

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

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**Hamlet's Lesson**

I STILL REMEMBER WHEN I first heard about the coronavirus.

2019 was a bittersweet year. I spent the first half of it at Washington College, a not-so-small college in a frozen-in-time conservative-looking Maryland town. I experienced for the first time in my life (I was 22) what snow felt like, I got to talk in a language not my own for more than two weeks straight (the typical length of my previous trips to America), and I met wonderful people (I frequently talk with two of my professors and two of my students, all of them close friends now).

But the second half... Well, it was tough. I couldn't attend classes in Argentina because the academic year here begins in March and not in August. So I had to stay at home, away from my classmates and the whole university environment that always did me well. It didn't take too long for my long-forgotten depression to kick in. Without something to entertain itself, my mind went back to its old habits: self-loathing and apathy.

And that's how I received 2020: downright melancholic and nostalgic, not being able to get off the bed, without reading nor writing. And that's when news about this new virus started to stand out here in Argentina. Journalists would report that things were bad in China (and its despotic, authoritarian government was trying to cover it all up), but almost next to nothing was known about it.

"Oh, great," I thought, "it's like in 2009, just another swine flu. Give it a month or so, and it will be over." I'm sure now that God laughed right at that moment. I was naïve enough not to care at all (and politicians here did the same) since my mental health was my top priority. Lithium pills started to do their job and, when one morning I was able to dance to "Club at the End of the Street," I knew I was (almost) cured. 2020 seemed promising: I would be getting a second chance at life, a redemption. Back to classes, back to seeing my friends, back to being busy. Nothing could go wrong, right?

I moved to a students' residence in Buenos Aires to become a little less dependent on my family (although they were the ones paying for everything), and there I met my two Ecuadorian roommates, who would become close friends. Everything was great: we watched anime, we listened to Bad Bunny, we smoked cigarettes, and drank so much beer that, the first Friday of classes, in what would be my last physical, face-to-face course in college as of now, I dozed off in my chair due to my massive hungover.

I visited my parents that weekend because I missed my house, and that's when the president spoke to the nation: quarantine would be mandatory starting next Monday. We didn't know back then what that entailed; we couldn't fathom the repercussions. Thinking it couldn't last more than two weeks (at most), I went back to my residence feeling excited: I would be able to read whatever I wanted since they were probably going to prescribe us a compulsory holiday season. But my college (Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina) must have known something we didn't because, after their initial silence, they started warning us that classes might go momentarily virtual.

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Wait, what? Is it supposed to last that long? The government (as always) was being completely inefficient and didn't communicate clearly their plans (I'm guessing because they didn't have any). So we were at a loss. How did virtual classes work anyway? I didn't know back then that being a student would become such a chore, such a painful burden. I suffered my education's virtuality. I wasn't learning as much; I couldn't pay attention. I had never had these problems in college; I felt like a high school student again, all frustrated and bored.

So I got really anxious too (I do suffer from anxiety and depression), being trapped in a small room with two strangers. That's when I started smoking like a chimney: two packs a day, sometimes more, never less. There was a cigarette shortage for a moment, so I had to walk many blocks and go to every store in my neighborhood until I could find decent (if I can say so) cigarettes to smoke. And I drank a lot, too—no alcohol, or not a lot of it, but mainly Coca-Cola. So I always felt bloated and out of breath, my stomach and my chest hurt constantly, and I couldn't sleep well (which was not good, since I had to get up around seven every morning).

I studied all day, every day. I don't know how I put up with so much studying. I didn't watch any series; I didn't read the books I wanted to; I didn't go downstairs to play pool or poker. I was just focusing on my courses. This was probably just a defense mechanism: if not studying and being away from my classmates made me depressed, being trapped in my room, I had to study extra to cling to my sanity. That was not life: for a whole semester, I didn't live at all.

I didn't mention that the residence I was in wasn't my first pick. I always wanted to go to one in Recoleta, an Opus Dei Hogwarts-like "Center of Studies," not because I'm a believer (I'm the complete opposite), but because it was the most exclusive, elegant one in Argentina. And when there was finally a place for me there, I moved out, leaving my two loyal Ecuadorian friends behind. Although Ecuador was still bound to haunt me since, when I got to CUDES (the new residence), other Ecuadorians there were cooking autochthonous food, and I helped them out to mingle with them.

I had gained much weight during the last year (I hit triple digits, in kilograms), so now people would call me "Gordo" (literally "fat"); it was the first time in my life that someone had appealed to my weight to characterize me. It bothered me initially, but then I got used to it (as people usually do).

There I met the most interesting people. I already knew an Uruguayan living there, but I got to know a Honduran filmmaker that blew my mind. We became closer as time went by, and now he's got a place in my heart. I also established strong relationships with the numeraries there (people devoted to Christ and their work). They tried more than once to convert me to Catholicism, but every time I politely declined. However, I went to mass once and confessed to a Korean priest (a great friend of mine) all of my sins.

I gave a couple of final exams, but not as many as I would like to. My GPA went down a bit, but it didn't affect me as much as I thought it would. I skipped many classes, mainly because I was getting really bored,

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and because I wasn't able to stay more than an hour in front of a screen without smoking a cigarette (that problem didn't go away, sadly). I didn't like what we were studying the second semester: too many bizarrely and painfully marginal authors and none of the classics. Professors seemed duller too, more annoying than ever, excruciatingly plain and silly.

My insomnia worsened. I would stay up until 4:00 in the morning, not able to fall asleep. My Honduran friend would play LoL while I studied right beside him, and that would go on for hours until night became day. Most days, I didn't sleep at all before my courses, so I ended up falling asleep before lunch, which I missed more than once.

2020 was a rocky year, but it had its highlights. I made great new friends (the Honduran one); I was able to write again (poems, basically), something that's of the utmost importance to me; I reorganized my priorities (being happy is at the top, along with being both physically and mentally healthy); I became a better friend, a better son.

Being trapped in a bedroom was hard, but it gave me much time to think. So I thought and thought long and hard. And I realized that what we most value in life, freedom, is mainly a state of mind. I finally understood, after a year of being a prisoner, what Hamlet meant when he said: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."