What happens?

Waiting soldiers are worn down by cold, fear and a lack of progress.

The main idea

War destroys through exhaustion and waiting as well as battle; nature defeats the promise of military purpose.

1. “merciless iced east winds that knive”

Method: Personification

Weather is imagined as a pitiless attacker.

2. “But nothing happens.”

Method: Refrain

Repeated inaction becomes an account of gradual destruction.

3. “Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army”

Method: Metaphor

Dawn brings another hostile force rather than rescue.

4. “All their eyes are ice,”

Method: Metaphor

The final bodily image freezes perception and life together.

Form and structure

Eight five-line stanzas; recurring shortened endings and pararhyme prevent a reassuring resolution.

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Development, voice and tone

Opening watch — Exhausted and anxious. Silent waiting already causes bodily and mental pain.

Snow and imagined home — Numb and estranged. Dreams of warmth offer no secure escape; the men imagine themselves shut out.

Faith and burial — Desolate. Religious doubt and frozen faces replace the expectation of a meaningful advance.

Context

Owen wrote from his experience of the First World War. The collective voice centres soldiers' suffering.

Comparison links

Storm on the Island: threatening nature. Bayonet Charge: different wartime experiences.

Recall question

Why is inaction so destructive here?

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