

Let them all tell you
what happened



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Lo Que No Existe

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Dedication

To all those who couldn't get a hug in their last moments:
may their souls rest among tulips and almond trees,
wrapped up by the breeze of unconditional love.

Mercedes Pescador

“My soul is free and it is its own self,
and it is accustomed to carry itself in its own way”

Michel de Montaigne

The Essays (according to the 1595 edition
by Marie de Gournay)



Writings from the heart

I started this collective literary work on March 12th 2020, I was full of curiosity but I also did it out of my own fears. The World Health Organization (WHO) had just declared the coronavirus or COVID-19 a pandemic, the death toll was alerting of an unknown danger with unpredictable consequences which was spreading from country to country, causing death and misery. The book shops were closing, the crisis was affecting every economic sector and the continuity of my own publishing label was unknown.

If this were to be my last book, I would be grateful.

While scientists were desperately searching for a vaccine to save humanity, I found refuge in these intimate chronicles of the 2020 pandemic.

While world leaders were declaring the state of emergency and ordering their citizens to stay home to fight the unknown and highly contagious virus, I knew that my passion for the written word would be my only confinement. The lockdown, the closing of borders, airports, schools and companies was pointing to a recession and in my heart, there was a growing need to tell the story, to leave a testimony for humanity.

These pages have been written by authors from across the five continents during the convulsive spring of 2020 and they make up an emotional radiography of what they were thinking and feeling while facing a threat to their own lives. All of them appear with their real names, without any position or titles. There are town mayors, ambassadors, diplomats, artists, writers, teachers, housekeepers, unemployed, pensioners, nurses, of all ages and backgrounds, they all put together their words to write about love, fear, family, context, fortune and future. Some express themselves with a poem, others choose an

illustration or a photograph. All of them together make up the evidence of how a pandemic, 2020's, changed our lives.

Thank you to all of you, writers, men and women from the five continents, thank you for granting me the rights to publish and put it out at everyone's disposal. Your words have been my stimulus. Thank you, dear Alicia Kaufmann, for sending out invitations all around the world so the most intimate diaries could reach our publishing house. Thank you, Carolina Orihuela, Estephanía Guerrero, Any Do Santos and Alicia Ojalvo for your priceless collaboration with the production and launching of this literary work.

The impressive cover illustration is by the world-renowned Chilean painter and illustrator Carmen Aldunate. The back-cover drawing is by Adam, who, at just 5-year-old and confined with his parents in the U.S., keeps drawing his life and he recreates the world as a big house with one sole roof through where the "bad bug" sneaks in.

If this were to be my last book, I would be grateful. Thank you.

Mercedes Pescador

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Spring 2020

FUTURE





FUTURE

What is happening now is different, it kills confidence

Ramón Tamames

Madrid, Spain

Economist, professor and writer

We show our surprise, we talk about how incredible this unexpected situation is, with the overused reminiscence of black swans. We don't quite understand the fact that we are still in confinement, more or less strict, not less than 4.000 million people, half of humanity.

Frequent recollections from Bocaccio's Decameron, and Camus' The Plague, even if we hadn't read them. There are, sometimes, personal feelings of freedom deprivation, but the confinement is not a prison but a passage from normal life to a path somehow oneiric.

There are a few episodes of unease induced by the "stay home", in a society which is, to a great extent, filled with comfort. But also, the extreme situation of what we call "to live hand to mouth", as we can't clearly see what the future might be.

The media, obsessed with the virus; and whole families, by the millions, are draining their stocks, both mental and physical, of films and series. Using telematic resources, they try to continue working, maintaining their precious routine...

Memories re-emerge, from past and hard times: the oil crash of 1973-1974; the stock-market crisis of 1987, which was stopped dead by the central banks; the fantasy of the dot.com companies in the third millennium; the wealth loss on the real estate speculative crisis of 2008. What is happening now is different, it kills confidence and foretells harder times.

Nothing can compare to the coronavirus crisis, the viral grave for hundreds of thousands of people, entailed by the darkest premonitions. No, we will not live better tomorrow just because we showed solidarity. We will suffer greater hardships, for the lack of global governing and coherent reasoning.

But we shouldn't sink into depression either. Jorge Manrique explained it better than anyone: "Not any time gone by was better".

The coronavirus seen from the future

Juan Manuel Rodríguez Elizondo

México

Grandad, why do you call my dad Chato?

—Oh, my dear Ana Sophia! It's because I couldn't call him Juan Manuel, because it would feel like I was talking to myself. You are as nosy as I am, poor you, any old matter will make you curious and you will try to make sense of the less common things.

—Hey listen, granddad, I want you to tell me about that time when so many people got sick.

—Yes, I remember, it was in 2020, a time of much uncertainty when the way of life of people got really disrupted.

—How many people died, granddad?

—Well, I'm not sure exactly, but at that time we were about 7.700 million people in the world, and I think around 50 million died.

—That's a lot of people...

—Most of those people were adults, elderly people. Even though they took refuge in their homes, many got infected with that disease. The biggest problem was that the symptoms didn't show in the first days of infection, but it

still could be spread to other people. It was a time when we all felt unsafe because we were not really sure who was ill and who wasn't. A few mad ones said that it was just a smoke screen so the world economy would reset but I never believed that. It was terrible, there were many deaths in Europe, the continent with more elderly people.

» Some people blamed China for the whole problem with this pandemic, because that's where it started. They said that they had allowed the virus to escape, that they had created the virus in a laboratory, that it was a biological bomb, like in science fiction movies. We were afraid. To kill the virus, we hid ourselves behind face masks, gloves, disinfectant products, sprays. It was a time of psychosis; it seemed a nightmare. There was a page on the internet which informed us about the daily cases of infection, the daily deaths, and the total figures.

» We didn't have a cure for this disease. They said it was like a very strong flu, damaging the lungs and stopping people from breathing. At that time there were still many people smoking cigarettes with diabetes, which was a lethal combination for those infected. Thank God, I didn't get infected, although I belonged to the risk group. At that time, I was a bit fat and I was suffering from high blood pressure.

» They forbid us to greet with handshakes and kissing. It was very strange, I would watch movies at home where the characters were hugging and kissing each other, and I would feel a chill down my spine watching those scenes which had been shot before the pandemic but now seemed like irresponsible actions. They put in our heads the idea that every personal contact meant a risk of infection so we would avoid any signs of affection.

» We learned a lot about health and how we could protect ourselves from this type of virus. Some politicians affirmed that it would only affect rich people because they were the

ones who travelled more and therefore were more exposed, how ridiculous! In one occasion, a presenter from Spanish television mocked the Mexican president for saying that the virus could be fought with the catholic saint cards. Your great-grandfather said that Spanish people came to teach religion to the Mexicans when they colonised us, so he wouldn't accept the mockery. Other people said that the virus had emerged from an armadillo species that the Chinese ate. There were no vaccines. A Frenchman became a hero worldwide for discovering that there were two medicines for malaria which could be used to cure patients with the virus.

»The most frequented tourist destinations like Spain, Italy and France were the most financially affected. A long time passed until visits could be resumed. Many economies collapsed, we even thought that humanity was coming to an end.

»Prince Charles, the heir to the British crown, got infected with the disease. That's why he couldn't become king and they mocked him saying «At last you had the crown, but the coronavirus, you fool». In Mexico there were about 100.000 deaths, not that many if you take into consideration the total population, and it was because we all locked ourselves at home when it was known that the virus was so lethal.

»That was the story of the coronavirus, my dear granddaughter, a story of psychosis from which we didn't really come out as well or unscathed as we should have done.

We're just a speck of dust in the Universe

Bernardo Congote
Colombia

When the Voyager 2 spacecraft was planning to leave the Solar System in the nineties, Carl Sagan asked for its

camera to be pointed towards us to take our photograph. And this way, we found out that we are nothing but a pale blue speck in the Universe. Now, that little blue speck is under a death threat made by a virus that scientist call COVID-19. These scientists, vilified by believers, chiromancers, preachers and haruspices, are now chased by journalists, political and social networks. To kill them? No! To find out the truth. COVID-19 is saving us from the post-truth era. From the ephemeral kingdom of Twitter and Facebook.

Scientists are teaching us to wash our hands and look after our bodies, something that thousands of gods and priests hadn't manage to achieve.

The one who calls himself God's representative on Earth has locked himself in a palace. He doesn't speak. And the square were his sheep usually hover around, is now empty. If he were to come to his window to give a speech, he wouldn't have an audience, as he had deserved for centuries. The country which they say is God's reign, Italy, is deserted. Europe, the empress of terror for centuries, is shaking, moaning and in lockdown. It's a positive feeling to notice how pleasantly peaceful it is now, in the middle of Trump's silence, and also now that the Chinese dragon hardly spits the flame of a match. The overly mass-produced goods are detained at the harbours because consumers are buying less. The oceans, infested with tankers, are desolate. The airports, empty.

What are we learning from this? Our own insignificance. Our belonging to a little planet which we had destroyed with no compassion and with the hope of reaching quickly a fantasy heaven. The apocalypse has arrived already; we've been building it for centuries. The churches are heading towards becoming museums, we could even substitute them for schools. Teachers could now achieve the position required by humanity eager for knowledge. Schools should

function twenty-four hours a day, and at the same time brothels should close down.

Our arrogance has made us think that Earth is immense because there are cars that reach 400 km/h and planes that get to 1,200 km/h. However, our planet travels the Solar System at around 40.000 km/h and the light's wave-particles travel at 300.000 km/s. The universe we can actually manage to see is just 5% of the total, the other 95% is made out of dark matter and energy. It's believed that the history of mankind only spans across 200,000 years, while the known Universe's is estimated around 13m500 millions of years.

We have deified our ignorance! The search for a sole path should be understood as multi-trajectory; what we considered to be true, as untrue. It's advisable to change the predictive ability of priests for the scientific empire of the doubt; our eagerness to live in balance, for the permanent unbalance; the search for equality, for the awareness of the unequal reality. It's in our own interest to learn again what we thought we already knew.

To those people who thought the world was going to end, I give you the good news that it's hardly starting thanks to a virus. It has made us aware of our small size in front of the immense universe and it has left wide-open the doors to the world of wonderland.

All this because of Carmela

Jhonny Castillo

Montevideo, Uruguay

These days I haven't stopped thinking about a course on historical demography about the black plague which I attended a few years ago. There we took some time to analyse the prologue of Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron. The Italian author, who belongs to the humanistic school of

thought, besides writing about the scourge that was decreasing the population in the 14th century, he talked about the cruelty of abandoning the sick to avoid infection: on the third day of showing signs of the plague —among them, stained spots on the skin—, the convalescent patient would die. These stains are the equivalent to cough and fever nowadays. The isolation and the social distancing are now being battled with the use of technology, but the vulnerability of the species is still the same.

And, talking about vulnerability, Uruguay became news to the world for not having any patients with the virus. They all blame Carmela for the disease reaching the country now. This small country ended up honouring that popular saying which reads «small country, big hell». The theme of conversations now is not the weather or crime, but the virus, and three key words: Milan, marriage and Carrasco. It turns out that a fashion designer was in Milan and she says that when she returned to the country she requested to be tested for coronavirus at the airport. She didn't get an effective reply from the public officials so she continued with her life as normal, in the bubble of her world of furs. A few days later, she decided to attend a wedding with over five hundred guests, and after that she found out she had coronavirus.

Carmela told her story to the newspaper El País, putting the blame on the government forces for their health inefficiency for not having done the appropriate tests. However, she has been heavily criticised, especially for her lack of common sense and caution. There was a leak of a few recordings where some of Carmela's acquaintances accuse her of being stupid and showing a cold and absurd individualism where the "I" prevails over the "we".

I've turned a bit sceptical since I arrived in Uruguay two years ago. But it's kind of odd that the virus appeared on Friday 13. Everybody talked about Carmela more than the

disease. They said: «It's all Carmela's fault, it's because of her that this is happening to us». As Carmela is posh and lives in Carrasco, one of the wealthy neighbourhoods of Santiago, there have been recommendations not to go to that particular neighbourhood, but also not to go to poor areas where for sure nobody there had been to Milan....

What started as just factory gossip has turned real and there are now fifty cases of infection. I was sent home, teleworking, for being asthmatic. You see know the fast pace of people in the street. I live with three friends and in our home there's an unprecedented revolution taking place: we all clean with enthusiasm. There's a smell of chlorine, soap and isopropyl alcohol.

I told my colleagues of the quarantines we had in Venezuela: «You could go out, yes. But, in times of social conflict, your life was in danger. If you demanded your rights, you were in risk of ending in jail or injured. That's why we had to be prepared to stay at home. You would buy and eat whatever was available». In war times in my country, between 2014 and 2017, you knew that it would all end when either the people got tired or when the government yielded. It was always a case of the former. This situation is different because it comes with pure and hard uncertainty. For now, we will remain isolated, without personal contact, like in the times of the black plague. What started as the union of two people in marriage, today is separating us. Thank you, Carmela.

A voice for the world

Adonay Vilche

Maracay, Venezuela

In our global society, mankind has forgotten its origin for a future it won't see, creating a reality where what's valued is not the simple but the complex. Mankind and its dynamics are the origin of the pain we are experiencing

right now. We are the ones who caused this distressing situation of social and family isolation, with grandparents separated from their children and grandchildren, couples at a distance or parents away from their children, trying to ease that distance with telecommunications. The houses are empty, getting ruined, without the presence of those who made big efforts to buy, build or refurbish them. The vehicles are gathering dust. The gardens are dry, with no new flower sprouts, and you can't even hear the barks of a guard dog.

And that's how we find ourselves in this global world, the same world where mankind wanted to enjoy a pleasant life, enjoy the gardens with family and pets, not imagining that soon nothing of this would be true.

Overcoming the problems as a team

Steph Ritz

Corvallis, Oregon, United States

As someone with a rocky health history, when my non-American friends began entering lockdown, I stocked up on essentials and switched to working from home - before the stay-at-home orders from our state governor, before my country understood and hoarders cleared out stores, before businesses were forced to close.

Like so many others, my full-time job reduced my hours because of the pandemic and I am facing an uncertain financial future. Even while I grieve the loss of income stability, I am grateful I still have insurance, that I had a second job, that my second job was able to pick up my extra availability, and that both jobs can be done from home. As the economy crumbles around the world and stocks plummet, who knows what will happen with the job market. Yet my loss is nothing compared to what others are facing because of this virus.

On Easter Sunday, two friends in two different parts of the country lost their fathers to COVID, while a third friend lost her mother. As someone whose parents have already passed, it's never easy to welcome others into the dead-parent-club. My heart aches for their losses.

Where I live now, no one I know has been affected by the virus.

Living on the outskirts of a deserted college town in Oregon, USA during COVID has its perks. We're a poster-child community who took early action and has done well practicing proper social distancing. I'm surrounded by quiet country roads and crisp cool smells of spring blossoms.

It's not been a lonely time, what with shelter-in-place friends upstairs, a sprawling backyard with a hen who loves hugs, and two cats vying for attention.

Instead of going to the market, I now buy my food directly from a farmer about 5 miles away. Coming up with seasonal farm-to-table gourmet meals has become a special kind of passion for me. This week my farmer friend tucked a pint of strawberries, first of the year, in my basket - a delicious treasure trove of juicy ruby gems to share with my quarantine crew.

It has always worked out in the past, so I trust it'll be the same this time.

A window to the world

Damián Rodríguez Pérez

A Coruña, Spain

Lawyer and script-writer

Day April 3rd 2020. There's less light coming through my window today. What day is it? Nothing seems to make any sense; citizens are avoiding each other. The pandemic has won, fear has sneaked into each corner of the city. You turn

the television on, or look to the counter of the newsagent's in one of those programmed trips, and all you can see are numbers and figures. I'm so tired of it all that I've started to not even feel empathy for others.

Day March 12th 2020. The pandemic has spread its dark wings, the jokes are over, the laughs are frozen. I see psychosis and paranoia around me. I miss reading without getting worried, but all of those deaths and my fellowmen getting infected, it's affecting me.

Day March 15th. Mark Zuckerberg has started to abduct us. We are eager to know and know more, even though it might be fake news. I'm worried about my parents, María and my friends. I have a lot of plans in my head to mitigate the isolation. I've started to go up and down the stairs like a madman to keep fit and to get rid of anxiety.

Day March 23rd. What is freedom? Now I start to understand prisoners and those people who have lost their freedom. The windows in my home are the bars in the prison cell I live in. Spring has arrived with all its exuberance. The first thing I'll do when the state of emergency is over, will be to hug a tree.

Two faces of the same coin

Diana Calderón

Medellín, Colombia

On March 19th 2020, he came to my house to bring me a book he had bought thinking of me, To Die for Love (really?). That was the last time I saw him. But this is not a story about my impossible love. It's the story about how, up to that day, I thought I would see most of the people in everyday life for indefinite time: students, bosses, friends, family. On the next day the quarantine started in my city, and then spread nationwide.

We are living in uncertain times, more questions than

answers. In spite of everything, I've managed to keep some continuity and I feel privileged. I've managed to continue with work, teleworking from home, and continue getting a salary, now there's double the number of people living off this salary. My nuclear family is small and living together has been peaceful. I've tried to keep active doing a bit of exercise and I've lost the hectic pace I had before the lockdown, now I don't get up early, I'm not late coming back home and I always eat at regular times. I've also kept in connection with the people I love, through video calls, and I've spent so much time colouring mandalas that I must be close to nirvana.

However, there is matter I still haven't managed to resolve, with respect to the two different positions being discussed about what will happen to humanity after all this is over (an expression quite common these days). There are those who say this situation will bring out the worse in us, and they predict more wars, poverty and diseases; but there're also those who think that we will suddenly learn from our past mistakes and we will come out of this situation being more empathetic and more aware of the world around us, more "human". Aren't these, by chance, two faces of the same coin, and therefore the full representation of mankind?

Just the beginning

Ekaterina Shapovalova

Moscow, Russia

I am writing this note with mixed feelings inside. For me personally as a professional coach, consultant and lecturer, the crisis opened many new possibilities and provided a secure space for experiment, where the right for mistake is granted with acceptance. Having faced substantial external limitations people and myself are facing inwards to find and accept their personal limitations, vulnerabilities and imperfection, which in turn is the first and most important