

Kundiman for Melissa

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From Kundiman

On May 19, 2009, Melissa Roxas, 31, an activist and Kundiman fellow from Los Angeles who had been doing volunteer health work in Tarlac Province in the Philippines, was kidnapped along with two other health volunteers for a nongovernmental nationalist group called Bayan.

Let us participate in a community of cymbals through poems— bringing noise and sound and outrage and unremitting memory to what has happened to Melissa and what continues to happen to activists and artists around the world who dare to take a stand against injustice. Let us encircle them, encourage them and fight for them. There is power when people agree to stand and speak together.

For original posting of “Kundiman for Melissa” poems, [click here](#).

NEIL AITKEN

Kundiman That Will Not Be Silenced

for Melissa Roxas

If I speak for Melissa, I speak as well for the disappeared,
for the ones taken under the heat of the high sun

or by the binding blindfold of night, for the sons and daughters,
husbands and wives, beaten down with rods and fists,

for the ones who cannot sleep tonight, whose unclosed wounds,
silent and heavy, span the black oceans between here and home.

I must carve my fear like hers into a shining blade of hope,
my heart into an iron fortress of will. I must enter the bruised homes

of the missing and kneel by the side of women in empty rooms,
their voices and hands scarred from searching in the dark. I must take

what has been written on the flesh with hard fists and hate
and write it plain, must make the stain of blood indelible, return

the tally of blows a hundred-fold with words. I must say her name,
Melissa. Say: Yes, I live. Say: My name is Melissa Roxas. Say:

I will not be silenced. I have rights. There are laws. Say: I am Melissa.

Say: My name is like honey in the skull of the lion. Say: I am a writer.

Though you gag and choke me, beat my head against the wall, yet I will live.

Say: My God is not a god of torture. The birds know and are rising from the trees.

Not all hearts can be destroyed. Say: Melissa. Melissa. Melissa.

Though I am not her, let me be a fire, a torch lit in a deep cave,

breaking the swell of darkness, rising back into the light. Let me be like her,
brave as the first bee setting out in spring, armed and hopeful. Yes, you live...

KIMBERLY ALIDIO

Kundiman

After "Author's Prayer" by Ilya Kaminsky

If I speak for Melissa, I must speak
from America as an American

to Americans and from the Philippines
as a Filipina to Filipinos

and to those with masks on
with my hood on and tape

across my mouth. I must speak
for the right to return to the place

of my birth on programs of exposure
and immersion, upon being endorsed

from the USA to the National to Central Luzon
to Tarlac, with a camera, external hard disk, a laptop,

an ipod, a journal, a sphygmomanometer,
a stethoscope, thermometers, medicines, my watch,

and a wallet. I must speak
of the right to witness without violation,

whether or not I am mistaken for another
North American Filipina activist,

by torturers and senators of the home country
of my parents. Let me be unhooded, uncuffed,

unsuffocated, undoubled over, unshot, unraped,
unsaved, and undisappeared. I must speak

upon resurfacing and speak for those unsurfaced
sitting at the other end of the earth.

When asked: "Handa ka na bang mamatay?,"
I give my name: Melissa.

When asked whether I would return
to the fold, I repeat my name, Melissa.

Melissa, not Maita. Melissa, not NPA.
Melissa, not CP. Melissa, not America.

Melissa, not (even) the Philippines.
Our country is wider than fear.

Yes, I live. We live among the relics:
a copy of *Love in the Time of Cholera*,

a Bible, a pair of slippers, a t-shirt, biscuits,
handcuffs, and a password. Yes, you live.

CHING-IN CHEN

Elegy for a Blindfold
a Kundiman for Melissa Roxas

On May 19, 2009, Melissa Roxas, an activist and poet from Los Angeles who had been doing volunteer health work in Tarlac Province in the Philippines, was kidnapped along with two other health volunteers for a nongovernmental nationalist group called Bayan.

If I speak for Melissa Roxas,
I must leave my blindfold by the door.

There were hundreds watching
while we wrote her name over and over,

for the white page leaves her song unsung,
To the fifteen ski masks asking for the opened door,

I say yes, I live. My mouth is a million

Melissas shouting my name against
the tape compressed to my mouth:

each who's lost home country still chanting

Melissa Roxas,
Melissa Roxas,
Melissa Roxas,

my mouth full of my own eyes.
Let me be honest.

I have never seen the corner
where they took you with
high-power rifles and pushed
you to the ground. You shouted your name
for memory.

I was not there with the bruise
dragging your arms and legs into that
blue van, where five punks pushed

you through the side door under the limits of
artificial sky.

For days, every creature a vanishing back, *punched repeatedly in the ribcage,*

head grazed to the letters of friends recycling *bamboo slats* –
your words:

“No goodbyes, it's always see you later, or sooner... *I was confronted by two burly men*
I will not be surprised if *they shone their flashlights* when in a little town in the Philippines
I slept light that first night in a couple years amidst earth and grass in my hands, *no breakfast*
or lunch was given me the sun hiding again for the last time *I did not listen and did not*
answer that day I hear your voice, turn around *and told them I knew my rights* and yes,
before long we meet again...” *passing through a sometimes grassy and graveled pathway*
where I saw through my blindfold

This inarched that has grown a film over my eyes *I took a bath with one hand free from its*
cuff but a hanging cuff on the other and my eyes free from the blindfold

I've hacked through. *Then a fist struck me at my upper sternum and it hurt and then a thumb was pressed strongly to my throat (I heard somebody saying "huh! ... huh ... huh.") choking me, making me suffocate for quite a time and when he released the pressure I gagged and I coughed and then he struck me with his fist on my left jaw ringing my ears ...*

I waited to hear word of you rising from the page with your name intact.
I prepared for the worst.

And you did, saying "Tonight I will learn
To Die
A Thousand Times
And Be Resurrected."

Yes, you live
to tell your own story.

Notes:

Italicized words are taken from Melissa Roxas' affidavit signed May 29, 2009, Quezon City, Philippines.

Words in quotes are taken from letters Melissa Roxas wrote to the Kundiman community.

"each who's lost home country still chanting" is a line from Vanessa Huang's "Kundiman *for Melissa Roxas*"

OLIVER DE LA PAZ

Kundiman

"I then started to shout my name, repeating it
again and again . . . "

—Melissa Roxas *from the affidavit on her abduction by
military agents in the Philippines.*

If I speak for Melissa, let my words
sound above the night crickets and the water

tonguing the edges of the fortress. Let the bats
arc above me in the night time, while a fingernail

is heard, scratching a poem on the underside of a chair.
Yes, I live. Yes, I live, and the far off sounds of boats

confirm me. Let my body rise above the waters
and the music. Let the helicopters whirl

their adagios while searchlight beams write my name.
Let television and the air waves say *Melissa Roxas*,

Melissa Roxas in the unquiet hours, beyond
the static of station sign-off.

Melissa Roxas, Melissa Roxas, the sound of the ocean
against the balustrades, the waters surging and receding-

Melissa Roxas, into the jeepneys with their jangled
American voodoo, *Roxas, Roxas*,

deep and thrumming with the baseline. Let me be
the silver jeep to carry you from here. Let the music

from the radio be heard from the street corner,
past the markets selling leather. Let me be the breath

in your ear as you turn your head to go to sleep.
Let the heat from what I say press down on your chest

in the nighttime. Yes, you live. Yes,
you live as the steam from what I say fogs your window.

As the vendors in the early morning, rise to carry
their wares in the pre-dawn. Yes, you live beyond

this solitude — beyond this immeasurable ocean to hear,
feel your name, my name, our song. Let me be unseen

yet ever present. Let my whisper be your whisper. My scream
be your scream, the pulse of my wrist, your cadence

keeping pace beyond the disquiet. Let our nerve endings
touch, setting fires with a spark on the horizon. Let us

be the kerosene soaked arrow fired above the fortress walls.
Let it burn, let it breathe, let it ignite the dry wild grasses

in the courtyard to spell my name, your name,
our song.

NIKI ESCOBAR

“Over and Over Again”

Kundiman for Melissa

If I speak for Melissa, I must paint
my tongue the color of the century,

I must release the prisoners
hidden between my bitter teeth.

If I must speak for Melissa, I must be more
than a standing number before the disappeared,

more than quiet mourning
sitting at the other end of the earth.

Yes, I have planted
my feet in the soil of what sustains us

across an ocean, through our parents’
amnesiac flight.

Yes, I live. I can chant “Melissa” in two tones:
unyielding stone and a lip-biting kiss

with the impossible. Let me be the smile of words
that rose in throats upon Melissa’s return.

I will meet a mouthful of crucified silence
with a lifetime of a poet’s howl.

I will repeat my name: Melissa.
Melissa, not NPA. Melissa, not America.

Melissa, not the Philippines.
Let me starve colossal lies,

and feed a bellowing era with forgiving
syllables for our beloved

masters. My sisters, my brothers live
in the incantation of Melissa’s name.

Yes, you live in the telling of this story.

SARAH GAMBITO

Kundiman

If I speak for Melissa, I force myself
upon the soldier. I keep him in my schoolhouse

feed him fish and aqua lovely numbers so he forgets
where he is from. He can be
as I am from.

As the woman ahead of you with a lovely Om
and it is like an Apostle.
A beatrice original family feeling.

I put my hand on your chest and say Feel.

I'll love the boy, the man, the old man.
Clenching, body aroma family.

Healing it as I hate.
(So you can stop. So you can rest. So you can drink something cool.)

Yes, I live. I move my books to stand beside your books.
Bright blade angel squalling like a whale.
Yes, you live.

Let's drape it around someone's shoulders.

VANESSA HUANG

Kundiman
for Melissa Roxas

If I speak for Melissa, I must speak
for L, N, and youth we do not name
Assata, Mumia, each name ears have fought to know
Andrea's Osage, names stolen inside the chanting
each stolen who's let me hear their heartdrum
each patience, in prayer, for one kiss with truthsong
all spirits and lovers who carry song without sound
and still dance.

Yes, I live now, the quiet fightdrum
You shouted your name for memory
Melissa Melissa Melissa still chanting
I hear you far and close still chanting
L N and youth still chanting
each purple flower, each return still chanting
Melissa Melissa Melissa still chanting
blank license plate of your capture still chanting
Assata Mumia and MOVE still chanting
all hiding in Quezon City still chanting
Melissa Melissa Melissa still chanting
each who's lost home country still chanting
Andrea's Osage neighbors still chanting
each ghost still not safe to name is chanting

Let us be this fightdrum still chanting
each *Kuya, help me* still chanting
each decline to comment still chanting
Melissa your camera memory still chanting
ghost of dead lovers still chanting
showing signs of torture still chanting
medicine for this break still chanting
language evaporate at gunpoint still chanting
stretch and pull each mask still chanting
each door forced open, each left ajar still chanting
each stomach caressing ground still chanting
each muscle fight back still chanting
Melissa your *Flame to the Body* still chanting
each *Foot that Bleeds Black* still chanting
each *Incipient Wing that can't fly* still chanting
military gone to hide still chanting
each inch tape, each knotted blindfold still chanting
sinking each handcuff's clasp still chanting
temperature their rifles still chanting
each bomb, each fire, each time still chanting
each death and resurrection still chanting
Melissa your compas inside still chanting
each rib, each palm stronger than cages still chanting
each breath you stole for rest, each whisper a campaign still chanting
each poem that speaks later, each truthsong *before Night Comes* still chanting
each window of sky, each freedom found in village arms still chanting
each knowing eye, each kind gesture still chanting

each movement til empire fall, each rest in love still chanting
gathering this rebel heartdrum still chanting
all this music poetry still chanting

Yes, you live, Melissa,
song of truth rising,
your music is chanting.

Notes:

This poem after Illya Kaminsky's "Author's Prayer".

"You shouted your name for memory" is from Ching-In Chen's "Elegy for a Blindfold", also a Kundiman for Melissa Roxas.

"Kuya, help me" is from Melissa Roxas' affidavit signed May 29, 2009, Quezon City, Philippines.

The rest of the italicized text is from a poem Melissa Roxas conceived and memorized during her abduction on May 19, 2009.

"each death and resurrection" refers to "I will learn to Die / a Thousand Times / and Be Resurrected" in Melissa Roxas' May 19, 2009 poem.

AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL

Kundiman for Melissa Roxas

"An American woman was freed five days after armed and hooded men believed to be military agents abducted her and two companions in a Philippine province north of Manila." — NY Times

If I speak for Melissa, let my ribcage & lung break
into beautiful pieces, let loose several freckles of spit.
Let the owl I keep in my nurseclothes lend you
a feather. Let her wide eyes be the lantern
& thirsty wick you carry into the dark rooms.
Let each wiggle & audacious pulse of a snake's heart
be the hiss & whisper that says, Yes, I live.

Melissa. Melissa. Melissa. Melissa. Melissa. Me-lis-sa.

Your name is a breeze from a sambong shrub.

New moon. Sea foam and broken dish. I salve the leaves

into your cuts and welts. We surround you in flame

& fountain. I cup my hand with mobolo juice & lime.

Bring it to your lips. Let our voices be the only match

& start you need when you return to face your captors.

We surround you in flame & fountain. Yes, you live.

Yael Villafranca

Surfacing

after Illya Kaminsky and Diskarte Namin

If I speak for Melissa, I have locked
my fingers with hers. I've planted
my feet in the soil of what sustains us

across an ocean, through our parents'
amnesiac flight. I've awakened to the cry
the unhooded roar

UNTIL WE WIN THIS REVOLUTION

stretching endless ribbon woven
in our voices our fists. The promise of
our country is wider than fear.

We swear upon our waiting generations, yes. We live
and speak for Melissa. We reach back
to our belonging. Our always. We rise

as Melissa, anak na babae, kapatid na babae,
taga Maynila, taga Los Angeles, taga Habi,
taga Kundiman. We name ourselves
the river carving unyielding stone and speak

for each other, together at once.

Para sa bayan.

