

BOOM+ TOOLBOX

CREATIVE WRITING SHORT STORY WORKSHOP

ON THE LATIN AMERICAN BOOM AND OTHER AUTHORS



MEXICAN
CULTURAL
INSTITUTE
WASHINGTON DC

BOOM+ TOOLBOX:

CREATIVE WRITING SHORT STORY WORKSHOP

ON THE LATIN AMERICAN BOOM AND OTHER AUTHORS

**BOOM+ Tool Box: Creative writing short story workshop
On the Latin American Boom and other authors**

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To write, first you need to learn to dream.

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Prologue

One day we were working together at our offices at the Mexican Cultural Institute, and the next, the pandemic restrictions hit. Like most cultural institutions, we resorted to sharing as much of our content online as possible.

We wanted to stay current and to offer a respite from the fear and worry. Soon, the abundance of content on every available screen forced us to dip our toes into trying something new. The decision was an easy one: encourage creativity.

Creative and artistic communities were some of the hardest hit immediately after the pandemic began. Many of them made their creations available for free to fill the void of everyday activities left vacant, while locked up in our homes.

How about we helped people get inspiration and tools to create something for themselves? Thus Boom+ Toolbox was born. We reached out to Luis Felipe Lomelí who immediately made a proposal that included Carlos José Pérez Sámano and all which they both know about writing.

To make it even better, they included texts by authors that many of us Spanish speakers consider literary canon. Would the nice people who joined our workshop get to read Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez AND Rosario Castellanos? Count us in!

And so, it was that eight participants sent in a short story they wrote after several sessions and exercises where they learned about the style and techniques of the authors they were reading. Some liked writing from before and just needed the extra inspiration. Some had never tried it before. Some were already familiar with the authors; some had never heard of them.

And still, this hodgepodge of personalities (myself included, since I logged in to almost every session like a fly on the wall) found something in common and beat the awkwardness of reading out loud something they wrote in front of people they had only seen through a screen on their desks. Not only that: they later agreed to let us put their texts out in the world.

I could not be prouder or happier to share their work in the form of this unassuming eBook. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed thinking of a way to offer a writing space for people during an unusual and painful year.

May Boom+ Toolbox II—which just ended and had even more participants! —end in another book like this one. See you on Boom+Toolbox III.

Ix-Nic Iruegas,
MCI Executive Director

About the Instructors

Carlos José Pérez Sámano



When we teach people to write, we are not only sharing a set of skills, a bunch of technical abilities and tools.

We are teaching others to open their frames to understand the reality.

We facilitate critical thinking processes that actually transform the shape of our world. Ideas are dangerous and beautiful.

It was an honor to be able to facilitate this workshop through the Mexican Cultural Institute along with Luis Felipe Lomelí.

Let's hope that by sharing our passion for Latin-American stories, more people can have a broader understanding of realities that can be both challenging, but deeply enriching.



Luis Felipe Lomeli

...perhaps I shouldn't say this. That's right, I shouldn't. No teacher should. And I wasn't even a teacher here —I was just a co-coordinator with Carlos José.

We gathered some short stories from Latin American writers, sketched some narrative techniques out of them, tried our best to explain how they work to a multinational and, at least, bilingual audience with our broken Spanglish and then, voilà, we were reading some marvelous short stories penned by the participants of this workshop.

That's it, I said it —their short stories were marvelous.

But I'm quite sure the merit is all theirs, not ours, we were just a couple of coordinators that gathered some short stories from Latin American writers, sketched...



BOOM+ TOOLBOX:

Volume One



Carmen Benito Vessels

Carmen Benito Vessels has dedicated her professional life to research historical aspects of the Spanish language, literature and the ample space in between. She has written several academic books and many scholarly articles about her areas of expertise. She is a Professor at the University of Maryland.

El hombre que no tenía reloj

Ni siquiera el aire se atrevía a moverse para no perturbar el silencio de los ancianos.

Ellos, sentados al sol de las frías mañanas de invierno, con la boina calada hasta las cejas y los párpados en duermevela, parecían pajaritos encaramados en invisibles perchas.

Todos tenían la mano izquierda apoyada en la rodilla izquierda, y la derecha, o en el mango de sus bastones ya pulidos por el uso, o en el brazo del banco de la plaza que ocupaban a diario y cuyos desconchados daban cuenta de los días.

Todos, a veces de dos en dos, a veces de tres en tres, pero siempre rítmicamente y al unísono, se levantaban pausadamente los cuatro puños: el del abrigo, el del jersey, el de la camisa y el de la camiseta, y consultaban el reloj de su muñeca izquierda durante unos segundos.

No es que fuera difícil leer los números, es que ese oficio les entretenía un rato, les hacía sentirse un poco

navegantes; y también les aseguraba que las agujas de sus relojes se movían y que el tiempo pasaba.

-- Ya pronto nos llaman a comer.

-- Sí, ya pronto.

--Ya queda menos.

-- Sí, ya queda menos.

-- A ver qué toca hoy.

--Sí, a ver.

Pero el hombre sin reloj, con su voz bobalicona, apestaba a diario y ponía nerviosos a los viejecitos de la plazuela pues les interrumpía cada veinte minutos pidiendo la hora. Y ellos no sabían qué hacer con aquel buen hombre.

No era peligroso ni mal educado, pero les irritaba sobremanera con su “¿puede Ud. darme la hora?”.

En varias ocasiones el viejecito que fuera jefe de intendencia, y a quien todos llamaban “coronel”, le había hecho un mal gesto al pedigüeño hombre sin reloj y sin mediar palabra; pero este volvía y volvía hasta que por fin otro de ellos, don Emiliano, a quien llamaban “el sacristán” –y que en realidad nunca lo fue – rompió bruscamente el silencio y respondió al “¿puede Ud. darme la hora?” de malos modos:

--Con gusto, ¿cuál quiere Ud.: vísperas, maitines, laudes, prima, tercia, sexta, nona o completas?

---¡¡¡Dios le bendiga!!! Si es gratis, me llevo las completas, dijo el sin reloj.

--¿Qué se ha creído Ud. que a mí me las regalan? ¡Años llevo intentando entrar en la orden y nada! ¡Lárguese de

aquí, y si vuelve aviso al loquero para lo encierren!

Al unísono, todos los viejecitos, boquiabiertos y con gesto mohíno, volvieron la cabeza hacia “el sacristán”; varios de ellos sacaron el pañuelo engurruñado del bolsillo, limpiaron la esfera del reloj y luego se limpiaron el moquillo, se levantaron los cuatro puños y esta vez miraron el reloj con una mirada perdida y llena de desasosiego.

Entonces fue el coronel quien también rompió el silencio:

“Cabron --y ahora, ¿qué? Te has pasado de listo, sacristán”.



Mateo Bonilla

Mateo Bonilla is a writer, editor, and translator. He lives in Washington D.C with his wife Victoria. Mateo was born in Ecuador and goes back and forth between his hometown of Quito and the U.S. His writing is influenced by the work of Neil Gaiman, Matt Ruff, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Isaac Asimov. Love rescued him from living in a sweaty jungle.

"With Luis Lomeli's guidance, we have descended into the depths of Mexican and Latin American writing. On the way, we encountered tropical fish, hard-skinned sharks, and various magical creatures which shall remain nameless."

The Sky is the Limit

Carlos was a newspaper editor. He had a degree in comparative literature from NYU. He spent most of his time in his attic office wearing sweatpants and waiting for copy to come in so he could destroy the words like ants under a magnifying glass.

Just like every Friday night out with his friends, Carlos gulped down his fifth or sixth tequila shot and started complaining about how he was always broke and had no money to pay for a housecleaner to help him with the chores and that left him no time to work on his novels, and that he was doomed to die alone as a copy editor of Savings—one in one thousand online financial publications based in Buenos Aires.

That night, Mario, who had grown tired of his friend's monologues, half-jokingly said to him *"what if you ate with the same spoon and a plate, that would save you a lot of time to work on your masterpiece, and maybe you would finally stop whining!"* All friends broke into laughter, but Carlos.

One afternoon, after going through another disappointing stack of copy, Carlos decided to give it a try. *Because, why not?* He was a single middle-aged man, with the kind of ballooning gut that thin men get when they don't exercise. At first, eating with one spoon and one plate served to keep his kitchen neat and organized.

During the first week, he had more time to read and write. During the first month, he learned French and became conversational. In his second month, he was able to finish the book of poems which he had started in college.

Between his third and fifth months, he wrote half of his novel about mountain climbing in the Andes. In his sixth month, he quickly realized this thing had potential.

Carlos started to use the same attire all the time. Between his seventh to the eighth month of eating with the same spoon and plate, and dressing with the same attire, he drafted his new plan for the economic recovery of Argentina, which he submitted to the *Casa Rosada* where it was revised and then implemented to successfully lift Argentina, once and for all, out of poverty in four months.

After a year of success after success, Carlos decided to stop cutting his hair and nails. By eating with the same spoon and plate, wearing the same attire, and never cutting his hair and nails he became unstoppable. After a month, Carlos became Argentina's Minister of Finance, all he had to do was to call and ask for the job. Yet, he quickly tired of having to read email after email from short-sighted bureaucrats.

Carlos decided he needed a job where people would just tell him what needed to be done and he could just say the

final word. So he decided to run for president. By now, it was clear to him he could achieve this goal by further streamlining. That's when he realized he needed to stop leaving his room altogether.

Going to the bathroom was a minor complication compared to having to fetch his food. During the campaign, he implemented his new plan. To save time Carlos began by eating small cuts of meat from his feet, then thighs, and then buttocks.

When he appeared at the Casa Rosada for the swearing-in ceremony, he was feeling a little frail but that didn't stop him from smiling and greeting his supporters. That was a first in the history of Argentina.

Carlos, overall, felt pretty satisfied by having come a long way from his copy editor job at Savings. But one night, he was moving around in bed, his stumpy legs feeling itchy. He couldn't stop thinking about what he would do next. And then a bright thought came to his mind, *"the sky's the limit!"*



Marta Caminero-Santangelo

Marta Caminero-Santangelo is the Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at the University of Kansas. Her research focuses on 20th and 21st century U.S. Latinx literary studies; she teaches classes in Migration Studies, U.S. Latinx Literatures, and Literature of Social Justice. Her books include: *Documenting the Undocumented: Latina/o Narrative and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper* (2016), *On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (2007), and *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998). She earned a Ph.D. from the University of California, Irvine and a BA from Yale University. She was born in Canada to Cuban immigrant parents.

"What I loved most of all was getting time to try to import boom style techniques into our own creative writing process. I had not actually tried creative writing in years—maybe decades. It was wonderful to get a specific technique prompt and some time to work on it."

Dogs

Tired

They or me?

Long walks make them tired. They are wiped out now.

They shove me to the edge of the bed.

They get me up when they need to go out.

Seeking love, she shoves her head under my arm, repeatedly, as I try to type on my laptop.

Seeking love, she shoves her head under my hand when I answer the phone, so I can't talk to you.

So annoying.

The old one likes to lie on the remote control. The tv show will flip to menu unexpectedly. I have to hunt for it under her belly.

The little one tries to get me to sit up, away from the headboard, so he can jump onto the bed behind me.

Then I can't lie down.

I can't sleep this way. There are too many in my bed, in odd places, in the places I'm supposed to be.

In the places you are supposed to be.



Minerva Canto

Minerva Canto is a journalist in Southern California who writes short fiction and is working on a memoir, "Dispatches: Tales of a Nomadic Journalist in Search of Home." Born in Mexico City, she has an MFA from the Stonecoast creative writing program at the University of Southern Maine and a B.A. in print journalism from the University of Southern California.

"Latino Boom + Toolbox was a dream come true for me! I grew up in and studied in the United States so my exposure to Mexican arts and culture has been limited to my own self-education. Thanks to the online format, this was the first course in which I had the opportunity to learn from Mexican writers and formally study the work of Latin American authors. Luis Felipe Lomelí and Carlos José Pérez Sámano are generous instructors who worked in perfect symmetry. An added and delightful bonus has been interacting with other student writers from both sides of the border. This has been a fun and unique experience."

Metalhead Carlos

He was a metalhead. I'm sure you remember him. He always wore tight jeans and faded black t-shirts with his favorite band on them. Yeah, Metallica. I knew you'd remember him. I'll never forget his knee-high orange suede boots. Not that I've ever seen any heavy metal singers wear those. But Carlos. Pfft, he was something else.

I still remember the day Mr. Ramos, the principal, came to our history class. He pointed at Carlos and said, "*Young man.*" And nothing else. Carlos didn't say a word, just got his backpack and followed him out the door.

You used to sit behind me in class, so you leaned forward. "*Ooh, Ramos is gonna get him for all his fighting.*" Remember? We were always talking about Carlos, not just you and I, but everyone it seems was always shit-talking on him.

When Carlos came back a few minutes later, Matt Jenkins was a real turd. Yeah, he was the kid with all the button-up shirts. He probably had one in every shade of pastel

to match his brown penny loafers. Well, laugh about it now, but he was your boyfriend. For a few weeks, Matt was your boyfriend. Ha, I you and he were always kissing in the hallway back then. You never did tell me why you broke up.

Anyway, when Carlos came back to class, Matt was smiling from ear to ear when he saw Carlos. His eyes were red, and it was obvious he'd been crying.

"Not such a tough guy anymore, huh?" Matt told him. *Did you know Matt could be so mean?* We were just kids, I guess, but looking back now, I see it was the beginning of the end for him.

Carlos had it out for Matt, and it was easy to see why. They were total opposites. I'm sure you remember girls were always hitting on Matt. They didn't care that his outfits were boring, and he was always writing his endless to-do lists. I once asked him why he needed so many lists and he told me he read that all successful people make lists. Of course, no one was surprised that he was voted *"Most Likely to Succeed."*

And Carlos? Well, Carlos somehow got by.

Not long after he got pulled out of class, Carlos tried to kiss Amy while they were walking home from school one day. Yeah, Amy, the loudmouth volleyball player who was Matt's girlfriend after you broke up. She and Carlos lived on the same street, so they'd known each other since kindergarten.

Amy told us later that Carlos dared her to go to his house that day to listen to heavy metal songs. She told him she'd

rather walk naked to school.

Carlos told her, *"If you let me kiss you, I won't beat up Matt."*

Amy liked attention and, by lunchtime the next day, we all knew that Carlos had nearly kissed Amy right there on the street.

It didn't take Matt long to come to a decision. He offered himself up to Carlos.

"This afternoon. The parking lot behind Taco Bell."

The fight was over before most kids got there. Juana, my chemistry lab partner, was Carlos' cousin, so we walked over together.

Let me tell you, I've never seen a more boring fight.

"Hit me."

Matt stood in front of Carlos, who didn't even hesitate. He pulled back his right arm and punched Matt in the jaw. Hard. Matt kind of wobbled a bit and rubbed his chin. He had a few drops of blood on his lips.

Then Carlos smiled and said, *"That's it. I just wanted to see your pretty face not be so perfect anymore."*

I think we all felt sorry for Matt for days, but I kinda forgot all about Matt and Carlos after graduation. Then, I ran into Juana at the grocery store while visiting my parents over Christmas. She and I laughed so hard talking about all our chemistry experiments gone wrong, and I suddenly remembered Carlos.

"Hey, how is Carlos?"

"Oh. You haven't heard."

Turns out Carlos did OK for himself. Well, more than OK. Juana says he's a big shot in Silicon Valley. Head of his own company even. Who would've guessed? Seems Matt ended up asking Carlos for a job one day.

Yeah, Matt did go to UCLA, but he flunked out. Dropped out after his first year. I don't know if you heard, but Matt was partying too hard. Got into drugs and stuff. His parents said they sent him to rehab and when he got out told him he needed to get a job. Handed him a business card of someone they said was Matt's former schoolmate and hiring workers, a lot of them former schoolmates, for his new tech company.

The name on the card was Carlos Sevilla. Matt didn't want to go, but even McDonald's didn't want him.

Who knows what happened that day when Matt and Carlos met, but later that week, Matt shot himself with his father's handgun.

You'd think that was that, but no. Carlos ended up going to Matt's memorial service with Juana. He hugged Matt's mom and told her how sorry he was.

"What happened?" Matt's mom was in tears when she figured out who Carlos was. *"Why didn't you hire him?"*

Juana says she tried to pull Carlos away. Even she hadn't asked Carlos about that day Matt showed up at his office. *"I did hire him. We shook hands and I told him, 'Hey, no hard feelings, man. We're not in high school anymore.' He was supposed to start a week later, but well..."*

Carlos never finished his sentence. Juana says Matt's mom just stared at Carlos for the longest time, until Juana finally pulled him away.

Before leaving the funeral home, Juana and Carlos took one last look at the display of photos from Matt's life. She says most of the pictures were from his high school glory days.

You remember those days, don't you?



Ofelia Montelongo

Ofelia Montelongo is a bilingual writer from Mexico. She received a BA in accounting and finance, an MBA, and a BA in English and Creative Writing. She has a MA in Spanish and Latin American Literature from UMD. Her work has been published in Latino Book Review, Los Acentos Review, Rio Grande Review, Ponder Review, The Lindenwood Review, and elsewhere. She is the 2019 Writer's Center Undiscovered Voices Fellow, the PEN America New Voices Fellow for the Old Town Books Festival, Tin House alumna, Latinx in Publishing mentee, and PEN/Faulkner writer in residence in Washington, D.C.

ofeliamontelongo.com

"In this workshop I was able to learn more about the BOOM and experiment with different forms and imagery. Luis Felipe and Carlos were amazing instructors!"

My Avocado Life

I grew up among avocado fields and monarch butterflies in Mexico. Every morning I woke up by the rooster's crow and the smell of fresh bread. After jumping off my cot, I'd grab a basket and stride out through the dirt corridors filled with leafy green trees until I couldn't catch my breath.

Sometimes, my little brother Pedro would come with me. But I was usually the one who picked avocados for an hour before breakfast. The campesinos arrived soon after that and filled the corridors with songs that I hummed along while helping my mom in the kitchen.

Sometimes when my dad didn't make enough money to buy us fruits or chicken, we'd eat only avocados for weeks. We ate avocados for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That's when I started to hate them. When my mom noticed the wrinkles on my face when eating them, she created an avocado cream, in which I didn't have to bite the texture that made me run to the bathroom.

When the cream stopped working, she smashed the avocados and put them on top of a piece of bread.

Comida de pobres, my aunt María used to say. Indeed, that was poor people's food.

When I was ten, the narcos burned down our avocado fields, and the butterflies flew up to the sky along with the fire. The narcos took our fields to sembrar whatever they wanted. There was no room in that home for us anymore, so we had to head north, the only path we could follow.

This wasn't something unexpected. It had happened to at least six other families around us. The last family that refused to leave ended up with their heads hung on a wall like dissected animals. That tale made Pedro laugh.

With some leftover avocados in our backpacks, my brother Pedro, my mom, my dad, and I took a thirty-hour ride bus to Nogales, Sonora. A bearded guy whose name I discovered later wasn't coyote opened a reja for us and told us to run and hide when it was needed. I don't remember much about those days in the desert. Some memories came back in flashes, recalling my mom eating an avocado while breastfeeding my four-year-old brother. She'd squish her breast into a plastic bottle and hand it to me. That was all I drank for days.

In the following years, I didn't eat avocados for two reasons. 1. Because they were too expensive in this new country, and 2. Because if that green thing touched my paladar I'd simply throw up.

When I became a chef, I knew precisely how to cut them, how to know when they were ripe; right on the point, when there wasn't even a need to open them up to find out they were podridos. Their sour smell would reveal their worthiness. It's been more than twenty years since I

felt them in my mouth and ten years since I touched one.

"Until today, the day you're forcing me to eat them," I tell my green-coated doctor. "It's for your own good," he says. "Nothing else will cure you." Cure, I think, what forced me to run away won't cure me. I didn't even dare to eat them when I was a chef or when we were stranded in the desert. And now, my mother has been long gone to breastfeed me back to health.

"There's a pill form," he says with a trace of nuisance on his face, "but only whole avocados will cure you; three a day, for at least two months."

It is pointless to discuss this further with the doctor. I know people have been cured before with avocados. I breathe in and out deeply and tell him: *"okay, I'll try them."* Even if my brother and I swore not to do it after my father was killed stealing some avocados from a laboratory. I only hope he keeps ignoring my whereabouts and never finds out.

The doctor hands me the prescription. He walks me back to the reception, and I take a glimpse of his upholstered office with avocado posters confirming that his eyes are gleaming because he'll get a big fat commission. I drive away to the nearest pharmacy-store, and they make me wait two hours for 21 avocados. Some of them green enough to last for a few months in the freezer. Others ready to be eaten. Twenty-one avocados are equal to three months worth of rent. As I drive away from the pharmacy, I see them looking at me. They're laughing that they'll be back in my body. Their nutty aroma takes me back to the fields and makes butterflies appear in my windshield. I shake my head and keep driving. I cut open

my first one at home. It's perfectly green, flawlessly soft. I snatch the brown seed and clean it with a towel. I place the round center in a large Ziploc bag and slice the rest of the avocado. The smell is a bit dusty as the real ones used to be. A butterfly flies around my kitchen. Its brown wings are flopping around. I dismiss it with a hand.

I place one piece in my mouth, with the trashcan next to me, just in case. I feel the silky texture, and I chew it with closed eyes. I swallow the piece and breathe in and out a little, trying to ignore my snarl of disgust. Something squirms inside of me. The air that goes out of my mouth is so strong that it becomes fire. I listen to the butterfly wiggling across the room, catching fire.

I see my mom cutting open forty avocados in a minute in front of me. I see my brother and I on the back of our truck selling avocados along the road. We have a letrero that says 5x20 pesos. I open my eyes, and I see greenish foam in my hand. I find myself hunched over the sink. I don't remember what happened. I eat the foam and swallow it all at once without chewing it. I drink a substantial amount of water.

Seven days pass by, and I don't throw up. That. Much. I go back to the green doctor, and my CT Scan shows that I have been cured. *"Something brown is growing in your belly, though,"* says the doctor. I understand what it is. *"Typically, it takes months for someone to show these results. It's incredible it only took you seven days."* He looks at his iPad. *"But you have to keep eating them often."*

I assure him I will, even though I know he wants me to do that for his commission. I like to feel the brown seed inside of me anyway. I adore seeing my mom again. She

looks so proud of me for eating my avocados. I also enjoy the butterflies zigzagging through my empty apartment. Their fluttering brings back a whiff of the avocado fields.

A year passes by, and I keep eating avocados and following up with my doctor. My fingernails have become a little greenish. My doctor says it's normal. He smiles more than usual every time I visit, or so the nurse says. He invites me to give a talk at a conference and share my story. I hesitate at the beginning, but the butterflies convince me to go. I get a standing ovation when I share my avocado life and how it's good to try something for the second time, give something else a second chance.

I go back to my green-walled apartment with a flower bouquet in hand. The butterflies rush to the door to welcome me. I hurry to clean my shoes on my avocado-shaped welcome mat to answer an unknown caller. It's my brother Pedro. Something clenches inside of me. He saw me on TV, and how dare I eat avocados again. *"You are as pobre as Aunt María said."*

I explain. My sickness. The green doctor. The CT scans. My despair. Mom. The butterflies. He smacks his lips and hangs up. I wail on my avocado pillow. My green tears feel silken-soft like the inside of one of my saviors. It's just a matter of time till my belly sprout out black, and my arms become silky as my legs.

I know I'll have more opportunities to talk at conferences that way. I just don't know how my brother would react when he'd see me on TV shaped like the thing we promise we would never eat again. I think about sending the butterflies to tell him that I, at least, am not rotting hanging on a wall.

María José Orozco



María José Orozco is 41 years old and originally from Mexico. She is a psychotherapist after spending over 15 happy years as a market researcher.

She lives in Mexico City and on top of seeing patients, she keeps learning about many different therapy specialties and... why not also learning about the Boom authors?

"Under the guidance of the great Luis Felipe & Carlos Jose I learned far more than expected; not only about many writers but also about their techniques and more importantly, I learned I can also write."

Despertar (existencial)

Mi cuerpo está aquí, conmigo, el dolor es testigo; nunca lo sentí tan intensamente, nunca me di cuenta de lo que realmente significaba habitar un cuerpo, hasta hoy, en que cada milímetro se ha hecho presente: me pesan los párpados como si con ellos cargara toneladas de concreto, me punza la cabeza como si las campanas de mil iglesias repicaran llamando a misa allí dentro, cada milímetro de piel me escoce, pareciera que una manifestación de esas enormes y horribles hormigas rojas me caminaran encima picoteando y repicoteando cada uno de mis poros sin piedad. Y nada de esto es lo peor. Lo peor, como siempre, no es lo que ocurre en la superficie, lo peor es lo que hay dentro,.

Creo que todos mis órganos están inflamados y a punto de estallar, se sienten enormes, de un tamaño descomunal, tanto que no caben ya en esas cavidades que les han sido asignadas, y entonces empujan, luchan por un espacio que no existe.

Tengo un cuerpo doliente, tengo la intención de abrir los ojos, tengo pensamientos – que por ahora no alcanzan

más que para notar dolores nuevos y cada vez más intensos – y, sobretodo, tengo mucha angustia, de ésa que te paraliza cuando no tienes idea de qué hacer en un momento en que la vida te desborda. Pero no sé qué me es lo que paraliza más en este momento: si el dolor de mi cuerpo o la angustia de no entender nada.

Sé que hay luz afuera, una luz muy intensa que traspasa el concreto en mis párpados, que me exige abrir los ojos aunque no pueda hacerlo. Y entonces, sólo entonces empiezo a sentir algo más que dolor en el cuerpo, empiezo a sentirme desesperada. No puedo ver y aparentemente tampoco puedo escuchar, sólo puedo percibir el silencio, un silencio que no me hace bien, que me obliga a prestar atención a mis pensamientos. Y mis pensamientos me asustan, me han asustado siempre y, en este instante, me aterran. Prefiero el ruido exterior.

El tiempo pierde todo sentido cuando sólo existe el dolor, cuando sólo puedes sentir eso. Así sé que existo en algún lugar. No sé en cuál. Tampoco importa. Estoy SOLA y no quiero sentir más: ni el dolor de este cuerpo al que estoy atada ni mucho menos esta soledad. Sólo quiero perderme, no pensar, no sentir, no saber más.

Vuelvo a despertar, lo sé en cuanto el concreto, las campanas de las mil iglesias y las hormigas rojas me recuerdan la condena de habitar este cuerpo. No sé qué ha pasado mientras me logré perder en el sueño, pero se siente todo igual... y sí, es igual, no puedo abrir los ojos, no puedo moverme y no puedo hablar, la única diferencia es que ahora puedo escuchar algo más que el silencio. Voces.

Hay una que llora. Otra grita.

La que llora, sigue llorando: «*No puede ser, si tan sólo me hubiera escuchado*» ¿Escuchado qué? La que grita, sigue gritando. Es inentendible. Luego escucho una voz más, una que habla sin emoción alguna: «¿Conocen a la otra mujer?»

De pronto lo entiendo todo, y no, no sé qué pasó y tampoco sé de qué otra mujer hablan, así como no lo vas a saber tú, porque yo estoy **SOLA** con mi dolor, mi desesperación y mi angustia y en esta soledad, tú no tienes un lugar.

Por fin aparece algo de lo que parece que me puedo sostener, tú no tienes un lugar porque yo no te lo quiero dar.



Pilar Orozco

Pilar was born in Mexico City but has been living in Washington, DC for the past 22 years. She is an economist that never did Economics who currently serves as the Administrator of the Mexican Cultural Institute and is a collaborator at Challenging Racism, a non-for-profit organization that supports a cause that is very close to her heart. She has a 17-year-old son and every day wonders why nobody told her parenting was not an easy task.

"Boom + Toolbox has been an eye-opening experience that pushed me to read the work of authors I never did before but most of all, thanks to the support and knowledge of incredibly talented Luis Felipe and Carlos Jose, to realize that even though my creative writing talents are very close to zero, there is a chance for improvement."

Ella

Ahí estaba. Sentada en nuestro salón de 2º de secundaria, con su pelo negro, brillante, largo y lacio, así justo como siempre lo habías querido tener. No era bonita, pero tenía algo que todas las demás no; no sabías que era, pero la envidiabas, era como esa madurez que a todas las demás nos faltaba. Se veía hasta en su andar, aunque después te enteraste que caminaba distinto no por madura, sino por lo otro.

Claro, teníamos 14 años, y aunque no teníamos ni idea de la vida, como buenas adolescentes sentíamos que lo sabíamos todo, solo que en nuestra época y en nuestro entorno era diferente, porque estábamos en una escuela católica, de puras señoritas bien, y no tanto por el nivel económico porque había de todo, pero todas éramos bien criadas, respetables y vírgenes.

O no todas, pero tu sí, porque siempre fuiste super fresa, late bloomer le dicen ahora, y cuando supiste, te espantaste, pero al mismo tiempo pensaste *“quien fuera ella, sin las consecuencias”*. Y piensas en todo esto ahora porque qué ganas de volver a ser como ella, valiente o

igual irresponsable, sólo que ahora si ya adulta, madura y con otros prejuicios que quitarte, con otras reglas que romper y con otros sentimientos en contra de los que luchar. Que ganas...

Todas la mirábamos, queríamos platicar con ella, pero un día dejó de ir a la escuela. Todas sabíamos por qué, pero nadie decía nada, ni los maestros, ni las monjitas, ni nuestros padres. Y tú pensabas que sería mejor que ya lo soltaran con todas sus letras en vez de tenernos a todas cuchicheando en voz bajita, asumiendo lo que no era, calificándola o descalificándola sin información certera, pero sí con todos los prejuicios de nuestra educación religiosa. Esos mismos prejuicios que son los que hoy no te dejan seguir, no te dejan pensar, no te dejan volar.

Pasaron los meses y se nos olvidó, o por lo menos a la mayoría, ya había otras cosas de qué hablar, como de la madre superiora que había colgado los hábitos para juntarse con el Padre Cristóbal, el mismo cabrón que tantas veces te había dado la comunión con las mismas manos con las que Dios sabe las cosas que le habría estado haciendo a la fulana; y luego otras historias más aburridas, como aquélla de la que había sido expulsada por decir *“que poca madre”* durante la formación matutina, de la que siempre estaba en el cuadro de honor pero porque decían que tenía una *“amiga”* que le hacía las tareas, o de ti, porque te habían elegido como representante de grupo pero las dulces y piadosas hermanitas de la Congregación te quitaron el puesto porque decían que, aunque tus calificaciones eran muy buenas, tu disciplina dejaba mucho que desear; además, te pintabas las uñas de colores *“solferinos”* y te volabas la misa siempre que podías. No, definitivamente no eras una representante digna para un grupo de niñas bien;

sorry, te dijo Miss Gloria, que nunca se imaginó el nivel de "sorry" que sentiría por ti si te viera hoy, si te leyera el pensamiento, seguro le daba algo.

Entonces llegó el gran día, cuando ya éramos las grandes de 3o en que aquella compañera, la del pelo lacio de tus sueños, regresó a visitar con su bebé en brazos. Ninguna la cuestionamos, sólo la abrazamos, la felicitamos y nos peleábamos por cargar al bebé. Ella se veía cansada, triste, vieja y tú sentiste una pena inmensa, aunque nunca habían sido amigas.

Lo mejor, o lo peor, fue al día siguiente, cuando lo único que se les ocurrió a las monjas fue llevarnos al auditorio para ver un video sobre el aborto, como una amenaza, como un *"para que no se les ocurra arruinar sus vidas"*, como una sentencia.

Después tuviste pesadillas durante una semana, veías al feto en el útero de su madre, tú eras su madre, moviendo sus manitas y diciéndote "¡mamá, no me mates, por favor, yo quiero vivir!" mientras veía cómo se acercaban las pinzas a su cuerpecito para sacarlo de ahí, para matarlo, para cometer el más vil de los pecados.

Pinches monjas, culeras, hipócritas piensas hoy, y eso que tú no dices malas palabras, puros pinches traumas. Pero tú no has acabado, te falta, y justo ahorita vas a hacer eso que has venido posponiendo, que pase lo que tenga que pasar, que te caigan encima si pueden, porque pobres hermanitas, hoy te sacas sus enseñanzas de la mente y de ese cuerpo que te está volviendo loca. Pobres, pero las vas a seguir decepcionando hasta el último día que te quede de vida.



Willona M. Sloan

Willona Sloan is a writer and literary host from Washington, DC. She also is the managing editor and curator of Black Coffee & Vinyl Presents: Ice Culture, a literary and art project focused on ice, culture, and climate change.

"Boom+ Toolbox was so much fun! I enjoyed learning from our knowledgeable and generous instructors. Every session was full of intriguing and insightful lectures, engaging conversations, and challenging writing exercises that pushed me out of my comfort zone."

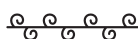
The Grocery Store

The pandemic has made my life very small. Every two weeks I roll my polka-dotted cart seven blocks to the grocery store, where I travel the aisles seeking a fantasy of wholeness, searching for the flavor of my contentment.

I fill my basket with parmesan quinoa, frozen margherita pizza, cheddar sour cream potato chips, red lentil pasta, organic ramen noodles, and cranberry white cheddar cheese puffs. Silly little bits of food that won't ever make me full.

The more I put into my basket, the emptier I feel. Cold brew in a can, apples that taste like honey and remind me of home, malbec like brunch with my best friend, Icelandic chocolate salty like the island air, flavorless ground sausage and frozen biscuits like poor versions of Grandma Hardees.

I can't buy a long hug or a soft touch, but I can get a fully cooked turkey like Thanksgiving for one.

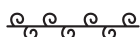


The Fantastic Grocery Store

There's a fantastic grocery where I can go for the moments, tastes, and smells of the life I once lived. I flee the boundaries of my apartment and the confines of my mind to gather pink sunset glow, the tickly smell of fresh lavender, fireflies and late-night laughter, black coffee and modern philosophy, and the sound of the creek behind my parents' house.

I fill my basket with Mom's shoulder shrug giggle, a hug from my brother, Dad's introspective hmmm, stories to sink my teeth into, poems about revolution, and tequila with sparkling sunshine.

I came to find Christmas Eve with my family, live music, my own smile, and the feel of my feet dancing barefoot again.



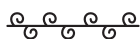
The Comfort Food Store

This grocery store specializes in foods that bring me comfort. Foods that remind me of where I came from and where I belong.

They have all my favorites like melted cheddar cheese, honey-glazed ham, a sweet celebration of my birth, chicken and waffles, juicy strawberries sweet like a Virginia summer, soup to cure a cold, mapley crispy crunchy fat, Mom's Super Bowl seafood spread, Chicago-flavored popcorn, watermelon with salt, the orange liqueur pancakes Dad made when we were young, and Uncle Dwight's fried Friday night chicken.

Foods like joy, good times, and laughter, like nourishment and care, like buttermilk sunrises, baked summer afternoons in sweet BBQ sauce, like the Pacific Ocean in

a bottle, and a slice of Grandma Becky's love.



The Fantasy Grocery Store

There's a secret store hidden from view beneath the street. You don't have to wait in line to come in, and no one stands six feet apart. There's no need for face masks, because no droplets hover in the air.

I fill my basket with my desires: a capsule to shrink the tumor in her lungs, an uncontested election, frequent sex, feeling the sun rise over Machu Picchu, affordable health insurance, an apology for all this pain, a biweekly paycheck, patience, a kiss on my shoulder while I'm doing dishes, Clorox wipes, that look in his eyes, luscious sleep, a Washington Football Team win, an effective exterminator, a field of sunflowers, liquid courage, a haircut, a joyful hand clap, a sense of wonder, om, a sense of myself.

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