

"We will become thankful for what has been given us, what has been taken away and what has been left behind." - saying from the Saint Augustine Fellowship

"Please, prepare me to be a sanctuary,
pure and holy, tried and true,
with thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you. "

I was 21 years old when I left my country. I didn't know it yet but I would never live in France again. It was a choice born of adventure and opportunity. I followed a boyfriend clear across Europe, and that's as deep as that decision really went. He was going and I had nothing better to do with myself. I was running away from my family and running away from loneliness. There was another human being that loved me and that would be home enough.

It is hard to explain how vulnerable you feel, trying to navigate a life you are alien in. I remember my first week, giving myself a panic attack trying to figure out how I was going to ask for a pack of cigarettes in English. For the first time in my life, I was forced to interact in a language that was not my own. Was it a box of cigarette? A bundle? A packet? I had no idea.

I am incredibly privileged, I had 10 years of good schooling in English by then, and still I tied myself in knots. It didn't even occur to me to point and mumble. Having to translate a foreign language in your mind constantly leaves little room for processing and adapting on your feet. Almost immediately, it became quite difficult to not overthink. I had to rehearse in my mind or deal with the constant frustration and intense alienation that comes with not being understood. It is really hard to understand how vulnerable that feels.

The decision to expatriate myself *permanently* didn't hold much more weight for me. It was made of the same opportunity and need to run away. My soon-to-be and now-ex-husband was moving clear across the world and I still didn't have anything better to do with myself. He never would be home enough, though, so I started to look for safety other places.

I dove into the english language with abandon and a serious dose of masochism. I am obviously fluent now, but it took years of intense efforts and a fortune in audiobooks. Still, no amount of work can make english my mother tongue and no amount of mastery can make me feel like I deserve to be here.

I progressively shut myself off from the world, increasingly wanting for respite. I am incredibly privileged, and I made myself a really pretty, really cozy cage, but there was little safety to be felt there either.

I tried to make other people responsible. I yelled and nagged and demanded care and consideration, and I never had enough. Human beings are beautiful because they are flawed, and every flaw was reminding me that I was out of place.

It is really hard to explain the heartbreak of being neither here, nor there.

Every year I belong in France less, and I belong here more, but part of my soul will always be there.

I am *incredibly* privileged, I got to make that choice. I had no idea of where that choice would take me, but I always had agency. I made that choice freely, honestly mostly out of sheer stupidity, but I don't have many regrets. I wish I could visit my ancestor's grave regularly, like I did with my grandma as a little girl. I wish I could go meditate on the beach the way I used to, I wish it didn't make family relationships so much more complicated, well maybe, but I stand fully behind my choice to build a life here.

It is really hard for me to understand what it might feel like to be forced into that choice.

It took me 20 hard years to come back to myself, 20 years to be able to recognize that I am beloved, I do believe that it was a sacred journey, and I do believe that the refugee families we host are on a sacred journey.

I hope we can help another family feel held by the love that unites us all.

It is hard to explain the relief and the heartbreak that comes with discovering that safety was with me all along, that I am the sanctuary I was so longing for. The great love that unites us all lives inside me, as I believe it does in all of us. Peace is mine to have, Safety is mine to have, love is mine to have. Not to find, but to have. I was never out of place, and no amount of running away could keep me from the home I carry.