

**Miyó Vestrini**

*Grenade in Mouth*

translated by Anne Boyer & Cassandra Gillig

edited by Faride Mereb

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REVIEWED BY JACK CHELGREN

Old Tomatoes and Lamb Shanks: *Grenade in Mouth*

by Miyó Vestrini

I wrote the first draft of this review in pencil, which feels appropriate because Miyó Vestrini is a poet of smudges. Among these I count grease-stains, blood-stains, and cum-stains, and also the blush of burst capillaries over chafed skin. This, too, is fitting, because reading *Grenade in Mouth*, a new collection of Vestrini's poems translated by Anne Boyer and Cassandra Gillig, feels a lot like experiencing an abrasion, where at first you don't know if it's pleasure or pain or the slow culmination of something both satisfying and gradually unbearable: "the final sunburn," as Vestrini puts it in "Last Will and Testament" (57). It's important to notice she is still alive here—it may be the final sunburn, but she hasn't gotten a melanoma. That's because Vestrini's is a poetics of beforeness, of penultimatums, pent-up old tomatoes. "There is always a before / before dying," she writes, and that "before" is right where her poems dwell (59). These are verses that anticipate the grenade going off, where you can still feel the cold clack of metal against your teeth, taste its bitterness, feel the gag reflex about to kick in.

Say aaaah.

Show me what your mother did when you were a girl. (63)

A Venezuelan poet working from the 1960s through the '80s, Vestrini writes in a direct yet rough-edged voice that defies easy categorization. Like her literary cousin Kathy Acker, she turns regularly to complicated, violent intimacies and family situations, and in particular to cruel mothers. Mothering, for Vestrini, is a business of wounding: retrogressive, reciprocal blunt-force traumas. She gives no tender quarter to children, either. In "The Walls of Spring," the narrator imagines a son who (like many of us) "will know that there are no crystal streams / no clean drinking water / His world will be hellish downpours / and dark plains" (76). To read *Grenade in Mouth*, the first collection of Vestrini's work published in English, is to crawl through ditches of irreverence, arrest, and anti-posterity; to lurch around in the bad pipes of a neglected apartment, leaking voyeuristic class treachery and affectless impoliteness into the private lives of the bourgeoisie.

A welcome corrective I find in Vestrini to a lot of lyric poetry being written today is her refusal to revel in hedonism. There will be no fully automated luxury communism. Accelerationist bullshit will not ooze off the hook. Sex is sometimes an answer to left-melancholy, to the querulous murmurs of "What do we do now?", but just as often it's a pretty darn tepid affair:

Had we had the chance,  
I'd have told him that the only good thing about making love  
is men who ejaculate  
without bitterness,  
without dread.

And that after doing it,  
no one wants to sit down  
or walk. (61)

These are lines written to a deceased friend, “El Chino,” who Vestrini tells us earlier in the poem “died like an idiot.” What could possibly be the tone of this undelivered fact-check? It’s hardly a celebration of the transcendent power of the erotic. Really, Vestrini’s narrators seem more interested in food and drink than in sex, more in the literal “the leg of lamb” that unexpectedly “melt[s] in your mouth, / soft, / milky, / on your tongue” than in whatever genital or digital member might be denoted, these days, by a lamb-shank emoji (28;🍖). And yet there are moments when sex/uality delivers real joy in these poems. Near the end of “Last Will and Testament” (which someday ought to be compared with Trisha Low’s poem of the same name, from 2013’s *The Compleat Purge*), one encounters these reflections:

You think again about what is deliberate.  
It is not fate.  
It is not vengeance.  
It is one’s hand  
sweaty palm,  
touching one’s thigh.  
Going back a little more  
and recalling the uneasiness of your love,  
the shadowy stench  
of your pleasure. (59)

Everything here is messy and trembling, knotted yet graceful, and utterly opposed to sensualism. That’s the beauty of Vestrini’s work,

presented so lucidly in Boyer and Gillig's renderings, though it makes me wish the translations had been published side-by-side with the originals so readers could more easily see how the versions match up.

Some of the most exciting poems in the collection militate against the neoliberal commodification of mental health: the ways postwar capitalism has turned wellness and happiness and the will to live into both industries and social mandates. With permanently vaulted rhetorical eyebrows, Vestrini pokes again and again at the biopolitical presumption that one must want to be well, or that we even know what we mean when we talk about wellness.

I find that all my friends treated by psychoanalysts have become  
totally sad totally idiotic  
they read my I Ching and predict I'll have a long life  
life of shit, I say  
I join the bandwagon  
I throw myself under the bandwagon (37)

The treatment of depression and mental illness not only backfires but winds you up worse than you started. Yet the tug of consensus proves difficult to ignore. In another poem, "Don't Come Back Here Anymore," the narrator submits to the counseling so virulently scorned in the lines above, but with hilariously anticlimactic results. The therapist-voice tries variously to encourage her, scold her, and guide her to meaningful introspection, but the patient arrives at only greater and greater puzzlement. The session ends with the poet imagining her mother shutting her out of the house and exclaiming resoundingly: "Don't come back!" (68) I read this as a final rejection of depth psychology, the point-blank denial of revelation or disclosure, let alone the fugitive pheasant

of the Freudian cure. “Don’t Come Back Here Anymore” is a lot like the Jack Spicer poem “Psychoanalysis: An Elegy,” which similarly stages a catechistic mental-health dialogue where the patient refuses to settle down into a decipherable subjectivity. But Vestrini’s psychic probings are snappier than Spicer’s, less languid, more restless. The poem and indeed the whole book’s intensity has more in common with the searing first lines of Audre Lorde’s 1976 poem “Power,” which read:

The difference between poetry and rhetoric  
is being ready to kill  
yourself  
instead of your children.

There are shared sensibilities here, kindred politics and poetics, and I don’t just say that because both Lorde and Vestrini both dealt with the question of suicide, or because Vestrini co-translator Cassandra Gillig is currently editing Lorde’s correspondence with Diane di Prima. Vestrini died by suicide on November 29, 1991, just under a year before Lorde died of liver cancer. These are very different deaths, yet both poets were acutely concerned with the encroachments of regimes of power on people’s lives, especially women’s lives, and especially when those regimes claim to be acting curatively. Like Lorde, Vestrini demands to live and die on her own terms, which for both poets is the same as demanding that the entire hegemonic world-system be abolished. “There is in *The next day a power*,” Vestrini writes: “It is the power of those who do not have anything, save their sweet waiting for the end.” (96)