

Elizabeth Alexander

THE AFRICAN PICNIC

World Cup finals, France v. Brasil.
We gather in Gideon's yard and grill.
The TV sits in the bright sunshine.
We want Brasil but Brasil won't win.
Aden waves a desultory green and yellow flag.
From the East to the West to the West to the East
we scatter and settle and scatter some more.
Through the window, Mama watches from the cool indoors.

Jonah scarfs meat off of everybody's plate,
kicks a basketball long and hollers, "goal,"
then roars like the mighty lion he is.
Baby is a pasha surrounded by pillows
and a bevy of Horn of Africa girls
who coo like lovers, pronounce his wonders,
oil and massage him, brush his hair.
My African family is having a picnic, here in the U.S.A.

Who is here and who is not?
When will the phone ring from far away?
Who in a few days will say goodbye?
Who will arrive with a package from home?
Who will send presents in other people's luggage
and envelopes of money in other people's pockets?
Other people's children have become our children
here at the African picnic.

In a parking lot, in a taxi-cab,
in a winter coat, in an airport queue,
at the INS, on the telephone,
on the crosstown bus, on a South Side street,
in a brand-new car, in a djellaba,
with a cardboard box, with a Samsonite,
with an airmail post, with a bag of spice,
at the African picnic people come and go.

The mailman sees us say goodbye and waves
with us, goodbye, goodbye, as we throw popcorn,
ululate, ten or twelve suitcases stuffed in the car.
Goodbye, Mamma, goodbye –
The front door shut. The driveway bare.

Goodbye, Mamma, goodbye.
The jet alights into the night,
a huge, metal machine in flight,
Goodbye, Mamma, goodbye –
At the African picnic, people come and go
and say goodbye.