

## Introduction

### I.

*Grenade in Mouth: Some Poems of Miyó Vestrini* is the most ambitious translation of Miyó Vestrini's poetry to date and the first full-length collection of her work available in English. Drawing from three decades (1960s-90s), *Grenade in Mouth* presents a comprehensive look at Vestrini's poetry, including both her best-known poems and previously unpublished work from the posthumously collected *Es una buena máquina* (*It's a good machine*; Letra Muerta).

The first section of *Grenade in Mouth*, selected from Vestrini's published volumes, spans Vestrini's career and demonstrates why hers is a major voice of the vanguard of Venezuelan Poetry. A member of the experimental literary groups Apocalipsis (Apocalypse), 40 Grados Bajo la Sombra (40 Degrees in the Shade), Sardio (Sardius), La Republica del Este (The Republic of the East), and El Techo de La Ballena (The Ceiling of the Whale), she wrote alongside Victor Valera Mora, Margara Russotto, and others of the Generación de Los 60s (The Generation of the 60s). As Vestrini challenged poetic form, she also challenged social convention. An uncompromising woman intellectual in a milieu dominated by men, Vestrini soon carried great influence in Venezuela and beyond.

The second section of this book, 2015's *Es una buena máquina* gathers fragments and poems from her archives. Edited by Vestrini scholar Faride Mereb, *Es una buena máquina* samples from the author's uncollected magazine publications, journals, and unpublished manuscripts. These texts expand and contract with the exhaustions of life and poetry and by doing so, create a sensitive portrait of a writer in process.

Miyó Vestrini was born in France, 1938, and given the name Marie-Jose Fauvelle Ripert. When she was nine, fluent in French and already reading the great poets in Italian, she emigrated to Venezuela with her mother, sister, and her stepfather, whose last name she took as her own. She was a rebellious child, and at eighteen, she joined Apocalipsis, the only woman to do so in the then male-dominated scene of the Venezuelan literary avant-garde. She soon became a dedicated and prize-winning journalist, directing the arts section of the newspaper *El Nacional* and writing columns in *Diario de Caracas*, *El Universal*, *La República*, *El cohete*,

and others for many years. She published three books of poetry in her lifetime: 1971's *Las historias de Giovanna* (*The Stories of Giovanna*), 1975's *El invierno próximo* (*Next Winter*), and *Pocas virtudes* (*Little Virtues*), published in 1986. Vestrini died by suicide on November 29, 1991, leaving behind two collections: a book of poems, *Valiente Ciudadano* (*Brave Citizen*) and a book of stories, *Órdenes al corazón* (*Orders to the Heart*).

*Grenade in Mouth* is another book of Miyó Vestrini's: an imagined one. It is a work that remains eternally unwritten and unread. Bequeathed into being in her poem "Last Will and Testament," it is a legacy she leaves behind for her best friend Elisa Maggi (*La Negra*). This imaginary book takes its place in that will among a sad feeling and a small pleasure—Vestrini also wills *La Negra* her loneliness and her Ismael Rivera records—and in its title, it suggests the power of Vestrini's words to destroy both others and herself. *Grenade in Mouth* is more, however, than a book willed into being inside the magic territory of a poem, it is a phrase that shows up a second time in the poem "Brave Citizen." That poem—arguably one of Vestrini's best—dares God to find a death too vile or violent for its death-loving narrator. Teasing and flirting with God, too, she asks him for more than death: what she seeks is clarity:

Allow me, lord  
to see me as I am:  
    rifle in hand  
    grenade in mouth  
    gutting the people I love.

We have called this book *Grenade in Mouth* not to presume that we have made the book Vestrini wanted—that version of *Grenade in Mouth* must be allowed to live in perfection inside the eternal desires of a poem—but because there is, as Vestrini must have known, no more apt descriptor of her work. This is a book that comes with a warning label. Readers must be careful. In the work of Vestrini, there is no casual or harmless reading.

Vestrini knew, of course, as she took her own life, that she would not live to make a book called *Grenade in Mouth*. It is with Elisa Maggi's permission and assistance that we have been able to make—if not a book that Vestrini herself imagined—a book that at least attempts to fill in the blank of her legacy, and it is with great pleasure that we are able to dedicate this other form of *Grenade in Mouth* to her.

## II.

Critics have called Miyó Vestrini the poet of militant death. It is also said of her that her entire life was lived in service of its end. Vestrini is known, too, as the Sylvia Plath of Venezuela, but if she joins Plath as a confessional poet, what she is confessing is not a set of personal problems: it is a fatal disappointment with the world at large. Her work is less a self-exposure than a set of incantations. These poems are spells for a death that might live eternally, for what Vestrini offers readers is a fundamental paradox: how to create, through writing, an enduring extinction. Her poems are not soft or brooding laments. They are bricks hurled at empires, ex-lovers, and any saccharine-laced lie that parades itself as the only available truth.

In Vestrini's poetry, no form of tenderness is left unprosecuted. Her poetry is unafraid to spit at beauty and swaddle death in its arms. Maternal love is tossed out as unsentimentally as a child's soiled diaper ("turn eighteen / and snort all the coke you want / and puke on your mother's china"). Romantic love is the precinct of rats. The love of a poet for poetry isn't let off easily either: its gendered absurdities are exposed ("[poets] write two lines and ejaculate. Alone"), its false heroics dismantled. Even friendship is not spared, as in her elegy to her old friend Victor Valera Mora, who she lovingly mocks and chastises in death ("he died like an idiot / of a heart attack treated with chamomile tea"\*\*\*).

The love of life itself is the love met with Vestrini's fiercest resistance. When joy enters her poetry, it is always as an intruder breaking into an apartment not to burglarize but to try, against the tenant's will, to install some nice furniture. As Vestrini writes in "One Day of the Week I":

if you choose  
you live.  
And if you live  
you enjoy.  
But joy is the horrific part of the dream

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\* "Caress"

\*\* "The Smell"

\*\*\* "Chamomile Tea"

Joy attaches Vestrini regretfully, via life's available pleasures—sex, tortellini, a good song—to the existence her poems are always boasting she would rather do without. “I’ll chose death,” she writes, “but you could not have expected the leg of lamb to melt in your mouth.”\*\*\*\* Attended to with the zeal only available to one who would prefer to despise it, any pleasure appearing in Vestrini’s poetry is the granular kind, slipped into the poems despite Vestrini’s vigilance against it. It is pleasure, not fear, that is always throwing Vestrini off the path toward her end.

Miyó Vestrini was, even at her most morbid, clearly hilarious, too—the only kangaroo among the corpses, perhaps—and it is this humor that gives her poems a distinct charm. Accusing God, for example, as she does in the poem “Brave Citizen,” of having a predilection for hot dogs, is typical Vestrini. Surprise becomes its own structure. A poem begging for death becomes, despite itself, one so funny its unintended side effect is a new will to live. Sufficiency, as a form of poetic organization, also reigns. Her mastery is often in giving the reader only just enough—a grease stain on the sheet, a breathtaking final line, a disorienting word in a list. In her poems, universes unfold in a wink, and a hint is as heavy as all the world. Vestrini does not let the reader fill in the blanks of her poems with boiler-plate lyricism: instead, having never omitted at least one unpoetic element—digestion, genitalia, cauliflower casserole, and peeling paint—from any of them, her poems keep even the white space around her words gritty.

There is, however, one love that Vestrini’s poetry is helpless against: the love of death. The thanatophilia of these poems is erotic, unashamed, and indulged in with sometimes gleeful candor. If there is one thing about life to love without reservation, posits her work, it is that life is allowed the mercy of an end. Her writing about death, we believe, must be read on its own terms. Vestrini’s poems seek to restore death and a desire for it as the concern of poetry, not therapy. Her work contains regular, explicit challenges to the institutions of mental health: “I find all my friends treated by psychoanalysts have become totally sad totally idiotic.”\*\*\*\*\* It refuses the circumscriptions of “health” or “unhealth” that by the second half of the twentieth century, had come to domesticate death and particularly any desire for it. Instead, she is a stubborn acolyte of death as

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\*\*\*\* “One Day of the Week I”

\*\*\*\*\* “XII (Next Winter)”

it is found in the wilds—death as seen from among the elements, not from the therapist’s couch.

That said, these are poems, not simply arguments, and it is obvious to us, too, that in existing in the near-perpetuity of print, these poems as poems curb and challenge the sentiments contained within. A self-preserving urge is in dialectical relation with the need to write oneself into oblivion. The very things that fill the poems with life are held up as evidence of death’s necessity, and death’s necessity is argued in its enduring form, to always be read by the living, and by extension, life. Death and poetry are always co-mingling among a scene of small pleasures and terrible feelings, but they are doing so for those who live, who are always also those who die. *Grenade in Mouth* is thus a document of an ardent wish to have one’s death last indeterminably. In Vestrini’s work, it is death, and not the foolish, flawed poet who sings of it, that is made immortal, or as she wrote in the poem *Beatriz*:

Writing is not important, she wrote,  
and signed her name in small print,  
believing it apocryphal.

### III.

Guillermo Parra, who has worked tirelessly and generously to bring Venezuelan poetry to Anglophone readers, first introduced us to the work of Miyó Vestrini, and it is only with his encouragement that we began to translate at all. He passed on to us a PDF of her collected poems, and as we began to translate—at first, strictly for our own use—one poem made us greedy for the next, in the way of enthusiastic readers, mostly, who can’t wait to turn the page of the book. So we felt, too, about each line and its turn, each turn of phrase, too, excited to see what could happen next, what Vestrini would be unafraid to write. Vestrini’s work began to take hold of us, creating such an urgency that we often felt as if we were in a translation emergency, needing to read something that we had only begun to reveal ourselves.

Without Faride Mereb, this book could not exist. Faride came to us with a vision for the first-ever English language book of Vestrini’s work and as our discussions about the necessity of such a collection took off, our project evolved from the translation of her press Letra Muerta’s beautifully designed and edited

*Es una buena máquina* into something more comprehensive. Faride was with us at every step of the way and it is only with her careful, rigorous eye and deep knowledge of Vestrini's work that these translations, that came from and for love and necessity, finally began to take a shape that could be shared beyond a living room in Kansas City. She has left a deep mark on these poems and we must credit her, too, with the brilliant idea for the title.

Sometimes it felt like by translating Vestrini's poems to English, we were attempting to use euphemisms to bandage bullet wounds. The English language's inadequacies when it comes to the vocabulary of feeling is a notorious problem for translators of Spanish poetry, and English also often lacks the capacity to pierce, pry, and sometimes assault in the way that Spanish can. Instead, we were left with our own language's worn out words, often puzzled at how to express Vestrini's ferocity without betraying it into cliché and how to express her poetry's whimsy without betraying it into error. Vestrini herself, however, well understood the difficulty of the translator's task, that "clumsy and impossible undertaking," and it was her courage in the face of her writing that continued to give us ours in translating not just Spanish into English, but poems into poems. In truth, Vestrini's poems are of the durable kind that forgive the crude hand of the translators at work on them. As Vestrini wrote in her own note on translation, "The text takes it all, is disturbed, is still, rages and always comes back, now full of another text." No matter how vast our inadequacies, they pale in comparison to her gifts. Vestrini's voice is so unmistakably her own that it would rise up without equivocation in any language, we think, and say what it must despite the bumbling efforts of any translators who have dared to offer themselves as its instrument. "All of civilization," she wrote, "depends on translation."

There is something else we must say, too. To translate Miyó Vestrini is like letting a deadly current pass through one's body and hoping not to get hurt. To read Miyó Vestrini is much the same, and any introduction to her work must end with a warning: of course this is dangerous territory. Of course you might feel some damage. Of course you must stay grounded, keep your feet on the floor. You must be careful, but if you are, you will feel the charge of her work without falling prey to its dangers. We believe that anyone lucky enough to read this work can be electrified into their senses. We hope you will find in Miyó Vestrini's deadly energy a resurrectional one.

—Anne Boyer and Cassandra Gillig