

# Thick and thin

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Guillermo Martínez

UNA FELICIDAD REPULSIVA  
213pp. Buenos Aires: Planeta. Bs195.  
978 950 49 3553 7

Alejandro Zambra  
MIS DOCUMENTOS  
205pp. Barcelona: Anagrama. €16.90.  
978 84 339 9771 5

The Argentinean writer Guillermo Martínez has clear ideas about what a short story should be and how it should work, which are set out in his essay “El cuento como sistema lógico” (The Story as a Logical System). Building on insights from Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Piglia, Martínez describes the story as a system in which the logic of common sense and the logic of fiction begin by coinciding: the world depicted seems to be operating normally but, as in a horror film, we know that “something is going to happen”. Gradually the fictional logic asserts itself and occupies the scene; the ending, says Martínez, should emerge from this logic with the necessity of a deduction, rather than coming as a surprise. He also compares the truly artistic short-story writer to a presidingator or an illusionist – perhaps surprisingly, since if a conjuring trick fails to surprise, it has failed entirely. Rigorous deduction can, of course, lead to surprising results, as Martínez is well placed to know (he used to lecture in mathematics and is the author, with Gustavo Piñero, of a book on Gödel’s incompleteness theorem). One way to resolve the apparent tension between the abstract model (the writer as logician) and the illustrative metaphor (the writer as magician) would be to conclude that a truly artistic short story is one whose ending is both surprising and arrived at by an unimpeachably logical series of steps, like the proof of a counterintuitive theorem. That is both to set the bar high (Martínez is susceptible to “the fascination of what’s difficult”), and to limit the field, for many writers of short fiction have quite different aims.

In his second book of stories, *Una felicidad repulsiva* (A Repulsive Happiness), Martínez coaxes a variety of fictional logics from the world of daily life, performing consistently difficult tricks with variable degrees of success. The daily life he starts from is generally that of an intellectual man in the prime of life with a keen eye for sexual opportunities. Sometimes this man is a literary scholar or a writer, sometimes a mathematician. Initially it seems that the world will smile on his combination of youth, intelligence and libido, and deliver satisfaction. But that would hardly yield a story. The world turns sour, and the events that intervene to frustrate the protagonist are not simply accidents, failures or injustices; they are shadowed by more sinister possibilities.

In “Un gato muerto” (A Dead Cat) and “Una madre protectora” (A Protective Mother), witch-like figures bring lasting misfortune on the lives of the central male characters, who, emasculated in all but the literal sense, are horrified by what they discover about the younger women they have impregnated. The narrator of “Un gato muerto” tells himself that he is “protected by the exact sciences, safe from . . . superstitions”, but he is fooling himself (history and anthropology might have been more help).

“El Ching y el hombre de los papeles” (The I Ching and the Man of the Papers) rings a subtler change on the theme of the rationalist, ill-armed against superstition. A statistician and his wife take turns to sit at the bedside of their seriously ill child. The wife asks her husband to bring the I Ching to the hospital. Unable to find her copy, he borrows another, from one of his students, who claims that its predictions have always been accurate. The statistician explains that an “infallible” copy of the I

Ching, one that has always been right so far, is simply a configuration of chance, like a tossed coin that has come up heads twenty times in a row. And yet he says to his student: “It’s an important consultation . . . I’d like it to be with your copy”. Is he just trying to persuade her, or has he fallen into the trap that he signalled earlier, having forgotten that her copy is just as likely as any other to yield a wrong prediction the next time? This ambiguity is delicately maintained by the use, in the final sentence, of an adjective – *aterrado* – the two meanings of which, “terrified” and “downcast”, are both in play.

Tzvetan Todorov defined the fantastic as a hesitation between the strange and the marvellous. “Una felicidad repulsiva” and “Una madre protectora” almost fit this description; their open endings leave us wavering between psychiatric diagnoses on one hand and supernatural or criminal explanations on the other. By contrast, the dystopian tale “Unos ojos fatigados” (Tired Eyes) and the documentary story, “El peluquero vendá” (The Barber Will Come) click shut with the very last words. Their perfectly smooth and economical execution recalls “Infierno grande” (Vast Hell), which appeared in the *New Yorker* in 2009, translated by Alberto Manguel.

Guillermo Martínez puts his refined skills at the service of primal emotions, especially horror and sexual desire. The stories in *Una felicidad repulsiva* are least effective when desire and horror collide, as in “Déjà vu” and “Help me!” where vaginas are seen as vectors of mortality. In order to set up these visions, creaky moves have to be made. Faced with a nurse who might have stepped from a pornographic film, the protagonist of “Déjà vu” initially seems to forget that his grandmother is present in the room. In “Help me!” there is a definite touch of disgust in the narrator’s description of a woman who implores him for help, and yet he proceeds to tongue-kiss her vigorously on a “sudden, undecipherable impulse”. No such manoeuvring is required in the deft and funny “Lo que toda niña debe ver” (What Every Girl Should See), whose protagonist, walking home alone after a night of drinking, steps into a sexual fantasy to find that he is required to perform an unsuspected service.

Almost every sentence in *Una felicidad repulsiva* is functional. This gives the stories powerful traction, but also makes the worlds that they construct relatively thin: colours, textures, weather and noise are rarely noted unless they reinforce the dominant mood. Readers of Henry James and Jorge Luis Borges (Martínez is indebted to both) may yearn for a moment of gratuitous descriptive richness or a lateral glimpse into the larger world beyond. Perhaps

the truly artistic short-story writer is the one whose skill does not preclude such indulgences.

The Chilean poet and novelist Alejandro Zambra does not have clear ideas about what a story, or a poem, or a novel, for that matter, should be. His first novel, *Bonsai* (2008), began life as a poem, and he has said that it could easily pass for a long story. This fluid approach may have something to do with writing in the wake of Nicanor Parra and Enrique Lihn, who have bequeathed their disregard for generic boundaries to successive generations of Chilean poets. In any case, it allows Zambra to lift stories from lived experience, as his countryman Roberto Bolaño or, in a different vein, the Argentinean Hebe Uhart have done. The two pieces in part II of *Mis documentos* (My Documents), about the selective secondary school that Zambra attended in Santiago and a failed attempt to give up smoking, are



Guillermo Martínez, 2014

straightforwardly autobiographical. First- and third-person narration are both employed in parts I and III, but it would be hazardous and imprecise to use that grammatical difference to separate recollection from fiction.

Zambra does not neglect the shaping of his materials, but none of the narratives in *Mis documentos* is a technical feat. Withholding a vital piece of information until the end, or eliding an anticipated crisis, using pets or a personal computer as devices for exploring the fragility of human relationships: these are effective but relatively simple strategies. The difficulty and the achievement lie elsewhere, in the work of memory and in the elaboration of a style.

“I try to remember better: more and better”, writes Zambra at the end of the title story, which intertwines memories related to computers and music. Remembering more, he recovers the apparently futile details without which memory remains an abstract scheme, such as the speech habits of his grandmother in “Mis documentos”, or the shopfront full of lights on an Amsterdam street at the end of “Camilo” (recently published by the *New Yorker* in Megan McDowell’s translation). As well as resurrecting his personal and familial past, Zambra is the meticulous scribe of a generation and a social group, like Georges Perec in *Je me souviens*. A section of “Instituto

Nacional” (National Secondary School) adopts the one-sentence micro-memory form that Perec borrowed from Joe Brainard.

Remembering better requires sensitivity to the dangers of retrospective embellishment, and at one point in “Camilo” Zambra goes back to retract his likely interpolations. It is also a matter of not abusing the benefits of hindsight, not patronizing, or censoring, the person one was. Zambra neither sculps his own statue nor projects an abject self-image in a bid for sympathy. No dark secrets are revealed, but he is concerned to recover what it was really like to inhabit states of mind that might well embarrass an adult with a sense of his own dignity: instinctive lying, conformist religious fervour, political ignorance, and, in the superb “Larga distancia” (Long Distance), whose protagonist is slow to grasp what he has meant to an older man and woman, obtuseness and insensitivity.

Relinquishing the privileges of the present also means revisiting the enmities of the past, especially in “Instituto Nacional”, which sharply separates the decent teachers from the inexcusable sadists, who are named. Is this grudge-holding? Perhaps. But it is also fidelity to the victims, for whom Zambra spoke out at the time. As the philosopher Agnes Callard has argued, it may be bad for us (and others) to tend our anger, but we can have reasons to be angry forever. The end of the story confirms the powerlessness of the dictator – be he Pinochet or one of his pedagogical epigones – to determine his reputation and what he will be remembered for.

What Zambra salvages and imagines is fixed in prose which is direct but not flat. His style is precise in description and attentive to the local specificities of Spanish. The Mexican mugger’s monologue in “Gracias” is an object lesson in the rhythmic organization of spoken language (in this case a string of partly playful threats). The literariness of this writing does not reside in a profusion of figures or allusions, but in the care with which each sentence has been fashioned.

Zambra is a knowing narrator, not averse to stepping back from the story and commenting on how it might have been handled otherwise. These metafictional moves are most evident in the closing piece, which recounts a day in the life of a writer rushing to complete a crime story commissioned for an anthology. The tricky shifting from one level to another is balanced by the gravity of the material that the writer recovers from memory, but chooses to distort in order to conform to stereotypical expectations, making the characters poorer and more marginal, inventing a cathartic finale. Finally, what “really” happened leaves the opportunistic writer behind, and this story of crimes in a family, unpunished and unforgiven, resonates irresistibly via the title “Hacer memoria” (Trying To Remember) with the recent history of Chile.

As a storyteller, Alejandro Zambra is not a magician or a logician, but something humbler and closer to the archaic roots of the art in the collective sharing of experience: the source of an unhurried, absorbing voice, persuasive even in its hesitations, which arouses and rewards the desire to go on listening. His four books of fiction, each slightly longer and richer than the one that went before, show how well he has been served by the “ingenious, intense and absolute” belief in literature that he declares in *Mis documentos*.