

HOW TO HAVE THE PERFECT PICNIC

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Invite all your friends, or invite no one at all.

Bring your dog, or your lover, or your children, or a swarm of hungry ladybirds.

Choose your setting carefully: somewhere secluded enough to be an escape but not so far away that you lose yourself forever. Preferably a place that offers both sun and shade, to accommodate shifting moods. Choose wisely, or just get in your car or hop on a bus or drag that rusty bicycle out of the shed and feel the slow, inexorable rotation of the earth beneath you and hear the distant hum of the universe expanding and see where you land.

Splurge on a posh picnic blanket, something checkered or woven from the hair of an animal you've never heard of. Spend hours researching this strange creature online until you know their delicate sensibilities and robust mating habits by heart. Or forget the blanket, forget the cutlery. Drink wine from the bottle and eat fistfuls of potato salad. If you find yourself in a bog, eat standing up. If you find yourself in a tree, pretend you're a crow and eat the shiniest foods first. If you find yourself in uncharted territory, congratulations!

Bring along a musical instrument, or blow into a piece of grass, or beat your body like a drum. Or don't generate sound but rather absorb it: the wind in the trees, the shush of a stream. The trickle of blood and nectar that keep us all going. The inevitable dissolution of rock to dust. The rumblings of magma, the promise of eruptions.

There is no perfect picnic.

There are infinite perfect picnics.

When you arrive, be prepared to count how many times a ladybird beats its wings in a second. You will feel something twitching under your shoulder blades, a vestige of wings you should have had. Take several deep breaths. Unfurl like a fern. Bloom like a foxglove, like forsythia, like a forget-me-not.

You can bring sandwiches, or samosas, or spring rolls. You can have all the crisps your heart desires: salt and vinegar, cheese and onion, pickled onion, prawn cocktail, haggis, sweet chilli, beetroot, prosecco and pink peppercorn. Fruit? If you must. Wild berries are best for staining your lips. Forage for mushrooms and wild garlic. Seaweed is a superfood. It is not a picnic if you do not eat. It could be a ramble or a retreat. But a picnic involves the licking of lips, masticating, digestion. A picnic requires hunger as well as satiation.

There's another kind of hunger, though. A meadow ringed with hills. A beach lashed by the sea. Birdsong. Belonging. It's been a long year. Eat the hills, dizzy with snow. Drink the sea, giddy with foam. Rest a while on your blanket, or patch of grass, or bed of sand. Stroke the soft moss, or feel the rough lichen. Did you know lichen isn't a single organism but a relationship? Fungi and algae, two lifeforms living as one. The fungus forms a protective shell for the algae, which drinks up the sun and makes food for them both. Look at the lichen. Marvel at their intimacy.

Look at your loved ones. They have crumbs on their faces, dirt on their knees. Your dog chases the wind. Your lover looks at you. Who is the fungus, and who is the algae? Perhaps the lines have already disappeared. Come here, you say, but they don't listen. They are following a butterfly. They are taking off their shoes to wade across the burn. You follow, leaving your shoes on the shore. You have never felt such cold—nor such pleasure when you emerge and your feet are reborn. Now don't go too far, or go all the way. The lines on a map are only a suggestion. The lines on your palms do not tell a single story.

When it's time to go, leave no trace. Fold up your blanket neatly, or wear it like a veil, one that implies a meeting of two worlds. The other world beckons: work, or warmth, that thing we call home. It is not a picnic if it lasts forever. Take all your rubbish, cover any hot coals. Fold yourself up and squeeze back into that shell of a body. Preserve the memory of the picnic in your breath, in your bones. As you glide or rattle or pedal away, as the city or suburbs or country lane swallows you, anticipate the next time. Where will you go? What will you eat? Who will you become?

Claire O'Connor is an educator who has worked with students of many ages in the U.S., Morocco, Malaysia, Greece, South Africa, and Scotland. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in New Writing Scotland, The Baltimore Review, the Southern Indiana Review, Shenandoah, Wigleaf, and others, and she was a 2022 Best of the Net finalist in fiction. She lives with her wife in Scotland and various other parts of the world.