

**Prison of Dreams (The Wrinkles of Life without Rights?) / Vera Milarka**

*If you want to remain young, get old fast.*

Nietzsche, posthumous fragments

*For Mamá Súper, my grandmother*

Just last year, she was putting on her Sunday best to spend Easter week at Cocay, the house in Cuernavaca which has always represented the family's desire to regain Paradise Lost—the same one that Adam and Eve were ejected from for sinning their hearts out. I've always dreaded Holy Week a little, not only because it recalls the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, but because the worst mishaps in my life have always happened around that time of year, and it's been that way for over a decade.

So 1997 shouldn't have been the exception, but I never imagined that anything would happen to Her, and yes, it is with a capital H, because until just before that fatal week, she was still coquettish and haughty as a capital H. She kept her hair nicely cut and colored, and though her skin did not hide her age, she looked fresh and hydrated. She didn't live a life of excess, and enjoyed an inner peace that came from a well-grounded spiritual education, so we rarely saw her sick or run-down.

We started calling her Mamá Súper when my grandfather, who was a doctor, baptized her that way. It was the first time that she had been gravely ill, and with her impressive desire to live, she made a miraculous recovery from a sickness that could have caused her death. From that time on, she demonstrated strength and vigor, and though she was widowed young, at the age of forty-four, she learned to not feel lonely.

Never, as long as I can remember, did she try to coerce anyone in order to have her own home. She liked her independence, and tried to instill in us a faith so powerful that we would never give in to sorrow, often reminding us that to think is to create.

She had her two daughters at such a young age that she always seemed more like a sister to them than their mother. She was a dynamic and self-sufficient woman, but that never kept her from fully embracing her role as a grandmother, almost like from a

fairy tale. All the grandchildren were lucky enough to experience the marvel that is a grandmother who is an accomplice, a sorceress, and a magician—super-modern, who loved to wear jeans and all the latest styles.

But that unfortunate week one year ago when, just like that, Mamá Súper—who rarely got angry—suddenly spilled out all the vitriol remaining in her while arguing with some tenants, and it was enough to cause a cerebral hemorrhage. Her life became fragmented, like a necklace that falls to the ground and can never be strung together again.

Everything changed for her then, and everything has been so different for the family, because for the first time we were forced to see her so debilitated, tiny, and shriveled, with wrinkled skin, mute for the first time and without her dentures, struggling to speak, trying to hold onto certain ideas and the right words. It was the first time that her body, which is still suffering the paralysis caused by the cerebral trauma, truly became useless, and because of that, it was one of the few times I could see that she wanted to die.

That's when the huge blow that threatened to take her from us also reminded us of what old age means, and of what it means to fight so that grandparents all over the world have the right to age with dignity.

### **A Photographic Hospice: Centuries of Exile**

A call for the dignity of the elderly is exactly what Vida Yovanovich—Cuban photographer of Yugoslav descent—presents in her book *Prison of Dreams*, recently published by the Centro de la Imágen, the National Council for Culture and the Arts, and the publisher Editorial Casa de las Imágenes. A marvelous and troubling photographic landscape that forces us to confront the “exile” experienced by the elderly who live in nursing homes: individuals who live not only at the threshold of death but, even worse, in a state of abandonment that hastens the end that we will all reach, whether in old age or not.

The origin of this photographic collection was nothing more than Yovanovich's pure desire to face up to her own future decrepitude. But her typically Slavic fearlessness did not save her from being overcome by fear. She comments, “At first, when I would leave the hospice, I would wash my hands with a horrible sense of contamination. I couldn't photograph, I could only experience the emotions. I think it's

difficult to introduce into my images what it feels like, the experience of taking them, and at the same time, it's impossible to forget and remove oneself from that experience. [...] I believe certain photographs have an effect on us. I try to understand life, my own life.”

This is how things come about sometimes: irrational fears that teach us unforgettable lessons, measuring us against humanity, and causing us to reflect on fundamental human values; this gives us the courage to denounce all the injustices that pervert these values.

Elena Poniatowska penned the preface to this wonderfully edited book, and she quotes a similar comment from Susan Sontag in her book *On Photography*: “For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. [...] When I looked at those photographs, something broke. [...] I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.”

The same occurs to those of us who have viewed Vida's masterful photographic works. We have come undone before the agonizing images of elderly women forgotten in homes where they remain vibrant, flaccid, lost in the mysterious depths of their minds, imploring, tremulous. Old ladies who no longer display their beauty on the outside but continue to hate and love in the daily solitude that accompanies them, dressed in threadbare clothing, or unclothed with skin hanging off them, enduring the inclemency of fear. There is no one to claim them or demand better conditions for their final years.

Vida's photography is more shrapnel than image. One click of her camera detonates truths that break our hearts. Our society focuses excessively on youth in order to place a higher value on life and to open a rift between worlds and underworlds that create a hierarchy within our existence. Thus are created the social strata that divide us into first- and second-class citizens: white over black, Mestizo over Indian, men above women, the rich above the poor, and of course, youth over old age.

So while in young people, even mindlessness can be seen as a virtue, in the elderly it is repulsive and an annoyance. The foolishness to which all old people inevitably return, as they were when they were children, provokes a deep intolerance in others, because we live in a society that has driven us to view the elderly as something we need to rid ourselves of. There is still a myth that regards those who die young as heroes, but there is no recognition of those who had the boldness, persistence, or simply the good health to continue on to their own decrepitude.

In her book *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir meticulously clarified this point, stating that, “If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive, and violence ludicrous. They are required to be a standing example of all the virtues. Above all, they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts that they possess it, and this assertion allows the world to ignore their unhappiness.”

Thus, old people are simplified and discredited, thus we are taught to not recognize the inner beauty that comes with age and the wisdom of continuing to grow over time. As De Beauvoir asserts, “For the last fifteen or twenty years of his life a man should be no more than a reject, a piece of scrap, reveals the failure of our civilization; if we were to look upon the old as human beings, with a human life behind them, and not as so many walking corpses, this obvious truth would move us profoundly.”

MILARKA, Vera. “Cárcel de los sueños (¿surcos de vida sin derechos?),” *El Día*, March 6, 1998, pp. 8–9.

*Translated by Michelle Suderman.*