

THE VIOLET HOUR

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*Translated from the Spanish by
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My son, if only you knew the wasteland from which
I write to you, out of what mess of tears and clothing,
out of what disorder and apathy.

FRANCISCO UMBRAL, *Mortal y rosa*

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back
Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits
Like a taxi throbbing waiting

T. S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*

This book is a dictionary with a single entry. It is the search for a word that does not exist in my language—the word for a parent who has watched his child die. Children who lose their parents are orphans, and those who have to close their spouse's dead eyes are widows and widowers. But we, the parents who sign the documents authorizing our children's funerals, we have no name, no civil status. We remain parents forever. Parents to a ghost who does not grow, a ghost whom we will never pick up from school, who will never fall for a girl, who will never go to college, who will never leave home. A child who will never upset us and whom we will never have to scold. A child who will never read the books we dedicate to him.

The fact that there is no word to describe us means we are condemned to live always in a violet hour. Our watches have not stopped, but they display the same time again and again. Whenever it seems that the second hand will force the hour hand to make the leap forward, instead it slips back again to where it started. We are stuck in no-man's time, stuck in our own redundancy, within which we call up this fantastic and unlikely story, this cheap

tragedy filled with all the tricks of an inexperienced screenwriter, the story that trapped us here in the first place. I evoke it in writing. I recall this year of my life in the hope of fixing the story in place, of making sure it never shrinks into a cliché.

My son Pablo was ten months old when he was first admitted to the hospital, and was nearly two when we scattered his ashes. It is this stretch of time that makes up our violet hour. It is this stretch of time that makes up this book, which contains all the words I need to give a name to my condition.

1

Here Be Monsters

I have decided not to call the child *the child*. Not *the kid*, not *the boy*. I might call him *cub*, but not in this book. I will not invent pseudonyms, I will not use initials. Just Pablo. Just his name. Ever since he was born, I have always been very upset whenever people depersonalize him. Every time anyone, even his mother, talks about him as *the child* or *the kid*, or *this child* or *this kid*, I correct them, ask which child or which kid they're talking about. I've never been able to accept it when people talk about someone who is present in the conversation using demonstrative pronouns. I am hypersensitive to particular acts of rudeness that go unnoticed among the majority. I don't like it when people ask for things without saying *please*, or when requests are phrased as orders—even if they are orders—or when people shout at each other. I fight, unsuccessfully, for Pablo to always be Pablo. And so I will not use tricks, will not do what Umbral did in *Mortal y rosa* and call his son *the child*, even though for him that was simply a way of fencing in and closing off the pain, making sure it didn't bite him as he wrote. I will call him by his name in full, so that his

presence does not blur or even rub off around the edges, so that he is here, complete and embodied in the midst of life.

I will also allow myself recourse to the catalog of heteronyms that can be written alongside the name of Pablo. The list of intimate names, names that only belong to the one who bestows them. The privilege some of us grant ourselves, or granted us by love, to take the name from the official birth registry and play with it, chop it up, shrink it, stretch it. In my mouth, between the two of us, Pablo can be Cuque. Or Pau, a name that makes some people think we're Catalan. When we're alone and give ourselves over to our caveman celebrations—two males banging their foreheads together and biting each other without causing any damage, the father and his cub, mammals with no culture, no tricks—it is love that comes up with little songs accompanied by farting noises to make him laugh. I sing, “Cuque is great, / Cuque is the man, he / turns himself around / and shows the world his fanny.” And Pablo laughs and shows off his smooth, white fanny, just as if it were any other child's ass, to be shown off in the park, on the beach, in the street, in any of those places where I still don't know that we won't be able to go any more. And I laugh, as well, laugh until my ribs shift out of place, laugh until I fall to the floor and show off my own old, unappreciated ass.

But to begin with, Pablo was only Pablo. Ever since he looked at me without seeing me near the entrance to the operating rooms, where hospital regulations had exiled me, fathers not being allowed to witness cesarean births. With my legs in pain from so much walking up

and down the hallway, waiting for the operation to come to an end—there had been complications and it had almost ended in melodrama—I saw two doctors and a nurse coming toward me, pushing a tiny crib. Out of it, wrapped in blankets and wearing a kind of Phrygian cap, appeared Pablo’s face, which fixed its blind eyes on my own. There was no room for sentiment in that hallway. The doctors overwhelmed me with information that I forgot as soon as they had spoken, and the nurse pushed me out of the way in order to take my son to the ICU, where he was to remain under observation until they brought his mother up to the maternity ward. I didn’t manage to say anything more than *hello, Pablo, it’s Daddy*. Going against the sanitary controls, I held out my finger to him, and his reflexes grabbed it with what appeared to me to be a great deal of force. Although it’s physiologically impossible, because newborn babies cannot look at anything, I felt him looking at me. It was an angry look, filled with Oedipal rage, blaming me for bringing to an end all those months of amniotic comfort and wrapping him in these cloths that were itchy and did not alleviate the intense cold of the world. A few seconds later, the elevator door closed and my son was lost in what was then still to me the incomprehensible jumble of the hospital’s guts. With Pablo taken away to some place I didn’t know how to reach, and Cris recovering from various complications in a room that I was not allowed to enter, I was left alone, walking up and down the hallway, unable to make myself stop. I had never felt so alone, I had never been so scared. Since then, I have never felt the same loneliness, but I almost miss the small, reasonable

fear, this worry that didn't even reach the level of panic or terror. A manageable fear, one-millionth the size of the real fear I would feel later.

Today I see it as an omen, although it was nothing more than a birth with a few problems, all relatively easy to resolve. Today I see relationships of cause and effect where there are only coincidences. Today I look for reasons, when all there is are hours, minutes, and seconds. And nevertheless the fear remained. Somehow it managed to make its way through those hours and that hospital hallway, and it followed me for the next several weeks and months. Fear of everything. Above all, fear of the air.

Early in the morning, without his mother knowing, I leant over newborn Pablo in his cradle. While pretending to pat him, I put my index finger under his flared nostrils and didn't take it away until I felt his breath. In the shadows, I learnt to make out the movements of his infant chest, an up-and-down unnoticeable for any gaze that was not my own. Myopic and bleary in my daily life, my eyes became eagle-like in their ability to detect signs of life in this minute, fragile creature. Sudden death, choking on vomit, suffocating under blankets. Every object was dangerous. Too much cold. Too much heat. Having things too clean, or too dirty. The whole world had my son under siege, and I had to pretend I didn't care.

An anthropologist or a radical Darwinist would talk at this point about the call of our ancestors, the hominid protecting his young from the very real threat of hyenas and lions. We live in a safe environment, although our primate brain has not yet realized this. Our instincts keep telling us that we are running around naked in the Great

Rift Valley, sniffing our own feces and seeking out trees for shelter from beasts. But I don't dream about spark-eyed hyenas lying in wait in the night, or hissing snakes, or eagles dive-bombing with their hooked claws held out to strike. I dream of buttons that he might swallow, of unexplained respiratory failure that no autopsy can elucidate, of vomiting, or diarrhea, of bundles slipping from my hands and landing headfirst on the floor.

My brain knows where I live, and it thinks up appropriate and realistic dangers for me. This is why it is completely unprotected from what's waiting for it in the doctor's office.

The young doctor sighs uncomfortably. She is not used to sitting down. In the ER, they spend their time standing up. The analysis has turned up some very irregular results, she explains, looking us in the eyes all the while, using a well-rehearsed speech where it is very clear what she can and cannot say. His leucocytes are very high, and his platelet count is very low. And what does that mean? I ask, not bothering to hide my fear. It might mean any number of things. In general, a high leucocyte count is an indicator of infection, as are enlarged lymph nodes, but we can't make a diagnosis until we run some more tests. So we're going to take him up to the ward now, there's a bed ready, and first thing tomorrow we'll run some tests in order to rule out certain possibilities.

We don't ask any more questions. Both of us feel that the pleasant doctor has strong suspicions—maybe an absolute certainty—about what the diagnosis will end up being, but we prefer not to guess, and, in the end, we don't give it a great deal of importance. We feel that we are in safe hands and resign ourselves to waiting.

We are very tired and sort things out between ourselves with a minimum of words. Cris will stay overnight, and I will go back home to find some clean clothes and a toilet bag.

In spite of my natural tendency to hypochondria, I feel that Pablo is in good hands and that all this will end up as one of those stories for stupid, first-time parents to share at the swings with other stupid, first-time parents like ourselves. We will compete to see which parents spent longest at the pediatrician's, which child was ill most often, who threw up the most. My son is hyperallergic. My son has a lazy eye. My son wears orthopedic shoes. My son's allergic to strawberries. My son is gluten intolerant, and it took us some time to find out. Just like old people sharing their clinical histories while they play boules, all us parents will talk about our children's medical troubles while we're out at the park, consoling ourselves with others' bad luck. Everything's fine, it's the same routine as always, I say to myself as I walk up the Paseo Fernando el Católico on the way home.

As I walk past the Telepizza on the Plaza de San Francisco, I am seized by a ravenous hunger. I remember that I haven't eaten and think that there's probably nothing in the fridge. I check to see if I've got any money and walk in to buy the greasiest and most unhealthy pizza they have, to add a calorific finish to this incredibly shitty day. I almost feel lascivious about the idea of chomping it down in the shadows of the living room while I fall asleep watching any old rubbish on the television. Perhaps predicting what was going to happen, Cris has told me not to fall asleep on the couch and to go to bed early.

She knows I'll end up slumped there with the television on and an open box of pizza at my side, like some pathetic and particularly obstinate bachelor.

I give my order, and the cashier asks me if I have a youth ID card.

No, no I don't, I say, but thank you very much for asking, it's nice that you think I might still be eligible.

The girl smiles broadly, her teeth are white and even. She blushes and looks at me with studied flirtatiousness. She is quite attractive. She doesn't know this, but her involuntary, adolescent seduction attempt has saved the day. I don't know this either, but this flirtation will be the last trivial, pleasant interaction that I have with a human being for some months. I have disregarded the omens, and I have no idea of what's going to happen in a couple of hours' time. If I did know, I would try to prolong this pleasure, make the girl blush a couple more times. She's young, and likes to know that she's liked, so it would be easy. But at the time it is only a small spark of friendliness in an unwelcoming afternoon. It must be a sad day if talking to the cashier at Telepizza brightens it.

I wake up at six o'clock in the morning on the couch, and a very old episode of *The X-Files* is showing on Fox Crime. I turn the volume on and try to get back to sleep, but the story sucks me in and I end up watching the next episode, as well. I've always liked Agent Mulder, and I can't deny that Agent Scully does something for me. I like them very much as a comedy duo. I have a piece of the remaining pizza for breakfast, make some coffee, and send a message to Cris, asking if she's awake and if I can call her yet. She calls back straight away. It's been a dreadful night.

Pablo has been running a fever practically the whole time and vomiting a lot. He's very sick. Also, she had a big fright (or an enormous fright, I can't judge how large fears are any more). When she called the nurse to come and clean up the vomit and wash Pablo, the nurse got very serious and started to examine him all over and make marks with a felt-tip pen in a lot of places. Then she ran out and came back with the friendly doctor, who looked at all the spots the nurse showed her. She went through them all very carefully and shook her head. In order to calm Cris down, the doctor turned to her and said, It's nothing, there are some blue marks, but it's the result of his pathological process. We'll wait until tomorrow, when they run the tests. And after that, nothing else happened. Cris thinks they were ruling out the possibility of meningitis but not daring to say so to her. It could be that, I speculate, rubbing my face. My brother had meningitis, and he was able to get it cured in time, and he also had a temperature and felt tired. I'm going to take a shower and come over there. Do you want me to bring you anything? We kiss over the telephone, and I hang up feeling very guilty about my night of bachelor freedom and the smile on the face of the Telepizza girl.

Cris and I sit down facing one another on ridiculously small chairs, a round table between us. As if they had been choreographed, or were playing musical chairs, all the doctors—I can't count them, maybe there's more than six of them—sit down at the same time. They smile. We smile. There is a hollow silence. Someone clears her throat. The doctors look at one another, and all eyes eventually turn to the oldest one, an extremely well-dressed and serious-looking woman. We look at her, as well, until she feels forced to speak. She speaks in a low voice, but without hesitation. Sweet and dry at the same time. Warm but blunt. Absolutely professional. She looks at Cris and me in turn, regularly switching her attention from one to the other. She knows how to do this. She has done it too many times before. She is not holding any papers, she does not take refuge in the patient's clinical history. She makes eye contact, keeps her hands on her lap, and crosses her legs elegantly, with an air of natural dignity. I don't know this yet, but I'm going to have to thank her a great many times for her control and her elegance. This is the first time.

In spite of her composure, in spite of all the many times she has had to act out the same role, she swallows and hesitates a little before beginning.

First of all, good morning, and thank you for waiting. We've brought you here to tell you what we know so far. (A brief pause.) You came to the ER because Pablo's temperature would not go down, and after running some tests, it was decided he would be admitted in order to take a sample of his medulla and rule out various possible diagnoses. (Another pause, a little longer than the first one.) Well, we've got the preliminary results back, and I'm sorry to say that the news is not good. (She looks like she's going to make another pause now, for us to ask questions, but she does not allow us to increase the dramatic tension and instead carries on without taking her eyes off us, speaking smoothly and clearly.) Pablo has leukemia.

I react extremely stupidly. I put my hand to my mouth to hold back a scream that comes out a bit like a hiccough, and I think I start to sob, but I'm not sure. I hear myself saying *no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no*, but it's not me who is speaking, rather a voice that sounds like mine, but distorted. I gather myself inward, fold myself into myself, pressed back in that ridiculously small chair. I sink deep into myself, and I stop seeing the room. It's Cris's hand that pulls me back out of my own guts. She holds it out, violently, wide open, looking for my hand. Making a great effort, I expand once again and reoccupy my whole body so that I can take the hand that's reaching over from the other side of the table. I feel that I should squeeze it tightly, without hesitating for a second. Any delay could crack the hospital down to its foundations. I move my gaze up the arm until I reach her

eyes, bright and wounded. Eyes that snuffle at me, eyes that root around looking for mine. Dog-like, beaten gazes that reach out beyond the world of the purely animal. From a distance, I hear myself asking a question between sobs, and I am surprised at my stupidity and that I am able to form words with my mouth—Is it very advanced? Without changing her tone or her position, the doctor replies—Yes, but that doesn't mean anything. Whenever leukemia causes symptoms, it's because it's advanced. It can't be detected early on. She stops talking, wondering for a moment if she should give me more information, then decides to go ahead. Ninety-eight per cent of Pablo's medulla is infected. Then it's as if she regrets having given out such a concrete detail, and she goes back to the pre-existent script.

They stand up. A flapping of white gowns and the rustling of cloth on cloth. A few of them touch our arms and murmur that they are very sorry. We stand up, as well. Again, it's nothing more than inertia. All I think, or hear myself think, as if I were reading someone else's mind, is that I like that they called Pablo by his name. They didn't call the child *the child*. They respect him, they name him, they see that he is deserving of a space and a time. They are putting him in a world of concrete objects, very far away from the shadows in the cave. He is not a patient, he is not a subject of study, he is not a case, he is not even *your son*. He is Pablo, with his five letters, autonomous, unique, present, and alive. They are going to look after him well, I hear myself think, and then I'm furious with myself for trying to comfort myself when I don't even know how much I'm hurting. I am angry at this mind that seems like mine but sounds distant and echoing.

The attendant stops in front of a door with “Pediatric Oncology” stenciled on it. I read each letter one by one: P-E-D-I-A-T-R-I-C-O-N-C-O-L-O-G-Y. I read it again, quickly, skipping over a few of the vowels—pdatrc ncolgy. We walk through the door, and I start refusing to believe what’s happening. My peripheral vision becomes blurred, there is something foggy in front of my eyes, and sounds come muffled and faint to my ears. I want to escape, and I know that there’s no way out. However far I run, Pablo will still have leukemia. I cannot go back in time, I cannot wake up and realize that it was all a dream, I can’t even turn and flee, take all my money out of the bank and hide in a distant country under an assumed name, because Pablo’s death will destroy me wherever I am. I want to be with my son and with Cris, and at the same time I want to run away. I convince myself that I want nothing, because desire is impossible. There is nothing in the world apart from resignation. All I can do is sit back and watch us sink.

Ten months, not even a year of brightness. Just ten months of normal, boring paternity, comparable to the

experience of all other fathers. I have only been an archetypical father for ten months. Now I have to be a tragic father, to write in implausible prose a story of imprisonment and love. I, who only wanted to be a gag writer. I, who wanted nothing more than to come across as frivolous and pompous at the same time.