a kind of systematic blindness to the earthy. But it's characteristic of O'Hara's humane and observant poems to prompt attention to what's overlooked, what's uncared for, the things which stay insignificant so that bigger, more significant things can take the spotlight. This ethics of recuperation has its dramatic cousin in Tadeusz Kantor's writing; he sought new kinds of stage, away from the glitz and glamour of the bourgeois theatres:

> Having rejected an "artistic object" and its fiction of reality, I consequently had to reject the notion of a place that was reserved for the theatre. In its stead, I called for a real place that was a part of reality. It was a "poor" place that was on the margin of the life's practice.
>
> Rooms destroyed by the war,
> abandoned railway stations,
> laundry rooms,
> cloakrooms,
> waiting rooms,
> storerooms.[31]

[31] Tadeusz Kantor, "Annexed Reality," from Kantor, *A Journey through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944–1990*, ed. and trans. Michal Kobialka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 71–76, 76.

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This produces a spectacle native to dirty zones, bare earth, anywhere there's a liminal space waiting to be given life, and Kantor's dramatic work travelled easily from country to country, because these liminal spaces can be found everywhere. Being places to use and leave, places designed to be quit, one station or waiting room might as well match another for aesthetic poverty. Exulting in this sort of filth, you can hear the jazzy notes of O'Hara's "Song," as it revels in the city's underbelly:

> Is it dirty
> does it look dirty
> that's what you think of in the city
>
> does it just seem dirty
> that's what you think of in the city
> you don't refuse to breathe do you[32]

Anne Stillman hears such repetition as dirty nothings that belong underground, each of them "a secret whispered in full view": "The repetitions nudge you into thinking twice about what comes back, as you might, say, in a subway commute, encounter the peculiar contours of singularity in exactly what seems most repetitious."[33] To reconfigure your vision like this requires, above all, empathy. John Ashbery valued O'Hara's ability to find not beauty hidden among the trash, but the beauty of what's been trashed, the value of what we've forgotten we need:

> The life of the city and of the millions of relationships that go to make it up hum through his poetry; a scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide drifts across it, making it the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place New York is.[34]

Like Kantor's theatrical practices, O'Hara's poems show a temperament of love: they stage their microdramas in subway tunnels and station toilets, so-called "poor" places. They draw your attention to just how much of your life can be counted out – but rarely is – in train tickets, or nightly fumbles, or steps taken along Third Avenue, under the long-dead tracks of a torn-down El.

IV. CORNERS IN RHYTHM

Those final lines from "A Classical Last Act" are tightly bound, from nine to eleven syllables. Run through them once again:

[32] Frank O'Hara, "Song," in *CP*, 327.
[33] Stillman, "Frank O'Hara and Urban Pastoral," 376.
[34] John Ashbery, "Introduction" to *CP*, x.

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Bang! bang! bang! and it is just like the
subway: we've at last found an empty car,

open doors are swaying for miles ahead, and
the conductor's in a perfect tantrum, eh?

Uncertainties and divagations flourish against that stability of length, and stem from the white spaces around and between these lines, where the traction temporarily gives way and we're left flying towards the next sequence. As elsewhere in O'Hara's poetry, such moments prompt uneasiness about how each of the instants might or should relate to the one we reach next. Now compare another poem of rail travel, the sharply concise "Lines across the United States":

The night's getting black
The train is cold
My back aches already

I don't want to smoke
We're going too fast
Our windows hurt the air[35]

These lines, as I hear them, clack along with a loud enough beat, four to six syllables, usually two stresses, occasionally the slight thrill (as in the sixth and maybe third line) of a third stress. These are the sounds of regularity, with light variation – itself regulated – all of which echo a train travelling between New York and Ann Arbor, hitting sleepers and points with a background hum at once unnoticeable and inescapable. What this prompts in O'Hara is a thought about being an "I," now here and now somewhere else, the disparate moments of being the same person, as you travel across space but don't quite lose yourself. (Losing yourself, of course, might have been the idea, or a sweet relief from finding yourself as you are.)

I'm sitting all night
I didn't buy a pillow
My watch got broken last week

I've not done much
I've loved too little
And I'm tired of running[36]

It's as if these are travel snaps, photographs of a journey, but photos that catch a soul in the process of looking inward, thinking of what external movement causes, and whether it's transformative or not. The poem's form contains

[35] Frank O'Hara, "Lines across the United States," in O'Hara, *Poems Retrieved*, 39.
[36] Ibid.

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different thoughts, or aspects of a mood, but seems resolutely unwilling or unable to change mechanical gear. As with "Poem" or "John Button Birthday," the lines attract and discard each other's company. We want to say "this poem could go on forever," or until the train arrives in New York, because only the journey can distract the poet, make him think of himself; it's a form of travel that broadens the mind by making you think of how you gain and lose so little from place to place. Except, we come to see, with one valuable exception: this piece of elegantly strict writing, born out of that journey, a piece which is about doubting the elegance and strictness of (among other things) how lines of verse can capture a lived experience. Within this poem, as so often in O'Hara's work, the line endings harbour frozen moments of suspended time, where there's a gap between two thoughts, two thinkers, or places where thinking happens; as if these are the corners where things stop making sense, and then go again, a little differently, in time for the next line to start.

Turning a corner in a grid system, we're always looking for what comes next, and how the shapes of the next block differ from what's come before. Each new point is shaped in our eyes by what launched us into its space. We search for correspondences, for interruptions that divide one section from another. Reading the map of Manhattan, Anne Mikoleit and Moritz Purckhauer point us towards the roles of the streets in marking these divisions between moments of city life:

> A neighborhood with defined borders does not exist in New York. The city consists of areas that constantly merge into each other. Nevertheless, all interfaces, ordering the city into many smaller areas, are recognizable in New York. They might be streets and buildings, a park or a body of water, wastelands or private compounds … Probably the most common border is the through street: the thread that serves to get people from one point to another. Like subway tunnels, they link areas together – often without becoming an independent area themselves.[37]

The through-street is a complicated kind of border, then, marking out other people's territories while plying its own route through them and past them – and *for* them, because such a road exists to be driven down and then abandoned, like one of Kantor's dead zones, in favour of the lively streets that join it. In Manhattan the classic through-streets are the avenues, sweeping up the island, and one block east of the "torn-down Third Avenue El," it was Second Avenue that took hold of O'Hara's attention. Unlike First, Broadway, or Avenue A, he never lived on Second, and so his time there was a fitting kind of transience, taking in the sights and reeling along to end up somewhere else, or, at any rate, to get back where he started, at some distant address. *Second*

[37] Anne Mikoleit and Moritz Pürckhauer, *Urban Code: 100 Lessons for Understanding the City*, trans. Susannah Nightingale and Lindsay Howe (Zurich: MIT Press, 2011), 107.

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Avenue is O'Hara's longest poem – eleven sections and four hundred and seventy-eight lines long – and this is the opening:

> Quips and players, seeming to vend astringency off-hours,
> celebrate diced excesses and sardonics, mixing pleasures,
> as if proximity were staring at the margin of a plea …
>
> This thoroughness whose traditions have become so reflexive,
> your distinction is merely a quill at the bottom of the sea
> tracing forever the fabulous alarms of the mute
> so that in the limpid tosses of your violet dinginess
> a pus appears and lingers like a groan from the collar
> of a reproachful tree whose needles are tired of howling.[38]

Throughout *Second Avenue* these long lines flow across the page, with huge clauses unspooling gradually, and clusters of highly charged visions crossing line ending after line ending. The poem remains in this form throughout, never repositioning itself on the page in smaller or narrower blocks. Its single-mindedness is like a tribute to the avenue itself, one of the longest major thoroughfares in Manhattan, spanning more than six and a half miles, one hundred and twenty-nine blocks and junctions, with no change in name or tack, and yet without the iconic status of Park or Madison. *Second Avenue* the poem, then, like Second Avenue the street, is a colossal point of departure, where we take a detail and walk off with it ringing in our ears.

O'Hara was prompted to write a letter to Rosalind Constable, editor of the *New York Times*, which has since been published as "Notes on *Second Avenue*." In it, he said a little about how the poem took wing from tiny observations, which became the seeds of a grander architecture. He discussed these lines, which he called "a little description of a de Kooning WOMAN which I'd seen recently at his studio":[39]

> You remained for me a green Buick of sighs, o Gladstone!
> and your wife Trina, how like a yellow pillow on a sill
> in the many-windowed dusk where the air is compartmented!
> her red lips of Hollywood, soft as a Titian and as tender,
> her gray face which refrains from thrusting aside the mane
> of your languorous black smells, the hand crushed by her chin,
> and that slumberland of dark cutaneous lines which reels
> under the burden of her many-darkly-hued corpulence of linen
> and satin bushes, is like a lone rose with the sky behind it.
> A yellow rose. Valentine's Day.[40]

[38] Frank O'Hara, *Second Avenue*, in *CP*, 139–50, 139.
[39] Frank O'Hara, "Notes on *Second Avenue*," in O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983), 37–40, 39.
[40] O'Hara, *Second Avenue*, 147.

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But after referring the reader to de Kooning, he caught himself:

> Actually, I am rather inaccurate about the above, since it is a woman I saw leaning out a window on Second Avenue with her arms on a pillow, but the way it's done is influenced by de K's woman (whom he thinks of, he once said, as "living" on 14th St.).
>
> I don't know if this method is of any interest in taking little pieces of it. You see how it makes it seem very jumbled, while actually everything in it either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue. Where Mayakovsky and de Kooning come in, is that they both have done works as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar …[41]

The image of the woman, like the snapshot of a dream, becomes transformed into something else, the material for a thought translated into thinking, into poetry, where she can be both de Kooning's woman and an actual woman "leaning out a window," both a woman framed by a building and a rose framed by the sky. That phrase, "works as big as cities," could be a motto for the poem's imaginative plan. An avenue is a big thing, sprawling wide and long, full of colours which, for O'Hara, were best captured here by writing a poem less like a diary than like a painting, in brushstrokes that don't obscure things, or tell you what to recognize, but trouble your sense of observation – which can be as thrilling as it is difficult. The architect Le Corbusier trafficked in lines and shapes, and knew how the sense of direction could be both a help and a hindrance to someone on a street like this:

> Man walks in a straight line because he knows where he is going; he has made up his mind to reach some particular place and he goes straight to it.
>
> …
>
> We should also be right in saying that a straight street is extremely boring to walk through, it never seems to finish; the pedestrian feels he is never advancing. The winding street, on the other hand, is interesting because of the variety of succeeding shapes; we must remember this in our attempt to get the matter clear. The straight street is boring to walk in.[42]

This may be true, although for the walker – and Le Corbusier wouldn't dispute this – a street like Second Avenue is neither a pure transit artery nor an arcade of beauties. It's designed to remove you from itself: it cuts through, delineates, runs you through its own contours at pace. And it takes eyes of a certain kind to enjoy that life in transit, where you come to love the insignificant things to which you can give new significance just by pointing them out, or pointing at them, or noticing them and letting them move your mind somewhere else.

[41] O'Hara, "Notes on *Second Avenue*," 39–40.

[42] Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, trans. Frederick Etchells, 3rd edn (London: Architectural Press, 1971; first published as *Urbanisme*, Paris, 1924), 11, 208.

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V. "A HURRIED WALK AND A SIDELONG GLANCE"

One particular Somewhere Else might well have been on O'Hara's mind, an Elsewhere spectrally mapped onto the existing Where. The Second Avenue subway has been under construction, on and off, since the 1930s; time after time, plans have been drawn up, hindered, scrapped, revived, killed again. The largest raft of planning until the 1970s was after the Second World War, when the elevated trains were being torn down one by one. There was a Second Avenue El until 1942, but by the time O'Hara walked the East Side, there was only one form of rapid transit, the Lexington Avenue Subway, hopelessly overcrowded, which he caught to work when not walking the way of "Rhapsody." By then, the Second Avenue route was once again dead before birth, termed "the line that time forgot" – which, in a gorgeous piece of timelessness, is what it was still being called in the 2000s.[43] As Le Corbusier put it, "tomorrow belongs to nobody," an architectural truth as portentous as it is liberating.[44] The planning stage, for a road, a subway line, or a line of poetry, is where everything might happen; the vastness of this freedom also implies that until something does, there are only the spectres of unborn futures to show for the labour. *Second Avenue* is frequently attended by these spirits of possibility: routes untaken, speeds unreached, dreams which are already proving translucent. See, for instance, the freewheeling lustre of these lines:

> (The western mountain ranges were sneaking along "Who
> taps wires and why?" like a pack of dogies and is there much
> tapping under the desert moon? Does it look magical
> or realistic, that landing? And the riverboat put in there,
> keeps putting in, with all the slaves' golden teeth and arms,
> self-conscious without their weapons.[45]

You can read *Second Avenue* as many things: a portrait of street life, a reservoir of images and daydreams, the chronicle of a life led amongst the places Kantor puts "on the margin of the life's practice." The poem itself will only present you with unfinished motions, and let you imagine their profit or their loss. To read a work like this, one which flaunts its roots in a street while transcending them and asking what use a street is to a poem anyway, is to become aware that travelling through a poem is a tricky business, which needs you to attend to

[43] Greg Sargent, for instance, cites the phrase as common currency in his article "Miracle on Second Avenue," in *New York Magazine*, 5 April 2004, at http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/n_10109. As of January 2017, the first part of the Second Avenue subway has at last begun service; the full line is currently scheduled to open in 2029, with the hope of further extensions to follow.

[44] Le Corbusier, 5.

[45] O'Hara, *Second Avenue*, 144.

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your surroundings and, impossibly, every single thing that goes into making you feel surrounded by a living place – not just the shops and diners and back-street dives, but the history of the West, the genre of magical realism, the camp gold of the slaves in Hollywood movies. If you read the poem's title, *Second Avenue*, as alluding to the subway line, a route built to carry people under the world with a speed still yet to exist, then the poem becomes a kind of psychic vortex, the melting pot of a peculiarly American future where everything past that makes up the present is also what has to cohere to make the shape of things to come. And this forging of a new New World, building better and bigger cities, is taking place in the places we take for granted, like our transit systems, where the usual kinds of vision are suspended and our eyes turn inward, dreaming their own landscapes because there's nothing else to see.

In part, it's a question of naming. Our sense of location dissolves in subway tunnels; there are no visual markers, no ways of turning sideways and leaving the line on a whim. We're only ever between somewhere and somewhere else, and we're only ever at one of those places in order to quit it for another. Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, heard the names of the Paris Métro stations as mythic signals, operating darkly underground, converting everyday transit into an insidious cycle. He compared the Métro to the Parisian arcades: dreams of surface architecture and the drift of *flânerie* were paralleled down below, in subterranean nightmares and the relentless dynamism of capital:

> But another system of galleries runs underground through Paris: the Métro, where at dusk glowing red lights point the way into the underworld of names. Combat, Elysée, Georges V, Etienne Marcel, Solférino, Invalides, Vaugirard – they have all thrown off the humiliating fetters of street or square, and here in the lightning-scored, whistle-resounding darkness are transformed into misshapen sewer gods, catacomb fairies. This labyrinth harbours in its interior not one but a dozen blind raging bulls, into whose jaws not one Theban virgin once a year but thousands of anemic young dress-makers and drowsy clerks every morning must hurl themselves.[46]

This passage ends, unfinished, with a note to self: "Street Names." The analysis would have returned to the surface: Benjamin knew that subway systems haunt the world above ground because they eat up our lives, facilitating the consumption of our labour by the lucrative temples to which they carry us. By making a subway station bear the name of the street above, capital combines daylight and darkness and makes the cityscape uncanny, alien to us even when we know it well. O'Hara's *Second Avenue* finds its objects spelling out the

[46] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, based on the German edn ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999; first published as *Das Passagen-Werk*, Berlin, 1983), 84.

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unexpected, too, corrupted by suddenness and speed; as the lines grow, things splinter off and point in different directions, creating and decreating poetic artefacts with every passing moment:

> And such whiteness not there!
> All right, all right, all right, you glass of coke, empty
> your exceptionally neonish newspaper from such left hands
> with headlines to be grey as cut WITHER ACCEPTED AS SELLING.[47]

Names blend into each other, letters shrink and grow, clauses totter on the edge of sense. It's these lines which lead into the lines above, on "dogies" and "slaves" – "a little Western story," he called them[48] – fragments of books and films and life, a synthesis of Americas past and future. Every perception seems hustled into becoming something new, and the outcome hangs upon how far the reader wants to travel, feels inclined to travel, is seduced into travelling. In Ashbery's phrase, this vital entrapment figures "the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place New York is," contradictory but still variously present and correct. *Second Avenue*, looking at things until they look different, is a poem as big as a city, on the horizontal and the vertical scales. Its energies are trafficked within, but also expand beyond, the clean lines of its grid. It lights up your eyes at every corner.

O'Hara's love for seeing the urban scene afresh, his dexterity and charge and their allure for a willing reader, are all what make his city visions come repeatedly alive. His poetry exists by a continual changing of aspects, through new camera angles and focal lengths; reading and seeing are kinds of leisurely work, in which you have to invest yourself to get something back. And time and time again, people who knew him talked of his life, and his lines, as having exactly this momentum. Take Kenneth Koch, who said that *Second Avenue* – written in competition with Koch's *When the Sun Tries to Go On* – was one of O'Hara's most oddly paced poems: its elements seemed to be "composed at high speed, as if they were attempts to catch an infinite succession of moments or the infinite expansion of one."[49] There's that doubleness again, the points on both the street and the page that blossom and collapse into each other's space. Or take Bill Berkson, listening to a lost friend as O'Hara listened to the Third Avenue El, writing that his "rhythms can be heard taxi-ing through the New York streets. You do not have to know New York or anyone in it to catch on, but the poems offer a clear expression of New York circuitry and speed."[50] To "hear a rhythm" is a very different kind of hearing from, say, a prosodic analysis: it's generous,

[47] O'Hara, *Second Avenue*, 144.
[48] O'Hara, "Notes on *Second Avenue*," 37.
[49] Quoted in Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur, eds., *Homage to Frank O'Hara* (Bolinas, CA: Big Sky, 1988), 208.
[50] Quoted in ibid., 164.

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a form of companionship, letting the sound come to you without demanding to hear something you can assert you understand. It's more like the kind of look Jascha Kessler remembered from O'Hara's days at Ann Arbor: "He struck me as faunlike. He had a hurried walk and a sidelong glance."[51] Seeing things sidelong is the kind of attention, or wilful distraction, which takes note of things that others mightn't notice, enjoying the streets that are usually just ways of getting somewhere else. O'Hara shared these sidelong pleasures in transit with his close friend Edwin Denby, who also wrote about the miniature joys of the New York skyline:

> Daily life is wonderfully full of things to see. Not only people's movements, but the objects around them, the shape of the rooms they live in, the ornaments architects make around windows and doors, the peculiar ways buildings end in the air, the water tanks, the fantastic differences in their street façades on the first floor … Do you see all this? Do you see what a forty- or sixty-story building looks like from straight below? And do you see how it comes up from the sidewalk as if it intended to go up no more than five stories? … Go and see them. There is no point in living here if you don't see the city you are living in.[52]

Later, O'Hara would write the introduction to Denby's essay collection *Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets*, and his tribute would be this: "He is always there, telling you what he sees and hears and feels and esteems, not caring whether you agree or not, because it is a friendly parlance about matters which are mutually important."[53] He would go on to add that one of the questions preoccupying Denby was "what does each second mean, and how is the span of attention used to make it a longer or shorter experience?"[54] The warmth of the appraisal shows O'Hara responding to the tender attentiveness he most valued in an urbanite's gaze; in both its forms of care, it's characteristic of this poet, and unwittingly true of not merely his generous person, but his generously personal poetry. He had a keen eye for all the peculiarities of buildings, and the motions of the streets, and the shape of the New York he lived in until his death. And as we move through the open uncertainties of his world, as he tacks between the hazy and the plain, we come to see how he wove what he saw into poems that play with the endless shapes of the city. These small texts of graceful guile prompt us to consider the relation between the tenses of our awareness, and how we can look more closely at all the places and events in life, and in the urban landscape, that we usually treat as incidental. They ask that in the

[51] Quoted in Gooch, *City Poet*, 168.

[52] Edwin Denby, "Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets," in Robert Cornfield, ed., *Dance Writings and Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 252–60, 258.

[53] Frank O'Hara, "Introduction" to Edwin Denby, *Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Streets* (New York: Horizon Press, 1965), 7–9, 9.

[54] Ibid.

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rush of city life, we give a little fresh attention to what we've noticed only vaguely – just for a moment, however long that moment may last.

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