

Musings since Milenyo

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I still remember some names from my childhood—Reming and her bone-deep chill, Rosing from my mother’s stories, Milenyo hurling galvanized iron roofs into the night, and Dindo with his sea salt scent when I was five. The names clung to the back of my mind, memories of years of disillusionment and fatalism. It was and is our reality. A hundred and forty names in a four-year rotation, massed from a 1998 nationwide competition “Name a Bagyo Contest” as if there was joy to be derived from personally christening destruction (well, a one-thousand peso cash prize is joy, I presume).

I remember them not for their names but for what they left behind.

When I was in elementary school, I used to have a love-hate relationship with typhoons. Being the indolent student that I was, I adored those tropical depressions passing over Bicol for giving me one of the most valuable things any naïve first grader would want: class suspensions. A good day or two of rain, occasional gusts of wind, and a bowl of steaming hot ginataang bilo-bilo was the dream. My classmates and I lived in the same neighborhood and whenever classes were suspended, we spent the entire day outside playing in the rain.

That is—until October 2006, when Milenyo ravaged our hometown and blew our neighbor’s concrete fences to rubble. I was seven when it struck Bicol, and I vividly remember being scared of something I only vaguely understood. We were renting a one-bedroom low-cost bungalow in the suburban outskirts of the city. The house was decent enough—waxed concrete floors, sturdy walls, bamboo furniture and rattan seats—but it didn’t hold up. The roof crashed against roofing beams while jalousie windows, some of which were already damaged before, shattered under the whistling streams of wind and rain. The night was unusually dark, occasionally illuminated by lightning cracking in the sky, followed by deafening growls of thunder.

At that age, I did not know anything about storms except one was outside, trying to destroy our truck tire swing set. We were all in the bedroom—me, my parents, sisters, and our youngest brother wrapped in blankets and an unspeakable terror. My mother was muttering prayers, clutching my brother’s head to her chest. Me and my sister gathered close to her. Eventually, we all fell asleep due to sheer fatigue, surrendering to what would be.

We evacuated to Lola Azon’s, my father’s mother’s house, after Milenyo. That entire month, classes were suspended; power lines were hardly touched much less repaired;

were there literally, in the center of the deluge, comforted by a false promise. The eyewall was slowly approaching. Soon the eye passed and with it the calm.



“Tito! Iba ako!” I yelled after my uncle, asking if I could join and hurrying after him as I grabbed a raincoat hanging over the umbrella stand. He was in his windbreaker, readying for his after-storm stroll. The winds had subsided after an entire day of tossing the city around the inner eyewalls of Reming. The eye went right over us, a faux stillness only to be betrayed by stronger winds.

“Miyang na,” he slung his arm around my shoulder, the other propping an umbrella over us. I walked with him outside and into the streets. “Grabe oh.” Tito Ike shook his head in disbelief. The destruction was...incredible. I was a seven-year-old child back then but I knew that what happened was...was...well, incredible.

I sighed instead and watched the neighbors from across the street gather thatched nipa roofing that littered their lawn. “Makusog su bagyo, ngani tito?” I asked my uncle, looking up at him. He nodded. Indeed, the storm was impossibly strong.

I was always fascinated watching the aftermath of typhoons. We have had many, and I was always amazed at how, in a few months, everyone seemed to forget those hours of strong winds and torrential rains and went on with life as if nothing had happened—as if weeks of suffering without running water or electricity is forgettable. As Tito Ike expressed while we were surveying the damages, “Isan sana man ana uran saka angina, di man an mapupugol. Pero ana distroso, diri dapat malingawan.” I can attest to its truth—the rain and wind will always be there, but we should never forget the pain they leave.

Walking around the neighborhood with my uncle, I saw an iteration of Milenyos; trees uprooted, galvanized iron roofs scattered in the streets, potted houseplants dragged miles away by the flood, and good people in their raincoats and umbrellas anxiously inspecting their homes for whatever they could salvage.

“Grabe tito, oh.” I pointed a finger at Mt. Asog, the landmark of our city. “Kalbo tito, oh.” The mountains, which once had a bluish-green façade of distant gmelina trees, now looked a sickly muddy-brown. “Guraan nay an tito?” I asked him, wondering if, unlike us, the trees didn’t live through whipping winds.

“Diri an.” He shook his head. “Mabubuway an.” The trees will live, he said, and they will go on standing, unaware that they were once stripped of their leaves by the very force that breathed them to life.

Another month of rehabilitation brought me to a relatively bad Christmas. We sang Christmas carols in the dark, unaccompanied by a cassette player, and without a lavish meal at the Christmas table. A few houses around the neighborhood welcomed Christmas with

the chugging of their generators, lighting their three-storey houses for their family of four, and blasting Jose Marie Chan for the entire neighborhood—either in the spirit of Christmas or of condescension, I never knew. All I knew was that Christmas felt bleak, like an ordinary day with fried chicken and spaghetti for dinner. It dragged on to my baby brother Paul's christening on December 30, New Year 2007, and the resumption of classes.

It was the second week of January when classes resumed. My classmates went to school in ironed uniforms, clutching their GameBoys while exchanging vacation stories. One went to Tagaytay, another to Baguio, another to relatives in Manila. Everywhere they went, there was electricity. Even when they came back from their vacation, they still had generators. Meanwhile, my sisters and I were burning unsoy leaves to spite Mama, who loathed the smell. We missed watching TV. We hated those humid nights without electric fans. We hated waiting when my classmates didn't have to. My classmates' parents were dentists, nurses, and overseas workers. Maybe if Mama and Papa were doctors, I would also have GameBoys, we could have vacationed away, and we would have had a generator.

It took a long while of waiting, but eventually the electricity came back. Mt. Asog looked faintly emerald again.



Years later in November 2019, Tisoy made landfall. The typhoon peaked in Manila at past noon. There were no major disruptions of utility services, just wind and rain—Tisoy next to Reming was just bad weather. That night, everything went back to how it used to be, not even a drip from that notorious ceiling corner in the bedroom where water leaked. I tried contacting my mother, but she wasn't answering. Her last message was for me to keep safe and dry, and I was. I called her but there wasn't any response on the other end. Maybe they turned off cellular sites for a while? A few repairs maybe, or she had turned her phone off. But no one would turn their phones off for three days, and I was alarmed. I called my Ate Tricia, who was renting an apartment in Sta. Mesa, and asked how they were.

“Di mo isi? Nagbabasa man ikang barita?” She asked me, her eyebrows creasing. I was not active on any social media site nor did I actively seek news whenever I was online. Was I missing something?

“Na uno?” I asked her what it was.

Instead of answering, she sent me screenshots of Facebook posts, and links from reputable news agencies. There was a picture of an electric post bent right at the middle, the detached lines pooling at the base of the post. Another showed a house with its entire roof peeled off. There were picture of floods, lahar flows, a blurred corpse under a coconut tree, a video of coastal areas with 10-foot storm surges slamming against the coasts and pulling wooden docks into the water, and all these other things that I'd never thought would happen in Manila, a city where the rain and wind are usually timid.

I felt angry with myself. I only learned of Tisoy when it was already here. I should have watched the weather forecasts. I should have known they were vulnerable in Bicol just like they always were. I wasn't there—I shouldn't even be saying "I experienced Tisoy" in Manila knowing very well that an entire region suffered when I didn't. There was this numbing guilt that nagged me until I went home for Christmas that year. It would be a lie if I said I wanted to be with them when the typhoon struck. No one wants to be in a situation where they're reminded of a horror film, but at the same time, it felt like a betrayal.

In Manila, I could enjoy the urban wonders of life; there's internet, running water, and most importantly, there's electricity. I could not imagine dealing with another month of dim nights under candles that barely lit the room, and a bitterness had already wormed itself inside of me when I was young, hearing the chugging sounds of generators. It was selfish, but after years of being acquainted with typhoons, I couldn't blame myself. Still, I never knew how to deal with that guilt until Mikee's little brother, JJ, borrowed my phone and scrutinized it for whatever entertainment he could find. They're my cousins, but more than that, they're my typhoon soul siblings—we shared the same suffering when we were young.

Mikee, JJ, and their parents, Tita Beng and Tito Jemmo, live in a house beside Lola Lydia's where they both share a lawn. Both the houses are at the base of Mt. Asog and in the backyard, you can see the neighbor's banana plantation over a poorly built concrete fence and the sloping of the land upwards the mountain. When heavy rain pours, water from the mountains rushes down in waves, carrying debris, gravel, and mud.

JJ is a sensitive little boy who gets easily upset. He said he is scared of typhoons after Nina on Christmas 2016 washed their belongings away in a flash flood. Nina encored there with a huge mango tree washed to the street in front of their house. It took weeks before their wardrobe was cleared of mud, the floors scrubbed clean, and the sheets dried. When we returned to Manila, there still was a dump of muddy household objects in the lawn, and the ground was higher, like soil was dumped in layers over the carpet grass where we used to play.

"Sari mo di nakuko?" JJ asked, where I got the pictures from. He showed me what was on the screen, and I saw the screenshots Ate Tricia sent me. "Amo di su poste sadto highway!" he exclaimed, recognizing an electric post by the highway to the city proper that was bent in half.

"Pinag-send ni Ate." I told him Ate Tricia sent it to me. "Mahina yung bagyo sa Manila, JJ. Kawawa naman kayo dito." He wasn't looking at me but was examining the photo on the screen, inspecting the details the way I did the first time I saw the photo. They did not need pity, but there was nothing else I could give.

"Okay sana yan. Wala namang may gusto."

It's alright, he said. This from a boy who saw his pet dog buried under mud, who saw our grandmother standing over the sofa as mud, gravel, and flood rushed inside the house, who cried with his mother when the sun came back up the next day, who, right at that moment,

sat on the mildly mud-stained sofa with me, looked at me with hopeful eyes and said it was all alright. I ruffled his hair, smiling at the child's honesty. "Wala namang may gusto." I repeated.

He punched me playfully in the arm. "Basta okay lahat tsaka may regalo ko sa'yo sa Pasko."

I made an exaggerated frown. "Broke si kuya mo, JJ."

Dramatically, he sighed. "As expected." And we roared in laughter. "Papanget ng mga selfie mo, oh."



Quinta took me by surprise, no one expected it would be that strong. We prepared, of course. We were renting a one-bedroom apartment a tricycle ride away from the city proper and I went home just before the nationwide COVID lockdown was in place. We cleared the lawn of my mother's precious potted plants, boarded windows, tied trees, weighed the roof down with sandbags, and prayed for the ceiling panel on the kitchen to keep holding on. Three years after Nina freed that ceiling, no one bothered to have it fixed—the costs could've fed us for days. Whenever it rained, they just placed a basin where the water pooled. I watched the news and tracked forecasts—I learned from Tisoy—but I forgot what "sustained winds of 155 kilometers per hour" meant as this was the first typhoon I ever followed. I tried estimating. Milenyong was also at 155kph but I forgot how it was—it's been years, and they were all the same to me. That night, we slept without power, shuddering in our sweaters.

It was another waiting game for electricity. We didn't have a generator in the apartment, so we had our phones charged in the city proper. The COVID pandemic wasn't helping either. Since lockdown, prices and transportation fares rose to unreasonable heights. The usual eight-peso ride to the city proper now cost thrice. If anything, we forgot about the virus with the storm's more immediate threat. The pandemic was insufferable and Quinta worsened our miseries.

Lola Azon had a radio and a few days after Quinta, when I visited her at her house, I heard an announcement "Isa na namang bagyo ang tatama sa rehiyong Bicol ngayong undas." At the time, mobile data services were up, and I quickly scanned the internet about the typhoon. Rolly, PAG-ASA's Facebook post said.

Electricity came back up a week after Quinta. The internet hadn't been affected, so I had the time and means to look up the typhoon. It started in the eastern side of Visayas, crept its way slowly into the warm waters of the eastern seas of the Philippines, and, with its favorable conditions, intensified into a supertyphoon with winds comparable to Yolanda's. It was relatively a small typhoon, but it held compact winds and rain. I took a crash course in meteorology by watching YouTube videos just to understand what the weathermen meant

when they talked about the absence of wind shears or the process of intensification. I tried to learn from the visualizations and animations. The next morning, Mikee and JJ stayed at the apartment to leech off electricity, water, and Wi-Fi since theirs were still down since Quinta. They stayed the night there and the entire day after, taking in as much of the electricity and internet as they could, knowing it would be another month without them as Rolly neared.

The day before Rolly, I sat in front of my laptop, clicking on any update about the typhoon. It was a bright and hot sunny day, but the light seemed wrong...ominous. There was a foreboding air. The typhoon was not supposed to make landfall in the Camarines provinces. In the initial forecasts, it was thought to track towards Polillo Islands, but the High Pressure Area around eastern Asia pushed it down, and further down until it was expected to traverse over Bicol. I thought of how those without electricity and generators were able to receive the news. Since Quinta, most of the city was still without power and those who learned of the news were the ones who had phones to update them. A high school friend told me they just learned of it when the neighbors were boarding up their windows. They had phones but the money for cellphone load could've been put to better use—for food or the costly necessity of candles. Ten pesos could've bought them two candles to last them for a night.

JJ cried that afternoon. He was in seventh grade, but with his experiences with typhoons at such a young age, he was inconsolable. I wrapped an arm around his shoulder and scratched his head. "Okay lang 'yan, JJ." I tried comforting him knowing I was just as scared as he was. He saw their clothes, their dogs, and their belongings drenched in mud twice in the past two years, and it left a mark in his mind. After Nina and Tisoy, JJ became obsessed with learning about typhoons, like he was learning about the enemy. He waited for updates with me and gave predictions himself—he knew it would intensify dramatically knowing the sea temperature in the area was warm. It was only when he recognized how huge of a deal the typhoon was did he drown in his own nerves.

When Mommy Beng and Tito Jemmo came on the eve of Rolly to pick my cousins up, Mikee and JJ pleaded to stay—they would rather not watch another flash flood rampaging down from the mountains. We filled them in of the statistics of the storm, its estimated time of landfall, and how strong it was. They had no way of knowing. They had a small generator but what could their phones do when the mobile internet signal was limited even under normal circumstances? All they knew was there was a storm; they never knew it was Yolanda's protégé.

We braced for impact that early morning. We prayed the entire day with all the faith I had left after losing some to a few typhoons before, and Rolly came down hard until that afternoon when the sky cleared and the sun shone as if it was all just a dream.

I almost cried when I saw the aftermath outside.



It took two weeks before I could use my phone again. We live near the national highway, so we know we're one of the first to have electricity restored. But two weeks in and the only services rehabilitated were text and call signals and some of the mobile internet signal. Thankfully, we had a week-long break after the typhoon and we were somehow 'excused' from class.

I went on Facebook, which somehow loaded after a few prayers. I couldn't see pictures as I was using free data (there's no point loading up when the signal was spotty), but I saw the headlines, even two weeks after, and they kept coming. I saw people offering donations and kind thoughts and prayers. I saw people comparing the casualties between Yolanda and Rolly to prove insidious arguments supporting the administration. I saw people from the supposed track of the typhoon before it scooted down to Bicol thanking God for saving them as if their fellow countrymen down south deserved the suffering. I saw people untouched by the storms telling us to sit down and endure just because they were enjoying comforts that we weren't. I saw our mayor pleading for us to be patient for help as if food on the table can wait.

I saw Ulysses.

Third week in without electricity and another storm was fast approaching. I was exhausted and at my wits' end. I felt helpless and ashamed at my professors looking at the text messages they sent me as I begged for leniency. I grew anxious and restless over how I'd be able to catch up in class. Most of all, I grew tired of the sound of generators from the neighborhood, how it mocked us with its every chug, how they refused to have our phones charged even if we offered to pay. "Maray sana palan a masisintabo ta hayahay a kamutangan." My brother once observed—the rich were lucky they had generators as if comfort was inherently theirs.

Ulysses swept Bicol, its eye and inner eyewalls went further south than expected, hitting Catanduanes and our province directly. It was a long ride, the winds started whipping past noon and went on until the morning the day after. Everyone in the house didn't care.

"Uda naman mararaot." Pau shrugged it off and went to sleep. After Rolly, there was nothing else to destroy. After Rolly, nothing else mattered.

Mobile data signals were still up, so I could log in for some news. Metro Manila was a mess, Cagayan sank undersea, and Catanduanes was practically turned upside down, which left rehabilitative efforts after Rolly in vain. While it was all horrible, it was just how it was, the same song sung over and over.

The Bicol Region always takes the strongest hits. Most of the strongest typhoons of the country bulldozed Bicol directly and took thousands of lives from Sening to Sisang to Rosing to Loleng and now, Rolly—typhoons so strong PAG-ASA never used the names again as if they were iconic brands of shoes. Not to peddle guilt, but I've always believed that the

Southern Luzon and Eastern Visayas cushions the worst before typhoons hit Metro Manila. Typhoons weaken on landfall, and more frequently does a typhoon hit Bicol first before anywhere else in Luzon. Manilaños are lucky. At most, resumption of electric services there took four days when Ulysses hit; here, it took four weeks since Rolly. I struggled looking for updates from our classes, and since most of my classmates were from Metro Manila, they had no problems catching up while we still dealt with typhoon fatigue three months after.

It took a Ulysses for Metro Manila to understand we had Rolly.

And this isn't resentment nor a devious desire for retribution. It's just how things always were. Looking at the responses online from strangers offering good thoughts, I wonder—was it out of empathy or of guilt? Did they ever feel horrible continuing life the way it used to be knowing people are suffering? Is it mere sensitivity or genuine care? Would it matter less if it wasn't Metro Manila?

I've learned since Tisoy when I was tucked safely under a comforter that it's not anyone's habit to actively empathize with typhoon victims—they could never because it's not their experience to own. I've learned then that unlike the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the wars in the Middle East, or colonization, history cannot permanently imprint typhoons in textbooks because Filipinos are conditioned to believe that all of these are purely works of nature. Nature takes its course, and the people who were victims of poor drainage systems, urban planning, disaster response and planning, and inaccessibility to typhoon-proof housing and maintenance merely reap the consequences exacerbated by poverty. For the unaffected, I've learned that the seasonal battery of the precious shores of Bicol with category five typhoons is just a test of faith and another opportunity to preach resiliency, and I am but an object for that benefit.

