

Aftermath

J. Malcolm Garcia

I arrive at Bệnh viện Đà Nẵng Hospital in downtown Đà Nẵng mid-morning, park my motor scooter and wait to meet my translator, Vương Nguyên. The courtyard swarms with people. They stare at the maze of halls and entranceways of the sprawling complex and the shoulder-to-shoulder mob of men and women filing in ahead of them, and the heat and the odor of all of us sweating rises around us as we determine what direction to take. I get caught up in the shuffling movement, hear my name called and see a lean young man in jeans and a blue dress shirt approaching, waving his arms, and I assume it's Nguyên. We've not met before but as I'm the only Westerner within sight he has guessed correctly that I'm the American reporter who called him last night at the suggestion of a mutual friend. I'm in Đà Nẵng writing about the ongoing health effects of Agent Orange more than forty years after its use in the Vietnam War and I hired Nguyên to introduce me to La Thanh Toàn, a man he knows with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, better known as Lou Gehrig's disease. A Hanoi doctor examined Toàn when he was a child and concluded that his condition resulted from his father's exposure to Agent Orange in the late 1960s when he fought with the Viet Cong in Cambodia more than twenty years before Toàn's birth in 1992. Dioxins, the toxic chemicals found in Agent Orange, can affect the composition of DNA resulting in health and birth defects that may be passed from one generation to the next.

Nguyên tells me that twenty-eight-year-old Toàn is one of six children. A younger brother, Nghĩa, also had ALS and died in 2005. Toàn's other siblings, four sisters, have no health problems. He and Nghĩa appeared to be healthy, too, until as toddlers they began having

difficulty walking. Toản studied English in school and has an email and Facebook account.

Nguyễn suggests I keep in touch with him after my visit. I agree and after I return to the States, I send Toản an email.

Dear Toản,

My name is Malcolm Garcia. I am an American reporter who met you and your mother in the hospital on 25 February 2020. Do you remember? I had a gray beard and hair. I have some questions I'd like to ask you. May I email them to you?

Dear Malcolm,

Yes, of course you can.

Nguyễn and I merge into a cluster of men and women and follow them down a dark hall. As we walk, Nguyễn tells me how he became a translator. A few years ago, he approached an American in a barbershop and asked if he could practice his English with him. Nguyễn had a college degree in banking but was unable to find work and was contemplating joining the army. He had already been a reservist. The American, a Vietnam War veteran working with peace groups, hired him as his translator. He and Nguyễn worked together for about three years. Now, Nguyễn is looking for work again.

Did you fight in the war? he asks me.

No, I tell him, I was too young.

So, the war is only a memory for you?

Yes, I remember it.

I was not born then. It is just history to me.

As we make our way through the hospital, we pass vendors selling soup, rice and noodles and families cluster around them and look pained as they count the money cupped in their hands and children stare up at them, tired, cranky, and bags filled with clothes and food for a hospitalized family member collapse at their feet. Nguyễn turns up some stairs and we walk two flights until we reach a floor with a large blue sign, INTENSIVE CARE UNIT. A nurse asks us to remove our shoes and put on flip-flops. I pick through an assortment scattered on the floor until I find a matching pair that fits. She then leads us into a room with eight beds. Toản lies on the bed closest to the door. He is naked except for a towel across his waist. A feeding tube protrudes from his mouth; a thinner tube in his nose clears his lungs. ALS weakens the ability to breathe and swallow and causes respiratory problems, among the most serious symptoms of the disease. His mother, Trần Thị Hoa, stands beside him rubbing his emaciated legs, the muscle all but gone from lack of exercise and solid food. Hoa's black hair is pulled back behind her ears and she wears a hospital smock and a face mask that has slipped to her chin. She turns to me, tearful, but the look on her face is not just one of sorrow but an appeal for cash to continue Toản's care. Please, she says, reaching a hand out to me. I give her twenty dollars and the futility of the gesture is not lost on either of us as we both consider the crumpled bill in her hand. She smooths it, flattening it against her palm as if that will increase its value, stretch what she can do with it all these decades after a war that took Nghia thirty-one years after it ended and will eventually take Toản. I tell her that getting the word out through my story will help but I know that's a lie. No one reading this, I'm sure, will send her a check. Certainly not enough checks. According to the Red Cross, three million people have diseases that may be the result of dioxin

exposure during the Vietnam War but even the VA doesn't test to determine if a veteran's illnesses were caused by Agent Orange. It's just assumed it's the source of their problems, an admission that suggests nothing can be done.

I worry a lot, Hoa says. He is weak and he will die but he wants to live.

She looks at me as if his desire and hers should count for something.

Dear Toàn,

My first question: As a child, when did you realize you and your brother were different from your friends and sisters. What did that feel like to know that physically you could not do things they could?

Dear Malcolm,

When I was a child, I saw that all other children my age were stronger than me. For example, when we played games or sports activities at school I was inferior. When I knew it, I limited my participation. When I was still able to walk, I often fell down and stood up very hard, I had to ask someone to help me up. I understood that I got a physical illness so I accepted it and wasn't so upset. I was just a bit sad because my friends poked fun at my gait. I often was alone and not in the crowd.

Every afternoon, Hoa tells me, she visits Toàn. She feeds and medicates her pigs—they always get sick, there's always problem—and takes them to market and afterward she drives her scooter to the hospital at five o'clock in the evening and stays until nine at night. Toàn's father

suffered brain damage from a motorcycle accident and is paraplegic and has temper tantrums. Hoa endures his outbursts, does all the chores and visits Toàn alone.

Toàn stares at the ceiling as his mother talks. His eyes roam, I hear his breath on the tubes. He is a passive participant in my interview. He can hear but because he can not participate I find myself talking over him as if he's not here. or no good reason I am reminded of my mother when she could no longer hear. Friends would drop by and talk to her by shouting like football coaches. Eventually they gave up and sat among themselves as if she weren't there and my mother watched them as if she were in the audience of a play. I feel I'm treating Toàn similarly. I grip his right hand to connect with him but he doesn't look at me. My mother, of course, was in much better condition than Toàn. He can't talk because of the tubes. He can only move his eyes, eyelids, lips and the index finger of his left hand. The finger connects him to the world. With it, he taps out his emails and Facebook messages on an iPad one letter at a time.

Dear Toàn,

What is it like for you to only communicate with one finger? Tell me what it was like to slowly lose your body functions.

Dear Malcolm,

My illness got worse day by day, I used to eat by myself and then one day I could not eat by myself anymore. Inside my body also started to weaken, I could not breathe and had to use a ventilator. When I was in the hospital, I could not talk like before, but fortunately I could use one finger to communicate with family, others were difficult because they did not know how.

After two years in the hospital, I started using a tablet. My younger brother found it on internet and bought a suitable computer mouse for my finger.

Like Toàn, the patients in the beds around him can't move. Whether they, too, suffer from ALS or some other illness, I don't know and neither does Hoa. Nurses rub them down with washcloths, removing the sheets covering them and wiping their faces, necks, arms, chest, thighs, calves, feet. The bodies of the patients move, jostle from being handled. Their eyes bore holes in the ceiling. Sheets cast aside, nothing is private. Penises, vaginas, breasts are exposed, and then they get covered again with clean sheets, and a creaking ceiling fan wobbles above them producing a mild current out the humid air cooling their bodies damp from being bathed, and no one speaks; only the sound of nurses shifting around beds breaks the tedium. When a nurse approaches Toàn, Hoa shakes her head and the nurse nods and leaves a washcloth at the foot of his bed. Toàn's mother picks it up, shows it to Toàn and wipes perspiration off his forehead. His mouth curves into a smile around the feeding tube.

His brain is very good, his mother tells me. When he and Nghia attended school they had difficulties but they were very happy. They really wanted to learn. By the time they were old enough for school, she continues, they were unable to walk. Nghia had his classes in the morning, Toàn in the afternoon and Hoa carried them individually on her scooter. By that time they could no longer lift their arms but they could still use their hands and she would wrap their arms around her waist and they would clasp their wrists and hold on as she drove slowly through traffic. In the morning, she carried Nghia on her back to his classroom, up one flight of stairs, and set him down at his desk and gave him a pencil. In the afternoon, she returned with Toàn. Lifting Nghia onto her back, she returned home. Four hours later she picked up Toàn.

When he was little, Toàn's family lived in a moldy row house at the end of a four-foot-wide alley, open fields all around. Once a week, the TV producers of a Vietnamese quiz show picked a poor family to help. Someone in the audience would answer questions on their behalf and for every correct answer, the family would win money, the amount determined by the difficulty of the question. One afternoon, the show's producers selected Toàn's family. Cameramen arrived to film their reaction to the show. By the end of the day, the family had won three thousand dollars.

They used the money to clean the house of mildew and install white and green tile on the bare concrete walls and floor. Hoa replaced her oil-leaking scooter with a new used one. She also bought a knee-high refrigerator. She'd never had one before.

A volunteer church group from Australia built the family a porch and Veterans for Peace gave them a king-size bed with enough room for Toàn, Nghia and another sibling. The brothers could not sleep alone; someone always had to be with them. They could not lift their arms to swat a mosquito. Toàn was crazy about the British soccer team Manchester United and would get up at two in the morning to watch a game. School friends sometimes came by to watch with him but dozed off on the floor as archrival Real Madrid beat Manchester one to nothing.

Toàn's condition worsened as he grew older. By 2012, he rarely left the house except to see a doctor. His mother attached a sidecar to her scooter when he could no longer use his hands to hold onto her. She bought a special wheelchair with a tall back and straps to hold him and she would take him to the beach and roll him through shallow water. In 2017, he entered the hospital with respiratory problems and never left.

Dear Toàn,

Do you dream at night? Do you remember your dreams? What do you remember?

Dear Malcolm,

My mind is normal like everyone else so I dream of everything normal, I don't have any outstanding dreams to remember.

I speak with Hoa for about an hour. When I finish, I look down at Toàn, squeeze his right hand and tell him I'm leaving. I explain that I did not mean to ignore him. I needed information and given his circumstances only his mother could provide it. I hope he understands but I suspect he sees through me. I have reduced him to a story about the generational impact of Agent Orange. Without it, without the toxins that have so affected Toàn's nervous system that he can no longer move, I'd not be here. The legacy of Agent Orange, the aftermath of war, makes the story. That which is killing him gives Toàn value.

I release his hand and he blinks, riveted to a spot in the ceiling. His inert expression does not change. A small fan balanced on a pillow beside a Santa Claus doll behind his head blows his short, dark hair. The tubes in his nose and mouth emit gurgling sounds. Another machine hisses air. Hoa walks me out.

Dear Toàn,

Are you bitter?

Dear Malcolm,

No, I am sad only because I am sick. I feel unlucky. In war there are only two sides. They want only to win. Neither side thought about what their weapons would do. Neither side thought about the future. I am not angry.

Only sad.

J. Malcolm Garcia is the author most recently of, *The Fruit of All My Grief: Lives In the Shadows of the American Dream* (Seven Stories Press 2019).