

atavisms, full of Jeanette Winterson-style descriptions that don't actually describe (hair like "barbed wire", men as tall "as thunderstorms" and so on).

Paul Ableman (1927–2006), meanwhile, brings to his aspiring poet hero's vagrant life in Macmillan-era London a type of rapt impressionism, or perhaps only caprice, with individual scenes constantly bleeding into each other, refined, or sometimes confused, by memory and foreshadowing, past, present and future coming together to produce a kind of fictional revolving door where, no doubt intentionally, hardly anything is discrete. Yet the really disquieting thing about his landscape, as with the

fog-strewn beaches of *Dancing with Mermaids*, is how hard the anti-realism has to be worked at, and how determinedly the English minutiae go on forming their patterns. In the end, despite Gibson's invocation of Bruno Schulz, for all his tall tales and telekinetic séances, what remains are the usual fragments of domestic life, some small boys called Vernie and Smudger and a backdrop in which Kynaston and Sandbrook would still feel very much at home.

Inevitably, there are wider issues at stake, in which the pull of social history features quite as strongly as aesthetic theory. For what truly unites these four very different novels, far more than their authorial coigns of vantage or even

the broadly homogeneous worlds that every so often loom into view, is the suspicion that they could not be written now. Not because the localized paraphernalia they assemble in such pitiless detail has changed, but because much of the anatomizing process that novelists traditionally brought to their material is now largely redundant. To put it another way, if the modern novelist is so reluctant to explore native domestic interiors, it is because those interiors are so much more difficult to pin down, so much more diffuse, polyglot and morally ambiguous.

And of course, to reissue any novel thirty or forty years old by a non-canonical writer, "Hampstead", "mid-list" or from any other fic-

tional category, is to risk a much more prosaic two-part question: is it any good and ought we to read it? And here the answer is that *A Domestic Animal* and *Monk Dawson* are superior stuff, if very slightly dated, and *Dancing with Mermaids* and *As Near as I Can Get* fascinating period curios. The modesty of their objectives and the constraints of their milieux will no doubt perplex modern readers brought up on novels of global diaspora and psychological displacement. But if the Hampstead novelist – whoever he or she may have been – had comparatively humble aims, then the great point in his or her favour was that, by and large, they were achieved.

The Chilean author Alejandro Zambra's successful previous novel, *Ways of Going Home* (2013; *Formas de volver a casa*), describes the partly autobiographical life of a narrator brought up in the suburb of Maipu, in Santiago. Like Zambra himself, the narrator was born in 1975, two years after the military coup. Children in this world are largely blind to the effects of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, but every now and then they unwittingly witness a disturbing scene. Thus a young girl one day finds her parents crying as they listen to the radio. "A voice was talking about a raid. It talked about the dead, about more dead." With scenes of this kind, Zambra subtly turns growing up into a political metaphor, one that encapsulates the gradual awakening of political consciousness in a regime that imposes relentless censorship.

The eleven short stories in *My Documents* continue in that subtle vein. In the first story, which shares the book's title, the narrator gets an initial childhood glimpse of politics when hearing protest music in the house of older friends. They explain to him what "revolution" means. In "Camilo", the effects of the Pinochet regime are more overbearing, if also indirect. Camilo is the godson of the narrator's father; he lives alone with his mother, his own father having been forced into exile, and becomes a politically influential older friend of the narrator. When Camilo eventually visits his father in Paris, they do not get on. Exile has destroyed the bond between them.

There are other complex father-son relation-

ships in *My Documents*. Zambra's child characters grow up and have children of their own, but they find it difficult to cope with parenthood. In "True or False", Daniel, recently divorced, buys a cat for his son Lucas, to keep him amused during visits. The cat, which turns out to be pregnant, has five kittens. Daniel is willing to keep them all to ensure his son's affection, but Lucas humiliatingly asks that they be delivered to his mother's home. In "Memories of a Personal Computer", Max rides a bus for several hours all the way from Santiago to Temuco in order to give a computer to his son Sebastian. But again, the sacrifice is useless. "Once he was alone, Sebastian set up the computer and confirmed what he already suspected: it was notably inferior, no matter how you looked at it, to the one he already had. He laughed about it a lot with his mother's husband".

Zambra's characters tend to be unlucky,

Pinochet's children

DAVID GALLAGHER

Alejandro Zambra

MY DOCUMENTS

Translated by Megan McDowell
200pp. Fitzcarraldo. Paperback, £12.99.
978 0 9929747 8 7

(US: McSweeney's. \$15. 978 1 94045 052 0)

unsuccessful and deeply anti-social. In "True or False", Daniel leaves his wife because "he needed silence". Left alone, humiliated by his son's departure, he is invited to dinner by his friendly neighbours. He declines aggressively, telling them that frankly he prefers to masturbate on his own. Daniel is but one of the several disgruntled – but engagingly self-mocking – adult misanthropists that Zambra's children have become. Sometimes they break out and manage a love affair, but there is usually an eccentric twist. In "Long Distance", the narrator picks up Pamela at the institute at which he gives language classes. They sleep together, but she insists on being paid each time. She in turn pays him for each of his supposedly free lessons. In "The Most Chilean Man in the World", Rodrigo makes a surprise visit to his girlfriend Elisa, who is studying in Leuven. He buys a ticket he can ill afford, and flies from Chile to Belgium. But the visit is a disaster. Not only will Elisa not see him, he loses his rucksack, with all his money. Lacking winter clothes, he wanders aimlessly through the streets of Leuven, shivering desperately, like a creature out of Gogol. We are left to imagine what his fate might be. In the magnificent "Family Life", Martin, forty and unemployed, gets a job looking after the house of his successful friend Bruno, who goes off with his family

to live for a spell in France. Little by little the caretaker allows the impeccably tidy house to become chaotic, all the more so when he meets Paz, a girl nearly half his age. They have an affair, and she carelessly adds to the disorder, gaily explaining the she "was born under democracy". To win her over, Martin pretends to be the owner of the house. He soon regrets the lie, but it is too late to withdraw it. When Bruno and his family finally return, they find the house in a state of disarray. Martin has disappeared.

In some of the later stories, Zambra abandons his self-deprecating, semi-autobiographical tone and tries his hand at straight third-person storytelling. But his most powerful tales remain those that seem to reflect his own life. In this respect, *My Documents* is a worthy complement to *Ways of Going Home*, and Megan McDowell has again produced an excellent translation of Zambra's subtle, understated prose.

Zambra's novels have been a critical success in some ten languages. Is this the result of intrinsic merit, or of some clever stratagem to win international readers? In "Artist's Rendition", the last story in *My Documents*, the narrator tells us that he is falsifying the facts a bit, partly for aesthetic effect, but also because international readers like the characters in Latin American fiction to be lower-class. This is Alejandro Zambra displaying his sense of humour and self-awareness once again. They are an engaging part of what is indeed his considerable merit as a writer.

There is a simple but important song known to all the islanders in *By Night the Mountain Burns*:

Maestro: Aale, toma suguewa,

All: Alewa!

We are told:

The "toma suguewa" part means "give it a pull", but it also means "will you give it a pull", or "will you all give it a pull", even "will sir give it a pull". Know why it can be any of these things? Because in the language the song is sung, my island's language, there is no polite form of address like there is in Spanish.

The song fills the narrator with memories of his childhood spent on "a sliver of land that pokes out of the murky" Atlantic Ocean, just below the equator off the west coast of Africa. The islanders sing it during one of their sacred customs – the sculpting of a new canoe from a tree trunk, which is then pulled by the community towards the sea. The "maestro", a skilful elder, "orchestrates everyone's efforts through song". Indeed, this is the novel's core conceit: in the role of a traditional oral

storyteller, the narrator ingeniously weaves together stories from his past – about the island, its people and the intense experiences he can't quite get over ("that incident"; "the most wicked thing we've ever done"). The result is a compelling novel posing as a memoir: "I'm not a writer, or a teacher . . . If this story becomes known, it will be because of some white people. They came to our island and wanted to know our folk tales".

What happens here isn't just about coloniza-

Diplomatic fruits

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel

BY NIGHT THE MOUNTAIN BURNS

Translated by Jethro Soutar
276pp. And Other Stories. £10.
978 1908276 41 4

tion. Alongside the "Padre" and the church, the islanders' daily life pulsates with their own rituals, superstitions, "she-devils" and a sea god. A boy becomes a man when he gets a canoe of his own; everything depends on these vessels: fish is the main source of food; access to the various villages, and the hospital, is by water; and when boats from the "friendly nations" are spotted on the horizon, the islanders paddle their women over to bargain for necessities (tobacco, kerosene, washing powder). It becomes clear that there are barely any fathers on the island because most of the children are the "fruit" of similar, previous negotiations ("a growth that remained even when everything else from that expedition of understanding had run out").

The narrator sees his past with the endearing innocence of a child. He constantly asks questions, and those he doesn't or can't answer are

conspicuously absent. His "mad" grandfather – who sits on the balcony every day facing the island's mountain ("El Pico de Fuego") – does not talk or paddle a canoe, and half his head is shaved. Why this is we never learn – it transpires that the narrator has made a promise never to tell – but the red herring keeps us intrigued. After two sisters accidentally start a bush fire that destroys the crops, their mother is savagely beaten to death by a mob – an act unintentionally witnessed by everyone, including the Padre, who does not step in to stop it. The islanders are then struck down by cholera; no coincidence, the narrator says. Pages of names and cross symbols, like headstones, give us a powerful sense of its impact.

Linguistic play and rhythm are clearly important to Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel, and they are effectively conveyed in Jethro Soutar's eloquent translation. This is the first of the Equatorial Guinean writer's novels to be translated into English, and it has been short-listed for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize: a recognition it richly deserves.