

Selected poems from *Medo,
medo, medo* (2019) by
Maria Clara Escobar

Translated by Miriam Adelman

Translator's Preface

Ana Paula Portella¹ begins her preface to Maria Clara Escobar's poetry collection with incisive musings on the countless ways that our current forms of life—the many crises that we have inherited from previous generations, steeped in legacies of inequality, violence, and environmental destruction—give us a variety of reasons for fears coming from endless sources and directions. Portella recognizes that the fears Escobar names, confronts, toys with, and turns into metaphor have universal elements. However, Escobar's collection—as a feminist text—speaks especially of and to the fears that permeate the everyday lives of girls and women, as well as the ways women look at these fears, attitudes, and needs. They take us right into the eye of the storm, where we are able—or perhaps obliged—to rethink our acts, our relationships, our survival, and our creativity.

I first read Escobar's collection *Medo, medo, medo* (Fear, fear, fear, 2019) in 2021, well into the COVID-19 pandemic and the gripping fear it stirred across the globe. Her work resonated with me beyond the context of the worldwide spread of the virus, a mere chapter in a long saga of human striving and blunder. At the time, I was fortunate enough to be participating in one of Alison Entekin's online translation workshops. Tackling the challenge of an English-language version of Escobar's poem became an opportunity to plunge into the work of a young Brazilian writer and a chance to test my own evolution as a translator of poetry, from Brazilian Portuguese to English. Years and circumstances had initially led me in the opposite direction—translating from English into Portuguese—in partnership with friends and colleagues who were native speakers of the latter. Hence, what became a reversal was also the continuation of my many years of translating English-language feminist writers and poets into Portuguese: a task that had compelled me, a kind of driving need to share my beloved sources—my *bibliografias!*—with my friends, my students, and my community. In both cases, it meant bringing out women's voices as voices that resignify, appropriate,

¹ Ana Maria Portella, "Medo como matéria de conhecimento, arte e mudança," in *Medo, medo, medo*, by Maria Clara Escobar (Nosotros Editorial, 2019).

defy, and diversify many centuries' worth of so-considered "canonical" literature. Today these women writers take their place as part of a potent and vibrant movement, an *explosão feminista* (feminist explosion), a phrase coined by Brazilian cultural critic Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda and the title of her 2018 book on the subject.² The expression refers to an unprecedented blooming of women's voices in the realms of art, culture, and politics in the Brazil of the new millennium. In the field of poetry specifically, Hollanda (who today publishes under her maiden name, Teixeira) refers to the decade that began in 2010 and its groundswell of women writers who are "poets of feminism, but not necessarily feminist poets."³

Escobar's poetry evokes a feeling of being on the brink. Have human greed and cruelty tipped an already failing balance in the definitive direction of our demise? In her interweaving of the personal and the political there is a simple, brutal honesty that ruptures any attempt to sweep hurt, damage, and injustice under the rug. There abound failed love affairs and frustrated attempts at connection, precarious lives, perilous streets and loneliness amid the urban multitudes, and vulnerability in a technology-driven world (as in the fear of airplanes that Escobar invokes in the first set of poems presented here). Yet Escobar also expresses intense feelings of empathy and tenderness for the many others who inhabit her verse; she weaves in stories that reveal her identification with the experiences, if not the destinies, of other women.

Participating in this veritable explosion of women's voices, Escobar's poetry moves to its own beat. Yet, as a poet, Escobar nevertheless shares the critical irreverence of many other young poets I've read recently, including Tatiana Pequeno, Lubi Prates, and Luiza Romão. In fact, the voices multiply much more quickly than any one of us—as readers, scholars, or critics—can keep up with. As a diverse group imbued with a bursting energy to tell their stories, these women speak from the specific ground they inhabit: both legacy and change, more shifting than solid. Yet however singular their

² Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, *Explosão feminista: arte, política, cultura e universidade* (Companhia das Letras, 2018).

³ Hollanda, *Explosão feminista*, 106 (my translation).

experiences may feel, to write them is to place them within wider webs of understanding.

Working here on the English-language version of these poems, I was reminded of a workshop I took taught by the millennial, gaúcha author Natália Borges Polessa called “A escrita da ruína” (Writing the ruins). Destruction, fear, and the feeling of desperately trying to navigate a largely unsalvageable world come to the forefront as hallmarks of our time, it seems. As I finish this brief commentary, Brazil is confronting the trauma and shock of recent flooding that has affected the overwhelming majority of municipalities in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, taking human and animal lives and destroying entire towns, farms, natural landscapes, and city neighborhoods. Tragedy as a wakeup call, if that is still possible. *Medo, medo, medo*. As a poet, Escobar recreates this twilight atmosphere and perhaps reminds us we must think about what to do about fear and with fear.

Finally, let me share some brief thoughts on the ongoing challenges of translating Escobar’s poems. I have tried, above all, to capture her emotional environment and the rhythm and feel of her colloquial tone, her key which is intense and direct. There were the usual tricky spots, inevitable in Portuguese to English translation, such as the differences in the way nouns and adjectives are gendered or not. Such grammatical gendering is a major issue for the current wave of feminist translation, because language has been shaped according to patterns that are steeped in gendered meanings and expectations. Finding other ways of naming things or people may mean inventing words or inflecting speech in ways that cause strangeness or discomfort. In English, pilots, doctors, workers, and other such nouns are neutral, but on occasion, translating them from the Portuguese, when the context calls for marking gender, may become clumsy. For example, I will probably not want to write “female doctor” or “woman pilot.” Yet I am tasked with finding a way of preserving the gendered meaning of “doutora” or “pilota.” Likewise, there are moments of interpretation, as in Escobar’s “Medo das ruas, deles e da morte,” where I chose “men” over “them.” In this case, “deles” might not necessarily mean “only men,” but context tells me it does. Other ambiguities, like when a double entendre in Portuguese might get lost—such as a simple “ligar mesmo já não

liga para ninguém,” which could describe calling someone, paying attention to them, or both—led me to different solutions, since I didn’t want to make that choice. In the end, the daily life of poets and translators is just this: paddling our way through a sea of infinite choices or juggling pieces of a composition that can fall into place—or fall flat on the ground.

The poems you find below are the first pieces in an ongoing project, my attempt to capture the spirit and thrust of a young poet whose work resonates with other voices of her generation and further unfurls in her third volume, *Zonas de guerra* (War zones). Sometimes the words spill out, and I might even get it right; other times, the words come out *cuidosamente vertidas*, as if poured carefully from the cadence of Brazilian Portuguese into the defiant mold of the English language, through the filter of a person caught in, and captivated by, all that is *entre-between*.⁴

⁴ Cristiane Busato Smith, ed., *Entre-Between* (Editora Kotter, 2023).

Selected poems from *Medo, medo, medo*

by Maria Clara Escobar

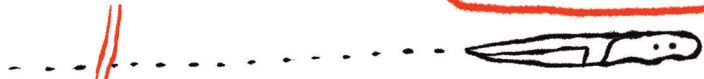
*my grandma died, my mom died, my aunt died, my friend died, my
neighbor died, my great grandma died, my acquaintance died, my
cousin died, my niece died, my self died.
my language: she will die.*

Sequence of untitled poems from Part I, “Fear of airplanes”

i'm fat, so is my face, i make fat faces
the girl next to me, on the plane that is landing, makes
ugly faces
she sleeps ugly, she yawns ugly.
the plane circles and i'm thinking about that whole sea
santos dumont, what kind of faces did he make?
for sure not fat and ugly ones.
he was a champ.
now i'm going around in circles and nearly die in an airport
too small

where only
airplanes
too small
land

i make fat faces—the girl next to me, ugly ones
as we pray to our father in heaven who wears no life vest
that we don't have to swim



you heard about the chapecó crash, didn't you?
no, what about it?
the only ones who survived

the only ones who survived were the ones who followed the safety
instructions
the others were screaming, running about—the lights went off, the
gasoline went dry
the ones who survived followed instructions
they put on their masks, they braced for impact

i would have put on the mask, but brace, maybe not.
they put on their masks.
the only ones who survived

and me here thinking about death, the instructions i didn't follow
when i sat next to you,
so getting on a plane

i'd put on the mask,
but not
brace for
impact.

The plane is taking off
Turn off your electronic devices
Look, that's where Aunt Sonia's house was
Aunt Sonia, poor thing, she died of a heart attack
Yeah, inside a plane

Even today I just keep thinking
How can a gray
Tube
Fly, full of people inside

They've evolved, you can't deny that
They say Marcelo always does a go-around
I'm not getting on board with him

Aunt Sonia, well the man spoke to her in German
She got nervous thinking it was going to crash
Had a heart attack
It was a false alarm

You folks know, but a reminder won't hurt
You're not allowed to smoke on board
Pay attention to the safety instructions
Even
If you're a frequent flyer

I always check to see if the life jacket is under the seat
Remember the days when they let you smoke?
At least it calms you down, yeah it does
Do those phones work? If we're crashing

Tchau

Tchau

I'm crashing, I'm dying
Wishing you all a nice trip and thanks for flying with us.

The spaceship to Mars is ready for takeoff
The men are here to say goodbye to their brave wives
They are the ones who are leaving this time
The men hold the snot-nosed crying kids in their arms
Say goodbye at the docks
Not just husbands, but fathers, uncles, granddads too
Someone has to stay home
Some kids are leaving too, if they're girls
And when their families have two moms—oh those are the
 lucky ones
Let's settle somewhere else, begin anew in another place
This place was a fail, guys
Farewell, *tchau tchau*



She said that if the plane crashed
She wouldn't care
She'd free herself from the fear of dying
But it's sad

She doesn't find meaning in life anymore
She thought
If the plane crashes
I don't have anything anyway
It's sad

I'm afraid of being alone
My mom was like that too
We were trained
Nothing belongs to anyone
Nothing is for sure

A woman, to have pride
Has got to be alone
She can't be sitting in the corner crying
Over anyone

What tomorrow will bring
No one knows
Money, the bank makes off with it
(My mother learned from President Collor)

Better to have a house

I'll never be a homeowner
If I can't trust the banks, then who?
They asked me the other day
If I trust not in anyone
Not in my life either

If the plane crashes, I'll fly it
I won't leave it to anyone else
Much less to pilots
And doctors
With their files and medications

If you want to survive you must disobey
The world wasn't made for us, little daughter.

Two untitled poems from Part III, “Fear of the streets, of men, and of death”

My uncle
Roberto Vinicius
Lived on a bank pension
In the city of Petrópolis
He used to go in every month
To pick up his pension
But stopped showing up
It's been a few months
They were thinking about getting a detective
A private one
To find out if he's dead or alive

They know he used to go in every month
To get his pension
Now they know nothing
I jot that down

I always wanted to be a detective
For a few days
Take a crash course in downtown São Paulo
Put on a cape, put on some shades
Follow someone

Uncle Roberto Vinicius
Who I don't even know if I've met
It must be sad, to not even know if he's dead or alive
Alone for sure, sad who knows
But someone is looking for him, wants to know

If he's alive or not alive
If he's dead or not.

And if he is, why isn't he picking up his pension
And if he isn't, who buried him

Could Uncle Roberto Vinicius be lying
Stone cold at home?
Left the bathroom, tripped, no one noticed
To die at home alone is one of my fears
You're there sprawled out
And no one realizes till a week later
When you don't show up for your pension check
Or pick up the phone no one picks up anymore
Went out for a walk, no way to know
Petrópolis is far away, it's big
São Paulo too

Cities can hide people
The homes, the dead.

I asked her
What is it you wanted to be, if not what you are
And she says
Are you really going to ask me that?
I say
Yep
So she says
I don't know
And cries
You don't remember anymore?
I don't know
But what did you used to want?
Her partner answers
She liked cameras
Journalism, that sort of thing
She cries too
She no longer knows
We go on surviving, doing our things
One day we don't know anymore