

Emilie Collyer

At Belsen

she arrives a few months
after the end of the war

from Sydney via
United Nations to Germany
(through a pretty birch-tree forest)

tasked with creating
a hospital from the remnants of—

Belsen Concentration Camp No. 1
liberated by British forces May 1945, who find:

10,000 unburied dead
40,000 starving people

huddled in huts
thick with shit
most too weak to move
typhus crawling the fetid air

for three months
soldiers doctors nurses students
work in desperation
save who they can

evacuate the Horror Camp
burn it to the ground
food & clothes for those
fit enough to leave

move patients—more than 17,000
to plush ex-German Army barracks

theatre, swimming pool, ball-room, solarium—re-purpose
for healing & regeneration

she arrives
 a letter writer
 to mother and friends
 no husband no kids—Miss Doherty
 she likes to be called
 documents her tenure
 with diligence

the world should know
 she writes, *it concerns us all—*
we must not forget

she walks the wards
 long daily rounds

black lace up shoes
 pressed woollen skirt
 ironed shirt every day

stop at each bed
 each mouth a story
 early on words limited
 to daily needs
 toothpaste, blankets, thread

hands press
 eyes smile
 translucent skin
 plumps slowly

wisp hair of malnutrition
 takes longer to thicken

shy smiles grow
 spirits restore
 hands busy with
 sewing, knitting

light fingered
 opportunistic *klipsi klipsi**

mild payback for local villagers
 this happened in your blind-sight

peace time shrugs and heaves
 displaced persons from
 dozens of countries
 through this small town
 her hospital mostly Poles & Jews, Italians & Czechs

orphans and camp children
 lead her with small hands
 show their tasks and talents
 needlework, stories, drawings

in the kindergarten
 Yugoslav children—called *little Titos*
 make the most beautiful work

rations allow one serve each day
 fresh cold milk

not sipped
 nor gulped

instead patients pour with care
 store in muslin bags
 hanging heavy ends of beds
 sour whey drips

they love it, the sourer the better;
they call it Quark

Pods bulge like fat bells

cheese making as healing

everyone here
is a long way from home

in time she bans it on wards
orders *Quark* to the kitchen
wrestles with dilemma, it brings
such joy, but the smell—the smell

autumn falls into winter
power failure lean supplies

everyone here
is making do

a day's thick snowfall
mud ice slips

slow careful steps
darkness drops early
numb finger writing
lit by a candle

she attends Luneberg trials
painstaking detail
Mad Doctor Beast of Belsen
women with *small square chins*
and little hard mouths

wants to *give a first-hand picture*
so this is known

many here are stateless
no path to take them home

shadow eyes

once well enough to leave
set out on roads to uncertainty

she worries, wonders how
the world will treat them

small joys grow
concerts by DP musicians
visit from Yehudi Menuhin
love tumbles
500 babies born
wedding of a Polish survivor
to an Italian ambulance driver
makes the British news

she is a godmother multiple times
new names pop in praise of liberation:
Little Ameri-go Koppa is a fine wee lad

every day she walks
every night she writes

black lace up shoes
polished
waiting by the door

cold nights
white sheets

time turns
this will become the past
(remember, don't doom to repeat)

in her dreams
steady pace
and the tang
of fresh cheese

Notes:

This poem was written in response to researching Muriel Knox Doherty, an Australian nurse who ran the hospital at Belsen Concentration Camp after the end of the Second World War. Text in italics are quotes are from: Doherty, Muriel Knox, Ed: Cornell, Judith and Russell, R. Lynette. *Letters from Belsen 1945: An Australian nurse's experiences with the survivors of war*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000.

*Klips is a Polish word, translating as clip in English. Miss Doherty explains that Klipsi klipsi was a term coined by DPs: *They are perfectly honest about it all and consider they are entitled to take any German goods they want—perhaps they are.*

Image caption