

Five Poems About Picnics

Edwin Morgan: *Strawberries* (1968)

There were never strawberries
like the ones we had
that sultry afternoon
sitting on the step
of the open french window
facing each other
your knees held in mine
the blue plates in our laps
the strawberries glistening
in the hot sunlight
we dipped them in sugar
looking at each other
not hurrying the feast
for one to come
the empty plates
laid on the stone together
with the two forks crossed
and I bent towards you
sweet in that air
in my arms
abandoned like a child
from your eager mouth
the taste of strawberries
in my memory
lean back again
let me love you

let the sun beat
on our forgetfulness
one hour of all
the heat intense
and summer lightning
on the Kilpatrick hills

let the storm wash the plates.

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

Where we made the fire,
In the summer time,
Of branch and briar
On the hill to the sea
I slowly climb
Through winter mire,
And scan and trace
The forsaken place
Quite readily.

Now a cold wind blows,
And the grass is grey,
But the spot still shows
As a burnt circle — aye,
And stick-ends, charred,
Still strew the sward
Whereon I stand,
Last relic of the band
Who came that day!

Yes, I am here
Just as last year,
And the sea breathes brine
From its strange straight line
Up hither, the same
As when we four came.
— But two have wandered far
From this grassy rise
Into urban roar
Where no picnics are,
And one — has shut her eyes
For evermore.

Billy Collins: Picnic, Lightning (1998)

"My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three." *Lolita*

It is possible to be struck by a meteor or a single-engine plane while reading in a chair at home. Pedestrians are flattened by safes falling from rooftops mostly within the panels of the comics, but still, we know it is possible, as well as the flash of summer lightning, the thermos toppling over, spilling out on the grass. And we know the message can be delivered from within. The heart, no valentine, decides to quit after lunch, the power shut off like a switch, or a tiny dark ship is unmoored into the flow of the body's rivers, the brain a monastery, defenseless on the shore. This is what I think about when I shovel compost into a wheelbarrow, and when I fill the long flower boxes, then press into rows the limp roots of red impatiens—the instant hand of Death always ready to burst forth from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak. Then the soil is full of marvels, bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco, red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick to burrow back under the loam. Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue, the clouds a brighter white, and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge against a round stone, the small plants singing with lifted faces, and the click of the sundial as one hour sweeps into the next.

Rose Macaulay: Picnic (1917)

We lay and ate sweet hurt-berries*
In the bracken of Hurt Wood.
Like a quire of singers singing low
The dark pines stood.

*local Surrey name for huckleberries

Behind us climbed the Surrey hills,
Wild, wild in greenery;
At our feet the downs of Sussex broke
To an unseen sea.

And life was bound in a still ring,
Drowsy, and quiet and sweet...
When heavily up the south-east wind
The great guns beat.

We did not wince, we did not weep,
We did not curse or pray;
We drowsily heard, and someone said,
'They sound clear today'.

We did not shake with pity and pain,
Or sicken and blanch white.
We said, 'If the wind's from over there
There'll be rain tonight'.

* * *

Once pity we knew, and rage we knew,
And pain we knew, too well,
As we stared and peered dizzily
Through the gates of hell.

But now hell's gates are an old tale;
Remote the anguish seems;
The guns are muffled and far away,
Dreams within dreams.

And far and far are Flanders mud,
And the pain of Picardy;
And the blood that runs there runs beyond
The wide waste sea.

We are shut about by guarding walls:
(We have built them lest we run
Mad from dreaming of naked fear
And of black things done).

We are ringed all round by guarding walls,
So high, they shut the view.
Not all the guns that shatter the world
Can quite break through.

* * *

Oh, guns of France, oh, guns of France,
Be still, you crash in vain...
Heavily up the south wind throb
Dull dreams of pain...

Be still, be still, south wind, lest your
Blowing should bring the rain...
We'll lie very quiet on Hurt Hill,
And sleep once again.

Oh, we'll lie quite still, nor listen nor look,
While the earth's bounds reel and shake,
Lest, battered too long, our walls and we
Should break... should break...

Nick Syrett: [untitled] (2020)

entry for *The Spectator's* competition for poetry about picnics

We had the most glorious day for the spectacle
Up on the Sapouné Heights,
With our rugs and our parasols, every receptacle
Brimming with local delights;
'No battle today,' said the Duke with a smile,
But our gentlemen cheered and hallooed all the while
As the miniature soldiers formed column and file
And presented themselves for the fight.

The Highlanders held and the Heavies defended
Our lines against terrible odds,
But then some instruction was misapprehended:
The Lights were all thrown to the gods;
There were certainly less of them there than before,
But by then I'd grown weary of watching the war,
And the clouds had rolled in, which was rather a bore,
And the picnic was more or less ended.