

# 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.

## Questions

- 1) Why do you think the poet chooses to list names in the first verse?
- 2) 'A boy from Stroud stared at a star to meet his mother's eyesight there' What do you think this means?
- 3) Find examples of alliteration. What effect does using alliteration have on the reader?
- 4) What filled the air on Christmas Eve?
- 5) What does the poet mean by 'liquid mud'?
- 6) Find 3 lines that support the idea the battlefield was eerie?
- 7) What is the German for Merry Christmas?
- 8) Find 2 lines that suggest the soldiers on both sides acted as friends during the truce.
- 9) What gifts did the men exchange?
- 10) What does the poet mean by 'shivering, shy stars'?

