

The Atlantic

Editor's Note: A Reporter's Final Story

Alex Tizon struggled to write about Lola, the woman who helped raise him. He was 11 before he realized she was his family's slave.



Alex Tizon at a journalism workshop in 1991. He believed that all people have within them an epic story.

Betty Udesen / 'The Seattle Times'

JEFFREY GOLDBERG

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EDITOR'S NOTE

THE PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING reporter Alex Tizon built an exemplary career by listening to certain types of people—forgotten people, people on the margins, people who had never before been asked for their stories. Alex's wife, Melissa Tizon, told me recently that her husband was always impatient with small talk, because he believed that all people had within them an epic story, and he wanted to hear those epic stories—and then help tell them to the world.

“Somewhere in the tangle of the subject’s burden and the subject’s desire is your story,” he liked to say.

His mission aligned well with *The Atlantic*’s, and we were pleased to publish, in the April 2016 issue, “[In the Land of Missing Persons](#),” a beautifully rendered story about ordinary people who mysteriously disappeared in the Alaska wilderness. And we were thrilled when Alex offered us the chance to publish a story he had been waiting much of his life to tell, [the remarkable tale of Lola](#), the woman who was his family’s secret slave in the Philippines, and who remained their slave when they moved to America.

And we were heartbroken to learn on Friday, March 24, that Alex Tizon had died. His story editor here at the magazine, Denise Kersten Wills, found out late that evening that Alex had been found dead in his home in Eugene, Oregon. He had died in his sleep, of natural causes. He was 57 years old.

His death is a tragedy for Melissa; their daughter, Maya; his daughter from an earlier marriage, Dylan; and Alex’s brothers and sisters. His death represents a loss for his students at the University of Oregon, where he was a beloved journalism professor. And his death is a loss for the editors and readers of this magazine, who were just coming to know Alex and his gifts.

Alex was a much-admired reporter in the Pacific Northwest. He shared a Pulitzer Prize in 1997 while on the staff of *The Seattle Times*, and he served as the Seattle bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times*. He was also a well-reviewed author; his 2014 memoir, *Big Little Man: In Search of My Asian Self*, was a self-lacerating examination of the complexities, humiliations, and small victories of Asian men trying to adjust to life in America.

His interest in the lives of people situated far outside the mainstream was abiding and deep. When he came to us with the enthralling, vexing story of his immigrant family and its terrible secret, we recognized that this was the sort of journalism *The Atlantic* has practiced since its inception. The magazine was founded in 1857 by a group of New England abolitionists eager to advance the cause of universal

freedom. When I first read a draft of Alex's piece, I imagined that the founders—people like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—would not have believed that 154 years after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, humans would still be enslaving other humans, in America and across the planet. The eradication of all forms of slavery remains an unfinished goal of civilization, and of this magazine, and stories like Alex's help us understand slavery's awful persistence.

Melissa told Denise and me that Alex wanted, more than anything else, to bring Lola's story to the world. "This was his ultimate story," Melissa said. "He was trying to write it for five or six years. He struggled with it. But when he started writing it for *The Atlantic*, he stopped struggling. He wrote it with such ease."

Alex did not know that we would be putting his piece on the cover of this issue; he died the day we made that decision, before we had a chance to tell him. His death, quite obviously, could have derailed publication of what turned out to be his final story, but his family, led by Melissa and his siblings, worked with us during this uniquely trying time to make publication possible. We are grateful to them. And we are grateful that Alex shared his story—his epic story—with us.

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