

Los Angeles Times

To the judges:

Good stories can introduce us to unknown subjects. Great stories can illuminate subjects we thought we already knew.

In his series “Without a Country,” Richard Marosi of the Los Angeles Times enters the seemingly familiar world of immigration and deportation, and takes readers someplace new: beyond the wall.

Since 2008, the U.S. government has deported more than 1 million undocumented immigrants. For most reporters, those deportations are the end of the story. For Marosi, they were the beginning.

Marosi had covered the U.S.-Mexico border for years, and the tide had always flowed one way: north. But in bus stops and cantinas from California to Texas, he began hearing a different sort of story. Stories of young men with no memory of any other home suddenly landing on the other side of the border fence, in a land both strange and hard.

The stories gripped Marosi’s imagination, and he spent months along both sides of the border listening, watching, pursuing. Vast tracts of the border are no less dangerous than war zones around the world, and Marosi used a war correspondent’s tools: In Matamoros, he spent long daylight hours in the city but slept outside of town. Even so, a gang leader confronted the reporter at the local bus station.

“As he made the rounds,” Marosi wrote in an article about Mexican gangs that prey on vulnerable deportees, “heavily tattooed men hovered nearby, wielding walkie-talkies that migrants said were used to summon convoys of gunmen.”

In other places, he found migrants in jeopardy as much psychological as physical. In Mexicali, Mexico, he found an entire hotel – the Hotel of the Deported Migrants – where desperate men and women lived life on the edge of their previous existence. They were close enough to use U.S. cellphone networks but too far away to see their families.

Marosi spent months in this place and watched as the people there deteriorated. They turned to drugs, or alcohol, or simply lost their minds. Those judged irredeemable ended up in a place called Area 3: a corner of the shelter that Dante might have imagined.

There were emotional risks as well. When Marosi met 20-year-old Luis Luna, his story seemed incredible. He had lived undocumented in the United States since he was a toddler and considered himself an American. Then a routine traffic stop – broken headlight, no driver’s license – brought the life he knew to an end.

“The threat of being deported had always seemed to him the stuff of breathlessly reported Spanish-language television news,” Marosi wrote. “Violent people were the ones he thought were targeted. Not someone like him, who, aside from driving without a license, had no criminal record and no say in coming to this country in the first place.”

Luna dedicated himself to returning home – narrowly escaping death time and again. In the last article in the series, Luna makes it. But there are no happy endings.

Likewise the starved teenager Marosi met near the border, down from 170 pounds to 115. Or the father desperate to return to his two young daughters.

It is with great pride and pleasure that we submit for your consideration these heartbreaking stories of life beyond the wall.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Davan Maharaj". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Davan Maharaj
Editor