

Animal crackers

EDWARD KING

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE
by JUAN PABLO VILLALOBOS
And Other Stories £10 pp74

This comic novella by first-time author Juan Pablo Villalobos, which caused a sensation when it was published in Mexico last year, is narrated by the young son of a Mexican drug lord who is obsessed with hats, samurai films and acquiring a Liberian pygmy hippo for his private zoo. Tochtli lives with his powerful father in a kitsch narco-palace, packed with guns, exotic trinkets and wild animals in cages. When he is not plotting the acquisition of animals "on the edge of extinction", Tochtli hones his idiosyncratic world-view in debates with his tutor and ponders how many bullets it takes to "make a corpse".

The narrative takes place around President Felipe Calderon's crackdown on the drug cartels in 2006, sparking the violence that is still tearing Mexican society apart. Tochtli witnesses the ramifications of this violence from his gilded isolation, observing with characteristic deadpan that "since then we've seen corpses on TV every day". His elliptical tale proceeds through a logic of free association that circles around the ever-present subjects of death and greed, with effects that are both comic and sinister. A typical paragraph starts by describing a severed head "with a bad haircut" shown on the television news and then points out the seemingly self-evident truth that one of the best characteristics of the pygmy hippopotamus is its baldness.

The greed, machismo and thirst for power that sustain the drug trade in Mexico are displaced on to Tochtli's childish concerns and revealed in all their madness through his irrational acquisitive desires. His father Yolcaut's impetuous commands to eliminate enemies of his drug empire and buy politicians are of a piece with his son's burning desire to possess a Liberian pygmy hippo. The cumulative parodic effect of the novella is chillingly powerful.

Available at the Bookshop price of £9 (including p&p) on 0845 271 2135