

This extract is from the middle of a novel by Pat Barker, it was first published in 1993. In this section, Prior, a patient suffering from shell-shock during the First World War, has undergone hypnosis during which he revisits the event that left him unable to speak.

1 He had first trench watch. He gulped a mug of chlorine-tasting tea, and then started walking  
2 along to the outermost position on their left. A smell of bacon frying. In the third fire bay he  
3 found Sawdon and Towers crouched over a small fire made out of shredded sandbags and  
4 candle ends, coaxing the flames. He stopped to chat for a few minutes, and Towers, blinking  
5 under the green mushroom helmet, looked up and offered him tea. A quiet day, he thought,  
6 walking on. Not like the last few days, when the bombardment had gone on for seventy hours,  
7 and they'd stood-to five times expecting a German counter-attack. Damage from the  
8 bombardment was everywhere: crumbling parapets, flooded saps, dugouts with gagged  
9 mouths.

10 He'd gone, perhaps, three fire bays along when he heard the whoop of a shell, and, spinning  
11 round, saw the scrawl of dusty brown smoke already drifting away. He thought it'd gone clear  
12 over, but then he heard a cry and, feeling sick in his stomach, he ran back. Logan was there  
13 already. It must have been Logan's cry he heard, for nothing in that devastation could have  
14 had a voice. A conical black hole, still smoking, had been driven into the side of the trench. Of  
15 the kettle, the frying-pan, the carefully tended fire, there was no sign, and not much of  
16 Sawdon and Towers either, or not much that was recognizable.

17 There was a pile of sandbags and shovels close by, stacked against the parapet by a returning  
18 work party. He reached for a shovel. Logan picked up a sandbag and held it open, and he  
19 began shovelling soil, flesh and splinters of blackened bone into the bag. As he shovelled, he  
20 retched. He felt something jar against his teeth and saw that Logan was offering him a rum  
21 bottle. He forced down bile and rum together. Logan kept his face averted as the shovelling  
22 went on. He was swearing under his breath, steadily, blasphemously, obscenely, inventively.  
23 Somebody came running. "Don't stand there gawping, man," Logan said. "Go and get some  
24 lime."

25 They'd almost finished when Prior shifted his position on the duckboards, glanced down, and  
26 found himself staring into an eye. Delicately, like somebody selecting a particularly choice  
27 morsel from a plate, he put his thumb and forefinger down through the duckboards. His  
28 fingers touched the smooth surface and slid before they managed to get a hold. He got it out,  
29 transferred it to the palm of his hand, and held it out towards Logan. He could see his hand  
30 was shaking, but the shaking didn't seem to be anything to do with him. "What am I supposed  
31 to do with this gob-stopper?" He saw Logan blink and knew he was afraid. At last Logan  
32 reached out, grasped his shaking wrist, and the tipped the eye into the bag. "Williams and  
33 me'll do the rest, sir. You go on back now."

34 He shook his head. They spread the lime together, sprinkling it thickly along the firestep,  
35 throwing shovelfuls at a bad patch of wall. When at last they stood back, beating the white  
36 dust from the skirts of their tunics, he wanted to say something casual, something that would  
37 prove he was all right, but a numbness had spread all over the lower half of his face.

38 Back in the dugout he watched people's lips move and was filled with admiration for them.  
39 There was a sense of joy in watching them, of elation almost. How complex those movements  
40 were, how amazing the glimpses of teeth and tongue, the movement of muscles in the jaw.  
41 He ran his tongue along the edges of his teeth, curved it back, stroked the ridged palate, flexed  
42 his lips, felt the pull of skin and the stretching of muscles in his throat. All present and correct,  
43 but how they combined to make sounds he had no idea.

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