

Refugees

By Brian Ascalon Roley

My son interviewed my father for a school project about adversity, in which he needs to draw affinities to a book about Vietnamese boat people and what hardships they needed to overcome.

He could have picked my mother, brown-skinned so impoverished during the Japanese occupation they shared a single egg among seven cousins, watched relatives slaughtered like pigs, planes shot down screaming from the sky.

But he'd heard

stories of my neglected father, white-skinned, unsung, from cornfield and factory country. Knew my father lived in a bar in childhood, brushed his teeth in the metal sink, slept on a cot behind a curtain as grown men shot pool and grownups danced to juke boxes. He showered in gym class, worked fields in humid summers, bailed hay, poured hot highway tar that filled his lungs and perhaps gave him the disease that will soon take his life. He was first in his family to go to college, migrate to California, then risk everything by chucking his safe ledgering job to start a business.

Yet, my father surprised him, spoke instead about the old stutter almost nobody knew about. People would talk, and he'd not be able to get a word out before they continued on, which was embarrassing, and worse, they'd grow nervous and jump in with more words, which can make childhood feel like an endless conversation in which you could never keep up.

My son who, like me, has his own struggles speaking, listened intently from his wheelchair, eyes on the Skype screen as my father told him about becoming college class president

among a student body of 2,000, giving speeches
to large auditoriums for work, managing groups of spitfire
salesmen. Thirty minutes later,
Dad still talked, my son raptly watching, noticing
that my father, despite a bit of coughing
from the disease that may soon exhaust his lungs,
had never reached for his oxygen mask
had not tripped up on a single word
in recounting his life's story
and seemed in no mood to stop.

Brian Ascalon Roley is a professor and award-winning author of Philippine and American descent, and a recent National Endowment of the Arts Literature Fellow. He is Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing at Miami University. His books include the novel *American Son* (W.W. Norton; Christian Bourgeois Editeur), which was a Los Angeles Times Best Book, New York Times Notable Book, Kiriyama Pacific Rim Prize Finalist, and winner of the Association for Asian American Studies Prose Book Award. Find more about his work at brianroley.com.

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