

SLANT

THE IMPOSSIBLE DEDICATION

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The author's desk.

DURING CONFINEMENT, in the time of the coronavirus, between the disorder of time and the

reorganization of daily tasks caused by the general shutdown, I acquired a new habit. Every day at 8:30 PM, after going out on the balcony to applaud or shout, I answer the videoconference call from my parents. They are in a city in the north of Castile in Spain, and I am in a district of Paris. Before the coronavirus, we talked once every two months, at important events, parties, birthdays. But now the daily call is like a blast of oxygen. This is what my mother, who has always had a talent for melodrama, says as soon as the screen opens: “Seeing you is like going out and breathing.” My father is ninety years old, a dynamic man who, before being locked up, walked five miles a day. He is also a cold man: a child abandoned by his own father, who grew up without affection, convinced that work was his only reason for existence. Although older people are not allowed outside, my father goes down every day, wearing his gloves and his mask, to buy a baguette several hundred feet from the house. “No one can refuse him that,” said my mother. And when he’s not in the room, she adds: “We may never be able to walk the streets together again. It may be his last spring. He must be able to go out.”

My mother addresses me sometimes in the masculine, sometimes in the feminine, but she always calls me Paul. I like it when my father asks, “Who’s calling?” and my mom says, “This is our *Pol*.” This is the way she imagines the spelling of my name. With each call, my father inspects my face on the screen as if to examine the changes produced by my gender transition. But also, as if he were looking for his face in mine: “You look more and more like your father,” says my mother. The transition underlined the similarity of our features, as if it brought out a phenotype that estrogen had concealed. I do not tell him, but this new resemblance is as disturbing for me as it is for him.

The other day my father asked me, “Why don’t you let your beard grow all over your face?”

“Because it does not grow uniformly,” I explain. “I started taking testosterone at the age of thirty-eight, and when the pores of the skin are closed, the hairs cannot grow.”

“Is that so. What a lot of hot air!” replies my dad.

“Leave him alone, don’t touch his beard. Is he talking to you about yours?” retorts my mother.

When I explain that I’m proofreading a new book that comes out in June, my mother asks me,

with an interest that reveals her desire, to whom I will dedicate it: *to Judith Butler*. “Who is this lady?” she asks. I explain that she is not a lady, that she is a person who doesn’t identify as either a man or a woman, that they just got their certificate as a nonbinary person in California. And that it’s an event, like when I legally changed my gender in 2017. I explain that it is thanks to this philosopher that I knew that even those of us who were considered deviant or degenerate could make philosophy. “But if it is neither a man nor a woman?” asks my father, “what is it?”

“They are Free,” I say to him.

“Is that so. What a lot of hot air!” he repeats.

The three of us laugh. Before hanging up, my father, who has never told me he loves me, comes very close to the screen and sends me a kiss. I don’t know how to react to his unexpected gesture. “We will wait for you tomorrow,” says my mother, “for our daily walk out together.”

After that meeting, hearing my mother’s subtle petition and seeing them so fragile and suddenly so affectionate, I told myself that I would like one day to be able to dedicate a book to them. And it occurs to me that for them to be able to take advantage of this dedication without being offended by the content, I would have to be able to write a book in which the words *homosexual* and *homosexuality*, the words *transsexual*, *transgender*, and *transsexuality*—where the word *sex* would not appear. Nor the word *sexuality*, nor *rape*, nor *sex worker*; neither *prostitution*, nor *abortion*; neither *penetration*, nor *dildo*; neither *anus*, nor *erection*, *penis*, *cock*, *vagina*. No *vulva*, no *clitoris*, no *breasts*, no *nipples*, no *fucking*, no *ejaculation*, no *AIDS*, no *orgasm*, no *blowjob*, no *sodomy*, no *masturbation*, no *perversion*, no *fag*, no *lesbian*, no *lesbianism*, no *dyke*, no *gay*, no *tomboy*, no *trucker*, no *whore*, no *mastectomy*, no *phalloplasty*, no *mental illness*, no *gender dysphoria*, no *psychosis*, no *schizophrenia*, no *depression*, no *pornography*, no *pharmacopornography*, no *shit*, no *addiction*, no *drugs*, no *alcoholism*, no *marijuana*, no *heroin*, no *cocaine*, *methadone*, *morphine*, *crack*, *dealer*, *suicide*, *prison*, *criminal* . . . And I think the writing exercise itself would be heroic. The book would be a long Barthesian periphrasis, but also a good distraction for periods of confinement.

Paul B. Preciado is a philosopher, a curator, and a trans activist. An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing, a collection of his columns between 2013 and 2018 for Libération

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