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**The ESU Roly Sussex Short Story Competition
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Second Prize in the Secondary School Division

Lori Adam

Frontlines of War

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2024

Lori Adam***Frontlines of War*****1915¹****“Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,”**

“We need to move now!” I screamed beneath my gas mask.

The dreaded hiss of escaping chlorine and phosgene came trundling down with the wind creating a queer fog that seemed strangely out of place. It reached the bulwark, paused, collected itself like a wave and ponderously lapped over the edge of the trenches. The then passive curiosity turned into active torment.

A burning sensation in the head, red hot needles in the lungs, and my throat seized as if gripped by a strangler. I watched as my friends fell, contorting in agony, dying slowly as the chemicals claimed their lungs.

What do I do?

I ran, having quickly shoved on my gas mask. The facepiece distorted my vision and muffled the sounds around me, fogging up heavily with each breath as sweat and water vapour began to bead on my forehead. As I fumbled forward, I contemplated my next move. The gas would clear, but then what?

Beyond it, I knew, lay a battle I wasn't sure I was ready to fight ...

¹ 1915 poem, for all but note 3 below: Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est”, from *Poems*, ed. by Siegfried Sassoon. New York: The Viking Press, 1921.

2020²

**“Weary. Waiting. Worried. Workers.
Drafted into a fight we cannot see.”**

“We need to move now!” I scream beneath my N95 mask. “Someone page respiratory therapy, we’ll need more ventilator support.”

The dreaded incessant beeping of monitors, a symphony of cries and the whir of ventilators came flooding down the ward, creating an oscillation of uncertainty that felt oddly out of place. The once choreographed atmosphere of the ICU turned into a frantic scramble.

A tightness in the chest, shortness of breath and fever gripped the patients one by one.

Doctors rushed from bed to bed, their faces etched with concern as the virus claimed more victims.

What do I do?

I hurried, as fast as possible through the airlock room. My hands shook, fumbling with the ties of the PPE gown. The face shield descended like a curtain, distorting my vision and muffling the sounds around me. Sweat began to bead on my forehead as I pulled on the gloves, the latex snapping against my wrists.

I contemplated what I’d have to do to help this patient, sadly very little. I stood for a second behind the door, about to enter the negative-pressure room and fully aware that, beyond it, I knew, lay a battle I wasn’t sure I was ready to fight ...

1915

**“In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”**

² 2020 poem, all lines: Josh Powell, “Frontline Workers of an Invisible War”, *Weapons of Grace*, <https://www.weaponsofgrace.com>, 2021.

Darkness was approaching but, through the dissipating mist, I saw him – barely touched by the gas yet stumbling towards me. His young eyes, wide with panic, hands clawing at his throat as he fell to his knees.

I rushed to him; my own breathing laboured through the mask.

“Hold on, mate, put on your damn mask!” I yelled, though my voice was muffled. We had outrun the major gas cloud but there was no telling how much further the horrid, chlorinated odour, like pineapple and pepper, had surrounded us.

As I reached him, my heart shattered. God, he was only nineteen – almost the same age as my boy back home. My son, who still believed his father was on some grand adventure, probably dreamed of enlisting, his head filled with romantic notions of honour and glory. If only he could see this moment, this brutal truth, it was a thought that twisted in my chest like a bayonet.

“Stay with me, kid,” I pleaded, forcing the headpiece around his mouth with trembling hands. His lips, once pink with youth, were turning a sickening blue. I could see the light in his eyes flickering, a candle in a storm. “Breathe, damn you!” I begged, starting chest compressions. Each push was a desperate prayer, a futile rage against the dying of the light. With every compression, a horrifying gurgle escaped his lips. I looked around wildly for help, for hope, but we were alone in this pocket of hell.

2020

**“Terrible, Trying, Turbulent Times
Is there anywhere to flee?”**

The airlock hissed as I entered the negative pressure room. The patient lay before me, her chest heaving with each breath. The monitor’s erratic beeping matched her desperate struggle
for air.

“I need suction here, now!” I called out through my mask. I tilted the patient’s head back, inserting the laryngoscope to clear her airway. “O2 stats are dropping,” my thoughts warned.

I was already preparing the intubation tube.

“Stay with me,” I muttered to her, though I knew she couldn’t hear me through her oxygen mask.

As I guided the tube down her throat, I could hear the wet rattle in her lungs. I connected the ventilator, watching her chest rise and fall with mechanical precision. But her colour wasn’t improving. “Start her on pressors,” I ordered, but no one else was there. I looked around desperately for some help, but with the shortage of doctors we were alone in this pocket of hell.

1915³

“What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.”

I refused to let him become another casualty.

He was still so young and close to life when I found him.

With trembling hands, I adjusted his mask, ensuring a tight seal. His breathing was shallow, but he was still fighting. I dragged him further from the gas-filled trench, every step a struggle against exhaustion and fear. I had no idea where we were, it was dark and no enemy was in sight, so we cursed through the sludge.

The distant rumble of artillery served as a grim reminder of our reality. No church bells would toll for the fallen here, only the thunderous roar of guns marking their passing. As we reached higher ground, the air seemed clearer. His coughing fits became less violent, and colour slowly returned to his face.

³ 1915 poem, for these lines only: Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, from *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. by Jon Stalworthy. W.W. Norton and Company, 1986.

2020

**“Where does the wounded hero go
when they are weak and struggling to see”**

I refused to let her become another statistic. Alone in the room, I adjusted the ventilator settings and fine-tuned the oxygen flow. Her stats were low, but she was hanging on.

“Where do we go from here?” I wondered, as I checked her IV lines. This virus had turned healthcare workers into reluctant heroes, but we were weakening.

“You’ve got this,” I said to her, though the words were as much for myself as they were for her. As the hours passed, her oxygen levels began to stabilise. The erratic beeping of the monitors gradually steadied.

1915

**“And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;”**

Awaken the morning. We must’ve unknowingly collapsed from tiredness and exhaustion. I roll over to awaken him. But instead, I rolled over to a mask of agony, his eyes rolling wildly as he struggled for each breath.

The gas had come back for revenge.

I held him steady, watching helplessly as he writhed. My hands shook as I tried to adjust his mask, to give him any relief I could. Around us, the battlefield was littered with similar scenes – men twisted, their faces frozen in final, horrific expressions.

“Hold on,” I whispered, though I wasn’t sure if I was speaking to him or myself. The war had turned us all into devils, sick with the sin of survival while others fell. As the sun climbed

above the ground, casting harsh light on our grim reality, I wondered the same thing I'd wondered every morning since we landed here, how much more of this hell could we endure?

2020

**“how they can go much further
when it is so hard to believe”**

Awaken the morning, my shift still not over. In the sterile hospital room, the patient's face contorted with each breath. Her eyes, darting around the room, seeking some form of hope or comfort. I adjusted her oxygen, feeling the weight of her life in my hands.

The monitors beeped relentlessly, a cacophony of data that seemed to mock our efforts.

How could we go on like this, day after day, watching patients struggle? Some were surviving; many were not. It was getting harder to believe that we could make a difference.

“Stay with us,” I urged, both to the patient and to myself. The pandemic had stretched us all to our limits, leaving us continuously questioning our abilities, our purpose. As another dawn broke outside the window, I wondered how much longer we could keep fighting this battle when it was so hard to believe.

1915

**“If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,”**

The sound was unbearable – a wet, choking rattle in every breath he took. His lungs, corrupted by the gas, fought a losing battle. I held him, feeling each jolt as blood gurgled in his throat.

The truth hit me like artillery fire – this boy, this child, who reminded me so much of my own, was slipping away. His life ebbing before my eyes, and I was powerless to stop it. God,

help me, he's only nineteen. The words echoed in my mind, a haunting chorus that tore at my very soul. The agony of my helplessness was suffocating. I held him close, feeling the warmth drain from his body, replaced by the cold finality of death. Tears blurred my vision as I whispered, "I'm so sorry, son. I'm so sorry."

In that moment, all the horrors of war crystallised into a single, heart-wrenching truth. This wasn't about glory or honour – it was about loss, about fathers burying sons, whether related by blood or not, and about dreams turned to ash. As I cradled him in my arms, I could only think of my own child and pray to whatever god might listen that he would never know this nightmare.

2020

**"Each day is filled with trauma.
Invisible griefs"**

The monitors flatlined, their piercing monotone cutting through the air of the ICU. Her lungs had finally surrendered to the virus. I stood there, rooted to the spot, as the sound filled the room – a haunting requiem for yet another life stolen.

My eyes burned with unshed tears behind my fogged-up face shield. The patient, a woman in her early forties, reminded me so much of my sister, who also had young children at home. The thought of those kids waiting for a mother who would never return tore at my heart.

"Time of death, 19:15," I heard myself say, my voice hollow and distant. God, she was only forty-one.

Each day brought new trauma, new losses that piled up invisibly on top of us. I removed my gloves and mask, feeling entirely numb. Another life lost to this relentless virus.

From the trenches of the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 to hospital wards around the world, the battle rages on. In these moments of despair, we are all soldiers, all healers, all victims, and all fighting forces that are beyond our control.

As we watch lives slip away, we're haunted by bitter truth:

there is no glory in this suffering, no sweetness in this sacrifice.

Yet we press on, for those we've sworn to protect, witnessing both courage and despair.

But, in the end, how many more must fall before we truly understand the cost of our humanity?