

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

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Another week, another installment of Weird Words. Here is UK-based writer Thomas Edmondson's chilling tale "1942." Enjoy...

A warm summer breeze sighed softly through the trees and parted the long water reeds that gathered in the gully of soggy marshland on the heath.

Higher up in the fields, spiders scuttled along the sun-baked dirt, hiding in cracks forged from the heat as passing feet threw chaos upon their desolate world.

Four bodies marched their way down a dirt track, dressed in shorts and gray caps. One of them swung a gas mask in his hand that he slung over his shoulder as they jumped a fence into a field that took them up to the waist in barley.

"Ouch," said one, nicking his arm on a thick stem. The graze welled up with blood and trickled down his arm, "Stupid plant!" He spun around to meet his adversary and began kicking at it, sending up a cloud of dust and spraying waves of soil over the other boys.

"Calm down, Greg," said Paul, shielding his face with a hand.

## Weird Words: "1942"

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Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

"The damn thing cut me," Greg pouted.

"Quit being such a girl," snapped Johnno. He dusted off his shorts. "We've not got long before it starts to get dark, and Charlie here still needs to be initiated." He put an arm over Charlie's limp shoulders.

"I don't mind," shrugged Charlie. "We can wait for another day to do this."

"Nonsense," said Johnno. "You want to be a part of our crew, don't you?" He flashed a wily smile at the other two boys, who smirked back at him.

"Yeah, I suppose," said Charlie, fiddling with the strap of his gas mask.

Paul glared at the mask. "You're not going to need that."

"Mum made me bring it," Charlie blushed. "You know, after what happened to my Uncle Eric."

Paul laughed. "Nothing's going to happen out here. Who'd want to bomb a bunch of fields?"

Charlie wilted and Johnno, grinning from ear to ear, slapped him on the back. "Let's get a move on. Greg, you dick, leave that plant alone."

The field was on a slight incline, and as they made their way up it, the trees grew around them like a fortress. Swarms of midges met them at the woodland.

"Bloody flies," said Johnno, fanning them away. He squinted through the trees. "Hell's bells, it's

## Weird Words: "1942"

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Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

dark in there."

They crawled under thick branches and over fallen timber, reaching a stream that chuckled its way through a gully of dead leaves, and they each in turn jumped over it and monkeyed up the embankment.

"Just up here," said Johno.

It was a clearing with plant life that was shriveled and hunched and black, and the air smelled foul. The ground was marshy and fog lay like cobwebs.

"There it is," said Johno, pointing at a tree that stood broad and twisted. He walked up to it and slid a hand over its rough, scaly bark. "They say that something lives in here. They say that it can see what kind of a man you are with a sniff of your skin. If you are worthy, then you will be spared, but if you are not"—he struck Charlie with a fierce glance—"it will chew off your fingers to the knuckles."

Greg leaned into Paul's ear, his voice jittering with excitement. "Did Chris make it up already? Is he in there, do you know?"

Paul frowned and pushed him away. "Keep it down."

Johno's voice rolled, "We'll each put our hands in. No one removes it until I say so, got it?"

"I'll go first," said Greg, his voice fluttering with giddy anticipation. He strode up with his chin in the air.

"Sod off, Greg. I'm first. Step back, will you?" snorted Johno.

## Weird Words: "1942"

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Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Greg wilted. "Well, I'm going second then."

"No. Paul's second, and then it's you. And then last, it's Charlie-boy."

Greg opened his mouth to protest, but decided against it. He turned to Charlie. "The beast works up an appetite for the last one."

Paul smiled. "Go on, then, Johno. Get on with it."

Johno mocked a prayer.

"Do it!" Greg blurted out. "Do it!"

Johno rolled up his sleeve, held his hand outside the hole for a second, and then plunged it deep within the cavity, his head thrown back and his eyes squeezed shut. He waited a beat. "I can feel it. I can feel it sniffing." He opened an eye to gauge Charlie's reaction and was pleased to see that his friend looked absolutely horrified. He clenched his teeth. "If you're going to eat me, then eat me. Eat me, you bastard!"

Greg giggled.

Johno's face built to a climax and then he suddenly relaxed. He wiggled his fingers and nodded at Paul, "Good luck, mate!" He patted him on the back.

Paul stood at the tree's enormous base. Roots wound out of it like anacondas, punching through the earth on thick, wrought bodies. He followed the trunk up to the great, sprawling

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

branches above, blistering with ivy. The top was split and peeled back, charred with black hunks of torched wood.

Paul slowly fed his hand inside.

"Deeper, go on!" shouted Greg.

"Do you feel its stinking breath on you?" asked Johno.

At first he felt nothing, but then something wet pushed against his palm. "I feel it," Paul grimaced.

"Don't move a muscle," teased Johno. "Let it get a good taste for you."

There was snuffling, and then a succession of snorts. Paul tensed and looked to the other boys, trying to keep his head.

"All right," said Johno, "You're good to go."

Paul gladly pulled out his hand and brushed it off against his shirt.

"My turn," said Greg, skipping up to his mark. He kissed his fist, punched it in the air and then sunk it deep into the hole. He threw back his head and started to scream. No one was fooled by the act.

Paul kicked away some woodland debris and slumped against a tree.

## Weird Words: "1942"

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Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

"Ohhh, I can feel it. It's licking at my hand, the dirty bugger." Greg hopped from foot to foot.

"I think you're enjoying this a bit too much. It's like you've got a hard-on for the beast," laughed Johnno, looking at Paul for a reaction, but his friend's attention was elsewhere, his face drained. "Paul? What's up?"

Greg was laughing. "It's sucking my fingers!"

Paul's eyes were wide open, "Chris—in the tree."

"Don't ruin this," warned Johnno. "Wait until Charlie's had his go."

Paul was shaking, his face contorted. "No. You don't understand." He turned to face Johnno. "It's Chris." He shouted at Greg, "Get your hand out of there!"

Johnno knocked Paul to the ground. "Shut the hell up. You're ruining this." He kneeled on Paul's arms and pinned him.

"It's not Chris," wheezed Paul, staring up. "Look, please, look."

Johnno faltered, then followed Paul's gaze. At first he didn't understand what he was seeing, but then the image clicked into focus and his jaw fell slack. Up above, flecked in shadows and swaying amongst the treetops, was Chris—his limbs stretched out, stitched into the branches with his own guts, a splattering of crimson dripping from his long, haggard face.

"Chris!"

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Greg's arm inverted and his whole body dipped. He tried to pull out, but this action was met with another jolt, this time harder, and his arm shot down the hole, right up to his shoulder. "What the...?" Another sharp pull sent his forehead smacking into the trunk. Again his body slammed against the tree. His forehead impacted once more and then he fell free, a slither of blood on the trunk marking his descent.

He whined and rocked, his arms tucked to his chest. Slowly, he unravelled and held out a bloody stump—the skin tattered, the bone protruding through mushy lumps of flesh. His mouth was open but no sound came out, and drool hung from his bottom lip.

Charlie made a bolt for it.

There were scrabbling noises, something scouring the inside trunk, and then a dark figure shot out of the top and into the canopy.

Johno got to his feet and stepped forward, his eyes absorbing the vehement horror that had met his friend. Greg's lips trembled as he got closer, the leaves at his knees saturated in blood, his eyes glossy, pained and imploring. "Please," he stammered, "please..."

Johno nodded, his lips now trembling too. He stopped dead in his tracks as a hybrid shriek rang out from above.

The figure landed behind Greg, hauled him up, sliced off his arms and legs and spilt his insides over the ground, all in a heartbeat. Then it pounced back into the trees.

Paul had now scooted back far enough on his bottom to make a run for it and was bolting down the embankment. He stole a fleeting glance over his shoulder, stumbling as he ran, and then Johno came charging into view, his legs pumping vigorously. The thing leapt behind him, pouncing from tree to tree, hissing as it moved.

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Paul could see light, dimly lit cracks at the woodland's edge—a way out. He changed direction, hoping to throw the creature off, ducking under the bough of a large oak and zigzagging his way forward. A wheezing sound over his shoulder, and Johno met him at his side. Paul only managed to connect eyes with him for a second before his friend was met with a thump and swung off into the darkness, snuffed out by the flying thing in pursuit.

Paul screamed and kept running. Somewhere above he heard Johno's bloodcurdling wail, just moments before he broke through the thicket through which they had entered, dusk now sweeping the rows of crops. He dived into the strong, bristling stalks and rolled over, lying flat on his stomach and breathing in the cold, dusty ground, tasting the gritty sediment on his tongue. He didn't know exactly where the fence lay that would take him into the adjoining field. He raised his head, careful not to lift it above the barley's tips, and tried to get his bearings. He could feel his muscles cramping, but knew that the creature was close. He crawled on, toothlike stones digging into his hands.

Something seized his arm. It was Charlie, one side of his face smeared with mud.

Paul tried to hush his voice, but it came out shrill, underlined with tremors that shook the words out from the back of his throat. "We've got to get out of here. Something is after us."

Charlie winced. "My ankle. I fell and dropped my mask. Mum's gonna kill me."

"Crawl. We've got to move." Paul began scurrying away.

Charlie hobbled after, dragging his leg.

Paul reached the adjoining fence and waited for Charlie to catch up. After a minute of waiting, he crawled back to see what was taking so long and found Charlie hunkered behind a trench of mud.

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Charlie pressed a trembling finger hard up against his lips.

Something moved in the barley, quickly, stealthily, but could not disguise the rush of air it left in its wake.

Paul gestured to Charlie that they carry on moving.

Charlie shook his head.

There was another scurry and the crop swayed only yards away.

Paul crept back, jabbed a finger in the direction of the noise and motioned for Charlie to join him.

Charlie refused.

A crow squawked, throaty, serrated, and both boys balked, their small bodies tightly clenched.

They breathed quick, short breaths, their faces wet with perspiration. The translucent hairs on their skinny arms pricked.

Charlie opened one eye. He began to uncoil and was seized by the black creature as it tore out of the barley. Paul fell forward and tried to catch Charlie's hand, but he was already gone, his fingers carving tracks into the cold soil.

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Paul sprang to his feet and darted to the fence, fell over it, smacked his chin, got up and ran on.

In the far corner of the field lay a rickety old shed that had long been abandoned. He ran there, his arms frantic pendulums at his sides.

He made it inside and struggled to shut the door, engaging the deadbolt with the stub of his shoe.

Paul squeezed behind a set of drawers and hugged his knees to his chest. He watched a spider's web catch the air from a crack in the wall, billowing out like the sails of a boat. He timed it with his own breaths and tried to compose himself.

Wind combed the walls of the old shed and whistled through its furrows. The door started to bang, heavy thuds that dented the steelwork. There was a noise above, some scuffling and then a jagged hook came tearing through the roof, quickly joined by another, slicing the asphalt as if it were paper. The roof peeled back and the night air came blustering in, making the gnarled furniture rock with a ferocious racket.

Paul screamed as the black creature looked down on him, its eyes burning brightly.

He covered his ears and closed his eyes. He felt the wind roaring around him, his legs being pulled and then the smack of his head against the floor.

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The broad smell of rot hung limply in the stale air.

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Tails of water cascaded from the ceiling.

Paul's head throbbed. His arms and legs were bound with twine.

Charlie was opposite, his face sallow, strung up in the same way, his neck limp.

The creature was nowhere to be seen.

Paul wriggled and pulled at his bonds, but they did not give. He tried again, this time lurching forward and throwing a fit, like a fly too big for a web, and he felt his arm starting to free. He became frantic, and managed to get a hand out. Once one was free, the other was easier. That done, he toppled forward and splashed into a cavern river that snaked through the rock.

He hobbled up toward Charlie. He picked a wet leaf off Charlie's cheek, and when he did so Charlie looked up, his eyes runny.

"I'll get you out," Paul whispered, pulling apart his bonds. Charlie dipped forward onto Paul, who caught him over his shoulder and buckled onto the ground.

From somewhere in the depths of the cavern came an alien shriek. It swept up through the stone corridor and flooded the chamber the boys occupied.

"Let's get away from that," said Paul.

Charlie moaned and flopped about as Paul guided him over some rocks and into a narrow stone corridor. Through the darkness, way up in the distance, was a slab of light.

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

Charlie's head lifted. "That's got to be the way out."

The two boys squeezed through the rock.

"I saw its face," stammered Charlie. "It was awful."

"Shhh, this way."

"Its eyes were bleeding. They bled with tears. And it didn't have a nose, just a stump with bone and holes, and the face, it kept changing."

There was a loud screech back in the cavern where they had just been.

"Charlie, keep it down."

"Paul, it looked like Mrs. Jenkins, and then my mum, and my brother. It kept morphing."

The light they pursued began to spill closer and they finally made it into an opening. It was a dead end. The light came from above, an old well that rose out into the night.

"How are we supposed to get up there?" Charlie shook his head and began to sob. "We're finished."

"We can make it," insisted Paul. "If we get onto that ledge we can use our backs against the wall and walk our way up it."

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

"No way can I do that," sobbed Charlie. "I'm not as tall as you."

"You've got to try," said Paul, clambering onto the ledge. He knelt on the platform and ducked down to Charlie with an outstretched hand.

They could hear scuttling, easily distinguished from the drips and moans of the cavern. The beast was coming.

Charlie reached out for Paul, who hauled him up on the ledge.

"Push with your back, then climb with your feet like this," said Paul, showing him the moves and beginning his ascent.

Charlie copied, but his feet couldn't quite reach and he had to use his tiptoes.

Paul was already several feet up. Charlie's ankle buckled and he fell back down onto the ledge.

"Paul," screeched Charlie, "help me."

"Go again. Try."

Charlie looked around at the blackness that lipped up against the ledge he was on. The noises had stopped, yet he felt watched, preyed upon, the darkness a hungry eye that he could feel stripping the flesh from his bones. He stared up at Paul. Charlie whimpered and tried to get back up the well, to gain friction against the slippery brick and moss, but the sounds had begun again, snapping with more salivating ferocity than before, and they were right beneath

## Weird Words: "1942"

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

---

him, leaping at him.

He looked up and saw Paul high above, almost indistinguishable. He was alone. An icy whip cut across his back. His spine cracked, and down he fell into the inky pit.

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Paul was pulling himself from the well and into the blue night as the screams were churned up and spat out.

He limped through the woods into the open fields and fell to his knees—too tired.

A hand landed on his shoulder. "Great game." It was Chris, grinning from ear to ear.

Paul smiled, "It dragged on a bit. Next time I get to be the beast."

"Hey, chaps," bellowed Johno, jogging toward them. "Are we done? Where's Greg?"

"Already gone home. He hates being the first one to die," said Chris.

They laughed.

Johno planted a hand on Charlie's back. "Welcome to the club, mate. You were great."

## Weird Words: “1942”

Written by Thomas Edmondson  
Thursday, 07 April 2011 15:47

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“Thanks,” said Charlie sheepishly. “Will you help me find my mask?”

“Tomorrow,” said Johnno, yawning.

The boys jumped the style and trotted off together, side by side, back down the dirt track.

*Thomas Edmondson is a video editor and aspiring writer from the drizzly Peak District of Derbyshire, England. A poisonous cocktail of American film culture, British humor and damaged friends have whittled him into the gormless daydreamer that he is today.*

{comments on}