

*December 31, 2016*

## After Before: El Libro de Carmen Boullosa

*by Aaron Bady*



Carmen Boullosa's *Before* is a ghost story told by a gentle and terrified little ghost, a child who died on the day she first menstruated. Alone in the darkness—with only her memories to keep her company—she struggles for the words that will speak her existence into life, and for someone to speak them to. Of her child's eternity of fragments, "Who can I tell about them?" she asks. And then the novel begins: "Tonight out of darkness, I'll create people I can tell."

As she creates us, the reader, a "you" to whom she can address, she raises from the dead her world of Mexico City in the 1950s, a kaleidoscope of images and sounds and fleeting impressions: ducks in the park, a decapitated turtle, a protective circle of white pebbles, spiders on a jacket, and the howling bestiary of night terrors that haunt her sleep. This is the world of innocent dread she will live in, forever: before, ever after. This is *Before*.

First published in Spanish in 1989, it has taken until now for this undisputed classic to be translated into English, Boullosa's first novel but also one of her strangest and

most *unheimlich* works of fiction. Perhaps because it was her first step into prose, her language still aspires to “touch the consciousness behind words, or before words” (as she told me in an interview); as with her poetry of the time, the novel “works with words to touch where the words cannot touch.” The result is that this novel, written in the artlessly-disordered consciousness of a child that never grew up, is difficult to describe. Which is exactly the point: nothing is more difficult for its ghostly protagonist than to describe her own world, because she, herself, is nothing but loose ends and dusty corners and unexplainable sounds, lost in a world in which nothing fits, adds up, or comes to the point. To a child ill at ease with the world—whether a maturing girl imprisoned in a Catholic patriarchy or a ghostly specter, haunted by her memories—this is what the world *is*.

The achievement of the novel is that if adults tell coherent stories about a world that makes sense, the language of her novel *fails* in exactly the way its protagonist fails to make sense of her existence and her place in the world. As she is menaced and threatened by the approaching steps of an unspeakable, terrifying womanhood, the world gives her no words with which to describe what she fears; beset with guilt for crimes she hasn’t committed—and can’t understand—she is the eternal ghost of childhood, lost in an adult world. This is *Before*: as she recounts the grisly witchcraft of childhood, in all its innocent and random specificity, we can only listen in silence, dreading, as she has, the outcome we’ve always known was coming.

Having read this terrifying little book, and re-read it—and then *re*-read it again—I have difficulty with even my own attempt to describe its indescribability: after all, it is a mistake to try to domesticate a ghost story, to make it feel logical or sensible or like it follows clear narrative rules. It doesn’t. Little in this book makes sense, because that’s the tragedy of a child who dies before becoming an adult, before reaching the point of socialization and understanding, and before coming to terms with herself as a woman. Because she does none of these things—and because, now, she *cannot*—she is left lost, forgotten, and confused, crying into the void, doomed never to know what it would be to be found, remembered, or at ease. And so, to us, who read her from the other side of a chasm wider and deeper than the abyss which separates life from death—we who know who we are, and why, and how (or at least we who *think* we do)—this novel will and must remain enigmatic, impossible, depthless, as impossible to understand as childhood itself. For those of us who have left its ghost behind, childhood cannot be understood. This is what *Before* shows us.

\*\*\*

Carmen Boullosa herself struggles to tell the story of *Before*. This is hardly surprising. It’s been over three decades since she wrote it, three decades in which she’s been almost impossibly prolific in nearly every literary form you can think of. Along with a dozen collections of poetry, she has written drama, short stories, polemics and criticism, many different varieties of creative non-fiction, and more than a few variations on the memoir; with her husband, the historian Mike Wallace, she wrote a searing history of the Mexican-American drug war, *A Narco History*; and when I met her in New York City, where she lives part of the time, she offhandedly mentioned a

screenplay she had just written, an adaptation of *The Prince and the Pauper* set in Mexico City. Last year, she was working on an adaptation of *Antigone*; this year, she has been writing about a pair of long-forgotten Ecuadorian writers (“my girls” she calls them), and about an imagined literary dinner party, in which a succession of great writers each prepare a dish. A dedicated bibliographer would need a lot of time on his hands to track down all that’s she’s written.

Yet it is as a novelist that she commands our attention, especially now as her work is finally being translated into English. Depending on how you count them, she’s written at least seventeen novels, across such a variety of genres and forms and modes as to make anything more than a summary impossible: she’s written everything from horror to historical realism to science fiction to nostalgia to comic farce. She makes light of her novel-writing, calling it a habit she can’t kick (“It is a vice and a sin and I like to sin,” she told me, with a laugh; “I’m a vicious person”). But she’s also, simply, one of the great writers of our time. Challenging and provocative and strange, her work is as gentle and human as it is full of violence, deadly earnest but full of life and laughter. And though she always circles around to the same themes—Mexico in the world, women in the world, and the fragmentary archives left behind of both—one of the charms of her work is that she can’t seem to help losing herself in strange tangents and back alleys; if *Before* is a stunning meditation on femininity and loss, it’s images like a child playing in the dirt, in an empty chicken-coop, that will haunt you.

Boullosa has been neglected by the English-speaking world. Her position in the world of Spanish letters is unimpeachable, but though she’s lived in Brooklyn for nearly two decades, her work has remained strangely invisible in the United States. Indeed, when Deep Vellum began re-publishing her in 2014—with a translation of what was then her newest novel, *Texas: The Great Theft*—only four of her novels had been translated into English, and all of them were out of print. As I’ve gotten to know her, and her work, this invisibility has become harder and harder to take: I’ve gone from delight at having discovered my favorite new writer to perplexity that she isn’t better known to outrage that one of the great writers of our time hasn’t gotten her due. Never have I been more sure of anything than of this: with time, that will change.

Of course, Boullosa herself just keeps writing: in the months since I spoke with her, she launched a new novel in Mexico City, *El libro de Ana*. It’s the story of Anna Karenina’s children’s novel, and her children: having noticed two passages in Tolstoi’s novel in which she is described as having written a novel, and that a publisher intends to publish it—and noticed that no one else seems to have noticed it—Boullosa spins the story of Sergio and Annie, her children, as adults on the eve of the Russian Revolution. It is a time of mass social crisis whose resemblance to Mexico, today, is the point. But it both is and isn’t a return to Tolstoi’s novel; it’s more like a revenge on an author who made his tragic heroine a writer, then forgot that he had even done it. “*Anna Karenina* is a nineteenth-century novel,” she said, in an interview; “This is a twenty-first-century novel.”

I hope *El Libro de Ana* will become *Anna’s Book*, soon; I want to read it, and I want you to read it too. But to tell the story of Carmen Boullosa’s belated reception in the United States, we need to go back to her first novel; hers is a story we have to start at the beginning.

\*\*\*

Boullosa tells a few different stories about how she first became a novelist. One is very simple: she needed money. She had written a pair of prose narratives in the early 1980s—*Mejor desaparece* (“Better to Disappear”) and *Antes* (“Before”)—but she hid them in her desk, afraid to publish them. At the time, she was a well-respected poet in Mexico City, and she knew that if she became a *novelist*, she would lose something important: “There’s something sacred in the figure of a poet,” she told me; “The poet doesn’t get *stained* by the kind of labor that a novel implies.” But then a dispute with her landlord forced her hand. Forced to sell nearly everything they could sell to raise money, she sent *Mejor desaparece* to the publishing house that would give her the most money for it, and when it did well, she sent *Antes* to the publishing house run by Octavio Paz.

It was done: she was a novelist.

Another story she tells is how *theater* started her on her journey from “the private pleasures of poetry to the dialogue with otherness that constitutes fiction.” She and her then-husband—the writer and dramatist Alejandro Aura—managed and ran a theater-bar in Mexico City, called *El hijo del cuervo* (“The Son of the Crow”), mostly by themselves. Along with taking tickets, selling beer, managing inventory and employees—and even occasionally acting on stage herself—Boullosa found herself called to write the script for a play called *Vacio* (“Emptiness”), which would be her first foray into narrative. The theater gave her space for a different kind of writing, and in a back room overlooking the stage, on boxes of beer she had dragged to form a crude desk, she found herself writing novels: with cabaret and laughter in the background, she worked at her violent ghost stories until the applause told her it was time to turn on the lights.

But the third story she tells is my favorite: it was *motherhood* that made her a novelist. “I wouldn’t have been a novelist if I hadn’t been a mother,” she told me; “You have to be totally devoted to poetry to be a real poet. You have to give yourself over to poetry.”

“But I needed a child to live. I was asphyxiating. I wanted a baby, and so I had Maria. And I changed as a writer. I got disturbed as a writer. And then I became a novelist. Because I was forced to see the needs of another person, the baby, the child: I was taken out of my being-inside-me, and it was a revelation. I became an adult...Being a parent is when you discover that you are not the center of the world.”

“Friendship and collaboration led me to theater,” she once said, “and motherhood led me to the novel.”

She began writing *Antes* when her young stepson, who suffered from night terrors, would walk back and forth all night, begging to be allowed into the bed with them. The sound of his footsteps—which are featured prominently in the novel—brought her back to her own childhood, when she, too, would beg to be received into the bed with her parents, or with her sisters, and be refused; those memories brought her back to her intensely Catholic childhood in Mexico City in the 1960’s, to her mother’s early death and her father’s re-marriage, with all the family turmoil—

and childish confusion about identity—that implies. And so she wrote it, the story of “a little kid looking for refuge,” but who finds it, only, in death.

It might also be that Carmen Boullosa became a novelist because she needed to write *Antes*. *Mejor desaparece* came first, but (as she is quick to clarify) it’s merely a “narrative,” without a focus on a singular character or set of events; a “corrupt non-novel,” she compares it to vomit. By contrast, *Antes* came to her fully formed, something she *had* to write, and all the more so because she didn’t know what she was writing, or why: if she would eventually publish it for the money they needed to keep the theater running, and if she could look back on it as an expression of what motherhood taught her, it reads like something more visceral, more basic, even primal; it reads like a vein opened onto the page.

Even today, three decades later, her words break down when she talks about *Antes*: there are long pauses as she leaps from one part of the book to another, and when she talks about her mother—whose death features prominently—her voice trails off, or she repeats herself like a stuck record. When I asked her what she thought of the translation, she eventually admitted that she hadn’t yet looked at it, that she finds it hard to go back to this particular novel, and can’t read the novel’s major death scene without crying. She can explain where she started to write it, about how a child wandering in the night, terrified, become the specter of impending womanhood, and the guilty memory of a mother’s death; she can remark how, in retrospect, she can see that it’s a very *Mexican* ghost story, in the vein of Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Paramo*, very much of its era.

These are all easy stories to tell. But they don’t quite add up, and there are too many of them. And this, it seems to me, is the point: to really explain where the novel came from—or to make sense of why and how it is what it is—we run aground on the very barrier that her novel so elegantly sweeps across: the lost-ness of before.

It’s a story, it turns out, that can only be told in fiction.

\*\*\*

Not long after *Antes* won the prestigious Xavier Villarrutia award, the British publisher Jonathan Cape published a translation of her novel *The Miracle Worker*, the story of a virgin whose dreams can heal and who gets caught up in Mexico City politics. As far as I can tell, the book left its English readers completely baffled; the reviews are mixed, and there was no sequel from Jonathan Cape. A few years later, Grove Press published three of her novels in the United States: her novel about pirates in the Caribbean called *They’re Cows, We’re Pigs* (1997), a pseudo-memoir *Leaving Tabasco* (2001), and a historical novel about one of the great icons of femininity, *Cleopatra Dismounts* (2003). These books didn’t sell particularly well either; if Grove had hoped she would become the next Isabel Allende—as their marketing seems to indicate—she certainly did not. It would be left to her contemporary, Roberto Bolaño, to become the next great Latin American writer for the English-speaking to belatedly discover. Around the time she moved to New York City, Grove cut its losses and cut her loose: *Cleopatra Dismounts* was released on Christmas day—

all but ensuring that it would flop—and Grove canceled their planned publication of *Antes*, which had already been translated. Her work in English drifted out of print.

In retrospect, it's easy enough to understand how and why this happened. Large publishers are less and less likely to make long-term commitments to writers whose sales are only modest: as profit margins get thinner and thinner, it becomes bestseller or bust and it makes more sense for a publisher like Grove to speculate on the next big thing, to try out some new, untested writer in hopes of hitting the lottery. If she was not to be the next Isabel Allende, perhaps someone else would be.

It's also easy to see why her sales were modest. Then and now, the US market has a limited appetite for translated fiction, even from elsewhere on the American continent. And Carmen Boullosa is not the kind of writer who has historically done well here. Look at *They're Cows, We're Pigs*, for example: while it might seem to promise a rollicking pirate adventure in the Caribbean—and seems marketed as a riotous picaresque—the book turns out to be an intellectual exploration of the gendering of utopia, with language that is sometimes forbiddingly archaic and violence that is disturbingly realistic. The rewards are there for the reader dedicated enough to learn how to read it, but it couldn't be farther from the escapist fantasy that its (U.S.) cover seems to promise (as she's explained in interviews, it's really a novel about two 20<sup>th</sup> century upheavals: The Cuban revolution and the Sexual Revolution).

Or take *Leaving Tabasco*, Grove's second attempt at making her legible to American mass markets. The book is brightly colored and welcoming—with a big red chili pepper on the cover—and marketed as a naïve memoir of rural nostalgia, with shades of magical realism and exotic picturesque. But it's neither a memoir, nor nostalgic, nor picturesque; in its own way, it's a ghost story every bit as edgy as *Antes*, leavened with humor and a dry sarcastic cynicism about what the south means to the north; if *Antes* is a kind of feminist deconstruction of *Pedro Paramo*, *Leaving Tabasco* is a feminist deconstruction of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Finally, while *Cleopatra Dismounts* nicely exemplifies one of the major obsessions of her work—Boullosa's lifelong trawl through the historical archives of repressed and forgotten forms of femininity—the violence and uncompromising brutality of her approach to gender must have been too much for general consumption (or even for easy recognition), and it sank without a trace. The problem, in short, is that her novels make you work too hard: she has a way of inventing a new language for each novel, or even re-inventing the novel itself, each time, in order to explore the new worlds she dreams into existence.

I suspect this is what one has to do if one is to be both a literary genius and a woman. And that's the other problem. Along with the adventurous sophistication of her work—which is never the same twice—the English-reading market's appetite for Latin American *women*writers has never been very deep. If Isabel Allende and Roberto Bolaño represent the two kinds of Latin American writers that the US market has traditionally embraced, Boullosa falls somewhere in the uncanny valley between. Allende gives us intimate portraits of feminine hearth and homes, magical realism, and historical fiction, but Boullosa's books are too filled with postmodern whimsy and gothic

feminism to quite fill that niche. Yet while Bolaño's success *has* opened more space for the high literary range of Latin American writers—including younger writers like Valeria Luiselli, Guadalupe Nettel, and Lina Meruane—both his example and his own framing have tended to code that space as specifically *masculine*. He was generous with praise, after all, in his relentless promotion of a particular vision of the Latin American literary, but the blurbs that adorn the backs of nearly every new novel translated into English tell a very masculine story of Latin American literature. When it came to Carmen Boullosa, whose genius he recognized, he could describe her only as “the best woman writer in Mexico today,” putting her in her place: a great writer, yes, but a *woman*, and only among women writers would she deserve such a superlative.

There is a story behind that blurb, in fact. Boullosa and Bolaño eventually became dear friends—she interviewed him and **wrote** about him, and recalls him with great fondness—but the essay that blurb comes from is a strikingly trifling work of vicious misogyny. She forgave him (“Of *course* I forgave him!” she told me, “I forgave him immediately”), but I can’t imagine she has forgotten. The essay is called “Vienna and the Shadow of a Woman,” and he barely mentions her work at all, dwelling instead on how beautiful she is, and on how the poets of Mexico City had divided themselves into two groups: those who loved her and those who did not. As misogyny, it would be breathtaking if such dismissals weren’t so banal, so normal; as criticism, it is worthlessly shallow. And for much of her career, this has been the background hum against which she stubbornly created works of genius, building worlds out of fragments and turning whispers, echoes, and ghosts into symphonies of language.

\*\*\*

In the next few years, Anglophone readers will get a second chance. After *Before*, Deep Vellum plans or hopes to publish everything else: they’ve got a translation of *Cielos de la Tierra* coming in June, as “Heavens on Earth,” a stunning science-fiction novel which ranges from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquest of Mexico to a post-apocalyptic 21<sup>st</sup>, in which future historians live in sky-castles made of air and water, struggling to look back into our earthly, muddy past. I’ve heard rumors that *Duerme* is next, the story of a cross-dressing Sleeping Beauty in 1571. With any luck, they’ll commission a translation of her next novel, too; Anna Karenina’s children’s novel needs to live in English, too. But at the rate she’s still going, Dallas will run out of paper before they run out of Carmen Boullosa novels to print. However belated, it is certainly time: now that nearly every scrap of paper that Roberto Bolaño ever scribbled on has been translated and published, the US seems ready to discover what readers in Spanish have already known: It will be a very long time before her work is exhausted.

*Aaron Bady is a writer in Oakland, and an editor at The New Inquiry.*