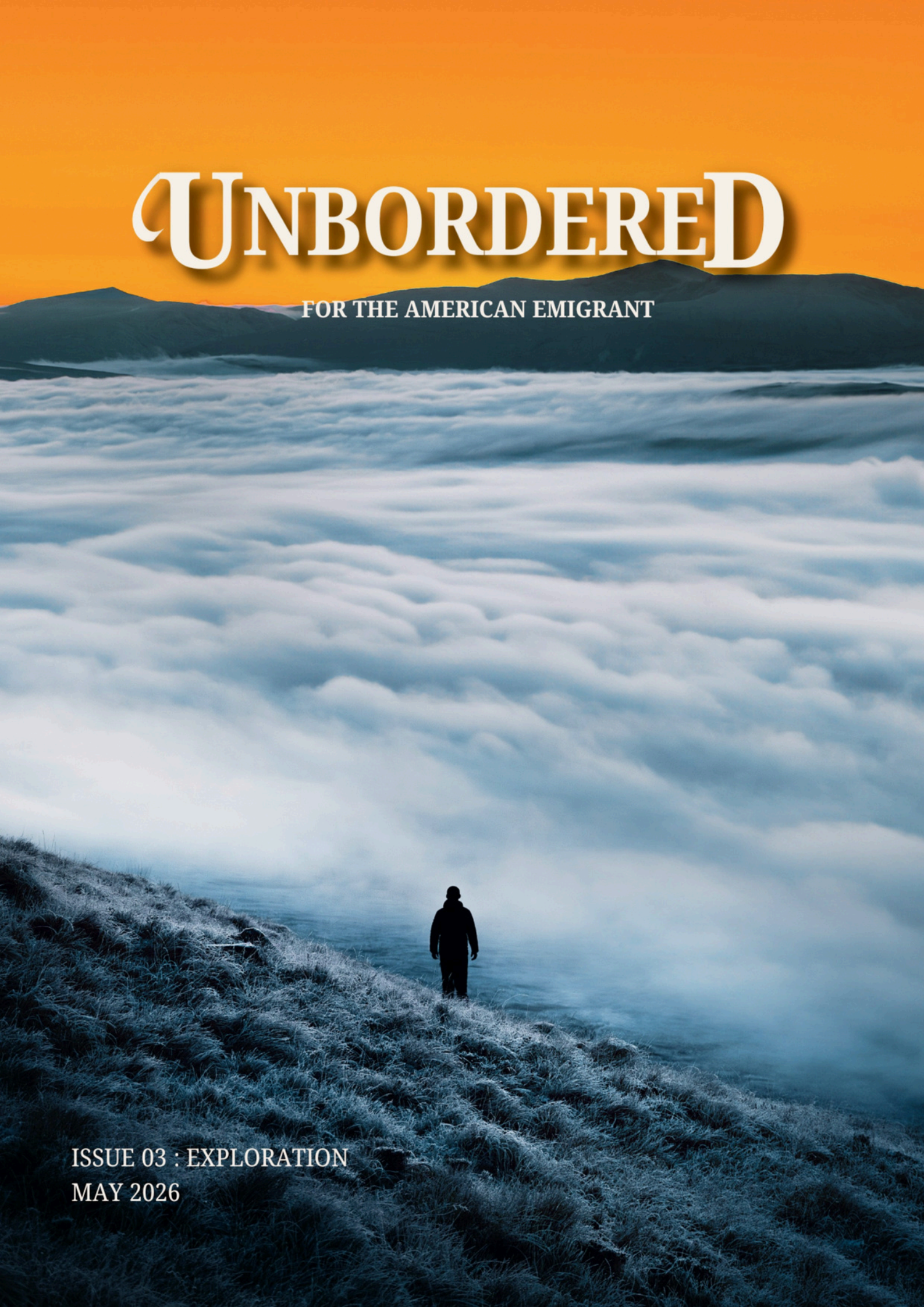
UNBORDERED

FOR THE AMERICAN EMIGRANT



ISSUE 03 : EXPLORATION
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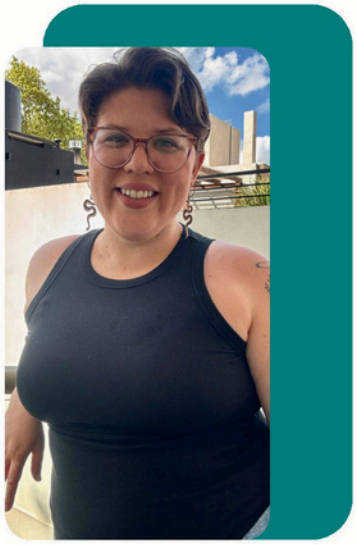
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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



When we chose the theme "exploration," it was before we knew there was going to be a mission around the moon. During the voyage of Artemis II, I, like most of the world, watched in awe and hope as the crew went further from the Earth than anyone had ever been before. The moment was a powerful reminder of what humanity is capable of when we work towards a greater goal. And it sat in stark contrast to what was happening on the ground–a war based on the petty whims of a madman given unprecedented power.

In its best form, this is what exploration should be: discovering our own capabilities, questioning assumptions about who and what we are, and encountering the unknown with open minds and hearts. But, we know, historically, that this is not what it has been about. The people we have named Great Explorers have often also been Great Colonizers or Great Oppressors. Their "discoveries" mistook "new to them" for "new to everyone" because the indigenous peoples they encountered–who did not look like them–could, of course, not be counted as people. This is the legacy that exploration has left behind: one of validation through (white) experience and usurped authority. Let's not forget they put a flag on the moon.

And this is the legacy that we now have to reckon with as Americans who move abroad, especially if we are moving to the Global South or places with less global power.

But it is my hope that, as we explore this issue, we can harness our curious spirit and use it for good–that we can look inside of ourselves and unearth the ways that being an American has formed our being, sifting through the ash to find important artifacts.

In this issue, Jessica Wilde explores what it means to leave unfinished parts of yourself behind, and Kenneth Kesner explores grief, ritual, and sacred space. Orlando de los Santos explores what it looks like to rally a family around a trans child, and Jason Mizula searches for a life that causes less harm. Cecily Stone explores the moment of arrival that feels like freefall, and Sarah Bolen examines ethical exploration and shows us what it's like to guide other explorers. Meghan Hyland explores how a community can magically grow to accommodate the people who need it, and artist Gerrit Vooren explores creating in the moment, mistakes included.

These are beautiful stories full of hope and sadness and grief and dancing. I'm so honored to share them with you.

Let's go exploring!

In creativity and solidarity,



Amber Stewart
Founder, *Unbordered*

Montevideo, Uruguay
May, 2026



Unbordered is more than a magazine. It's a record of those who are choosing to build a life beyond empire. Subscribe on Substack to receive weekly updates as we document what comes after leaving.



MORE THAN PARALLEL

POEMS BY KENNETH KESNER

you'd imagine lines as silhouette
then a heart in broken shadow
hardly breathing
maybe there's a rhythm to the equator
spinning though never moving
so much depends on not knowing
what happens has happened again
the world dies on time and stays there
for the heroes and the ghosts
learn to speak in measured doubt
draw the motion of someone's eyes
as they leave inspiration to rest

i sometimes reach past myself
rise and fall to the touch of her memory
fight with spirits within my head
place offerings of belief like pearls
spend hours to retrace the tears
i listen to the hopes of icons
falling to a bronze creator in alabaster
until all that's mine becomes hers

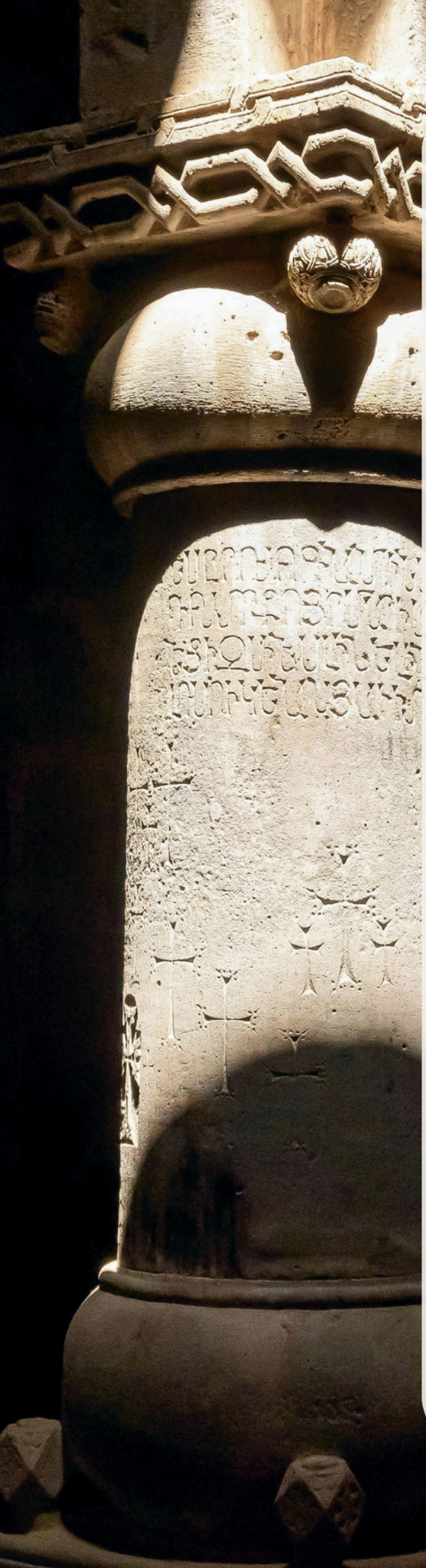
RUBI'S VIGIL

KENNETH KESNER

some return from a horizon of long ago
holding hands that are muted
sacrificed to embered statues as fire
wants to be at first
contained by the blackness of an urn
when the frost circles its depth
and you can't stand it any longer
as you were right then
and the winds too cold to leave ripples
cloud a place you can't recall
branches shudder from such drowning

who's going to light candles which god
looks to that vintage daguerreotype
the silver that disrupts the mekong's gold
an unlikely sunset thrives to be here
long enough to hold the head so close
a setting that won't let you go

something of a woman's sandalwood gown
burnt to hover in vapors of smoke
lining the currents of a summer wind
spills from the weeping humidity
so much the gods stand frozen
unable to reply to our chants
their own prayers misheard in the silence



SILK

KENNETH KESNER

such heavy gold must have dripped from
the sky in waves you'd see from the sun
but don't stay too long
don't look here
at the feet hand-forged tile geometry
inscribed meaning a visitor's edifice
taking turns the next one taught to learn
incense handed over right to the left hand

though some can't read the scripted gods
pure white banners sashes that surround
all around columns that heighten the eaves
of the roof of tiled green moss
how weathered they are seen from
the inside out unlike the gods they shelter

iron circles these columns holding intact
the only grey relief worth seeing
just ask the monks who learned prayers
and fed ore to the ochre furnace
here alone you can see the red tongue
depicted as such and screeching
a stone foot that grinds
a flowered serpent to the ground but
may recover next spring as evil recoils
for the next visitor to begin their memory

So High Up We'll Never Hear Them Shouting

by Meghan Hyland

Dad leaves behind a duplex in the city, but Mom doesn't want to live there, and that's sad but okay. One day it's raining sideways outside and my friend Dena's parents kick her out. Her boyfriend won't take her in because he's afraid his friends will find out she's trans like me. So I give her the unit above mine.

Dena's like, "Thanks, Ma!" and I'm like, "I'm not your Ma, Ma!" and we wrestle her furniture up the stairs, and I spy a crack in the landing wall. Turns out it's a door, and behind it another whole-ass stair, and then another whole-ass apartment.

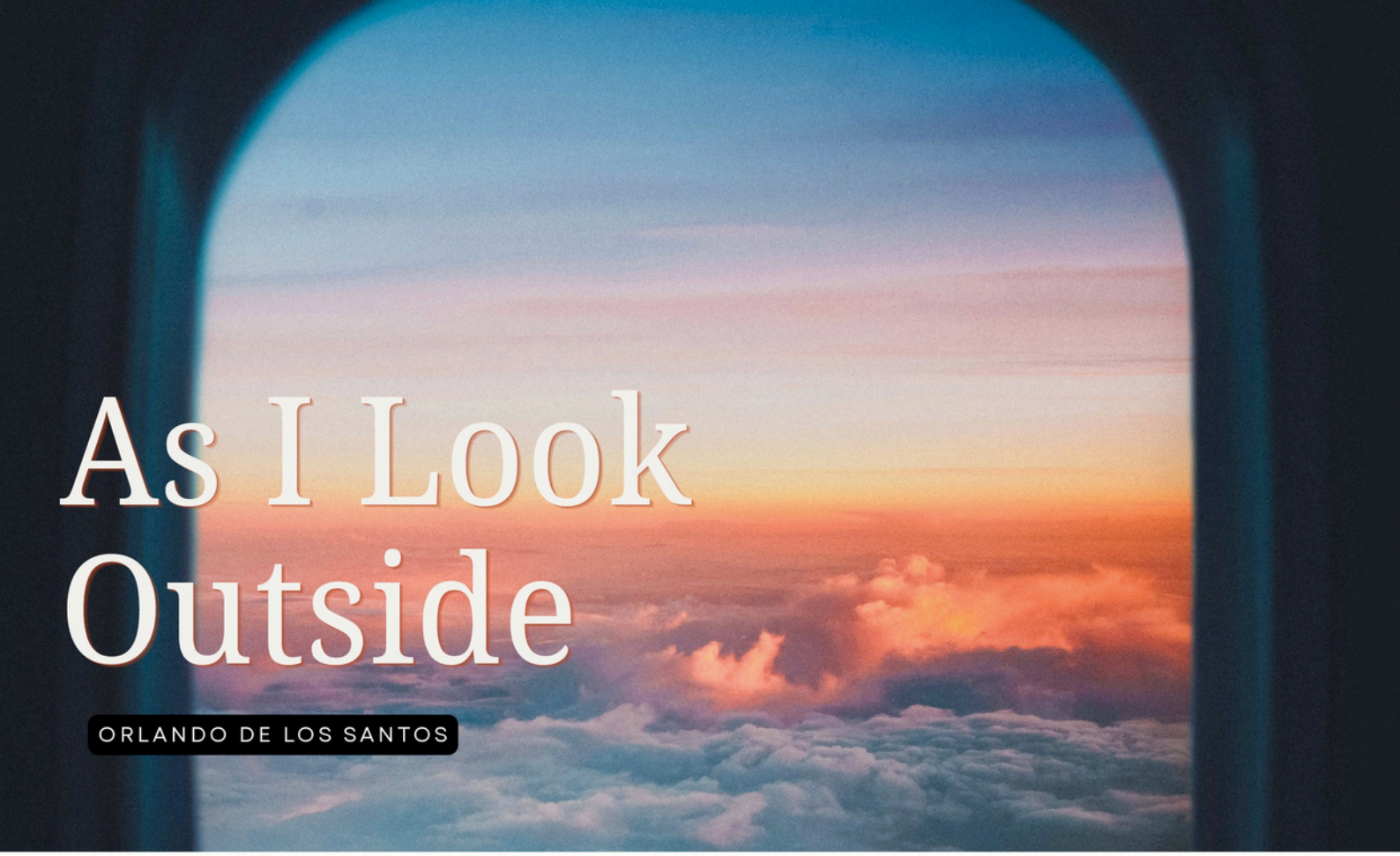
Which makes zero sense until we meet Jamal and Fritz at the cafe. Nobody will rent them a place. We're like, "Come stay with us!" and they're like, "Hellz yeah!" and we move them in and surprise! Another crack, another stair, another apartment.

That unit goes to a family on the run from Tennessee, and the next one (turns out there's always a next one) to a mother and son fleeing Florida. I think, wait, don't buildings fall down when they get too tall? But we keep finding abandoned kids–from Idaho, from Indiana, from everywhere–and the house keeps growing, fifty states high and then some, until it looks like a tower of big ol' pizza boxes spiraling up through the clouds.

One day, Dena comes home crying. Her boyfriend's friends found her out, and he tried to take it out of her hide. I hold her like Mom used to hold me. Together we watch the rain fall sideways, and listen to the floors creak beneath the weight of friends we love like family, and outside, the storm throws itself against this house that rises up and up and never falls.

This piece was originally published in Queer SF's anthology Rise.





As I Look Outside

ORLANDO DE LOS SANTOS

"I don't like it when people call me a boy..."

Those were the words our oldest daughter told my wife and me when she was four years old. For two years, we noticed that she was not like the boys that we had forced her to play with, often looking at them as though they were aliens and crying when she looked in the mirror. With each performance of "Let It Go" that we were held captive audience to, we assumed we had a future theater kid. Naomi would appropriate scarves, ties, belts, and anything else she deemed sufficient to make into an Elsa braid.

One afternoon, in the fall of 2021, as we sat on our back patio, it all clicked when our daughter confided in us, "I don't like it when people call me a boy." I do not remember who asked why, but I have a vivid memory of her looking at us, her brow furrowed, as if she were confused about why we were asking. "Because I'm not a boy, I'm a girl." That was five years ago.

The next few months were a flurry of information gathering and laying a foundation to assist Naomi through her journey, which we, at the time, were not fully equipped to support. Podcasts, books, articles, pediatrician recommendations, gender-affirming therapists, and groups; it was all fair game. Over the years, our network of families going through similar journeys expanded–yes, there are a lot of us, but many families fear being targeted and cannot be open about it. We, however, were fortunate to live in Colorado, and found that our neighbors, friends, family, and schools were not only accepting but also supportive of Naomi. At the time, we lived what we thought was a perfect life in what we referred to as "our forever home."

During the 2024 presidential election, Republicans spent nearly $215 million on television ads targeting transgender people[1], a group that makes up less than one percent of the population.[2] Still, after the 2024 presidential election, my wife and I were worried but held out hope that our government would protect our daughter's right to exist.

Two months later, our greatest fears were realized when, on January 20, 2025, Donald Trump took office and immediately began announcing his executive orders targeting transgender people. "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" was the first anti-trans executive order signed by Trump.

Lack of brevity in naming aside, the executive order was a shot across the bow, signaling that our family needed a backup plan if things got worse. And they did. In the month that followed, the Trump administration signed four additional anti-trans executive orders.

"We need to get out of here," my wife said.

I was sitting at the dining room table when she said those words, and, like when our daughter came out to us, a part of me already knew. The discussions that followed focused on where we could go and the various hypotheticals that could play out, impacting our urgency to leave.

"We need to get out of here," my wife said.

Again, our lives were dominated by research: visas, residencies, cultures, crime/safety, remote work, healthcare, gender-affirming care, how to sleep when your world is crashing down, and schools.

Eventually, we determined that Mexico's proximity to the United States would be optimal for both family and work obligations. As the top LGBTQIA+ destination of Mexico,[3] and with an ample amount of immigrants–they call them "expats" here–we chose Puerto Vallarta as our jumping-off point.

The next five months were a blur, and in a bizarre, undiagnosed medical anomaly, my sphincter found a new home in my throat. We packed what we needed and told the girls that we were leaving the United States because the government was making laws that were unfair for our family. At the same time, we sold nearly all our possessions and said goodbye to our friends, family, and forever home.

Our initial week was set to be a whirlwind: obtaining residency, signing a lease, and completing the testing required for the school we had been in touch with for several months. Shortly before our flight, we were notified by the school that they no longer had openings for us, for reasons that we speculate were related to Naomi's gender identity. My wife and I were heartbroken and upset, but we also had our first encounter with the "things happen for a reason" culture that is prevalent in Mexico, which we are still getting accustomed to.

For anyone who has not experienced Puerto Vallarta in July, it can best be described as having your entire body wrapped in gym socks full of sweaty armpits. Not having a car meant that even short trips to the grocery store left me looking like Ursula Andress emerging from the beach in Dr. No, minus any seductiveness.

Neither my wife nor I speaks Spanish. My parents are both fluent; however, I somehow made it to my mid-forties barely able to order from a Taco Bell. So even in the air-conditioned grocery store, I found myself in interactions that replaced heat sweats with nervous sweats, which smell worse and look more like someone who just committed a crime. Within the first week of our arrival, I was questioning whether we should begin exploring other, cooler cities in Mexico.

Before we left, my wife's friend told her that what helped her move abroad was taking time to celebrate all the firsts, no matter how difficult or easy they were. So, we did: my youngest daughter's first trip to the beach, their first day at a Mexican school, our first Spanish lessons, and our first earthquake–I would be content to not celebrate a second of the latter.

Living in Mexico has been an amalgam of culture and art, with customs and infrastructure that have required some acclimating for our family. While credit cards are accepted at many restaurants and stores, it is not guaranteed, nor is it guaranteed that their machines will be working that day. We learned quickly that you should keep your head down when walking, or you might trip over cobblestones, broken sidewalks, or step in–pick your animal–excrement. Also, somehow keep your head up when walking, because a pipe might be dripping onto the sidewalk, or you might run into an air conditioner unit inconveniently placed at eye level.

Of all the learning experiences, one of my favorites has been the handling of time, which is often wrapped in a tortilla of vagueness. The nebulousness of time in Puerto Vallarta is made evident in "ahora," which translates to "now," meaning anytime other than this moment, because that would be "ahora mismo."

Before leaving the house one morning, I checked a store's Facebook page–Facebook pages are more common than websites–for their hours, then arrived fifteen minutes after their scheduled opening, only to find a herd of completely unbothered people waiting outside the locked door. Thirty minutes later, the store opened. On another occasion, our family arrived at a birthday party at the time the invitation said it started, only to find ourselves setting up the decorations until the rest of the guests arrived, anywhere from one to three hours later. It's 1 AM, think it's time for sleeping? Not in December, when you can listen to outdoor bands playing until the wee hours of the morning and fireworks, or possibly dynamite, going off for no apparent reason–or perhaps it is in The Bible.

Above all, my biggest takeaway has been how incredible my daughters are. In 2020 and 2021, during COVID, I often heard how resilient kids are. The pessimist in me would scoff or want to ask whether those people would be willing to pay for the therapy my kids would require for all their resiliency during what we thought at the time was as bad as it could get. But it's true. Every day, my daughters prove they are grittier than I ever imagined.

Throughout this experience, they have kept their gripes to a minimum, despite saying goodbye to everything they had known for their entire lives, and embraced adjusting to new lives in a different country. With each word or sentence I hear them speak in Spanish, each friend they make, each new food tried, I am filled with pride.

The past five years have been scary as a parent, and the last eight months have caused an abundance of platinum blonde hairs to grow on my otherwise black beard. While not as large as the community we built in Colorado, we are making friends. More importantly, we are creating indelible memories for our daughters in a place where acceptance is the norm.



This morning, while making breakfast, I looked out the window and noticed a fire in the distance. My daughters and I went out and looked at it, curious whether it was a house or burning trash.

Within twenty minutes, several more fires appeared, and before we knew it, there were fires surrounding the city. El Mencho, the head of a cartel, was killed, and we were witnessing the fallout from the retaliation.

The local news had not reported any civilian deaths, but we wanted to be prepared to leave if it came to that. I had to isolate myself for a few minutes because my heart raced and my legs shook. Like animals, kids can sense fear, so I wanted to compose myself before we began preparing.

My wife and I drew the shades, messaged friends and family, discussed an exit plan, and told the girls to stay away from the windows. We said that we did not know exactly what was happening, but that no matter what, we would do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

As more details became available, we explained that cartels were setting fires to cars. Naomi, always our inquisitive one, had a dozen questions:

What is a cartel?

Why are they burning cars?

How do they make money off of drugs?



It was difficult to answer everything when we were unsure ourselves.

While we tossed toothbrushes, toilet paper, cash, and our documents into backpacks, the girls packed essentials like stuffed animals, "treasures" they collected off the street, and fruit snacks. For the next few hours, we distracted the girls with games and screens–keep your shaming to yourself–and listened to the local news, in Spanish. Then waited.

By 2 PM, the city was quiet. Smoke still smoldered from several unextinguished fires, but there were no reports of new ones. There have been announcements that stores and schools will be closed tomorrow, but officials do not expect any additional incidents. We watched a movie together, but our hackles were still up, and remained that way until the kids went to bed.

As I write this, it is almost midnight, and solitude breeds reflection. Again, I am in awe of my daughters' incredible resilience. Perhaps it is youthful ignorance, but I think it is more than that; throughout the ordeal, they remained calm and cooperated with us, something that we cannot always say on a typical day.

When we left the United States, we thought we were leaving the violence behind. During our first school tour in Mexico, we noticed a sign for earthquake drills, and asked whether they also practice active shooter drills. The woman giving the tour raised an eyebrow and explained that they do not have that problem like in America.

That is not to say that Puerto Vallarta is without violence. As of last year, it was estimated to have 15.6 homicides per 100,000 people,[4] which is still a far cry from even relatively safe Denver, but it feels different. Unlike the United States, the violence we experienced today was between the government and cartels; civilians were not targeted.

While messages continue to flood in from friends in the United States, asking if we are safe, we are reading about the US government abducting and killing citizens in the streets, refusing to prosecute child predators, and further dividing its people through race, gender, and sexual orientation culture wars.

As I look outside at a city that wears the ashes of a skirmish, I still feel safer than in the country aflame that we left behind. The last year has been difficult, but at least I know that should we need to flee again, my daughters will be fine.

1 McNeill, Zane. "Republicans Spent Nearly $215M on TV Ads Attacking Trans Rights This Election." Truthout, 5 November 2024, https://truthout.org/articles/republicans-spent-nearly-215m-on-tv-ads-attacking-trans-rights-this-election/.

2 Herman, Jody L. and Flores, Andrew R. "How Many Adults and Youth Identify as Transgender in the United States?" Williams Institute, August 2025, https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/.

3 Tim. "Best Places in Mexico for Gay Travelers." Out in Mexico, 21 December 2025, https://outinmexico.com/gay-travel-hotspots-mexico/.

4 Albelda, Jeremy. "Puerto Vallarta Crime." The World or Bust, 24 June 2025, https://www.theworldorbust.com/puerto-vallarta-crime/.

THE ART OF THE GOURDS









THE PROCESS

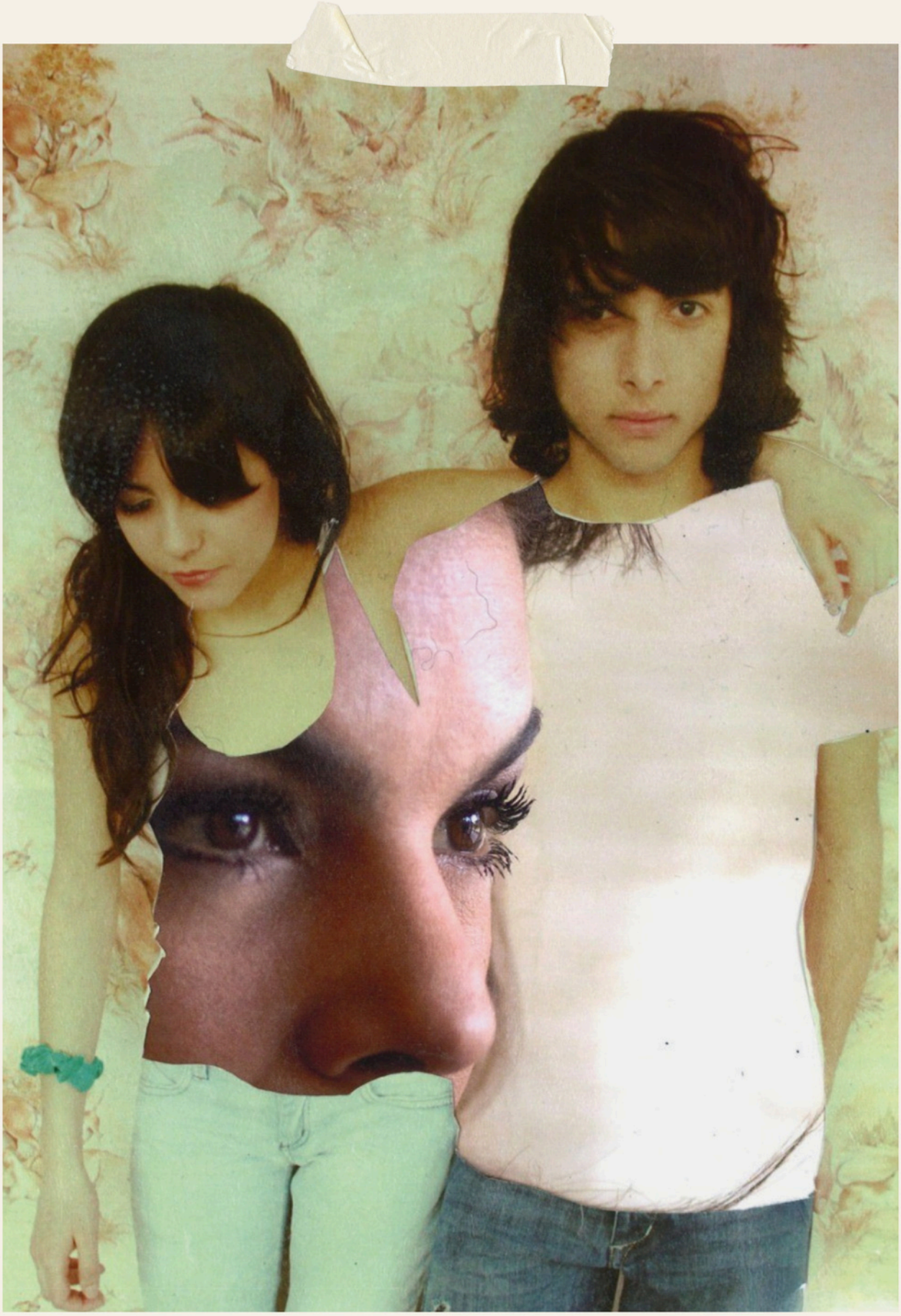
My practice begins with not knowing. I come to each jicaro gourd without a plan–no preliminary sketch, no decided palette, no destination.

I sit with it first. I look.

Something in the particular swell of one side, or the way the stem meets the body, will eventually suggest a direction, and I follow.

My intention is to follow the moment, to accept “mistakes” as a necessary part of both the process and the final design.

GERRIT VOOREN



STAFF COLLAGE PROJECT



HOPE

JASON MIZULA

It's been just over six months since we stepped off the plane at Carrasco International Airport with our three year old son, Omid, and his then not quite two year old brother Azad. We knew we'd be arriving at the tale end of what had been a very cold Southern Cone winter, but after a decade and a half in Hawai'i, the temperature was still jarring.

This was part of our new reality, part of the trade off we made to no longer be complicit. In our living room in Punta del Este, my wife Bahar sprinkles water on a plate of lentil sprouts. Although today is the autumnal equinox here in Uruguay, in the Northern Hemisphere, including Iran, it's the first day of spring. The Persian new year, Nowruz, which means "new day" in Farsi, has been celebrated for thousands of years. With these lentil sprouts, the sabzi part of our haft-sin display, Bahar tries her best to honor that tradition. Her name is the Persian word for spring and anyone who has met my wife will agree it's the perfect name for her. She was born during springtime in Tehran in the early years after the revolution when there was still a glimmer of hope. For Bahar, every day is a new day, and in every moment, no matter how dark, a reason to smile. She radiates life and love and hope. Amazingly, because of humanity, not in spite of it.

We had already started the paperwork, already gotten fingerprinted, already broken the news to our loved ones that we were leaving, before the bombs started to fall on Iran last June. We had decided even before the steady uptick in fighter jets training to kill in the skies above Hawai'i last spring. If we weren't already sure that we were making the right decision, this would have removed any doubt.

Bahar fled Iran with her mom when she was a baby, bouncing around the world for the nearly five years her dad spent as a political prisoner. She went to preschool in Honolulu, kindergarten in Germany, and ultimately grew up in Northern California after her dad escaped and her family was reunited.

As an adult, she moved back to Hawai'i, which is where we met in the spring of 2014. We got married a year later, on Nowruz, eleven years ago today. Shortly thereafter, we set out on a four-month journey that was part honeymoon, part scouting mission. Although we'd traveled vastly different paths to get to where we were ideologically, we were on the same page as we started looking for a new home outside the US.

We fell in love with the Azores, the beautiful Portuguese archipelago that's known as the Hawai'i of the Atlantic, and planned to move there until emigrating proved more difficult than we'd imagined. Ultimately, we decided to stay in Hawai'i. We took a friend up on his offer to become caretakers of his five-acre homestead on Moloka'i, the island where I was living at the time we met. With a population of less than eight thousand people and no traffic lights, Moloka'i became our home together for the next decade. We grew a lot of food, rescued a lot of animals, and tried our best to be good neighbors to those in our community struggling as a direct result of colonization and the ongoing US occupation. More and more, we saw pain and suffering. More and more, our hearts broke.

Around the time Bahar and I met, I had become a war-tax resistor. Together, we lived our lives divested from the system as much as possible, but to merely exist in such a system is to be complicit in human suffering. Since it's very much a forced complicity, I have so much compassion for those unable to leave. I also have compassion for the 18, 19, 20-something-year-old men and women in the US military and don't fault them for going to war in Iran any more than I fault myself for going to war in Iraq. Undereducated, naive, and blindly patriotic, I genuinely believed I was doing something good when I willingly enlisted. I believed I'd be helping my community, my country, and all the poor souls not fortunate enough to have been born in the greatest country in human history. I really believed that.

I knew nothing about the reality of US history, nothing about Iraq or Afghanistan, nothing about Iran. It wasn't until I met Bahar that I learned about the US helping overthrow a democracy in Iran in 1953, helping ensure democracy didn't return after the revolution, and helping arm both sides during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's. The sad, difficult truth I have to live with is that I willingly served what Dr. King called the greatest purveyor of evil in the world, and I would have willingly put my boots on the ground in Iran if that's where I'd been sent two decades ago. Iran or anywhere else.

Bahar's parents, who left San Francisco in 2018 to live near their only child in Hawai'i, are currently making their final preparations to join us here in Uruguay. She talks with them every day and most days it's a video call so they can see their grandsons. What had been normal, light-hearted conversations catching them up on all the new parks, beaches, and playgrounds we've taken the boys to, has turned into a daily update on the health and well-being of Bahar's aunt's, uncle's, and cousins in Iran. Twenty, or is it twenty-one days of war now? With an internet blackout in Iran, calls are infrequent. My father-in-law's oldest brother called him a couple of days ago. Everyone in the family is still alive, though over a thousand other people have been killed in Iran and over a thousand other people have been killed in Lebanon in just the past few weeks. More and more bombs drop every day. The air and the rain are toxic. Anxiety is high.

I wish so badly Bahar's parents were already here. I wish flights weren't getting cancelled because of skyrocketing fuel costs. I wish they didn't have to encounter unpaid TSA agents or their possible ICE replacements. They're so excited to get here, but it literally can't happen fast enough. A major storm is currently hitting Hawai'i for the second time in less than a week, and the flooding is catastrophic.

Some of our friends' homes are already underwater, and a massive 120-year-old dam, owned and neglected by Dole (the pineapple company) is on the brink of collapsing. As if that's not enough to worry about on top of moving to the other side of the world, Bambino, their elderly Chihuahua, who was scheduled to make the journey here as well, died this past week. His tiny heart gave out.

Our decision to leave was ultimately Bahar's parents' decision. Moving to Portugal while they were still in California would have been bad enough, but there's no way Bahar could have left them on a small island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Especially now that they have grandchildren. Ultimately, they wanted Omid and Azad to grow up safe, healthy, and happy with two loving parents who are also safe, healthy, and happy. After we left Moloka'i for Honolulu a year ago, before they had even followed us over there, Bahar's parents let us know they were willing to follow us if we moved to Uruguay. Bahar's mom would have gone anywhere. Her dad, after exhaustive research and knowing it's a place that had long been on our radar, decided that, at 75, he'd be willing to uproot his life, move halfway around the world, and learn what will be his fourth language, only for Uruguay, only for Omid and Azad.

After a couple of miscarriages, Omid arrived in July 2022. His name is the Persian word for hope. A couple of months after he was born, the Iranian people were rising up once again. The ayatollah was aging and frail. Upon his death, there would surely be a new day, and things would inevitably change, so long as the Americans, the British, and the Israelis didn't ruin it, hope would prevail. A year later, in September 2023, Azad was born. His name means freedom, or 'to be free' in Farsi. He was twenty-seven days old on October 7th. The days, weeks, and months that followed were a blur. We spent a couple of months holding regular vigils calling for an end to the genocide. That winter, we hosted a 12-part Palestinian film series at our local public library, and we continued to sell Palestinian olive oil at our local Saturday farmers market, as we had been doing for years, to raise money to help farmers in Jenin plant new olive trees. We stared into our cellphone screens helplessly, in complete horror, as an open-air prison long under siege, barely one-third the size of the tiny island of Moloka'i, was completely obliterated. It became impossible to hold my newborn son and his one-year-old brother and not cry.

I missed the last film night while I was in Istanbul as part of the Freedom Flotilla Coalition. After a month surrounded by doctors and aid workers and all sorts of human rights activists, the former mayor of Barcelona, Che Guevara's daughter, and Nelson Mandela's grandson, people who were all willing to risk their lives to do the only humane thing there was to do, we were ultimately blocked by the Turkish government from even leaving port. Thousands of tons of food and medicine are waiting on our ship, and my own government sent diplomats to Turkey to threaten Erdogan into capitulating. At that point, I was ready to fly to Egypt to rent a boat, fill it with as much food and medicine as possible, and set sail for Gaza by myself. Instead, I flew back to Hawai'i completely dejected. I would have given anything to be able to bring even one bite of food for one person, so in their suffering, in their dying, they could have felt a little less alone and forsaken. I wanted to dig through the rubble in search of children no less precious than my own. I couldn't continue to live under the flag of an empire causing so much pain and suffering in Palestine and so many other places around the world. We had to do something, in the short-term, we thought living in a city might help.

During our nine months in Honolulu, it was cathartic to march with thousands through the streets of Waikiki and to regularly be in community with so many other people who felt the same way we did. Unfortunately, every day as I pushed Omid and Azad in their stroller to the playground, beach, park, zoo, cat cafe, literally anywhere we went, there would be at least one or two and sometimes a dozen or more fighter jets, helicopters, or other military aircraft flying above us. Hawai'i is among the most beautiful places on the planet, but, especially on Oahu, there's no escaping the fact that it's basically one big military base. I wish I could have continued to exist beneath the red, white and blue flags of the American empire, continued to stand in solidarity with my native Hawaiian friends and neighbors in their struggle for sovereignty, but my moral injury wouldn't allow me to.

My wife deserves a husband, and my children deserve a father. We had to leave.

Not therapy, not medication, not meditation, not long walks on the beach, not half a dozen plant medicine ceremonies, nothing has provided the relief that I've felt since stepping off the plane here in Uruguay. I had been searching for peace of mind for many years and have been sober for over a decade now in pursuit of it. Jon Kabat-Zinn once said, "Wherever you go, there you are" and that's true; I'm still here the same as I was in Hawai'i. The difference is that there are no warplanes training above me now. None of my neighbors are cheering on death and destruction, or funding hell on earth for other people. They're drinking mate while watching the sunset, and they're funding healthcare and education, parks, and recreation. I'm still acutely aware of the horrific things happening all over the world at the hands of the US empire, but it's a relief to no longer be complicit.

Like so many others, Bahar's mom had little choice where she landed when she fled with a baby in her arms. If there is courage in our decision to emigrate, it's certainly a different type of courage, a courage comfortably nestled in the arms of privilege. While our reasons for wanting to leave are valid, we had the luxury to decide where in the world we wanted to live and where we wanted to raise our children. Bahar and I didn't find some magical, mythical place. There's a lot of natural beauty here in Uruguay, but there's endless natural beauty from California to Colorado to Cape Cod. Certainly in Hawai'i. What we found is a country that isn't perfect, but is human. More importantly, it's humane. Uruguay learns from the horrors of its past; it doesn't ignore them and continues to double down.

It's beautiful to see what a society can look like when compassion is part of the culture and when resources aren't consumed by war and oppression. It's also heartbreaking to think about how easily the United States could have what Uruguay has. Everyone deserves this. I may never find true peace of mind; I'm not sure I would even recognize it. What I've found is a place that, even as half my heart is trapped beneath the rubble in Gaza, and even as bombs are dropped on the country of my wife's birth by the country I risked my life serving, I can still breathe. The air seems different here in a way that's difficult to describe, almost as if the trees are happier, almost as if they know they're not hurting anyone. I look forward to watching Omid and Azad grow up surrounded by these trees.



STAFF COLLAGE PROJECT



SEASON FINALE

CECILY STONE

Everyone's afraid right now, and you're
the one
leaving all of this behind,
my therapist is telling me as I sob on our
weekly zoom session and tell her
everyone seems to hate us now. It's a thing
people do, when you tell them you're
leaving, they leave you first,
they take the door you've cracked
open and slam it shut. I know you're
standing there, knocking still,
screaming to them that you're still here,
please, we have phones, we have planes,
we have years, we have days,
but they've slammed it shut, you
understand, so they can sit alone
behind the door, staring deeply into
a scratched-out mirror, ignoring your pleas
because you made it all real when it's
not, it's not real, any of this, there's no
reason for you to leave, because nothing
bad is happening to you, none of this
affects anyone, the news is just
approaching the season finale,
and all of the good people will conquer
evil, like they always do, just sit
down and wait, you'll see.
You're overreacting.
Everyone's just acting.
If you really leave, that means –
that means it's –

that

means –

it's –



ON READ

CECILY STONE

My words have left me on the wind.
You ask me how I am doing after
leaving the United States, But I have
left you again on read,
forgetting about hot dogs,
my regular order from Target.
I go to the right now to get in the car,
I stop telling my children to put
on their shoes.

I have no right to ask about
your daily fear, now,
and I don't know how to tell you
about the breeze stirring my hair
as I pull the tea towels from the line
the walks to the coast from
my new home, sun stinging
arms and legs and eyes
and the blessed cold
of the sea, salt on my lips,
waves rolling my hips
saffron threads of Pohutukawa
tumbling in the streets,
and I collect them and twist
each of them through the eye
of a needle, delicate,
sharp like the cry of the tūī
in the cold of the morning
and I stitch my fingers back
together with my fingers –
carefully, with mistakes,
with unraveling and raveling
and swallowed screams, and they
shake, my hands, but they are
crusted with scabs, volcanic stones
for my skin.

I have cancelled the New York Times.
I still grieve for you, for us, but I am a
mother, and I hold my guilt
close to my gut as it haschanged
to nourishing foods,
to rainwater,
to pointed fingers,
to effigies
in the yard, to targets on my back.

I have hardened both of my eyes,
you understand, obsidian dreams,
and when I close them, if it is quiet,
I still see stars.

What can I say
to you, my friend,
when all is quiet,
the tide is out,
and I am mile
after mile of black sand,
muddy, desperately waiting,

dreaming
of who I once was
under the moon



THIS IS WHERE I LEAVE YOU,

JESSICA WILDE

with my unfinished pieces,
ones that I haven't tended
to in quite some time.
The various versions
of me half painted/ half
peeking through cloth, strewn
and askew in the guest bedroom.
These self portraits are staring
me down, daring me to bring
them out, touch up the paint and
play...
But I can't.
And I won't.
I walk around the room and gently
touch all the ones I chose not to become.
I linger on some a little longer than others.
I hold up my latest painting and admire it.
You were the closest I've ever come to
being done, but the colors weren't quite
vibrant enough and the lines were still
a little rough.



STAFF COLLAGE PROJECT

GRATITUDE

JESSICA WILDE

Gratitude lives in my feet/ my hands/ and swells in my chest/ I dance in my kitchen to Pink Pony Club/ my baby laughs/ I shake my hips and sing at the top of my lungs/ my ligaments are loose/ I didn't know it was possible to feel so relaxed/ my joints have so much room to move/ my chest expands/ my heart cracks/ wide open/ my eldest smiles her real smile/ pure joy/ magic in the making/ I wish I could freeze this moment/ I'm so thankful that we left/ gratitude glows golden/ and/ it feels like

freedom



On Time

CECILY STONE

There are moments when you don't know how time keeps moving.

Like standing in line for the flight that will take you away from your home forever, boarding pass in hand, kids in tow, heart pounding in your chest, everything seems to freeze.

But the minutes pass. Time gently takes you by the hand, and soon, your feet are moving forward, step by step, carrying you away.

The doors shut, the pilot tells you to prepare for takeoff, and as the plane lifts, you feel your lungs fill with the oxygen of being carried away.

It's a cliff, and with your family, here you are, jumping straight off of the edge, and the free-fall is a crowded cabin, a toddler force-feeding you pretzels, and fitful sleep with tiny feet in your face. It is hearing after both an eternity and a single moment that we're ready for landing.

"*Kia ora, and welcome to New Zealand*," the pilot crackled over the speaker, and I caught my love's blue eyes as we both realised that landing was imminent. I felt the free-fall in my diaphragm.

Moments like that define your entire life. Jumping, together, into the unknown.

And we were not ready at all, but the doors cracked open, and our feet moved, kept moving, stayed in motion, through queues and lines and customs and stamped paperwork and out into the dawn of the day, where it was humid and smelled like the sea. We stepped outside and felt the air for the first time, holding steaming mince pies in the cold of winter.

It was warm, though, for a winter morning, we marvelled.

After both a single moment and an eternity of waiting, we were on the road, time opening our doors for us, buckling us in, lovingly. My husband, white-knuckled, was driving on the wrong side of the road, and the children and I twisted like vines around ourselves to see everything outside the windows. The lush and green. The rolling hills. With a gasp, the expanse of water rolling over the dry mountains that live inside our skin.

There is nothing like experiencing a new country for the first time.

At stoplights, my love gripped my hand. In moments,

ESSAY

I looked at my children in their soft, round little eyes and smiled at them. They wiggled like little worms and kept repeating, “We’re here.”

My love put on a song as we passed over the Harbour Bridge. I could feel his soul swelling out of his skin, too, and it’s like we held each other there in the space between us.

I know I’ve got you, the reverse car sang to us, *and you know you’ve got me.*

The ocean swelled up to meet us as we finished crossing the bridge, to drive right up the coast.

We’ve got everything we need.

And we did—suitcases in the back. Children strapped in. Nothing but each other, over the hills, onto the peninsula of our new home.

The sun was shining as we leapt out of the car, the wind rushed into the house with us as we surged into a new life.

We arrived, ready to live in that new beginning forever, but time keeps pushing us forward, doesn’t it?

It pushed us to the wharf, where I met you, to tell you your mother had died, where together we crumpled like a soda can.

To the sea on the first warm day, two months later, where, after being submerged in our own grief, we finally came up for air.

To our first spring Halloween, haunting for candy among the flowerbuds.

To the long and dark driveway, where at the top, we picked up our little cat’s body in a cardboard box.

To places underground, where carnivorous worms glow like bright galaxies, and reflect afterwards in our children’s imaginations for weeks.

To nights of desperation, of shaking hands, of tears, of being misunderstood, judged, and unwelcome.

To the moments where, holding each other tenderly, we know we’re the only ones alive who will always try to understand each other. We are the keepers of trust, knowing what’s in our own hearts.

In each of these moments, time stopped, but the minutes walked, continued to walk, carried us through the hours and the days and the weeks and

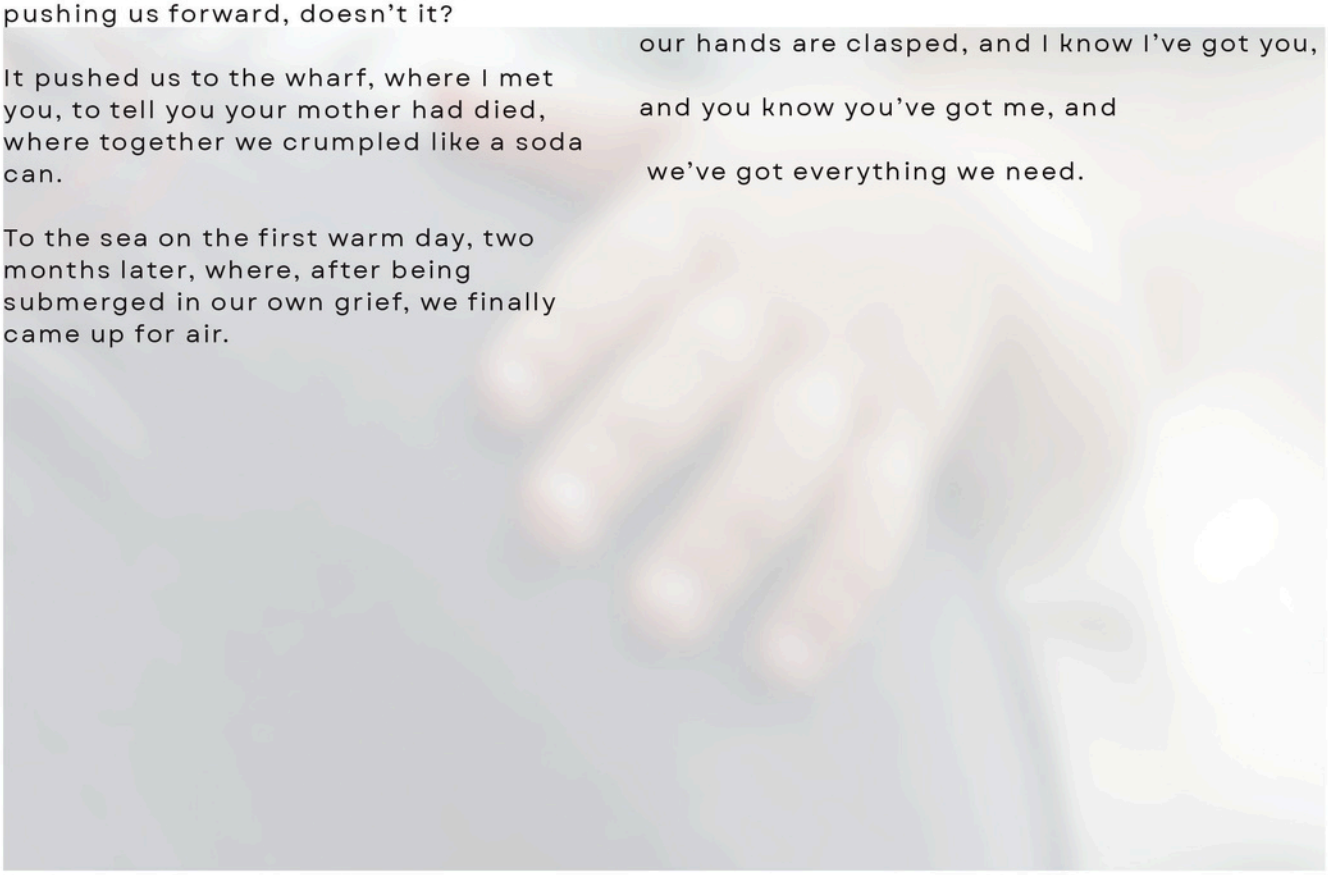
after an eternity, and a single moment,

here we are, wrapped in linen in the sunshine, and

our hands are clasped, and I know I’ve got you,

and you know you’ve got me, and

we’ve got everything we need.



Sarah Bolen

The Ethics of Exploration

"I just feel at home here, it's amazing. My grandmother was famous for her chicken parm recipe. We're Italian, you know," boasted Phil... Fred? Frank. Definitely, probably Frank. The rest of the group nodded in friendly acceptance.

A bead of sweat crept slowly down my forehead, but it didn't distract me from reciting the difference between ice cream and gelato, with a smile, as I had 62, 349 times that Roman summer. Overtourism meant two full food tour groups a day, guaranteed. And each one concluded with the shameful admission that they, too, had fallen prey to big chain gelato.

They vowed to explore Italy ethically henceforth, and I forced a smile at their kind intention. Perhaps I was saving local businesses, one scoop at a time. It was something my clients and I could feel good about.

Lots of people choose to explore the world in hopes of an illuminating experience that leads to self-discovery. Italy, my home of the past twenty years, welcomes many such pilgrims. Some are tourists, some are heritage seekers, and some are more permanent transplants.

Years of working as a tour guide and a teacher have led me to the conclusion that people generally do the best they can with the tools they have. We all want to be good guests.

What Frank, and most people for that matter, didn't realize was that, while buying a sweet treat at a family-run business and perhaps venturing beyond the ransacked capitals of Italy were steps in the right direction, the **"ethical exploration"** they spoke of has less to do with overtourism than the underexamination of what we expect to find, and who we expect to be.



See, I didn't tell Fletcher at the time, but chicken parm is not a native dish to Italy. In the past, I had gently suggested that Nonna had simply invented Italian-American cuisine, cool, right? Wrong.

This nearly always ended uncomfortably, either with an aggressive refusal to hear of it or silence, and I don't know which one was worse. I always felt as though I had, at best, ruined their vacation, and at worst, given them an existential crisis.

When reality contradicted expectation, to my surprise, the expectation was defended. Exploration gave way to selective openness, a willingness to entertain difference only if it remained palatable. Authenticity is welcomed only if the fantasy is performed back.

On social media, "authenticity" within the travel niche has become a buzzword, but once the phone's power is down, we accept only the kind that flatters us. The immersion we thought would resolve the language barrier sounds great, but only if we can remain comfortable ourselves. We travel to be transformed, but not unsettled. And when a place refuses to act out the imagined version we've rehearsed, we label it disappointing and overrated.

The irony is that the more tightly we cling to our dream world, the more we help reshape the real place around it away from the authenticity we claim to seek. Businesses learn to bend towards our vision in order to survive. Those that don't vanish. Restaurants open earlier and include items on the menu not previously considered. Traditions are cartoonified.

Neighborhoods reorient toward the visitor's expectations. You might call it good business, and perhaps it is. Rarely do we admit it is also erasure.

Overtourism is not just a logistical or environmental failure; it is the external consequence of an internal refusal: the refusal to be changed, unsettled, or disappointed.

I thought back to Fabian. I used to think my role was to correct misconceptions, to gently educate, to widen perspective, and advocate for ethical choices. I still believe that matters. Over time, though, watching tourists unknowingly cling to their imaginary Italy forced me to confront the scary possibility that I was no different. I resisted the notion that this could possibly be true. I lived here, after all, and worked here. I spoke the language. Heck, I could tell you the trash collection schedule. Surely, I was more open and flexible.

Then again, we're all guilty of adjusting the narrative to suit our ego. Who hasn't edited a story in real time, cropping out the inconvenient details and retelling the memory in a way that bolsters the self we prefer?

The version of myself I preferred was authoritative, seasoned, and fluent in the life I had built. Somewhere along the way, though, the line between gently correcting those pesky misconceptions and quietly lecturing otherwise curious people had blurred. It wasn't that I believed I knew everything; it was that repetition had begun to feel like mastery. A life my clients regarded as luminous had, through familiarity, grown ordinary, and I had grown ungrateful. And I wasn't ready to admit that, least of all to myself. Control can look like confidence from the outside. From within, it feels more like distance.

This very mentality was what I had been warning amateur visitors against. You stand in the square you've already seen a hundred times online, reproduce the image, and still feel outside of it. Expectation turns experience into performance, and somewhere between my 62,348th and 62,349th performance, I realized that Frank and I were not so different after all. I was only doing it in reverse.

After so many tours, I could practically lip sync what would come out of his mouth, and yet, I wasn't listening. I couldn't even remember the poor man's name. Any natural curiosity and wonder had tiptoed out the back, somehow, yet keeping these characteristics alive had been one of the goals of moving abroad in the first place. "Frank" may be the tourist, but that doesn't excuse the rest of us from carrying a quiet, curious, and unguarded posture of exploration, even into the most ordinary corners of our own days. It's hard to let what is actually there meet us because it requires daily mindfulness and practice. It's a decision we have to actively make. Ultimately, it's up to you; the journey continues either way. The difference is whether we meet it resisting or receptively.

Ethical exploration, I began to understand, is not just about how we move through other people's landscapes. It is about how honestly we move through our own. To explore ethically means releasing the demand that experience exists to fulfill us. It means observing before narrating and allowing disappointment to refine us rather than disqualify what we encounter. It requires admitting that we may not become who we imagined simply because we crossed a border, and it's not the border's responsibility anyway.

If I could ask travelers to let Italy be what it is, messy, layered, sometimes inconvenient, could I not ask the same of myself? Of each other? Is chicken parm not still delicious?

Moving abroad never promised to change any of us. It only offered space. What I decide to do with that space, to defend myself within it or surrender to it, continues to be the real measure of what I'm willing to explore.

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