

Class 3 : Eating Out

B. Five Poems About Picnics

1. Poets' portraits

In keeping with the theme for today, I posted five poems about picnics; I hope you had time to read them. They cover the span of just over a century, from 1913 to 2020, and I think they offer a good variety. Not all are actually *about* picnics, but they all mention a picnic somewhere, and that is good enough for me.

Let's start with one from the very middle of that span, *Strawberries* by **Edwin Morgan** (1920–2010), the first ever **Makar**, or Poet Laureate of Scotland. [I'm proud to say that he was also a colleague of mine on the faculty of the University of Glasgow way back when, though I don't think our paths crossed.] There is a nice reading of it by **Tom Hiddleston**.

2. Edwin Morgan: *Strawberries*, read by Tom Hiddleston (1½ minutes)

3. Edwin Morgan: *Strawberries*, text

I'll start by asking simply, What does it do for you? There is a very simple level to most poems, and that is a good place to start. It is a story, a memory, and a poem full of love. What is the balance between feeling and detail? What about the form of the poem? It's neither rhymed nor regularly scanned, so why break it into lines, of just *this* length? Why no punctuation? Why does he separate off the last short stanza at the end, and then a single line? What lines can you find whose syntax is not what you would expect from prose, and what do they do? How long after that sultry afternoon do you think the poem was written? And what, if anything, can we glean about the "you" in the poem?

There are at least three versions on YouTube of this next poem, *Where the Picnic Was*, by **Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928): a rather lovely musical setting by **Gerald Finzi**, a poetic film with less pleasant music, and a rather hectoring reading. I'll post the two musical versions on the webpage, but for now you'll have to make do with a reading from me.

4. Thomas Hardy: *Where the Picnic Was* (1913)

Clearly, this is another memory poem, but in a very different key. All the same, I'll ask similar questions. How long ago was the picnic of the title? Who are the other three people mentioned at the end? Why does he choose to return, not in picnic season, but in "winter mire"? What is the role of the detail? It has short lines like the Morgan poem, but this one is rhymed, in a rather unusual scheme: abacbadcc. But why is the third stanza is different, both in the rhyme scheme and the number of lines? How does Hardy use the rhymes at the end to get to the core of his feelings? What is his purpose in writing? You have probably guessed this already, but Hardy's wife died the year before, in 1912.

Crossing to this side of the Atlantic, we have *Picnic, Lightning* by one of our own former Poet Laureates, **Billy Collins** (b.1941). It is not really about picnics at all, but something altogether deeper. This reading is by **David Bauman**.

5. Billy Collins: *Picnic, Lightning* (1998), read by David Bauman
6. Billy Collins: *Picnic, Lightning* (1998), text

Billy Collins' poem jumps off from a throwaway line in Valadimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Much of it is a meditation on life and death. But we can ask some questions. What is the balance between what he is *doing* and what he is *thinking*? What is the function of the detail? It is neither rhymed nor scanned, but there are parts, surely, that could only be poetry. Where do these come, and why? Where would you place this poem on a scale between pessimism and joy? Is there a place where one shifts to the other?

Back now to the beginning of the last century, and a poem written in the middle of the Great War by the novelist **Rose Macaulay** (1881–1958). It is set in Surrey, in the Southeast of England, near enough to France to hear the sound of guns carrying across the water (this was true). Again, I must read it myself.

7. Rose Macaulay: *Picnic* (1917)

Like the other poems, this one balances physical description with internal thought; what is the balance of the two? What and where is she describing, and does it all have the same degree of actuality? It strikes me that the detail of the picnic spot is absolutely first-hand, while the war scenes come from other people's reports only; no surprise there. Other than the fact that writing in rhymed stanzas was still the "normal" approach to poetry (though it would not long remain so), what does Macaulay's use of stanzas do for her? What about her choice of a rhyme scheme in which the first and third lines of each quatrain are *not* rhymed? And why does she divide the poem into three longer sections? When she returns to the image of lying on the grass at the end, is she the same person as at the beginning? I think, incidentally, that Macaulay may have had a very famous poem in the back of her mind when writing: **Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach***.

I added the fifth poem mostly for fun, because I liked the way it matched the situation in the Macaulay. I know nothing about the author, **Nick Syrett**, except that this poem was a winner in a competition held in 2020 by the English magazine *The Spectator*. I originally gave it a title, but have taken it away again; I think he means you to have the experience of figuring it out.

8. Nick Syrett: untitled picnic poem, 2020

Anyone guess what he is describing? Probably it works better in Britain, where we are taught about the Crimean War of the 1850s and Tennyson's poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade* is standard fare in about fifth grade. If you ever saw the 1968 film of the same title, you will remember that parties of well-to-do tourists would picnic on the heights of the Crimea and look down on the fighting below. The futile charge of six hundred men down a valley surrounded by guns on both sides, all riding bravely into near-total annihilation, was indeed the result of "some instruction misapprehended."

9. Main title 3