

Fear's Body

Por: Charlotte Whittle

In Carmen Boullosa's novel, *Before*, the reader traverses a geography of fear



The map of childhood is a map of shifting fears. Irrational but unwavering, the fears that haunted me as a girl can still be summoned by a certain sound, the glimpse of an image: wind in the dark, the size of the moon, floorboards creaking. I remember too how my fears were personified in the form of an androgynous flat-headed figure, which would appear in my room at night and place its hands around my neck, muting my cries. In this way the traumas that went unspoken were embodied and transformed, daytime disturbances becoming the terror of night.

In Carmen Boullosa's novel *Before*, first published in Mexico in 1989, the narrator traverses a geography of fear, but there is

no personification, no ghost, no single sinister character to terrorize her, no Sandman from whom she must run. Instead she experiences fear as an omnipresent force that permeates spaces, objects, and even language. Menacing steps pursue her throughout the scenes of her childhood, objects move around of their own accord, harassing her and sabotaging her plans, like the eucalyptus tree in her yard:

“Imagine its leaves chorusing hatred and revenge. Imagine its roots determined to go on the offensive, its branches, its bark, its buds riven with anger!”

The young woman who speaks cannot escape the malignant forces that surround her, but in this novel Boullosa turns the traditional ghost story on its head by giving us a narrator who speaks from beyond the grave, haunting as well as haunted, revisiting the memories of her childhood in order to recover a sense of self in the incorporeal realm where she is suspended. This character without a body, gripped by terror, should herself be a cause for alarm, but with her chatty, buoyant account of a singular Mexico City girlhood, she inspires more pity and affection than fear.

That Boullosa’s protagonist should speak from beyond the grave may be a nod to Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*—among Mexico’s greatest novels—in which the inhabitants of a whole town speak in chorus from the tomb. *Before* also contains echoes of José Emilio Pacheco’s quintessential *Bildungsroman*, *The Battles in the Desert*: like Pacheco’s Carlos, Boullosa’s protagonist moves between the domestic and educational spheres of a rapidly modernizing Mexico City, an experience circumscribed, in both cases, by the characters’ belonging to a particular social class.

But Boullosa’s novel is playfully subversive rather than derivative, and converses with her precursors while forging a

decidedly feminine — and feminist — path for the treatment of growing up (or failing at it).

Having lamented her solitude (“But nobody’s with me. Nobody, apart from my fear, my panic, my terror...”), Boullosa’s unnamed narrator recalls her birth and the fear that gripped her mother: “I return to the fear, a woman’s fear: the young woman bathed in sweat, her body suffering the violence of birth...” The fear, then, is associated from the outset with the brutality of female physiology. Peter Bush wisely retains this emphasis in his translation, but the original Spanish performs the more disruptive gesture of feminizing the definite article that accompanies the noun — *la miedo*: the jarring grammatical perversion suggests not that fear is *of* women but that it is itself essentially feminine. This feminization of fear sets the tone for the narrator’s entire quest, and is accompanied by her refusal to recognize the woman who gives birth to her as her mother.

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The protagonist’s birth is shot through with gender trouble. Her grandmother is disappointed that the baby isn’t a boy. The child’s father is absent from the birth, and pays little attention to his new daughter. A few pages later, though, we learn that unlike the mother, he seems able to develop a straightforward relationship with his children: he is “hugely happy with the girls he looked on in every sense as his rightful daughters. And we all were.” The ease of the paternal relationship is at odds with the ruptured maternal bond: the narrator laments, “I’m so afraid. I’m so afraid and I can’t shout *Mom*. It’s a cry I can’t utter, because I don’t possess that word.” As a girl, she seeks

refuge in her parents' room, but "Dad never let me sleep in their room, thinking my nighttime terror was 'clowning,' which was the word he used to describe it." Her father, then, plays a part in widening the gulf between daughter and mother. Although he is scarcely present in the novel, the father reinforces a patriarchal structure that prevents the women from being tied together by forces other than fear.

Boullosa's protagonist observes fellow victims of fear all around her. Her sisters and peers also fall prey to the menacing steps. María Enela, a classmate, is her companion in fear, but this force drives a wedge between the girls rather than bringing them closer: "I must avoid my own fear, a fear I reflected in her..." When Enela suffers a fainting fit in class and is taken away to the nurse, the narrator becomes convinced that together they might be able to combat what pursues them: *"I promised myself I would be brave and talk to Enela about the footsteps. I spoke to her silently. I wasn't sure, perhaps we could oppose, and even defeat, a fate I didn't fully understand but was beginning to glimpse desperately."*

But Enela never returns to school, the girls remain estranged, and Boullosa's narrator is left with a sense of guilt and shame over her fate: "I didn't need to compare myself with the flesh of the martyrs, as my schoolmates were doing, to know how puny I was..."

In several of this novel's episodes, the hope of a bond made through mutual fear is similarly dashed. One of the novel's most disturbing sections concerns a turtle and a pair of scissors. Frightened as usual by the mysterious nocturnal steps that pursue her, the protagonist roams into the kitchen, where she encounters a turtle being kept by the cook for a celebratory soup. The moment with the turtle is more intimate than the stunted friendship with Enela, even though in both cases the

relationships are grounded in a shared experience of fear. For a moment, the girl and the turtle appear able to conquer what pursues them: “I walked through the dark clasping the turtle to my bosom like a defenseless lover, as terrified as I was, I said to her: ‘I’m going to look after you, don’t worry’...we could no longer hear the noise we were pursuing.” On her return to her room the girl discovers a pair of scissors under her pillow, breathing as if they were alive. She returns them, realizing only too late that she has been complicit in delivering a murder weapon: on her return to the kitchen she finds the scissors bloody, the turtle headless. Significantly, the ill-fated turtle is consumed in a soup eaten to celebrate the birthday of her distant, inaccessible mother Esther. But Esther is only amused by her daughter’s bewilderment, showing a cruel lack of attunement to the girl’s sensitive state.

“Sometimes as children, to evade our fears, we invent rituals.”

We avoid stepping on the cracks in the sidewalk for fear of the emergence of monsters. We go to bed with a protective object, a talisman against anxiety and sleeplessness. Boullosa’s narrator takes white pebbles and with them designs playful geographies, a fantastic kingdom, with her sisters. The game augurs well: “Never has there been such a resplendent coronation as the one when I was crowned queen of my own kingdom, perched on a rickety chair on my bed, wrapped in a sheet.” The pebbles encircling the bed appear to remedy the night fear: “At the center of a territory invented by chance in a game I managed (finally!) to escape the painful darkness that closed in around me.” The magical solution, however, is temporary. Our heroine is at pains to explain that her fear cannot be categorized along with typical childhood neuroses — it is something different, deeper, visceral — and as such, we

should not expect it to be done away with by superstitious rituals.

Her fears temporarily quelled, she continues to seek female figures with whom to bond. On vacation she meets a thirteen year-old girl who wears a premature, tired maturity, “sad and perfumed like an overripe fruit... a frustrated *girl*, a girl not kissed or caressed by her mom.” This girl speaks a language of innuendo that nearly pierces the narrator’s innocence and occasions her earliest friction with a young woman as a sexual being. When she pinches the narrator’s nipple, staining it with nail polish and leaving a “brutal, painful” stigmata on her skin, our narrator plunges into the pool to wash away the stain that brings her perilously close to knowledge of the adult world. After this incident, she can no longer find the pebbles. Soon after comes estrangement from her sisters, who begin to recede into the country of adolescence. The protagonist cries at their rejection of her, “not realizing that what I should have been mourning was the *disappearance* of the girls who had once been my sisters.” The closer she moves towards growing up, the more distant all possible remedies for the fear seem to become.

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These encounters with the pubescent Other are full of impending doom, as we sense the character’s progression toward a transformation against which she strenuously reacts, declaring, “this will never happen to me.” The anxiety crescendos when she returns home from a trip more harassed than ever by the sounds. As if anticipating her future as a

ghost, she begins to haunt the family home by night, “never as big as it was then,” and seeks refuge in the forbidden space of Esther’s painting studio. This out of bounds room is a refuge associated with the distant mother; the protagonist allows herself to believe it will be safe, but her transgression is ultimately what triggers the catastrophe of Esther’s sudden death. In the whirlwind of noises that enter the forbidden room, the girl and her mother are once again brought together then torn asunder by the presence of the fear. The noises gather around them, objects in the studio become animate and turn “enraged” upon Esther, pursuing her at last. Only at the moment of this violent loss is the protagonist able to call Esther her “mother.”

In *Before*, Boulosa offers a coming of age tale of a girl who searches for role models, and for a map that might allow her, like her older sisters, to step forward into womanhood. What she sees instead are signs of the violence of being a woman in a physical body. Despite being surrounded by women, she is repeatedly unable to enter into communion with them. As *Bildungsroman*, the novel is decidedly ironic and rebellious, for the moment the protagonist reaches maturity, marked by her menstruation, is also the moment of her death—the completion of her physical maturity is also the moment she disappears from the physical realm. The feminine subject here meets with the impossibility of full acceptance, even by a sisterhood that turns out to be fragmented and hostile.

Without its fantastic elements, *Before* would be the story of a young woman who forms part of a family and yet finds herself isolated and alone in childhood. Steeped in the gothic and fantastic modes, the novel becomes a testimony of the structural violence of family relationships and of the cruel bodily transformation of becoming a woman. As I write this

and remember my girlhood fears and the events that triggered them, I realize that Boullosa evades an identification of original trauma, instead suggesting that the trauma of her protagonist is rooted in living while female. The source of pain here is more troubling precisely because it refuses to be named. The culminating disasters of the novel appear to occur as a result of the fear, rather than having occasioned it.

In a novel where the structural violence of family makes anything but the protagonist's ultimate erasure impossible, there is also, paradoxically, much to celebrate. This tale, told with the ebullience and urgency by now familiar to readers of Boullosa, becomes a rallying cry for the power of stories, for as she speaks from beyond the physical realm, the narrator of *Before* tells of the joy she finds in remembering:

“When I decided to tell you this, to invent you in order to tell this, and by having an interlocutor to have words myself, I didn’t imagine the bliss my memories would bring. Though I can exaggerate my epiphany, I might say I’ve come alive again.”



Though it might be impossible for the disembodied voice to recover her sense of the physical, and though the reader is perpetually aware of the irony of the attempt, it seems that

despite the violence of the estrangement and ruptures of which she is victim, Boulosa's storyteller is able to tell herself back into existence, even as the tale moves her towards annihilation.