

A The National Archives

WRITING WAR, WRITING PEACE



Grace Howarth, Maleeha Mir,
Elizabeth Ryder and Keziah Smith

Writing War, Writing Peace

A Creative Writing anthology inspired by the records of Nurses in
the First World War

 The National Archives

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The stories told within this anthology are inspired by real records of the First World War. However, each is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental

Cover image

MUN5/157, Hospital, Elizabethville, Birtley National Projectile Factory 1916-1918

Interior images

RAIL253/516, Hut accommodation at the Front, 1915-1918

RAIL227/436 (1) Ambulance Train in France 1914-1918

ZPER34-148 Red Cross Workers 1916

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Introduction

The National Archives holds over fifteen thousand service files for nurses who served during the First World War in both the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service and the Territorial Forces Nursing Services, ranging from the Matron-in-Chief herself to nurses who served only a few months. Each file has a story to be told within it, whether it's an individual who gave her entire and lengthy career to nursing, or another who was obliged by circumstance to serve for a short period and then return to her previous work, be that in order to marry, or perhaps care for a sick relative, and many more in between. There is so much capacity and potential to understand the variety of what nursing means and does and is within these files and I will never tire of reading them.

The pieces of writing included here are the result of a week long course which we ran at The National Archives in the summer of

2018. The course came about as a result of a wish to explore the stories of some of the nurses whose service records we hold for the First World War, and we are very privileged to have worked with Melvin Burgess and Sara Robinson in order to have done so. Young people worked with our documents, exploring primary and secondary sources within our collections, in order to learn about some of the lives and experiences of these women. These pieces of writing are some of the results. It's been fascinating to see the creative responses of these writers to the material held here and continues to demonstrate how archives can inspire creative practice, regardless of age and content.

Jessamy Carlson

Partnerships and Programmes Manager
The National Archives

Arthur

Arthur

By Elizabeth Ryder

1st June 1916

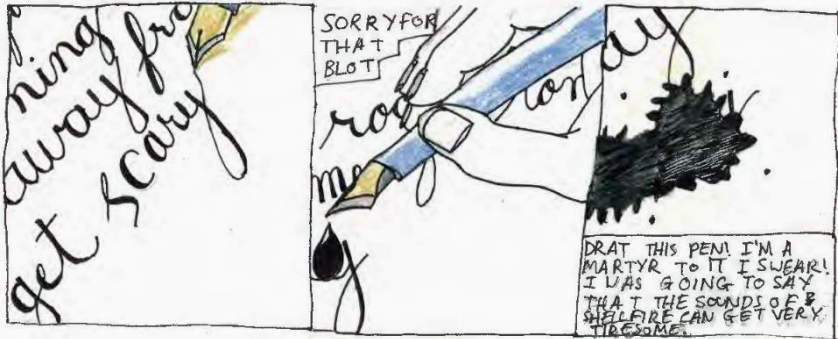
Dearest Arthur,

I am writing to you from my new posting in the Chateau d'Oderzelles. I must admit, it is beautiful. All pale yellow walls and shiny slate blue spires, like an illustration in a storybook. I could hardly believe it when I first arrived— there are so many rooms and they all look alike, I swear I shall get lost.

The cliffs are far nicer in my opinion. There is a chairlift down them and onto the beaches, where we take some of the more able-bodied patients sometimes for exercise, but we nurses usually just take the cliff path. It's fairly narrow, and winds around the cliffs so much that at some parts you can stand on it and look down and find that

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there's absolutely nothing between you and the crashing waves. The roar is quite deafening—but after Ypres, it's nothing.



I must confess, I am at times glad to be away from the front. Of course, one wants to do one's duty, but the sound of shellfire can get scary.

Drat this pen! I'm a martyr to it, I swear! I was going to say that the sounds of shellfire can get tiresome. It's so loud. I shall be glad of a rest.



There is a single beach nestled between the two cliffs and that's where we go. It's sheltered and quite private. Of course, sometimes the patients or male orderlies fancy a dip as well, but so far they

Arthur

have proven to be perfect gentlemen, and always make sure to only go down to the beach when they are sure we are not there.

Of course, we have to be careful all the same. The currents around these cliffs can be treacherous. A VAD told me that a local girl drowned here a year ago— she'd heard it from one of the men in the town (I made sure to tick her off about that)— I wasn't sure whether to trust her, the VADs can be such gossips, but a passing doctor backed her up. Apparently the girl went out too far and sank beneath the waves. Her body washed up on the beach a few days later. What a ghastly way to die.

I will try to write again soon, but I'm not sure if my next letter will be as long. We are expecting a new convoy any day now, so I'm sure that soon I shall be rushed off my feet!

Yours always,
June.

5th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

Well, the promised convoy finally arrived a day after I wrote my last letter, and I've barely had time to write since. It's nearly one o'clock now, and this is the first time I've sat down all day. Changing dressing, cleaning wounds, folding sheets, sorting out the VADs— I swear, it's like herding cats!— I haven't had a moments peace.

Some of these boys though. I'd almost forgotten what it was like, though it's only been a few weeks. Legs crushed, arms broken so the

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bones poke out through the skin, faces half torn clean off, eyes missing or damaged beyond repair— those men wear bandages round their faces, like kids playing blind man's buff, and most of them are little more than kids. One boy on my friend Mavis's ward says he's eighteen, but his face is still smooth and his voice cracks occasionally, so it's obvious to anyone that he's lied about his age to join up. Mavis has nicknamed him 'the Lamb' after the character in the E Nesbit story and says he seems to have quite a pash on her. She said that when she came over yesterday, to change his dressing, he blushed so red he looked like someone had lit a flame beneath him! She is such a card. A good thing too, for we have precious little to laugh about these days.

Her Lamb certainly won't be going back to the front, anyway, which I suppose is a blessing. He took some nasty shrapnel wounds to the face, and even if the army is now desperate enough to let blatant fourteen year olds in, I doubt they're yet so low on soldiers that they'd accept a man with one eye.

There is a boy on my ward, Private Carlton, who has got some lead pellets embedded in his lungs. Everybody knows he is going to die, including him, unfortunately. In fact, one of the men on the train apparently said that they all thought he'd be DOA for sure. But so far he's managing to hold on by the tips of his fingers.

He's very weak though, and can scarcely breathe without groaning, so I doubt he'll be here for long, poor soul.

Yours always,
June.

Arthur

8th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

I think I mentioned a few letters ago what gossips the VADs can be? Well, I've just heard the latest rumour they are spreading, and it's the silliest one yet. Apparently we have a ghost on the ward! I heard a group of them whispering about it and managed to get the whole story out of them. Basically there have been some unusual noises—creaks, rattles and moans, I'm sure you've heard this sort of thing before— and the silly geese had put it down to a ghost!

I told them it was foolishness, of course. Big old houses do creak and rattle, and as for the moaning— do they think these men are just here for a holiday? They didn't seem all that convinced, "but you do get ghosts in big old houses." one of them said.

"Nonsense!" another one who was passing had joined in the conversation. "My Grandmother's property in Norfolk must be nearly as big and about twice as old as this place, and she's never heard so much as a whisper of a ghost!" I do hate it when the VADs start showing off like that, but at least it shut them all up. Ghosts! I ask you!

The closest we've got to the living dead is my poor boy Carlton. I swear I can't stop thinking about him. He doesn't read, like the other men, he can barely move. He just lies there, staring up at the ceiling, occasionally gasping out a few words when the pain lessens slightly. How he's still here I really don't know. We're doing our best to make him comfortable, but really, I don't think that comfort is something he's likely to know again on this earth. Each night I pray that he will find peace and rest at last, but so far no joy.

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Yours always,
June.

11th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

Do you remember the ghost I mentioned in my last letter? Well, despite my best efforts, the story has spread. The day before yesterday a man on my ward was complaining about a missing pack of cigarettes and a friend from the next bed joked "are you sure it wasn't the ghost that took them?" I am furious with my VADs — stupid little things, I'd have thought that even they would have had better sense than to let this silly rumour spread to the men! Don't we have death enough around us, without having to invent ghost stories?

That one mention seems to have sparked something off, however, because now the ghost is everywhere. Fortunately the patients seem to find it more amusing than frightening, though their jokes are becoming more and irritating. It's getting so that a nurse can't walk down a ward without being accompanied by a barrage of "whoop whoop" noises and jokes about strange white veiled figures stalking the corridors.

Unfortunately, now that we have a ghost, I suspect that we'll have a hard time getting rid of it. These sorts of ideas tend to take root in people's minds. Probably soon the story will spread even further, carried by nurses to other hospitals and patients to the front or back home to blighty. I fear that we may end up being 'the haunted hospital' forever. Drat those VADs!

From what I've heard, there are several conflicting rumours about who the ghost was in life. Some say it was "some Frenchie toff", as one man on Mavis' ward so eloquently put it, who was killed during the revolution and now goes around rather gruesomely carrying his own severed head under his arm. However, surprisingly, despite all the talk of ghosts in old houses, most stories claim it was more recent. That poor French girl who drowned off the coast is quite a favourite — though what she's doing in the hospital I have no idea — closely followed by the spirit of a nurse who died on duty and now wanders the wards still looking out for her patients. A lot of the men seem to like this idea, even if they don't truly believe it, they find it a comforting thought all the same.

Personally, I find it morbid. The chateau itself is enough to give me a creeping feeling sometimes — all those dead eyes staring down at you from the portraits on the walls, and those seemingly endless corridors — without adding a ghost into the mix!

I've even been having nightmares, though personally I put that down the different food I've been eating here, the same dream every night for the past few days.

I'm swimming out beneath the cliffs, further out than I've ever gone before, when I catch sight of a hand, sticking out of the sea, waving at me. When I swim over and look beneath the waves, I see that it is that poor dead French girl, looking as I imagine she must have looked on that last day of her life, kicking frantically against the current that's dragging her down, writhing and screaming under the sea. I go to help her, but then suddenly I'm in the hospital— though it is still somehow under the sea, in the mixed up way things often are in dreams— and the person I am holding is not the French girl

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at all, but Carlton. And I find that I am not pulling him up, out of the water, but pushing him down, and me with him, until we both sink below the water and I wake up panting. I wouldn't mind, except that the disturbance to my sleep makes me tired while on duty. And that is a pain.

Like I say, I put it down to a change of diet, but I'm sure you understand why I'm not quite in the mood for ghost stories at the moment.

The real Carlton, not the dream one, is no better. He really seems chained to earth, and I think everyone's praying for a bout of pneumonia or something just to carry him away gently. I read to him for an hour today— he can't move himself, or even hold a conversation without pain, so being read aloud to is the only comfort he now has— and when it was time for me to go back to my duties, I told him goodbye and that I would "see him tomorrow."

"God, I hope not." he croaked, followed by a gasp of pain. I have recommended that his morphine dosage be upped, but it doesn't seem to be doing him much good— I almost wish that it could be raised enough to finally put an end to the poor boy's pain altogether. But it is a sin even to think such a thing— his life is in God's hands, and I must trust that He knows better than I do.

Yours always,
June.

16th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

I have had a most extraordinary experience. I was on night duty last night, and had just finished checking on a poor boy whose leg has become infected and will probably have to be amputated soon, when I heard laughter, coming from the next ward. Of course I rushed over at once to see what on earth was going on— I don't mind the patients having a good time while they're recovering, but not in the middle of the night!— intending to tick them off and tell them to be quiet, but when I got there, everyone appeared to be asleep. I stood at the end of the ward for a while, looking to see if I thought anybody was lying in an awkward position, or breathing in a suspicious way, when something flashed in the corner of my eye.

A pale blue-white thing, moving quickly through the door at the end of the hall that we're currently using as a ward, and I looked up just in time to catch a proper look at it. It was only for a split second, but I could have sworn that it was a man. A soldier, to be exact, wearing his uniform and tin cap and carrying a pack on his back. I would have thought that it was one of my men up and about when he shouldn't be, if it weren't for the fact that this soldier looked as if he'd been dipped in flour and his skin and clothes glowed with a strange blue light.

Then I blinked, and he was gone. And when I walked to the door and looked through it, he was nowhere to be seen.

I know what happened, of course. Obviously it was just the darkness playing tricks on me, my eyes painting the blank space of the shadows with shapes that weren't really there. The laugh was from one of the men, who must have heard me coming and quickly pretended to be asleep.

Still, it was strange. Almost enough to make me believe in the VAD's ghost!

I've been talking more and more to Carlton recently. Not that he can reply— even croaking a few words is getting to be too much for him. I've been writing to his mother for him, and reading her letters to him. It doesn't make for pleasant reading. The poor woman clearly hopes that her son may yet get well— no matter how much I try and hint in my letters that she'd be better off hoping for something else.

I can't understand why God continues to let him suffer. I know that I must trust to His plan, but I just don't know. If Carlton was a dog or a horse in this condition, we'd have had him put down long ago and considered it a mercy. But because he is a man, and so unlike a dog or a horse is perfectly capable of understanding the hopelessness of his condition and the true depth of his pain, he is forced to bear it until his body gives out from under him. It really doesn't seem fair.

It's at times like this that I wish you were here. Things always used to seem clearer after I'd talked them over with you.

One thing that has been niggling away at me all day, no matter how often I tell myself that it is just nonsense, the product of an overactive imagination and not enough sleep, is something about that laugh I heard last night. You see, there was a moment, just after I heard it, when I thought I recognised the voice. As I say, I know it was just my imagination, and possibly the creeping feeling that has been following me around for the last few days, thanks to all those

Arthur

silly ghost stories, but for a moment I could have sworn that the laugh was in Carlton's voice.

Yours always,
June.

19th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

I have seen the ghost! Properly and truly this time I have seen it, so that there can be no mistake.

The VADs were right— I suppose there really is a first time for everything!

I was on night duty again last night, and I must admit that my head was full of those stories everyone had been telling. I felt shaky for some reason, I suppose I was a little cold, and every small noise seemed to echo around the ward. One of the men rolled over in his sleep and his cigarette tin slipped out of his pocket and hit the floor with a clap. I swear, I nearly jumped out of my skin it was so loud in the silence.

All around me I could hear the sound of the men breathing heavily in their sleep, and in the distance, the roar of the waves crashing against the cliffs. Soon, the two sounds seemed to blend together in my head, until I felt almost as if I was back in my dream, in a hospital under the sea.

I think I must have been half asleep by that point. Two night shifts in such a short space of time really isn't good for anybody.

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But I am most definitely sure that I was wide awake for what happened next, even if it does sound hard to believe even to my ears. I had just been to check on Carlton again— even in his sleep the poor boy seemed troubled, and he kept giving off little groans— when I saw it, standing over his bed.

As before, it took the form of a soldier, cast in pure white with a pale blue light coming off him, flowing over his body like water. But now he was standing in front of me, and not just a faint glimpse in a doorway, I was able to make out his face for the first time. Carlton's face. He had Carlton's face. Carlton's face as I had never seen it before, Carlton's face smiling, actually smiling, and opening its mouth to laugh a laugh that sounded just like the one I heard on night duty a few nights ago.

The ghost looked at me and winked once. Then he put a pure white finger to his smiling lips and turned and walked out of the ward, leaving me stranded in his wake, frozen with shock.

Not fear though. I know I should have been afraid, but then I suppose there's only so much fear a person can hold. When you hold people's lives in your hands daily, I suppose there's not much spare fear left for their ghosts.

It puzzled me though. I just wish I knew what it meant. How could I have seen Carlton's ghost last night, when as of this morning, Private Carlton is still very much alive?

How I wish you were here to help me understand.

Yours always,
June.

20th August 1916

Dearest Arthur,

I remember when I got the news— how could I forget? Even if it was nearly a year ago now— the one thing people kept telling me was “at least it was quick”. I remember I got quite annoyed about it. “Damn ‘quick!’” I wanted to say (if you’ll pardon my language), “Do you think he wanted a quick death? Don’t you think he’d have preferred a nice slow death from old age?” But now I think I finally understand, and suddenly it is a comfort to me that your death was quick.

Just think, if that shell had landed even slightly further away, then you could have ended up in a ward like this, groaning and moaning on a bed, unable to breathe without it hurting. I’m glad. I wouldn’t have wanted this death for you, even in exchange for a thousand of our happy Sundays together before the war.

If you were in Carlton’s position, Arthur, would you have wanted to be left to die in your own time, no matter how long it took? Or would you have wished for a quicker death, a syringe full of air, or a pillow over the face?

You see, I think I have figured it out. How I could have seen the ghost of a man still alive. It came to me in a kind of half-dream last night.

Carlton, is dead.

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Yes, true, he is still alive. His heart still beats, his lungs still breathe, his mind still suffers, but his life is over, he's just stuck waiting for it to end.

Or for someone to end it.

Arthur, if I do this, if I do this for him and for you, then I know that I shall never see you again. I shall have gone against God and broken the sixth commandment, and there is no going back from that. There will be nothing but Hell left for me after this, and the thought makes me shiver, but then Carlton is in Hell now, and I cannot believe that it is right to keep him there.

I love you, no matter what I decide.

Yours always,
June.

Dearest Arthur,

It is finished.

I went to Carlton's bed in the early hours of the morning, before anyone was awake, and shoved a pillow over his mouth and nose. He gave a muffled shout, from pain or fear I do not know, but I could see his eyes looking out from over the top of the pillow and I swear they looked merely grateful. I held the pillow down for a few minutes, while he squirmed and thrashed beneath it, until his movements slowed to a stop and those grateful eyes went blank.



I'm writing this by the edge of the cliff, my legs dangling over the raging sea. I have taken off my shoes and my stockings and, even from this height, I can feel the spray of the sea tickling my bare feet. I feel quite daring.

They'll have found the body by now, and the pillow beside it. I'm not quite sure if they'll suspect — possibly they won't connect the two and will just assume that poor Carlton finally

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succumbed to his injuries and passed away peacefully in his sleep. I'll be gone by then, anyway. I'm sure it won't hurt.

I've cast all my letters to you into the sea, ready and waiting for me. I have sinned greatly, and there is no getting away from that, even if I am sure it was the only right thing to do. I am a little scared, but there is no point hiding from my fate.

I can hear birdsong in the trees and there is a cool sea breeze blowing in my hair.

The wind is roaring in my ears, but it can't drown out the roaring in my head.

Love forever,
June.



The Last Song

The Last Song

By Maleeha Mir

A destroyed ruinous desert,
Littered with eyes and lungs – burnt black and beaten,
Laced in limey, green
Light and scarlet mud.

The shrill of shells pierce the air - landing without considerable
fanfare,
Until the foul and misty clouds erupt,
Flooding the trenches with its vile, murky fumes - stealing their
last breath and boiling their flesh,

-

The wailing choir of men penetrates my brain, as I charge forward
Bandages in hand - hoping to grant some dignity. Yet
Courage dyes my clothes in crimson naivety.

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Beds spilling with loose limbs and missing minds.
Not Men,
Only parts of Men
Torn and twisted
Plugged and sown back together,
A fruitless seed planted between their skin and
Lies piercing their tongues,
Fire in their throats and Shells filling their bellies.

A painful, deathly feeling pulses through my veins
I could've -
'I could've saved them...' - 'I could've stopped this',
Where's the honour in drowning in mud, in splintered bones that
protrude in obscenity from innocent knees.

My every fibre aching to stop this Hell –
We sold our souls to Blighty,
Only to have our voices, our eyes and our hearts ripped away,
Left out under the charred earth,
To rot and fester with pity and dismay.

I'd bomb away this War if I could,
With a paint brush or a pen,
drained from the veins of the Tommys and the Huns,
– erase the ravaged dead man's Wonderland,
Smearing it in crimson purity and start anew.

We must rearrange the pieces of the Broken and the Lame.
They never left the War,
Nor did I.

The Last Song

I laid next to them,
As the rifles screamed
and shrapnel shredded through our skin,
Annihilating our souls, leaving us in nameless sin.

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RAIL253/516, Hut accommodation at the Front, 1915-1918

Gauze

By Keziah Smith

My wooden chest sat by the door, jutting over my toe a little and making me wince yet I didn't dare move. My eyes were locked in Mamma's, which grew increasingly blurrier – colours merging into a rainbow of possibilities and a mosaic of the unknown as the dam broke and tears rushed down my cheeks. Although Marcus left for war two months ago, it was still raw for both of us, and here was I, doing the exact same thing after only a few days' notice. Mother had been coldly distant ever since Tuesday when I had received the telegram stating that my service was needed, speaking only to ask me to 'warm the stove' or how I needed to 'do something about that fearsome draft through the door, for goodness sake!' Now though, the silence is different – it hangs in the air and lingers over the threshold. And then suddenly, it broke. Mamma flung herself at me and gave way into series of convulsive sobs, rattling breaths wheezing with emotion.

A twinge of guilt knots in my gut as I clasped her in my arms – I'll have to leave her here to deal with father alone. My father's not a bad man – no far from it, he's a very good man. A man as firm in principle as he is with his fist. Marcus, my brother, used to reproach him for his strictness and when he left with the troops he bequeathed the job to me. Now I'm leaving too. It was father that forced me to sign up to be a VAD – no daughter of his was ever going to be idle in the war effort and merely contribute by knitting a few socks. No. His daughter needed to set the tone for the village, he needed to be commended for his excellent upbringing, his talent in childrearing, to create such a little trooper.

Releasing me now from her smothering embrace, Mam held me at arm's length, trembling a little.

'Make sure you listen to everything Matron says, Bella, and... and do your father proud.'

She grimaced a little, her eyes flickering downward as if refusing to meet mine. The man was standing by the banister, staring vacantly at the door behind me as if already imagining himself striding out and down the path, rid of me and free to fester down the pub. I couldn't stand to look at him. I only saw Mother. A kiss on each cheek, a squeeze of her raw fingers, a watery smile and that was all I managed before I was ushered out of the door. The last thing I saw was her face suddenly composed and resolute, grim as stone before the door closed on her by her jailor.

My stomach churned as I forced my legs to march down the path, dragging my chest behind me to where a cart was waiting for me at the end of the road.

A year's service awaited me after only six weeks training. I was being sent to help with the transportation of the soldiers, an extra body to scrub floors and make themselves useful. It'll all help towards the war effort, I suppose, and keeping father happy can only serve to work in mamma's favour. Reaching the end of the street now I dumped my chest at the roadside, massaging my stiff fingers already stripped red raw from my burden, and indicated for it to be loaded into the stage coach.

The driver, a balding man with a thick neck, squinted at me.

'A'right lovely? Where yer off to? I got a few goin' to London an' one off to Dover if that suits yer fancy, or if anything else suits yer fancy, mind', he winked at me with a cheeky grin.

My cheeks burned with indignation at his familiarity and I nodded curtly.

'Dover. Dover *please*.'

Refusing his offered hand, I scrambled into the carriage, keeping my head down for fear of making eye contact with the other passengers and them striking up a conversation. I wanted to be left alone. A whole new life awaited me, one with vigorous routines, new people, new problems, new responsibilities, but I wanted nothing to do with it now.

Clenching my eyes shut and holding my breath until I felt I was about to burst, I leaned into me seat and imagined myself on a sea of blue, crystal blue with the sun beating down upon my back. Marcus is swimming behind my rowing boat, that's right, I'm in a little paddle boat, and I laugh and squeal as he spits water out of

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his mouth so it falls in a graceful arc splattering me from head to toe. As the stage coach starts to move, I jolt and sway with its irregular pattern, which morphs into the small waves which barrel into the sides of my boat. I'm on the sea. Without a doubt. Sailing into oblivion with liberty on the horizon. I'm on the sea.

*

Dear Mamma,

So I've arrived in France – an odd country as even though there's a war going on a few miles away, a bloody horrendous war at that, life still continues. My role, as you may have gathered from my brief, is not really on the ground or in the hospitals, but as a VAD on the trains – injured soldiers who need to be moved between the front lines and base camp, or base camp and Dover, or wherever has space for them, and they're and placed temporarily under my care. Oh Mamma, the injuries! This one boy had his arm completely blown off and the sheer pain that ... I needn't trouble you with this.

I was just letting you know that I am safe and that I've heard from Marcus who says he's enjoying his time in the trenches and he's made a new friend- Gareth something or other, and they "take on the world together".

How's father? *Do* write with news of home, I miss it more and more every day.

God be with you,

All the best, Bella. x

*

Wave after wave of the sick, their souls chained to their bodies, flickering as they lose connection with reality and float up to wherever it is that souls are destined for. My Mother would say it's heaven and how 'God, our eternal creator has designed us to re-join him someday' 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.' HA! This is a joke. I look around at God's "children", scars blistering their skin that shreds like tissue, black eyes and bruised mortality, gouges slicing from their wrists to their elbows. I know that my mother's faith has made a mockery of us all. God and Asquith are one of the same. Both exercise power that they shouldn't have, or should have but use wrongly in the sense of not giving a *shit* who gets hurt.

The thrill of a blush races through me. As a lady I shouldn't swear, but oh *shit* this war has brought out the demon in all of us and there's obviously no angel here to counteract its presence. A month has gone by since I arrived in this cursed country and if swearing is a vice to the soldiers around me, it shall be mine also. I will *not* be defined by- .

"Bella!"

I jolted. Matron. She comes striding towards me, eyes burning and I curse myself. Much to the soldiers' amusement I've been mooning in the middle of the walkway, my face perfectly blank, the thermometer I was cleaning now defiled on the floor. It must have slipped from my hands. I've never seen Matron so furious, her bosom trembling with rage and her hands firmly locked in a grasp as if the temptation to slap me was too great. Seemingly, unable to decide which thing to be angry at first: neglect of my duties, the abandoned thermometer, or my dishevelled appearance, as I later noticed that my hair had fallen out of my cap, she stood there

puckering her lips, trying to compose herself to a more dignified expression.

'Never, in all my years,' she eventually gulped, 'have I encountered such insolence as to neglect your duties in favour of standing around like a vagabond! Never!'

Every nerve inside me trembled. I wanted morphine. I wanted my bed. I wanted my mother.

'Fourth carriage, now! You'll take over from Nurse Winwood and do the night shift and if I catch you pausing even for a second under my regiment, you will be a symbol of shame and sent home to prove it. Pick up that thermometer immediately for *Pete's sake* don't let me lay eyes on you again if you know what's good for you!'

My cheeks burning, I scurried out, tripping over my skirts in my haste as the soldiers' whoops of mockery penetrated my eardrums. 'Death would be welcome', I thought as I slid open the door to carriage four and swayed dramatically as the train veered round a corner, knocking over a pile of spare pinafores. Suddenly, strong hands placed themselves on my waist to steady me and I snapped my neck sharply to the left to cast a look of scorn upon my 'saviour'. My lips parted to release a torrent of abuse yet only a croak escaped. My eyes had partnered with his. Dark pupils pooled within the irises of hazel brown, flecks of green adding emphasis to their purity.

Gauze

***** Extract 2 *****

Far from a lullaby, the gentle swaying and clack of the trains wreak torment upon my boys who lie there with a ghostly pallor- beads of sweat tracing maps down their cheeks, through the mountainous ridges of clotted blood and grime.

"Nurse," whimpers a lad next to me. He looks no older than fifteen with straw-coloured hair matted to his forehead. Tommy.

"Nurse!" he yelps again as the train gave a sudden jolt, mocking him as he lay on his side, seething in agony. "I'm sweating," he cries, "I'm drenched."

"Oh, Tommy, don't worry, it doesn't make you any weaker."

'Sweating.' It makes me want to laugh at the injustice of it all- a sharp metallic laugh. Sweating is code with Tommy.

He's wet the bed.

Kneeling down, I push my sleeves up as far as they will go- the unforgiving fabric rising two inches before its tightness cuts off my blood circulation, and gently untuck his sheets from the corners of his bed. I have to lift his arm, his leg, his torso in order to retrieve the sodden bundle. Tears slide down his face in his silent pleas. "Don't. Don't tell my brother?" they gasp. A thin smile of reassurance is all he needs, which is good, because a thin smile is all I can muster, and even then, it quivers with spasms of my inner emotion elbowing its way to the surface. This boy shouldn't be here. He should be at home in his room, and helping his father out on the farm, and waiting for his sixteenth birthday.

Writing War, Writing Peace

***** Extract 3 *****

Pressed and trimmed. Straight and smiling. Rigid and firm. We cower with repulsion behind masks of steel, our eyes sculpted wide despite our desperate wishes to close them. Our creator forces our systems to continue to whir, cogs grinding and wheels screeching, one leg in front of the other, wringing out the clothes that emits a stench of iron that hangs like sickly yellow fog over the carriage, right until our arms are bathed in red. I am controlled beyond human understanding. A paradox of anger, injustice, fear, and patriotic duty. A mix of humanity that seems to strip me of my ability to be human.

Unknown Warriors

By Maleeha Mir

Rows upon rows of
Swollen, streaming eyes
and gaping red mouths,
Lines of screeching Burning Boys – laid out
Twitching, as their ravaged skin
Ripped and twisted
Disentangling from the marble frame within.

I try to ease the pain,
To stop the brutal agony plaguing their tender flesh –
Bandages! Syringes! Morphine!
Quick shouts and hurried steps.
Never quick enough –
Never enough time to save the fleeting soul.

Their eyes forever oozing from the demonic green vapour –
Heads stained from the dripping limey pus,
Their flesh like a dirty coin – hard metallic copper searing

Writing War, Writing Peace

the crippled hands and sodden knees,
Their pulses rocky and throats raw from the screams.
One touch from the Leper's skin,
and the World ends before it even
begins.

Yet we cannot abandon our Burning Boys,
Despite the fear,
Despite the blood-curdling noise,
Cutting through the muddy, crimson clothes,
Concealing the blistering and burning woes –
Pus and shrapnel craters piercing their abdomen and thighs.
The bitter stench of slaughter and death
embedded into their life-lines.

Poisonous and inescapable.
Clawing into my nostrils –
it's crude talons rapping around each man,
Ensnaring us, poisoning our minds and skin.
It transforms into the Invader of a forgotten Land -
Entering the mouth - burning the devotion from my tongue and
dissolving my bony-fingers from my aching hands,
Stealing the breath from lungs -
A cough, a croak and a breathless wrench –
Blood and rust clogging my last sense.

Face crumbling, hands melting away -
'The One you don't hear is the One that Ends you'.

War Blooms

By Grace Howarth

Violet had known war, and she had known peace.

Peace was long, childhood days of dancing in grass long enough to reach your armpits, and paddling in the cold shock of morning sea, watching the horizon roll out from under the clouds. It tasted of strawberries and cream, and laughter. War turned the flower fields into trenches and the sea into a battlefield too dangerous to cross.

Violet stared through the slashes in her tent, watching the sunlight glow, just for a moment, deceiving the world that it was not as awful as it seemed. At the first sign of light, she was expected in the main hospital tent, prim and perfect in a starched, white collar and apron.

She dressed quickly, layering cloak over dress over corset. Eva, the girl who slept in her tent, was still snoring in her wooden bed.

“Wake up,” Violet muttered, pinning her shining, metal nursing badge to her sleeve. “Matron will be furious.”

Eva yawned and rolled over, stretching out as though she was not in the middle of a war. That girl could sleep through the rattling of shellfire and the injured screaming, but still frequently complained that her beauty sleep had been lost. Violet frowned and stalked out into the morning air, before Eva could ask her to help her with her uniform. Eva confessed that she had used to have a maid who dressed her every morning, and gasped dramatically when she learned that Violet had not.

It was finally dry enough to briskly walk across the tented hospital without fear of breaking an ankle, as one of the voluntary nurses had done on her first day. All of the girls wittered about the mud as though they were in the trenches themselves – anything to fill the silence, Violet supposed.

The Matron nodded sharply at Violet, and though it was just a slight incline of her bony chin, Violet pressed her lips together, turning away to suppress a smile. She was the first, besides Matron, to be there. She always was.

She wiped the feverish brow of a soldier.

Poor thing, he had been dipping in and out of consciousness as if he was drowning. With each day that passed, he spiraled further into delirium, shouting out in a harsh German tongue with fear painting his words. Cropped blonde hair lay on his pillow, spilling over like sunshine. In his stiller moments, he looked just the same as the angels Violet had seen in the bible, his eyelashes were woven gold across the pale arcs of his cheeks, the gentle curve of his lips blush

pink. Beneath the sheets tightly wrapped around him, his right leg was missing. If he woke from fever, she hoped the shock of waking up with no limb did not finish him off instead.

She wondered, as she waited for the gaggle of nurses to arrive on time, what would happen to him if he survived. There was no time to wonder, she thought, treating his septic wound. Of the hundreds of soldiers she treated, stories were not uncommon. At first, she had collected them all, tucked them into her skin, and stored them like currency. Eventually, there had just been too many to remember.

All the nurses flooded in at once, quiet and straight-backed, shrinking under Matron's piercing eyes. They scurried like ants, changing bed linen, wiping the floors, and offering water to the soldiers.

"Eva..." Violet said warningly, watching the nurse jump back, blushing wildly. There was no need to lean so close while taking a soldier's temperature. The guilty look framing her eyes, and the smirk plastered on his lips, did not help her case. Eva scampered away, leaving Violet to scan the thermometer. He was a British boy, brought in just the day before. Slight shrapnel wound to the left arm, she noted. He would be shipped off back to England to recover in mere days.

"You look like you're on the mend, Private. You'll be back with your family in no time. May I take your pulse?"

The Private's playful grin slid off his face, melted into a gape. "You're a nurse?" he asked.

"Yes," Violet said, smile stitched to her lips. "May I?" As she reached forward, his uninjured arm flinched away, crawling into its cocoon of blankets. "Surely you have faced worse on the front, Private?" she asked evenly, discomfort roiling in her stomach.

"Er..." he stammered, cheeks filled with watercolour red, "I think I'd rather a professional nurse checked... Just in case..."

Professional. Violet nodded with a tight smile and called for Eva to return. It was moments like that, which made her want to scream. Eva was a child, barely eighteen, and she had spent her youth in ballrooms and gowns. Before 1914, Violet was sure Eva had never seen the inside of a classroom or worn a dress so practical. Violet had spent years training alongside some of the finest doctors in Europe, after battling to prove she was a suitable woman.

Her grandfather was a very famous banker, and despite him despising his daughter's choice of husband, his influence stretched to Violet and allowed her a place at Saint Thomas', a school founded by Florence Nightingale.

Violet had waited her whole life to serve, passing from Matron to Matron until one found her prowess too skilled to waste in wartime, and finally sent her to France to work in the rush of a Casualty Clearing station on the Front. Eva had volunteered on a whim, saying it seemed like a 'jolly decent thing to do.'

Besides Matron, she was the most qualified there, but somehow the soldiers ignored her bright, scarlet cloak, and chose the voluntary girls with garish red crosses emblazoned on their chests, and pale skin peeping from their collars.

War Blooms

Violet's father had come from overseas – he often told glorious tales of Barbados, and his six children begged for more. Before war bloomed, travelling abroad sounded like a grand adventure, too impossible to dream up.

When Violet learned she was to be stationed in France, wanderlust fizzled in her veins like champagne.

When she went home to pack, her five siblings greeted her with excitable chatter, but her father had scooped her into his arms as if she was still an infant.

"Papa!" she had laughed, "How improper!"

"When has this family ever been proper?" He beamed, light dancing off his chipped tooth. "A father being proud of his daughter is no scandal!"

Perhaps not, but scandal did have a tendency to follow him around. It had embroiled Violet's mother when he married her. There was no man as flighty as a seafarer, he had no coin to his name, and most of all, his skin was as dark as a storm-ridden sky.

"That's love," Violet's mother had said, many years before. "It creeps up on you when you least expect it."

Violet knew nothing of love. She did not read the reams of romance novels her sisters giggled over, she had never had a sweetheart, and she could think of nothing worse than flirting with the patients. She hadn't the time for frivolities while surrounded by the constant loop of life and death, so vicious it kept her awake at night, rolling by,

taunting her with the faces she could have saved, had a hundred other men not needed tending in the same room.

The hours rushed by, in slathers of mud and armfuls of filth. She had changed her apron five times, but could feel the damp warmth of old blood still seeping through her dress. Her hands, once soft and dainty, were now as calloused as her father's were; raw and jagged as a cliff face. As evening crept ever closer, the prospect of tomorrow, and her only day off in a fortnight, shone like a coin in her hands. The latest ambulance had carried only three men, so the chaos of battle was ebbing away for the night.

She finished where she began, administering morphine to the dying German boy, mopping his forehead, almost hoping his bed would be empty by morning.

"Violet," Matron said as the nurses filed out. Violet tucked the boy in tighter and straightened her cuffs.

"Yes, Matron?" she said, not quite meeting the woman's eyes.

"I have received a number of complaints about you, I am afraid," she said, sternness pursing her lips together like drawstrings.

Violet blanched, feeling her heart tremble under her skin. Seismic tremors wreaked through her veins. "I am so sorry, Matron," she said, "I cannot think of a reason... I have helped send over twenty men on to the base hospital to recover!"

"I am aware."

If Matron sent her home, she would be disgraced. She had promised her whole family that she would nurse until there were no more

War Blooms

soldiers who needed it. She was mere months into her service abroad, she tended hundreds of new men a day – if she left, how many would die without her?

“Please, Matron, forgive me for speaking out of turn, but I believe this war needs me. I am far better trained than most of the women here.” Her eyebrows crumpled, though she kept her voice unwavering. “Please don’t send me back.”

The woman stared at Violet, how tall she held herself, how neat her uniform sat against her. “As long as I am the Matron here, you will not be going home. Whatever the other nurses are so squeamish about,” her eyes flickered down to Violet’s dark hands, “does not bother me. I wanted to warn you that your opposition is growing stronger... Just keep working as you are doing, Miss. Clarke. I do not doubt you could be an excellent Matron yourself.”

Violet’s lips quirked a fraction, “Thank you, Matron,” she said, trying not to beam with joy.

“Enjoy your day off,” said Matron, turning to her piles of paperwork. “You’ve earned it.”

That night, Violet slept through every shuddering shell explosion, so wrought with exhaustion that she could have remained asleep for days.

As the dawn cracked through the night, spilling over the edges of the sky, painting it golden, Violet was already dressed – in a rich burgundy gown she had owned before the war. Though now tattered at the elbows, it was still the loveliest thing she owned.

“Day off?” asked Eva, struggling into her corset, arching her back, tangling herself in the strings.

“Finally,” Violet said, restraining a roll of her eyes. She turned the girl around, tightening the laces, fastening her in for the day.

Eva smiled, the sight a waver of gratefulness, unsure on her lips. “Lucky,” she sighed, pinning her hair into her long, white veil. “I haven’t had a day off in weeks!”

Prone to exaggeration as ever, Eva was always sneaking off at night, laughing with soldiers, sharing their cigarettes. It was a wonder the Matron had never smelled the bitterness on her breath.

Plenty of volunteer nurses flitted around the handsome soldiers, to distract themselves from the near-dead ones. Matron had never received complaints about them.

Violet smoothed her frizz of hair, laid her uniform out for the next day, polished her badge, and stepped out into the watery, morning sunlight.

Cobbles stretched all the way to the town centre, gleaming in the sun, children hopped across them, shrieking French nursery rhymes and scrabbling in the dirt for fragments of shrapnel. Violet smiled for the first time in weeks as she arrived at the Café d’Or. Freckles of dust spiralled under a chandelier dripping with glass. She exhaled, the bloodstained tents feeling miles from the near decrepit grandeur. Music slinked through luxuriously, and Violet froze as she saw an African-American soldier singing with a voice like velvet. Her shoulders, used to tension, uncoiled and a deep, morphine relief settled on her skin.

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She drank tea by the gallon, writing letters to her family, wishing them well in their war efforts. The stories poured out of her, trapped for weeks behind closed lips and loneliness.

All too quickly, the hours had tumbled by. She was forced to return to her tent, leaving the bliss of the warmth behind, though the melodies still sung in her head, soft and gentle as an embrace, sometimes crashing and dissonant as the war itself. She walked with a sway, feeling lighter than she had for months, a dreamy look in her eyes that betrayed the shades of her soul.

It crumbled as she sat on her bed and noticed that her nursing badge was missing from her uniform.

Movements frantic, frenetic, she disturbed the bedclothes, lifting her thin mattress for the glint of silver. It did not matter how good a nurse she was, Matron would be livid if she lost her nursing badge. Violet would be livid. After the years she had poured into training, all the death, and pain she had witnessed, that pin symbolised it all.

It had been there when she left that morning. She remembered clearly shining it and fastening it to the lapel. A pinprick of light shone through the tiny hole where it had laid. Violet jostled through all of her belongings, scattering through pages of books and checking in every pocket of every spare apron.

She turned to Eva's bed and scowled. The volunteer must still have been mopping floors or thrilling the patients with her whispers. Violet rummaged through Eva's lace and silk entourage in her suitcase, uncovering nothing. She dropped to her knees and rifled through Eva's bed sheets, finding a hidden letter, but discarding it.

Leaning further down, she stretched under the mattress, into the darkness, and felt her palm close around a shock of ice-cold metal.

Eva walked in, letting her hair lose, as Violet whipped around, fury ill-disguised in her eyes.

“What are you doing down there?” Eva said, lips curling into a sneer. “I’ve never seen something so ungraceful!” She wittered a velveteen laugh.

“Did you take this from my uniform?” Violet asked, scrambling to her feet, cheeks burning.

Eva paused, eyes darting, mouth letting loose a bubble of a snort. “No, Vi!” she pressed her hand to her chest, an unconvincing performance, “Why would I take your badge?”

“Why on Earth is it under your bed, then?” She was careful to keep her tone soft and gentle, as though speaking to a confused patient. The volunteers like Eva wanted her gone, and Violet would not give them the satisfaction of sending her away. Anger pinched at her throat. She turned away to pin the badge to her uniform, pressing her thumb down, feeling the indentations crush into her skin, tears burning in her eyes. This was no reason to get upset, she admonished herself; a lost badge was the least of her troubles.

“It was only a joke, Vi,” Eva said, still hovering by the door.

“Do you think this is an apt time for jokes?” she spat. Eyes prised open, she clapped a hand to her mouth and rushed out into the air, choking back even bitterer words.

War Blooms

Though her shift did not start for another seven hours, she found herself in the hospital tent, back by the German soldier's bedside. He looked as though no one had treated him all day, exactly as she had left him, sweat still beaded on his forehead.

She softly pushed his hair aside, mind racing, heart heavy.

Beneath her fingers, he was stone cold.

Writing War, Writing Peace



RAIL227/436 (1) Ambulance Train in France 1914-1918

Chapter 1: Molly the Fox

By Maleeha Mir

Molly

This was easier than I thought. I sat on a small crate where the men gathered around the old water-barrel shoulder to shoulder, a half-melted candle perched on top. The rest of world was blackened by the night – only the warm, circular glow of the candle allowing me to see their faces - some annoyed some less-annoyed, but all about to lose their cigarettes to me – the cards in my hand were perfect, five aces. I smirked as the others eyed me, looking at their cards anxiously. Feet shifted, and frowns appeared. I sat comfortably on my crate-throne, my legs crossed and heart trying not to beat so loudly against my chest, as the flares hooted in the background. Just another night. *Breathe*. I told myself. The game is afoot.

'You're full of shite!' croaked John.

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A young man of pure London descent, his ginger hair matched the candle's core, his eyes always shifting quickly from side to side in flurry of panic at every shrill. I smiled.

'You sure about that'.

I tapped my bony fingers across my set of cards triumphantly. Arthur and Tommy snickered. It was too easy to get under John's skin – beyond easy. He pursed his lips, his face turning red.

'You bet yours too!' he exclaimed. Arthur playfully nudged John's shoulder, 'Not as much as you!'

Tommy and I laughed softly. I was glad to be with them tonight. Our final night before being sent to the Front.

Placing my cards facedown, I rubbed hands together trying to gather what little warm I could. If the other lads noticed the smallness of my hands – they never mentioned to me. Compared to theirs, mine were smaller, more delicate. I tried to disguise them, covering them in grit and some mud – much to my disgust. The others had hands like leather, bruised and discoloured by fading marks. I could never match theirs, but they looked boyish enough. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I placed an Ace on the barrel – the candle revealing a faded A in a curling font, the edges stained and spotted by dark marks. Arthur raised his eyebrows and eyed his cards for the last time - 'I'm out!' He raised his hands to the air in surrender, looking at me with a loop-sided smile. *If only all men surrendered this easily.* He flopped

Molly the Fox

down his cards and lit a cigarette. The fumes white and cloudy, floating above us. I swallowed the small lump in my throat. Fumes, gas and mist. John had told me so little about the gas, despite wanting to know more I didn't dare say I word. I had told them - that my mind was still misty from the recent charge at the Front. But that was lie. I had no choice – pretending to be lost when John found me wondering into the camp a month ago. I tried to remember as much detail as I could from Malcolm's letters. But the panic, the sudden rush, the fear of discovery deafened my mind to reason. Although, I suppose everything I'm did was beyond reason.

John had been the first man I encountered, when I arrived at the edge of the camp at the mouth of a damp wood. My back turned and focusing on louds bursts of cloudy explosions in the distance.

*

'Oi, who're you?' he shouted.

I flinched, turning my head slowly towards the voice. I found a lanky, moustached man standing a distance away. His pale, green uniform dirtied – sludge and red stains spotting his sleeves and shirt. He looked me up and down and sighed waiting for a reply.

John walked closer and asked quietly, 'Can't ya speak?'

His eye brows raised high, his face concerned. I cleared my throat loudly, telling my heart to stop racing against my chest.

'Afraid so.' I said. He frowned. 'You should've reply mate – I thought you might've been injured.'

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I nodded apologetically – gazing at my feet, not wanting to meet his eyes. *Just in case*. John stared at me intently, his eyes narrowing and his body leaning towards me.

'What're you doin' out here?' his voice suddenly serious. I looked up to meet his steely eyes.

'I don't know... I – I just don't remember'.

John nodded slowly. 'It happens sometimes... y'know, after a charge'. The gun-fire faded into the distance allowing the wood to buzz with life, birds and leaves glad to rustle in the void. 'Do'ya remember your name?'

I looked at him, uncontrollably stuttering, 'Mol-Malcolm. Malcolm Fox'.

He waited for a moment, also focusing in the direction of the fading guns before turning. 'Come on then'.

He and Arthur had been to the Front before – during the big push a couple of months ago. The very same push my brother had died in.

*

I placed another Ace on the barrel next the first. Tommy grimaced – 'I'm out too'.

He placed his cards on his lap and stretched luxuriously. Like me, Tommy was younger and had never seen the Front.

'You two give up too easily?' John coughed. His chest was always a problem, or so Arthur claimed. Those two had been inseparable during the time I spent with them – like brothers. My heart tightened. Even thinking the word tore me up. I wanted to fall to floor and cry from it – the intense, rotten feeling surging through my gut.

'When you gettin a new uniform?' asked Arthur.

My eyes widened slightly. 'New uniform?'

John scoffed, the crate under him creaking. 'It's obvious yours don't fit'.

I smiled, weakly. 'I wouldn't say that'.

Tommy leaned in, getting closer to the side of my face. 'Don't let'em tease ya – mine don't fit either'.

I nodded gratefully. Tommy always knew what to say, despite being completely oblivious to the world. Perhaps not the best quality during a War, but he sure was happier than Arthur and John. I'd seen them stare into the candle a few times tonight – lost in the blaze, shadows dancing inside their heads. The weight of the world upon them. *I knew the feeling.*

At any moment, discovery seemed imminent – a doctor's check-up or worse, a public shower. We'd been offered one a couple of days ago. The others jumped at the chance to be washed and scrubbed

before walking down the sludgy lanes. I did not. The very idea paralysed me – one peek at my naked form and this whole thing would be in shambles. Thankfully, no one had noticed when I slipped away.

Instead, while my comrades bathed and sang, I returned to the mouth of the wood. I'd grown attached to it during my time in the camp. It felt most like home. I found an ancient rock surrounded by moss and decaying leaves. The dampness and intense, pungent odour bothered me for a bit. But it sure smelled better than the deep pot holes and new graves we'd pasted a few days prior – the uneasy, musky smell of newly dug earth filtering through my nostrils made me gag. What rested underneath them disturbed me more than I'd like to admit. But the stone I perched on, surrounded by the leaves, the small weeds, the towering trees and the birdsong above were the only things that quieted the panic inside my head and the hot pulse racing through my body.

Carefully, my fingers slipped into my left chest pocket and I took out his photo. A small square against the huge wood and gazed upon it. It felt like hours, eons even, finding myself overcome with a strange calm as I stared at the small thing – committing every detail to memory.

We shared so many things. The same hazel eyes, the same mousey hair, the same freckled face and ruddy complexion, the same detestable parents. We were twins in every way. With one distinctive difference – He was born a boy and I was born a girl. My thumb stroked the small, wondrous thing.

Molly the Fox

'Malcolm...' I whispered to the photo.

No reply from the papery treasure, only silence and the low hum of the wood.

'I'll be joining soon enough'.

A Creative Writing anthology inspired by the records of Nurses in the First World War

In the summer of 2018, The National Archives ran a workshop for students interested in Creative Writing.

Working with award winning writer, Melvin Burgess students had the opportunity to explore original documents from The National Archives' collection, discovering the experiences of nurses during the First World War.

These brave and extraordinary women travelled the world, bringing care and comfort to those in need at the centre of military action. They implemented their medical expertise and developed new approaches to hospital care.

All of the stories and poems featured in this anthology were created by our students as works of fiction, based on the records they discovered during the week.



ZPER34/148, Red Cross Workers 1916

