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Down the Rabbit Hole, By Juan Pablo Villalobos, trans. Rosalind Harvey

Reviewed by Lucy Popescu

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Tochtli (Nahuatl for "rabbit") lives with his father, Yolcaut ("rattlesnake"), in a country mansion, surrounded by a high perimeter wall, and with armed guards around the clock. This is the grim reality for many wealthy Mexicans today (even the modestly well-off segregate themselves in fortified complexes), but the difference is that Yolcaut is a dangerous drug baron and "home" is a palatial hideout in the middle of nowhere.

It's something of a prison for Tochtli who, unlike boys his own age, is unable to attend school or have friends over to play. His is a solitary existence spent mainly with his home tutor, Mazatzin, and the guards. Tochtli develops a passion for hats and owns a private zoo. He regularly draws up a list of presents or animals that he wants to acquire and his doting father always tries to oblige. His latest obsession is to own a pygmy hippopotamus from Liberia.

Mexican-born, Juan Pablo Villalobos brilliantly encapsulates the chaos of a lawless existence in which, under the sway of drug lords, anything might happen and everything goes. By using a child's voice to observe Yolcaut's kingdom, his atrocities and escalating paranoia, Villalobos conjures a fantastical world – a nightmarish inversion of Alice in Wonderland – where absurd wishes are granted, miniature guns fire real bullets, giant cats are fed human corpses, and corrupt politicians come to lunch.

Through carefully constructed, satirical prose, deftly translated by Rosalind Harvey, Villalobos illustrates how prolonged exposure to violence desensitises people and the ease with which the grotesque can be normalised. As well as an unhealthy interest in his father's gun collection, one of Tochtli's favourite pastimes is a question and answer game. "One person says a number of bullets in a part of the body and the other one answers: alive, corpse, or too early to tell." He is also obsessed with the French guillotine – comparing this to the Mexican gangs' proclivity for decapitations: "We Mexicans don't use baskets when we cut off heads. We hand over the severed heads in a crate of vintage brandy."

Down the Rabbit Hole is an astonishing debut from Villalobos and the first novel to be published by And Other Stories, an exciting new imprint that encourages readers to suggest and support titles. Regular subscribers are acknowledged in the book and receive a numbered edition. Hopefully, Villalobos's darkly comic tale is an early indication of what more we can expect from this refreshingly original publishing enterprise.

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