

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Cosmos Latinos

An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

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Eduardo Goligorsky

ARGENTINA

Eduardo Goligorsky (1931-) was born in Buenos Aires, but since 1976¹ he has made his home in Spain, working as a journalist, editor, translator, critic, anthologist, and author. Before relocating to Spain, Goligorsky attained recognition as a prolific writer of Spillane-school detective fiction.² Writing as James Alistair, he published more than twenty detective novels, and in 1975 won a prize in a detective story contest judged by Borges, Marco Denevi, and Augusto Roa Bastos.

Goligorsky was also a key figure in the Argentinean SF movement of the 1960s and 1970s, both for his fiction and for a landmark critical work, *Science Fiction: Reality and Psychoanalysis* (*Ciencia ficción: Realidad y psicoanálisis*, 1969), coauthored by psychologist and SF author Marie Langer. He also collaborated with Alberto Vanasco on two short story collections, *Future Memories* (*Memorias de futuro*, 1966) and *Farewell to Tomorrow* (*Adiós al mañana*, 1967), and he wrote the prologue to *Argentineans on the Moon* (*Los argentinos en la luna*, 1969).

We selected "The Last Refuge" for this volume not just for its narrative interest, but because it serves as an excellent example of Latin American political SF. In an interview published alongside this story Goligorsky said, "My worst nightmares—which are expressed in my fiction and essays—were made real (in Argentina) between 1966 and 1983: a country degraded by oppression, violence, necrophilia, irrationality, demagoguery, and xenophobia; a country which the ultra-Right, the idiotic Left, and the chauvinist populists tried to isolate from the most fertile currents of civilized thought."³ This is the Argentina that forms the political backdrop of the present story. Anyone familiar with the terror and persecution characterizing so many authoritarian regimes the world over will appreciate the plight of Goligorsky's tragic hero as he desperately seeks "The Last Refuge."

The Last Refuge

■ *En el Ultimo reducto, 1967*

by Eduardo Góligorsky
translated by Andrea Bell

The man could feel his eyes filling with tears. Before him stood a spaceship, a gigantic metallic disk that seemed to be made of two immense plates joined at the edges. The observation panels and the hatchway were on the upper, inverted plate, and a ring of vertical tubes encircled the entire disk at the edge where the two plates met. These were the propulsion devices. He recognized the image he'd seen so often in his photographs. But never before had he been just an arm's length away from a spaceship, as he was now. And that was why he felt like crying.

"Bye, Maidana."

"See ya tomorrow, Guille."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Guillermo Maidana, surprised to see his wife standing on the street corner, said his goodbyes distractedly. Marta hadn't combed her hair, and some of her gray locks fell across her forehead. She was wearing the old dress she used when going to market. Maidana realized that something bad must have happened. She didn't approach him, though, but remained standing on the corner, motionless.

"Marta, what's wrong? Why'd you come here like that . . . ?"

She took him by the arm and headed off down the street. This wasn't the way to their house. What's more, she was trying to keep him away from his coworkers, who were still hanging about in small groups.

"G'bye, Mr. and Mrs. Maidana."

"Hey, what's wrong?" he repeated, "What . . . ?"

Marta looked around to make sure no one could hear her, and without slowing down said, "Carlitos found the album. I forgot to lock the dresser drawer and he found the album."

A knot formed in Maidana's throat. He felt like he might throw up

then and there, but somehow he got hold of himself. Suddenly it was he who was dragging Marta along, as she clung to his arm.

"How do you know?"

"He told me himself. I hadn't noticed it was missing from the drawer."

"And what did he do?"

"Listen to me. He took it to school. The pictures really impressed him and he wanted to share his treasure with his classmates. He told me the teacher saw it, too. The teacher gave it to the principal. They asked Carlitos whose it was and he said it was his father's. I don't know how it is they let him come home. I'm sure they've already notified the Department of Internal Security. The police must be looking for you. You've got to escape. You've got to . . . "

"But where can I go?" whispered Maidana.

"You have to escape," she insisted, unable to think of anything else.

"Anywhere. Right now. They'll come looking for you at work."

It was getting dark. Maidana could see that his wife's eyes were shining with tears. He hugged her fiercely.

A soft purring sound emanated from the spaceship. At times the noise would grow louder, and the propulsion tubes would emit little blue flames. When that happened the temperature in the vicinity of the ship rose, but the man didn't seem to notice it. His fingers caressed the metallic surface of the fuselage and touched the grooves left by rains of cosmic dust. The man had the impression that, through the workings of some strange magic, this contact allowed him to commune with the far-off galaxies that had always inhabited his dreams, and that were forbidden to him.

Maidana kept going the whole night long. At times he ran, at times he trudged along slowly, but he never stopped. He chose the darkest, emptiest streets. He never came across the police. At last he felt the need to stop and leaned against a rickety wooden fence. He tried to catch his breath. It was starting to get light, and the kerosene streetlights were still lit up on their aluminum posts.

A noise made him feel anew the sharp stab of fear: the splash of a horse's hooves in the mud of a cross-street, and the squeaking of cart-wheels. He looked around for someplace to hide but found nothing. The wooden fences of the small farms stretched out in an unbroken line, offering not even a chink into which he could squeeze himself. Maidana knew that if he tried to climb over one of the fences the poorly nailed

boards would come clattering down around him. He chose to press up close against the fence, far away from the street lights, fading into the shadows.

At last the cart appeared at the intersection. It was coming down Maipu Street, and kept going straight. Nothing to do with the police.

Maidana resumed walking along Lavalle Street, toward the Bajo, quickening his step each time he passed under one of the street lights.¹ He had another scare when a dog barked at him from behind a fence, but the animal had already calmed down by the time Maidana crossed San Martin. The only sounds were his own footsteps in ground drenched from the recent rains, the croaking of frogs in the coastal marshlands, and the song of the crickets.

A rough-hewn sign leaning up against a lamppost bore a message written in heavy black letters: *Our dignity rejects the temptations of materialism, which has enslaved the world.* The upper-right-hand edge of the poster had come unglued, and the fugitive grabbed the hanging corner as he passed by and yanked at it. As expected, underneath it was another slogan: *We are the last refuge of Western civilization. We are not afraid to be alone!* Maidana made a face and quickly left the circle of yellowish light cast by the kerosene lamp, which swung back and forth overhead.

The man stood facing the ship, and his outstretched arms seemed to want to embrace the lower hemisphere of the spacecraft. He rubbed his cheek against the rough metal surface, leaving behind a damp track of tears. It was like crying over the stars. From within him burst a hoarse cry: "Please, let me in! I'm your friend!"

Instinct drove Maidana toward the river. It wasn't as if, from there, it would be any easier to escape. All exit routes-whether by water, land, or air-had been closed. It had been centuries since any ship had touched the coast. No one left the country, and shipping was strictly prohibited. One of the most enduring principles of the regime was *Let us close our borders to materialist illusion.* In order to comply with this slogan, first all tourist traffic was halted, then study abroad trips were canceled, and finally all commerce and correspondence with the outside world were forbidden. Nostalgia for a civilization with which all ties had been severed became a sort of clandestine birthright for a handful of reprobates and misfits.

But although he could not dream of finding refuge out beyond the

quagmires of Leandro Alem, Maidana headed into that sector and made his way to the small mountain near the coast. He plunged in among the brush, trying not to trip over any of the fallen trunks and avoiding the gullies and bogs. The first light of day illuminated his path. The smell that came from the damp, rotten wood and the stagnant ponds was getting steadily stronger. His shoes were filled with water, and his wet pant legs clung to his skin. Mosquitoes formed an impenetrable cloud around his head, and he felt the quick sting of leeches on his calves.

The man beat on the armored surface with his fists, ignoring the skin being scraped off his knuckles. Every blow left behind a stain of blood, but he felt no pain. He only wanted them to open the hatchway, to grant him asylum within the depths of the shining capsule. He shouted and pounded, shouted and pounded. The sound that came from the interior of the ship became increasingly loud and regular. Once more little blue flames spat from the propulsion tubes. The atmosphere was getting hotter.

"Open up! Open up!"

While he made his way through the undergrowth, Maidana told himself it was paradoxical that his own son had revealed the album's existence to the authorities. The mission in store for him was indeed different.

Carlitos would have become the guardian of the album as soon as he'd reached adolescence. That was how possession of that heirloom had always been passed on, that was how Guillermo Maidana had obtained it, given to him by his father who, on that sober occasion, had told him the album's history.

One of his ancestors had served in the air fleet that had made the last trips to the outside. It was he who had gathered together the collection of photographs that had opened a fragile window onto universal civilization. The family held on to the album when, a short time later, the regime ordered the confiscation of everything that glorified "the false progress of materialism," that was unworthy of "the solemn tradition of our native individualism." Thus began their defiance, and thus was the album transformed into the secret object of their cult.

On Sundays, when Carlitos went to play in the park with his friends, he and Marta had often taken advantage of being alone to remove the album from its hiding place and look through it. This ritual, which their ancestors must have repeated countless times, transported them to a world of dreams and imagination. The photograph of the huge seawater

desalination plants installed in the Sahara was next to the one of the transparent survival domes scattered across the fantastic purple landscape of Mars; beside a picture of the Karachi skyscrapers was one that captured the intricate arabesques of the gray, elastic vegetation of Venus. One photo's radiant colors showed the twenty stacked artificial terraces where wheat was grown in Xinjiang, and another displayed the proud outline of the *Einstein III*, the first spaceship to have a crew made up of representatives from every nation in the World Council. The last picture in the album showed a misty panorama, with colossal towers of green stone rising up in the background: it was Agratr, the first extraterrestrial city the World Council explorers had discovered ...

Maidana experienced a feeling of profound disgust when he thought that the album was now in the hands of the regime's security agent s. There were few collections left in the country that contained so many of the forbidden images.

The man clawed at the ship's fuselage. The violent scratching against the metallic surface had destroyed his fingernails. His hands were two bloody wounds. Rendered numb, he did not feel the temperature rising as more blue flames shot out from the propulsion tubes above his head. He didn't hear the growing rumble of the ship's engines. One idea only was lodged in his brain: he had to break through the armored shell that separated him from the inside of the spacecraft.

"Open up! Open up!"

The roar of the engines drowned out his voice.

Maidana abruptly stopped walking, and his hand clenched a tree branch. His feet sank a little further into the mud of the swamp, but he paid no attention to that. A different sort of picture had caught his attention.

He was at a place where the mountain's vegetation was starting to thin out again. From there a strip of sand, mud, and limestone stretched out, and roughly two blocks ahead was the river. He heard the splashing of water and waves. But that wasn't what had him rooted to the spot.

The sun's rays were sparkling with dazzling light on a giant metallic disk. It was a ship. A spaceship. Above the dome that shaped the upper part into a curve was the emblem of the World Council. And there it was on the beach, immobile, separated from Buenos Aires by nothing but the swamps and scrublands of the Bajo.

Maidana realized that something extraordinary must have happened.

His eyes had often followed the World Council ships on their glittering path across the sky. But never in the last twenty years had one landed in the forbidden zone. Once, due to a breakdown in the guidance system, a ship had come down near the city of Tandil. Its crew had gone out in search of help-and had been gunned down by a watch patrol. The next day a proclamation announced that the security forces had discovered and wiped out a gang of foreign infiltrators. The story became the main theme of the regime's propaganda for a year, and after that the affair was never spoken of again. The abandoned spaceship, which turned out to be indestructible, was surrounded by a fence so as not to awaken any unhealthy curiosity.

This ship must also have suffered some kind of breakdown, but its crew already knew the risks associated with landing there. The hatchways were hermetically sealed, and the beach around the vessel was empty. No doubt the mechanics were inside the ship working quickly to repair the problem and leave before morning passed and a watch patrol

showed up.

Maidana walked toward the ship, slowly and cautiously at first, then more quickly. He crossed the last stretch of beach at a run. He could feel his eyes filling with tears ...

He'd fallen to his knees beneath the curve of the fuselage. He covered his face with his hands, and the blood from his torn fingers mixed with the tears that ran down his cheeks. The engines roared above his head. The column of blue fire that burst from the propulsion tubes enveloped the figure kneeling on the beach, and then seemed to become solid, supporting the ship as it rose. The displaced air formed a whirlwind that shook the branches of the nearest trees and churned up a cloud of blackened dust and ashes. Then, slowly, the dust and ashes fell softly back down to the deserted beach.