

What Essy Stone Done to Us

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Essy Stone: write it down if you have to, but don't forget the name. Her poetry is voice-driven, deeply rooted in place, narrative in all the best ways, and tough as fuck. It's also weirdly inviting. Many of her poems are dramatic monologues, addressing the reader directly, and her work is musically deft, grotesque, grotesquely funny, and a total pleasure to read. Sitting in a café the other day, I found myself smiling while rereading her debut collection *What It Done to Us*; I handed the book to a friend, who burst out laughing within seconds. The collection was selected by Gary Copeland as winner of the 2016 Idaho Prize and published by Lost Horse Press in 2017. (Get yourself a copy.)

Stone builds much of her thematic tension through cinching together seemingly disparate forces: God and domestic violence; the Devil and homesickness; Christian testimonials and hotel blowjobs. In “Among the Prophets,” which was originally published in *The New Yorker*, she takes on religion, sex, deception, poverty, small-town life, Southern conservatism, the KKK, and what it's like to love and hate a father who wishes his daughter were a son. It's a prose poem that paints a portrait of the speaker's dad, who, people say, is “possessed by the spirit of King Saul.” Stone makes clear that the gossipers are “in town,” and with those two words, she quickly positions the speaker and her family *outside* the town, in the country, the outskirts. The poem goes on to describe the speaker's father like this:

He plays the game of uproar. Writes midnight checks to televangelists,
smashes the homosexual television, buys my mama a gold necklace &
then rip it from her neck. The controlling spirit. The use you up &
throw you away ghost.

Here, Stone's descriptions are precise and intense; the loose iambic rhythm gives way to an anapestic gallop just often enough to conjure a colloquial voice and propel us forward; and the music is both playful and swift—listen to the short “i” and “e” sounds: “midnight checks,” “televangelists,” “homosexual televi-

sion,” “necklace,” “rip it,” “spirit.” Notice the use of “rip” rather than the grammatically correct “rips”: a subtle, yet powerful choice. By pairing this colloquialism with a biblical-sounding, old-timey dialect, Stone delivers an informal intensity that sounds distinctly of our time.

In the middle of the poem, Stone effortlessly moves from addressing us to addressing the father—and back to addressing us: “Daddy you a just ruler, Daddy you so brave, Daddy, yes, we’d be dead without you, we’d be dead on the street like rats, yes, we is like rats exactly.” This shift to an address of the father reinvigorates the poem, and also increases the level of intimacy, making the tyrannical father (and the speaker’s relationship with him) feel immediate, and more dangerous. It also forces us to “become” the father, if only slightly; because we feel the address to the father aimed at us. Although subtle, this shift toward empathy for a mostly unsympathetic character is another hallmark of Stone’s deserving of praise. The father character might never be redeemed in our eyes, but he is nonetheless layered, vulnerable, human, and humanely rendered. Stone juggles all these complexities with ease, and she moves the poem forward at every turn.

At the end of the poem, what’s sharp on the speaker’s heart is Judgment Day, the end of all *this*, and she has a knack for prophecy: “Come judgment, I know how it will happen.” By placing this poem at the beginning of her book, Stone fuels the reader’s imagination, leaving us hungry to turn the pages as we wonder what will come to pass. And fittingly, for a book that consistently marries high to low, spirit to flesh, baptism to dirty joke, what happens is wonderfully practical. She writes that “how it ended is I earned some scratch & moved / to California.” But the book itself doesn’t end there: in Stone’s world, there’s always a little more to say, and the speaker in this poem (and throughout Stone’s first book) is dynamic as hell: sharply observant, cunning, by turns manipulated and a manipulator, and a damn good storyteller.

Let’s also look at “Breakers, before the Feds shut it down.” Here, Stone employs a collective voice (first-person plural) as she conveys the hypnotic cycle of an all-girl crew’s life at Breakers, a dive bar in a strip mall in Knoxville. This is the poem’s opening:

Ain’t this our dive? We watch the sharks, count bathroom trips,
by midnight can guess
who’s dealing what & how much weight.

A few lines later, the crew observes: “The bouncer calls us *little sisters* when / we see him, / *hoodrats* when he thinks we don’t.” There’s a tension here built on

gender, status, and a desire for belonging—yet a competing desire to flee. The crew is composed of waitresses (“restaurant folk”) who order pitchers of beer (another nod to the collective nature of their lives), swap gossip, score drugs, and talk big about what their futures hold. They all yearn for change, for a better life (“we claim we’ll start school in the fall”), yet they fail to take action. This latter tension is enhanced by the title: we know that in the unspecified future, “the Feds” will shut down Breakers; yet in the poem itself, these late-night get-togethers seem to go on and on, and the characters yearn to escape their loop:

August rolls around, we’ll still be here,
Pouring excuses out our mouths like white corn whiskey down our throats.
My job,

my boyfriend, my daddy says—

Don’t matter.

This narrative is reminiscent of the 1939 Eugene O’Neill play *The Iceman Cometh*, in which a group of downtrodden (mostly male) alcoholics gather at a bar and indulge in their own delusions: “They manage to get drunk by hook or crook, and keep their pipe dreams, and that’s all they ask of life.” However, unlike the characters in *The Iceman Cometh*, Stone’s group is rural, Southern, and all-female. More than down-and-out, these women are *held* down—by a patriarchal society, their lack of status within that society, and specifically by the male bargoers, who speak of women as “triumphs,” and the male bouncer, who, it’s worth noting, the women look at—“we see him”—and not the other way around.

But the most potent part of the poem—and a further departure from *The Iceman Cometh*’s portrayal of failure and inaction—comes in its closing scene, when the crew faces the question of what stops them from changing:

In the bathroom, we share glances through glass scarred
with Sharpied graffiti.
The half-smile, half-shrug, ain’t nothing to be done
but adjust our cleavage, growl through lipsticked teeth at the unseen
hand that holds us here.
Raise our chins to meet its invisible fist.

The fact that the crew is looking in a mirror creates the possibility of self-blame, but, in fact, the poem’s earlier subject matter pushes for a more complex interpretation. Stone leaves us with an ending that challenges its own sentiment

(the limited ability of the crew to take meaningful action) and even calls for rebellion. Rather than being overtly stated, this call for rebellion is embedded within the poem's music: these closing lines are perfectly tuned to a 21st century vernacular and they sonically *enact* the group's dissenting spirit. In the middle of this excerpt, the emphasis falls on short "u," short "i," and long "e" sounds: "Sharpied graffiti," "half-shrug," "nothing to be done," "but adjust," "cleavage," "lipsticked teeth," "unseen." There's a sort of spit-in-your-face tone created by these quick, jabbing "i" sounds and these guttural "u" sounds; and by pairing this music with the wry, knowing lingo employed throughout the poem, Stone depicts a group that can do more than "shrug" and take a blow: this collective has voice; this collective has attitude; this collective, though held back, can growl and actively resist.

Stone's work with sound and rhythm, her intoxicating voice, and her powerful storytelling drive us through these poems and leave us wanting more. For now, we'll have to settle for dog-eared pages in *What It Done to Us* as we wait for Essy Stone to do what she does next.