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On the Wire

Sarah F. Lumba (University of the Philippines)

There was a fridge—a fridge on a wire.

It looked like an oversized, ageing acrobat, tottering almost four metres from the ground—all 254 litres of it—in all its white enamel glory. Such a spectacular, death-defying feat, one would think. But no one was even applauding. It had only been a few hours since tropical storm Ondoy¹ had left, and there were only a few spectators out on the street—a pile of scrunched-up clothes, two cars pinned down by a fallen molave tree, an old shaggy loveseat that had lost a leg, a drowned dog. And they were all there, half-buried in sludge.

I saw this scene on the news a few days after the storm had exited the Philippines. The fridge had been spotted in Marikina, my hometown, which was only fourteen kilometres away from the capital and was most affected by Ondoy. There the floodwaters had risen to 23 metres above sea level, inundating 14 of the city's 16 barangays. Other cities had been flooded, too, and there were certainly images that were more jarring than the fridge, for Ondoy had become the most devastating typhoon in the country's history, with 800 people dead, 400,000 displaced, and 17 billion pesos worth of agriculture and infrastructure damaged. But there was nothing quite as surreal for me as the image of that hefty appliance on the wire.

How did it get there in the first place?

Vanity, of course, had something to do with it.

My grandfather used to tell us old stories about Marikina. One of them was about a young maiden who had no name, but whom everyone knew, for her beauty was unsurpassed in her small town. Because this maiden spent all her waking hours studying her own reflection in the nearby waters, he said, the townsfolk kept reproaching her, “But you're already pretty! *Marikit ka na!*” She ignored them. Instead, she searched for flaws on her face, and finding none, searched even more. Then one day, as she sat by the river that flowed through the rice fields that lay across her town, the sky suddenly turned dark, and heavy rains began to fall. The river quickly swelled, and wise folks warned her to seek higher ground. But she heard

¹ International codename: Typhoon Ketsana

nothing and saw only what she wanted to see. By the time she noticed the floods, it was already too late.

Or so the story goes.

I remembered this myth in the immediate aftermath of Ondoy. Even before the typhoon hit Marikina in the early hours of September 26, 2009, the weatherman had already been warning Marikeños, “Brace for rain. Move to higher grounds.” It was the same warning the maiden had supposedly received almost 400 years ago. But it was a weekend; most people were still sound asleep. And no one was really bothered about the few streets already under ankle-deep waters in just a matter of hours. They were used to it. Marikina is a valley, after all, between the Sierra Madre mountain range to the east and the hills of Quezon City to the west: waters from both always settle in the area, sometimes causing its river to overflow, especially during the rainy season. So when Marikeños heard the weatherman’s warning, they simply took their TVs and toasters upstairs and went straight back to bed.

Then as now, nobody really listens to those who could read the signs of the times.

And so it goes.

After Ondoy, there were rumours that the waters that eventually flooded Marikina came from a nearby dam that overflowed. But the only dam around, Wawa Dam, has been out of commission since the 1950s. It was also much simpler for Marikeños to blame the municipality of Rodriguez, the largest town in the province of Rizal. Rodriguez sits on the slopes of the Sierra Madre where a once vast, fertile forest lay, but that, due to human greed, has been stripped of its thick green foliage and its minerals, limestone, and marbles. Now, every typhoon season, rainwater that the now-barren mountains cannot contain pummels the valley, together with all the highland’s collective debris from its many subdivisions, piggeries, poultry farms, and sanitary landfills. The September, 2009 flood was quite different, though. It was not mainly caused by water from the mountains. It was caused by the city itself.

There is a street near my grandfather’s house in Calumpang, one of Marikina’s barangays, which always has small pools of water forming here and there, even during the summer. To try to solve this problem, the local government has dredged the area, and then either asphalted or cemented the whole street several times over ever since I was a kid. No long-term success has been seen as yet. There are many streets like this in Marikina. When my grandfather was still alive, he told me that there used to be a brook

somewhere in that Calumpang street, and that, no matter what man does, water will always find a way back to its ancient paths. Water, unlike people, has a long memory, and it remembers that Marikina used to be all marshland.

It used to be that the lives of Marikina's early inhabitants revolved around water. They first built their huts around a spring on a hill in what is now known as Barangka, another one of Marikina's barangays, from which they drew drinking water, and which, owing to its healing powers, was treated as sacred ground. Their communal lives also followed the river's flow. It was the river that told them when it was best to plant or when it was best to move to higher ground; that kept their land moist for rice, sugarcane, and vegetables to grow abundantly; that gifted them with fish to eat; and that made their travels to the market in Manila, where they could sell the fruits of their labour, swifter. But Spanish colonisers arrived in the 16th century. They came to sniff out sin and win more souls for their king. They also quickly staked their claim on land that was not theirs, then tortured and killed those who raised so much as a whimper against their God or their unholy rule. It took the Filipinos more than three centuries to band together and fight back to reclaim their land. Like many of those Filipinos, Marikeños could only arm themselves with bolos. But despite their inferior weaponry, they came close to victory in 1898. Unfortunately, other invaders came—the Americans, then the Japanese. When, after another 50 years of colonial rule, Filipinos finally gained their sovereignty, it was perhaps already too late. There were just too many battles and too many deaths to deal with. Four centuries of subjugation wore out their spirit and erased their memory of how their ancient collective soul was tied to land and river and sky.

What they did remember was a painful lesson learned from their colonisers: a lesson in ownership and personal greed. When thousands of hectares of wetland in Marikina that used to be owned by the Tuazon Estate² began to be parceled off in the 1930s, Marikeños, now walking wounded, besieged by so much self-doubt and fear of losing everything again in the end, immediately put up fences and walls, as if to say, "Mine! I can now hold on to something that I can call mine." Thus, Marikina's forebears turned

² On April 16, 1630, the Spanish crown, through Fray Pedro de Arce, apostolic ruler of the Archbishopric of Manila, gave ecclesiastical control of Marikina to the Jesuits. During this period of control, the crown also decided to reward a certain Chinese named Son Tua with thousands of hectares of land for the help he extended to Spanish soldiers who were trying to thwart a British invasion of Manila. The Tuazon Estate ("Tuazon" was the Hispanised version of "Son Tua") demanded taxes from the natives of Marikina for the use of the land and forced them to turn over more than half of their harvest. It was only after a series of back and forth between prominent Marikeños and highly placed government officials, as well as with the lawyers of the Tuazons, that the natives got to own the land they tilled.

from nature's caretakers to land owners. What they owned, they quickly covered with cement, and what was not theirs, they felt no affinity for. Then, beginning in the 1940s, people from other parts of the country started migrating to Marikina, attracted by its balmy weather. More and more of the marshland was filled up with soil and covered in concrete in order to build more homes, businesses, and roads for these newcomers. Open spaces soon became scarce; the paths of springs and brooks were blocked or changed in the name of progress. In the 1950s, this marshland covered an area of 11.23 square kilometres. Only eight percent was left in 1997.

I took my eleven-year-old son to visit my hometown last week, and we sat on a green bench by the banks of Marikina River. It was a warm day. Everyone seemed to have chosen to stay indoors and have lunch, save two old men finishing a game of chess and a few stray dogs sleeping in the shade. I remembered this place when it was filled with vegetable patches, and when lilies and spinach still blanketed the waters. Now, there was only a park, and the paths had all been paved. My eyes moved across the river. The old stone chapel built by the Jesuits in the 1630s would have been right across from where we sat, and I tried to imagine a young priest, still with some holy chip on his shoulder, zealously yanking on a *campanilla* to call the faithful in for the Angelus.

Behind me was the city proper. What used to be a small town filled with rice fields and mangroves, a place whose livelihood was dictated by a 27-kilometre river traversing all the barangays, was now full of hip restaurants, suburban homes, and air-conditioned malls. I turned to my son who was just getting ready to play a game on his smartphone. "This was where we flew kites when I was young," I began, "and where women used to come to wash clothes." He nodded politely, but seemed distracted. I persisted: "This was where we chased the wind and where our neighbours bathed, wearing only their birthday suits." And he asked, "What about you, *nanay*? Did you swim here, too?" "No," I replied, "because this was where my grandfather's twin drowned, too."

"Oh" was all he could manage before he started fiddling with his phone again. I kept hoping that his first close encounter with the river would stir something deep within his gut—a desire to learn more about his roots. I looked at the waters, dark and still, wishing that a mudfish or catfish would suddenly show up to amuse him. But only janitor fish could survive now in these forsaken waters. I turned to him again and thought of jolting him with "This was where hundreds of people drowned during a typhoon

when you were only three,” but he was already off to check out the large bas-relief of a lizard near the bougainvillea archway.

And so it goes.

I am almost certain that the fridge did not know what hit it until it was too late. Perhaps it sat, snug and smug, by the corner of a green-and-blue kitchen, knowing it was the chunkiest appliance in the house. And perhaps it even threw its weight around, sticking its crisper out at the sink, and with handles akimbo, giving the new oven an occasional icy stare. Then Ondoy happened, dumping 341 millimetres of rainfall on the morning of the first day alone—an amount that surpassed the average rainfall of the city for the whole month of September. Tragedy then became a great leveler, even for kitchenware.

It is mesmerizing to watch how the earth goes through its own cleansing ritual. That fateful September morning, when huge droplets from the sky hustled toward the ground, the earth tried to gather all the water in its bosom. It tried to absorb as much as it could. But it was simply too much rain in too short a time. Underneath Marikina’s concrete roads and manicured lawns, underneath its cemented roads and even the underground parking lots of its malls, the marshland that had long been forgotten, that many Marikeños did not even know existed, reawakened. Not long after, it heaved. It began to spew water out through the city’s pores, its gutters, displacing the rats and regurgitating decades-old urban waste, a mix of feces, urine, laundry suds, and small chunks of sanitary napkins. Then spaces between the tiles in household kitchens and living rooms and the cracks on the driveways began to bleed dirty water. And the fridge that was sitting comfortably in the green-and-blue kitchen slowly felt its lower torso getting soaked. The toilets were up next. No one could flush. Instead, out of these bowls popped the last things that had passed through the traps. And whatever those were, they streamed out, cascading like driftwood down miniature Niagara Falls before hitting the bathroom floors.

At first, Marikeños scratched their heads at the sight of puddles slowly forming in the middle of their living rooms. They made jokes about indoor fishing and tried to make light of the situation in typical Filipino fashion. But when the water reached their knees in just minutes, it also reached deep into the fears they thought had long been buried when their ancestors had divided the land. They rushed to bring their kids and their new ovens and sofas upstairs. But they had to let go of the cutlery. For the water rose too

fast, and some of them realised too late that their windows were all barred or that none of their children knew how to swim.

The ground floors of my cousin, my aunt, and my mother's homes became cesspools in just a matter of hours. My brother had to tie his car to a lamppost, lest he find it at the end of the street stacked up with the rest of the neighbourhood's vehicles. My best friend had to leave her four-wheel drive on the nearby highway, never mind if it floated around, to swim through two kilometres of sludge to get to her kids whom she had left alone at home that day. A shanty built by the riverbank collapsed, its thin plywood walls unable to push back the rains, and the family that was inside—a couple, their two young kids, a grandmother, a few cousins—was seen on top of the debris, riding the currents for a few seconds, then was seen no more. The wetland retched and covered my hometown in ten feet of muddy water, and the raging currents in the river carried off buckets, trees, cars, pianos, a fridge, and a whole city's sense of security. Afterwards, bodies of children were seen dangling like neglected laundry on fences and electric wires. In Provident Village, which was considered the most posh village in Marikina in the 1980s, many of the dead were fished out. Old Marikeños were not surprised, for they remembered that this village used to be the river's old path.

I rose from the bench and saw my son sitting on the steps of the nearby grotto. He seemed to be flicking ants off his long pants. Oh, little god, and everything around mere playthings, I thought. He looked up then, and I managed a smile before telling him it was time for us to get going. As we walked back to the car, I gave the river a final nod and thought again about her, the maiden in the tale. She had no name. But the river, for sure, knew her well. She was full of conceit, and the river—how terrible its wrath was. I knew she suffered. I saw her head bobbing on the waters, arms stretched out toward the heavens, begging to be rescued. I saw her clawing on boulders, on threads of water, struggling to surface again and again, gasping for air, but always being pulled back under, the undercurrent thrashing her about, whirling her this way and that, together with branches, loose limbs and mismatched boots, the way a washing machine's spin cycle would. I saw her long hair already gone around her twice like a noose, until finally I could see her no more. They found her days later by the mouth of the nearby Pasig River, turnip leaves clinging to her clothes, a half-dead janitor fish in her mouth. Her face was bloated and blue, her eyes a frozen stare, half in disbelief, half in unbelief. They warned her, yes they did—the people, the skies, the

earth, the river . . . all the signs were there. But she refused to heed them. I knew her story quite well. I was there when she lived. I saw her die. Because water has a long memory. And three- fourths of me is water.

That day, by the riverbank with my son, the water was peaceful, and the city seemed to be in a good place. After all, it has already survived many upheavals—four major earthquakes, two cholera epidemics, an attack of locusts that ruined farms and caused famine, numerous fires and floods—and has become one of the most competitive and greenest cities in the country. But such kinds of accolades could make a place and its people deeply engrossed with their own reflection, and they could forget to look up at the darkening skies.

I wanted to tell my son that I have been saving up for a small piece of land in Marikina, for this was where I would wish to retire. I could imagine him all grown up, with a family of his own, visiting me on the weekends, and we would share a bowl of *goto*, that steaming hot yellow rice porridge my hometown has always been known for. But I could not completely dismiss the things that I knew: that the quarrying and dredging in Rodriguez continues unabated; that Marikina has not ceased building new subdivisions and new malls; and that, though the city has long been warned not to build near its river and to be cognizant of its natural flow, nobody really pays much attention to warnings such as this, except during a storm.

And so, as my son and I drove away from my hometown, a certain kind of unease began to settle in my bones. I could hear the bell toll from across the river. It was calling all the faithful again, but this time, to warn them: The river giveth, the river taketh away. And as the pealing persisted, I could not help but picture that fridge, still there, dangling from the wire.

Everything, on the wire.

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