

Bomb Magazine

Carmen Boulosa's *Before*, Translated by Peter Bush

by Will Heinrich

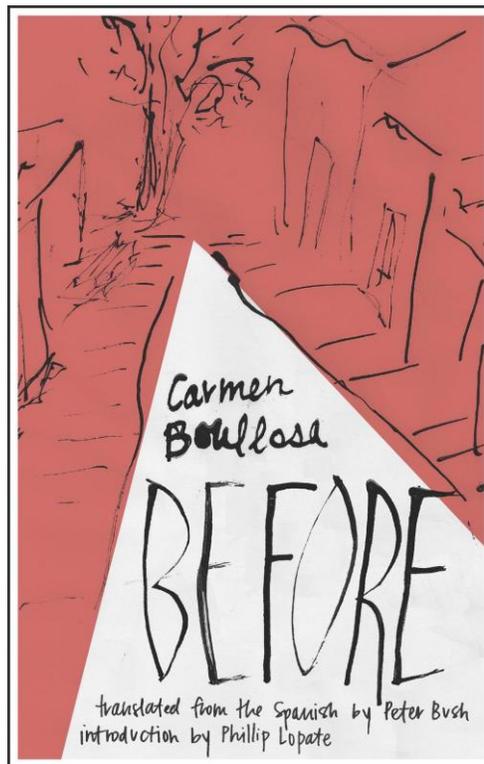


Anna Zylitz, *Before Drawing*, 2016, ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Deep Vellum Publishing, 2016

Carmen Boullosa's novel *Before* begins with the kind of grand existential problem so difficult to disentangle from the problems of consciousness itself: "Where were we before we got to this point?" But, like Saint Augustine when he was asked what God did before creating the universe, her narrator dismisses the question as meaningless, and slips adeptly from the absolute to the immediate, from the theoretical to the practical. "If I keep on perhaps you'll show up," the young narrator tells God, herself, and her readers. She goes on to rifle through a few numinous memories until she finds one concrete and sensual enough to double as a figure of self-reflection: the sound of phantom footsteps, which, she tells us, begin to dog her shortly after she enrolls in elementary school.

First published in 1989 in Spanish by the prolific Mexican novelist, poet, playwright, and essayist, *Before* is written in the style of a memoir, albeit an odd one written by the ghost of a girl who was born, just as Boullosa was, in 1954 in Mexico City. However spectral, this fictive double of the author produces a vividly expressionist argument that the transformations of adolescence amount to the literal death of the child. She also serves up a finely observed account of how a person—specifically, a high-strung, privileged, and impatient Catholic girl like the author herself—becomes a writer.



The narrator's first awareness of the relentless passage of time is also her first experience of alienation, the beginning of the disembodied doubleness she will need in order to recall, reconsider, and recount her passage through the world. At first, the

phantom steps are ominously schizophrenic: she thinks they're coming for her friend Enela. Then, she wonders if she herself isn't coming for her friend Enela. She blames herself for Enela's sudden death—the first of three in the book. She finds the decapitated corpse of the family turtle on their patio but doesn't remember having killed it. It is only after she and her sisters have played at inventing and ruling over nonexistent countries, marking out their features on the ground with white pebbles, that she makes a momentous discovery: that no ticking footsteps or other sounds of carnal anxiety can be heard inside the kingdom of the imagination.

Boullosa presents an increasingly sophisticated set of images of self and self-consciousness that her narrator uses to understand the boundaries between her new kingdom and the larger world. There's a lizard that keeps running in place, even when a girl holds him by the tail, and a curled-up child studded with nails, like a sainted hedgehog, whom she draws as a gift for her artist mother. Of being allowed into her mother's studio for the first time, she says, "I observed it with the same feeling I later observed a frog's heart in the live, open body of a drugged specimen in the school laboratory: I knew the heart existed, but seeing it—seeing it was something else."

Ultimately, none of the precocious narrator's imaginary asylums lasts forever, and the larger world keeps breaking in. It's not that the question she started with, "Where were we before we got to this point?" is meaningless. It's just that it has no answer. The *we* summoned into being at the beginning of Boullosa's book doesn't exist anywhere but at the point of contact between reader and text, and, in that sense, every book ends with its narrator's sudden death.

Will Heinrich is a novelist and art critic. He has written for the New York Observer, Aperture, Modern Painters, Art in America, and other publications. His novel, The King's Evil, was published in 2003 by Scribner and won a PEN/Robert Bingham Fellowship.