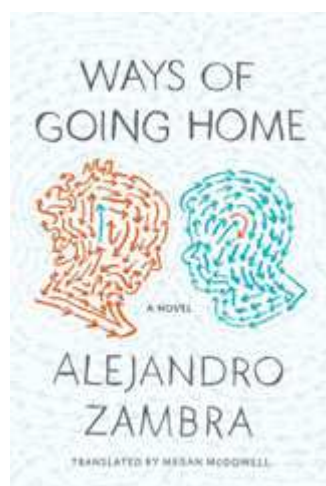


## [Alejandro Zambra's "Ways of Going Home"](http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/alejandro-zambra-ways-of-going-home) (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/alejandro-zambra-ways-of-going-home>)



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Translated from the Spanish  
by Megan McDowell  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,  
2013

The Chilean poet and novelist Alejandro Zambra has swiftly become one of my favorite contemporary writers. I read his first two novels in translation in a single afternoon, but their momentum stayed with me for days. The most recent, *Ways of Going Home*, translated by Megan McDowell, resembles the others to a point. Like they do, it deals with the processes of writing and storytelling; this, though, is as far as the similarities go. While it is only a few dozen pages longer than the first two, it is by far the most fully developed. Where the first two read like sketches for potential stories, or blueprints for how to tell them, the latest book achieves dramatic tension and emotional immediacy without ever shortchanging the overarching ambition: namely, to create a novel that exposes, and springs from, its own scaffolding.

Zambra's first book to appear in English was *Bonsai* (Melville House, 2008), a potent novella with a new take on the anxiety of influence: the protagonist is an aspiring writer, considered for the task of transcribing an older author's handwritten manuscript. The eighty-something pages end abruptly when the young writer learns of his lover's suicide and asks a cab driver to circle him around the city for 30,000 pesos, the amount in his wallet. It's an affecting passage, but on first read it seems like a missed opportunity: the rich moment could have been held a little longer in suspension. The next two novels do just that; they give some direction to this melancholy sense of aimlessness.

Julian, the writer-protagonist of *The Private Lives of Trees* (Open Letter, 2010), is haunted by a moment from his university days, when the memories of the dictatorship loomed large. "Of those present, Julian was the only one who came from a family with no dead, and this discovery filled him with a strange bitterness." Given Zambra's interest in writing about the storytelling process, these sentiments of guilt are particularly acute. They also beg the question of authorship. As a reader, one wonders to what extent they are stand-ins for Zambra himself. Still, whether these

books contain autobiographical elements is beside the point—and this is a tribute to their author. All of them crackle with the inventiveness of fiction, and they share a deep, generational fixation on how to tell stories of growing up in Chile during Pinochet.

*Ways of Going Home* is the first of Zambra's novels to be told in the first person. This allows the theme of authorship to feel more personal and immediate, which may offer more to a reader who couldn't see past the meta-fictional exercises of his past work. There is a shift in tone from the opening, which is set in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake in Chile when the narrator is just nine, to the middle of the novel when he starts to interrogate the past. At the book's start, the narrator is amused by graffiti like "Pinochet sucks dick." By the middle, he confronts his father for becoming reactionary in his old age, recognizing that his parents "were there so we wouldn't feel afraid. But we weren't afraid. They were the ones who were afraid." His criticism of his father stems from a personal complication: the narrator himself feels guilty over, and restless with, his own relatively cushy, uneventful childhood. The dueling, unflattering portraits humanize both father and son.

The parents' first object of fear is the new next-door neighbor, a mysterious single man named Raúl. The narrator's parents keep to themselves and dissuade the boy from asking questions. They are survivors, remaining on the sidelines whenever possible. The narrator, at nine years old, meets an older girl named Claudia, who asks him to spy on the new stranger. He agrees, but only because he has a crush on her. Years later, the circumstances of Claudia's interest in Raúl form an unexpected intrigue, when the narrator decides to track her down so he can learn her story and incorporate it into the novel he's writing. The interplay between the apparent reality of the novel and the narrator's willful manipulation of events is woven so naturally that it feels as though we are let in on an author's thoughts as he looks up from the page; the effect brings us closer to both the narrator and the story he's telling, which doesn't always happen with novels that follow someone's writing project.

The narrator needs Claudia because he knows she must have a story that is more interesting than his own, with genuine trauma that can fill the void of his less-consequential childhood. Equally important to the narrator is Eme, his recent ex, upon whom he is dependent not just for love and affection, but for support with his writing. When Claudia briefly moves in with him, she fills the void left by Eme along with the deeper emptiness he feels for the past. This slippage between the story the narrator wants to tell and the events that unfold in Zambra's actual account only adds to the novel's depth. At one point, he tells Eme his plans for the novel, which involve arranging for his protagonist to be reunited with Claudia even though they would probably never recognize each other in real life. They do in the novel version, but as he predicts to Eme, they don't live together happily ever after. That, he says, would make for a bad novel.

At dinner with Eme, near the end of the book, the narrator is reminded of a moment from his childhood, recounted in the first section of the book. "It's like in the novel," he tells her. Earlier, when he meets with his fellow novelist-friend Diego, he compliments him on a passage in his own book that seemed real. "You didn't make that up," he says to him. These instances abound: life imitating art, while art reflects back images of life. This excitement on the part of the narrator for glimpses of life that confirm the reality of his fiction only heightens the desire Zambra has expressed in all his work: to find one's place both in history and in the present. It is a converse of the feeling Proust's M. has when he reads Bergotte and finds his own thoughts expressed in the other writer's work; in Zambra's case, he is excited when his own work is proven by life to be real.

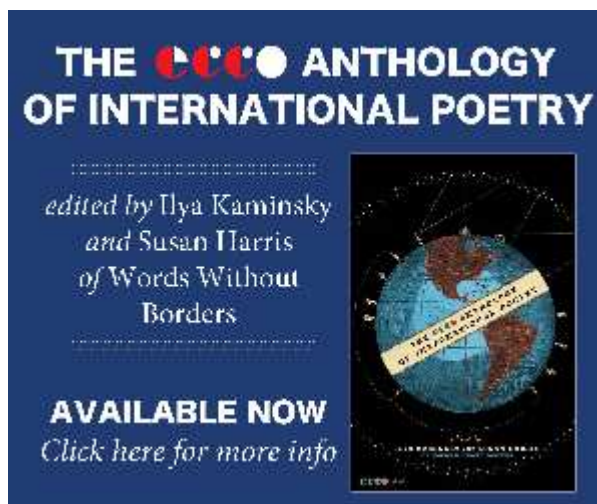
Marcela Valdes once wrote that *Bonsai* was an expansion of Zambra's earlier verse work into prose narrative. *Ways of Going Home* is packed with poetic images, and McDowell has done a beautiful job crafting a casual lyricism that continues to surprise right up to the end. The book's final image comes from an attempt on the narrator's part to replay a detail from earlier in the novel: he hopes to spot a Peugeot like the one his father drove, in which he once daydreamed from the backseat. There are no Peugeots, but still, he imagines children sleeping in the backseats of the cars that pass, and marvels at what they might one day remember. The use of city traffic to create a circling effect recalls the ending of *Bonsai*. And yet at the same time it resonates in a different key, suggesting new beginnings and new stories, children who don't yet know their future or their past.

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