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STORY OF MY LIFE

The fictions of Alejandro Zambra.

BY JAMES WOOD

People kept mentioning his name, but I was slow to encounter the Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra. I hadn't read anything by him before opening his new story collection, "My Documents" (McSweeney's). The title story is

immediately captivating; it bolts straight out of the book, running at the reader in gusts of life and joy. Though the narrator and the author may not be identical, the wonderful details have the liberated onrush of memory: they tumble like things randomly released, not lengthily chosen. The narrator reaches back to memories of his Santiago childhood and brings us vivid scenes: life at secondary school, where his friend Dante, a very tall, autistic boy, wanders about, telling everyone his exact weight ("Hi, today I'm weighing 227 pounds"); the narrator's mother, who becomes obsessed with Simon and Garfunkel and plasters the marital bedroom with posters of her idols, despite her husband's irritation; and going to Mass, where the priest (who can be seen zooming around the neighborhood on a scooter) hurries through the homily, "delivering it with a pleasant disdain, and even making, quite often, a hand gesture that meant 'et cetera.'"

The story begins like this: "The first time I saw a computer was in 1980, when I was four or five years old." The little boy sees the strange object in his father's office. But his mother, though trained on a computer, prefers a typewriter, on which she types up songs, poems, and stories written by the narrator's grandmother, who "was always entering some contest." (Hence the narrator's formulation "My father was a computer and my mother was a typewriter.") This grandmother is remembered as a woman of ready phrases. If someone suggested that it was cold outside, she would return with: "Well, it certainly isn't hot." And instead of just saying the word "no"

she was quick to reply "Not at all, as the fish said," or just "As the fish said," or simply "Fish," to summarize this saying: "Not at all, as the fish said when asked how he'd like to be cooked, in the oven or the fryer."

The grandmother, though a believer, has little time for organized religion. "I don't need to say prayers," she tells her grandson. "It's enough to have a conversation with Jesus, freely, before I go to sleep," a statement that the boy

Zambra's examination of Chilean history is driven by a vibrant sense of story.

ILLUSTRATION BY ALVARO TAPIA HIDALGO;
REFERENCE: ALMA RODRIGUEZ AYALA / AGENCIA EL UNIVERSAL / AP



finds curious and a bit intimidating. At school, in 1985, there is a new teacher, Juan Luis Morales Rojas, who instructs the class to repeat his name, which the children do with burgeoning confidence and volume: "And after a while we were shouting and jumping while he moved his hands like an orchestra director, or like a musician who was enjoying listening to the audience sing along to the chorus of one of his songs." When the kids get tired of shouting and laughing, the teacher tells them that now they will never forget his name: "In all my years at that school, I don't remember a happier moment than that one."

The title story (also the first) is worth lingering over, because it's so appealing and funny, and because it displays in miniature Zambra's delicate talents. On the one hand, the writer opens his senses wide, to the jubilant secularism of remembered detail, to a cataloguing of life that seems free, unjudged, open-ended—those schoolchildren, for instance, shouting the teacher's name again and again, the scene apparently placed in the story for no better reason than that it still delights. On the other hand, these are Chilean schoolchildren, and Alejandro Zambra was born in 1975, two years after the coup that brought down President Salvador Allende and installed the murderous Augusto Pinochet, so history will fatally interrupt—interrupt, then warp and dominate. The narrator tells us that after the attempt on General Pinochet's life, in 1986, Dante went around asking everyone in the neighborhood "if they belonged to the right or the left." Now the narrator begins to hear about those who have been arrested, tortured, disappeared. He is filled with feelings of "impropriety, of ignorance, smallness, estrangement." With his friends, he is left-wing, but at home he is more right-wing. Mainly, he keeps quiet and tries to fit in.

Two years later, in 1988, he enters the National Institute, Chile's oldest secondary school (which Zambra himself attended). "And that's when, at the same time, democracy and adolescence arrived. The adolescence was real. The democracy wasn't." Many Chilean Presidents were educated at the National Institute, including Salvador Allende. To be at such a school is to be political, whether one wants to be or not. The unstoppable jubilation of the kids who endlessly shouted their teacher's name has become something else, something wavier, more knowing, disillusioned. And by 1994, when the narrator enters the University of Chile, even the sweetness of his musings about childhood computers and typewriters has been subtly stained. As a student, he uses a computer, but he always erases his files: "I didn't want to leave any records." The narrator's "documents" are at once innocent and corrupted. They are nothing more than a joyous calendar of reminiscence, and at the same time a bitter reckoning with history, and the reader understands that there can be no purely innocent fictional record, however much the author may long for it. "I was a blank page, and now I am a book" is the last line of this story, one that stands as a kind of admonition for the rest of Zambra's collection: blank pages get written on, scored, scrawled over, filled up, and used up. And, in ways both good and bad, books can't be erased as easily as computer files.

"My Documents" is the fourth book by Alejandro Zambra to be translated into English (this one very ably by Megan McDowell). All of them are very short and strikingly original, and display a wry self-consciousness about the obligations,

difficulties, and pleasures of writing fiction. Zambra often features protagonists who are writers, and often these writers are seen to be writing the stories we are reading. In his earlier work, this metafictional element, though likable, occasionally seemed a bit modish and weightless, as if the young author were dutifully channelling his fellow-Chilean Roberto Bolaño (the obvious influence, gratefully studied) and Paul Auster (the more complicated influence, ultimately resisted). There's a little too much of this kind of thing: "Anita's husband was called Andrés, or Leonardo. Let's agree that his name was Andrés and not Leonardo. Let's agree that Anita was awake and Andrés half-asleep."

Zambra's first novel, "Bonsai," translated into English by Carolina De Robertis and published here in 2008, holds stories-within-stories; it hides nestled simulacra, like those wallets in stores which contain fake credit cards. It tells about two young lovers, Julio and Emilia, who are briefly and passionately together, and about how, after their relationship ends, Emilia commits suicide. Julio and Emilia are brought together, in part, by their love of literature. They happen to read a story by Macedonio Fernández, about a couple who buy a small plant as a symbol of their love and, realizing that if the plant dies their relationship is symbolically doomed, decide to lose the little plant amid a lot of other identical plants. Julio and Emilia dislike the story—a sign, perhaps, that their own love is waning. Later, when, indeed, Julio is no longer living with Emilia, we see that he is working on a novel called "Bonsai," which appears to be about a man who is mourning the death of the woman he loved in his youth. When this couple were together, they took care of a little plant, a bonsai. Julio's novel is his homage to the memory of Emilia.

"Bonsai," though it attracted plenty of attention in Chile when it was published there, in 2006, seems fairly slight. The self-reflexive fictionality, in its multiple iterations, appears obsessive, and strikes one as an elaborate way to make a point already familiar in much postmodern work of the past forty years: that life resembles a fiction, and that fiction resembles another fiction, too. But Zambra's novel is always lively, often funny and aphoristic, and it introduces the kind of intriguing young man who will appear often in Zambra's later work, a Chilean, updated version of Russian literature's Superfluous Man—spectatorial, somewhat literary (i.e., always "writing" something), hovering on the edge of things, passionate in love but destined to lose what he loves, and thus fatalistic and defensively unserious. Julio, we are told, avoids serious relationships, "hiding not from women so much as from seriousness." This posture could describe several of the men who appear in the stories in "My Documents": Rodrigo, in "The Most Chilean Man in the World," who wanders around a city in Belgium, having feebly tried to win back his girlfriend; or the feckless (and finally sinister) Max, in "Memories of a Personal Computer," who "smoked a lot while he wrote, or, rather, he wrote a little while he smoked a lot," and is apparently unbothered by the disintegration of his relationship with his lover; or Martín, in "Family Life," who is cat-sitting for a family and spends the four months of his tenure doing little more than watching TV, smoking, and fantasizing about inhabiting the lives of the house's owners—that is to say, impersonating them.

These men seem in some mysterious way corrupted by writing (and by reading).

There is a quality of masquerade to their lives, as if all that time spent in parallel fictional worlds had infected the stability of nonfictional reality. Zambra's second novel, "The Private Lives of Trees" (published here in 2010, in a translation also by Megan McDowell), carries an epigraph from John Ashbery: "Life as a book that has been put down." In Zambra's world, it seems all too easy to put that book down. Indeed, Zambra's work displays a deep ambivalence, amounting to a kind of shame, toward fiction-making. The bonsai's uselessly autotelic function can seem uncomfortably close to that of the novel. The bonsai is "an artistic replica of a tree, in miniature. It consists of two elements: the living tree and the container." Julio feels that writing is like tending a bonsai, and that his own novel (the one titled "Bonsai") has become "unnecessary."

*"I don't know if I want
to marry, but I would
like a combined
household income."*

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Zambra's work abounds in qualifications and complaints of this kind. Julian, the protagonist of "The Private Lives of Trees," described as "a professor, and a writer on Sundays," waits up one evening for his wife, Veronica, to return home. To pass the time, and to keep his young stepdaughter distracted, he tells her a story that he has

been improvising at bedtime, which he calls "The Private Lives of Trees." But Julian is also writing a real book, which sounds a lot like Zambra's own first novel—it's "about a young man tending a bonsai." This level of self-reflexivity can sometimes seem about as resonant as the prospect of repeatedly having to smell one's own breath, and perhaps Zambra is knowingly protecting himself from such criticism when he has one of Julian's friends complain to him that he's been reading "too much Paul Auster."

But Zambra's second novel is not content to doodle metafictionally; it gains surprising power from its reflections on storytelling. Like Julio, Julian seems disappointed with the book he is writing. When he remembers 1984, and the Los Angeles Olympics, he thinks that the only truly "necessary" book would be not about tending a bonsai but "a long story about those days of 1984." Elsewhere, Julian remembers a period when he lived alone, above a bar. He would write at night, sometimes with feverish productivity, at other times haltingly. He liked hearing the music and the voices: "the sour voice of an older woman who used to tell anyone who would listen about her father's death, and the panic of an adolescent who, one winter dawn, swore that he would never screw without a condom again." Zambra's writing flares up here, in a premonition of the life-filled energy of "My Documents." And Zambra seems to sense it, too, because he has Julian reflect that it would have been a good idea just to write down everything he heard: "There would surely be more life in those accidental pages than in the book he was writing. But instead of being content with the stories that destiny put at his disposal, Julian remained fixated on his bonsai."

What appears to torment Zambra is, in fact, the old realist dream of an infinite novel, a fiction that haplessly captures all of life, a novel that has escaped the artificiality of form, that has vanquished the aestheticism of authorial selection: a

long book about a whole year, say; a book made up of nothing but inventoried reminiscences; the blank page before it has become a book, as open to life as a camera or a microphone, waiting to be filled up with existence—the “accidental” book that would perforce become a “necessary” one. Recall Zambra’s description of the bonsai: “the living tree and the container.” The container—form, machinery, convention—is what avant-garde fiction has been trying to explode since at least the nineteen-fifties, the better to isolate and nurture the living tree. (Most avant-gardisms, even the antirealist ones, march under the banner of better, or different, or new realisms; writers are sure they know how to make their particular tree grow best.)

Zambra’s breakthrough occurred with his third novel, “Ways of Going Home” (2011; published here in 2013, in Megan McDowell’s sparkling translation), which seems a different order of achievement from his earlier work. Here, at last, Zambra’s authorial self-consciousness, his reflections on the perils and pleasures of fiction-making, finds a theme that gives it moral gravity and not just formal ingenuity. The novel begins with some of the charm and joyousness of “My Documents.” A nine-year-old boy in a suburb of Santiago witnesses the earthquake of March 3, 1985. He is afraid, but he also enjoys the new excitements on the street—the grownups gathered around a fire, the kids put in tents for the night. The boy notices Claudia, a twelve-year-old girl; a couple of years later, they become friends. Claudia is interesting for several reasons, one of them being that she has an uncle, Raúl, who lives alone: “Raúl was the only person in the neighborhood who lived alone. It was hard for me to understand how someone could live alone. I thought that being alone was a kind of punishment or disease.” Mysteriously, Claudia asks the boy to spy on her uncle, who is rumored to be a Communist: “To me, a Communist was someone who read the newspaper and silently bore the mockery of others—I thought of my grandfather, my father’s father, who was always reading the newspaper. Once I asked him if he read the whole thing, and the old man answered that yes, when it came to the newspaper you had to read it all.” The boy later discovers that Raúl is in fact not Claudia’s uncle but her father, Roberto, a left-wing activist who has been living under a new identity in order to escape the dictatorship’s scrutiny.

In the novel’s second section, the narrator is the writer of the story we have just read in the novel’s first section; and Zambra’s book proceeds like this, the fiction about Claudia and Raúl/Roberto alternating with sections narrated by a man who is writing those very fictions. But what might have been dryly self-involved steadily opens out into Chilean history and political reality. This man, this writer, is trying to come to a reckoning with recent political events, and with the knowledge that his parents were politically quietist (and possibly right-leaning) during the Pinochet years. He has searing memories from his childhood. When he was thirteen, he became aware for the first time that his schoolmates included the children of murdered and tortured parents, and of murderers, too. One day, when he was sixteen, the police chased some thieves into the school’s parking lot and fired shots. The class’s history teacher started crying and hid under the table. “He slowly managed to calm down as we explained to him that no, the military had not taken over again. . . . Of course I knew, we all knew; he had

been tortured and his cousin was taken prisoner and disappeared.” The teacher asks the boy about his parents, and the boy replies that during the Pinochet years they “kept to the sidelines.” The teacher seems to look at the boy with curiosity and disdain.

The man who is writing the story about Claudia and Raúl and the earthquake wrestles with the function and utility of writing fiction. He comes to the conclusion that “the novel” (by which I think he means the stable, solid, old-fashioned realist novel) belongs to his parents’ generation. As they suffered, their lucky children played and drew pictures: “While the country was falling to pieces, we were learning to talk, to walk, to fold napkins in the shape of boats, of airplanes. While the novel was happening, we played hide-and-seek, we played at disappearing.” If “the novel” belongs to the parents, to the generation that witnessed and suffered and did things (or, in the case of the narrator’s parents, did nothing very much), then what is left for the next generation? To begin with: something that will not look quite like a “novel.” The containers will have to be broken up. But perhaps the odor of triviality will cling to the fictions of the younger generation? Perhaps the young writer is just playing in the shadows, as he did when he was a child?

Once again, as in Zambra’s earlier books, the writer-narrator tells us that he is disappointed by his work. He deletes a lot of what he has written. He switches to writing verse, and this suddenly feels like a reprieve from fiction-making—“no compositions of place, no unnecessary scenes.” Sometimes, he thinks,

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. That’s why a book is always the opposite of another immense and strange book. An illegible and genuine book that we translate treacherously, that we betray with our habit of passable prose.

But this isn’t merely passable prose; it’s rigorous and essential prose, and if Zambra is disappointed by literature he is also saved by it. “Ways of Going Home” becomes a “genuine” book, a necessary one. It is structurally exquisite. The alternating fictions are beautifully mixed, hardly separable: Zambra seems only to be pouring slightly different-colored liquids from one urn to another. And the metafictional meditation takes on a justified ethical anguish: in a political culture of actual disappearance, how can the writer not be acutely sensitive to questions of fictional ethics—to the whole complicated business of fictional lying, of inventing parallel worlds, of game-playing, of narrative presence and absence? How could the responsible writer not bind these scruples into the very form of his work?

In his new book, Zambra returns to the twin sources of his talent—to his storytelling vitality, that living tree which blossoms often in these pages, and to his unsparing examination of recent Chilean history. These come together

magnificently in a story titled “National Institute,” which reads like a snatched memory of the years that Zambra spent at the school. A few pages into it, the author starts listing apparently random memories, each of which begins with “I remember.” He remembers friends at school, severe male teachers, a female teacher he fell in love with: “I remember the list of Chilean presidents who had studied at my school. I remember that when teachers reeled off that list, they omitted the name of Salvador Allende.” He remembers one friend in particular, a brilliant, difficult student named Pato Parra, who committed suicide. One morning, near the end of his time at the National Institute, the boys get into a fight and are hauled up before the school’s inspector general, Mr. Musa, who happens to be visiting. He magnanimously informs the boys that he is not going to expel them but is instead going to tell them something they will never in their lives forget. The story ends as, of course, it must: “I forgot it immediately. I sincerely don’t know what Musa told me then.” What begins as a slight exercise in reminiscence becomes a deeper tale about presence and absence, appearance and disappearance, in which unofficial memory (the author’s casual “I remember”) triumphs over official memory. It’s a vindication of what the committed and talented fiction writer can do best, and the victory is all the sweeter because Alejandro Zambra peels off this utterly charming fragment as if it were nothing very much, as if he were just offering us one of his candies, on the way home from school. ♦



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