

Two Poems by J.T. Whitehead

Suicide

A minus B

only equals

B minus A

when the condition that A equals B

is dis-satisfied.

The Power of Sound

Whether it's from the boots on the asphalt
in perfect synchronized procession
or the sonic boom from the cobalt
sky overheard overhead, she can

grasp almost scientifically
certain almost scientific rules
the drill instructor specifically
shouts. YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU YOU ARE
TOOLS

WHO MAKE FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY
WORK IN THIS WORLD JUST LIKE THAT MACHINE
OVERHEAD WORKS YOU WILL BE UNSEEN
THE ISLAMO-FASCIST ENEMY

WILL NOT ENCOUNTER HIS GOD UNTIL
YOU AND THAT PILOT OVERHEAD CAN
BRING DOWN ON HIM WITH PERFECTED SKILL
SALVATION FROM IRAQ OR IRAN

It's the sound of the drill instructor
but whether it's boots on the asphalt
or the sonic boom from the cobalt
sky, it's just sound, but sound is faster

than most cadets are, including her.
Sound travels at almost 800
miles per hour. The drill instructor,
faster than his words, is in her head.

NOT IN MY AIR FORCE . . . that's what he said
about DON'T ASK DON'T TELL. Another
was also sounding off in her bed.

Sound may be fast . . . but love is faster.

*

This is the point in this poem when
even the patient reader expects
a description of hot, lesbian action
to come upon one faster than sex.

Sex may come fast, but sound is faster.
Like sex, sound needs matter to travel,
is rarefied, or compressional,
and travels through elastic matter.

*

It was leave and training was over
when she was one of two graduates
in a hotel room in a mirror
visualizing co-ordinates.

NOT IN MY AIR FORCE the other said
mocking the drill instructor, kissing
her at what she called "points A & Zed"
and every letter in between

until she reached that special concave
place, first with her touches, then with her
kisses, then her words, saying BE BRAVE,
once again mocking the instructor . . .

*

The girls – the word is not the poet's –
well, the girls, as the drill instructor
would call them, were separated. It's

just the way of a nation at war.

So she sat silent at her station.
She received orders. She didn't ask.
They didn't tell. She performed her task,
followed her orders, punched each button.

*

Kuo Hsiang adduced that "Not all
sounds can be produced." Compare
the sound of one thunder-god clapping
and one hand clapping, the silent air

of the Taoist scholar, the Viking
exhaling the smell of the battle,
and the Koan of the Zen master.
Sound is fast. Something else is faster.

*

Between each air support assignment
she'd anticipate e-mails from her
new special friend, letters never sent,
newspaper clippings from her mother

which sometimes reached her like a mother,
a mother's love, a mother's bother,
or news articles from the teacher
which never reached her any better

than he could ever reach her before
when he tried to teach her that this war
is fought for a poet's bitch, gone bad in the teeth,
a tin-horn tin god, wearing a tin wreath.

Poetry is fast. Sound is faster.
A letter is lasting. A censored letter
lasts forever, censored forever.
She missed people. She missed her lover,

not like she missed the censored letters,
but the way she missed the way she kissed.
There were lots of things she missed. She missed
the family garden, the asters,

the roses, the wild flowers. She missed
dirty fingernails, she missed rinsing
them off in the kitchen sink, missed
growing lavender, heather, ginseng.

She missed those letters from her brother,
every one of them a massive tome
filling the screen of her computer.
But for weeks she missed the news from home.

There were lots of things she missed. When her
brother was killed, she'd still not learned it
for weeks. When she learned it, God Damn It,
She was broken. Living with murder

somehow made sense, but learning of this,
going down at that intersection,
far away from this war, that was a sin
no vengeful God could forgive, or miss.

Jerome minded his own business.
Likely, he minded his business then.
He was approached by his killers, when
his passenger decided that this

crime was worth resisting (stupid fuck)
(and witness for the prosecution).
Her brother Jerome stayed in the truck.
The Preacher said he died amidst sin.

The record said that his passenger
(key witness for the prosecution)
saw the light flash from out of that gun
well before he heard that revolver.

*

Sound is fast, but light travels faster.

*

There were lots of things she missed. She missed
this news of her brother's death. She missed
the news and details for weeks. She missed
her teacher's news articles. She missed

the sound of her lover's moan. She missed
her brother's camera flash. She missed
her father's pat on the back. She missed
the smooth of her lover's skin. She missed

practicing scales on guitar. She missed
the major, minor, and blues. She missed
the gypsy, the ionic. She missed
the pentatonic. She also missed

hearing tunes. She missed music. She missed
fireworks. She missed that boom. She missed
loud stereo speakers, and she missed
the bouncing cars that blared them. She missed

boyfriends that lied, I love you. She missed
lightning on Midwestern plains. She missed
a life without regularity.
She missed her lover. That's what she missed.

*

Sound is fast, but light is faster.
Consider any constellated aster,
or ordinary military
aerial assault . . . or gun-shot disaster.

*

And damn but she never missed a target.
When those Middle-Eastern cities lit
up like those Midwestern plains, crackling
and reminiscent of the lightning

that brightened those skies, before making
noise, like that gun that killed her brother,
she was back on those plains that she missed.

But this was the light she never missed –
the one that brought the fire shower –
that power of the sound of power.

-J.T. Whitehead