SHANNON EBNER’S STRIKE is a collection of photographs. It is also a book, and a poem. As such, it rewards multiple forms of engagement: looking, reading, and reciting. Each of the 504 black and white pictures that make up STRIKE depicts a generic pegboard, small steel pegs fixed in each hole. The grid—11 pegs high, and usually 8 (sometimes 9) wide—provides a structure on which cinderblocks are hung to assemble the basic forms of single letters. Over time, by reading a series of images, or paging through the book, the letters form words, then sentences, and, in their full sequence, a poem.

“NO!” the poem begins, that most primal negation. Fragments rush to follow: “IF CAN/ AS IT IS/ IT IS A WAR/ RAW AS IT IS/ IT IS AN ACTION!” Composed of short stanzas, the poem comprises 15 palindromes, or sequences that read the same forward and backward. In these palindromes, “Evil” becomes “live,” “war” turns to “raw,” and “now” transforms into “won,” together signaling a world in which life and war must coexist. Action, joy, love, sex, sadness—all the received and enacted things that make up a lifetime are folded into each other by the nature of the palindromic structure.

As the words mount up, a certain mood, and a certain narrative, are established. Written in 2007–08, in the context of mounting death tolls, and the economic precarity of an impending financial crash, the poem is punctuated by forward slashes that both delineate the text and inflect it; when reciting the poem, each “strike” beat, cannot be remembered as separate from the human suffering.

Negations double as affirmations in this poem that flips itself inside out and the dissenting terms that begin and end the piece—“NO” and “STRIKE”—must be joined to a third term. “NOW SIR/ A WAR IS NEVER EVEN SIR/ A WAR IS NOT WON/!” The “NOT” breaks the logic of the palindrome in which it is positioned to assert that the war in Iraq was not won, and neither were the left’s attempts to stop the military advances. Inserted into this poem among otherwise visually identical letters, this negation—“A WAR IS NOT WON”—is especially forceful in its negation of the palindromic structure. Breaking her own rules, Ebner asserts her agency as a political subject.

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