

At war's end: an elegy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

AT WAR'S END: AN ELEGY by Rony V. Diaz ©2002 by Copper Sturgeon 1.

THE DINNER PARTY THE evening before he killed himself, Virgilio Serrano gave a dinner party. He invited five guests—friends and classmates in university— myself included. Since we lived on campus in barracks built by the U. S. Army, he sent his Packard to fetch us. Virgilio lived alone in a pre-war chalet that belonged to his family. Four servants and a driver waited on him hand and foot. The chalet, partly damaged, was one of the few buildings in Ermita that survived the bombardment and street fighting to liberate Manila. It had been skillfully restored; the broken lattices, fretwork, shell windows and wrought iron fence had been repaired or replaced at considerable expense. A hedge of bandera espa±ola had been planted and the scorched frangipani and hibiscus shrubs had been pruned carefully. Thus, Virgilio's house was an ironic presence in the violated neighborhood. He was on the porch when the car came to a crunching halt on the graveled driveway. He shook our hands solemnly, then ushered us into the living room. In the half-light, everything in the room glowed, shimmered or shone. The old ferruginous narra floor glowed. The pier glass coruscated. The bentwood furniture from the house in Jaen looked as if they had been burnished. In a corner, surrounded by bookcases, a black Steinway piano sparkled like glass. Virgilio was immaculate in white de hilo pants and cotton shirt. I felt ill at ease in my surplus khakis and combat boots. We were all in our second year. Soon we will be on different academic paths—Victor in philosophy; Zacarias in physics and chemistry; Enrique in electrical engineering; and Apolonio, law. Virgilio and I have both decided to make a career in English literature. Virgilio was also enrolled in the Conservatory and in courses in the philosophy of science. We were all in awe of Virgilio. He

<https://assignbuster.com/at-wars-end-an-elegy/>

seemed to know everything. He also did everything without any effort. He had not been seen studying or cramming for an exam in any subject, be it history, anthropology or calculus. Yet the grades that he won were only a shade off perfection. HE and I were from the same province where our families owned rice farms except that ours was tiny, a hundred hectares, compared to the Serrano's, a well-watered hacienda that covered 2, 000 hectares of land as flat as a table. The hacienda had been parceled out to eleven inquilinos who together controlled about a thousand tenants. The Serranos had a large stone house with a tile roof that dated back to the 17th century that they used during the summer months. The inquilinos dealt with Don Pepe's spinster sister, the formidable Clara, who knew their share of the harvest to the last chupa. She was furthermore in residence all days of the year. Virgilio was the only child. His mother was killed in a motor accident when he was nine. Don Pepe never remarried. He became more and more dependent on Clara as he devoted himself to books, music and conversation. His house in Cabildo was a salon during the years of the Commonwealth. At night, spirited debates on art, religion language, politics and world affairs would last until the first light of dawn. The guests who lived in the suburbs were served breakfasts before they drove off in their runabouts to Sta. Cruz, Ermita or San Miguel. The others stumbled on cobblestones on their way back to their own mansions within the cincture of Intramuros. In October, Quezon himself came for merienda. He had just appointed General MacArthur field marshal of the Philippine Army because of disturbing news from Nanking and Chosun. Quezon cursed the Americans for not taking him in their confidence. But like most gifted politicians, he had a preternatural sense of danger. " The Japanese will go to war against the Americans before

this year is out, Pepe, " Quezon rasped, looking him straight in the eye. This was the reason the Serranos prepared to move out of Manila. As discreetly as possible, Don Pepe had all his personal things packed and sent by train to Jaen. He stopped inviting his friends. But when the Steinway was crated and loaded on a large truck that blocked the street completely, the neighbors became curious. Don Pepe dissembled, saying that he had decided to live in the province for reasons of health, " at least until after Christmas. " Two weeks later, he suffered a massive stroke and died. The whole town went into mourning. His remains were interred, along with his forebears, in the south wall of the parish church. A month later, before the period of mourning had ended, Japanese planes bombed and strafed Clark Field. Except for about three months in their hunting lodge in the forests of Bongabong (to escape the rumored rapine that was expected to be visited on the country by the yellow horde. Virgilio and Clara spent the war years in peace and comfort in their ancestral house in Jaen. Clara hired the best teachers for Virgilio. When food became scarce in the big towns and cities, Clara put up their families in the granaries and bodegas of the hacienda so that they would go on tutoring Virgilio in science, history, literature, mathematics, philosophy and English. After his lessons, he read and practiced on the piano. He even learned to box and to fence although he was always nauseated by the ammoniac smell of the gloves and mask. Despite Clara's best effort, she could not find new boxing gloves and fencing equipment. Until she met Honesto Garcia. Honesto Garcia was a petty trader in rice who had mastered the intricate mechanics of the black market. He dealt in anything that could be moved but he became rich by buying and selling commodities such as soap, matches, cloth and quinine pills. Garcia maintained a network of

informers to help him align supply and demand—and at the same time collect intelligence for both the Japanese Army and the Hukbalahap. One of his informers told him about Clara Serrano's need for a pair of new boxing gloves and protective gear for escrima. He found these items. He personally drove in his amazing old car to Jaen to present them to Clara, throwing in a French épée that was still in its original case for good measure. He refused payment but asked to be allowed to visit. Honesto Garcia was the son of a kasama of the Villavicencios of Cabanatuan. By hard work and numerous acts of fealty, his father became an inquilino. Honesto, the second of six children, however made up his mind very early that he would break loose from farming. He reached the seventh grade and although his father at that time had enough money to send him to high school, he decided to apprentice himself to a Chinese rice trader in Gapan. His wage was a few centavos a day, hardly enough for his meals, but after two years, he knew enough about the business to ask his father for a loan of P60 to set himself up as a rice dealer. And then the war broke out. Honesto was handsome in a rough-hewn way. He tended to fat but because he was tall he was an imposing figure. He was unschooled in the social graces; he preferred to eat, squatting before a dulang, with his fingers. Despite these deficiencies, he exuded an aura of arrogance and self-confidence. It was this trait that attracted Clara to him. Clara had never known strong-willed men, having grown up with effete persons like Don Pepe and compliant men like the inquilinos who were always silent in her presence. When Clara told Virgilio that Honesto had proposed and that she was inclined to accept, Virgilio was not surprised. He also had grown to like Honesto who always came with unusual gifts. Once, Honesto gave him a mynah that Virgilio was able to

teach within a few days to say " Good morning. How are you today? " The wedding took place in June of the second year of the war. It was a grand affair. The church and the house were decked in flowers. The inquilinos fell over each other to, supply the wedding feast. Carts and sleds laden with squealing pigs, earthen water jars filled with squirming river fish, pullets bound at the shank like posies, fragrant rice that had been husked in wooden mortars with pestles, the freshest eggs and demijohns of carabao milk for leche flan and slews of vegetables and fruit that had been picked at exactly the right time descended on the big house. The wives and daughters of the tenants cooked the food in huge vats while their menfolk roasted the suckling pigs on spluttering coals. The quests were served on bamboo tables spread with banana leaves. The war was forgotten, a rondalla played the whole day, the children fought each other for the bladders of the pigs which they blew up into balloons and for the ears and tails of the lechon as they were lifted on their spits from the fire. The bride wore the traje de boda of Virgilio's mother, a masterpiece confected in Madrid of Belgian lace and seed pearls. The prettiest daughters of the inquilinos, dressed in organza and ribbons, held the long, embroidered train of the wedding gown. Honesto's family were awe-struck by this display of wealth and power. They cringed and cowered in the sala of the big house and all of them were too frightened to go to the comedor for the wedding lunch. Not very long after the wedding, Honesto was running the hacienda. The inquilinos found him more congenial and understanding. At this time, the Huks were already making demands on them for food and other necessities. The fall in the Serrano share would have been impossible to explain to Clara. In fact, the Huks had established themselves on Carlos Valdefuerza's parcel because his male children had

joined the guerilla group. Honesto learned for the first time that the Huks were primarily a political and not a resistance organization. They were spreading a foreign idea called scientific socialism that predicted the takeover of all lands by the workers. Ricardo Valdefuerza, who had taken instruction from Luis Taruc, was holding classes for the children of the other tenants. Honesto was alarmed enough to take it up with Clara who merely shrugged him off. " How can illiterate farmers understand a complex idea like scientific socialism? " she asked. " But they seem to understand it, " Honesto expostulated " because it promises to give them the land that they farm. " " How is that possible? Quezon and the Americans will not allow it. They don't have the Torrens Title, " Clara said with finality. " Carding Valdefuerza has been saying that all value comes from work. What we get as our share is surplus that we do not deserve because we did nothing to it. It rightly belongs to the workers, according to him. I myself don't understand this idea too clearly but that is how it is being explained to the tenants. " " They are idle now. After the war, all this talk will vanish, " Clara said. When American troops landed in Leyte, Clara was four months with child. THE table had been cleared. Little glasses of a pale sweetish wine were passed around. Victor pushed back his chair to slouch. " The war has given us the opportunity to change this country. The feudal order is being challenged all over the world. Mao Tse Tung has triumphed in China. Soon the revolution will be here. We have to help prepare the people for it. " Victor declared. " Why change? " Virgilio asked. " The pre-war order had brought prosperity and democracy. What you call feudalism is necessary to rebuild the country. Who will lead? The Huks? The young turks of the Liberal Party? All they have are ideas; they have no capital, no power. " The university was alive with talk

of imminent revolutionary change. Young men and women, most of them from the upper classes, spoke earnestly of redistributing wealth. " Nothing will come of it" Virgilio said, sipping his wine. " Of all of us, you have the most to lose in a revolution, " Apolonio said. " What we should aim for is orderly lawful change. You might lose your hacienda but you must be paid for it. So in the end, you will still have the capital to live on in style. " " You don't understand, " Virgilio said. " It is not only a question of capital or compensation. I am talking of a way of life, of emotional bonds, of relationships that are immutable. In any case, we can do nothing one way or the other so let us change the subject. " " Don't be too sure, " I said. " We can influence these events one way or another. " " You talk as if you have joined the Communist Party, " Virgilio said. " Have you? " But before I could answer, he was off on another tack. " You know I have just been reading about black holes, " Virgilio said addressing himself to Zacarias. "

Oppenheimer and Snyder solved Einstein's equations on what happens when a sun or star had used up its supply of nuclear energy. The star collapses gravitationally, disappears from view and remains in a state of permanent free fall, collapsing endlessly inward into a gravitational pit without end. " What a marvelous idea! Such ideas are art in the highest sense but at the same time, the decisive proof of relativity, " Virgilio enthused. " Do you know that Einstein is embarrassed by these black holes? He considers them a diversion from his search for a unified theory, " Zacarias said. " Ah! The impulse towards simplicity, towards reduction. The need to explain all knowledge with a few, elegant equations. Don't you think that his reductionism is the ultimate arrogance? Even if it is Einstein's. In any case, he is not succeeding, " Virgilio said. " But isn't reductionism the human

tendency? This is what Communism is all about, the reduction of human relationships to a set of unproven economic theorems, " I interjected. " But the reductionist approach can also lead to astounding results. Take the Schrödinger and Dirac equations that reduced previous mysterious atomic physics to elegant order, " Enrique said. " What is missing in all this is the effect on men of reductionism. It can very well lead to totalitarian control in the name of progress and social order, " Apolonio ventured. " Let me resolve our debate by playing for you a piece that builds intuitively on three seemingly separate movements. This is Beethoven's Sonata, Opus 27, No. 2. " Virgilio rose and walked gravely to the piano while we distributed ourselves on the bentwood furniture in the living room. He played the opening Adagio with sensitive authority, escalating note to note until it resolved into the fragile D-flat major which in turn disappeared in the powerful rush of the concluding Presto, the movement that crystallized the disparate emotional resonances of the first two movements into an assured and balanced relationship. When the last note had faded, we broke into cheers. But at that moment, I felt a deep sadness for Virgilio. As the Presto flooded the Allegretto, I knew that he was not of this world. Outside, through the shell windows, moonlight softened the jagged ruins of battle.

2. THE INVESTIGATION ON July 14, 1950, in the evening, Virgilio killed himself in his bedroom by slitting his wrists with a straight razor and thrusting them into a pail of warm water. His body was not found until the next morning. He did not appear for breakfast at eight. At eight-thirty, Josefa, the housemaid, knocked on the door of Virgilio's bedroom. Getting no response, she asked Arturo, the driver, to climb up the window to look inside. The three maids panicked. Arturo drove off at once in the Packard to get me. After leaving a

<https://assignbuster.com/at-wars-end-an-elegy/>

note for the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, we stopped at the police station near General Luna to report the suicide. Two police officers were immediately assigned to investigate. They came with us in the car to the house in Ermita. They started interrogating me in the car. " Who are you? " Police Officer No. 1 asked. " Why are you involved? ", Police Officer No. 2 demanded. I was somewhat nervous but as calmly as I could be, I answered. " My name is Nestor Gallego. I am a second-year student at University of the Philippines. Virgilio Serrano, the deceased, and I come from the same town, Jaen, in Nueva Ecija. I have known Virgilio since 1942 and I think he considers me his closest friend in university. That is the reason the driver came to me. " The policemen brought together the household staff. " Did you touch, move or remove anything in the bedroom? Did any of you go out of the house after the driver left for the university? " To both questions, the maids answered, No, whereupon they were told to stay within the premises for separate interviews later in the morning. Police Officer No. 1 went out to the yard presumably to look for clues. Police Officer No. 2 made a sketch of the scene and then searched the bedroom systematically. He opened the drawers of the tallboy carefully, he felt around the linen and underwear. The wardrobe and the aparador were also examined. But it was on the contents of the rolltop desk that No. 1 concentrated. The notebooks, a diary, and address book were all neatly arranged around a Remington typewriter. He was looking for a letter, a note even, to give him a clue or lead to the motive for the suicide. On the first page of one of the notebooks were the " Down There" and then " To my friend and confidant, Nestor Gallego, with affection. " Although unsigned, it was in Virgilio's spidery hand. " You know anything about this? " No. 1 said in a low, threatening voice. He handed it to me. I

leafed through the pages. It looked like a long poem that had been broken down into thirteen cantos. " No, " I said. " I have not seen this before. " " But it is for you. What does it say? " " I don't know, I have to read it first, " cuttingly. My sarcasm rolled off him like water on a duck. " Well then-read, " he ordered, motioning me to the wooden swivel chair. A frisson ran up my spine. My hands trembled as I opened the notebook and scanned the poem. There were recognizable names, places and events. There were references to his professors in university and his tutors in Jaen. The names of some of his inquilinos appeared again and again. But the longest sections were about Honesto and Clara Garcia and Ricardo Valdefuerza. From the tone and the words, it was a satire patterned closely after Dante's Inferno. Virgilio, like Dante, had assigned or consigned people to different circles " down there. " It ended with a line from Valery, " A l'extrême de toute pensée est un soupir. " " I cannot say truthfully that I understand it. I know some of the people and places referred to but not why they appear in this poem. " " I will have to bring this back for analysis, " No. 1 said, giving it to No. 2 who put it carelessly in a plastic carryall. " When you are done with it, can I have it back? I have a right to it since it was dedicated to me. " I wanted desperately to read it because I felt that it concealed the reason for Virgilio's suicide. They spent another hour talking to the household help and scribbling in grimy notebooks. Before they left past one o'clock, No. 1 said: " It is clearly a suicide. There was no struggle. In fact, it was a very neat suicide. " He made it sound as if it was a remarkable piece of craftsmanship. I hated him. I went with Arturo to the post office to send a telegram to Jaen. " Virgilio dead stop please come at once. " The undertaker took charge thereafter, informing us that by six o'clock, the remains would be ready for viewing. He asked me to

<https://assignbuster.com/at-wars-end-an-elegy/>

select the clothes for the dead. I chose the white de hilo pants and the white cotton shirt that Virgilio wore the other day. " It is wrinkled, " the undertaker said. " Don't you want to choose something else. " " No, " I shouted at him. " Put him in these. " 3. THE FUNERAL FATHER Sean O'Donovan, S. J., refused to say Mass or to bless the corpse. " Those who die by their own hand are beyond the pale of the Church, " he said firmly. " Let us take him home, " Clara said. She asked me to make all the arrangements and not to mind the cost. The rent for the hearse was clearly exorbitant. I bargained feebly and then agreed. Victor, Zacarias, Enrique, Apolonio and myself were to travel in the Packard. Honesto and Clara had driven to Manila in a new Buick. The hearse moved at a stately 30 kilometers per hour while a scratchy dirge poured out of it at full volume. The Garcias followed in their Buick and we brought up the rear. The rains of July had transformed the brown, dusty fields of Bulacan and Nueva Ecija into muddy fields. We passed small, nut-brown men, following a beast and a stick that scored the wet earth; dithering birds swooped down to pluck the crickets and worms that were turned up by the plow. The beat of sprung pebbles against the fender of the car marked our passage. The yard of the big house was already full of people. In the sala, a bier had been prepared. The wives of inquilinos were all in black. Large yellow tapers gave off a warm, oily smell that commingled with the attar of the flowers, producing an odor that the barrio folk called the smell of death. Then the local worthies arrived, led by the congressman of the district, the governor of the province, the mayor of Jaen, the commander of the Scout Rangers who was leading a campaign against the Huks, with their wives and retainers. They were all on intimate terms with Honesto and Clara. Except for the colonel who was in full combat uniform, they were

dressed in sharkskin and two-toned shoes. They wore their hair tightly sculpted with pomade against their skulls and on their wrists and fingers gold watches and jeweled rings glistened. They all knew that Honesto had political ambition. It was not clear yet which position he had his sights on. With the death of Virgilio, the immense wealth of the Serranos devolved on Clara and on Honesto and on their 5-year old son, Jose Jr. Both the Nacionalista and Liberal Parties have been dangling all manner of bait before Honesto. Now, there will be a scramble. Honesto shook hands with everyone, murmuring acknowledgments of their expressions of grief but secretly assessing their separate motives. Clara was surrounded by the simpering wives of the politicians; like birds they postured to show their jewels to best advantage. They only fell silent when Father Francisco Santander, the parish priest, came to say the prayer for the dead and to lead the procession to the Church where Virgilio's mortal remains would be displayed on a catafalque before the altar before interment in the south wall side by side with Don Pepe's. I left the sala to join the crowd in the yard. My parents were there with the Serranos' and our tenants. There was a palpable tension in the air. A number of the kasamas had been seized by the Scout Rangers, detained and tortured, so that they may reveal the whereabouts of Carding. They were frightened. From what I heard from my parents, most of the tenants distrusted Honesto who they felt was using the campaign against the Huks to remove those he did not like. The inquilinos were helpless because Clara was now completely under the sway of Honesto. I walked home. When I got there, Restituto, our caretaker, very agitated, took me aside and whispered. " Carding is in the house. He has been waiting for you since early morning. I kept him from view in your bedroom. " He looked at me, uncertain and

obviously frightened. " What shall we do? " Leave it to me. But do not tell anyone—not even my parents. He shall be gone by the time they return. " I put my arm around Restituto's shoulder to reassure him. Carding wheeled when I walked in, pistol at the ready. He was dressed in army fatigues and combat boots. A pair of Ray-Ban glasses dangled on his shirt. He put the pistol back in its holster. " You shouldn't be here. There are soldiers all around. " " They will not come here. They are too busy in the hacienda, " Carding said. The shy, spindly boy that I knew during the war had grown into a broad muscular man. His eyes were hooded and cunning. " I have to talk to you. Did Virgilio leave a last will and testament? " " Not that I know of. He left a notebook of poems. " " What is that? " Carding demanded, startled. " A notebook of verses with the title ' Down There.' You are mentioned in the poem. But the police has it, " I answered. " Did it say anything about the disposition of the hacienda in case of his death? " " I did not have a chance to read it closely but I doubt it. Aren't such things always done up in legal language? There certainly is nothing like that in the notebook. What are you leading up to? " Carding sighed. " In 1943; Virgilio came to see me. He had heard from Honesto that I have been talking to the tenants about their rights. Virgilio wanted to know himself the bases of my claims. We had a long talk. I told him about the inevitability of the triumph of the peasant class. Despite his wide reading, he had not heard of Marx, Lenin, or Mao Tse Tung. He was visibly shaken. But when I told him of the coming calamity that will bring down his class, he asked ' What can I do?' and I said: ' Give up. Give up your land, your privilege and your power. That is the only way to avoid the coming calamity'. " He apparently did not have any grasp of social forces. He kept talking of individual persons—tenants that he had known since he was a

child, inquilinos who had been faithful to his father until their old age, and all that nonsense. 'The individual does not matter,' I yelled at him. 'Only the class called the proletariat.' " But even without understanding, he said that he will leave the hacienda to the tenants because it was probably the right thing to do. But Clara should not be completely deprived of her means of support. It was exasperating, talking to him, but he did promise that in his will the tenants would get all. " Obviously, he changed his mind. " Carding said in a low voice. " That is too bad because now we have to take his land by force. " I was speechless. In university, talk of revolution was all the rage but this was my first encounter with a man who could or would try to make it happen. " When I get back the notebook, I will study it to see if there is any statement that will legally transfer the Serrano hacienda to you and the other tenants, " I said weakly. " I will be in touch, " Carding said. He walked out the door. The day of the funeral was clear and hot. Dust devils rose from the road. In the shadow of the acacia trees in the churchyard, hundreds of people of all ages crowded to get away from the sun. Inside the church, even the aisles were packed. " Introibo ad altare Dei" Father Santander intoned. " Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam, " I answered. The mass for the dead began. My heart was racing because I knew the reason for Virgilio's suicide. But nobody would care, save me. Rony Diaz writes a novel / Serafin Quiason presents a model for our leaders " At War's End", Rony V. Diaz's first novel, had a tremendously successful launching at a recent PEN meeting in the Solidaridad Bookshop. Among the scores present were National Artists for Literature F. Sionil Jose and Bienvenido Lumbera, eminent writers Elmer Ordoñez, Lito Zulueta and Virgie Moreno. In brief remarks, Bien said he and Rony were both post-graduate students at Indiana U.; when Bien asked Rony

<https://assignbuster.com/at-wars-end-an-elegy/>

what he was taking, the latter replied, " Indian linguistics. " There and then, Bien convinced Rony to take up literary courses which later led to Rony's garnering Palanca prizes for short stories. Earlier, while still at the UP, he had in fact already won several awards. Copies of " At War's End", printed by The Manila Times Publishing Corporation managed by Dante Ang II, are available in Solidaridad at P300. Rony is now working on two other novels: " The Adventures of Candida" and " Quita y Pone". During the launch, Dr. Serafin D. Quiason, former National Library director and National Historical Institute chairman and now Lopez Museum consultant, so regaled me with accounts of Vietnam's late president Ho Chi Minh that I requested him to send me a fuller description of the icon. What follows is the speech Dr. Quiason delivered on May 10 at the Laguna State Polytechnic U. His Excellency Ambassador Nguyen Vu Tu, Dr. Ricardo Wagan, President, Laguna State Polytechnic University, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. May I take this rare occasion to extend to you my warmest greetings in conjunction with the unveiling of the statues of President Ho Chi Minh and Dr. Jose P. Rizal. It was the good fortune of Dr. and Mrs. Ricardo Wagan and my own to take part in the commemoration of the 120th birth anniversary of President Ho Chi Minh, the Father of the Modern State of Vietnam. Measured by a universal moral yardstick, he was every inch a man of culture, letters and peace in the highest order. He was truly that, a unique Asian leader who served his beloved country and people faithfully, fully and extremely well. In the early morning of May 10, the foreign delegates to the international conference made a pilgrimage to Kim Lien commune in the province of Nghe An, the birthplace of President Ho Chi Minh. The distance from Hanoi to Nghe An province is about 1, 000 kilometers. It took us eight hours to get there,

<https://assignbuster.com/at-wars-end-an-elegy/>

breaking our arduous journey at two four-star hotels, and another eight hours to get back to Hanoi. To us pilgrims, our visit was an unforgettable experience. Any homage bestowed upon Ho Chi Minh, no matter how tiring and how long the journey to his birthplace, is not wasted. Twenty years ago, I was in Hanoi and took part in the celebration of the centenary of President Ho Chi Minh. What I have witnessed during my brief stay is a remarkable transformation or an unprecedented metamorphosis of Vietnam into a progressive and prosperous nation-state in the ASEAN region, thanks to its dynamic, committed and dedicated collective leadership. Since 1986, the policy of "openness" or "doi moi" has been relentlessly pursued resulting in the process a happy balance between industrial development and growth and complex luxuriant agricultural rice production and distribution. The cities I saw are mushrooming with finely designed sky rises and multicolored residential houses displaying a distinct Vietnamese architectural style. I took a glimpse of the ancient looking Roman Catholic churches along the long route which are visible signs of the policy of religious toleration. Much to my astonishment I have not seen unsightly enclaves of slums, impoverished beggars roving the shady lanes, truant street children, tricycles and pedicabs. How I wish and hope our new crop of leaders could emulate the simplistic ways of President Ho Chi Minh! When he became President, he never lived in the fabulously built Palace for the French Governor General, but instead stayed in the gardener's tiny cottage on stilts just a stone's throw away from a nearby pond. He bore the title and position with utmost simplicity and decorum. He had a Gandhi-like deportment, bordering on the ways of a Buddhist ascetic. In his calculus of personal values on food habits, attire, and lodging, he was a man of simple tastes. He knew the delights of

excellent cuisine, considering his work experience at the famous Carlton Restaurant. Still, his preference went to ordinary or common man's fare. His beloved countrymen owe an inestimable debt of gratitude to their nationalist patriotic icon. He died at the age of 79. Although he never lived to see a unified Vietnam, his legacy in the form and substance of extraordinary gifts and major achievements shall live forever.