

VERNON SCANNELL

Hide and Seek

Call out. Call loud: 'I'm ready! Come and find me!'

The sacks in the toolshed smell like the seaside.

They'll never find you in this salty dark,

But be careful that your feet aren't sticking out.

Wiser not to risk another shout.

The floor is cold. They'll probably be searching

The bushes near the swing. Whatever happens

You mustn't sneeze when they come prowling in.

And here they are, whispering at the door;

You've never heard them sound so hushed before.

Don't breathe. Don't move. Stay dumb. Hide in your blindness.

They're moving closer, someone stumbles, mutters;

Their words and laughter scuffle, and they're gone.

But don't come out just yet; they'll try the lane

And then the greenhouse and back here again.

They must be thinking that you're very clever,

Getting more puzzled as they search all over.

It seems a long time since they went away.

Your legs are stiff, the cold bites through your coat;

The dark damp smell of sand moves in your throat.

It's time to let them know that you're the winner.

VERNON SCANNELL

Hide and Seek
(cont.)

Push off the sacks. Uncurl and stretch. That's better!

Out of the shed and call to them: 'I've won!

Here I am! Come and own up I've caught you!

The darkening garden watches. Nothing stirs.

The bushes hold their breath; the sun is gone.

Yes, here you are. But where are they who sought you?

LAURA KASISCHKE

Game

*I thought we were playing a game
in a forest that day.*

I ran as my mother chased me.

But she'd been stung by a bee.

Or bitten by a snake.

She shouted my name, which

*even as a child I knew was not
"Stop. Please. I'm dying."*

*I ran deeper
into the bright black trees
happily
as she chased me: How*

*lovely the little bits and pieces.
The fingernails, the teeth. Even
the bombed cathedrals
being built inside of me.*

LAURA KASISCHKE

*Game
(cont.)*

*How sweet
the eye socket. The spine. The
curious, distant possibility that God
had given courage
to human beings
that we might
suffer a little longer.*

And by the time

*I was willing to admit that
all along
all along
I'd known it was no game*

*I was a grown woman, turning
back, too late.*

CAROL ANN DUFFY

The Christmas Truce

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.

CAROL ANN DUFFY

The Christmas Truce *(cont.)*

*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.*

CAROL ANN DUFFY

The Christmas Truce *(cont.)*

*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 Weinachten, 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.*

CAROL ANN DUFFY

The Christmas Truce
(cont.)

*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*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Playthings

Child, how happy you are sitting in the dust, playing with a broken twig all the morning.

I smile at your play with that little bit of a broken twig.

I am busy with my accounts, adding up figures by the hour.

Perhaps you glance at me and think, "What a stupid game to spoil your morning with!"

Child, I have forgotten the art of being absorbed in sticks and mud-pies.

I seek out costly playthings, and gather lumps of gold and silver.

With whatever you find you create your glad games, I spend both my time and my strength over things I never can obtain.

In my frail canoe I struggle to cross the sea of desire, and forget that I too am playing a game.

A E HOUSMAN

Twice a week the winter thorough

*Twice a week the winter thorough
Here stood I to keep the goal:
Football then was fighting sorrow
For the young man's soul.*

*Now in Maytime to the wicket
Out I march with bat and pad:
See the son of grief at cricket
Trying to be glad.*

*Try I will; no harm in trying:
Wonder 'tis how little mirth
Keeps the bones of man from lying
On the bed of earth.*