

A READER'S COMPANION

for

Nomi Stone's

Kill Class

Tupelo Press (2019)

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Biographical Note

Born in 1981 in Los Angeles, California, **Nomi Stone** earned a BA in Creative Writing from Dartmouth College, an MPhil in Middle Eastern Studies from Oxford University, a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Columbia University, and an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College. She was a Creative Writing Fulbright Scholar in Tunisia.

Winner of a Pushcart Prize, Stone is the author of *Stranger's Notebook* (TriQuarterly, 2008) and *Kill Class* (Tupelo, 2019). Her poems have appeared in *POETRY Magazine*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New Republic*, *Tin House*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day and widely elsewhere. Her poem, "War Poem" was turned into a film in Motion Poems Season 8 and her poem "Fieldnotes from a Catastrophe" was selected by the Poetry Society of America to appear on busses across Rhode Island and throughout Brown University.

Her anthropological articles have been published in *Cultural Anthropology* and *American Ethnologist*, and her ethnographic book, *Pinelandia: Human Technology and American Empire* is currently a finalist for the University of California Press's Atelier Series for contemporary ethnography.

Critical Praise for Nomi Stone's Poetry

On *Kill Class*

“There is a door in every word of Nomi Stone’s Kill Class, a fierce book of poems that is a field report from the fake villages of a fictional country built in America, where U.S. soldiers and civilians of Middle Eastern descent dream-walk and role-play at war for military training purposes. This is the world of military technology fairs, the village in a box, the kill zone, where pretend Iraqi towns are brought to life — and death—in the language of a country/ we are trying to make into a kinder country. Stone’s language sears through the simulation to the actual war, lighting a long fuse of image and utterance that detonates, finally, in the imagination of what we have become. This is a report from depths of the war machine. Are you writing this down? one of the soldiers asks. Yes. And we can be grateful she has done so. Kill Class is a rare achievement. -Carolyn Forché

“Nomi Stone has a singular gift for excavating the magnetism between language and the physical bodies it signifies. In her extraordinary collection Kill Class, Stone makes poems out of the hubris and mistrust that make violence a human commodity. And through these moments of violence, she builds poem that are simultaneously archival and creative. She excavates lyrics that meditate on humanity without ever losing sight of the brutal transactions of war and their requisite dehumanizations, subjugations, and traumas. What an unexpected and absorbing book. What a potent treatise on war making.” -Adrian Matejka

“Easily one of the most important books of our time. Nomi Stone is a principled poet, rousing the conscience of poetry for a nation asleep through its wars and annihilation of real live human bodies. Her concerns for the world are only matched by her skills as a poet. There is no denial in her lines that this world is worth protecting and that it is entirely up to us, ‘Brother, look into my eyes until the act is done.’” -CA Conrad

“The sense of language as a portal permeates these poems written from the perspective of a speaker-anthropologist who struggles to understand the balance between recording the lives of others and engaging with those they seek to record, including learning and speaking in the language of another culture. ‘Anthropologist, why are you in this story?’ the speaker asks, to no easy

or readily available answer. I'm interested in the many questions these poems excavate: of self-awareness, the practice of ethnography, the responsibilities of the modern poet-citizen, and the risks involved in grappling with the ever unwieldy, but perhaps still helplessly necessary, lyric 'I.'" **-Tarfia Faizullah**

"'The woods/ are a class in what/ they can take,' Nomi Stone writes in "War Catalogues," one of the poems from *Kill Class*. Her second collection offers a searing and tender series of observations about the Iraq War. In these poems, Stone dissects violence and the vulnerability of being human with the stunning clarity and singular insight of her anthropologist's eye. She continues, "The country/ is fat. We eat/ from it's side.'" **-Eliza Griswold**

"*Kill Class* is unsettling, arresting, essential. The poems insist we listen to war's distant cry, its close sigh, to the wreckage of language, to the questions buried and excavated, to worlds lost, to faces 'sent to sea,' to hearts incapable of translating other hearts. Nomi Stone is an invaluable voice."
- Nathalie Handal

"Poetry is pushed to its limits--and across them--as Nomi Stone inventively devises language to enact entrapment in a mad military script which uses Iraqi players in roles intended to make their country more vulnerable to the will of an invading force. *Kill Class* is written with white-hot nerve, knife-edged precision, an anguished restraint, and a poet's implication of the untranslatable." **-Eleanor Wilner**

"I can't imagine reading a contemporary poetry book that I'll return to more. In *Kill Class* Nomi Stone touches all the bases: individual, social, religious, natural. If her large suggestion is an indictment of nationalism, that suggestion is engrained in poems about real people, specific actions and scenes. Some poems work as standalone masterpieces, others as integral parts of a structure that reveals war through the absurd theater of military games played in blue-state America. A necessary book." **-Rodney Jones**

"Nomi Stone's stark and unflinching poems give a harrowing sense of cultural understanding made into a vehicle of state violence. At the same time, with tremendous delicacy and grace, they enter into the minds and lives of American soldiers and their Iraqi counterparts, revealing bewilderment where you would have thought to find certitudes, vulnerability where you would expect only hardness, small moments of wonder in the face of horror. The result is a truly arresting ethnography of American military culture, one that allows readers to circle at length through the cloverleaf interchanges where warfare nestles into

the most mundane corners of everyday life, only to arrive at an exit where you would have expected least to find it: in an ethics of radical and transformative encounter, a way of coming undone in the company of others through the practice of sympathetic imagination.” -**Anand Pandian**, Anthropologist, Johns Hopkins University

“...a book of poems that is emotionally uproarious, intellectually chaotic, and filled with a torpor of spirituality in a landscape of displaced humanism and degraded identity. This book, Stone’s second and a follow up to 2008’s *Stranger’s Notebook*, blends Stone’s numerous skills into a single, defiant statement that demands a revisiting to our seemingly-endless production of conflict. Stone’s writing doesn’t afford comfort and the shattered mirrors are painfully present. The voices in this book are slanted and fractured, collective but damaged, broken, and paralytic to the point of a wretched, damning beauty.” -**Greg Bem** at *Yellow Rabbits*

On *Stranger's Notebook*

"Stone is a genuine poet, with the capacity of seeming artless while being extremely artful."-**Alicia Ostriker**

"Nomi Stone brings to life the searing heat, the balance of superstition and tradition, and the flow of history that has built up to become the tremendous monument that is daily life. Stone speaks from a point both inside and out, letting us see the frame and stand inside it at the same time. It's an electric place to be."-**Cole Swensen**

"Nomi Stone has created a poetic space and time in which each appears to be a stranger to each other, and a stranger to him or herself. Deeply realized, *Stranger's Notebook* is a remarkable achievement, ultimately and powerfully grounded in the deepest and strangest human mystery of love."

- **Lawrence Joseph**

"...*Stranger's Notebook* is marked by a gentle sense of adventure and a quiet passion for history. Through Stone's insistent repetition and steadily lilting sibilance, she guides the reader on tiptoe through this intrepid, and at times hostile, Djerban community. There is a graceful persistence as the poet, rather than forcing her way into the center of town, waits for the people to trust her and invite her into their fold." –**Amanda Rutstein at *Storysouth***

"I am consistently struck by the way these poems lead me tenderly by the hand through someone else's confession, only to shape-change and reveal my own desires and anxieties. The strategy feels almost deceptive. Yet it is a necessary deception, for it periodically implicates me in a story that would be easy to encounter from the perspective of a passive observer."

.....The presence of pain in illumination—that stab of light—reminds us of the violence inherent in all sociopolitical and religious systems, as well as in human relationships as basic as that between parent and child or lover and beloved. The poet places this violence before us, and acknowledges the role it plays in the creation of communal belief, without criticizing it outright. This is no justification or apology for violence; it is a presentation of complexity." – **Kelly Swartz at *The Cincinnati Review***

Author's Commentary and Discussion Questions

“Human Technology” (p. ix-x)

I wrote this poem (the first poem in the book) when I returned to the field (the military town, bases, and mock villages) after a long gap. It is inspired by interviews I conducted with two different soldiers, each of whom I had known for two years, as well as a conversation with the poet Solmaz Sharif. I wrote this poem because I was feeling bewildered and uneasy about empathy. Some of the questions that preoccupied me were: Why is empathy so celebrated? Is real empathy truly possible? Is empathy good enough, and what are the alternatives? And in the more sinister context of war, what are the consequences of using empathy as a tool to know your enemy?

1. *What is the effect of the repetitive construction, “one soldier” in the poem? How does it impact how you feel about the soldiers in the poem? How does it make you feel about the other people in the poem (“the child”, “Solmaz”, “a man”, “a woman”, “my child”)?*
2. *How does the title phrase “Human Technology” function in the poem?*
3. *How does the speaker feel about empathy in this poem, as it evolves? How do you feel about empathy by the end of the poem?*

*

“Motel Six After the War Game” (p. 11)

I wrote this poem in the very earliest stages of my fieldwork. I was in an Econolodge under a very stiff flowered blanket after a very long day observing war games and feeling acutely alone. One of the role-players had become traumatized during one of the simulations and fainted, and I felt a quaking, the malaise of that aftermath. I remember thinking: what is it I have just seen, and how much darker is this story than even had I realized?

1. *How do metaphor and simile (and their progression) function in this poem (the field glows like televisions, the motel floats across the river of the highway)?*
2. *In this poem, we become more acquainted with the individuals in this book (Yusuf, Hana, Laith, Ahmed, Omar, Nafeesa). What is the effect of their characterization*

in this poem and other poems? Do you feel you can differentiate them from one another, how and why or why not?

3. *Who do you think the “you” is at the end of the poem, and what is the impact of this moment of intimacy? Are there other moments in this book with an implied you, a person or imagined person addressed by the speaker, and what effect does this thread create?*

*

“War Game: Plug and Play” (p. 16)

When I visited a mock village for the first time, I was stunned. Surrounded by squawking chickens, a cacophony of role-players pretending to weep, stalls full of fake shanks of meat, bloody handprints on walls, and disoriented soldiers, none of these made it into that first poem. Amidst that disquieting carnival of artifice, I instead wrote a poem that was bare and pared down. I felt somehow that the simulations could not simply be described to start, but rather that their laws had to be evoked.

1. *What is the effect of the terms enclosed in parenthesis on this poem?*
2. *This poem and other poems in this book use the slash mark (/) within lines. What is the effect for you?*
3. *The poem is three quatrains followed by a couplet. What experience does this shift create for the reader?*

*

“Driving Out of the Woods to the Motel” (p. 26, p. 38, p. 59)

When I began this book, almost all the poems took place inside the simulations of the mock villages. Halfway into the project, I began a series of poems about the role-players’ lives exterior to the war game, as well as my relationship with them in these outside places (driving on the highway, working a second job as a hotel maid or as a poultry process worker, in a shwarma joint in a strip mall, sitting on the couch helping them practice for their citizenship exam). I realized that as much of my life (and their lives) in this period was spent driving out of (and back into) the woods as it was in the war games.

1. *What is the effect of the repetition of this title (“Driving Out of the Woods to the Motel”) across different sections of the book? What sensations does it create?*
2. *These poems employ a version of the haibun a form pioneered by Basho, where a prose poem is capped with a couplet (or in Basho’s case, a haiku). How does the diction change from the prose poem to the couplet?*

*

“Kill Class” (p. 43)

This poem began as ethnographic prose in my field journal. It then became more lyrical prose that unraveled (I lineated it more and more towards the end). In the final draft, I lineated the poem from beginning to end. “Kill Class” went through many drafts, as I sought to integrate narrative and dramatic tension, dialogue, as well as lyric moments. The greatest challenge of this poem was my desire to generate for the reader the kind of disorientation (and panic) the speaker experiences, but without so disorienting them that they give up on the poem.

- 1) *What do we know about the speaker of the poem?*
- 2) *Why is “Kill Class” this book’s title poem, and what kind of “kill classes” are in this book?*
- 3) *What is the function of the rabbit in this poem and in this book?*
- 4) *How do the poet’s formal choices locate or dislocate the reader?*

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“The Camera Burned a Hole” (p. 77)

The poem was inspired by a call for submissions by the Asian American Writer’s Workshop, “Calling All Literary Baghdads,” which invited writers to use the titles of books from Ibn al-Nadim’s 7,000-book catalogue *Kitāb al-Fihrist* to inspire new poems; the actual books were lost during the sacking by the Mongols in 1258. The titles I used in the poem are *The Drawing of Lots* by Ibn al-Mutahil; *The Varieties of Creeping Things* by Ibn al-Batriq; and *Coming on Objects Unexpectedly* by an unknown author. The titles were so rich and surprising that they generated this poem, which I see as something like a tapestry to close the book: it brings together these surreal titles, interviews from my fieldwork, half-recorded times and places, and dreams.

1. *At the very end of this poem, the speaker asks: "have I translated this correctly?" There is a preoccupation in this book with the act of translation, translatability and untranslatability. What kinds of translation occur or are interrupted in these poems? Between what people, what states, what forms of time and space?*
2. *The camera is another key preoccupation in Kill Class. How does the camera (and relatedly, the stage, and film) function? Why does it burn a hole, and what is the impact?*

Writing Exercises

1. *Kill Class* incorporates fieldwork. Choose a short field project and write a poem. Fieldwork entails participation as well as close observation: you might spend two hours observing passengers on the subway, or a park or a grocery store or a dentist's office. If you find someone willing, ask if you can conduct a short interview (for a school project) about the experience they're having in that space.
2. "War Catalogues" (p. 8) is a list poem, bringing together both concrete ("pigment, hair, jade") and more abstract objects ("the face/ of an enemy/ as he holds his young"; "the enemy's face the moment/it's harmed") in order to make a bigger comment about the impact of something large: war. Write a poem about a large topic (i.e. war, love, death, hope, the plastic in the ocean) that likewise employs a hybrid list.
3. "The Etymology of 'Alasah', Wartime Snitching" (p. 23) makes use of etymology to plumb a single concept. To write this poem, I consulted medieval as well as contemporary dictionaries and my own interviews about how the concept of 'alalah had evolved during the war. Choose a word or concept that may have changed over time. Write a poem that incorporates the etymology of this word as well as one interview: ask someone you know about how they understand the word.
4. Look up a haphazard word in a library catalogue, cull titles (the more unusual the better) from five books, and integrate them in a poem.
5. "The Anthropologist" (p. 6) and "Driving Out of the Woods to the Motel" (p. 26, p. 38, p. 59) are all variations on Basho's haibun: prose poems capped with a couplet (or a haiku, if you want to follow the full form). Write a haibun: for the prose poem, use more daily language; allow the final couplet to flood out more lyrically.
6. Study the form of "Former Iraq War Interpreters Role-Play Executioners" (p. 17), where a symbol keeps interrupting the reader's flow, to create a feeling of jolt. Choose a subject that this form might suit. Write a poem in this form.

7. “The Notionally Dead” (p. 37) incorporates overhead speech. Sit in a public place, and listen until you hear several interesting sentences to weave into your poem.
8. “Mass Casualty Event” (p. 54) incorporates the tactic of repetition with revision to shift the reader’s perception: “I am in war. No,/ I am in a game/ of war. No, I am in a painting.” Write a poem where you make an assertion and then revise it, while using repetition to do so.
9. Both “Lost Object” (p. 53) and “Shock: War Game” (p. 57) incorporate lines or partial lines from books. Lost Object uses portions of Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses” and “Shock: War Game” brings in a line from Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. Choose one poem and one book from a completely different genre (science, politics, etc.) to incorporate a line from each into a poem.
10. “The Soldier Takes the Anthropologist to the Shooting Range” (p. 74) alternates between long narrative lines and shorter more lyrical lines. Write a poem in this form.

Recent Interviews with Nomi Stone

Interview with Laura Liu at *Neocolloquy*

<https://www.neocolloquy.com/home/nomi-stone>

Interview with Len Lawson at *Up the Staircase Quarterly*

<https://www.upthestaircase.org/interview-with-nomi-stone.html>

Interview with *Cultural Anthropology*

<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1101-kindred-tools-an-interview-with-nomi-stone>

Interview with The Wenner Gren Foundation

<http://blog.wennergren.org/2014/06/interview-nomi-stone/>

Interview with *Jet Fuel Review*

<http://www.jetfuelreview.com/interview-nomi-stone.html>

Podcast: Intimate Stranger, *Tablet Magazine*

<https://www.tabletmag.com/podcasts/3063/intimate-stranger-2>

Academic Articles by Nomi Stone

“Poetics in the Ethnographic,” in *Commoning Ethnography*

<https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/ce/article/view/5205/4614>

“Living the Laughscream: Human Technology and Affective Maneuvers in the Iraq War,”

Cultural Anthropology

<https://culanth.org/articles/887-living-the-laughscream-human-technology-and>

“Imperial Mimesis: Enacting and Policing Empathy in US Military Training,”

American Ethnologist

<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/amet.12707>