

The Death of Harry Patch

When the next morning eventually breaks, a young Captain climbs onto the fire step, knocks ash from his pipe then drops it still warm into his pocket, checks his watch, and places the whistle back between his lips.

At 06.00 hours precisely he gives the signal, but today nothing that happens next happens according to plan. A very long and gentle note wanders away from him over the ruined ground and hundreds of thousands of dead who lie there

immediately rise up, straightening their tunics before falling in as they used to do, shoulder shoulder, eyes front. They have left a space for the last recruit of all to join them: Harry Patch, one hundred and eleven years old, but this is him

now, running quick-sharp along the duckboards. When he has taken his place, and the whole company are settled at last, their padre appears out of nowhere, pausing a moment in front of each and every one to slip a wafer of dry mud onto their tongues.



Andrew Motion

