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Issue 1: Literature in Translation

*Camanchaca* by Diego Zúñiga

Translated by Megan McDowell

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My father's first car was a 1971 Ford Fairlane, which my grandfather gave him when he turned fifteen.

His second was a 1985 Honda Accord, lead gray.

His third was a 1990 BMW 850i, which he killed my Uncle Neno with.

Thus begins Diego Zúñiga's wafer-thin novel *Camanchaca*, dropping a small emotional bomb into a dry list of possessions. The reader will wait, with the protagonist, throughout the novel's 110 pages, for the bomb to explode, but this novel is more a jigsaw puzzle than a hand grenade; it transpires that what explosions will happen have happened already, and the narrator has internalized the shards of them. What we have instead are the efforts of a naïve and lonely narrator to assemble the pieces of his life, and his family, into an order he can understand.

Framing the novel is a drive the unnamed narrator (whom I will call N) takes with his usually absent father across the Atacama Desert. N is an overweight and mostly aimless 20-year-old who lives with his monstrously selfish mother and

a dying dog in Santiago, while his father lives in the north, in Iquique, where they lived together as a family before the separation. N's only ambition was, for a while, to be an announcer at soccer games, but chiefly he whiles away his life playing video games or listening to music with his headphones on. He comforts himself with hot dogs and KFC. N had friends briefly as a child, before his parents separated and his world began to unravel.

What led to that unraveling is one of the mysteries N is trying to understand. Another is Uncle Neno's death. He is told different stories (in one his father killed Neno); which is true? What happened to his cousin, Uncle Neno's daughter, whom he used to play with, and are those two events related?

N is not an unreliable narrator, but the ultimate naïf. This is hardly his fault; the adults around him (mother, father, grandfather) completely disregard his needs, both physical and intellectual. His father is spectacularly self-obsessed and blind to his son; his grandfather is a Jehovah's Witness who can talk of nothing but Satan and Jehovah. N understands little of the adult dramas that he reports in fragments with the same emphasis he employs in describing making a sandwich, whether that be rape, murder, attempted suicide, or incest, all of which are packed into this slim work. But he tries, which lends the novel its poignancy.

His mother opens the door on the mystery of Neno's death:

It was on one of those nights [when they slept in the same bed] when my mother told me what happened to my Uncle Neno. She said there was a lot

I didn't know, that it hadn't been her idea to lie to me, but she'd made an agreement with my grandparents. And she told the story. In complete detail. Full of silences. A few days after that we'd never mention Uncle Neno again. A few days after that, there'd be another story nobody would want to tell.

Later, N tries to question his mother again:

She looked at me and told me that some day she'd tell me the truth, but for now, I wouldn't be able to understand. That's what she told me; that I wouldn't understand the truth. Then we sat in silence.

When he asks his grandfather directly what happened to Neno, his grandfather stops talking to him. N cannot bring himself to ask his father the question he needs to. This is a novel with as many ellipses as facts, more silences than information. This is a family, if not a society, where uneasy silences hide ugly truths buried just beneath the surface, making for treacherous terrain.

*Camanchaca* is the second novel by Zúñiga, and the first to be translated into English (by the excellent Megan McDowell.) Zúñiga is one of a new cohort of dynamic young Chilean novelists whose members include Alejandro Zambra and Matías Celedón. The oldest of these is Zambra, who was fifteen when the dictatorship of General Pinochet ended in 1990; Celedón was born in 1981, Zúñiga in 1987. The weight of those years is not as heavy on these writers as it was on

the previous generation, which includes Roberto Bolaño and Ariel Dorfman, but its lingering impact on society is an inescapable part of the context; only occasionally does it intrude directly into their narratives.

Zambra's most recent work to appear in English is *Multiple Choice*, which uses the form of the 90 questions of the Academic Aptitude Test that Zambra took in school to critique an educational system oriented towards rote knowledge rather than real comprehension, as well as the trauma of years under a dictator. In Celedón's dystopian novel *The Subsidiary*, his first novel to be translated into English, employees are locked into a corporate office due to a power outage in increasingly nightmarish conditions; it's a riff on authoritarianism carried to its extreme. The entire narrative is composed with stamps the nameless bureaucrat keeps in his desk. Thus both books, which are closer to novellas than novels, depart from traditional forms to express their meaning.

Also novella-length, *Camanchaca* shares the sense of external menace conveyed in these books. N has a relative who was either seized by aliens or arrested by the military and tortured; another character's daughter disappears—abducted or killed. Neighborhood toughs bully small children. Yet the deeper sense of menace comes from within N's family. And while *Camanchaca* is less formally inventive than the work of Zambra or Celedón, its small units (ranging from a paragraph to a few pages), jumbled chronology, and blank language perfectly express the bewilderment of the protagonist.

When N sets out across the Atacama, his mother charges him with getting his father to buy him pants and shirts. N's private quest is to get his father to talk to him, and to get his father to tell him what happened with Neno, in particular. N succeeds in neither goal. Instead the book ends with an image of the *camanchaca*, the fog obscuring the great, dry Atacama, and N's vision of the highway and desert littered with bodies.

In this brief novel, Zúñiga paints as bleak an image of the family as Zambra does of Chile's educational system, or Celedón does of its corporate/political reality. Chile is a country with a bloody and repressive past that has not been faced. Families of the murdered have not received satisfaction; silence still reigns. *Camanchaca* is a chilling portrait of the cost of that silence on an individual, a family, and perhaps a nation. Concise, unsentimental, and bleak, it delivers an emotional punch and demonstrates a writer of control and power.