

Sarap ng buhay, at iba pang ingay

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I could not get my mind off page 120, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* deserving three underlines as I made my way through it mid-April, during Metro Manila's deceptively calm enhanced community quarantine days. Data was just coming in, so there was scarce basis in assessing the effectiveness of the lockdown, if we have been flattening the curve, if the data was accurate, if we had to choose between dying of hunger or dying of a disease. People were waiting for *ayuda* in its various forms—canned goods, five kilos of rice, five thousand pesos—as they waited for a presidential address said to take place at 6:30pm, ay 10:30 na raw pala, “anytime during the night” na raw, bukas na raw pala, 8am.

It takes a reappearance bungle—a senator jesting in an online session after people hashtagged weeks ago, #NasaanSiBato—for me to dive back into page 120, where the airborne toxic event has slowly gripped the town in DeLillo's novel. Jack Gladney and his family were on the road, following the advice of officials to “abandon all domiciles”—a more grounded version of Dante's “abandon all hope,” a fancier way of saying “leave your house.” Savoring the official's voice (“Move! Now, now. Toxic event, chemical cloud”), Jack noted how “the cadence itself was still discernible, a recurring sequence in the distance. It seems that danger assigns to public voices the responsibility of a rhythm, as if in metrical units there is a coherence we can use to balance whatever senseless and furious event is about to come rushing around our heads.”

In beloved Philippines, in the event of a pandemic, a viral cloud, there is not much cadence or rhythm in the President's late-night addresses. Instead: his hand hypnotically playing with a pen, an invitation for a meme, the Putang**a's we have grown accustomed to, threats to dissenters, lines like "Kapag tinamaan ka pa rin, then walang sisihan. It's just your time."

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Nasaan si Bato in this written piece?

Another quotation from page 120, the Picador edition of *White Noise*: "what people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in position of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos." The moment NCR's status was downgraded from ECQ to MECQ, the President fled to his hometown in the South. I have lost track of Bato's whereabouts—na-elect naman siya as Senator diba? Isa naman siya sa 24 senators natin, no?—and heard about him in the news first via the hashtag last March and more recently due to his "Sarap ng buhay" comment. Thus, a more embittering, enraging twist: we were mostly left to deal with our own chaos habang nagpapakasap ang ilang opisyal ng pamahalaan.

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Finally, near the bottom of the page, Jack doubted the propriety of what his family was doing, noticing other people "content to shop for furniture while we sat panicky in a slowpoke traffic in a snowstorm. They knew something we didn't. In a crisis, the true facts are whatever other people say they are. No one's knowledge is less secure than your own."

Already swarmed by trolls, led by backpedaling government officials and mired in disinformation and a sagging public discourse done in civil, or heated but productive ways even before the pandemic, we look more lost today. We carve out truths from the various, differing data and information and insights we've been getting, formulating assessments and provisional judgments on our own or within our circles in the absence of a rich, centralized platform for disseminating information and analyzing the facts. CTTO may be a symptom of the death of context; all knowledges and views can be content

with purported 'equality,' coddling a behavior where we go our own ways. We believe what we want to believe, damning a kind of truth that results from engaging with data, scanning and sensing the ground, hearing other perspectives and experiences.

How did page 121 begin? "People already indoors were being asked to stay indoors. We were left to guess the meaning of this. Were the roads impossibly jammed?" Should we speculate all we want? Make guesses much harder than those required by multiple-choice tests? Listen to the echo chambers that are sometimes our online feeds?

All the possible definitions of "white noise"—either as idiom or as technical term relevant to waves and physics—compete for applicability today when they can all possibly make sense. I think not of silence and retreat as a prettier alternative, but clichés like give-and-take or the more umaatikabong "back-and-forth or palitan ng kuro, or "talaban ng ideya" as Bomen Guillermo puts it.

Can't I just shut down the TV, shut down this book I'm reading, Delillo or whatnot, or go offline to drown all this white noise? Sure, bakit hindi, come here, tell me your soul and what we might craft together.