



## Rose Macaulay, Hurt-Berries and Compassion Fatigue

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The term 'compassion fatigue' is usually associated with a disinclination to donate to yet another mammoth charity telethon. The OED defines the phrase as 'apathy or indifference towards the suffering of others?', and cites an early usage in a 1987 article in *The Listener*:

'What the refugee workers call 'compassion fatigue' has set in. Back in the 1970s, when the boat people were on the front pages, the world was eager to help. But now the boat people are old news.'

In mid-1917, Rose Macaulay, then a junior administrative assistant at the War Office, later to become a noted novelist, biographer and travel writer, wrote a poem that seems very much to be about compassion fatigue. The title 'Picnic, July 1917' initially suggests a carefree activity, but this is weighed down by the significance of the year. In the opening section of the poem, picnickers are lying in bracken eating berries in a kind of drowsy nirvana ' but then they hear a noise:

See [Stanzas 1 to 5](#).

Hurt Wood is a real wood in Surrey, which Macaulay would visit when staying with her friend Naomi Royde-Smith in her cottage on the North Downs. Royde-Smith was in love with Walter de la Mare and in a letter pressing him to visit, Macaulay described Hurt Wood as 'the peaceullest and silentest and sweetest-smelling place anywhere'. But 'Hurt Wood' also carries associations of damage and pain into the poem, and it is notable that the picnickers are eating 'hurt-berries?', an archaic form of hurtleberry, whortleberry or bilberry (related to the American huckleberry). Sweet hurt-berries suggest an exquisite form of suffering ' and the deliberate archaism is part of the injured English rurality that Macaulay is building up with references to Surrey and Sussex, to wild greenery and bracken, to the 'quire' (another archaism) of dark pines assembled like so many singers of Matins, and to the unseen English Channel. All these elements bind the picnickers in a 'still ring?', and there's an echo here of a poem by the seventeenth-century writer Henry Vaughan (1622-95). Vaughan's 'The World' begins: 'I saw Eternity the other night, / Like a great ring of pure and endless light'. Macaulay's picnickers are suspended in a ring of similar timelessness, in rural serenity that is yet inflected with pain.

Beating into the tranquility is the sound of the guns firing in France. Macaulay catalogues the picnickers' reactions in terms of what they do not do: no wincing or weeping, no cursing or praying ' just a matter-of-fact 'They sound clear today' and a remark about the weather. Such apparent apathy is puzzling, but the middle section of the poem offers a justification:

See [Stanzas 6 to 10](#).

These stanzas plot a growing familiarity with the death and suffering occurring in the trenches of France and Flanders: 'anguish' and 'pain' are now old news 'muffled' and 'remote' and the ring around the picnickers is now of 'guarding walls' that shut out 'pity' and 'rage'. By 1917, those picnicking are in a state of self-induced numbness, having erected mental defences that the guns cannot penetrate.

'In the last two decades,' wrote the Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist and trauma specialist Paul Valent in 2002, 'it has become accepted that people can be secondarily affected by the sufferings of others.' 'Compassion fatigue' is the term for a species of secondary traumatic stress, the symptoms of which include, according to Valent, grief, depression, anxiety, horror, fear, rage and shame. Numbing and avoidance phenomena are common reactions. Compassion fatigue is not habitually associated with the First World War (although the centenary anniversaries may well induce mild versions in some people), but this seems to be what Macaulay is describing.

And yet, in the third and final section of the poem, it appears that the picnickers' mental fortresses may not be as solid as first thought:

See [Stanzas 11 to 13](#).

No longer numb, the picnickers now seem all too susceptible to the noise of the guns and what it signifies. The splintering of the last line of the poem with ellipses suggests an imminent mental fragmenting. Compassion fatigue has become compassion overload: the fate of those who feed on hurt-berries.

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Rose Macaulay was a student at [Somerville College, Oxford](#). In 1903, she took part in a 'Going Down Play' (a play to celebrate graduation). Each student dressed as the animal she considered most closely resembled her nature. To view Rose Macaulay's portrayal of herself as a caterpillar, visit (<http://blogs.some.ox.ac.uk/archive/2012/03/21/rose-macauley-as-a-caterpillar-in-1903/>) or the Somerville archives themselves.

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