

# On the fear of living in the mouth of a volcano before and after the USA elections

By Gema Álava

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Seventeen kilometers north of Quito, in the dry, flat caldera of a volcano, in Pichincha province, lies the village of Pululahua. The last eruption of the Pululahua Volcano was so powerful that its chamber of magma was emptied out, weakening the internal structure to such a degree that its walls collapsed and the slopes, more than 13,000 feet high, fell into the entrails and clogged the stripped seam of the formation.

At that elevation, in the mouth of a volcano that pretends to sleep, one cannot breathe. And in this state, oxygen-starved, you stop being what you are and become something else, something said to have neither name nor sense, no color, measure or time, and whose presence fingers cannot touch. With a crater of thirteen square miles, Pululahua is one of the only two inhabited volcanoes in the world.

"It's all right, it's asleep," I think as I take a tourist photo of the Pomasqui Valley.

But on the edge of a volcano it is easy to imagine the lava boiling. Molten stone that burns.

Where does this vision come from, the lava pouring like molten iron that turns yellow as it softens, like sugar into caramel? The seduction of danger, perhaps? Jean Baudrillard says that seduction and perversion maintain subtle relations. "Seduction is something that takes hold of all the pleasures, of all the affections and representations, seizing the same dreams." The seduction of what could be? The potential of what we could become if we really went for it? Can a volcano stop being a volcano? How and when?

"Pululahua" means "Smoke of Water" in Quechua. It never rains here, but the humidity floods everything and gives life to extraordinary orchids. As if the landscape would like to honor its name, a cluster of cumulus clouds surrounds a 2,500-year-old mound of cold lava. I think of Luke Howard, the English meteorologist who woke up one morning unaware that Goethe had dedicated a poem to him for classifying the clouds, for giving them a name. In an era when society didn't think transience was interesting enough, intellectuals felt the importance of the precariousness of meteorology.

The nimbus seems to fear Pululahua and remains grazing on the slopes, not climbing to the top. A volcano cannot be tamed; if you are a volcano, you are born and die a volcano.

I breathe as much air as I can, because my plane takes off at midnight. On the way to the airport, downhill through the Andes, I think that my multiplied red-blood cells, adapted already to altitude, may enter into euphoria and time come to stop. But that doesn't happen. The ancestors have made it very clear that I have to go back to New York and vote. I set my phone in airplane mode at quarter to eleven, and when I wake up, we are landing in JFK.

Quito proposes dawns, sunrises, and its height does not know about descents. New York, however, is at sea level.

### **Monday, November 7, 2016: pre-Election Day (Magma Chamber)**

New York City is another caldera, and the hysteria being lived the day before the election is felt by the two finches that I have at home. They live in a large cage, where they can fly, but today they have not left their nests, and they make so many twirls that I move them out of the living room in order to write.

I turn on the computer, and some news filters onto my screen: "Nostradamus has prophesied the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House." The *New York Times* has been announcing for months that Hillary has an 80 percent chance of winning the battle, and I wonder which prediction will come true: the augury of the polls or the 16<sup>th</sup>-century prophecy.

I turn on the TV, and Mr. Trump comes on screen. "These are historic elections," he says, adding, "These are the elections of *common sense*." Hearing that stirs my guts, and I press the button on the remote. *Out Trump!* I scream to the finches in the other room.

The pain exerted by a truth that, although absurd, is no less certain, is immense. Tomorrow we will vote with our *common sense*, yes, but will it be there? Because the elections will indicate just that: the percentage of common sense, and the percentage of fear, anger and frustration accumulated in this

country since Trump was first placed on a televised stage, microphone in hand, where he has performed for us the shark, the lion, the snake, the elephant, and from where he has insulted Muslims, blacks, women, individuals with disabilities and intellectuals. These among a thousand other deplorable actions.

The visual media have provided a great dose of entertainment, says Paco Reyero, a writer born in Seville, in his book: "Trump: The Lion of the Circus," in which he tells us how *in Trump reality* a barbarity can only be surpassed and replaced by the barbarity of the following day. (Like lava flowing into lava).

Quito with its minimal oxygen kept me dizzy, but in balance, too, as also happens to the egg gripped by equal positive and negative magnetic charges so that it can stand on end, there at zero degree latitude, the equator, the so-called Half of the World, where earth's opposite poles enter equilibrium. The flat screen of the TV, however, steals my oxygen like a dementor, leaving me feeling that I'm going to fall flat to the ground. (Without oxygen, you stop being what you are and become something else, which it's said it has no name, no sense, no color, no measure, no time, only a presence unfelt by the fingers.) Yes, from onstage it can be easy to move audiences with a roar that shakes the sand, but, after that, what? For how long can an egg stand on end?

For months we have witnessed a *perverse seduction* in its full force. We have seen abusive verbal displays (and non-verbal ones as well) that a person with low self-esteem, or immense rage, does not capture on his or her radar. The frustration of millions of Americans has been simmering since their savings bailed out the banks (and paid the bankers' bonuses) eight years ago. And when self-worth has

been knocked to the ground, a vote gives power, security and the opportunity to confess what has not been confided to telephone pollsters: the things that keep us awake at night.

Historian Julian Casanova warns us that Trump represents many aspects of traditional republicanism and, since he passes on this message in a sharper and more radical way than has been usual in American public life, he creates a greater gap between the *informed people* and the rest. "In the 1930s informed individuals knew and warned us about what was coming, but the masses took democracy away. Trump's campaign has been dismissing people who think, and it leads us into a black hole."

Will the nimbus, clusters, and strata be pushed away by the trumpets of a Trump presidency? Will poets run out of stamina to sketch poems? If no one invokes the clouds anymore, they will become nameless.

I wonder how much lava has Trump left in his caldera—whether its structure will eventually weaken or if, on the contrary, every spit thrown to the surface will fall right back inside, dragging a couple of cirri down too. And I'm afraid, because you can neither fry an omelet nor score a goal with your eggs (or balls) buried underground.

On the vast wall of Facebook, American writer Cristen Hemingway Jaynes, great-granddaughter of the Nobel Prize-winner, shares, with exclamation points both outside and inside the parenthesis (as if her anguish overflowed the punctuation): "Don't vote for Trump, (please!)!!" Puerto Rican artist Miguel Luciano writes: "Alright people, go VOTE, go VOTE, go VOTE. Let's make history, avoid global catastrophe, and then start working again on all these real problems". Erika Kawalek, a journalist once

Brooklyn-based but now residing in Montreal, notes, "It really does feel like Christmas Eve + the day before major surgery."

### **Tuesday, November 8, 2016: Election Day (Internal Walls)**

Fifteen years of giving lectures about European social tensions between the wars, inside museum galleries, alerted me to similarities between the hymns of "lock her up!" (being chorused at Trump's rallies) and the colliding forces of the Weimar Republic. Such was my astonishment that I decided to exchange my renewed green-card for an American passport. I wanted to vote.

### *Crater*

I had promised my daughter that we would go together to the polls to celebrate the likelihood that a woman would become president, but on Election Day my instinct (which smells odorless things) told me that reality could be different. This possibility, added to the trauma of replacing Obama's face for that of the Donald, would be too much disappointment for an 11-year-old citizen. I walked slowly to Sara's pillow and told her in her dreams that I would go to vote while she was waking up. Better this way.

At 8:59 am, as I am about to drink the last sip of coffee before running to the polls, my phone beeps. It is an email entitled "*Costeño entre volcanes*" from the Ecuadorian singer and composer Danee Ramón,

born in the Province of El Oro (The Gold), Pasaje de las Nieves (Passage of the Snows), in the southern region of Ecuador.

The first time I listened to Danee Ramón, he was standing onstage, microphone in hand, surrounded by two trombones, a bass, timpani, congas, bongos, bells and couples of men and women who danced possessed by a devilish rhythm. The ladies, with flying miniskirts, tight dresses, or jeans, spun like protons in undergoing fusion to the sound of a voice surrendered to the salsa. The gentlemen, with broad smiles, rotated around the skirts like orbiting electrons. That voice commanded such a *mare magnum* of positive energy that I assumed the blast wave would shake (at least) two oceans, Pacific and Atlantic. Pululahua's eruption at max potency would have gone unnoticed in that place. Since talent and generosity know nothing of borders or frontiers, at the end of his performance, Danee Ramón gave me his card and agreed to write a text about how it is for an artist living between active volcanoes.

I open the e-mail and read a quote by Alexander Von Humbolt: "Ecuadorians are unique and rare beings: they sleep peacefully in the midst of crushing volcanoes, they live poor in incomparable wealth, and rejoice with sad music."

I continue reading: "In my music and performances I seek to bring joy and hope. I come from a medium where progress is a tremendous challenge, where social, ethnic and cultural differences have divided us so much that we are not able to embrace each other as brothers. And, if we can sleep quietly among active volcanoes, why can't we overcome our differences and let our outdated idiosyncrasy evolve?"

It is true that division between classes is a global disease. Or, as Julián Casanova says, "political democracy is under harassment." I wonder how it is possible for two human beings to make such opposite uses of the performance scenario: the candidate generates horror, fear and despair; the singer, joy and hope. I slam the door on my way out and head for the ballot box.

### *Cone*

American public schools close on election days to let the voters come in. On the fence at PS 144 in Forrest Hills, Queens, a pumpkin-orange poster (left over from Halloween) announces in a Spanish that recalls Tarzan introducing himself to Jane: "No Lurking. Do Not Campaign 100 Feet from the Entrance of the Building. Section 17-130, Electoral Law." The same message also appears in English, Chinese, Japanese and Arabic. Five Orthodox Jewish teenagers gather around a camping table with a yellowish plastic tablecloth on top. The wind blows away the tablecloth but not the boys' black hats. A policeman approaches, points to the fence with his finger, and informs them that it is forbidden to meet there.

As we enter the building, we are asked if we want to buy pumpkin muffins, but I've lost my appetite. I'm nervous, because although I do not feel American, I am. And I can vote. So, I stand in line like a post until a brunette with a ponytail calls me.

"Next, please. Last name?"



"Álava" I say.

"Sign here, please" she says.

She doesn't ask for an ID. She hands me a document with a photocopied signature of mine that I remember scribbling the day I had to swear to Immigration that I would not believe in princes. (No one mentioned princesses.)

I go ahead and scribble another signature with a blue pen under the black signature, and I am given a paper file longer than an unfolded *New York Times*. With an automaton voice, she says: "You're number 269. Fill out the paper and, when you're done, enter it in the voting machine."

I sneak into my confessional booth and fill in all the ovals from the Democratic Party.

*Smoke*

After lunch I go to work on a gold-leaf art installation that I have been commissioned to do at 15 Central Park West, side by side with Trump's International Hotel, in Columbus Center. (Coincidences no longer frighten or surprise me, I just let them come.)

In the subway car only the air conditioning dares to say anything. On my right, a woman in her mid-thirties with a navy blue burka tells me that she's not going to be able to vote today because she has only a green-card, but that her husband has already voted for Hillary.

Coming out of the subway, on 57th Street, policy editor Corin Dann tests his microphone in front of a TV camera with New Zealand's Channel One News Political Unit reporter. They allow me to take some photos.

"There's a lot of tension in the air," the producer tell me as we shake hands.

"It's contained hysteria," I respond.

He gives me his card and encourages me to write to them in a couple of days. I tell him that Wellington is just a little bit too far away.

I leave behind the horse carriages that act as New York's gondolas and decide to cross Central Park. I run into Stu, who is sitting on a bench. He has two gold rings on one of his fingers, one wide and one narrow, and is reading a thriller. He has on a denim jacket and a light hat for the sun.

"Stu is from Stuart, right?" I ask.

"Yes," he replies, holding the book half-opened.

"So, how's your stomach this afternoon?" I ask again.

"I voted for Hillary, but I do not sleep well at night," he says.

"Well, with a thriller your insomnia is going to last longer," I say, laughing, and we give some crumbs of adrenaline to a squirrel that wanders around the lawn.

He takes off his reading glasses and lets me take a picture.

Underneath the monument dedicated to Cristobal Colon, at the main entrance of the park, Kimberly and Alina rent out bicycles, wearing twin green polars with the logo "Bike Rent NYC." Alina, who has parents in the Dominican Republic, says that if Trump wins today "everyone gets kick out." Kimberly, with family in Puerto Rico, says that today they are renting more bikes than usual, "maybe because of the good weather, maybe because of the stomach knot that we all have."

At the Trump International Hotel and Tower two constructor workers are building something like a wooden hatch with golden hinges. At 15 Central Park West, I ask the six doormen on duty in the lobby if they have already voted.

## *Chimney*

As I leave the building to go back home, I see the lights of Times Square shining in the distance. I wait for the traffic lights to turn green, and I see a barricade of cement blocks piled up at the corner of Trump Tower. I take a photo. Walking down 59th street, I realize that the entrance to the park has been fenced off with a barrier that says, "Only Official Vehicles, The Park Closes at 1 AM." It's 6 PM. On the other side of the barrier there is a line of trailers belonging to the mounted police. I take another photo. In the subway, inside the car, I move through tunnels that swallow me and spit me out but don't share a word.

When I arrive home, my stomach hurts me the way the first step taken after a C-section does; it stuns me like the delirium of 113-degree fever; it burns like motorcycle exhaust on my leg, and it stings me like the regret of a kiss never given.

I turn on the TV. This cannot be happening. I feel like vomiting but I don't.

## *Magma*

Following the vote count on television is like watching a leak that falls from the ceiling and tries to open its way to the basement through the dining-room floor.

Facebook has gone crazy. Me too. At 10:18 PM I write on my wall, "I need air." Several people respond, "Me too." Julian Casanova responds to everyone, "The problem is, Gema Alava, that you will not be able to share the air with those who already have it."

At 2:40 AM there is almost no hope for Hillary. Something round, like drops of frozen water, slips down the right side of my neck. I'm crying in a parallel reality. Or maybe I've traveled in time, without losing my memory, and I'm saying goodbye to the Titanic as it sails from the harbor. I do not remember crying tears this big since I discovered when I was seven who the Three Magic Kings were.

In this state of mind, in shock, the image of Pululahua's chamber filling up with magma comes to mind. I need some air: the blast wave of a plugged volcano that has been dormant too long and finally wants to wake up can overrun too many things at once.

I realize that I have not answered Danee's e-mail. I turn on the computer and reread it.

"I spent the holidays at my grandmother's house, in the middle of the Andes, with strong, cold winds that can dry your cheeks and toast your skin in less than an hour. There I discovered the energy of the mountains and felt our connection with mother earth and father sun, who were revered by our ancestors. We grew up studying the names of our volcanoes, but we never feared being between them, because we have always seen them asleep, with little activity. On November 4, 2002, streets, houses, cars, trees, plants and flower beds were covered with ash. I'm a 37-year-old who has never seen snow

fall; that was the closest thing to it, but gray and too toxic to inhale. Anyway, the truth is that we are more concerned about crime and corruption, which are more harmful than any of our active volcanoes."

As if I were in Narnia's closet or had taken a hallucinogen, I watch particles mixed with snowflakes fall from the ceiling of my room. At first the flakes fall slowly, and when the snow begins to stick, it heaps. The newly fallen snow is soft and fluffy, but when I hold it between my fingers it fragments like a freshly baked bun opening with the heat. If I close my fist, it hardens. And if I place another handful of snow with another one, a ball is made. And if I throw the ball to the ground in rage, the ball explodes.

It's 3 AM. Trump has reached 270 electoral votes. He will be president.

### **Wednesday, November 9, 2016: post-Election Day (Caldera)**

Alberto Cortes explains in one of his jokes the easiest way to know how many cows are on a prairie: you count the legs and divide by four. Until last night we did not know if we had cows or pigs. Today we don't even know if we'll have a prairie.

Isaac Newton, at the end of the 17th century, proposed the theory of universal gravitation, which implied that the earth was flatter at the poles. "His thesis convulsed the scientific and philosophical world of the time," reads a label at the Half of the World-Museum, in Quito (where the egg stayed in balance). In

1672, the astronomer Jean Richer traveled to Cayena to make observations in the equatorial latitudes, where Newton's theses were confirmed. Because every thesis has to be tested to prove that it's true.

New Yorkers are hallucinating. We are stunned and don't know what to tell our children during breakfast, before they go to school.

"Did Hillary win?" is the first thing my daughter says when she gets up.

"Umm ... No," I say.

"Are you kidding?" she insists.

"No, but don't worry because Trump is not going to enter this house. Let's have breakfast."

From 1736 to 1740, in Ecuador, thirty-two large triangles were mapped out by surveyors on the land between Cochasqui and Tarqui, then were measured. Many astronomical observations were made, especially of the stars in the belt of Orion. After almost three years of work, in 1743, it was concluded that the arc of the meridian had a curvature of  $3^{\circ} 7' 11''$ .

The victory of Donald Trump seems like science fiction—278 electoral votes for him, 218 for Clinton. The media wonders how it is possible that the polls didn't reflect the final result. "I feel like I've been fooled," says Elaine Cipriano, a New York-based publisher born in Manhasset. "Over the last sixteen months, journalism has failed us. They have not told us the truth. We have been told what we wanted to hear. I'm furious. Where are those stories now?"

Should the elections have been measured with a sextant or surveyor's triangles? Because it is clear that we have been lacking an instrument that can measure an angle in two directions (from land and from a ship).

I wonder how people will react. I try to calm myself down with the idea that the protest demonstrations on Hillary's side will be more peaceful than those that might have come from Trump's supporters.

I turn on the TV and listen to Obama's speech. It's calm. He tries to relax us. He says that we have to work together. So I listen to him and go to the subway.

When I arrive at Columbus Center, right in the middle of the square, a young woman wearing white sneakers and a white hat holds up a banner to the Trump Hotel as if the building could read: "You'll Never Be my President." The back of the banner says, "I Will Always Be with Her." To her right, a young man raises his arm and makes a fist as he looks at a father (with his daughter) who raised his middle finger in the universal sign for "Screw you."



I cross the street and walk past the Trump building. The wooden construction with golden hinges is finished. From the other side of the sidewalk, I take a photo of the girl with the banner. I see that a cameraman is installing a tripod behind her.

I work on my installation all afternoon in silence. When I come out of the building, it is drizzling. I look for the girl with the banner, but I do not see anything. The street is blocked by trucks from various TV channels. I hear a mass of people shouting, and it reminds me of the roar of the dancers in Quito just a couple of weeks ago. Here people roar not with joy but with rage. Once again, without seeking it or wanting it, I find myself in the epicenter.

There are cameras, banners, microphones and police everywhere—in the sidewalks, in the cars, in the crosswalks, on horses—and more signs, homemade signs, handwritten with markers and covered with transparent tape so the rain doesn't melt their words.

"Protest This Way" says the first sign.

"Not my President" says the second one.

"Black Lives Matter" says the third one.

"No Billionaire Will Fight for the Workers," says the fourth one.

"Not OKKK America" says the fifth one.

"Jews Reject Trump. We've Seen This Before," says the sixth one.

"This is How It Starts" says the seventh one.

"United to Stop Trump, Hate, Racism," says the eighth one.

"Wall Street is the Enemy, Not Asian or Latino Workers, Not Muslims or Immigrants," says the ninth one.

"No More Deportations, Organize Now," says the tenth one.

The police officer tells me that I cannot stop. A banner hits my head. The officer tells me again that I cannot stop. A man points at me and blinds me with his photoflash. A woman about to cry talks to a journalist. She says that the world is going to end. Another journalist stops me with a three-foot-long-microphone as if it were a medieval sword. In the middle of this *mare magnum*, Khalid Gafar, television presenter, asks me if he can interview me.

“For which channel?” I ask.

“Mekameleen, a Muslim station,” he says.

Aware of the effect that such images might have on an audience, and having witnessed the damage a microphone can cause, and knowing well the waves of hope a microphone can generate, shaking at least two oceans, I realize the responsibility I am being offered. The meaning of the protest, as it appears to this man’s viewers, will depend on what I say. And what I don’t want is for thousands (or millions) of Muslims to become as frightened as I am (or more so) when they see these images.

I answer, “Yes, of course.”

“Very good. Let’s begin,” he says, then explains to me, “You are going to be interviewed in Arabic. Don’t look at the camera. Someone will translate for you. When we edit the footage, a voice will translate what you say as well.”

I tell him that we New Yorkers are in shock because we did not expect these results, and it is difficult to assimilate them due to our anger and frustration. “Too many emotions to be swallowed in a single drink.” I tell him that it is good to process so much *feeling* with demonstrations. Besides, it’s our right. Life tests us, and we have to go forward, whatever we have to face, and now we have to face “a Trump.” We need to think and act, but with respect.

“Do you think Donald Trump is going to endanger democracy in the United States?”

I don't talk about how it's possible, in the first hundred days, that Republicans could obliterate Obama's legacy and roll back rights such as gay marriage or abortion. (Things that would lead to other things and would radically change the country.) I tell him, however, that Trump is a *Kinder Egg* yet to be unwrapped and that, since he contradicted himself constantly during the campaign, no one knows what he's going to do. "Not even he does." I tell him also (or I tell myself) that democracy is going to be maintained because the popular vote is on Hillary Clinton's side, and because most Americans—and for the first time in my life I identify myself as such—respect the institutions and laws that we have at this time, especially our civil rights. And, yes, we will have to make changes, as we can and as we do when we are faced with disappointment in life. And I add:

"The fact that I'm not screaming or hurling insults through this microphone, even if I am disgusted by the situation, is in itself a good sign. It is a step. I encourage those who are listening to me right now—regardless of their culture or nationality—to do whatever is in their power to lower the level of negativity in this world. “

The last person with whom I discuss the demonstration is Victor Zafra Vallejo, from Madrid, who is passing through New York on a residency for maxillofacial surgery. He says that he feels the way he did on September 11, or on Brexit. "It looked like it could not happen, but it happened. Now we have to wait

and see." And with a smile he tells me that today, in Madrid, is the Holiday of Almudena, and that Laura, his fiancé, will meet him here in a matter of days, and they will go for a walk in Central Park.

### **Epilogue (Blast Wave)**

Overnight, New York has become the world's third inhabited caldera. But we do not know if the magma chamber is active, nor whether it will be controlled, dominated, directed or governed.

The intellectuals run into the streets and flood Facebook with words so as to not just stand passive, with arms crossed.

The Bulgarian writer Maria Popova says that critical thinking without hope is cynicism, and that hope without critical thinking is ingenuity.

Ilya Noe, a Mexican artist living in Berlin, reminds us that Patrisse Cullors, founder of Black Lives Matter, describes the movement's mission as "hope and inspiration for *collective action* to build a *collective power* that will achieve a *collective transformation*, even if this comes out of anger and pain." Its goal? A new vision and a dream.

"It is important to say what hope is not," writes Rebecca Solnit in her book *Hope in the Dark: Untold History, Wild Possibilities*, "[It is not] to believe that everything was, is, or will be fine, because the

evidence is everywhere: the tremendous destruction and the tremendous suffering.” The hope that interests her is the hope of broad prospects, with specific possibilities, that invites us or requires us to act.

But Nadia Macarena Díaz, a Buenos Aires-born psychologist living in New York, is worried about the possibility of a "witch hunt," because Trump “has legitimized aggression, chauvinism, machismo, racism, and many may feel the right to exercise them.” And Alison Rogovín, a New York consultant for educational reform, confesses that the idea of replacing Michelle with Melania makes her want to cry.

I close my eyes and return to Pululahua, to the moment when I try to capture with my camera the vast Andean landscape but cannot do it. The sensation of sublimity arises when the retina focuses, almost at the same time, on both the near and the far, giving a sense of the totality—something the camera lens, in its rigidity, is unable to do. Now I look at the people who watch the precipice from the *mirador*. Now I look at the horizon. And then back again. It is in this zig-zag of the gaze that one becomes aware of vertigo and barbarism. Becoming aware of things is always a matter of contrasts. The glass lens that can grasp this duality does not exist. In order to imbue the soul with odors that a bottle cannot contain you have to be present in the flesh.

“And who had the brilliant idea of living in the mouth of a volcano?” I asked Pululahua's guard just before I left.

"They say the first settlers did not notice, and then it was too late."

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