

Esquire

# LAND OF THE MOURNING

FIVE DAYS AFTER THE  
VISAYAS WAS STRUCK BY  
THE STRONGEST TYPHOON  
EVER RECORDED, ESQUIRE  
WRITER-AT-LARGE  
**PATRICIA EVANGELISTA**  
FLEW TO TACLOBAN CITY,  
LEYTE, TO REPORT ON  
THE AFTERMATH. SHE  
WAS THERE FOR 18 DAYS.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLO GABUCO  
AND RICK ROCAMDRA



An aerial view of Tacloban City taken November 22, 14 days after super typhoon Haiyan struck.

**A BOAT IS STALLED ON THE ROAD IN FRONT OF THE CITY HALL. Thirty feet of flagpole lies bent across the lawn. Down the street, out past the field of bagged and stacked corpses, a plastic panda head floats in the water.**

**ABOUT 16 STALLED** on the road in front of the city hall. Thirty

This is Tacloban. On the day after Haiyan, there were bodies in backyards leaning on refrigerators, inside houses jammed behind closets, in bathrooms and bedrooms and on the edges of the airport road wrapped in Rainbow Brite bed sheets. This is the city where generals pick up dead soldiers to clear the tarmac and diesel is traded for cars.

There is no room for imagination or exaggeration here. All the narrative rules are broken. Every comforting truth is suspended. This is where the four horsemen of the apocalypse ride daily down the San Jose Highway and turn, galloping, into the muck of what is left of Village 88. This is where it is normal to be asked for directions to the nearest pile of cadav-

ers by a boy looking for his brother.

Some place else, there may be some sort of ironic value to the image of a corpse in a body bag lying under a waiting shed painted with an "I love Tacloban" sign. Here, a body under a shed is a body under a shed, made special only by virtue of the fact that it lies under a shed, unlike the seventy other bodies rotting in similar bags along the same road in a city where the sound of rain sends children screaming for mothers who do not come.

**HIS NAME IS RAMIL NAVARRO.** He is a handsome man, just past 40, skin darkened by the sun, dark curling hair a mop over his head, eyes an odd light hazel. He wears rubber boots and a tattered pair of green shorts, the pair he has worn every day for 17 days. An old gang tattoo tracks over his right arm, a fresh scar runs over his left.

Ramil built a shack along the San Jose Highway after the storm, tall, strong Ramil, well over six feet, the butcher from Vitas, tough guy from the toughest part of tough Manila. It

was that tallness and that strength that nearly killed him, made him an anchor for the drowning of Village 88. They clung to him, around his neck, clutching at his hair, gripping his shoulders, clawing up his back, children, teenagers, a mother carrying a daughter, all clinging to Ramil while birds and turtles and snakes slithered up his chest. He shoved them all away, snakes, birds, mothers, children, abandoned them all in the water before he swam to save his wife and daughter.

Ramil found his wife, just as she was going under. He snatched at her hair, thrust her under his arm, wrapped himself around her until she was safe from the sheets of tin and rolling logs. He caught a pair of trailing coconut leaves and pulled, until both of them were safe above the water.

When the water receded, Ramil found his daughter in the wild grass, 11-year-old arms wrapped around a rock.

The other children are gone as well, every child who clung to Ramil in the water. Their parents don't blame him. Most of them are dead.

**ON THURSDAY AFTERNOON,** November 7th, the day before the storm, Interior Secretary Manuel "Mar" Roxas and Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin flew into Tacloban City to supervise the government response.

On Friday afternoon, after Haiyan cut all communications, National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council executive director Eduardo Del Rosario admitted they had lost contact with the cabinet secretaries. Neither Roxas nor Gazmin had brought satellite phones or military radios.

Roxas made contact on Friday evening, after Del Rosario sent a satellite phone.

**HIS NAME IS EDGAR LAPID,** a fisherman from the coast of Calupian. Two days before Haiyan, he brought his wife Josephine and his four children to the Fisherman's Village Elementary School. He was there again the day before the storm, carrying a bowl of cooked rice.

Ma, he said, you should eat. He left them in the afternoon and headed home to guard the house. He thought his family would be safe.

In the first floor classroom where Josephine and her four children covered behind wooden tables, the surge pushed against the green door. Young men broke the glass jalousies, Edgar's 14-year-old son Junior caught his mother and pushed her to the surface, up to the second floor roof.

When the water disappeared, it left bodies plastered against the walls of classrooms whose windows were crosshatched with metal frames.

**A MESSAGE IS PAINTED** in two-foot tall letters across the school roof. *Tulong, maraming patay dito.*

Help, there are dead bodies inside.

At least 20 died inside the Fisherman's Village Elementary

Clockwise from top left:  
Body bags waiting for  
processing at the Basper  
Public Cemetery (Photograph  
by Patricia Evangelista);  
William Gabuquing in Times,  
Fisherman's Village; one  
of many corpses along the  
coastline of Barangay 83.

School. Josephine and all four of her children survived. It was later when she discovered her husband did not.

**IN A NOVEMBER 11 INTERVIEW** with CNN's Andrew Stevens, the Interior Secretary was asked if the situation was under control.

Yes, said Roxas. "I would say that it is."

**THE WOMEN LEAVE** for the airport at six in the morning. There are seven of them, trailing toddlers, carrying bags and babies. They hope to get out of the city, win their way into one of the government C130s flying refugees to Cebu.

Look straight ahead, they tell the children.

They walk past bodies lining the sidewalks, past crumpled government cars wedged into fence posts, past a twisted chain link fence and the long lines of the waiting.

They have survived five days in Tacloban City.

It was the two youngest women who kept the family alive. They left home at one in the morning of the second day, walked three hours following a crowd all the way to a warehouse with a shattered roof. They climbed the broken wall, up to the broken roof, and jumped down to fight it out with a hundred other thieves. Sardines, water, whatever they could carry.

It was not the stealing that was dangerous. It was protecting what they had stolen.

They were brave, says their mother. We were hungry, say the girls.

**HIS NAME IS DODONG CELIS.** Thirty years ago, he fell in love with an accounting clerk more than 15 years his senior. He courted her for two years, they were married, had a son, and lived in Tacloban City in Village 31, where Dodong drove a tricycle and was elected the village chief.

At midnight before the storm, Dodong came home after evacuating his village. He told his wife to get ready. She said there was no need. The wind was calm. The air was warm. It was Dodong's birthday, and she did not want to leave.

They lay down together, husband and wife.

In the morning, the first wave came. They ran, 20 villagers



racing down the street, straight into another stronger house. They closed the door, but the water still swelled.

Up, Dodong howled, up, up, up the stairs.

The next wave came. The house broke off its moorings. The water flooded the second floor.

Dodong jumped up on a bed and rammed a length of pipe into the ceiling. The ceiling broke.

He rammed the pipe against the roof. When the roof broke he tossed all 19 people up, through the ceiling, through the roof, until all 20 of them were crouched on a bucking tin raft. Hold on, he told everyone.

He saw a balcony on the third floor of a standing building. He pushed his wife toward his nephew. Hold her, he said.

He jumped. He fell. It was dark in the water. There were planks and walls and posts tumbling over his head. He pushed his palms together and forced his way up, breaking through the debris. He found his wife dazed, reached up, held her face and screamed.

Wake up, he said. Wake up. Snap out of it. We will live.

He jumped again, caught the balcony railing, swung himself up. He turned and called for his wife. She was gone.

In minutes, 19 people were standing on the balcony, watching the water recede, quickly as it came.

**DODONG FOUND HIS WIFE** a meter and a half below him, under a tangle of debris.

He carried her to the city engineer's office, where other bodies had been left. Laid her on a sheet of wood and stayed



**THEY CLUNG TO HIM, AROUND HIS NECK, CLUTCHING AT HIS HAIR, GRIPPING HIS SHOULDERS, CLAWING UP HIS BACK, CHILDREN, teenagers, a mother carving a daughter, all clinging to Ramil while birds and turtles and snakes slithered up his chest. He shoved them all away, snakes, birds, mothers, children, abandoned them all in the water before he swam to save his wife and daughter.**

with her, all day for his birthday, all the way until the next day, slept beside her in a room filled with corpses until he buried her in an open grave he had found. He filled it with his own hands.

He visits her every day. Sorry, he tells her. Sorry, sorry, sorry, love.

**ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10,** Chief Superintendent Elmer Soria, Regional Director of the Eastern Visayas Police Regional

Office 8, said in an interview that there were 10,000 people feared dead.

Two days later, he was relieved from his duties "due to stress."

"Ten thousand I think is too much," said Philippine President Benigno S. Aquino III, during an interview four days after the typhoon. "And perhaps that was brought about by being at the center of destruction. There's emotional trauma involved with that particular estimate."

There are only 2,000 dead, said the President. Maybe 2,500.

**HER NAME IS NIEVES NERJA.** On the day after the storm, she left home to see her son Oscar. Her daughter walked with her. Her husband Cirilo could not. He wept instead.

Nieves found Oscar along the highway of Village 99, just one body among dozens. Someone had wrapped Oscar in a sheet. Nieves brought another from home, draped him again in damp white.

They cried, mother and daughter. They asked the police to cover Oscar's body with a sheet of tin. They prayed over him, talked to him, asked a friend to stay with the body, to make sure Oscar would be left on the road when the government truck came by to pick up the rest. Then they left, looking for men to carry Oscar and dig his grave and lay him down in the ground. They were willing to pay any price, with what little they had, but there was no one who was willing.

Everyone is fighting to survive, says Nieves. Everyone has problems. Burying Oscar is hers.



Ramil Navarro, a butcher from Vitas, in the shack that he built in Barangay 98, San Jose Highway

Every day for 12 days, Nieves walks to see Oscar. She walks on cold days. She walks on rainy days. She walks on days when the heat broiled the corpses and choked the backhoe drivers in spite of their masks. She walks four hours each way, from the little house along Imelda Avenue to the highway in Village 99.

She comes to keep him company, to talk to him, to pray for him, to promise that his mother will not leave him. Oscar was a good boy, says his mother, a kind boy who sent money home and put his sister's children through school.

The walk is shorter on the last day, the twelfth day. A motorcycle takes Nieves up to Basper, drops her off at the bottom of the road. She walks, red umbrella, a cane, purple knitted cap pulled over her head, bags slung over bony shoulders. She pays no attention to the fire trucks, to the government tents, to the tripods manned by foreign correspondents. She keeps her head down, her eyes on the ground, on the long line of white body bags stretching down the cemetery road.

She wants him buried separately, but she is told it can't be done. She has asked the policemen, the firemen, the women in vests emblazoned with the seal of the Department of Health. They tell her there are too many bodies. Two trenches have been dug, one for the hundreds of unidentified, the other for men like Oscar Nerja.

Oscar's little sister has written his name on a sheet of paper. She asks the police to slip it inside the body bag. Other bags have been labeled in marking pens, the lumps inside ranging from the very large to the pitifully small.

Nieves is waiting for the experts with their identification kits to work their way to Oscar. They will tell her when they

find his name. She will wait until the men in gloves carry him up the green swath of grass to the trench behind the cemetery wall. She will mark where they lay him with a candle and a prayer, so she will know where her Oscar rests, so Oscar will know his mother is here.

**ON THE FIFTH DAY** after the storm the Red Cross pegged the tentative missing at 20,000 people.

**THE CORPSE TRUCK** trundles down the road, the men in masks and gloves coming out of side streets in pairs carrying white body bags. Sometimes the bags are laid out on the road, unzipped, checked, marked with felt pens.

The journalists follow the trucks, foreigners with tripods and fluffy boom mics. Sometimes it is old women who follow, hanging on from the backs of motorbikes.

Their sons are inside, they say. They want to know where to pray.

**HIS NAME IS EDUARDO ABOGANDA**, father of one. When he dropped from the roof at eight in the morning of November 8,

From left to right: the hand of a woman caught in the branches of a mangrove in Barangay 88, Timex Compound; a boy washes his face among the rubble last December 14; Eduardo Aboganda in San Jose Highway, Barangay 88.

it did not matter that the water had ripped off every shred of clothing he wore.

He walked down the coast naked, his only daughter dead in his arms. He washed her, cleaned her, slipped her inside a soggy wet dress he had found crumpled on a branch, then laid her down under a tree and built a roof of tin over her body.

The roof was important. He was afraid she would be cold in the rain.

**ON NOVEMBER 13, THE SIXTH DAY AFTER THE STORM**, Interior Secretary Roxas is told in an interview that there are decomposing corpses still on the streets.

They are not the same bodies, he says. "Every day, we pick up the bodies. I myself led a pickup, a cadaver recovery team yesterday and the day before."

He says the bodies may look like they are the same, "because they are in the same-looking body bags."

"We pick up along the main road, all of the bodies in the interior are then brought out."

**ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY** after the storm, a crew from the Department of Public Works and Highways reports for duty. Their shirts are bright blue, their helmets orange. They are all survivors, paid P260 a day to clear the debris layering over San Jose.

In the language of Tacloban after Haiyan, a bundle left over a sheet of tin roofing means the bundle contains what is left of a person. The tin is used as a tray, an attempt by whoever chanced upon the body to keep the crumbling pieces together.

To the side of the road are three fresh body bags. Fresh, because the bodies were found early the same day, before they were packed, zipped, tagged and bundled neatly for the passing corpse trucks. A large backpack sits to the left of the bodies, a cheap Jansport imitation flecked in bright purple set on a sheet of tin.

The backpack slouches, only half full. Inside the bag rots the corpse of a baby.

The corpses are still there later in the day, with one dif-

ference. A baby doll has been left to sit beside the backpack, plump plastic body glowing in the sun. The doll is smiling.

**ON THE 16TH DAY** after the storm, a man's body bobs in the water, everything but his clothes bleached a powdery white. Feather strings of skin trail in his wake, small clumps of fish gnaw away at the stumps of his arms.

This is Paradise, Village 83, a short walk from the Tacloban Leyte Ice Plant. Outside, another corpse lies sprawled among pink bottles of baby powder, the swollen body bursting the seams of a blue baseball jersey.

The children of Village 83 point to the center of the bay, right where the sunlight shoots sharp off the steel edges of half-sunken container trucks. The bodies float in clumps, one on top of the other, limbs caught by wooden markers.

The children say there are more men locked inside the cabs of their own trucks, sitting in the driver's seats, fisted hands on steering wheels, eyes blind to the bodies floating outside.

**ON THE NINETEENTH DAY** after the storm, Roxas announces the reinstatement of Chief Superintendent Elmer Soria. The official death toll is 5,500.

**WHEN THE NEW VILLAGE CHIEFS OF TACLOBAN CITY** were elected on October 28, 2013, they did not know they would take office in a broken city. Two incumbent village chiefs died on November 8, along with ten councilors. All of the newly elected have survived, and are sworn into their new positions at the Tacloban City Astrodome almost two weeks after the storm, on the same ground where at least 300 were killed.

Mayor Albert Romualdez speaks to his new officials. He tells them to stand fast. He tells them the world is watching. He tells them this is a test of leadership, that he himself was tested, that everyone should band together.

"When someone goes to me in the city, they say, 'Mayor, we lost our house.' I say I lost two houses. Someone tells me, 'Mayor, I lost my car.' I ask them, 'How many?' They say,

**SHE WANTED HIM BURIED SEPARATELY, BUT SHE WAS TOLD IT COULDN'T BE DONE. SHE HAS ASKED THE POLICEMEN, THE FIREMEN, THE WOMEN IN VESTS EMBLAZONED WITH THE SEAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. THEY TELL HER THERE ARE TOO MANY BODIES. TWO TRENCHES HAVE BEEN DUG, ONE FOR THE HUNDREDS OF UNIDENTIFIED BODIES, THE OTHER FOR MEN LIKE OSCAR NERJA.**



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A body inside a Red Cross bag is left under a waiting shed along Airport Road, Tacloban City

Photograph by Rick Rocamora / UNHCR

A BUNDLE LEFT OVER A SHEET OF TIN ROOFING MEANS THE BUNDLE CONTAINS WHAT IS LEFT OF A PERSON. The tin is used as a tray, an attempt by whoever chanced upon the body to keep the crumbling pieces together.

'Mayor, one! I lost seven. I lost seven cars. Are we going to have a contest about this?'

In the Astrodome, one of the few standing structures of Tacloban City, 200 voices rise, to echo off the walls and float past the shattered dome, returning with a chorus of a thousand more.

*Land of the morning, child of the sun returning, with fervor burning, thee do our souls adore.*

*Land of the morning, of love and glory, to live is heaven in thy embrace. It is our joy in the face of tyranny, to die because of thee.*

**ON THE TWENTIETH DAY** after the storm, seven bodies are found inside a house along the curve of the San Jose Highway.

**ON THE TWENTY-SECOND DAY** after the storm, the village chiefs of Villages 88, 89 and 90 report at least a hundred bodies scattered along their coastlines.

**ON THE TWENTY-THIRD DAY** after the storm, Navy men stationed along the city seaport ask for the retrieval of headless cadavers caught in recesses beneath the pier.

**ON THE TWENTY-FIFTH DAY** after the storm, a Chinese humanitarian team finds 120 bodies floating under the San Juanico Bridge.

**ON THE TWENTY-SIXTH DAY** after the storm, William Cabuquing stands alone outside his shanty in Fisherman's Village. There is a new body that has floated into the debris in the shore across his house.

William knows he is one of the lucky ones. His wife is missing, but his children are alive and far away.

For 14 days after Haiyan, the length of time it took the government to send body bags to Timex Street, William has lived with the bodies of his neighbors. Many remain in the debris around his home. The corpse of a woman still hangs impaled in a tangle of branches, legs spread, her arms akimbo, thigh and ankle pierced by twigs, naked torso a yellow bag of little more than bones. What is left has turned the color of wood.

William is building a house. A small house, the height of a man's waist, driftwood and tin and rusty nails cobbled together to face the sea.

He will not leave. He is waiting for his Cecilia. **12**

*Many of the dispatches in this report were written originally for multimedia news agency Rappler.com. The editors would like to express our gratitude for allowing the use of the material.*





Container vans and other debris swept by the surge of water in Barangay 88 along the San Jose Highway. Photographed last November 13.