

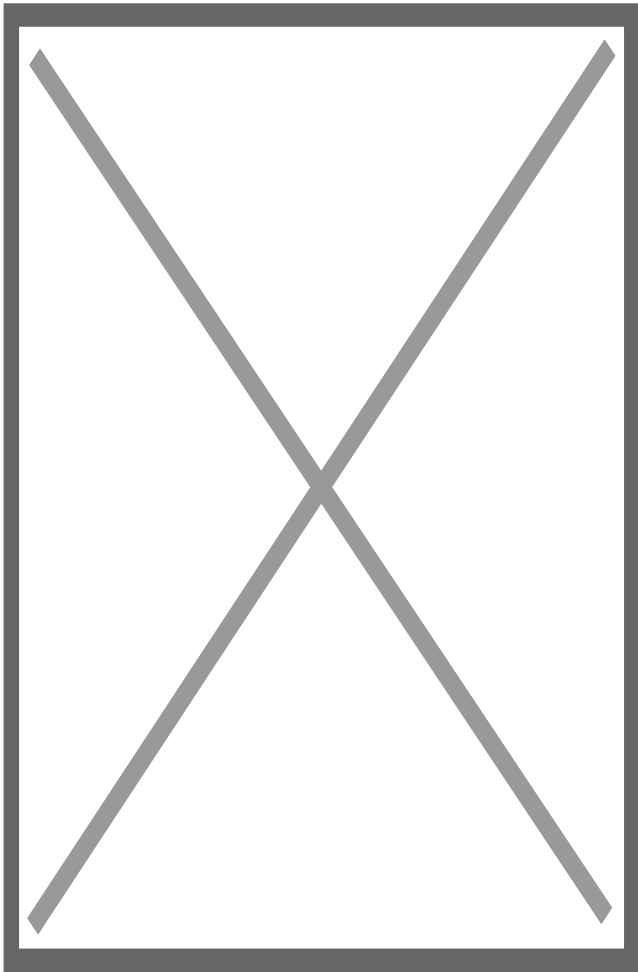
Where God waits in line

In 2019, Cristina Rathbone immersed herself in a tent camp at the border in Juárez, Mexico.

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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In Review



The Asylum Seekers

A Chronicle of Life, Death, and Community at the Border

By Cristina Rathbone

Broadleaf Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The border between the United States and Mexico resembles the elephant in the Indian tale of blind men who discern that it is just like a wall, or a rope, or a snake, or a tree. To the Trump administration, the border is a battleground overrun by rapists and thieves and drug dealers. To travelers fleeing from beatings and death threats in Central America, it is a gateway, closed today but perhaps open tomorrow, to new opportunities and reunions with long-separated family members. To ranchers and landscapers and restaurant owners across the United States, it is a filter through which many of their most valued, if least compensated, workers must pass. For residents of the borderlands like me, it is a battleground not between marauding criminals and law-abiding citizens but between political factions unwilling to address immigration in a coordinated way and always ready to exploit it for political advantage.

In this brief and personal narrative, Cristina Rathbone, a journalist ordained to Episcopal priesthood in midlife, offers a fresh and insightful perspective on the border. Her field of vision is intentionally narrow. On a border 2,000 miles long, she focuses on one pair of cities and on one of the four bridges between them. As migrants arrive from around the world, she immerses herself in the life of one tent camp near that bridge. In the long history of US efforts to control immigration and keep people of undesirable nationalities out, Rathbone zeroes in on half a year, late in Trump's first presidential term. *The Asylum Seekers*, she writes, offers "nothing like an objective or a comprehensive account of the border" but rather something more personal and ephemeral:

a collection of stories about myself, and the border, and of a handful of people who tried to survive there, even as they sought something more. And it is also, I pray, a story about God: not as God is so often portrayed, tucked away in the corner of a pretty church someplace, or floating, disembodied, above the fray, but of God enfleshed and incarnate, out in the heart of the suffering world—*with* and *as* and *in* the people who wait so vulnerably there.

Hardly any of Rathbone's border experiences unfold as she plans. Having been sensitized to immigration issues by her Cuban immigrant mother, and shocked by conditions she witnesses in the barbed wire enclosures at Calais in France and by the chaos and lawlessness of Tijuana, she decides to make a brief visit to Ciudad Juárez, across the Rio Grande from El Paso. The stories she hears from migrants and from Mexicans and Americans seeking to help them affect her so deeply that she decides to stay, with no specific plan except to listen and learn. She rents a room and for six months spends most of her days in the tent camp and at the bridge.

The asylum process Rathbone observes in 2019 assigns unlimited discretion to immigration agents stationed on the international bridge. Under a policy called metering, asylum seekers are assigned numbers on a waiting list of several thousand. Then they wait on the Mexican side for six months to a year, the wait growing longer each month as more names are added than removed. Rathbone comments:

Most basically, then, metering meant that officers never said *no* to a request for asylum. Saying no would be flatly illegal, and in all my time on the border, I never once heard anyone say it. What they said instead was "Not right now." Or "We have no room." Or "We are full." Or "Try back later."

This process has changed dramatically since 2019, in two distinct stages. The CPB One app made available to asylum seekers in 2023 offered a more orderly process and created a more orderly border. By late 2024, arrivals with scheduled appointments exceeded illegal crossers. But in January 2025, the app was abruptly shut down and all appointments were canceled. A leaked government memo from 2019, quoted by Rathbone, describes US policies as "presenting aliens with multiple unsolvable dilemmas." Little has changed.

Rathbone documents the depredations of cartel enforcers, government officials, and criminal gangs on migrants. El Paso, she notes, is one of the safest cities in the US, contrary to right-wing politicians' false claims, but Juárez is one of the world's most dangerous, with 1,499 murders in 2019. Travelers from Central America must pay enormous sums for their passage, and 80 percent of female migrants traveling through Mexico suffer sexual assault. Rathbone's interviews with some of them are among the most difficult pages of the book to read.

And yet at the tent camp, waiting for asylum appointments that may never come, the travelers form a community of mutual support that draws Rathbone in and elicits her admiration. Committees oversee distribution of food and clothing donations. An informal school meets in the streets, then in an empty building, and Rathbone volunteers to teach. Children patrol the streets to pick up garbage. Among the heroes of Rathbone's narrative are the leaders who emerge from the migrant camp and help the community make life better for all. She also credits the work of American volunteers, supported by the Red Cross or by churches, who have learned to collaborate rather than manage. These include a 96-year-old Catholic priest and an 85-year-old Sister of Mercy, tireless workers for migrant families and advocates for more compassionate policies.

Gradually Rathbone realizes that the most important work she does is the least visible—and the least planned or anticipated. She comes to see that giving aid to the needy, “handing out sandwiches, and offering toothpaste and T-shirts and fresh pairs of socks,” is a manifestation of power over others. What she is called to do in the community of the tent city, she discerns, is not to organize or to hand out supplies, but simply to “remain a little longer . . . using that most essential word from the Gospel of John: to remain and be with the people there, even when I had nothing to give.”

Through her highly personal and elegantly written words, Rathbone invites her readers to live more intensively and attentively in whatever border communities we inhabit, listening and learning.