

OHIO VIOLENCE

OHIO VIOLENCE starts with scandal: the narrator leads the high school football coach into the cornfields, but as she promises, *nothing happened*. In the fields, in the woods, in the dark water of Ohio, something is happening. Girls disappear, turn on each other. Men watch from the rear view as the narrator hedges, changes her mind, then shows all in this break-out collection of bittersweet and cataclysmic lyrics.

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Paperback: 80 pages

Publisher: University of North Texas Press,
2009

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1574412582

ISBN-13: 978-1574412581

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BIOGRAPHY



ALISON STINE was born in rural Indiana, and grew up in nine states, including Georgia and Ohio. In February 2009, **OHIO VIOLENCE**, her first book, winner of the 2008 Vassar Miller Prize, selected by Eric Pankey, will be published by the University of North Texas Press. She is also the author of the chapbook **LOT OF MY SISTER**, winner of the Wick Prize (Kent State University Press, 2001). Her stories, essays, and poems have been published in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Tin House*, *The Kenyon Review*, and many others. A former child actress, her musicals and plays have been performed at such theatres as the Cleveland Playhouse, the University of Nebraska, and Off-Broadway for Stephen Sondheim's Young Playwrights Inc. Her awards include a Wallace Stegner

Fellowship from Stanford University, and a 2008 Ruth Lilly Fellowship from the Poetry Foundation. She has taught at Fordham University, Grand Valley State University, and Gettysburg College, and currently teaches at the Reynolds Young Writers' Workshop at Denison University, and is a PhD Candidate at Ohio University.

Q & A WITH *Alison Stine*

Q: Talk about the title Ohio Violence.

The title came about when I moved to New York City. My husband was raised a New Yorker, and when I moved in with him, even though I had lived in big cities before, I was surprised and saddened by the homeless on the streets, and how few people seemed to be helping. Daily, I would see people ignore the homeless, pretend not to see them, step over them. That's a kind of violence: looking away, not caring or pretending not to care. But when my husband visited my family in Ohio, he was horrified by the violence on the side of the road: road kill, dead deer, which to me is familiar. We get used to violence. We accept forms of violence every day in our lives, and maybe we shouldn't.

Q: What kind of violence is in the book?

At first I thought the book would be organized by love. There are many poems in the book about love. But love is a kind of violence, or can be, the things men and women do to each other. Growing up is a violent process, and there are poems about that. There are deer in the book and birds and snakes and bees and floods. There's violence against women in the book. But there's also hope. There's a prison where the inmates, as part of their work detail, make chairs. We don't know what crimes they've committed, but we know what they're doing now, which is a patient, delicate work, a weaving. Maybe that's healing.

Q: There is also a strong thread in the book about truth-telling and story-telling. The narrator keeps insisting events actually happened—or didn't. Can you talk about that?

I think of my poems as stories. Some of the stories happened to me, more happened but not to me, and a few didn't happen at all. As I said to a group of high school students after reading them "Fields Beyond Fields": nothing happened and I wasn't there. But stories can be real without being true. Loss has been a real presence in my life. I lost a childhood friend and her little sister to murder when I was nine years-old. I lost a student to drowning. Another childhood friend, one of the people to whom the book is dedicated, died at twenty-eight. They are in the book, in some shape or another. And so are the girls whom I heard about, but didn't know. The murder in the title poem, for example, happened down the road from my parents' farm. In small towns, violence like that doesn't happen very often, but when it does, we talk about it for a very long time. My job is to tell.

Q: You've lived in many places, including Washington D.C., San Francisco, New York City, and rural Georgia. Why focus on Ohio?

I grew up in Ohio. We moved there when I was eight. It was where I learned to be a writer. It was where I learned to pay attention—and there was a lot in Ohio to notice. Ohio is magic. It's lovely and dark and strange and changeable. People have a saying about the weather: if you don't like it, wait five minutes. But the whole state is like that. It's not strictly Midwest; it's not Northeast; it's not Rust Belt, or Bible Belt, or Appalachia, or urban. It's all of those things, and others. There are factories and farms and warehouses and tattoo parlors and old hotels and most of all: diverse people. I think one of the reasons Ohio has been—and will continue to be—so important in the presidential election is because here's the whole country in one state.

Q: What Ohio authors have influenced you?

James Wright. He made me want to be a poet, and every time I return to his work, he makes me want to be better. I first read him at eighteen, and when I came to his poem “Stages on a Journey Westward” where he mentions by name the town in which I grew up, Mansfield, I thought, that's it. He gets it. He understands where I come from; he understands me. He made me realize that you can love a place and leave it and long for it at the same time.

Q: While you don't write in immediately recognizable metrical forms, there is music to your work. Can you talk about it?

Hearing—or more specifically, *not* hearing—is the kernel of many of my poems. I'm deaf in my left ear, and I often mishear, but mishearing has provided me with a wealth of interesting phrases, mistakes. Those go in my work. I hear differently. I have to listen harder, more carefully, so my poems listen carefully and sing carefully too. Slowly, exacting. I also play the piano, sing, and compose—though, typically, I learned to play by ear before learning to sight-read. My piano teachers would tell you I have a lot of bad habits. And there's a certain freedom in “doing it wrong.” That's a theme with me.

Q: You've taught at such institutions as Fordham University and Gettysburg College, as well as at high schools. How has teaching impacted your writing?

My first job, at fourteen, was as a teacher's assistant, and I've really never looked back. Teaching was for me, at first, a way to support my writing, but it quickly became the way to support my life, the way to keep going, to feel I was doing something meaningful. I teach at the college level during the school year, and in the summer, I teach high school writers. My students inspire me. They get me excited about writing. They help me believe in it still. And I write for them. I remember, one of my teachers said once that poems were for other

poets, for poetry professors. But I don't write for professors. I don't write for poets. If you're a professor and you want to read my poems, that's fine, that's great. But you should

know, I don't write them for you. I write for teenagers, for young adults. I write for the girl that I was.

Q: Do you have advice for young writers?

There are many ways to be a writer, and you have to find your own way. Everything takes longer than you think it should. Everything you do, every job, every experience, gives you a new language from which to draw. Know that the high school years are not the best years of your life, even though people say they are.

Q: When did you start writing poetry? You write fiction and essays too. What makes you write a poem rather than prose?

I started writing in a pan of sugar. My mother taught me to read as a child by having me trace the alphabet. But even before that, I was dictating stories to her. I think she taught me to read so young, in part, so I could write my own stories down. *The Atlantic Monthly* rejected me when I was twelve—I still have that slip. *Hanging Loose* published my poems in their “Writers of the High School Age” when I was sixteen, and that was huge. I remember running to my room, locking the door, and ripping open the envelope. As soon as I saw the edge of the check, I knew they had accepted my poems. I don't think I ever cashed that check; I think I pasted it into my journal. *Hanging Loose*, I saved you twenty bucks. I always wanted to be a writer, but I didn't know or think about genre. In the last few years, my big projects have actually been prose. In that case, poems feel like wonderful distractions, an escape from my real work that *becomes* real work. In school, I used to write poems in the margins of my notebooks as I sat in class, pretending to pay attention. I still feel like I'm misbehaving when I write poems—and I like that.

Q: What's next for you?

I am always writing poems and essays, but the next book I hope you see from me is fiction, a novel. All I can tell you is that it's set in a library, and what it shares with my poetry is attention to language, lyricism, darkness, just plain strangeness—and a girl and boy, trying to get it down, trying to make sense of it all, trying to be believed.

PRESS

"Alison Stine writes, *Believe me. I am telling you a story*, and the story she tells us we believe as it unfolds. The poems are moving - beautiful, tragic, death-haunted, and uncanny - like old folk songs and murder ballads - lovely on the tongue, heavy on the heart. As a narrator, Stine does not and will not swerve when faced with the brutal, the adamant and the ordinary damage that equals a life." - **Eric Pankey, Judge, 2008 Vassar Miller Prize**

"In this highly anticipated debut of poems, Alison Stine guides us in a moving tour of the heart's land: the star-lit terrain of Ohio, the quiet chambers of loss and longing. Stine's poems present a gloriously vibrant zoology dotted with a blessing of birds, reptiles, and the gallop of a branded horse so real--you'd swear you could hear them chatter and hiss as you read. These poems are electric, raw, and charged with such beauty, your heart is bound to be forever bruised. You will thank her for it again and again."
—**Aimee Nezhukumatathil**

"Alison Stine is a vulnerability artist: her poems appear simple, delicate, direct. The impression one gets is of a speaker so open that she is nearly vivisectioning herself for us on each page. But she is aware of the demands of story, our expectation, our desire for more, our hopes for love, our eye for doom. Ohio Violence is a gut punch of a debut, a rural winter book, replete with doom and elegy, loss and love and lack. It is exceptionally precise and clear-eyed. What loveliness there is (and there's a fount of that) comes through constellations of blood, beauty, animal death, girldoom, the dark pines, bisected toys, burned birds, the remains of deer: everything connecting and electric. Each poem becomes a trapdoor through which we must descend. Yes. You'll like it. Poor deer. Dark night. Big love. Great book."
—**Ander Monson**

"Alison Stine's poems are sanguine... Her work has energy and always a delicate, attractive sadness... This is intricate, strong, and very tough work... A very accomplished debut collection." —**Paul Zimmer, *The Georgia Review***

"Alison Stine's work is successfully mesmerizing in part because of her uncanny ability to take materials from the familiar and turn them in the light of imagination until they reveal unexpected facets of myth and mystery. She writes with the profound respect and care which is reverence—like the beings in her poems, she is tuned in." —**Blackbird**

