

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Cosmos Latinos

An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

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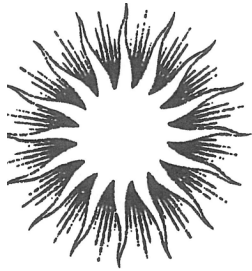
Braulio Tavares

BRAZIL

Braulio Tavares (1950-) was born in Campina Grande, in the northeast of Brazil, and has resided in Rio de Janeiro since 1982. His work has been chiefly in the creative arts; in Brazil he is recognized as a singer /songwriter of what he calls "oral literature," or folk poetry. He is a 1991 Clarion graduate and a member of the Science Fiction Research Association.

Tavares's nonfiction work on s F includes the *Fantastic, Fantasy, and Science Fiction Literature Catalog*, an English-language bibliography of Brazilian fantastic literature (1992), and articles in the Nicholls and Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993), in Clute and Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), and in publications such as *Foundation* and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. He has published one SF novel, *The Flying Machine* (*A maquina voadora*, 1994), and two story collections, *The Backbone of Memory* (*A espinha dorsal da memoria*, 1989), and *Ghost World* (*Mundo fantasma*, 1996). *The Backbone of Memory* received three *Nova* awards.

"Stuntmind" was first published in Portuguese in *The Backbone of Memory*, and was later translated into English by the author for publication in the Canadian magazine *On Spec* (fall 1994). For those who might have missed it then, we offer it here and invite you to experience Tavares's hypnotic vision of interspecies contact between humans and a powerful race of aliens, called the Outsiders. What the alien race craves is what humans take for granted and even despise about themselves: their feelings.



Stuntmind

Stuntmind, 1989

by Braulio Tavares

translated by the author

1

At the opposite end of the large marble room, a photo of Roger Van Dali covers the entire wall. I am sitting in my sliding chair, and I press the keys, making it glide toward that enormous face.

The face of Van Dali. I don't remember when this photo was taken; all I recall is that it was before his mission. He wears a gray suit with a black tie. He has a thin face, short hair, thick eyebrows. Deep lines run down both sides of his mouth. He is looking at an indefinite point to the left of the camera and doesn't seem to acknowledge its presence. He seems unaware of everything; he just stares into the void.

I call this room "The Art Gallery." It contains nothing but this twenty-five-square-meter photo. I come here every day, before breakfast. I look at this photo, and I think about me.

I go downstairs. Van Dali's servants are busy around the table, preparing a meal with tropical fruits. In the afternoon, if the weather is good, I will take the helicop and go to the canyon to see the sunset. I haven't been out of this house for six months.

2

It rained, and I could not go to the canyon. I went to the basement instead, put on a mask, dived into the tank, harpooned some fish. It was ten P.M. when I went upstairs and dressed for dinner.

My guests talked about the incredibly bizarre kidnappings that have been taking place in several countries. It's not a matter of mere politics anymore: those groups claim to have created a new form of art. The first hostages were tattooed before being released, but now a group in Venezuela has introduced the procedure of peeling the skin off their faces. Stanzarelli (one of the guests, one who always closes his eyes while

speaking) said that anesthesia is a kind of ersatz blindness, and then he smiled. We all smiled, and I ordered the waiters to serve the honey wine.

After dinner we went upstairs to the Oval Room. I showed them my collection of cuneiform tablets; I had hired some translators for the night, and we read and discussed the texts until dawn. Naskatcha and her geishas were the last ones to leave. I went to my bedroom, read a little, and then spent some time not reading, just retracing the beautiful shapes of the letters with my eyes, and I slid smoothly into an imageless sleep.

3

Roger Van Dali never slept well; since his childhood he had never slept more than three hours at a time. As he grew up he realized that he was not like other boys, and his family used to see him as a Predestinate, as so many families do. He was thirty-two and had been working as a bookkeeper when he was discovered and drafted for the Contact Mission.

During his training, with dozens of physicians around him, he asked what he was supposed to do. "Someone will say something in your mind," they answered. "You will hear, and then you will tell us what it was."

It was during the Van Dali mission that the press coined the name that would be applied to his group from then on. "Stuntminds" was the label given to the people whose minds were, for some random genetic reason, suitable for mental Contact with the Outsiders.

4

Millions of government agents combed the world in search of potential stuntminds. Whenever one was found, he was enrolled, trained, and taken in a space shuttle to the Orbital Station, where an Outsider scout ship submitted him to another series of tests. Some were turned back, without explanation. Those approved were taken to the main Outsider ship and put in mind-contact with the Outsiders by a process whose details were kept secret by the aliens. For some period of time (minutes? hours? days?) the minds of the Earthling and the alien vibrated and pulsed together, becoming a whole; then they were separated again, and the man was taken back to the station. When Van Dali returned to Earth he was physically devastated, weighing twenty pounds less than he had

two weeks earlier, when he had shaken hands with nine presidents as he prepared to enter the shuttle.

Stuntminds returned to Earth no more than zombies, but prolific zombies nonetheless. They created and developed the most eccentric mathematical formulae, in insane bursts of activity, and they wrote things without an inkling of understanding. When their information was exhausted they were officially retired, mentally ill, their minds half-crippled by what scientists called "the Kingsley-Weichart effect"-an overload of information. Their mission fulfilled, they withdrew from the world to spend their last years like sheiks, like maharajas, like mandarins, in mansions with ninety-nine rooms-like this one of mine.

5

Today was scarab day. I undressed and, in an enormous marble basin, had my legs and arms tied and then had the scarabs spread over me. They seemed to have millions of tiny feet, and they acted as though they knew what I was feeling. Then I slept. In the afternoon I saddled a pony and rode through the woods on the ground floor.

6

In this house I have bedrooms, I have swimming rooms, I have rooms full of perfumed smoke, rooms full of children's toys, rooms full of books, rooms full of fishbowls. I have dozens of rooms whose furniture recreates other times and other places. I have the dark crypt where Aleister Crowley performed his rituals. I have the room where Paris loved Helen of Troy, and also Messalina's sultry alcove, and the huge canopy bed of Christine, Queen of Sweden. I have the room where Marilyn Monroe died, and in that room lives a professional Marilyn double, almost a clone. I have Turkish seraglios, dungeons and cloister cells, rooms from brothels in Nazi Berlin and in Muslim Andalusia. When I feel lonely I warn my servants and, half an hour later, I open door and enter the chosen scene. It's not every day that it happens. It's more during winter, when fierce storms are raging outside, and I try to forget them.

7

Today is Tuesday, and I had to welcome Van Dali's biographers. Since it is winter, only two of them appeared. When they arrived I was playing tennis against Ivanov and Leroux, my nurses. Sometimes I imagine that I

could play several simultaneous tennis games, as chess players do; a semicircular court, me against four, or five ...

I think about this while I take a shower and choose my clothes. Last Tuesday I wore an artillery uniform, a gift from Pablo Mikherinos, a recent stuntmind with long purple hair. Today, I choose a tuxedo and a top hat in bright colors. I feel talkative.

I go downstairs to the library and greet the biographers, whose names I always forget. The blonde woman has a quaint accent, and she asks me about the usefulness of a stuntmind to the world. Patiently I repeat: we receive a Gleam, and we have the duty of transmitting its reflex. The man who dresses in white asks me how I would describe the mental feeling of the Contact. I describe it as that of a geometrical point that is compelled to receive a polygon inside itself.

8

We are useless parasites of mankind. This is what is written in the newspapers financed by the opposition companies. And maybe we are. The multistate companies spend more and more money on stuntminds every year, because every Contact, every message, demands a new, untouched brain.

It is said that our Xanadus insult the poverty of the world's billions of people. But the countries of Earth needed us. They needed the messages that our crippled minds brought home, and so it is only fair that now we have our city, far away from other cities, a city just for us, where each month a new house is built: a pagoda, a marble honeycomb, a tower made of Brazilian redwood, a mansion in the shape of a word, an upside-down castle. Here we are: the parasites and the illuminati, the men and women who gave their minds to be raped by equations, by alien formulae, by data that Earth scientists receive with eagerness and examine with wonder; something for which a scholar would give half his life, and which billions of people pay homage to but don't understand.

I live in Van Dali's mansion. To the Outsiders, the person of Van Dali didn't exist, or, like an electron, could not be told apart from the others. His mind was only a chip, a stone on which a message was carved. When Van Dali came back to Earth, he carried in his mind the blueprints of the topological structure of the Interwoven Universes. It was only after this that the nations of Earth could master the projection of physical objects in Hypertime and start to build the Gate.

9

It is winter ... but I am repeating myself. I wake up at noon, and even before opening my eyes I turn on the hypnoscope, then stare at the small silvery sphere as it revolves a few inches before my eyes. Entranced, I restore some minutes of my dreams, minutes that otherwise would melt away under the ruthless touch of reality.

I turn it off and go to the gym. Afterward I have breakfast, then go to the hothouse, take a box full of insects and feed my plants. I make sure that they have everything ... water, electro-sun, fresh air. I talk to them, touched by the way they respond, gently waving their leaves. At three P.M. I go to the Indigo Room on the fourth floor, call for a fellatrix, stay with her a long time. Then I go downstairs, have a bath, do my check-up, my acupuncture.

It is still raining! I cannot see the sunset in the canyon. I go to the library instead, and spend hours leafing through picture books. At eight, I am called to dinner: shrimp with cream cheese and sweet garlic, and a salad of synths. After finishing, I order the coffee in the Black-and-Silver Room, together with a ballet-the pas de deux from Smoliakine's *Tristram and Juliet*, with choreography by N'Mura .

Back in the library I sit at my computer and exchange correspondence for a few hours, after choosing a group of programs at random: De Assis, De Camp, De Quincey, De Sade. A servant appears and announces the arrival of guests. I remember I invited some people to a bagpipe concert at midnight.

Downstairs is a small group: three stuntminds from the neighborhood, and five visiting Earthlings, as we call them. Two of them are first-time visitors to Van Dali's house. They take my hand as if I were a king, as if I were an octopus.

10

One more day, like any other. Now I am naked; my body floats inside a huge, vertical glass cylinder . The jets of hot air keep me hovering, almost weightless, revolving around myself inside the circle of tanning lights. In my ears, phones with docu-music, the sounds of the rescue of a Spanish galleon from the seventeenth century, near the Cape of Good Hope. The hot air is so good. It is fourteen minutes past eleven on a winter night . . . outside.

11

I once jumped into an enormous chocolate pie: I sank like a bullet in wood, I swam, I ate, I found my way out. I have been tied to the propeller of a plane and had the engine turned on. I have drunk everything: brine, urine, semen, pepper juice, amniotic fluid, hydrochloric acid, menstrual blood, *aqua tofana*, hyperdistilled water. I have fought rattlesnakes with my teeth, with my hands tied behind my back. I have jumped from a plane at six thousand feet, tied to an elastic cord. I have been entombed for six days and six nights.

12

Today the rain stopped; I called my helicop and flew to the canyon. I sat on a rock and stared at the sun, I saw how it melted in wild colors, and tears rolled down my face till the world was dark.

Back home, I went through Cypress Glades. I passed along it very slowly, my chair gliding softly upon the air-spheres, my closed eyes preserving that trembling shadow of the sun. The air around me was resounding with the music of the thousands of bells that hung from the trees, golden bells, silver bells, crystal bells, tinkling at the cold wind's blowing. I felt that I was vibrating and pulsating in sympathy with their sound.

In moments like this I remember the Contact, I remember that moment in which I, Roger Van Dali, felt all the vast loneliness of the Outsider (yes, I still think of them as individuals, as units of consciousness, or psi-quanta). I remember that instant in which I became me-and-him. In that moment, my frail human mind touched his memories of travels through Hypertime, recoiling at what I found there. I think the same thing happens with all stuntminds, but I have never asked anyone about it. We are a guild of silent people.

And I awoke in Van Dali's body after the Contact, like one who emerges from a throbbing abyss. I came to Earth and was given this face of mine. They taught me my name, told me my life, gave me a mountain of money, and then forgot me: and now here we are ... I and I.

I can say: am embedded in Van Dali's mind. Also I can say a part of the Outsider is inside me and now lives in this world where it indulges itself in every excess, in every curiosity.

We can thank the Outsiders for the keys to Hypertime and for open-

ing the doors of the universe for us; but I don't think they came to escort us across the galaxies. What they want is to live here, and to be like us.

The taste for human feelings is their vice. In exchange for this caprice, for this desertion, they give us their theorems and send us into space. I cannot understand this human greediness for space, since the Abyss is only the Abyss, and nowhere is there a planet so full of perverse beauty as this world of yours.