

Laura Farmer

Review: Before by Carmen Boullosa

In all our lives there are moments – profound, joyful, heartbreaking – that cause our personal trajectories to split in two. There is before, and there is after. For renowned Mexican author Carmen Boullosa that divide came at age fifteen when her mother suddenly passed away. And in a blending of personal and fictional, of the poetic and the mundane, comes *Before*, a haunting novel about one woman's ghost-like return to the childhood days before her mother's death. In it the narrator attempts to grapple with the fear that once held her captive, as well as come to a further understanding of herself.

As beautiful and personal as a dream, *Before* is a courageous testament to honoring the person you were before, and coming to terms with who you became after.

Boullosa is one of Mexico's most cherished authors, having published 18 novels as well as poems, plays, and essays. *Before* is her first novel – a novella, really – that has just become available in the United States through Deep Vellum press. The work showcases

Boullosa's early stylings with the themes and constructions that would make her great: the rushed, near frantic passages of dialogue; the presentation of the everyday supernatural; the found eroticism in daily life.

What strikes the heart in *Before* is the profound earnestness in which the narrator explores the memories that transform her life. These are not all grand, show-stopping events. One chapter is dedicated to her fascination with the pebbles in her neighbor's garden boxes; another to a cheaply framed photo the narrator discovers, and her quest to find its deeper meaning.

This, in many ways, is childhood: the laser focus; the deep emotional attachment to small items; the fear and fascination with getting older. Boullosa captures these sensations with a poet's heart and sensibility. Memories come not in a linear fashion, but scattered, jumbled, true to the mind: "I'm sorry I can't retain in a single moment everything told here, can't feel in sequence everything I wanted to reach your ears!" the narrator says in a burst of direct speech to the reader.

A story unlike any other, *Before* is a profound coming-of-age tale that stretches the imagination.