

Selected poems from *Fotos  
ruins muito boas* (2022)  
by Moema Vilela

*Translated by Raquel Parrine*



## Translator's Preface

The works in this collection poetically explore the disorder of life in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Moema Vilela's poetry collection *Fotos ruins muito boas* (Very good bad pictures, 2022) pays witness to the disastrous public handling of the pandemic by Jair Bolsonaro's presidency, with inconsistent policies and anti-vaccine disinformation. In face of this unfolding incomprehensible horror, poetry strives to rise above the level of the public debate. While Bolsonaro seemed to sink lower and lower in his disdain for human life, refusing vaccine offers from Pfizer, mocking asphyxiating people, and denying the public mourning for the deceased, the public debate had to descend to his level and explain basic concepts such as how a vaccine works, how viruses spread, and why human life is important. In this national context, Vilela offers a vulnerable, subtle approach to poetry that recenters human experience. Discourse on public matters operates within the superficial realm, compelled by conservative elements to defend previously matter-of-fact issues, such as human rights and science. This constraint effectively prevents the debate from transcending to a more substantive engagement with the underlying issues affecting the holistic realization of those very rights. Rising above this constraint, Vilela reclaims the power of the words to give shape to the inner subtleties otherwise neglected. As Vilela states,

The urgency to seek and find more capacities to live also came from this closeness to more deaths, to more losses, with the fact that we endured the pandemic in Brazil—so much more brutal and maddening due to the federal misgovernment, the violence, and the political and institutional negligence. Not only because of this but very sharply because of it, there was so much love, loves, expressions of joy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Ricardo Romanoff, "As 'Fotos ruins muito boas' de Moema Vilela," *Matinal Jornalismo*, August 25, 2022, <https://www.matinaljornalismo.com.br/rogerlerina/literatura/fotos-ruins-muito-boas-moema-vilela/>.

Reading Vilela's poems reminds us of the small things lost and the loss that inhabits the small things. Reading becomes holding (onto) something delicate, precious, and alive: the preciousness and uniqueness of life. As such, the poem as form assumes its status as nourishing, life giving, contrasting generalizing language we grew accustomed to, such as of "excess deaths" or "herd immunity."

Vilela was born in Campo Grande, the capital of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and now lives in Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Endless soybean fields currently dominate the landscape of Mato Grosso do Sul, a region that began urbanizing in the 1960s. This urbanization accelerated with the construction of Brasília, the new capital. With a culture relatively unknown to the rest of the country, the region received incentives from the military dictatorship (1964–1985) to displace the Indigenous population for highly mechanized monocultures in the 1970s. Vilela exchanged the low vegetation of the soybean fields and the native shrubs of her native region for the pine-like *araucária* trees of the Southern *pampas*. Porto Alegre has been fertile ground for new writers, such as Jabuti Award–winning authors Natália Borges Polesso and Jeferson Tenório.

Vilela's work subtly incorporates themes of migration and displacement, just as these themes subtly infuse her entire writing approach. As such, a language that displaces crosses the text. In the original Portuguese, Vilela uses the second person singular "tu," which is typical of the South Region of Brazil, and "você," more commonly used across the rest of Brazil, interchangeably. Moreover, Vilela references some of the most recognizable Southern regionalisms, the word *guri* or *guria* (from the Guarani language, meaning boy or girl) and the mate beverage (served hot in the South as opposed to cold [*tereré*] in Mato Grosso do Sul), as well as those typical of her home state, such as the fruit *guavira*. Language displaces but also builds a unique form of living, in which these contrasts generate new insights, expanding the idea of home to a constant experimentation, a living-to-be. While some language specificity will be inevitably lost in translation, the instability and vulnerability of Vilela's language will still be present through her attention to the minimal aspects of life.

The most notable characteristic of Vilela's poetry is the strength of the domestic images combined with a deliberately prosaic language. As she argues, "In the end of the day, the bread and butter of thinking about poetry is considering its connection with astonishment, uncanniness, the capacity of seeing playfulness and smallness in everyday life."<sup>2</sup> This characteristic enlists Vilela in a genealogy of female Brazilian writers inspired by Ukrainian-Brazilian author Clarice Lispector (1920–1977), whose pioneer feminist approach to literature elevated the domestic to a space of ontological questioning. Famously, in her classic novel *The Passion According to G.H.* (1964), Lispector's questions regarding being and existence start through the protagonist's encounter with a cockroach. More than elevating the mundane and banal, Lispector also broke ground in thinking through social reproduction. By raising to literary status domestic work, care work, and the emotional above the rational, Lispector challenges the sexist division between the public and the private. As Nelly Richard argues in *Masculino/femenino* (1993), the feminine language developed by feminist authors sought to deterritorialize the hegemony of the masculine language and its relationship with power, seeking instead another form of articulation of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, Vilela, following Lispector's footsteps, uses her poetic imagination to claim language back from the perversities of Bolsonaro's public debate, thus carving a space of resistance in the minor and the poetic.

The experience of the pandemic, the loss of loved ones and the threat of losing them, is a shared trauma no one wants to relive. Instead, Vilela reclaims the subtlety of this experience, such as in the opening poem, "in the air," which reads, "It will be months / without / knowing the scent / of anybody's / hair / Without touching the hands / of the ones who give us light." Vilela uses sensorial images (the scent of the hair, the touching of the hands, the seeing of the light) to describe the isolation of the lockdown. The experience closes with hearing, "I hear your voice / getting older," symbolizing the loss of time in the form of loss of life in isolation. The voice gets

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Romanoff, "As 'Fotos ruins muito boas' de Moema Vilela."

<sup>3</sup> Nelly Richard, *Masculino/femenino: prácticas de la diferencia y cultura democrática* (Francisco Zegers, 1993).

older, trapped inside, without air to allow for sonic reverberation, thus evoking the title of the poem. As such, the air both spreads the disease and the poet's voice. But it is not just the voice of the poet that gets older. The stress and constrictions of the lockdown also erode the relationships inside the enclosure. Despite it all, the erotic grows like grass in the cracks of the concrete: "In the bite, it wants to find something / with another with the same nature" ("seek the bone"). No experience gets flattened. The complexity of the writing carries a sustained life through it all. Like the title of the collection and the poem that names it, Vilela finds meaning in the imperfect flashes of life we take for granted.

Vilela's anthology closes with the question of the purpose of the literary. The ten parts of the last poem, "not writing," show the agonizing experience of trying to find a space for creating in a morbid world: "i don't write because of all the life that scares me / i don't write because where is this going." What kind of world is waiting for us outside if it is life, not death, which scares us? Procrastination appears as the sane response to the disintegration of life as we know it: "this abysmal disorientation / that distracts us from the obvious facts."

I wish I could say that the themes of powerlessness and political dystopia have become a thing of the past since the publication of *Fotos ruins muito boas*. But in June 2024, Porto Alegre, along with most of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, was underwater for several days, displacing over half a million people and killing over 100. Mirroring the COVID-19 pandemic, the flood situation arose from a fatal combination of climate catastrophe and local neoliberal policies by the mayor of Porto Alegre, Sebastião Melo, and the governor of Rio Grande do Sul, Eduardo Leite. While literature cannot protect us from physical harm, Vilela's work lifts the fate of words as subservient to power, shakes the stabilization of the normative, and refuses to reproduce institutional consensus, elevating the space of the minor, from the smallest grain of cassava flour.

**Selected poems from *Fotos ruins muito boas***

**by Moema Vilela**

**in the air**

You catch it through the air  
It falls  
On us  
like a spell  
Avoid  
contact  
Revoke the step  
forward. Pay attention to everything  
Commands in the present  
that get extended

It will be months  
without  
knowing the scent  
of anybody's  
hair  
Without touching the hands  
of the ones who give us light

I hear your voice  
getting older  
We talk about the days  
but not the after

We must learn  
to wait  
Withstand  
To say months  
As to not to say  
More  
Say today. Believe

Give it time  
For the body to integrate the new  
awareness:  
I had a nightmare last night  
I called my love  
On the phone

The dreams I collect  
are only in my sleep  
We don't dare  
plan what is to come

We enumerate the imminent  
Be swift, don't stay  
Try to go on foot  
Take your shoes off, take off your rings  
Don't touch  
anything  
Don't lose your mind

Ask the elders what  
they want  
to do: how many  
conversations like this  
can you possibly have?

I see your beard  
grow, my toenails  
The eyebrow growing whiter  
Through the screens

We look like a rescued person who returned from the sea  
and it is good  
I prefer it this way  
I'd rather see  
Have this truth on my face



It was enough to have had  
to sew shrouds in the air  
Revoking the future is not even  
close  
to what we need to do  
about the past

### **two bedrooms**

In a bedroom cats nest together  
on your lap, that's how I know that it's warm there.  
You wear shorts and have been cycling.  
That's what your thigh muscles would say  
on the video call if you hadn't said it yourself  
in the inventory of the hours that we shared, meanwhile.  
In the other bedroom, the heater does its job,  
*pinhão* leftovers smudge a plate on the desk  
and on the floor there are so many books  
that no one is brave enough to try to read  
the ones below. Under your coats  
I would like you to come to the things  
that hide behind the most  
palpable facts, like the fact that my legs,  
which were born pretty and perfect like my  
mother's, are now flabbier than ever.  
I talk about time. I talk about death.  
I ask what good are legs for,  
what drives them and where.  
But you know only what you see: I have been drinking  
too much mate and this must not be good for you.  
This is why I don't sleep, you say.

### **goma**

As the cassava flour falls from the strainer  
looking for its pair, it soon forms a trio and then  
an incorruptible world, like *tapioca* or *beiju*,  
it looks nothing like life, today.

### **as a whole**

As the cassava flour falls from the strainer  
looking for its pair, it soon forms a trio and then  
an incorruptible world, like *tapioca* or *beiju*,  
it looks nothing like life, today.

Dispersed over the same words, the problems  
don't show themselves as a whole, they keep burning loose  
on the hot skillet, without revealing their meaning, their  
roundness.

Like sand in the mouth. You can't eat it. Let's look at another  
image:  
Like the initially thin snow that accumulates against the garage  
door.  
With a full tank, the car grows old in waiting. It can't leave.

### **really good bad pictures**

i like  
these bad  
pictures, in the dark  
of the bar  
of someone really close  
really far  
moving

a record that doesn't  
capture. memory  
you cannot hold  
on your hand. the pulsing  
of a low note  
on a speaker

someone who turns their back  
who takes the backpack  
moments  
of the most banal prodigies

like a foot that holds  
the bottle that the new couple  
inadvertently knocks down  
and almost shatters

a picture that if  
you auscultate, it breathes  
— we want to scream  
like in the accidents  
in the movies, in the ambulances  
so that everyone can hear  
and celebrate together  
the glory— it's alive

### **seek the bone**

Seek the bone under  
the flannel of the body. Hold  
the hips on your hands, gather  
the whole knee, with the kneecap,  
femur, tibia. Want that which resists  
behind the softness. The striking emotion  
of being with somebody, before  
we melt, calcium phosphate  
under the earth. It wants to taste  
through the collarbone, the zygomatic,  
magnetized by whatever thirst,  
whenever it could really touch somebody  
— was it this, then, the mania on the hands  
finding the metacarpus, the phalanx?  
I wanted: to arrive in what sustains the remainder  
of the landslide. It was enough  
to foresee the structure under the garments  
for the mouth to open in surprise  
and give space to teeth that,  
like that of vampires', grow.  
They suppress the gentleness of the lips  
to reach for what they finally find

in front of them—from the arms, the one that  
builds cities, cultivates food, enlivens  
clubs. The one that holds itself up  
in protest, an inflatable raft among whalers.  
In the bite, it wants to find something  
with another with the same nature.

### **the best cassava, the best guavira**

i always say that this is the best sandwich anyone has  
ever made

this is the best granola, the best rice and beans  
that someone has made in history, please

isn't it a little lousy to say, he says  
of such a true thing

i say: this is the best fettuccine i ever had in my life  
which one would be the best fettuccine of a whole life and the  
universe

if not the marvelous pasta of the present?

the only one you have  
what would i say, then, *guri*  
tell me what you want me to say

with your mouth full, always complaining  
about the exact words of the best woman  
that you ever heard saying words in your life

### **not writing**

i  
to draw with a pen  
over what was written  
years ago. it was possible, but  
is it still? the pen tracing  
the old cursive, truths  
of ten notebooks ago

ii

i love to think about the house  
instead of writing  
tips to grow sage  
new curtains for 29.99  
tricks to wash pillows in the washing machine  
i love to buy shoe racks instead of writing  
wash legumes, bags of beans  
worrying about baby's temperatures

iii

in order not to write, i research  
a lot, every-single-thing, the minutia  
i google it all the way down, i call, i chase it  
from taxidermy to big data  
specialists. i take notes. i edit them  
i put together this big collage  
with maps, pictures, news on the wall  
i'm almost a detective on a crime show

iv

it was so hard for such a long time  
keeping up with this, that when something  
follows through i can't go on  
it's too much emotion. a sentence! complete, look  
stop it, turn up the music  
i can't help myself  
i'm going to scream, throw myself on the floor

v

how do you write? the ones who work with it  
sometimes answer. they show their notebooks  
the day or the night. the mate. the trick  
apps. philip glass in the winter, paulinho da viola in the summer  
being stubborn and precise. bird by bird  
with a consolation wine after writing so many characters  
some sigh by the window when there are no characters

how do you write? without saying anything that matters  
completely ruined-in-green-and-yellow, absolutely lost dot com  
with the voice of samba, the voice of goodbye, brazilian in medium  
height

i write with body expressions: with the heart  
falling on my face, stomping my feet, in blood sweat and tears  
biting my tongue

vi

i frequently speak about how i'm not able to  
do what i used to, what i did  
what did i use to do?  
before what?  
what does it mean to not be able to?  
wallowing is a full-time job  
i hope that was clear

vii

because i think too much about romance  
because death doesn't help  
it doesn't pay the bills and nobody wants to read  
it's difficult and i can't create anything exciting  
there are a lot of things being made that contemplate and fulfill me  
i don't write because i love writing  
because i have hope and there is so much at stake  
i don't write because it doesn't change things  
and if it changes, it's awful for the people who write, individually  
i don't write because crooked inside  
i don't write because of all the life that scares me  
i don't write because where is this going  
i don't write because i say yes to the text  
i don't write, you know how much it costs  
i don't write because i'm here but maybe i went to saturn  
half an hour looking at pictures of lauren bacall when she was  
young, fruit being  
shaved et cetera

viii

the house is dirty  
we need to make choices

ix

it's your birthday and we need to choose  
being present is a different art  
available, shining in the parties of being people  
its wakes, its fevers, depressions, christenings

x

what else can i count down as  
the experience of this not-writing trade  
i won't talk about doubt  
about the benefit of meaning  
the value the pleasure the sacrifice  
the struggle to swim against the tide  
the planet going extinct, the worst presidents  
at the neighbor's, in the family, in the well-spoken people  
this abysmal disorientation  
that distracts us from the obvious facts  
a fever of 100 degrees in the spring  
in the teeth—nothing, though,  
while the people sleep  
exhausted poets  
  experiment  
  one wrong word  
  after another