



SOME  
PEOPLE  
NEED  
KILLING

A MEMOIR OF MURDER  
IN MY COUNTRY

PATRICIA EVANGELISTA

“Tragic, elegant, vital . . . Evangelista risked her life to tell this story.”

—TARA WESTOVER, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Educated*

# SOME PEOPLE NEED KILLING

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IN MY COUNTRY

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PATRICIA EVANGELISTA



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*What I want to do is instill fear.*

—MAYOR RODRIGO ROA DUTERTE

## Prologue

**E**very day, for a period of a little more than seven months beginning in 2016, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* maintained what it called the Kill List. It was a public record of the dead, fed by reports from correspondents across the country. The circumstances of death were brief. The entries were numbered and chronological. The locations were limited to towns, cities, and provinces, without the specificity of street addresses. Names were recorded when they were available, numbers were used when they were not.

The first “unidentified suspected drug pusher,” for example, was killed on July 1, the first day of Rodrigo Duterte’s administration, the same morning that Jimmy Reformado, fifth most wanted drug pusher in the city of Tiaong, was shot by “unknown hitmen.” The next day, July 2, Victorio Abutal, the most wanted drug pusher in the town of Lucban, was “killed by unknown hitmen in front of his wife” an hour and ten minutes before the death of Marvin Cuadra, second most wanted, less than fourteen hours before the seventh most wanted, Constancio Forbes, was “killed at close range outside a lottery betting station.” A day later, on July 3, Arnel Gapacaspan, the most wanted drug pusher of San Antonio, was killed “by unknown hitmen who barged into his house” at exactly the same time that Orlan Untalan, tenth most wanted in Dolores, was “found dead in a spillway, body laden with bullet holes.”

“Unknown hitmen” was a common phrase, but it was the nature of their victims—suspected drug pusher, suspected drug dealer, at large on drug

charges, on the local drug list, most wanted—that demonstrated that what was occurring was far from random. These were targeted killings, as President Duterte had promised, directed against “people who would threaten to destroy my country.”

The methods were limited only by the killers’ imaginations. There was the man “found dead after being abducted from his house.” There were the three “found dead in a canal, blinded and hogtied.” There was the man “shot in the head in his bedroom” and the man killed at seven in the morning “in front of his daughter’s elementary school.” The daily death toll sometimes rose to double digits, as it did on July 9, beginning at midnight with a suspected drug dealer’s aide named Danilo Enopia Morsiquillo, who was shot as he slept beside his girlfriend. The twelve other deaths that day varied in means and disposition. One, a former overseas worker, was shot as he drove down the highway. Two were found strangled under cardboard boxes with signs calling them criminals. Three others were found dead with “gunshot wounds to the head and mouths covered with packing tape.” The rest were drug suspects—“killed by unknown hitmen.”

None of these deaths were officially at the hands of the police. If the government was to be believed, these killings had been committed by private citizens and members of drug cartels, some of whom used the war as a cover to silence possible informants.

The constancy and sheer velocity required its own nomenclature. They were drug-related deaths. They were illegal killings. They were targeted assassinations, salvagings, body dumps, drive-by shootings. They were “casualties in the Duterte administration’s war on crime,” or, as the news network ABS-CBN would put it, “those who perished.” Even Philippine officials seemed unable to agree on the terminology. One senator called them “summary killings.” The interior secretary called them “alleged vigilante-style killings of drug personalities.”

There is language for this phenomenon. The term is “extrajudicial killings.” It was the single phrase that became commonplace on the street and on television, so common that a Senate resolution called for sessions investigating “the recent rampant extrajudicial killings and summary



executions of criminals.” The repetition forced a shorthand—EJK. The press used it as a qualifier. The victims’ families used it as a verb. The critics used it as an accusation.

From the beginning of the Duterte era, recording these deaths became my job. As a field correspondent for Rappler in Manila, I was one of the reporters covering the results of the president’s pledge to destroy anyone—without charge or trial—whom he or the police or any of a number of vigilantes suspected of taking or selling drugs. The volume of Duterte’s dead was at times overwhelming, as was covering the powerful in a country where the powerful refuse to be held to account.

I ran away halfway through the war.

At the time, I was investigating a series of killings in the capital. It was slow work. I hunted down witnesses. I culled official reports. I met men who detailed the precise manner in which they killed their own neighbors on orders from above, then sent interview requests to the police officers they accused. Rappler decided my presence in Manila was a security risk. I agreed. It was safer to assume that the self-interest preventing vigilantes from shooting me on sight was unlikely to hold. My editor delayed publication until my plane lifted off the tarmac.

All this was why I found myself crossing the Pacific in early October 2018. If the good people of the Logan Nonfiction Fellowship believed I could produce literature, I was happy to pretend I could. The residency was three months long at a wooded estate in upstate New York. It should have come as a relief, but years of covering a state-sanctioned massacre does odd things to the mind. I had learned to qualify every statement and to burn transcripts on my balcony. I had lain awake nights convinced that a misplaced comma could be grounds for criminal libel. For someone with my sort of obsessive imagination, the practical caution required of a drug war reporter morphed into an almost paralyzing paranoia. Nothing was certain. Everyone was lying. The man with the selfie stick was a spy for the cops, or a killer, or a fanatical supporter of the president likely to upload my photo of meeting a source on to Twitter.

The fact that I was occasionally correct fueled the lunacy. Many things were suspect: white vans, flashing lights, spam emails, men on motorcycles, automated credit card transactions, the waiter at the coffee shop, the hotel clerk asking for my billing address, a ringing phone, a dropped call, the doorbell. I read and reread my own stories, hunting for gaps, agonizing over sentence construction, convinced I had missed the error that would get a witness killed. By the time I stood at JFK airport, blank disembarkation form in hand, I couldn't trust my memory to write out my own name. I verified the spelling against my passport. I remember distinctly the compulsion to find a second source—and found it, in my birth certificate.

The Albany countryside was a pretty place, even if a pack of cigarettes did cost thirteen dollars a pop. It was cold. People were warm. There was chocolate mousse for dessert, sometimes berries. I spent most of the first weeks trying to disappear into a fog of *Star Trek* and Agatha Christie, but the residency required I make an honest attempt at producing a book proposal. I did. I wrote about who I was, and where I came from, and what it was like to stand over a corpse at two in the morning.

I signed with a publisher at the end of the residency, committing to a first-person account of the Philippine drug war. It happened fast. I didn't intend to lie. That promise of intimacy was a distant thing, discussed inside a glass-walled conference room one winter morning, thousands of miles away from the heavy heat of a Manila under the gun.

I went home. I began to write. The first draft was a carefully detailed 73,000 words describing the circumstances of every death, the crime scenes so many and so thick on the page that it wasn't possible to distinguish one corpse from the next. It was reportage, cold and precise. Nowhere did I say who I was, or where I came from, or what it was like to stand over a body at two in the morning.

Journalists are taught they are never the story. As it happened, the longer I was a journalist, the better it suited me to disappear behind the professional voice of an omniscient third person, belonging everywhere and nowhere, asking questions and answering none. Every conclusion I published was double-sourced, fact-checked, and hyperlinked. My name might have been

below the headlines, but the stories I wrote belonged to other people in other places, families whose grief and pain were so massive that mine was irrelevant.

All this is true, but it is also true that I was afraid. My inability to hold myself to account was due not only to a misguided commitment to objectivity. It was a failure of nerve.

This is a book about the dead, and the people who are left behind. It is also a personal story, written in my own voice, as a citizen of a nation I cannot recognize as my own. The thousands who died were killed with the permission of my people. I am writing this book because I refuse to offer mine.

—*Manila, June 2023*

# I MEMORY

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POSITIVE

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**M**y name is Lady Love, says the girl.

The girl is eleven years old. She is small for her age, all skinny brown legs and big dark eyes. Lady Love is the name she prints on the first line of school papers and uses nowhere else. It was her grandmother who named her. Everyone else calls her Love-Love. Ma did, when she sent Love-Love to the market. Get the children dressed, Love-Love. Don't bother me when I'm playing cards, Love-Love. Quit lecturing me, Love-Love.

Nobody calls her Lady, and only Dee ever called her Love. Just Love.

Love, he would say, give your Dee a hug.

Dee is short for Daddy. It embarrasses Love-Love sometimes, not the hug, because Dee gives good hugs, but that she calls him Dee. Only rich girls call their fathers Daddy. Pa should be good enough for a girl who lives in the slums of Manila. But there they are, Dee and Love, Love and Dee, walking down the street in the early evening, the small girl stretching up a scrawny arm to wrap around the tall man's waist.

Love-Love was supposed to be the third of eight children, but the oldest died of rabies and the second was rarely home. It fell to Love-Love to tell Ma to stop drinking and Dee to quit smoking. You're drunk again, she would tell Ma, and Ma would tell Love-Love to go away.

Love-Love worried they would get sick. She worried about rumors her father was using drugs. She worried about all of them living where they did, in a place where every other man could be a snitch for the cops.

Ma and Dee said everything was fine. Dee was getting his driver's license back. Ma made money giving manicures. They had already surrendered to the new government and promised they would never touch drugs again.

Let's move away, Love-Love told Dee, but Dee laughed it off.

Let's move away, she told Ma, but Ma said the little ones needed to go to school. We can go to school anywhere, Love-Love said.

Ma shook her head. They needed to save up first. Don't worry yourself, Ma said.

Love-Love worried, and she was right.

Love, said her father, one night in August.

Love, he said, just before the bullet slammed into his head.

—

I meet her at her aunt's. She is sitting on a battered armchair. I crouch in front of her and stick out my hand to shake hers. If nothing else, an interview is an exchange. Tell me your name, and I'll tell you mine.

My name is Pat, I tell Love-Love. I'm a reporter.

I was born in 1985, five months before a street revolution brought democracy back to the Philippines. That year it seemed every other middle-class mother had named her daughter Patricia. Evangelista, my surname, common in my country, derives from the Greek *euangelos*, "bringer of good news." It is an irony I am informed of often.

My job is to go to places where people die. I pack my bags, talk to the survivors, write my stories, then go home to wait for the next catastrophe. I don't wait very long.

I can tell you about those places. There have been many of them in the last decade. They are the coastal villages after typhoons, where babies were zipped into backpacks after the body bags ran out. They are the hillsides in the south, where journalists were buried alive in a layer cake of cars and

corpses. They are the cornfields in rebel country and the tent cities outside blackened villages and the backrooms where mothers whispered about the children that desperation had forced them to abort.

It's handy to have a small vocabulary in my line of work. The names go first, then the casualty counts. Colors are good to get the description squared away. The hill is green. The sky is black. The backpack is purple, and so is the bruising on the woman's left cheek.

Small words are precise. They are exactly what they are and are faster to type when the battery is running down.

I like verbs best. They break stories down into logical movements, trigger to finger, knife to gut: *crouch, run, punch, drown, shoot, rip, burst, bomb*.

In the years since the election of His Excellency, President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, I have collected a new handful of words. They rotate, trade places, repeat in staccato.

*Kill*, for example. It's a word my president uses often. He said it at least 1,254 times in the first six months of his presidency, in a variety of contexts and against a range of enemies. He said it to four-year-old Boy Scouts, promising to kill people who got in the way of their future. He said it to overseas workers, telling them there were jobs to be had killing drug addicts at home. He told mayors accused of drug dealing to repent, resign, or die. He threatened to kill human rights activists if the drug problem worsened. He told cops he would give them medals for killing. He told journalists they could be legitimate targets of assassination.

"I'm not kidding," he said in a campaign rally in 2016. "When I become president, I'll tell the military, the police, that this is my order: find these people and kill them, period."

I know only a few dozen of the dead by name. It doesn't matter to the president. He has enough names for them all. They are addicts, pushers, users, dealers, monsters, madmen.

Love-Love can name two of them. They are Dee and Ma.

It was a blow that started it, on the wrong door, just down the hall. There was a commotion, fists on wood, tenants protesting, and door after slammed door, punctuated by a man's voice.

Negative, said the man. Negative, negative, negative.

It didn't take long for the man to reach Love-Love's door. Open it, shouted the man.

Inside, Love-Love crouched with her mother. It was three in the morning. Dee was fast asleep on his back, one of the toddlers tucked into his chest. The other children slept scattered around the room. The man kicked the door.

This, Love-Love thought, was how her parents would die.

Her mother opened the door, afraid the men outside would punch through the window and kill them all in a hail of gunfire. Two men burst into the room. Both wore full masks, with holes for eyes and nose and mouth.

"Positive," one of them said, looming over Dee. Get up, he said.

Dee jerked awake. He tried to sit up, but there was a baby curled into his chest. He fell back again.

Love, he said, before one of the men shot him dead. The bullet burst out of Dee's right temple. Blood spattered over the baby.

"Dee!" Love-Love screamed.

The baby wailed. Ma wept. She thrust a handful of paper at the man who killed her husband. Here was proof, she sobbed, that they had mended their ways.

Ma fell to her knees. Love-Love dragged her mother up until she was on her feet. It was Love-Love who squeezed her body between the gunman and Ma. It was Love-Love who stood with the barrel of the gun just inches from her forehead. It was Love-Love, all big eyes and skinny brown legs, who cursed at the gunman and demanded he shoot her instead.

Kill me, she said, not my Ma.

The second gunman held back the first. Don't shoot, he said. She's only a child.

They left. It wasn't for long. When they returned, the first gunman turned back to Love-Love's mother and raised his gun.

"We are Duterte," he said, and emptied the magazine.



Ma died on her knees.

Love-Love cursed at the killers. You motherfuckers, she said. You already killed my Dee. Now you've shot my Ma.

The gunman swung the muzzle at Love-Love's face.

Shut up, he said, or we'll shoot you dead too.

When they left, Love-Love found the hole inside Ma's head. The blood gushed through Love-Love's fingers. Dee lay where he fell. His eyes had rolled back. Love-Love wanted to hug him, but she was afraid. He did not look like her Dee.

"Dee," asked the girl called Love. "Are you leaving me, Dee?"

—

In 1945 the reporter Wilfred Burchett broke the story of a nuclear warhead exploding over the city of Hiroshima for the London *Daily Express*. He covered what he called "the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war." Burchett marched into Hiroshima carrying a pistol, a typewriter, and a Japanese phrasebook. "I write these facts as dispassionately as I can," wrote Burchett, "in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world."

Like Burchett, I am a reporter. Unlike him, I'm not a foreign correspondent. I spent the last decade flying into bombed-out cities, counting body bags, and reporting on the disasters, both natural and man-made, that continue to plague my own country. And then came the last six years of documenting the killings committed under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte.

The fact that I'm a Filipino living in the Philippines means that for me, there's no going home from the field. There is no seven-day shooting schedule with a pre-booked flight and an option to extend; only more corpses, every day. I do not need a translator to tell me that the man screaming *putang ina* over his brother's body means "motherfucker" instead of "son of a bitch." I understand why coffins sit in living rooms for weeks at a time, and I'm ready to refuse, with all manner of excuses, when I am offered a sandwich at

a wake by a widow so desperately poor she cannot afford the twenty-dollar formaldehyde injection necessary to preserve a rotting body.

There were corpses every night at the height of the killings. Seven, twelve, twenty-six, the brutality reduced to a paragraph, sometimes only a sentence each. The language failed as the body count rose. There are no synonyms for *blood* or *bleed*. The blood doesn't gush by the time I walk into a crime scene. It doesn't burble or spurt. It sits in pools under doorways or, as in the case of the jeepney barker shot in front of a 7-Eleven, streams out of the mouth in rivulets.

*Dead* is a good word for a journalist in the age of Duterte. Dead doesn't negotiate, requires little verification. Dead is a sure thing, has bones, skin, and flesh, can be touched and seen and photographed and blurred for broadcast. Dead, whether it's 44 or 58 or 27,000 or 1, is dead.

I record these facts as honestly as I can, but I am not dispassionate as I set them down. That I am Filipino also means I understand guilt, in the complicated way only a Catholic raised in the colonized Philippines knows guilt. I know why a father kneels to wash away his son's blood while muttering apologies into the linoleum. I know he believes himself responsible for failing to stop the four bullets that burst through his thirty-year-old son's body: forehead, chest, and narrow shoulders, in a manner he sees as the sign of the cross—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. I know all this because I am my father's daughter and understand that while my survival is a privilege, my own father prays too.

President Duterte said kill the addicts, and the addicts died. He said kill the mayors, and the mayors died. He said kill the lawyers, and the lawyers died. Sometimes the dead weren't drug dealers or corrupt mayors or human rights lawyers. Sometimes they were children, but they were killed anyway, and the president said they were collateral damage.

—

I saw many young girls in the first months of the war, and not all of them survived to tell their stories. In the same week that Love-Love's parents were

killed, a five-year-old girl named Danica Mae was shot with a bullet meant for her grandfather.

I spoke to him inside a cramped cement room where the face of Jesus Christ looked benignly down from a wall calendar. His name was Maximo, and he didn't attend his granddaughter's funeral. His family told him to keep away. His daughters promised they would take video on their phones. Wait for it on Facebook, they said. Wait for the funeral video, we'll make sure you can watch. He understood why he shouldn't go, and why his family had taken him straight from the hospital to a house far from where he had lived most of his married life. The men in masks could come back to the house and finish the job. Nobody would go to visit his Danica Mae. He wanted Danica surrounded by her mourners. She deserved it, and so much more.

Maximo had supported the Duterte candidacy. He still wore the red-and-blue baller band with the president's name stamped in white. Maximo had voted for Duterte because Duterte was a strong man. It didn't matter that Maximo had used drugs himself. Maybe Danica would have died even without Duterte in the palace, or maybe she wouldn't have. All he knew was that there had been many deaths, some of them men on the same list where his name had been found. The list called him a drug dealer.

"Let them come and kill me if they can," he said. "I leave it to God. God knows who the sinners are, and who is telling the truth."

So he waited alone, a big man with a hard, heavy belly and red-rimmed eyes. He cried a little, prayed a little, cleaned what bullet wounds he could reach. He called Danica's parents and told them to lean over her coffin and whisper that her grandpa loved her.

He told them to say he stayed away for her.

—

Until the year President Duterte was elected, I considered myself the most practical sort of cynic. I understood that terrible things happen to good people. I took a morbid pride in the fact that I belonged to that special breed of correspondent for whom it was possible to stand over a corpse and note

that the body in the water was probably female, that there were remains of breasts under the faded yellow shirt, despite the fact the face above the shirt was missing skin and flesh.

If my journalism had a moral hierarchy, uppermost was that the loss of a life was the worst of all things, to be avoided at all possible instances. The concept wasn't revolutionary. I was raised a citizen of the oldest democracy in Southeast Asia, and I believed, as I thought most of my generation did, in free speech and human rights and the duty to hold my government accountable. I believed in democracy in 2009, when I reported on the murders of thirty-two journalists. I believed in it in 2013, when I covered the bombardment of Zamboanga City. I believed in it in 2015, after government arrogance sent forty-four unsuspecting policemen into a cornfield to die at the hands of rebels. I believed in democracy much the same way I believed in short sentences and small words.

*Democracy*, like *murder*, is a simple word. I saw it as a general good opposed to a general wrong. By democracy, I did not mean the elected administration. The government, every government, failed often, was complicit often, was by and large incompetent, hypocritical, and out of touch. The democracy I believed in was the nation, a community of millions who saw brutality as an aberration to be condemned as often and as vigorously as necessity demanded.

I still believed in democracy when I began counting President Duterte's dead. I didn't understand that the democracy my journalism depended on was particular only to myself and a minority of others. Elsewhere in the country, people died, starved, or were widowed or orphaned or ignored. In the world as imagined by Rodrigo Duterte, that nation was a crowd of idiots and innocents, set on by crooks and thugs. His nation was the badlands, where the peace was broken, no citizen was safe, and every addict was armed and willing to kill.

Duterte had your back, and he said the struggle ended here, today. Fuck the bleeding hearts. To hell with the bureaucracy. There would be no forgiveness, there would be no second chances, the line would be drawn, and on one side he would stand with a loaded gun. The law might be optional, the