

## Dulce et Decorum Est<sup>1</sup>

Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.

Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired Five-Nines<sup>2</sup> that dropped behind them.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys—An ecstasy or fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime. . .  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

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

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
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.

1917

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<sup>1</sup> from Horace (Odes III.2.13), well known to British schoolboys: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—it is sweet and honorable to die for your country.

<sup>2</sup> Five-Nines—shells containing poison gas. The whole poem is about a gas attack. The use of gas in World War I raised moral problems (like atomic weapons or napalm later).