

# COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 1 | No 1 | 2018

## Poetics in the Ethnographic

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**ARTIST'S BIO** | Nomi Stone is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University. She has recently published articles in *Cultural Anthropology* and *American Ethnologist*, and her poetry appears in *The New Republic*, *The Best American Poetry*, *POETRY Magazine*, *American Poetry Review*, *Tin House*, and widely elsewhere. Nomi Stone has won a Pushcart Prize and was a Fulbright scholar in creative writing in Tunisia. She has recently served as a judge for the Society of Humanistic Anthropology's Ethnographic Poetry Competition. Her first poetry collection, entitled *Stranger's Notebook* (TriQuarterly Books), was published in 2008, and her forthcoming collection, *Kill Class*, will be published in 2019 by Tupelo Press.

**Keywords:** Poetry; Ethnography; Anthropology; Militarism; United States.



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ISSN 2537-9879 | DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26686/ce.v1i1.5205>

Published online December 15 2018

## Introduction

“At this hour, the fictional country is still, and twelve men glide through the dark into a cotton field.”

“the fictional country stills  
in the hour’s resin. Men glide  
through the pinedark  
into fields of cotton.”

As both a poet and an anthropologist, I mostly think about what it is like to be inside a body and to be inside time. To write field-notes as a poet is to store the sensory and the musical alongside the analytic, to think in particular about the rhythms of that which is lived. These two modes of seeing spark and extend each other. For example, the first sentence (see above) of my ethnographic monograph in progress, “Pineland: Human Technology and American Empire” (now a finalist for the University of California Press’s Atelier series) came from a poem I had already written in my collection of poetry based on the same fieldwork, *Kill Class* (Tupelo Press 2019). I began the ethnography with an image of 12 training soldiers covertly entering a war game at night, by parachute. But it’s not enough to just say the thing. I wanted my readers to feel the eerie, almost-sweet vertigo in the soldier’s descent, the late hour a sort of dark honey around us—an enclosure, the men are told to make no sound— as they tumble into the cotton field (there, such softness, the cotton bolls under their boots). The prose sentence in the ethnography borrows the affect, rhythm and imagistic arc of the poem: we begin our entry with time (“this hour”), then startle into the strangeness of place (“the fictional country”), and its state (“still”), and each of these clauses slows the reader, before we arrive at the key action in the sentence: “twelve men glide through the dark.” Their bodies fall through the dark like the l’s in the words, and the sentence itself brings us through their descent all the way down to the field where they land. That moment of secrecy and almost terrible softness: this calm before the war begins. In this way, an ethnography contains the ghosts, the trace-structures of the poem.

First, a link to a recent ethnographic article: <https://culanth.org/articles/887-living-the-laughscreeam-human-technology-and>. And below, a selection from *Kill Class*.

**Soldiers Parachuting into the War Game**

The fictional country stills  
in the hour's resin. Men glide  
through pinedark  
into fields of cotton. Eyeless  
seeds above: Is it, lord,  
          snowing? They cross  
into the mock village:  
dome goat road row  
Iraqi role-players whispering  
in collapsible houses  
made for daily wreckage.  
Lights pulse, pixels  
within them. In one room:  
          a tiny fake coffin no  
isn't here a body no, nowhere  
here my body. Input: say  
a kind word to the villager / output  
villager soaked clean of prior forms  
of place. It is (subtract  
this footprint) snowing. Now  
          fade.

(Originally appeared in *Poetry Northwest*)

**War Catalogues**

Soldiers collect & number:  
pigment, hair, jade,  
roasted meat, timber,  
cum. The enemy's  
flute; the face

of an enemy  
as he holds his young;  
the enemy's face the moment  
it's harmed. The woods

are a class in what  
they can take. The country  
is fat. We eat  
from its side.

(Originally appeared in Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day)

### The Anthropologist

I bring my waterproof notebook, Arabic phrasebook, bug spray,  
a terror of snakes. I drive the wrong way and the car is spat onto  
Sanitary Field Road, or onto the road for Normandy or littler  
massacres. Or for the meat you eat after. Do I take it with vinegar  
or sweet? Separate the shoulder from the rib. Spit me onto Pork  
Chop Hill, Ham Road, Chicken Lane, Devil Way, and into the hold  
of these woods. So, what do you study? Is this part of a class for you?  
Jeeps grow and grow under the pines. It's true, they take me for  
BBQ after, ask me am I comfortable, do I want dessert and what  
do I think I know about them and do I know any Americans who  
went to war or don't I and if I don't who do I think I am, and do I  
agree that through my

stomach, they will get  
my heart?

(Originally appeared in *Puerto del Sol*)

**War Game: Plug and Play**

Wait. Begin Again.

Reverse loop. Enter the stage.

The war scenario has: [vegetable stalls], [roaming animals],  
and [people] in it. The people speak

the language of a country we are trying  
to make into a kinder country. Some  
of the people over there are good /  
others evil / others circumstantially

bad / some only want  
cash / some just want  
their family to not die.  
The game says figure

out which  
are which.

(Originally appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*)

### **Driving out of the Woods to the Motel**

It's true, for your second job, you're a parking attendant or a poultry process worker: stun and kill them, trim them and cut into portions, bone and weigh and grade them. You're a hotel maid. If an American soldier stays in the room you clean, you will fold his uniform as crisply as love, a message that you too call it a liberation. Your brother calls it an occupation, tells you: Do not become American. Brother, the sanctions: 2 kilos sugar / 3 rice / 1 oil / 9 flour parsed into sections? Buy lipstick at the drug store. Watch Ramadan soaps. Number your hungers. Braise the bird until it is gold with lemon. Unstring your wish:

one bone liberation,  
one bone occupation.

(Originally appeared in *The Arkansas International*)

**Human Technology**

Sunlit and dangerous, this country road.  
We are follicle and meat and terror and

the machines leave their shells naked on the ground.  
One soldier makes a museum in his basement.

Each mannequin in brass, incombustible coats:  
I am walking between their blank faces,

their bullets traveling at the speed of sound. One soldier  
who roasted a pig on his porch barbecuing until sinews were tender

tells me he waited above the Euphrates and if they tried to pass  
even after we told them not to, they deserved it: pop (deserve it); pop

(deserve it). Euphrates, your dark tunnel out is rippling around us.  
In the war, a child approaches a tank as one soldier counts the child's

steps. In the town, I drink a bottle of wine with that soldier  
among barber shops, boot repair shops. Is she my friend? I weep to her. I've lost

who I thought I loved and she says I did  
this thing and to whom was that child beloved?

Find common ground, the soldiers say. Humanize  
yourselves. Classify the norm of who you're talking to, try

to echo it. Do this for your country, says one soldier; we  
are sharks wearing suits of skin. Zip up.

This spring, in the chilly, barely blooming city  
Solmaz says enough of this emptied word "empathy."

Ask for more: for rage. For love. On the porch,  
as the sun goes, the dark pools around us and one

soldier says it is nightfall. I am tired. I did not mean for it to go on  
this long. That soldier across the table, we lock eyes.

He tells me: in the occupied land we are the arm, they  
are the weapon. The weapon

in this case is a person. Choose a person  
who knows who is bad. Make them



slice open the skin of their country: only they can  
identify the enemy. Say yes or no: if a man squints while

under the date palm; if a woman does not swing her arms  
while walking. Sir, my child was not with the enemy.

He was with me in this kitchen, making lebna at home.  
The yogurt still is fresh on his wrist.

(originally appeared in *Plume*)

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