

The Reader

By Hadi Abou-Ghaida¹

A flick of the matchstick, the drip of melting wax; the flame of the candle burned brightly. A precise flick of the page, a shift of his spectacles; Thomas sat down at his study to read. Today, he mused the Roman classics of Horace; whose words emitted a flamboyant exuberance of flavour, the intensity of them created a warmth like a festive fireplace:

“Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori.”

As he mused these words in his Latin, a joyful after-taste like that of an exotic wine danced on his tongue – a glorious elixir.

Thomas gently blew out the flickering flame on the candle in his study and knew that beneath those smooth and sentimental serifs was concealed a profound truth.

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One year too young to sign up for the Great War, Thomas watched his older brother in awe. Purposeful stride, majestic military regalia, the girlfriend kissing him goodbye – epitome of masculinity, he thought.

His presence was conspicuous and unmistakable like that of a hero.

Thomas's awe was like a fiery flame which cast the occasional shadow of envy – he could not join his comrades on the battlefield. He could only imagine – the glory! The honour!

¹ Hadi is a third-year student at the University of Sydney, studying Software Engineering and Commerce. With a passion for working on innovative new technology, he balances his tech-driven pursuits with early morning surf sessions. Every now and again, he escapes to the bush, where the serenity and solitude spark the inspiration for his creative writing.

And his brother began his departure. He walked down to the port; cheery folk interspersed at the wharves watching the grandeur display of honourable men boarding upon mighty vessels. Young women, mothers, fathers, children all bidding their soldier's farewell.

His brother stepped aboard. With a prompt wave to Thomas, he joined his band of brothers.

And the departure was complete, robust and venerable, just as Thomas envisioned.

As he recalled Horace's golden words – an explosion of flavourful, sweet wine – he pondered their momentous truth.

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The boat had returned, the crude wooden hull barely afloat in the murky waters.

An emaciated figure on a wheeled chair is rolled off, meagre and emasculated. His legs, now dull stumps, his purposeful stride had been stolen. His regalia was now a set of drab rags, and his dark eyes were fearful to soul deep.

Thomas gazed into them and saw nothing – he was now a shadow in a chair.

Alone, his band of brothers disbanded. In his hazy vision, Thomas saw flickering images; scenes of hellish flames devouring angelic youths and fathers burying sons. Again, he remembered Horace's words:

"Dulce Et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori."

Words which once carried a joyful exuberance of flavour, now inconceivably unpalatable. Their truth stripped back to deception. Their serrated serifs stabbed him deeply, and Thomas prayed for no further incisions.

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Thomas sat down at his study. Years later, pangs of painful despair remained etched into his veins.

He had no appetite for conspicuous, overtly sweet and exotic wine; shallow and unsatisfying. He reached for different pages on his bookshelf, a recent volume, yet emanating an aroma of antiquity and wisdom.

And while he felt their heat, their genuine warmth asserting there was life, they spoke to him, exuding the subtle scent of aged wine.

And he opened the bottle:

“My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.”

The wine had matured, and Thomas was now decanting it. And it flowed freely, dark and acrid. It carried a bitter, yet rich and complex after-tone with every sip; unmistakably genuine, the real thing. Complex and fecund, fitting for an honest appreciation of what it is to be truly human.