

Teaching Takeaway: Frank Lima

Welcome writers! The Teaching Takeaway series begins with two poems by New York School Surrealist Frank Lima (1939-2013). Lima is a newer poet to me, having come across his name in Garrett Caples's article "[Surrealism Is a Romantic Critique of the Avant-Garde from Within](#)." I'm halfway finished with my second readthrough of, and recommend, *Incidents of Travel in Poetry*, the New and Selected collection of Lima's work (City Lights Books, 2015, eds. Garrett Caples and Julien Poirier). In the book's appendix you'll find David Shapiro's informative "Frank Lima: The Poetry of Everyday Life and the Tradition of American Darkness." As Shapiro tells us, "When I met him in 1962, Frank Lima had already written extraordinarily sensuous descriptions of the street and the body, and he had already conquered any timidity in poems that shocked everyone concerning incest, drugs, and violence. Instead of pursuing this as a single reductive mode, Lima accepted influences and worlds that made him larger and richer" (274). We pivot from large to small in today's poems . . .

Haiku

For Frank O'Hara

I
The lights are out
The cats are hungry
The room is full of gangsters

II
The dishes are dirty
The icebox is empty
I dream of celery and a compass

III
The roof is upstairs
The window next door
A guitar in the shower

IV
The hours disappear in my room
Where is my blue pistol
The door-god is knocking.

How It's Put Together

Lima's title would have syllable counters believe they're in for an array of 5 / 7 / 5, though this is not the case.

Haiku I 4 / 5 / 7

Haiku II 6 / 6 / 10
Haiku III 5 / 5 / 7
Haiku IV 8 / 6 / 6

What we have are fragments in the cloak of haiku, their sparseness coupled with straightforward diction.

Haiku I consists of:

Ln 1 Everyday Observation
Ln 2 Everyday Observation
Ln 3 A Gritty Element Contained

“full of gangsters” is an indeterminate number, but this is a lightless environment with multiple cats, crowdedness ever-present. Lima’s “room” does Haiku I’s heavy lifting.

Haiku II:

Ln 1 Everyday Observation
Ln 2 Everyday Observation
Ln 3 Surrealism

I don’t know about you, but this is the first time I’ve seen a vegetable and a navigational aid paired together. Note the first appearance of an *I* that’s dreaming.

Haiku III:

Ln 1 Obvious Architectural Fact
Ln 2 Obvious Architectural Fact
Ln 3 Placement of an Item Where You Least Expect It

Does anyone else notice Lima’s pattern of Line 3 ferrying us away from predictability’s dock? The image of “A guitar in the shower” stays with the reader mostly because the iambs *guitar* and *shower* are strange line-mates (similar to *celery* and *compass*). Just as Haiku I’s narrator is in a potentially dangerous circumstance, so too is the guitar. One handle twist and it’s wood-warp city.

Haiku IV consists of:

Ln 1 Time’s Passage
Ln 2 Question Involving a Weapon
Ln 3 Architectural Deity

Line 2 is Lima’s first use of color.

The “door-god” of Line 3 is an unexpected addition since the poem’s been religion-free up to this point. It’s also visually/sonically interesting because you have a string of three O’s (*door-god* =

Long O-sound followed by a short O-sound; don't forget the short O in *knocking*).

The period after Line 3 is the first use of punctuation, literally closing the poem on the image of a door. Is that blue pistol reserved for the door-god? Remember, Shapiro's primer to Lima's writings on street life . . .

The O'Hara Connection

Garrett Caples's "Incidents of Travel in New York: The Lives of Frank Lima," a preface to the New and Selected, explains "the signal event of Lima's life in the early '60's was meeting . . . Frank O' Hara and Kenneth Koch at the New York City Writers Conference at Wagner College, on Staten Island, in August 1962" (xx). As well, "it was O'Hara in particular who took Frank under his wing. Unlike Koch, who imposed a professorial distance, O'Hara offered drinking and companionship, bringing Lima everywhere from the symphony to the Cedar Tavern" (xxi).

Imbiber's Trivia: The Cedar Tavern was a landmark watering hole for New York School poets.

Try This

Write four three-line fragments in pseudo-haiku (brevity over syllable count).

Follow Lima's patterns of the observed and expected meeting Surreal departures in Line 3.

Include an architectural deity. The citier the better: cold water Messiah? goddess of fire escapes?

Are you dedicating your haiku to a poet? How might you portray their essence in a single line?

Poem

Tomorrow
I'll go
Fishing
On the
Ganges
With an
Orange
Some rice
And gather
My hands
Then I'll
Entreat
Your window
On a scaffold
In September
I'll hide
In your

Shower
Because
I am also
A philosopher

How It's Put Together

This poem is as columnar as a Slim Jim. I've never written in so skinny a line but I'm game to try anything. Let's re-form the poem as punctuated sentences to see how it lays on the page:

Tomorrow I'll go fishing on the Ganges with an orange, some rice, and gather my hands. Then I'll entreat your window on a scaffold in September. I'll hide in your shower because I am also a philosopher.

Your interpretive reformatting might look different (ex: "... on a scaffold. In September, I'll hide ..."). That's fine.

Manually sentencing the piece changed my reading experience of it. When I chose this poem, I thought there were more Surrealist aspects, though moving single-, double-, and triple-word lines into a paragraph gave me a behind-the-scenes tour. Only then did I recognize the influence of O'Hara's "I do this I do that" mode.

Are you as smitten with Lima's alliterative deployment of the letter G, plus the *Ganges / orange* sight rhyme as I am?

Tomorrow
I'll go
Fishing
On the
Ganges
With an
Orange
Some rice
And gather
My hands

The S sounds of "Some rice" are pleasant too.

The next section consists of micro-rhyme and alliteration with prepositional assistance. Also important, the *I* has a *you*.

Then I'll
Entreat
Your window
On a scaffold

In September

We end with *I* concealed in a shower (what is it with Lima and the possibility of water?) and a justification that skews ever so Surreal.

I'll hide
In your
Shower
Because
I am also
A philosopher

I don't need further explanation behind Lima's reason for hiding in the shower. *Philosopher* is one of those career words that's gravitas-rich because it involves the mind and mystique. See also *cartographer*, *alchemist*.

Try This

Write a three-sentence poem with subtle alliteration, sight rhyme, and an *I / you*. The third sentence will include a justification that takes a Surreal turn.

Next, remove all punctuation, then lineate it à la Slim Jim. How does this change your expectations of the narrative potential in shorter poems? What freedoms does the column give your writing?

Happy Poeting . . .

-Jon