

Notes from the Field

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Ordinary Time (While You Are Waiting)

Every day you walk past the same slum between your flat and the bus station. You catalog the same sights: two generators, 52 steps up the footbridge, graffiti reading *Free the nation*. While you are waiting, a radio broadcaster claims advent, the coming of a king. You study the changing billboards: beer, Bench, Belo, rotate. Water plants crowd the river until they are swept away. While you are waiting, you navigate the mountainheap of clothes in your bedroom. They turn hypnotically in the wash, loose fibers clumping to dust bunnies. You wake up to find the clothes have outgrown you. While you are waiting, the rest of the city never changes—it only peels. The rain washes away its layers, each under-color duller than before. Men plaster new posters over old ones: *Tubero, call center job, missing*. You carry the same difficult umbrella, the same rainsoaked sundae home. There is no dramatic situation. Only the passage of ordinary time. How will you find poetry here, or how will poetry find you? The days all look the same, until newspapers count down to the election. The calendar promises rapture or rupture, while you are waiting for a poem to wake you from your stupor and lend you the words for joy, or grief, or rage. When it finally arrives, you do not expect to be robbed the words for fear. It happens on the way home one evening. The street lamp flickers. The shanties in the slum are boarded shut. A dozen onlookers crowd the sidewalk. Across them is the transport service of a morgue.

Mimicry

This is how you disappear: first a leg
and then an arm, and then a head.
The image seared into your mind
even after you closed your eyes: crumpled
boy, bright blue shorts, blood pool.
The last thing he said still rang in your head.

The predators usually wore blue.
They were evolved now, well past that.
They could have been anyone, but you knew—
they were not in uniform. They are bipedal,
they can give chase. One was crouched,
making sure the boy was dead.
They are carnivorous. They could snap
you in half. Their tails were there and then

they weren't. Paper white, you turn
to posters on the wall. Your family always said
you were square. The grime makes you gray
as a post. You etch the number of a plumber
across your chest. Save your head
for the President on a tarpaulin. Don't
flinch. They might even salute.

You seal your mouth like a gag
order. If they found you now, you would be
spineless. Only the brittle moth, crawling
upside down on the ceiling, to vouch for you.
You could be a moth. Two muddy shirt stains
for spots. What you would give
to fly out of here. What you would give

to be a threat. Instead, your life flashes before your eyes:
the breakfast you ate this morning;
the snippet of a primetime crime soap opera;
the days you sat beside the window watching the flies;
the day you returned to your neighborhood and found no one
you recognized, and it did not feel like anything, you were not surprised;
every long day at every Senate hearing you would ever attend;
the long walk home. None of it matters
when you try to turn into your shadow.

Having taken their fill, the predators
examine the street for any witnesses.
The moth inches toward the only lamp
in this back alley. A lizard emerges
from under the roof, calling out to it. The moth
spreads its wide-eyed wings wide open.

Marawi is Trending

After [Sam Sax](#)

Listen—I want to be done
with poems about bygone
bullets and the aftermath. The truth

is what happened in Marawi has happened
before. The news is loud until after the anniversary

passes. They said they'd keep a backward countdown
for every day that went without a trial—they forgot.

Other buried things: a woman's account of escape
has a hole in it. The torn genealogy
of a royal family, discarded
at the bottom of the lake;
evidence: the backhoe with the mayor's name on it;
a family, under the rubble
of a government airstrike.

Is this land cursed or unlucky—
or are the people upstairs just greedy?

We are always spoken about and never spoken to.
Today, it was the Maranao yesterday
the Badjao the day before that, the farmers
and before that, the indigenous
and after that, the journalists
and soon after: your shops your boats
your harvest your rivers your language

Surely martial law is meant to be a security precaution,
not some Stanford prison

experiment, one party armed, thinking itself bigger
than the other, beating the balls out of the other

Rido

The women weep for the river. The river weeps for the women. The women weep a river. The river sings to the women. The women wash and dry their plates and laundry. The river divides those on either side of it. The river unites those who come to fish in it. The children cannot cross the river. The river runs, clear and cold. When blood was first spilled here, it was thick and hot. Blood is thicker than politics, than principle, than religion, than the waters that run between us. Revenge is a dish best served warm. Nobody likes a cold body—everybody cries over what is fresh. This is what men tell us. *We do not expect you to understand this.* But we do. There is a woman across the stream, and she looks like me. We have bled a river, cried a river, and washed a body. It is said that the river was once a woman, her sons killed in a feud. She has not stopped weeping since. Their bodies have hardened to stone.

Perimeter

Fog hangs over the lake. The city
gives way to swamp. What remains
of buildings whisper what they once were:
a nursery, a furniture shop, a market.
The holes punched by mortar
have become wells. Moss clings
to the carpets of the mosque.
Snakes dart out of their nests.
Vines snake around cars, cloaking
windshields, climbing windows.
Prayer fades to the croaking
of frogs. It has been a year since they
have last returned. What remains
of a restaurant: the legs
of a table; of a church: the planks
of pews and half a face of Jesus;
of a hideout: a map and a bomb
unexploded. Time gives way to sand.
There is nothing here but dust and bone,
and the breath that hangs over it.

Interview with a Churchgoer at the Jolo Cathedral

January 27, 2019

I missed mass on the morning of the bomb.

My mother-in-law, at the front of the cathedral, hung on to God.

When we rushed to its ruins, it was overrun by dogs

and policemen. We were told to search elsewhere. A drum

pounded in my chest as we combed the hospitals, the morgues.

Expecting the worst. We learned there was only one ambulance

in all of Jolo, my lost mother-in-law in it. She would never dance

again, but she was alive. We were told she was taken aboard

an airlift to Zamboanga. We were at the pier for hours.

The last fastcraft docked to the song of crickets.

Dozens of injured died during the wait; we got their tickets.

When I returned, I thought, I would offer them flowers.

We arrived at dawn, and I unburdened my cross.

A week later, terrorists bombed the mosque.

Lucky Strike

The photograph shows how, after shell shock,
the bearded butcher shares a light
with a transgender woman. He sits squat
on the sidewalk; she extends her arm
forward, both reaching for the point
at the edge of the other's space.

A cloud of dust rises behind them.

They do not gaze into each other's eyes.

All around them: ruin.

They do not think much of it anymore.

The things they have in common,
they can count with their fingers on one hand:

One, Aleppo.

Two, the cigarette lighter.

Three, the circles under their eyes. Four—

An explosion rattles the safehouse.

The photograph reaches me in the dull light
of borrowed data, as I scroll past the lives
of my friends, of politicians, of strangers
on a screen, in another country,
in another conflict. Bodies heave
in the dark—soldiers and journalists
and civilians. I knew no one
in the room before this.

When you watch the wars of world headlines,
do you think of Mindanao,
that we are a cheaper version of it?

Marawi, our very own Mosul.

All it takes is one lucky strike
to light a stick or a whole city.
It takes no words. How unexpectedly war
brings people together before
silence, before grief, before God, before
swiftly, decisively, tearing them apart.
And if you are lucky
you get to keep all your fingers.

Newspeak

They begin by taking away our language. America tears babies from their mothers. They become *tender age children*, complicit

in their parents' illegal pilgrimage. The White House summons an *alternative truth*. A television anchor cries falsehood. He is being kind, if not complicit.

It is a lie. Spokespersons spin the same doublespeak:
A propagandist becomes a *pundit*. When a judge is complicit,

no means *yes* means *anal*. By now you know what happens in America does not stay in America. A one-way ticket to Hawaii is complicit:

firepower for narcos, a round of golf with Marcos. Our dictators take a cue from that playbook. Our headlines betray another accomplice—

A *former president* faces plunder charges. There were no skeletons in his closet, only thousands of shoes belonging to his complicit

wife. A *former first lady* is convicted of graft. The *late president* gets a heroes' burial. When you take a word and water it to complicity,

does it grow or wash out? A drug suspect is *neutralized* and escorted to rehabilitation. Another is *neutralized* and arrested. One, complicit

with his friends' crimes, is just neutralized. Extrajudicial killings are *homicides* are *deaths under investigation*. Complicity conflates—even Congress

finds the indigenous are *communists*, the communists, *terrorists*.
It considers censorship an *edit*. I do not want to be complicit.

The job costs more than it pays. Changing headlines, I backspace *Regine* and slap on *staff*. Another attempt to fold into a byline a protest.

Arrival

After Eric Gamalinda

(12) There is no greater alliance than a shared war.
(23) A harried mother offers her breast to her infant
in plain sight. (19) The tribes do not get along here.
(25) Under every tent another life is occurring,
 childbirth,
or sex or the exhaustive last sigh before succumbing
to horizontal lines. (9) You remember everything, except
the weather when you first arrived. (3) This is how all wars begin:
the lighting of a match. (20) Is religion the cause of war,
or its remedy? (15) The misinformed blame faith; I blame
politics. Conspiracy obscures like a cloud. (6) When the bomb arrived
it looked first like a seed, and then an egg, and then
a bomb. (4) Some kind of restart button for civilization.
(11) Broadcast that we have survived. (8) A cardiac monitor
has only one channel. (26) This was how they found us.
(1) Survival is just borrowing another tomorrow
from your assistance. (24) When hunger unfolds it passes over
 the vast planes
of the body, from the stomach to the spirit. (18) Deliver us
from aid. (13) Grief makes a citizen of everyone.
(17) It was known that to seek asylum meant you had to be
crazy. (14) Peacekeeper is just a euphemism for soldier,
abuser. (5) Seize all maximum potential of the human being
and place it inside a single bullet. (22) Resilience is when you press down
so hard on coal, it turns into diamond. (10) We thank you
for your correspondence. (16) This is how all wars are won:
they aren't. (21) Between rage and despondency,
I choose hope. (2) And then the war
arrived. (7) Like you, the world stood watch.

Witness

In this country, there is no such thing as winter.
No such thing as a serial killer.
No such thing as a successful
revolution. When I was five, a movie star
was ousted from the presidency.
A catalog of little known things:
Navotas Public Cemetery is in a district called
Bagong Silang. Freedom is most crowded
on the Metro Rail Transit, speeding past
a celebration of the EDSA anniversary.
Congress is a collective noun
for a group of baboons. Who needs metaphor
when metaphor is a matter of fact?
When I was twelve, I caught my teacher
buying lipstick with the class funds.
She said nobody would believe me.
I am about to exit a scene but a story follows
me out of the frame. It says, *how could I go
unreported?* Three babies are born
every minute. A person is raped
every hour. There is no statistic
for abortions. There is no such thing
as a slow news day. The day of the attack
on Ariana Grande's Manchester concert,
ISIS tried to take over a city.
When I was sixteen, my father pulled aside
my professor and said, *I don't want her to be
a journalist*. But I grew up to a bomb
threat and a falling bridge—was there ever
anything else for me? There is no such thing
as objectivity. We're all someone's
someone. Or somewhere's citizen.
We're all witness: the accident
causing traffic; the sweeping crash
of the stock market; if you dig deep
enough, your uncle
molesting your cousin, or
your neighbor, or his maid;

your uncle, molested
by the parish priest.
We are all trafficked in and out
of inequality. We've jumped from shepherd
to prophet to king. The truth is so loud
it could crack you open.
The truth is so quiet it gets drowned
by the noise. It's the price of knowledge
of good and evil. Definition of villain:
someone who is undoubtedly convinced
what they are doing is right. Someone
who will always point to someone else.
It wasn't the snake that told me.
It was the woman. Nobody likes
the inconvenience of truth:
A slave lives in your house,
your house is in a city that sinks.
Your cellphone, your pedometer, your zodiac
are meant to spy on you.
The woman is not lying.
A dictatorship by any other name
is just as brutal. It traps truth
in a funhouse, the mirrors all skewed;
people laugh at their distortions
but hate their own reflection.
Some reporters hate their own reflection.
If you're not killed, you can live long enough
to be a public relations strategist.
When I was eighteen, my hometown
was under siege. Four years later, I watched it
happen again. There is no such thing
as a happy ending. The following
have lived long enough to be villains:
Bill Cosby, Aung San Suu Kyi, Facebook.
Somebody else wrote this story.
I'm just here to tell it. Don't shoot
the messenger. I've set up shop
in the bureau of autocracies.
I've kept rolling after the cut.
I've been that mosquito.

I've crossed that troll bridge.
I've been cast out of Eden.
I've got a mark that says *shoot me
at your own risk*. Nothing scares me
and everything scares me.
*Little miss, I hope you are
raped, I'll let you come
to my house if you take my name
off your headline, I look forward
to working closely with you.*
So this is the freest press in Asia:
Contractual fly in a web
of the president's making,
chasing pangolins, paying more bail
than your weight; living paycheck
to paycheck, but also dead
in a ditch with 30 bodies and a crane.
A close call. Everything tells me
I shouldn't be here. Everyone tells me
Get Out. I could have been comfortable
in the garden of indifference.
I didn't have to know the emperor
had no clothes. I could have taken his word
like a bullet: in one ear, out the other.
But one morning I woke up surrounded
by water. I was living in the province
of another country. I could not read
any of the signs. The light coming through
the church was not some curtain of sky,
but a shattered roof. In the house of mirrors,
I've been big and small and wide.
I've laughed at all my distortions.
I saw myself, and I was naked.
So was the whole cohort.
Now my eyes are open even when I'm asleep.
Since it was wrenched so, I could not keep it shut.
I've only seen the half of it.

Notes

“Marawi is Trending” is follows a prompt from “Jerusalem is Trending” by Sam Sax.

“Rido” builds on the motif from the 2016 film *Women of the Weeping River*, directed by Sheron Dayao.