

TOSA MOTOKIYU

The Strange Account of ‘A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island’¹

[A Tape-Essay by Tosa Motokiyu, Ojiu Norinaga, and Okura Kyojin—date and location unrecorded]

Tosa Motokiyu: We are gathered to talk about the nature of ‘A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island,’ a poem that is attributed to Frank O’Hara and one that is considered central to his great oeuvre.

Ojiu Norinaga: By “nature” of this poem we mean its authorship. Our thesis, so to speak, is that there is strong reason to suspect it was not written by Mr. O’Hara.

Okura Kyojin: Indeed, it is our proposal, let us say it at once, that it was written by his dear friend, Kenneth Koch, shortly after O’Hara’s death in a tragic accident on Fire Island—written in homage to the poet, its spurious attribution to him a strange and moving tribute to the poet’s memory.

TM: We realize this will be controversial.

ON: Well, not only controversial, but downright blasphemous to many!

OK: However, we hope the reader will bear with us, hear out our hypothesis, which is based, in part, on conversations we have had with central people “in the know,” as it were, and our putting of “two and two” together. I mean, of our putting certain very suspicious circumstantial clues together...

TM: Some might consider our hypothesis—that the poem was written by Koch—as a denigration of sorts of O’Hara.

ON: But of course this isn’t so at all: To the contrary, that another poet would so selflessly subsume his name under that of his friend is actually testimony to O’Hara’s greatness, as a poet and no doubt as a person.

¹ [Footnotes by Kent Johnson and Javier Alvarez] The tape-essay is by Tosa Motokiyu, acknowledged now as the pseudonymous author of the Araki Yasusada writings. Norinaga and Kyojin are his invented collaborators. Unlike most of the other essays in the “tape-essay” series, this piece—with exception of “tinkling of sake cups in toast”—does not include Motokiyu’s eccentric “transcriptions” of ambient sounds.

OK: So let us proceed, explaining our reasons for believing that ‘A True Account’ is one of the most important instances of “mistaken” authorship in the history of 20th century poetry.

TM: Yes...Well, the story begins with a phone call I placed in 1990 to O’Hara’s long-time roommate and friend, while the three of us were on a trip to New York with the Mexican composers Mario Lavista and Javier Alvarez. Well, it was a glorious day in May.

ON: Yes, we walked among the bright-colored cars, while the workers fed their sweaty bodies and drank Dr. Pepper through straws, with orange helmets on. And the skirts flipped above high heels and a huge cowboy man in a sign blew smoke into the sky and a waterfall fell, though it was just electricity, not water. And an Arab man was chewing on a pencil, diffidently, in the doorway of the Seagram Building, and there was so much neon in daylight, and all the earth was as full of life as death is also full of these things, it was memorable, so memorable, I shall never forget it...

TM: It was from a telephone booth outside the Automat that I dialed. And so Mr. Joseph LeSueur answered the phone. Hello? He said pleasantly. Hello, I said, and I then proceeded to tell him that I was a poet and translator from abroad, very interested in discussing with him the work of Mr. Frank O’Hara.

OK: This was right on the cusp of O’Hara’s great rise to canonicity, and so our request was received with more openness by Mr. LeSueur than it might otherwise have been later, once the deluge of fans and acolytes had descended like a great rain.

ON: That sounds funny, “deluge of fans descending like a great rain.” It makes me think of that painting by Magritte, where men in bowler hats are falling from the sky!

OK: Well, there’s no need for sarcasm. My point is perfectly clear, I think, and a good one. It isn’t necessary for you to get on your usual aggressive horse.

TM: Well, if we could refocus now, please, and get to the heart of things, without distractions, gentlemen: Mr. LeSueur pleasantly said, “Let’s meet at The Cedar at 5 PM sharp, at the outside tables in the sun,” and so we did, walking through the legendary streets of the Lower East Side. And he was simply a delightful and gracious man.

ON: And so handsome!

OK: Yes, well Motokiyu and I were more interested in the waitress, but the attraction seemed mutual between the two of you, you rascal.

ON: Alas, I wish circumstances had afforded a longer acquaintance between us. Such a kind and handsome man...

TM: Well, let's move on. The waitress brought us our drinks, martinis all around, and Mr. LeSueur smiled, made a gracious toast and asked, "So then, what would you mysterious gentlemen like to know about Frank O'Hara?"

ON: Immediately, I nervously asked him, "Don't you think, Mr. LeSueur, that 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island' sounds like someone else speaking?"

OK: And I remember how awkwardly... how you stuttered as you asked it!

ON: Mr. LeSueur, confused, looked at me quizzically, and replied, "Well, yes, it is *the sun*, of course, who is speaking to Frank..." I laughed gently, and then said, "No, no, sir, you see, I mean, rather, that the whole poem sounds like someone else is speaking—I mean, that *another author* has written it" Mr. LeSueur took a sip of his martini, looked at me in a funny sort of way, and said, "Well, I never did even think of this. Do you really think so, Mr. Norinaga?" I replied with the following question: "I wonder if you could tell us if you ever saw Mr. O'Hara type this poem or if he showed it to you?" Mr. LeSueur put his finger on his chin and said, "Hmm. No, actually, it's funny that you should mention it, because there's always been a great mystery, to me, about that poem."

TM: May I read what he said so that this doesn't become a Norinaga monologue? [*laughter and clinking of sake cups in toast*] Well, Mr. LeSueur then continued, as I secretly clicked on the tape recorder in my book bag, carefully placing the expensive miniature microphone in my lap. [*TM reads from transcript of tape*]:²

Yes, it's strange, that poem. Let me see if I can explain...

I was in the city when Frank wrote his account of talking to the sun, a poem whose existence I was completely ignorant of until Kenneth Koch read it at New York University's Loeb Center in the fall of 1966. Less than two months had passed since Frank's death, so the reading was like a memorial. Many people spoke and read some things. But

² These remarks by LeSueur on 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island' later appear, albeit in somewhat revised form, in his memoir, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (FSG, 2004). It is our assumption, for no other explanation seems possible, that Motokiyu sent LeSueur either the tape or the written transcript of the comments, which the latter incorporated rather directly into his book. It is clear that Motokiyu did meet with Mr. LeSueur and that the account that appears in LeSueur's book originates in the meeting between the two, for Motokiyu's manuscript predates the publication of *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*.

the only poem I remember is 'A True Account.' After Kenneth read the final stanza...

*"Sun, don't go!" I was awake
at last. "No, go I must, they're calling
me."*

"Who are they?"

*Rising he said "Some
day you'll know. They're calling to you
too." Darkly he rose, and then I slept.*

...well, you could have heard a pin drop, there was a total stunned silence-- one that bespoke, no doubt about it, the shared feelings of grief, melancholy, and mystification among those members of the audience who knew and loved Frank. Then Kenneth gravely proclaimed something to the effect of, "This is truly the work of a great poet."

TM: And it certainly *is* a great work!

[LeSueur continues] Yes, and a work Frank never showed to anyone, let it be said, including Kenneth, or John, or Jimmy. Thus, understandably, we were not only moved by the poem but completely mystified as well, thrown for a loop. I mean, Why had he kept it a secret like that? That might seem an overstatement, but isn't that really the case? Because no one knew... While he wasn't in the habit of sending out his poems, Frank usually made a personal practice of showing what he'd written to his friends. But with this work he made an exception. Why? It's really strange! And, you know, actually, when we lived at 791 Broadway, Ted Berrigan, Frank's *numero uno* acolyte, was permitted to go through Frank's papers, pore over his poems, and the kid did this often and with great vigor, such intense attention... Didn't this most avid fan of Frank's come across 'A True Account'? Apparently not; if he had, he would certainly have recognized it as a major work and mentioned it to someone. I mean, this is the poem Ted just would have gone crazy for, there's no question! So, for whatever reason, Frank seems to have been reluctant, to say the least, to let anyone see a copy of the poem--or, to put it more provocatively, he must not have wanted us to read it until after his death. But where was it? If Ted didn't find it, why did it suddenly appear later? For me, the mystery deepens when I cast my mind back to mid-July 1958. You see how you have me talking now...

ON: Yes, but this is so fascinating, please do go on!

[LeSueur continues] Sure. Let's see... Well, I'd been Gian Carlo Menotti's secretary for the past year and now, with Menotti in Spoleto, Italy, running the festival, I was taking care of New York-related business in a little office I had on West Fifty-Seventh Street. Then it was discovered I had nothing to do, so I was given my walking papers and instructed to close the office. This happened toward the end of the week that Frank was spending with Hal Fondren at the Fire Island beach house Hal and his wonderful beau, Jack Shaw, rented each summer. I wasted no time in getting hold of them. "I'm free! I've been fired!" I said excitedly to Frank, who answered the phone. Hal, the best cook any of us knew, was preparing lunch. "Tell Joe to come out," I could hear him call to Frank after he'd been given the news. Of course, that was all I needed, I was gone.

OK: And when was this again?

Well, this was Thursday afternoon, July 10, the very day, you see, Frank communed with the sun and wrote his poem, as the text reports. I dropped what I was doing and was able to make our usual eastbound 4:19 train, except I'd be getting off at Sayville where I'd catch the ferry for Fire Island Pines. Frank was at the dock to meet me, and Hal must have been back at the house, making yummy hors d'oeuvres for our cocktails. I would have given Frank whatever news I had, and he probably filled me in on what they'd been up to, mainly eating, drinking, swimming, and lying in the sun, all of which is conjecture now on my part--plus what we know from the poem: ". . . I stayed / up late last night talking to Hal," as he says there. Anyway, the only thing I actually remember concerns a young boy we encountered on the boardwalk as we made our way to the house... Not that there was anything unusual about him. He was just an average looking nine or ten-year-old with tousled hair, and I wouldn't have noticed him had it not been for the way he acted when he caught sight of Frank. A look of recognition came into his face, while at the same time he appeared embarrassed by their running into each other. Frank smiled and said hello, and the boy nodded back, sheepishly, as he walked past.

"Who was that?" I said.

"A boy from the beach," Frank said.

"And?" I looked at him when he failed to reply. "You're being awfully mysterious."

Later it occurred to me that Frank had so completely empathized with the boy that, out of deference to his tender feelings, he was reluctant to enlighten me about their shared experience. Perhaps he wouldn't even

have told me about it had we not run into him. "It's just something that happened on the beach this morning," Frank said, going on to explain that he was stretched out on a beach towel, dozing, when he heard distant cries for help. He quickly sat up and saw someone struggling in the surf, caught in an undertow. It turned out to be a boy he'd seen on the beach, an unusually self-possessed child for his age who was always arguing with his mother about going into the water unattended. "Don't worry about me so much!" he insisted, according to Frank. "I know how to swim." And now the boy was in trouble; the beach was virtually empty, and nobody else was in the water. But Frank, being an expert swimmer, something few people know, was able to reach him in good time and bring him safely ashore.

ON: Frank O'Hara saved a boy's life!

[LeSueur continues] "So that was why he acted funny, running into you just now," I suggested... "He felt chagrined about the whole thing," Frank said. "He came over and thanked me later--at his mother's insistence, I'm sure--and that only made it worse."

OK: That's so poignant...

[LeSueur continues] Yes, but there you have it, and with everything that was going on that day, Frank sleeping until ten or so, as Hal had mentioned to me, the boy's rescue, my phone call, preparations for my arrival, etc., it is a wonder Frank found the time and solitude to write his poem, really. Of course it didn't take him long to knock off a poem, and he never needed peace and quiet. But it's still hard to imagine when or where he would have written it. And why didn't he show his memorable 'True Account' that day or ever to Hal, particularly since Hal's name comes up in it? Or why didn't Hal hear him typing, or say anything to me about Frank writing it, for Hal was in the habit of recounting the details of the day, and Frank's writing of a poem at his home would have pleased him, immensely, for he was keenly interested in Frank's work.

TM: Hmm...

[LeSueur continues] Yes, it's strange, isn't it? It's the big mystery poem, no question. Someone has suggested to me that Frank wasn't sure of the poem, that he put it away and forgot about it. I doubt that. But I don't doubt that he was awakened by the sun and thought of Mayakovsky and then recorded his own dialogue, partly in tribute to the Russian poet he admired so much, a sort of gloss on Mayakovsky's poem. The account is described as "true" for good reason, I guess, and

Frank must have transcribed it right away, on the Royal portable he'd brought with him. But wouldn't his typing have been noticed by Hal in the next room? And as I said, what of his rescue of the boy later that day? In a sense, was it not an extension of the poem, its occurrence as clandestine as Frank's conversation with the sun? Why wouldn't Frank, so attentive, as we know, to the charms of the quotidian, to the unexpected occurrences of the day, have entered even an allusion to such a poignant and special occasion as the boy's rescue? What a perfect thing to tell the sun, after all... Well, anyway, I don't know if any of that is useful to you gentlemen, but you've gotten me to thinking. You may do with this what you wish, I suppose. But why are you so interested? We have the poem, and that seems enough, doesn't it?

OK: Ah, it is such a great monologue, isn't it? We felt it would be inappropriate at that time to tell Mr. LeSueur of our specific suspicions. But we did ask, I can't remember who did: Do you know if Mr. Kenneth Koch took Mr. O'Hara's typewriter shortly after Mr. O'Hara died? "No, no," said Mr. LeSueur. "I don't know that and I never thought about it. Why do you ask, pray tell?"

TM: Yes, and a pigeon hopped up on the table all of a sudden then, and we all laughed, and we chatted some more, pleasantly in the falling sun, asking him to tell us more about Mr. O'Hara, his small habits, his way in the quotidian sequence of things, his humanity, in other words, and O, what an interesting hour or two it was!

ON: He was so eloquent and charming!

OK: Then we said goodbye, we shook hands, and watched him walk away, he turning back to us, smiling and waving, we never to see him again nor to have contact with him.

ON: Which is just terrible of us, of course!

OK: But you, who were so taken. Why did you not write him subsequently?

ON: Oh, I don't know, isn't it strange how we abandon without explanation those who are so close to our hearts, those who intrigue us most? How sad.

TM: Be that as it may, we then paid the bill and rode in a yellow automobile to the house of Kenneth Koch, after calling him on the telephone.

OK: Yellow automobile? I think they call it a taxi cab... [laughing and clinking of sake cups in mock toast]

TM: And so we knocked upon his door.

ON: It opened, and there stood a man with a handsome head of hair, a black turtleneck, grey slacks, and fluffy beige slippers. "Come in, come in!" he said, enthusiastically, waving his arms. "So nice of you to stop by and say hello!" And it struck me how his breezy manner was just like the sound of his poetry.

OK: So many books all around, and the sunlight, it was late now, and I remember its soft glow in beams through window slats all around. "What can I do for you three gentlemen," he kindly asked, smiling, inviting us to sit on the divan, which we all did, somewhat awkwardly, in a row.

TM: Yes, I remember thinking to myself, "Perhaps we look like the Three Stooges sitting here, facing him."

ON: "Mr. Koch," I said, clearing my throat, "You will forgive us if this question seems impertinent or presumptuous. But are you the true author of 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island'?"

TM: Mr. Koch's mouth fell a little bit open. There was a long silence... The honking of car horns filled the air for a long time, or so it seemed. Mr. Koch, who only moments before had been so full of *joie de vivre* now appeared to become ill at ease, his hands moved to and fro, he took off his glasses and rubbed, affectedly, the corners of his eyes. He started to get up but then sat down once again. "What?" he exclaimed. "Just what in the freaking blazes are you talking about?" And then he laughed, but in a way that was very forced, quite nervous.

ON: There was another silence. I interjected: "Mr. Koch, forgive us, we know our question is unusual, but it does appear that no one knew of this now very famous poem before you suddenly read it at the memorial for Mr. O'Hara shortly after his death, and this is very strange, since Mr. O'Hara was always effusively sharing his poems with his friends, no?"

OK: "Really? Who told you this?" said Mr. Koch. "Yes, yes, so no one knew...And what of it? And anyway, how do *you* know he showed every poem around? Forgive me if I'm a bit confused here."

ON: "Mr. Joseph LeSueur told us this," I said. "We just had martinis with him at The Cedar."

TM: "Joe?" said Mr. Koch. "Well, Joe's been acting a bit odd lately. Joe... Joe... Anyway, all I can tell you is the simple fact that I discovered the poem in

Frank's papers. It's unmistakably typed, like a great deal of his later poems, on his personal portable Royal, for goodness sakes, which he habitually took with him out of town!"

ON: Yes," I continued. "But we understand from Mr. Larry Rivers, with whom we spoke on the phone two days ago, that you took Mr. O'Hara's Royal with you when you went with your suitcases to Mr. O'Hara's apartment the day after his death. He said you carried it away from his apartment and that in the grief of it all neither he nor Mr. Frank Lima gave it a second thought."

OK: "Huh? Look," said Mr. Koch, "Larry is famous for imagining all sorts of things after getting into his cups. And anyway, I think this is all pretty strange to say the least. I don't know what you are all getting at, and I really don't feel comfortable with the silliness of all of this, and come to think of it, I'm not even sure who you people are. Frank O'Hara is the author of 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island,' and that is the end of that. This is truly quite ridiculous!"

TM: And with this remark he showed us to the door, smiling somewhat tightly and bidding us, curtly, a good day, for, he said, "I'm afraid I am late for a previous engagement."

OK: We heard the bolt and dead lock behind us.

ON: And then we went back to The Cedar and had some more martinis. But I'll never forget his fluffy slippers!

TM: Well, so what are the issues here? In addition to the very intriguing, tantalizing clues presented in Joseph LeSueur's account, is there anything in the poem that might seem to hint at its Kochian authorship?

ON: Well, let's see... There is first of all the obvious fantasticalness of the poem, the Mayakovskyan theme of a conversation with the sun, and one can well see how the whole scene strongly suggests an event in the afterlife, for only there may such an impossible incidence hold any water.

OK: And there is, for me, a passage that is a dead giveaway, so to speak [reads]:

*And
always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. That
is your inclination, known in the heavens*

*and you should follow it to hell, if
necessary, which I doubt.*

*Maybe we'll
speak again in Africa, of which I too
am specially fond. Go back to sleep now
Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem
in that brain of yours as my farewell."*

Indeed, what are those words if not the words of a friend or lover or brother speaking to a departed friend, softly announcing, as he does, his gift of authorship?

ON: And the Sun's voice... It registers as unmistakably Kochean, I'd say: Consider his later poem, "Some General Instructions," for example, an uncanny echo, there, of the Sun's voice in "A True Account..."

OK: And the odd, awkwardly self-conscious reference to Africa, so slyly, it seems, an allusion to O'Hara's off-handed mention of the "poets of Ghana," in his famous poem, 'The Day Lady Died.' And then this, at the poem's very end [reads]:

*"Sun, don't go!" I was awake
at last. "No, go I must, they're calling
me."*

*"Who are they?"
Rising he said "Some
day you'll know. They're calling to you
too." Darkly he rose, and then I slept.*

TM: Ah yes, there is hardly need to comment much on those concluding stanzas... the tiny poem left "in that brain of yours" as "my farewell," the dark rising, the mysterious "They" calling, the poet now "sleeping." In fact, introducing this stanza, Brad Gooch has this to say, in his biography, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*:

[T]he poem had been written by O'Hara on July 10, 1958, when he was visiting Hal Fondren at his rented house at Fire Island Pines, not far from the spot where he would be hit almost exactly eight years later. The poem consists of a conversation between the Sun, who wakes O'Hara and complains petulantly, "When I woke up Mayakovsky he was / a lot more prompt," and the apologetic poet's comment, "Sorry, Sun, I stayed / up late last night talking to Hal."

"I almost fell off my chair," remembers [Kenneth] Koch. "It was Frank talking about his own death." In the following months, Koch often read the poem at poetry readings to audiences who were invariably moved by its almost too neatly prophetic parting stanza...

ON: "Almost too neatly prophetic" indeed!

OK: A death, to be sure, that took place on Fire Island, only a short stroll from where the poem was supposedly composed, when the sun had gone down, before it again darkly rose... Ah, the sun, the sun... It is the most ubiquitous figure across Koch's oeuvre, really, appearing again and again.

ON: Yes. And let us observe the following: It's well known that the NY School of poets were very open to false attributions and writerly dissimulations. Koch himself was a great fan of Ern Malley, for example, the famous invented Australian poet.

OK: Not to mention that he wrote one of his greatest books, *Some South American Poets*, under a variety of names... So one might ask: Is it not possible to conceive that a poet sympathetic to authorial subterfuge and indirection would adopt a grief-mask in selfless offering for the beloved, dead friend? That he would do so in a poetic ritual of oblation to his friend's afterlife?

TM: Well put. And speaking of books he wrote, there is the marvelous, reader-friendly late book of "criticism," entitled *Making Your Own Days*, this phrase taken, of course, from 'A True Account.' And also his last book of poetry pedagogy, *Talking to the Sun*. The poem never seems to have left the forefront of his mind, does it? But let us reemphasize here the central and curious fact, a matter of record: Kenneth Koch removed from O'Hara's apartment all available poetic notebooks and manuscripts *in the hours* after the mortal accident. In such strangely rushed act, he made possible, obviously, the addition we suspect him of making to O'Hara's corpus. And it appears that he also, shortly after the poet's death, came into possession of the brand new journal O'Hara had with him on that fateful night. Its *only entry*, in the poet's unmistakable holograph, and in all probability, the last lines written by him, read:

"He falls; but even in falling he is higher than those who fly into the ordinary sun."

ON: Needless to say, this sends a shiver up one's back.

OK: It seems impossible, doesn't it.

TM: But here is something else: We have examined this otherwise empty notebook,³ and there written on its decorative cover is the poet's name. But what is clear is that the holograph on the cover is *not* in the poet's hand. It is, we strongly feel, in Kenneth Koch's dissimulated hand.

ON: And so this entry, these final words by O'Hara, very likely stand, if one puts one and one together, as the direct inspirational impetus of Koch's miraculously beautiful tribute to his dear friend, the poem 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island.'

OK: And there is one final thing, isn't there?

TM: What's that?

OK: That Kenneth Koch, the Sun who darkly puts a poem in his friend's brain before the latter finally sleeps and goes away to those calling him, prepared his final book, a selected early poems, shortly before his own death, published under the title, *Sun Out*—a collection of poems written when he and O'Hara and Ashbery and Schuyler were so full of life and life was so full of them. Within, is its strange and most famous poem, 'When the Sun Tries to Go On.'

ON: I hadn't thought of that!

TM: And neither had I! ⁴

[Clinking of sake cups in toast. Tape ends.]

³ LeSueur, also, reports in *Digressions* that the signature on the cover is not in O'Hara's holograph. For reasons that cannot be discussed here, Motokiyu has chosen not to reveal the circumstances surrounding his access to O'Hara's last journal.

⁴ Of course, the Koch books mentioned toward the end of the tape-essay, *Making Your Own Days*, *Talking to the Sun*, and *Sun Out* were published after Motokiyu's supposed death in 1996, which was announced in a note by us [KJ & JA] in the appendix section of *Doubled Flowering*. It is with this tape-essay, in other words, that Motokiyu has chosen to reveal that his purported passing was a fictional move within the conceptual unfolding of his much-discussed work. Indeed, "Tosa Motokiyu" (the pseudonym of the primary author of the Yasusada corpus) is still quite alive. Though the Yasusada material is now complete, he intends to continue writing, in coming years, as best he can, under his chosen nom de plume.