

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #174

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Poems About June



Does anyone still build a bonfire on a Lake Erie beach, cavort and huddle together against a screech owl swooshing low? Bonfires on the beach are an ancient Nordic, pagan custom celebrating the life force at the seasonal solstices.

Ellen Duffy, a Vermont poet, sings of it in her “Solstice”:

from Solstice

On the first full day of summer the sun is up
the sky as far as it will get and now it will
head south to warm the Antipodes, where today
it rains and gales blow up from the Antarctic.

Here it is summer already, the lawn mowed, garden
weeded and nostalgia for summers past makes her
way into this place. The years of WWII bunkers
on South Beach and the tar coating our feet from

the boats out there and green-eyed Billy, now gone to
fat and trouble, trying to pull me through his bedroom
window. Now, Lily Briscoe paints the lighthouse again,
and my cousins across the yard. And the others, all

of them. Grown middle-aged ... or dead or sick and
their children, for Christ's sake, all grown up.
We were something. The great bonfire on the beach
and sex in the dunes with someone I would

never see or taste again, and hanging on each
other before the fire ...

Now, all these years on, we
see another summer coming, relentless in
its blooms and breeze and thunder rolling up
the valley and apple blossoms strewn like snow
flakes on the ground. [1]

If I argued with Duffy's poem, it would not be about the images from her untamed youth, but the first line declaring June 21st "the first full day of summer." It would, admittedly, be a pedantic argument. The solstices and the equinoxes are not the first day of their respective seasons; they are the highpoint, the mid-point of the season from which the season in question begins to fall away to the next. June 21st is summer's high point from which each day grows shorter by one minute until it bottoms out on December 21st's winter solstice.

It's a quibble, I know, but an irksome one. Shakespeare knew better, which is why he called his wonderful summer solstice comedy a "Midsummer Night's Dream." If he specifically mentions summer by name in the play's text, I missed it. He does, however, have one of the loveliest descriptions in English of a meadow in summer:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet muskroses, and with eglantine.

A Midsummer Night's Dream II, i, l. 257-260.



Recently, I seem to have gotten onto one of my poetry rolls – two weeks ago poems about marriage, last week poems about paying attention, and now this week poems about June, which came from I am not quite sure where. I think it was re-reading some of Mary Oliver while researching for last week's *paying attention* **Book Note**. While she did not write a poem specifically about the summer solstice or the month of June, she did write two exquisite poems about summer. One – “Summer Poem” – beautifully illustrates, without any explanatory asides, what it means to *pay*

attention and to be **present-to-the-present**.

Summer Poem

Leaving the house,
I went out to see

the frog, for example,
in her shining green skin;

and her eggs
like slippery veil;

and her eyes
with their golden rims;

and the pond
with its risen lilies;

and its warmed shores
dotted with pink flowers;

and the long, windless afternoon;
and the white heron

like a dropped cloud,

taking one slow step

then standing awhile then taking
another, writing

her own softfooted poem
through the still waters. [2]

While still paying the minutest and the most intense attention, in her “The Summer Day” Oliver takes her observations a step further than Duffy, who simply notes summer’s neo-pagan, cyclical return. Oliver, reflecting upon herself and her reader, asks “What else should I have done?” and what will you, my reader, do “With your one wild and precious life”? And, of course, she doesn’t supply an answer.

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the [black](#) bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has [flung](#) herself out of the grass,
the one who is [eating](#) sugar out of my hand,
who is [moving](#) her jaws back and [forth](#) instead of up and down –
who is [gazing](#) around with her [enormous](#) and [complicated](#) eyes.
Now she [lifts](#) her pale [forearms](#) and [thoroughly](#) washes her face.
Now she [snaps](#) her [wings](#) open, and [floats](#) away.
I don't know [exactly](#) what a [prayer](#) is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to [kneel](#) in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to [stroll](#) through the fields,
which is what I have been [doing](#) all day.
Tell me, what else [should](#) I have done?
Doesn't [everything](#) die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and [precious](#) life? [3]

I’m tempted to stop with Oliver, because the question she asks, like Hamlet’s “To be or not to be ...,” is the only really important question you can ask yourself or anyone can ask of you. But I thought I’d see what a few more poets had to say about June and summer.

Of course, Robert Burns said his "... luvie is like a red, red rose/That's newly sprung in June" and James Russell Lowell, he of the Lowells who only spoke to the Cabots who only spoke to God, said "What is so rare as a day in June?," but what have other poets had to say about June?



Gwendolyn Brooks, the first Black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, saw in it some of the same heat Ellen Duffy did, but with a twist when the heat beats on city streets.

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon. [4]

Shakespeare understood that summer with its fecundity turns one's thoughts to eros and, so the Freudians say, eros' flipside, death. As in these two poems by Claude McKay, who recalls one night of fugitive love, and Sara Teasdale who can only repay the earth she loves with herself.

from A Memory of June by Claude McKay

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May...
I always see the evening when we met –
The first of June baptized in tender rain –
And walked home through the wide streets, gleaming wet,
Arms locked, our warm flesh pulsing with love's pain.

I always see the cheerful little room,
And in the corner, fresh and white, the bed,
Sweet scented with a delicate perfume,
Wherein for one night only we were wed...
A love so fugitive and so complete. [5]

June Night by Sara Teasdale

OH Earth, you are too dear to-night,
How can I sleep while all around
Floats rainy fragrance and the far
Deep voice of the ocean that talks to the ground?
Oh Earth, you gave me all I have,
I love you, I love you, – oh what have I
That I can give you in return –
Except my body after I die? [6]

For the moment, setting thoughts of death aside, Paul Laurence Dunbar shares the spirit of summer most common to all of us – heat, warmth, “drowsy indolence,” and the sweet peace of “rustling trees”:

from In Summer Time

When summer time has come, and all
The world is in the magic thrall
Of perfumed airs that lull each sense
To fits of drowsy indolence;
When skies are deepest blue above,
And flow'rs aflush, – t then most I love
To start, while early dews are damp,
And wend my way in woodland tramp
Where forests rustle, tree on tree,
And sing their silent songs to me ... [7]

Carl Sandburg caught a similar – I almost said “vibe” – sentiment in his “Summer Stars.”

Summer Stars

Bend low again, night of summer stars.
So near you are, sky of summer stars,
So near, a long-arm man can pick off stars,
Pick off what he wants in the sky bowl,

So near you are, summer stars,
So near, strumming, strumming,
So lazy and hum-strumming. [8]

And, in the spirit of another and simpler time, James Whitcomb Riley, the Hoosier Laureate, shared Dunbar's joy in "drowsy indolence":

from Knee-Deep in June

Tell you what I like the best —
'Long about knee-deep in June,
'Bout the time strawberries melts
On the vine, — some afternoon
Like to jes' git out and rest,
And not work at nothin' else! [9]



I could do this all afternoon — search the internet and my personal library for poems about summer, eros, and death, but to steal a line from Robert Frost "I have miles to go ..." not to sleep, but a radio script to write, a great-nephew's kindergarten graduation to attend, and dinner to make.

So, although it's actually about autumn, I'll end with one of my personal favorites that captures all three themes in one memorable image — wild swans at Coole Park in the west of Ireland. My wife Judy and I have actually been to Coole Park, but that is beside the point. William Butler Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole" captures everything that's been said about summer in the poems above, but, like Oliver and other great artists, he doesn't tell — he shows.

The Wild Swans at Coole

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me

Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away? [10]

Enjoy your summer – indulge in some “drowsy indolence” – and try not to think about politics (or, at least, not too much).



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“Mary Oliver” at **Vanity Fair** available at [How Mary Oliver’s “The Summer Day” Became an American Sensation | Vanity Fair](#) accessed May 28, 2024.

“Gwendolyn Brooks.jpg” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:Gwendolyn Brooks.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed May 28, 2024.

“William Butler Yeats by Sarah Purser 1898.png.” at **Wikimedia Commons** available at [File:William Butler Yeats by Sarah Purser 1898.png - Wikimedia Commons](#) accessed May 28, 2024.

End Notes

1. Duffy, Ellen. “Solstice” at **Academy of American Poets** available at [Solstice by Ellen Dudley - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed May 28, 2024.
2. Oliver, Mary. “Summer Poem,” in **Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver** (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 209.
3. Ibid., p. 316.
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