13. *‘Phrase Book’* by Jo Shapcott

The importance of poetry: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cf6WHeSC_A>

The prize-winning title poem of 1992's Phrase Book is an exercise in ostranie (making strange) which links three ideas: lovers in a room; aerial bombardment in The First Gulf War; and the odd format of language in an old-fashioned phrase book. The poem is notable for its ironic appropriation of the diction of the US military, which transfers meanings as rapidly as the shift between the three ideas changes into the next. Love, the poem suggests, may be a risky enterprise, where two lovers find it difficult to communicate, metaphorically speaking different languages and needing a phrase book.

* The narrator of the poem (‘I’) is, or has been, with her lover in her room. Ecstatic sexual acts are implied, giving rise to ‘bliss.
* A television programme on military tactics is being shown or was being shown when her lover was there. Military vocabulary is blended in with the description of the love-making, with the acronym BLISS being explained as a USAF escape tactic.
* The phrase book is quoted throughout, creating a strange, awkward tone, perhaps indicating a difficulty in communication between the two lovers.