

The Christmas Truce

by Carol Ann Duffy (for Armistice Day, 2011)

Christmas Eve in the trenches of France, the
guns were quiet.

The dead lay still in No Man's Land –
Freddie, Franz, Friedrich, Frank . . .

The moon, like a medal, hung in the clear,
cold sky.

Silver frost on barbed wire, strange tinsel,
sparkled and winked.

A boy from Stroud stared at a star
to meet his mother's eyesight there.

An owl swooped on a rat on the glove of a
corpse.

In a copse of trees behind the lines, a lone
bird sang.

A soldier-poet noted it down – *a robin
holding his winter ground* –
then silence spread and touched each man
like a hand.

Somebody kissed the gold of his ring;
a few lit pipes;
most, in their greatcoats, huddled,
waiting for sleep.

The liquid mud had hardened at last in the
freeze.

But it was Christmas Eve; *believe*; belief
thrilled the night air,
where glittering rime on unburied sons
treasured their stiff hair.

The sharp, clean, midwinter smell held
memory.

On watch, a rifleman scoured the terrain –
no sign of life,
no shadows, shots from snipers, nowt to
note or report.

The frozen, foreign fields were acres of pain.

Then flickering flames from the other side
danced in his eyes,
as Christmas Trees in their dozens shone,
candlelit on the parapets,
and they started to sing, all down the
German lines.

Men who would drown in mud, be gassed,
or shot, or vaporised

by falling shells, or live to tell, heard for the
first time then –

*Stille Nacht. Heilige Nacht. Alles schläft,
einsam wacht . . .*

*Cariad, the song was a sudden bridge from
man to man;*

*a gift to the heart from home,
or childhood, some place shared . . .*

When it was done, the British soldiers
cheered.

A Scotsman started to bawl *The First Noel*
and all joined in,
till the Germans stood, seeing
across the divide,
the sprawled, mute shapes of those who
had died.

All night, along the Western Front, they
sang, the enemies –
carols, hymns, folk songs, anthems, in
German, English, French;
each battalion choired in its grim trench.

So Christmas dawned, wrapped in mist, to
open itself
and offer the day like a gift
for Harry, Hugo, Hermann, Henry, Heinz . . .
with whistles, waves, cheers, shouts,
laughs.

*Frohe Weihnachten, Tommy! Merry
Christmas, Fritz!*

A young Berliner, brandishing schnapps,
was the first from his ditch to climb.
A Shropshire lad ran at him like a rhyme.

Then it was up and over, every man, to
shake the hand
of a foe as a friend,
or slap his back like a brother would;
exchanging gifts of biscuits, tea,
Maconochie's stew,

Tickler's jam . . . for cognac, sausages,
cigars,
beer, sauerkraut;
or chase six hares, who jumped

from a cabbage-patch, or find a ball
and make of a battleground a football pitch.

*I showed him a picture of my wife. Ich zeigte
ihm*

ein Foto meiner Frau.

Sie sei schön, sagte er.

He thought her beautiful, he said.

They buried the dead then, hacked spades
into hard earth
again and again, till a score of men
were at rest, identified, blessed.

*Der Herr ist mein Hirt ... my shepherd, I
shall not want.*

And all that marvellous, festive day and
night, they came and went,
the officers, the rank and file, their fallen
comrades side by side
beneath the makeshift crosses of midwinter
graves ...

... beneath the shivering, shy stars
and the pinned moon
and the yawn of History;
the high, bright bullets
which each man later only aimed at the sky.