

World Science Fiction Spring 2019

Latin@ Rising: An Anthology of Latin@ Science Fiction & Fantasy

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ARTIFICIAL

Edmundo Paz Soldán

Edmundo Paz Soldán has a B.A. in Political Science from the University of Alabama-Huntsville, and a M.A. and PhD. in Hispanic Languages and Literatures from UC-Berkeley. He is currently a professor of Spanish with a focus on Latin American Literature at Cornell University. Along with Alberto Fuguet he was the editor of an anthology of U.S. Latino fiction: *Se habla español. Voces latines en USA* (2000). Paz Soldán is a prolific writer and two of his many novels have been translated into English: *The Matter of Desire* (2004) and *Turing's Delirium* (2006). Paz Soldán lives in the U.S. but publishes in Latin America and so his work has been strongly identified with the McOndo literary movement which sought to move Latin American literature towards engaging technology. The short story "Artificial" is set in the same world as his science fiction novel, *Iris* (2014). When the narrator's father is critically wounded in battle and is reconstituted by technological means, his human identity is put in question.

It rained all morning the day they declared Dad artificial and Randal and I stared at each other, not knowing what to do. It had caught us by surprise after weeks of filling out forms in the Department of Reclassification, which had been especially hard because we were on our own; Mom, the coward, had left home after the first operation, when the doctors informed her that his injuries were serious enough that he was probably going to become an artificial. We'd tried everything: we woke up at dawn and stood in long lines to get into over-packed, under-ventilated buildings with windows so high and so small it was like being in a war zone. Mornings and afternoons that got us nowhere, because the system

was down or was being updated and we would be asked to return the next day. In the faces of the others, we'd see dramas about to unfold or that already had: the hope or the pain—or the hope and the pain — when a sibling or spouse was declared artificial, or not. It was an endless melodrama that wore us out, but we couldn't escape it, even if we had wanted to.

At our last stop — an office where a lean, long-faced woman scribbled away without even glancing at us, surrounded by pictures of wild birds sketched with such hyperrealist precision that I thought they were holograms — Randal and I meekly, dutifully presented the documents that showed how good and dedicated Dad had been with the race, a real model human, always in a good mood, always ready with a word of encouragement. He wasn't a typical soldier, one of those sullen types all about physical strength: he'd organized a neighborhood reading group, played socc12 with the kids in Blind Square. A war hero, to boot. The time they sent him to the Malhado observation post and he saved his whole platoon, seven grateful soldiers: he'd figured out that the men of Orlewen were preparing an ambush, and instead of telling the others, he went in and fought on his own. That should count for something. It was bad luck, what had happened a month later: on his way back to the city, he'd tried to help an old lady lying in the street in front of the market, the apparent victim of a heart attack. He wasn't the only one. Four soldiers died, and he ended up in such bad shape that his children now had to fight to save him from becoming an artificial.

That morning, the woman in the Department of Reclassification who conveyed the final ruling to us said that we'd done the whole thing by the book, and that Dad's documents had been read and discussed by the committee. She said they were surprised that he would have been given patrol duty, at his age. I told her that he'd been put on desk duty once, but he had requested a transfer because he missed getting out there and pounding the pavement, risking his life to protect ours.

One of those intense types, she said with disdain. I don't know why you're so upset, he's going to love being artificial.

We insisted that we could provide witnesses to go before the committee to convince them not to do it. The woman looked at us, tired and ready to move on. She didn't understand why we were fighting so hard to be able to call Dad a human. Being artificial could and should be considered an upgrade. They had lots of advantages over humans: they were more efficient and were given better jobs. The hormone injections they got every so often kept them in excellent physical condition, and their memory, oh, their memory, was purged of traumas that could negatively affect their development. We weren't seeing what was right in front of us. All you had to do was to turn on the news to see who was really in charge.

Artificials born as artificials are one thing, my brother said, humans reclassified as artificials are another. And anyway, it isn't about better or worse: it's about being what you've always been.

Artificials have their humanity, too, she said, why stigmatize them?

They're another category, I said, why be one of them if Dad is fine being one of us?

If there were a war between humans and artificials, Randal said, Dad would be on their side, and he wouldn't be able to stand that.

The woman laughed, showing us her deformed arm. She said that she was 12% artificial and sometimes fantasized about cutting off her other arm, or damaging one of her lungs so they'd have to give her a synthetic one, or maybe even dousing her eyes with acid so her percentage would go up and, who knows, maybe they'd reclassify her. Lots of people had done it, we'd be surprised. Stop exaggerating, she said, there won't be a war between us and them, don't you see that we're working together, that we all want the best for Iris?

And so we left, despondent, and played Rock, Paper, Scissors to see who would tell Dad.

Dad's hospital room wasn't very nice, but it was no one's fault. He'd been convalescing for six months. In the beginning he'd been assigned a big, bright one; later, he'd had to make room for those who

had been wounded more recently in battle, which is how he ended up in this dark little corner by the physical therapy wing. When we arrived, the nurses had already gotten his suitcase together and he was ready to go. It was strange to see him, I still wasn't used to it. The doctors had done an incredible job with the reconstruction: the charred face I had seen after the explosion, the chest run through with metal and glass, the missing legs—they had all been replaced remarkably well, and standing before us was a being that looked a lot like Dad, though it wasn't entirely him.

Dad got out of his hospital bed and tried to walk over to us. His steady, energetic gait had been given way to a hesitant one, so we reached him first and gave him a hug. He looked at us, searching for a sign of hope that wasn't there, and his one immobile eye reminded me which side of his body the bomb had ravaged.

He asked about Mom and there were words he couldn't remember; others came out all guttural and we had trouble understanding him, which reminded me of a few things I had read in the report from the Reclassification committee. If there had been no neurological damage, the report had said, the reconstruction would have rendered him 34% artificial according to the algorithms, and Dad would still have been human. But the explosion had also charred parts of his brain, and his long-term memory had been affected, along with his ability to process language and communicate; those adjustments had brought his artificiality up to 48.7%. Dad could just as easily have been human. But in cases like this, right on the line between two fates, the committee had the power to play with the numbers, and after days of deliberation they decided that since his memory would get worse over time it was better to classify him as artificial. We complained, discussed the matter with lawyers, said that we could accept a scientific result but not a final decision in which the personal impressions of the committee added so much arbitrariness to Dad's fate. Another committee might have reached a different conclusion, might have said that he was human and that was it. Only one lawyer gave us hope. There's something there, he said, and added that we should find him when we left the hospital.

He would talk to the media and raise a scandal. Dad could still be human. But when I saw him in the hospital I wasn't so sure, anymore.

As I drove us home through a persistent rainstorm that flooded the streets, Dad asked if we'd heard anything from Mom, and Randal explained that we hadn't. Dad moved his head from side to side, as though he couldn't believe that she could have been heartless enough to leave him, to leave the city while he was still in the operating room. That gesture was a human response, a sign of vulnerability, I said to myself, but what did I know. Maybe it had been programmed; maybe, like they'd said, in his artificial state it was impossible for Dad to be hurt by Mom's desertion. I should be better informed.

All my anger was directed at Mom, who had abandoned us without even leaving a note. I wondered where she was. Fate would catch up with her and make her pay for not rising to the occasion. Dad said that he remembered Trinket, the childhood cat he hunted dragonflies in the garden with, and Panchito, a parrot who could swear in three languages. He remembered his parents, the grandparents I never knew, who were so dedicated to their work he barely even saw them on the weekend. He had grown up with a nanny, Nancy, who would talk about the Devil as though he were someone from the neighborhood. He wasn't one of those who had come to Iris because they'd run out of options; he was drawn to the adventure it promised. Some went to Buddhist monasteries at the foot of the Himalayas, others lived in eco-communities along the Amazon; he and his friends would go to Iris. What an extraordinary time, he said, his voice full of emotion, when adversity made us search out new horizons, leave the familiar behind, reinvent ourselves. When exploring made us what we were.

If you look at it that way, Randal said, wiping the fog from the window beside him with his hand, maybe you could explore your new being that way; that could be good.

It's different, said Dad, very different. Being artificial doesn't make you a new person. You're something else, you're on the other side.

That's not true, Dad, I said, remembering the words of the woman in the Reclassification building, they're on our side, we're fighting together.

I think you meant to say "you're" on our side, said Dad.

You and us, I repeated, but it sounded strange, forced. You'll always be one of us, Dad, I said, no matter what some committee says.

I stopped at a red light and noticed that Dad's eyes had welled up. He wasn't entirely artificial, I thought, at least not yet; he was still shaken by the trauma, though the doctor said that this would change over time. He went back to talking about Panchito and Trinket, he wanted to hold onto the things that had made him human, those things that reminded him best that he was who he was and not what some committee said. As the light turned green, I suddenly got the feeling that something was wrong. Dad had never mentioned Panchito or Trinket before, or any Nancy who'd told him about the Devil when he was a child. Or maybe everything was just as it was supposed to be. Yes, of course. They had rebuilt his memory, too.

The good thing about all this is that only those closest to us will know, I said that night as I brought him dinner in his room, and I tried to believe it because that was what I wanted: no way were my co-workers going to look at me like the daughter of, of who, of what, I didn't know anymore. The room seemed big, now that Mom was gone. He was in bed and tried to eat the soup without help, but he had trouble with it. He was going to need physical therapy every day; it would be a long recovery. That's right, only those closest to us, I said, there's no sign on your forehead that says you're an artificial. I tried to sound optimistic: if the others do find out, though, you'll have better job opportunities. I don't need a sign on my forehead, said Dad, for everyone to know what I know. He repeated the sentence, unsure that either of us had really understood it. His voice was thick, unnatural. It's a matter of intuition, he said. A few officials have fooled me at the Perimeter, sometimes I haven't been sure, but in general I know who is and who's not. I didn't say anything because I knew he was right. Maybe the decades of living side by side with machines had given us

a sixth sense, and even when they started to physically resemble us, something always gave them away. Or maybe not and I was being too sensitive, which is what I wanted to believe.

I kept him company in silence, a little uncomfortable at his clumsiness, surprised by how difficult an everyday activity could be, at least, for the moment. The doctor had said that he would be back to normal in a couple of months. A new normal, of course.

I couldn't sleep that night. At three in the morning I turned on the light in my room and the weight of what had happened came crashing down on me. I felt as though my heart had stopped.

I walked up and down the halls, as quietly as I could to avoid waking Randal, and wondered what had become of Mom, who couldn't bring herself to live with a man who wasn't her man anymore, a human who wasn't a human. In trying to understand her, I was able to stop hating her. This was hard on all of us.

I approached the door to Dad's room, which was ajar. One of his eyes was open, but he was fast asleep. I took three steps in, as though I were going to go over and hug him, but I stopped, not sure I was doing the right thing. The sound of crickets filtered through the window. I remembered a trip that Dad, Mom, Randal and I took to the black pine forest just outside town when I was seven. I was certain I hadn't made it up.

I started walking again, toward the side of his bed. He, who used to be such a light sleeper, didn't stir at all. Maybe it was the exhaustion of the past few days, or the painkillers. Or maybe he was just different.

That's what it was.

I couldn't hug him. Not that thing that looked like Dad but wasn't.

Maybe it was time for me to think about leaving, too.