

DONALD PLATT

Nonetheless

Tristan Tzara's instructions for making a Dadaist poem:

Take a newspaper. Take a pair of scissors.

“Corporal Poole has no memory / of the explosion or even the
days / before it, although he has had / a recurring dream of being
in / Iraq and seeing the sky / suddenly turn red.”

*Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem. Cut out
the article.*

“Other marines have told him he was / on a foot patrol when the
bomb went off. / Three others in the patrol—two Iraqi soldiers /
and an interpreter—were killed. / Shrapnel tore into the left side
/ of Corporal Poole’s face and flew out / from under his right eye.
Metal fragments / and the force of the blast fractured his skull / in
multiple places and injured / his brain, one of its major arteries,
/ and his left eye and ear. Every bone / in his face was broken. /
Some, including his nose / and portions of his eye sockets, / were
shattered. Part of his jawbone / was pulverized.”

red dream sky seeing of being recurring a had
has Iraq the suddenly and in turn he

*Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a
bag. Shake it gently.*

broken in face every his was bone

shake gently it

“He has been a patient at the center / since September 2004,
mostly / in the brain injury rehabilitation / unit. He arrived
unable to speak / or walk, drooling, with the left side / of his face

caved in, his left eye blind / and sunken, a feeding tube in his stomach / and an opening in his neck to help him / breathe.”

his an in help breathe opening neck him to

“Damage to the left side of his brain / had left him weak on the right, and he tended / not to notice things to his right, / even though his vision in / that eye was good. He had lost his sense / of smell. The left side of the brain / is also the home of language, / and it was hard for him to talk / or comprehend speech. ‘He would shake / his head no when he meant yes,’ / said Dr. Zeiner, the neuropsychologist. / But he could communicate by pointing. / His mind was working, but the thoughts / were trapped inside his head.”

the brain home the is language the of also of side left

lost had his sense of smell he

head thoughts inside trapped were his the

“He needed an ankle brace and a walker / just to stand at first. His balance / was way off and, because of the brain / injury, he could not tell where / his right foot was unless he could / see it. He often would just drag it / behind him. His right arm / would fall from his walker / and hang by his side, and he would not / even notice. He would bump / into things to his right.”

Take out the scraps. Copy conscientiously, one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.

other scraps conscientiously which the they copy out order in after take then the bag one in the the left

“Nonetheless, on his second day / in Palo Alto, he managed to walk / a few steps.”

“By the last week of September, / he was beginning to climb
stairs. / He graduated from a walker / to a cane to walking on his
own. / By January he was running / and lifting weights.”

“‘If it was me,’ his father said, / ‘I’d fall apart. We think of how
he was / and what he’s had taken from him.’”

him what how he’s taken from he and apart I’d
we think fall had of was

In the snapshot of Corporal Poole
weeks before the roadside blast wounded

him, he’s dressed in camouflage and full
battle gear, automatic rifle,

Kevlar helmet, bulletproof vest with
water bottle and regulation

wounded camouflage in dressed blast roadside he’s
him

combat knife. He stands mugging, arms spread
wide, head thrown back to sing O Sole

Mio in front of twenty laughing
Iraqi men. It must be over

back wide head O thrown mugging sing arms
spread to stands He Mio Sole

one hundred degrees. In the background
ancient crenelated towers squat.

The gateway in the stone wall is an
upside-down U, through which blue sky shines.

“In his first weeks at Palo Alto, / he hid behind sunglasses and, even / though the weather was hot, ski caps / and high turtle-necks.

We said, ‘Jason, you’re sweating. You have / to get used to how you look.’

‘Even when I do get low / it’s just for five or ten minutes,’ / he said. ‘I’m just a happy guy. / I mean, like, it sucks, basically, / but it happened to me and I’m still / alive.’”

me happened still and to I’m it alive

“Ms. Klein began with the basics. She / would point to items in the room. / What’s this called? What’s that?”

table chair telephone coffee mug notepad TV

“He would have to name five types / of transportation.”

car train airplane sailboat submarine

“She would read a paragraph or play / a phone message and ask him questions / about it.”

“Hi, Mark. This is Tom Notley calling. / It’s about four o’clock on Saturday / afternoon. I got your message. Feel free / to call me at home anytime / for the rest of the day. I should be home / tomorrow afternoon too. I’ll be / unavailable most of tomorrow / morning. I’m looking at my calendar / for Monday. Monday morning I should be / in the office by 8:30, and I don’t / have any appointments scheduled / until 11:00. Then in the afternoon / I do have something from 1:00 until / 2:30 or so. You can use / my cell, 586-8443. / I look forward to talking to you, / and I hope we can work out whatever / the problem is. Take care. Bye.”

Who is calling?

When is he calling?

When is Tom free for Mark to call him back?

When is Tom not free?

Does Tom know what the problem is?

“Very gradually, he / began to speak. But it was not / until February that he could / string together enough words / for anyone to hear that he still / had traces of an English accent.”

he very speak gradually to began

“‘They have to reinvent who / they are,’ said Dr. Harriet Zeiner.”

The poem will be like you. And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

be will you poem the like

“She handed Corporal Poole a sheet / of paper that said, ‘Dogs can be taught / how to talk.’ A series of questions / followed. What would be / the benefits? Why could it be / a problem? What would you do / about it?”

how taught to can talk be dogs

“Corporal Poole hunched over the paper, / pen in hand. He looked up. / ‘I have no clue,’ he said softly.

‘Let’s ask this one another way,’ / Ms. Gandolfi said. ‘What would be cool / about it?’”

he clue no have softly said I

“He began to write with a ballpoint pen, / slowly forming faint letters. / ‘I would talk to him and listen / to him,’ he wrote.

In another space, he wrote: ‘lonely / the dog happy.’ But what he had / actually said to Ms. Gandolfi / was: ‘I could be really lonely / and this dog would talk to me.’”

happy lonely dog the

“‘It will take a bit / of time,’ Corporal Poole said, ‘but / basically I’m going to get / there.’

One evening over dinner, he said, / ‘I feel so old.’”

old so feel I

“His girlfriend from before he went / to war is now just a friend. Before / he left, they had agreed they might talk / about getting married when he got / back.

‘But I didn’t come back,’ he said.”

he I back said but didn’t come

“‘I didn’t come back.’”

The quoted material in “Nonetheless” is from Denise Grady’s article, “Struggling Back from War’s Once-Deadly Wounds,” which appeared in the January 22nd, 2006 edition of The New York Times.