

By Night in Chile

Alejandro Zambra's novel considers the legacy of Pinochet.

BY ADAM THIRLWELL

IN a summary, most literary careers nowadays — in New York or Zagreb — can look eerily similar. Take, for instance, the case of Alejandro Zambra. Zambra is a Chilean who has so far written three novels. He was born in 1975, and teaches literature at the Diego Portales University in Santiago. He has figured on Granta's list of best young Spanish-language novelists, and the Bogotá39 project. His career, in other words, has the usual global vibe. But if you held his novels in

WAYS OF GOING HOME

By Alejandro Zambra.

Translated by Megan McDowell.

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your hand, then something much stranger would be immediately apparent. "Bonsai," his first, takes up only 86 miniature pages. His second, "The Private Lives of Trees," requires 98. His third, "Ways of Going Home," which has just been published in a translation by Megan McDowell, uses a comparatively gargantuan 139. All of them are marked by a uniquely manic brevity.

Their other distinguishing characteristic is that they are written with startling talent. And Zambra's latest novel represents, I think, his deepest achievement. It is the most intricate of his experiments with brevity. But first, therefore, the international reader requires some kind of description.

There are two stories in "Ways of Going Home" — described in just four chapters, with a simple alternating rhythm. The first chapter describes a nameless 9-year-old boy who, in the 1980s near Santiago, during the era of Pinochet, spies on a neighbor for an older girl he adores, called Claudia. The neighbor, she says, is her Uncle Raúl. Another girl visits Raúl, and so — wanting to impress Claudia — the boy follows this girl to her home. But when he later goes to meet Claudia, to tell her his discovery, she is with another boy — and so, piqued, he says nothing. Over time, they begin to drift apart until, a while later, both Raúl and Claudia's family move away.

The second chapter introduces a nameless novelist, who is writing the story described in the first chapter. Meanwhile, he is trying to get back together with a woman he used to live with, called Eme. In some way, the reader discovers, the story of Claudia resembles the story of Eme, just as the story of the boy overlaps with the story of the novelist.

Then the third chapter returns to the fiction. It is now roughly the present moment. The era of Pinochet is over. The protagonist meets Claudia again, and they

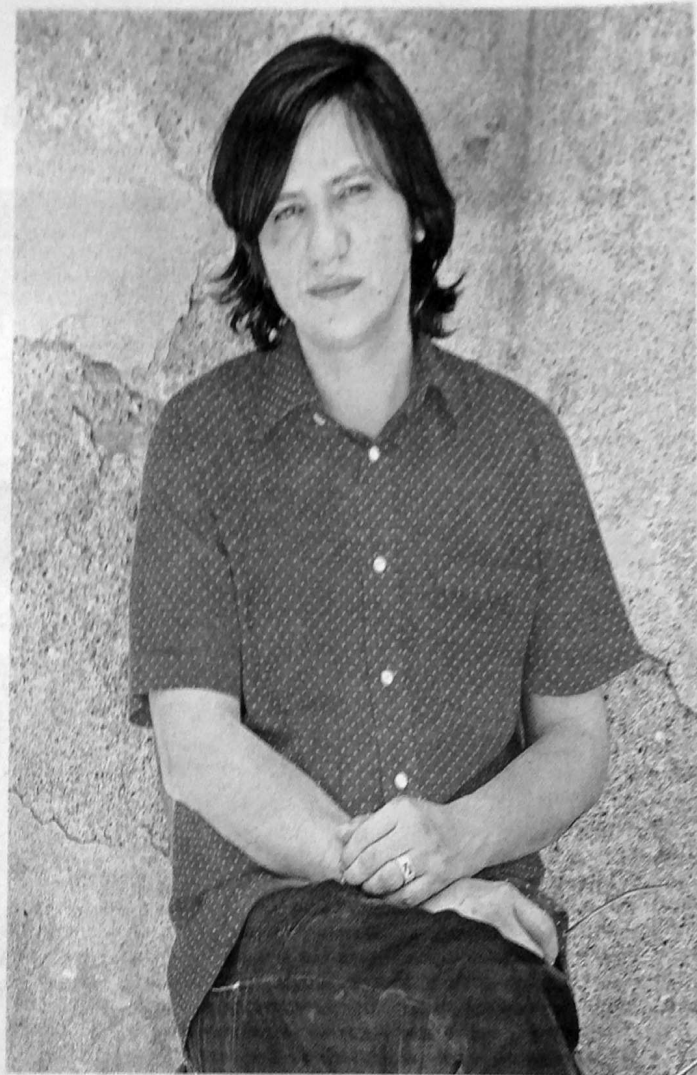
have a brief affair, during which Claudia explains to him what the real situation had been when she asked him to be her spy. The final, fourth chapter returns to the story of the novelist — whose break with Eme is irreparable. The last image is of him alone with his manuscript, watchful in the night.

In this high-speed description, the novel might seem a minute study, a sketched memoir of the fallout from the Pinochet era. In fact, this small novel contains a surprising vastness, created by its structure of alternating chapters of fiction and reality: the story of the boy and the story of the novelist. From this structure an intricate pattern — of time frames, and levels of fiction — gradually emerges. Almost every miniature event or conversation is subject to a process of revision, until you realize that Zambra is staging not just a single story of life under political repression, but the conditions for telling any story at all.

You can make a mini-taxonomy of these revisions in the novel. The largest is to the protagonist's idea of what was happening during that time in the 1980s, in a suburb of Santiago. A much darker story, he discovers, was being played out. But then there are further subtle revisions — not just within the fiction, but among the novel's different levels. Scenes from the fiction are later revealed as based on the novelist's own past. Or scenes from the novelist's own life are openly reused later as fiction. In fact, Zambra's nameless novelist argues, at the deepest level revision is inherent in every description of one's past. For every image and memory comes with its own stains and sounds — but "sometimes, when we write, we wash everything clean, as if by doing so we could advance toward something. We ought to simply describe those sounds, those stains on memory. That arbitrary selection, nothing more. That's why we lie so much, in the end."

The only solution, he argues, is a process of patient distillation — trying "to remember the images fully, no compositions of place, no unnecessary scenes. To find a genuine music. No more novels, no more excuses." Brevity is the only route to truth.

This systematic zigzag of revisions, of sideways moves, also has a lovely extra effect. Every major character is a minor character, too. The protagonist thinks he is the hero of a love story with Claudia, but really he is a secondary character in a sadder drama. Likewise, the novelist's childhood in a suburb of Santiago now seems only minor in relation to the major and tragic events of Chile's recent past. Every story might be nested inside a larger story, of which it is unaware. On the one hand, therefore, the novel's structure is a self-reflexive device, designed to examine its own premises. But it is also a way of examining a global condition. The central two chapters are called, very simply: "Lit-



erature of the Parents" and "Literature of the Children." For the deep structure being examined here, in the end, is the relation between parents and children. All of us grow up into a family whose past we do not know. All of us live in the shadow of a private back story. And so the truth of the world is always, necessarily, some kind of incomprehension and loss: "Parents abandon their children. Children abandon their parents. Parents protect or forsake, but they always forsake. Children stay or go but they always go." This is the novel's inner core, its painful essence.

AND I know: The novel that's being written by a novelist in the novel — this is not a structure that appeals to every reader. It can seem a fashion that is no longer chic. The worried reader will perhaps not be reassured to discover that both of Zambra's previous novels have also featured variants on the story within the story, or that each of his novels even contains its own compressed reflection in another. Julián, the protagonist of Zambra's second novel, is writing something that seems very similar to "Bonsai," Zambra's first. At the same time, he seems to want to write a novel that resembles "Ways of Going Home": like the novelist in "Ways of Going Home," Julián also comes from a family where "there were

no dead." His friends have tragic histories, but he does not. And so he imagines a future novel that would examine this condition of ignorance, or innocence.

"He has definitely been wasting time with his fixation on bonsais. Now he thinks the only book that would be worth writing is a long story about those days of 1984. That would be the only permissible book, the only necessary one."

The somber tone to these sentences is a clue, I think, that the reader's worry is also unnecessary. Really, the meta-fictional is just a neutral mode like any other. It is capable of multiple uses. And in "Ways of Going Home," Zambra uses the metafiction to create the most concision. It allows him to skip unnecessary scenes; to avoid composition of place — to analyze his themes directly. It's an instrument, therefore, not of modish skepticism but of truth-telling.

And the truth this light novel describes is heavy with anguish. For what is it to be born into this generation? "We go home," Zambra writes, "and it's as if we were returning from war, but from a war that isn't over." This is the giant, poignant condition staged by the novel's playful doubleness — the way the best conjuring trick is the one where you're shown how it's done, which in no way contradicts your belief that what you've seen is magic. □

Adam Thirlwell's most recent novel is "The Escape."