

Christmas 1914

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Moonlight shone all glinty off bayonet steel
frost and freeze had turned mud to iron
as subterranean, unmanned men
looked out on Christmas eve,
looked out in their tens of thousands
across Flanders' fields and the plains of Picardy –
those strangely assonant killing grounds –
looked out and wondered, wondered
what that night and day would bring.

Lying and dying had been their lot
since the guns of August broke,
broke out with hope of liberation
from the torpor of the twentieth century.
It was to be a brief blood sacrifice
a burnt offering to the Gods of Progress
followed by deliverance home,
home by Christmas,
home with glorious tales to tell.

Lies, damn lies and dead men
were all they had now.
A million, a thousand thousands,
ten thousand more than that,
who could count, who could number
the loss, could imagine what
those eyes had seen,
eyes that looked out on that
Christmas eve.

And yet, Christmas came.
Historians, those deadly desiccators of the past,
call it the "Christmas Truce" a label
pinned to that day and year, like a
specimen among specimens
in the curio cabinet of the remembered,
recollected, and collected past.
But historians' words cannot contain
the wonder of that hour.

For on that night, war withdrew
as peace descended onto no man's land,

and spread across the wire into
the trenches, bunkers, and dugouts
on either side, seeking out
the tattered, bedraggled and terrified,
evading attempts by officers to
prevent this, this foretaste
of another world.

It came announced in song,
as German voices intoned
"Stille nacht, heilige nacht,
Alles schläft, einsam wacht."
across landscape, never silent,
never asleep.
And then with more voices still,

"Es ist ein Ros entsprungen
aus einer Wurzel zart
Wie uns die Alten sungen
Aus Jesse kam die Art.
Und hat ein Blümlein bracht,
Mitten im kalten Winter
Wohl zu der halben Nacht."

Thereafter, for a day,
peace commanded the field.

Neither Dickens nor Goethe could
have scripted that day,
as Westphalians clasped hands with
Scots guards, Bavarians traded
schnaps for the bully beef of
Lancashire fusiliers, and
killers and those to be killed sat down
peaceably together to share
food, drink and a smoke.

No one who survived the war ever forgot that day.

There would be no others.
Aghast at the lapse of fighting spirit,
chains of command were applied
to ensure there be no quiet on the Western Front
on the three war Christmases to come.
War had to be defended against Christmas.

For the War-Lie is a great lie,
but it is not the old lie:
Dulce et decorum est pro Patria mori.
No, this lie claims
heaven never descends to earth,
enemies are never friends,
forgiveness and redemption
are impossible.

That lie was broken once on Bethlehem's plain,
and once again that Christmas on Flanders' fields.
And where again might peace descend, perhaps
in the streets of Baghdad, or Kabul, or Jerusalem,
where sentries watch, and wait, and hope.
