

Into The Void

Arts and Literature



Issue 5 | Autumn 2017 | €6

Into the Void Magazine

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Published quarterly. Print ISSN: 2009-9398 | Online ISSN: 2009-9401. Published in Toronto, Canada by *Into the Void Magazine*. Editor-in-Chief: Philip Elliott | Nonfiction/Poetry Editor: Amanda Gaines | Poetry Editor: Heath Brougher | Flash Fiction Editor: Laura Halpin

intothevoidmagazine.com | intothevoidmag@gmail.com | facebook.com/intothevoidmagazine

OWL: Of War and Love (in America)

Julieta Vitullo

Right around the time when I'm falling out of love with my husband, I'm standing at the PATH station in front of the Hudson River across from Manhattan and a man tells me, 'An airplane hit one of the towers, bang, and then another airplane hit the second tower. One is plenty bad luck, but two?' He says this in Spanish and I ask him where he's from. 'From Ecuador,' he tells me. I have the feeling that neither of us wants to be there right now and that we would choose to never have left our home countries if we could. But I don't buy his story. This wasn't just a random conjunction of really bad luck, although the situation seems so unreal that what else is there to think. Twenty minutes ago my brother and I received a desperate email from Argentina, our parents inquiring about our wellbeing: *Kids, send us a message to tell us you're okay, we're worried. Apparently there was an attack at the Twin Towers.*

The internet is slow and we don't have TV. The home line isn't working and cell phones aren't the law of the land yet. I just moved to the U.S. with my husband to start an MA in English. I don't have any money beyond a \$1,000 monthly fellowship stipend. Three quarters of that go towards renting the one bedroom apartment we just took in Jersey City. The rest pays for trips on the PATH train and NYC subway, cheap Goya-brand frozen food at the Latin supermarket around the corner, and occasionally some fresh vegetables. I don't have enough money to buy books and I'm fascinated by the fact that the university library system has almost every title I'm required to read, so I don't buy them. I wait for the books to be shipped to my campus or to become available, often missing the deadlines to read them.

We take our time, my brother and I. My parents tend to be alarmists. I remember that a few years back there was some kind of terrorist attack at the World Trade Center, with a car bomb, I believe. Was it five years ago? Ten? It wasn't that big a deal, I seem to recall. I think about the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in '92. I think of the Jewish Mutual attack in '94, the year I was taking my exams to enter college. Car bombs in all three cases. The WTC attack must have happened right in between those two. I think there were only a few dead. I know I was still in high school when it happened. I learned at the time that WTC stood for World Trade Center.

We walk a few blocks to Journal Square station. There's a blue sky and a pleasant late summer morning air. There's the smell of cigarettes and piss, and the usual congregation of black homeless men gathered at the steps of the station, fooling around and saying things I don't understand as we walk by. We see smoke far away to the east as we approach the back of the station, the side that has a view of the New York City skyline. Where there used to be two towers there's now only one. There are birds flying by and some boats crossing the river. Birds unaware. Boats unaware. A few minutes later the second tower disappears in front of our eyes as I take pictures with the three megapixel digital camera I bought after I found out that I had won a fellowship to come to the States for two years. MGP stands for megapixels, I learned when I bought it.

At home, we chat with our parents through MSN messenger. I don't hear from my husband until later in the day. He left early that morning to attend his ESL class somewhere Midtown Manhattan. He is now at a friend's place in Brooklyn and he'll head back to New Jersey whenever they reopen the PATH trains—PATH stands for the Port Authority Trans-Hudson, I happen to learn as I look for news on what means of transportations have been shut down. I'm relieved to hear he's all right and glad to know I'll have enough time to check on my new friend Saed. He and I became close a few weeks ago while we both attended a culture immersion program at

Ohio University. I was learning the names of the different parts of a typical university campus in America—including what ROTC is and what the acronym stands for. I was putting on some extra pounds at the all-you-can-eat style cafeteria—which offered unlimited portions of soft serve ice-cream, an exotic delicacy that back home you could only find in the relatively new chains of McDonalds. I was surrounded by students from all parts of the globe. And in the midst of all that, it so happened that I also felt prettier than ever before and realised I no longer wanted to be with my husband.

Saed is from Palestine and he's worried about what the terrorist attacks will bring to Muslims at his campus in Buffalo, NY. It's from him that I first find out about Osama bin Laden. My brother tells me who bin Laden is and how unlikely it seems that they already know who did it. We talk about the fact that he, my brother, was planning on going up to the observatory at one of the Twin Towers just that Tuesday. (Later I would use that word, *just*, a lot to describe my experience back then: I got to the States *just* two months before 9/11. I was living *just* across Manhattan when it happened. I watched the second tower collapse *just* in front of my eyes. Are they going to say this is a *just* war?) My brother is here for a conference we both attended the week before in DC and he wants to do all the touristy things. He was at the WTC the day before but he didn't go up to see the view because it was cloudy. 'Tomorrow will be a better day,' we had both agreed that September 10th.

I receive communication from the university that classes have been cancelled. This is the second week of school and now that I don't have to take the train to go to campus and attend a three-hour seminar on Literary Theory, it will be easier to get caught up with readings for the next day. I go back and forth between checking on the news and finishing my reading of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. My brother and I have empanadas for dinner that night. All you have to do is take them out of the box and heat them in the convection oven. The result is a smashed-meat-filled cardboard-like pocket that collapses on the plate. While we eat, we talk about the attacks and what will happen now. On the way back to the apartment from the train station that morning we saw American flags booming out of yards and storefronts—*That was quick*, I had thought. We talk about my crumbling marriage—'He's kind of a loser,' my brother says. We talk about Osama bin Laden a bit more. We don't talk about my crush on Saed.

The next day school resumes and I attend the second class of 'Crime and Punishment in America,' an interdisciplinary seminar taught by professor Bruce H. Franklin, one of the country's leading cultural historians, an anti-war activist, Vietnam War lit expert and Melville scholar. 'We are going to war,' says one of my classmates at the opening of the discussion. Dr. Franklin has made it clear that before we talk about our assigned readings of Douglass and Melville we will discuss what's going on. 'Who is *we*?' shoots another student from across the oval table.

Over the next few weeks I hear a lot about the issue of the pronoun *we* coming from the mouths of students and professors at spontaneous campus meetings and organised debates. I engage in discussions about the use of the name America. I'm also American, *americana* from South America, I explain, and if we are going to discuss how the U.S. is embarking in yet another imperial enterprise we better call things for what they are—more than discussions, these are exercises in self-confidence. I find that even the smartest of interlocutors raise their eyebrows at this, as to say, 'I've never actually thought of that.' I find that I can hide my weak language skills behind my righteousness.

I continue to struggle to check my books out from the library in time for the assigned discussion dates. I check out other non-required books instead because I find it unbelievable that

the library has so many books that I can take home just like that. I can even ask for an ILL, an interlibrary loan, I learn, and get any books I want from anywhere in the world. I fill my backpack with heavy volumes that I carry on the bus to the PATH and I never get to read because I can barely keep up with the amount of readings required for the three classes I'm taking. I discover that reading in English takes me five to ten times longer than reading in Spanish.

I learn more about the geography of the Middle East than I ever knew before, as the terms *mujahideen*, *Taliban*, *Al-Qaeda*, *Jihad*, *Sunni*, *Shia* enter my everyday language. I hear from the superintendent of my building that the nice men in turbans at the local delis are not Muslim from the Middle East but Sikh from India—the superintendent himself is Bengali, as is a vast part of the population around that section of Jersey City, probably the most culturally and linguistically diverse place I'll ever live in.

I try to keep up with class discussions but my decent TOEFL grades do nothing for me now because a test is just a test and this is real life, and because, after all, English is no longer supposed to be a foreign but a second language for me. I spend two weeks wondering what the *Asian* revolution is and how come if it's so significant for the development of black history in the Americas I never heard of it before. I find out one day that there's no such thing as an *Asian* revolution and that instead what they've been talking about is the *Haitian* revolution, which, of course, I have heard of before.

I march around the campus quad in front of the Paul Robeson student center. I learn that Paul Robeson was a brilliant actor, singer, football player and activist who became an anti-fascist activist when the Spanish Civil War broke out. Students and professors unite to protest the impending invasion of Afghanistan and to demand a minimum fair wage for janitors on campus. I help found RAPJ, Rutgers Acts for Peace and Justice, ever amazed at how the English language is so prone to catchy acronyms.

On the elevator on my way to class, I meet with one of my classmates. She's blonde and pretty with rosy cheeks, and her damp hair smells like she just got out of the shower. She asks if I'm from Colombia and I say no. As students start socialising around the oval table waiting for the professor to arrive, she shows a big brand new rock on her manicured hands. A week ago I was prompted by the professor to talk somewhat extensively to the class about my country of origin and, as I now watch the student show off her rock, I wonder why it is so hard for someone to remember such simple piece of information from one week to the next. I find myself getting angry and wondering if the reason Americans have acronyms for everything, including for their own country, is to assist with remembering.

For the first time in my life, I go to an outing with an all-English speaking crowd. The graduate students have organised weekly hangouts in the bar around campus. There's karaoke, beer and chicken wings. I'm going to attempt to sing a Shakira song and the guy who is acting as the MC asks me my name. I tell him slow and clear, as I always do 'Ju-lie-ta.' 'Hoo-leeeee-ta?' I repeat, 'Ju—lie—ta.' The guy's 'j' vanishes and the 't' gets shy, as he tries again, 'Ooo-leeeee-da?' The routine repeats itself until I explain that it's like Juliet with a soft 'j' and an 'a' at the end. He attempts one last time and more or less gets it. 'Pretty good for a white dude,' he states proudly. Countless times over the years I will go over the name routine with people. No matter how much my English has improved, their Spanish has not, and the 'not bad for a white person' pitch becomes routine as well, in various circumstances. Over the years I've thought about the many levels in which this makes no sense (my skin is white; non-white Americans don't necessarily struggle less with Spanish than white do; the colour of your skin doesn't determine your language skills, etc.). Over the years, I've come to realise that Americans have not only appropriated the name of an entire continent, America, to call just themselves, but they also believe that they own they colour white.

On a cold autumn night standing in the corner of Avenue of the Americas and 4th St in NYC while we wait for the light to turn green, my husband and I kiss, a last kiss that fails to reignite the long gone spark in our marriage. Some kids drive by and yell to us: ‘PDA! Get a room!’ I find out later what PDA means. Of all the strange things I’ve come to learn in the last couple of months, this one is perhaps the most perplexing of all. America the prude.

Although I have stopped talking to Saed a while ago, my husband decides he’s had enough of us and he’s grown sick of the lies, a few from me and some more from this country, and returns to Argentina. There’s no more *we* there.

The U.S. launches OEF, which stands for Operation Enduring Freedom, and the War in Afghanistan begins. The truest part of that acronym turns out to be the Enduring one: the war in Afghanistan would officially last thirteen years, until the end of 2014, although in reality it never ended. Another catchy acronym would later justify the criminal invasion of Iraq by the U.S.: WMDs. I haven’t heard of an acronym that explains the suffering of the Iraqis caused by the relentless bombing, the devastation of the land, the lost limb of a U.S. soldier or the very fact that Iraq did not have any weapons of mass destruction—another fucking lie. When the frat boys in the Bush administration wanted to call the invasion of Iraq ‘Operation Iraqi Liberation,’ OIL, the distastefulness of their *joke* became too grotesque—perhaps just too apparent—and they settled for Operation Iraqi Freedom. OIF didn’t catch on.

Over those weeks I have a recurring dream: I’m inside a space capsule flying over the ocean. I don’t know how to pilot the capsule and I make sudden maneuvers to control it. In the distance I see a tall building. I try to move my course but I can’t. I crash into it. I die. Time stops. I wake up, most of the times alone.

§

It’s been sixteen years since that late summer turned to fall and that fall became winter, my first winter living in the U.S. As I’m trying to wrap up this piece to send it out, my mind keeps going back to those days in September: the images of the airplanes hitting the towers—images that the media obscenely showed, time after time, and then ceased to show as it suited them—the feelings I felt, the voices I heard, the smells, the fear and the strangeness of it all. I struggle with how to end this story, what part of the many years of my life after 9/11 to recount, what acts of world violence to remember, what lovers to mention, what words vanished in translation to conjure up, what events, what people, what trips, what grief, what joy. I live in a country that has a short attention span and a short-term collective memory. But I am—as perhaps most people are if we look at them as individuals—very bad at forgetting. What to remember and select out of the last sixteen years? Bittersweet sixteen. Too many arbitrary thoughts, a list I type frantically in my phone as I go about my day—doing the groceries, sitting in front of a red light, running from one meeting to the next:

The fling whose name I no longer remember.

The insane amount of books I continue to check out from libraries because I think libraries are one of the best things USA has to offer.

The journey to some remote islands caught up in their own 200-year-old imperial rendezvous.

My lost baby.

The time I opened my Facebook account and received a message that would change my life forever.

The day I went to the hospital because I had hurt my ankle and they asked me—rightfully so—where my uncle was.

The drones in Yemen.
 The war in Libya.
 The war in Syria.
 The PhD, my OCD, the GOP & the DNC, the DoD . . .

DoD stands for Department of Defense. One night before bed I see two things in the news that disturb me deeply: the U.S. military brass has pushed the threshold of what collateral damage means, turning war crimes into legitimate acts of aggression, and in Syria U.S. planes have bombed a building filled with civilian families, killing over 200. I don't know about the living conditions of the people in that building, neither do I know if the attack happened in the day or at night, but I picture some kids in their PJs and some women trying to get water to wash the kids' faces before bed. Earlier that day I had listened to a series of history presentations from ninth grade students at the school where I work, a private school that sits in twenty acres of gorgeous land adjacent to one of the many Indian Reservations in the Puget Sound area, in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. One of the students has done her research on the Watergate scandal. She explains the context of the conspiracy and describes the chronology of events and the role of the different people involved. She shows several of Herblock's Nixon cartoons. She goes into painstaking detail about the wiretapping procedures undergone by a team headed by former CIA officers E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy. Several other students have researched the U.S. involvement in some of the many wars of the 20th century: WWII, Korea, Vietnam. One of the boys has focused on the chemical weapons utilised by the U.S. in Vietnam. He presents to an auditorium full of students from 6th to 12th grade the Pulitzer prize-winning photograph of the Vietnamese kids running away from their village just as they've been hit with napalm. One of the girls has torn off her burning clothes—her name is Kim Phúc, the boy says while he uses a laser pointer to signal the figure of a naked child running towards the camera. Napalm, he continues to describe, is a gel-like flammable agent that sticks to everything it touches and burns at 1,500 to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit. Kim Phúc survived and lives happily in Canada, he goes on to explain.

A dream that night provides me with a way to end this piece.

I'm standing in a balcony at night, presumably in my old apartment in Buenos Aires, with my seven-year-old son Martín. (After many years of bad relationships, I've finally married the man of my dreams. We had a son together and we often tell each other our dreams to try to figure out their messages while we lay in bed together in the house he built for us in the woods. He too happens to have watched the towers collapse from New Jersey, although we weren't aware of each other's existence at the time. He too organised against the war—his group's spirit captured by the word ASAP, Architecture Students Association for Peace. Interesting how he too had his own Muslim friend and crush at that time, but of course I knew none of this back then.) In the dream, Martín and I are getting ready to go to bed. Right in front of us there's a beautiful old building flanked by two Greek columns. It looks like some kind of government building but perhaps it's a cathedral. As I'm pointing out to my son a detail in the building, the left column suddenly collapses. There's an explosion, then a moment of silence, then the second column collapses as well. I think, holy shit. I grab Martín and we go back inside and get down on the floor. We lift our heads just as an airplane brushes off the side of our building. We see it go by through the side window. It misses us by a few inches. We are in a state of shock. We need to get out of this building before *they* come and bomb *us*. We know that they are going to do it, even though I'm holding my son in my arms, even though he's wearing his PJs and he's only seven. We go to the elevator. I grab pants for Martín to put on over his PJs. If we are going to become refugees in this war, I think, my boy better have extra clothes to wear. We go down to the street. There's con-

fusion as we wander around. There are no more signs of planes and bombs so after a while we go back to the apartment. As we gather at the balcony—more people have joined us now, strange and familiar faces, as is often the case in dreams— we look at the ruins in the old building and *where there used to be two columns now there are none*. The airplanes seem to have come a long time ago now and things are normal again. We collect ourselves. It's a beautiful night and the sky is wide open in front of us. Then we notice hints of a shower that starts to come down, tear-shaped sparkles falling from somewhere far in the firmament, a shiny snow-like shower in the middle of summer. It feels dreamlike, as it should. There are just a few drops at first but then there's a ton of them and they start getting everywhere. They get inside the apartment. We laugh, we cheer. But then we look at the walls: the beautiful sparkles have turned into sticky gel. We look at each other. We know these are bad news. The gel—I know with the sudden epiphany that can only be had in dreams—contains small particles of wiretapping: microphones, cameras, sensors. This is how *they* are going to know everything *we* do. We figure that even if we clean everything up, it's going to be impossible to remove it all because the gel sticks to every surface, the walls, the couch, each piece of furniture. WTF do we do now? We're SOL!

I don't tell this dream to my husband while we lay in bed because he has gone to the city to spend the night with our two older boys—our son's brothers from another mother. Instead, I recount the dream to him in a long text as I wait for the coffee to brew. I'm a morning bird, he always tells me. But he's a night owl, so his response doesn't come until an hour later when he wakes up and reads it:

Whoa...good morning, Julieta.

So what do you think?

The columns seem like the WTC

pillars of civilisation.

But also stability in your life in general, perhaps.

The snow crystals seem like pleasure, wonder, mystery...

But it gets corrupted, it becomes something sinister.

Very haunting.

Wow, an amazing interpretation!

Not bad for an architect.

TX, I♥U.

LOL...U2

FIN