

REDBORNE FICTIONARY

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CHRISTMAS 2017



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

The Festive period in December is a time of holiday, celebration and joy for many people from different walks of life. Christmas is a rare time in the year when we Brits universally have something in common and for once, it is not something that we scorn or moan about with our internationally recognised angst and pessimism. The positivity generated by Christmas is one truly tangible, positive effect on the British population, and the depth of happiness which it generates borders on the supernatural.

In light of this, in this 3rd Fictionary issue, our talented poetry, prose and rant contributors have attempted to incorporate themes of satire and comedy into their submissions, to reflect the merry aura of Christmas.

On the other hand, this is subsequently challenged by our “Trenches” serial’s third instalment which depicts a tragic and graphic loss of life on Christmas Day in 1915.

This contrast serves as a reminder that not everyone will be enjoying Christmas in the same way, to same degree, or even at all. We must encourage everyone to have the best time possible and remember that for many, Christmas can be hard time, only survived by the generosity and inclusivity that others provide.

JACOB ADAMS & WILLIAM SIMPSON

I CAN SEE SNOW

The rain lashes against the window on every beat of my heart
It smudges and smears the outside world, transforming the view into abstract art
Proof of the horrendous weather is stained in condensation before my eyes
And yet all I see is the sprinkling of snow as the sky cries
Tears trickling along the gutter turn to snowflakes with the most intricate designs
In the reflection of puddles are couples hanging mistletoe and sipping second glasses of wine
It's England, don't be daft, there's no thick covering of snow
Santa's wearing his ironically Superdry raincoat and yelling a damp "ho, ho, ho!"
I could see the rain last Christmas
There was no icy glow
I was sad about the rain last Christmas
So how come when it's raining I can see snow?

The turkey's burnt
The gravy's somehow dry
The sprouts are getting cold
"Can I skip to my mince pie?"
Dad's almost dozing off
But now the Christmas songs have begun
With an out-of-tune rendition of Shakin' Stevens' Merry Christmas Everyone

And God rest our ears, Mum's attempting the high notes in All I Want For Christmas Is You

And yet I can't taste the charcoal on the turkey's flesh

And I can't hear the flat notes sung by the tone-deaf

I could taste it last Christmas

I felt like hurling

I cursed at them for singing so badly last Christmas

It was a critique of which they were deserving

The turkey's burnt, they're singing badly and there's no icy glow

So how come I can't taste it, I can't hear it but I can see snow?

We missed the Queen's speech

Grandad's upset

"What the hell's Nan doing with those castanets?"

We did karaoke last year but no-one wants to relive that

Mum's starting to stress that when we left we forgot to feed the cat

Let's open the presents before we run out of time

Soon it'll be the New Year and we'll hear Big Ben chime

Tearing through the ribbons and Tesco wrapping paper

My Aunt's knitted a scarf – why can't I escape her?

And yet I can't feel scared of Nan and her castanets

And I can't argue about the itchy homemade scarf around my neck

I could feel scared about the castanets last Christmas

We had to take them off her

I could cry about the knitted presents last Christmas

But now I see it's actually kind of her

Nan's got her castanets, I'm having to wear an awful scarf, the turkey's burnt, they're singing badly and there's no icy glow

So how come I'm not scared, I don't mind, I can't taste it, I can't hear it but I can see snow?

We settle down to watch the Strictly Christmas special
Nan moans at Grandad because he hasn't put on the kettle
I start to imagine what future Christmases might be like
The curtains are drawn in front of the cold December night
I see Nan and Grandad hold each other's hands
I suddenly think of you and finally understand
This Christmas, I'm not scared of Nan and her castanets
I don't mind wearing a scarf that irritates my neck
My mouth doesn't carry the taste of a turkey that's been cremated
When the painful singing stops, my ears don't feel elated
There's no icy glow
Yet you've managed to fill my Christmas with snow
Because you make me happier than you will ever know

ANDREA KNIBB

TRENCHES

PART III - Tea and Crumpets in No Man's Land

25th December, 1915

The shelling was deafening, howitzers thudding into the muddy banks of trenches to clink and explode; showering shrapnel and soil down on tin hats. Half a group of artillery lads, using their backs against the wheels of an 18-pounder to shove it through the clogged ground underfoot, their boots sinking into its filthy grasps - one slipped. And the gun came clanking down upon the poor boys back, snapping it in two with a wretched, nauseating scream. "GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF!" He wheezed and shook, yet trying to pull it up only caused the soldier to be dragged deeper into the soft, churned mud.

Far beyond the scene, a horse whinnied, flashing the whites of its eyes whilst it's legs became torn by barbed wire, the wicked metal hooks tearing open the soft stomach of the beast - it's dead rider hanging from the stirrups. A stray bullet took mercy leaving it twitching and juddering till the nervous system at last faltered; falling limp.

Men shouted, the yelling never pausing for even a second as whistles were blown. One battalion went over, charging into the rattling of machine gun fire, rifles blazing and kicking, recoiling into shoulders before being blown off their feet. Smoke hazed the battlefields, sweat poured over brows, blood seeped from limbless stumps; and the screaming. Always the screaming. Demented and twisted, like a broken harp singing the praises of crippled souls.

Captain Ward hunkered down on the front, within a shell crater. Marks and Jonesy by his side. "WE HAVE TO MOVE FORWARD, BOYS." He shouted over the cacophony of noise, breaking out his revolver to snap the chamber and reload.

Jonesy shook violently, his fingers yellowing from the force he gripped his rifle. "I - I can't - I can't - Captain - I -" His words dissolved into inconsolable sobbing. Shoulders juddering up and down, "- Th - they're - we're - *dead!* We're not going home, we're never going to see it again." He lamented hunched over with melancholy, losing his mind to the noise. The chorus of war. Guns and knives and agony. "I'll never see Dover again! I'll

never see my girl again!”

Christmas of 1914, they had laughed and jeered, eating pudding from tin cans, with eyes too big for their stomachs. Ward sat among them, clinking mugs with the officers who poured out extra whisky rations. A young lieutenant from the Lancashire battalion stood up, “Might not be over this Christmas boys! But the end is close! I can feel it. We have Fritz on the run!”

The Lancastrian was gone now.

Ward tightly grasped Jonesy by the neck of his shirt. Although a stern, reserved man, something incited anger within him. “MAN UP!” He bel-lowed. “MAN UP, DAMN IT!” Jonesy blinked.

“I’m sorry Captain.” And the moment Ward dropped his hand, Jonesy leapt up and threw himself over the side of the crater; Arsenal scarf trailing behind him like a festival ribbon. It was suicide. “JONESY!!” The soldier turned to stare - before the tell-tale returning ratta-tat-tat of a German MG 08 thudded along the scattered few who stood out in the open.

His body jolted in a seizure of bullets, red blossoming from his chest in dark stains. As rich as the velvet petals of roses - bursting forth till withering. Dropping down.

Marks grabbed Ward from going out after him. “It ain’t worth it.” The Captain faltered. Hanging his head, as if supported by an invisible noose. “It never frickin’ is.”

Song permeated the air, a mixture of German and English, following the tune of ‘Silent Night’. Packets of German cigarettes were tied to stones, and lobbed up into the allied trenches. Ward remembered how people hit the floor thinking those gifts were grenades. A friendly voice calling out “Frohe Weihnachten!”

The men they fought, were no different from themselves. Using the last of their brandy rations to fill a small flask, the English returned the favour. One of the men on the cricket team threw it over, hearing the clank as it hit the enemy trench. “Merry Christmas!”

Ward choked - “I killed him, Marks. I killed him.” Yet Marks could only offer a squeeze of his shoulder. “Should never have-” The younger, Northern lad shook his head.

“Ain’t nothin’ to frickin’ do now. We keep movin’ on. Like you said. We gotta keep movin’. To hell with this war, and to hell with frickin’ Asquith!!”

Supporting one another, they crawled up into No Man's Land. Thick, clay mud slickening their Khaki uniforms. Ward glanced between the next crater, and that of Marks. Yet those words rang in his head, like the forever trudge of marching boots. *Keep moving forward.* A mortar exploded, as if right beside their heads, throwing Ward up - and cushioning him with corpses. Maggots writhing beneath sunken sockets. A low buzz infiltrated his hearing, sharpening in pitch. Warm, wet blood trickled from his ear. The drum had burst on the side facing the explosion.

"MARKS! MARKS!" He pressed his encrusted palm to his aching head, dragging himself over to the fresh pit.

The boy was dead. Not entirely, yet the shrapnel had taken off the top of his skull and that thick hair of his - the hair which could never be tamed. Ward retched, his hand serving only to get in the way as he emptied his stomach. Nerves and disgust combined. Tongue coated with that acidic bite of bile.

Marks was breathing still, gazing at Ward who kneeled. The captain swallowed. Ward reaching for his pistol - yet it had vanished from his belt. Putting his hand over the lad's chest, he smiled. "Sh-shh ... t-there's - there's the - the red cross now! You're going home to Blighty! Blighty! Home." His fingers wrapped around the boy's rifle. Lee Enfield issued. "H-home for boxing day." Gently sliding it out from under him, he angled it under Mark's temple - and tugged the trigger with an audible click.

The wounded boy's eyes went wide, and muted he desperately tried to bat away the muzzle - Ward hurriedly pulled the pin mechanism back to put a bullet in the chamber - "I'm sorry - I'm so sorry."

The next time he pulled the trigger, the bullet sprayed what was left of his head across the field. Skin and flesh, brain matter. Ward breathed.

He took a glance upward, tears streaming down his pale, filthy face. Cuff damp from sick and smothered in things not even a hardened soldier could describe. Hellish, biblical to the extent one only found in the old testament. Dashed against the rocks for the sake of God.

"Oi oi! Marks! You seen this magazine? Bought it for a can of peaches off a bloke in Piccadilly trench. Look at this, they're sayin' the Russians are up in arms about some - bol-bolsh-bolshe-vickers." Jonesy scowled at the word which escape him. *"Never mind that, but have you seen this about Ypres? Absolutely insane over there. I have a mate who's fightin' in the Worcestershire lads, and he said it was bloody hell on Earth."*

Marks batted the thin magazine Jonesy held. "Ah, like someone cares.

Enough about the frickin' war, Jesus Christ. Have a drink, settle in. The boys in the London set are doin' a nativity. McAvery is dressed up as the bloody Virgin Mary! That frickin' hulk of a man."

Bennet stumbled in, jabbing his thumb behind his head. "The play's startin'!"

He lay there, whilst the fighting stormed. Each exhale and inhale, deep and ragged. Throat stinging, head throbbing. Closing his eyes, Ward could see them. That photograph. The last one they took together behind the lines. Jonesy, Marks, Bennet. Him.

Ward needed to cover himself - and once more looked to the crater he and Marks were headed for. *Keep moving forward.* He'd do what the dead men wanted. One arm after another, grunting in exertion and shivering with cold. His canteen of water gone, leaving him with a bitter taste of copper and vomit. Rolling over the side, he fell into the deep puddle which had collected in the middle. A face-down grey-uniformed man lay, bloating in the rancid, natural pond.

The captain, was drawn to the British corpse who lay nearer the edge. Staring at the overcast skies. Cheeks sunken and gums drawn. Slowly decomposing with a mottled shade of greyish blue. Tin hat tucked with a bible. New testament.

Bennet wore his hat like that.

The closer Ward got, the further he realised that the corpse was none other than the man who had gone missing in action. His wedding band, glinting on his swollen fingers. Twisting the ring off with difficulty and tucking it in his breast pocket - buttoning it closed. Ward had to return it to his loved one. The girl he cried over at night, when he thought nobody else could hear.

In reality, Ward would never let go of that ring.

The shouts went up. "GAS! GAS!" A distant reply, discordant with the sounds of captains and lieutenants relayed to their men - "GAS MASKS ON!" Ward fumbled with Bennet's, untucking the box and wrenching it open. Removing his hat before securing and sealing the mask to his features. Yellow mist fingering out across from the German trench, leaving Ward to scramble as quickly as he could up and out.

An observation craft blocked the sun, watching the tiny dots of men running from the weapon they couldn't fight. And those who had masked up, walking into the fray

He needed to go back. Back - back - back! There was nothing forwards.

Nothing. Forwards was a lie. Back - back - back - to the beginning! Wishing he'd never left his mother's womb.

Ward's skin began to blister. The dirty, mustard fog was around him now. Wrapping it's tendrils around every part, flesh raw and red. The Captain itched his neck and hands, desperately stumbling, climbing, limping - anything. Anything to get away. He leapt up into the emptied side of a British trench.

McAvery's voice could be heard above all else, few glimpsing the masked soldier with raised rifles - which Ward surrendered to. "I'm British! British! Don't shoot!"

Marks would've said that too if he could.

People sheltered themselves, staring bewildered like infants as the scotsman faced down his officer. "I AIN'T GONNAE DIE FOR YER STUPID KING!" The Sergeant lifted his rifle beneath the Lieutenant's chin. Ward cocked his gun and lunging forwards, a thunderous clap shattered the arguments. McAvery shook. Hands wrapped around his throat, where the lead had torn.

The pioneer sergeant finished his rebellion on Ward's watch, and the men looked at that young captain as if a monster.

"It had to be done." Agreement murmured sparsely.

*"Ward, come on ye old begger! Sing! Sing!"
The officer laughed.*

*"God rest ye merry, gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember, Christ, our Saviour
Was born on Christmas day -"*

Those words resounded in his head as if scripture: Keep moving forward and... God save the King.

LUCY GOULDTHORPE

PART III OF VI

A WARM CHRISTMAS

The night glows dull and the flakes prick at my face,

I am reminded of warmth.

A warmth that cannot be duped

one of comfort and care

Yet I am here, hollow and holding out for a forgotten heat.

Fading to a faint red the blood leaves my fingers as

the cold air engulfs me.

A pale wash fades my skin

as the barrier of glass seems to thin.

I sit there frozen in that frame, legs bent, arms hanging.

Head floating, bobbing for air, my lungs hurt, my breathing shallows in a

futile attempt to preserve and protect.

The heat has stopped circulating but it only reached the surface anyway.

RACHEL SIMPSON

RANT COLUMN

Firstly, since this is supposedly a Christmas issue, my editor has asked (forced) me to lighten up my mood and has challenged me to include a number of Christmas puns. He has also challenged me to use every letter of the Elf-a-bet within this article, but personally, I think that would make this piece far too CLAUSTrophobic. THERE. DONE... Never again. That was humiliating and I wouldn't be surprised (or upset) if this magazine was cancelled.

Anyway, happy Christmas everyone! Right, thank God that's over, back to being a grumpy sod.

Wasps

Wasps. The flying disciples of Satan. Summer is here, kids are off school and the time has come to enjoy the warm weather, in most places (sorry Scotland). An afternoon family picnic at the local park, a seemingly harmless event, until the oncoming swarm of aggressive buzzing, parades the bench you and your family had eyed up. You are forced to reconsider your options and patiently wait for the family of 3 that have taken up a 6-seat bench and the children using the benches to trade cards rather than eat to finish. Your big moment finally comes as they get up and begin to walk away. You exchange glances with a bench rivalling family to your left who have the nerve to challenge for your bench even though they arrived 30 seconds after you did. You then find yourself, whilst retaining as much of your dignity as possible, running to the bench clenching the hands of your children and, if the bench rivalling family were that bad, sometimes even your partner. The bench is now all yours, the hard work has paid off and you are now free to return that smug grin that you were initially greeted with, at the new family with the screaming, dribbling child in a push chair arriving through the gates. The food that you so carefully prepared the night before (that your children already know about because you spent the whole of the next morning complaining that you missed the wedding episode of Neighbours on repeat and the Ten O'clock News) is perfectly arranged on your bench ready for all of your relatives to tuck in. But of course, the flying sins return. The youngest member of the family jumps up with a reaction speed you never realised he had - almost as speedy as Mr Fannon on lanyard patrol (I'm sorry) whilst knocking over the 1.5 litre bottle of Pepsi that Granny bought back from a KFC in Los Angeles 3 years ago. This is quickly followed by a scream

from the mother, yet somehow the dad remains calm and allows a wasp to crawl across his nose whilst keeping his eyes transfixed on the uneaten Mars bar. When you have done enough for the devils (the wasps not the children) to go away, it is time for pudding. Ice cream! However, apparently ice cream is the long-lost lover of the wasp family. As soon as the protective layer of packaging has been removed, the wasps are back to where they left off and the screaming and maximum panic kicks in once again. All the devotion to getting that bench for your family, simply ruined by the buzzing pests. The children are now upset because their lunch was ruined and they have unintentionally ended up on a YouTube video titled 'Harlem Shake around wasps', so you go to the swimming pool. But once again, the wasps are back! However, this time they're dead, yes, dead, but are using the children's swimming pool as a graveyard and if you are to swim in it, it turns into an eating contest, the only difference being you are trying not to eat them. Wasps are possibly the only thing that can still be annoying when they're dead, except Michael Jackson, the media's coverage of his departure would drive anyone insane.

Self-Service Checkouts

Indefinitely one of the finest creations for being as far away from what they were designed to be as possible. Admit it, the first time you saw one of these machines, you had to take a minute to comprehend its brilliance and the next minute to ring home and tell the family about your discovery. "I shop and then I get to scan my own items, this is completely brilliant. Gone are the days of the awkward confrontations with the cashier. I will be racing through Sainsbury's like nobody's business." Brilliant, excluding the fact that they don't actually work. In reality, you have finished your treacherous weekly shop that you managed to complete even though your husband forgot the shopping list and you arrive at the 'self-service checkout'. Instead of being greeted by a friendly smile from the cashier, you simply have to stand and wait as you see the one man with a key and a code dash around like a deer facing headlights, running from machine to machine, saving the day 390 times a day. "Mine is flashing red what do I do". "It's charged me for 3 broccoli stalks"! You look back at the empty queues at the normal tills but decide not to give in. You finally get your chance, look at the machine and immediately think that everyone before you were complete idiots. You press a button, scan, put scanned stuff into bag, pay, leave, easy. All is well and then, "unexpected item in the bagging area". This is the moment of your life, where no matter what reputation you have gained, everyone in the shop thinks you are a criminal. "Is that man stealing the DVD mummy"? Your machine is now asking

itself for assistance and the man with the holy grail at his fingertips quickly jogs over, makes no attempt to look or speak to you, bashes some buttons and then he is off. If this isn't the closest to a real-life Superhero we have got, then I don't know what is. The idea of these machines is that queues would be reduced and our shopping experience would be enhanced. Instead, we are left queueing even longer because nobody actually follows the 10 items or less rule and the machines DON'T BLOODY WORK. A human being is actually trained and employed to stand and wait for the machines to break. At this point I would like to calm myself and take a minute to applaud Aldi and Lidl. These companies knew not to follow this stupid trend because they knew that people who actually shop there wouldn't be able to use the things. Now I have relaxed myself, I will return to the story of the weekly shop looking at all events in a new positive light.

The man has now helped you and the final item is in your bag. Hooray, you can go home. "Have you swiped your nectar card"? Nonsense profanity is the only response

"Select payment type".

NICHOLAS PASQUET