Story synopsis

In December 2020, Anthony Veasna So was a 28-year-old writer hurtling toward his big literary moment: the debut of his first novel, *Afterparties*. Months before the book’s launch, So died in his bed, the cause of his death not immediately clear. Friends, family members, and So’s devoted readers were stunned and shattered by the loss of such a vital figure in their lives and the literary scene. New York magazine’s E. Alex Jung was one of those readers. He’d been taken by So’s distinctive voice and pitched his editor on writing a profile, knowing it would be sad but thinking the process would be relatively simple. It wasn’t, in part because So was remembered by the people closest to him in profoundly contradictory ways.

Why this story?

We chose this story for Language, Please because reporting thoughtfully on identity and culture means writing into contradiction, resisting the instinct to fit a person's messy life into a neat narrative package. Jung’s dynamic prose and novel structure – inspired in places by So’s own storytelling style – provide powerful lessons for reporting on individuals in their full, flawed humanity, in ways that reveal deep connections to history, community, and movements that shape our world.
Language, Please: We’d love to start with how you decided to profile Anthony Veasna So and how you pitched the piece to your editors.

E. Alex Jung: I had read “Superking Son Scores Again” in N+1, and I thought it was beautiful. It’s funny, intimate, warm, but has this undercurrent of pathos and a real feeling of a community and lived experience. And then I read about Anthony’s sudden passing in the news, and it felt kind of devastating. I was curious about the person who had written the short story and was on the cusp of this literary career.

Once I started doing the actual reporting, it got much more complicated. It was like, “Oh, no, this isn’t going to work.” That’s what I realized. And I had a real emotional breakdown in that moment. I wanted to quit the piece. I was like, I don’t want to do this anymore. I don’t feel capable.

“Each person has their own conception of Anthony, dependent both on who he was when he was with them and also, perhaps, on how they wish to remember him.”

From Infinite Self
L,P: Do you remember what happened that caused you to realize you needed to approach the profile in a new way?

EAJ: I had gone to San Francisco and I met up with Anthony’s sister. We drove out to Stockton, where I met his parents. I met his aunts and uncles and cousins. They’re very tight-knit, so it’s a lot of emotion. It’s the loss of a cousin, a son, a brother, a grandson. And that’s heavy. That’s just very, very difficult. People are still processing, especially his parents. And then after that, I spent the day with his partner. And there was a real emotional whiplash.

The next morning, I woke up and I felt really shattered. I was just like, “This is too disparate.” So I woke up and I called my editor, and I was like, “I don’t think I’m going to do this. I have to stop.”

Anthony and I are not similar in terms of backgrounds, but I have an intuitive understanding of these kinds of fractured worlds that he lived in. So talking to people who knew him in these different capacities, I felt very sensitive to how you are different in different parts of your life. Ultimately, after I was like, “I’m not gonna write this,” my editor was very kind. She was like, “Take your time, we can discuss this later.” And when I thought about it, I was like, “Is there a way to write about Anthony that contains all of those parts that people feel?” Because ultimately, the way we know the dead is how they’re remembered by the living. And so that’s what the profile ended up becoming. Each section is written like a profile, if you were to write a profile from one vantage point. Visually, I thought of it essentially as a mosaic. There are pieces that you assemble together and it finally creates one image, but you also see all the gaps and the cracks where it doesn’t fit, where it’s not seamless. Ultimately, my decision was to embrace the fractured quality. Normally in a profile, you’re supposed to create seamlessness, to create a smooth image where you patch over the inconsistencies, the contradictions and holes. But in this, it was like, well, what if that is the piece? What if that is actually how we all are? What a person is?
L,P: Let’s talk about a passage in the piece — the scene that you mentioned, when you visited Anthony’s sister and siblings and cousins and parents. You set it up that many of Anthony’s cousins have “jobs with 401(k)s.” But Anthony took a very different route:

Anthony picked the thing so many Asian immigrant parents fear: a life of creativity and fellowship applications. The older he got, the further his adult life spun away from his family’s. Feeling uncomfortable as a queer man with his conservative family was a part of it. Another was the mutual language barrier; Anthony’s Khmer wasn’t that good, in part by design. He was raised on a steady diet of encyclopedias and American sitcoms like Frasier, Arrested Development, and It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia. He didn’t watch the Khmer-dubbed Thai Lakorns like his sister did, so as good as Ravy and Sienghay’s English is, they felt the barrier between everyday conversation and the intellectual world he aspired to be a part of. The American Dream for immigrant children means entering rooms their parents cannot.

From *Infinite Self*

L,P: I love this paragraph because even if you don’t get the specific cultural touchstones, if you are an immigrant in any sense, you’re going to be like, “Oh, I know exactly what you’re talking about or what he was feeling.” It culminates in this last line about “the American Dream for immigrant children.” How do you take this very big topic that people have touched on so exhaustively, and bring something new to it?
**EAJ:** I was thinking about Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth,* and all of these immigrant writers who write about that gap between the first-generation parents who emigrated from different countries and then the second-generation children who are born in the States or the West. That’s a gap that I intimately understand in the context of my own life. And so the most important part for me about this was having a feel for the voice of what it would sound like. *In Anthony’s published work, he has this funny, conversational style.* There’s a lot of humor in it, a real vividness that allows you to picture things really clearly. He was really good at that in his fiction. And so it was important for me to emulate that sensibility as much as I could within the style of my own writing. Ultimately, the writing is about carrying you toward this conclusion, but drawing it within the specificity of his lived experience.

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**L,P:** The next excerpt is a moment where you give Anthony the floor, which felt like a bold move in the middle of this piece. You include a series of Anthony’s tweets.
L,P: Then you feature an artist’s statement that he wrote when he was a student at Stanford. It’s an interlude in the profile where you back off and we encounter Anthony on his own terms. What were you going for?

EAJ: His tweets are written in the vernacular of gay Twitter. It demonstrates to me his facility with language and audience. His fiction is going to sound different than his tweets, which are different than an artist’s statement on his personal website that he sends to professors and college fellowship applications. And Twitter is one of the ways in which people get to know each other, or at the very least, cultivate a persona. That’s why I thought it was important to put that in there. That was how he interfaced with a different kind of public. Especially at that point, Twitter was still relevant for writers and a way of communicating your sense of humor, your worldview. He’s not self-serious. These tweets are incredibly chaotic and very sexual and very funny. He’s extremely lewd. He was a young writer who fucks. That provocation is important, because it pulls him out of this quiet, demure persona or version of himself that he was with his family.

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L,P: So we meet Anthony on his own terms. And then there’s a turn toward Alex, Anthony’s partner. Alex is such a complicated figure in this story. He was the only person present when Anthony died. He held information that the family desperately needed, and he shared that information in different ways with different people. And the family ultimately didn’t trust him. What guided you as you developed Alex’s character?

EAJ: It was challenging because of how disparate his feelings were next to everyone else’s. Ultimately, it was really just about letting him speak while also creating enough space around him so that other people’s opinions and perspectives on what he’s saying can be introduced. It was about letting him talk about their relationship and how he viewed it, and letting the reader interpret that how they wish, while also bringing in the parents or friends, to potentially say, “Well, that’s not how I view things.” So the reader is able to take all of that information and those different perspectives in and come to their own conclusions. That was the goal.
L,P: On the note of Alex, he talks a bit about Anthony’s drug use. What struck me in reading your piece was there is no moralizing. It’s just: “Here’s the reality of things as people perceive them.”

E AJ: I was not interested in trying to create a causal link between his party sensibility and his death. Ultimately, we still don’t know. The parents had not gotten the coroner’s report. They had wanted it for a really long time, and they hadn’t gotten it. And then I got it, because I made a request with the San Francisco coroner’s office. And I don’t know if it’s because I was a reporter from New York magazine. I assume that’s why I got the report that they had been asking for. And once I got it, I contacted them immediately and I said, “Do you want the coroner’s report?” They said yes. I sent it to them. Ultimately, why I included it was because you read the cold language of the state, a police report, and you get facts. It’s the closest you get to, quote-unquote, “what happened.” But you still don’t know anything. It felt important to demonstrate: This doesn’t give you anything.

And you know, every section [of the profile] is about the limit of your knowledge of another person or an incident. And so it was about the ultimate humility one must feel, that you will never really know someone else.
Here’s how it should have gone down: I would have flown to San Francisco, where Anthony might have shown me his favorite haunts around Soma and the Mission. We would have grabbed food at Tartine or gotten drinks at El Rio. Our exchange would have existed within the parameters of a conventional profile: the tension of mutual seduction. He would have been charming and engaging. Someone as well versed in critical theory as in Pokémon types. We might have rehashed a discussion around autofiction or cruel optimism and the American Dream. I would have asked about his chaotic bottom tweets, his family, his queerness, the collisions between them. I would have wanted him to dish, no really, and maybe asked to go to Stockton; he might have said no to the fancy Asian reporter, which, fair. Either way, I probably would’ve liked him...

During one of his last public appearances, a Zoom reading of the Steinbeck fellows in December, Anthony reads pages from Cambotown. He sports a mustache; he looks healthy. During the audience Q&A, his answers are concise but inviting — perfect for the rigmarole of a book tour. At the end of the event, one of the audience members asks, “Is there a particular emotion or feeling that you want to try and evoke in your readers?” He replies, “I got really drunk one time and just, like, started screaming — it was, like, in my M.F.A. — and I just started screaming to everyone about how all I ever wanted my work to be was to communicate an exuberant grief.”

From *Infinite Self*
**EAJ:** That was the very last thing in the piece. And I was trying to give it this feeling of some sort of closure for the reader. I knew how I wanted the piece to end, on his quote. Endings, more than anything for me, are about having you feel something. And I wanted you to feel “exuberant grief.” But I wasn’t sure how to get there. And then this whole project is about these various limits that we have, in terms of our ability to know someone else. And I just started thinking about, what would I have actually done, had he lived and gotten to do the press tour? It wasn’t hard for me to imagine what that would have been like. I could extrapolate another lived life. And the piece is about alternate lives, past lives, future lives, the possibilities that exist within us, and the way in which we can continue to live on through other people.

In his fiction, his characters would think about the past as a way to imagine the future. And so that’s what sent me on that line of thought. I was like, “Well, what could this have looked like?” I know where he would go out. I know what we would be doing. I had a sense of it. So once I had that thought, it was easy to write.
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