

Cosmos Latinos

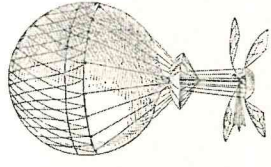
An Anthology of Science Fiction from Latin America and Spain

Translated, edited, &

with an introduction & notes

by Andrea L. Bell & Yolanda Molina-Gavilán

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The Yellow Wave Kenneth MacKay

To Chris and to all my family

To Massimo

—*Andrea Bell*

—*Yolanda Molina-Gavilán*

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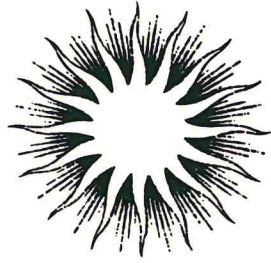
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Reaching the Shore

Llegar a la orilla, 1994

by Guillermo Lavín

translated by Rena Zuidema
and Andrea Bell

Don't ask for guarantees. And don't look to be saved in any one thing, person, machine, or library.

Do your own bit of saving, and if you drown, at least die knowing you were headed for shore.

—Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*

The laconic sound of the whistle split the air at exactly fifteen minutes before six P.M.

And a few moments later, as if the first were an order from the team captain, one and another and another and dozens of whistle blasts echoed through the city to tell some of the workers that their shift had ended, to alert the wives and children that their husbands and fathers would be arriving soon, and to announce to the other laborers that their shift was beginning.

But José Paul, standing in the doorway of his house, was interested only in the first sound that reached his ears. It seemed distinct, unique, as if in its journey through space the sound had been nourished by the swaying of the gilded tree boughs and by the breath of birds that had not yet abandoned the wintry city; by the melody of dry grass being stepped on by children's bare feet, and by the jingling of the bells that hung on most of the neighborhood houses' front doors. The other whistles constituted a jumbled multitude of laments.

The first one was the call.

A special call.

It was his papa's voice that cried out, "I'm coming home." And José Paul, hearing it, called out to his mother asking permission to go to the maquiladora to wait for his father. He didn't stop to hear her consent; he was already off, the thousand-meter distance fast disappearing. The boy

ran along the sidewalk, avoiding the cracks in the cement and kicking empty soda cans, while picturing his father's bouncing stride.

This was a special afternoon. The afternoon of December 24th. José Paul dreamed of waking on Christmas morning with a bicycle like that of Brian Jesús, his neighbor, with aerodynamic handlebars, high impact brakes, and side reflectors. The bicycle that he saw in his mind's eye faded away when he reached the factory.

The doors of the gate opened. The men came down the walkway toward it with a sense of urgency and fear, like prisoners set free after a long jail sentence. And the man with the bouncing stride, thickset and dark, stood out among the others. He was accompanied by various men, all in navy blue uniforms with the red emblem of a brain sewn on at chest level. The men stopped under the company sign: *SIMPSON BROS., INC., The Leisure Time Company*. They gestured animatedly. José Paul noticed the sore at the base of his father's skull and the partially singed hair around it. His father touched the burn with his index finger, as if wanting to make sure it was still there. His friends called him by his last name, Frago, since he never gave out his first name. One time, years ago, while he held his son on his lap, he had confessed that his name irritated him almost like an insult. His name was Teófilo José.

José Paul approached him. Frago tried to convince his buddy Isaias Ray to go have a beer with them to celebrate Christmas before they split up. The boy exchanged smiles with Don Luis Phillip, the old guard who monitored with extreme seriousness the comings and goings of the staff. The boy seemed to see a touch of sadness in the gaze the old man directed at him. He knit his brows, wondering what sadness could possibly bother a man as important as the guard who, in that vast domain, had the power to grant people entry and exit. A hand made of big, strong bones masked by cold, brittle skin played with his hair and distracted him from his thoughts. The boy was pleased that the guard caressed his head, since this gesture was usually accompanied by a candy. Quickly he caught the hand that was making small knots in his hair and squeezed it while raising his eyes. He poked between the stiff fingers and found, hidden in a fold of skin, the smoothness of the plastic-wrapped sweet. The old man lifted the boy up. Their faces were a few centimeters apart.

"What did you ask Santa Claus for?" asked the guard.

"A bicycle."

The old man's smile slowly melted. He put the boy down.

“I hope he brings it to you,” he said, his voice sounding like gravel, “they’re very expensive.”

The father’s voice reached them like an alarm clock. The group of workers was moving further down the street and Fragozo gestured for his son to follow them. José Paul drifted toward him. He stopped and looked back.

“Thank you,” he said in a low voice.

The old man heard the child’s words and responded to himself, “It’s expensive, but your father’s addiction is more expensive still.”

The boy studied Don Luis’s eyes. He didn’t understand that last part; the movement of the old man’s lips formed incomprehensible words. He decided it wasn’t very important, and went to catch up to the group of men who were now stopped at the corner, forming a line to watch a young woman who walked by with her gaze fixed straight ahead of her. He caught up with them there. He followed the men’s gaze and his eyes glided along the undulating curve of her smooth hips and the dark reflection of legs encased in pants that seemed fused to them. The color of the clothes changed constantly, like a kaleidoscope, and he liked that. A gust of cold wind raised a dust cloud; it crystallized in the men’s eyes and compelled them to move on.

They stopped before the sun finished setting.

The group of men climbed the three steps and entered the semi-deserted bar. It was a sparkling clean business, with an immaculate green metal revolving door. They pushed two tables together and the waiter quickly took their orders. The boy looked with pride at his father—who spoke as if he owned the place—and thought of the day when he would have the right to sit like that, with friends, to drink beer and not the orange soda the waiter put on the solitary table in front of him. The cashier pointed a remote control at the wall and the sounds of the big-screen TV filled the air. The men turned toward it and protested with jeers, shouts, and threats, until the cashier changed the channel; they told him they were tired of watching Christmas movies. They didn’t like the idea of watching the news either, so the racket continued while the screen skipped from channel to channel. Judith’s face and voice flooded the place with the ballad of Juan Cortina. The men returned to their beers and their conversation. The boy walked over to the counter and amused himself by leafing through the headlines of the magazines and newspapers.

“Papá!” he called.

The men fell silent. Teófilo José raised his eyebrows questioningly at his son.

“What’s an economic war?” asked the child.

The cause of all problems.” The paternal response elicited guffaws. The men settled back in their chairs and put their elbows on the tables.

“Papá!” he persisted, seated on a bench, though he knew that the seven men would now consider him a nuisance.

“What do you want?” he replied, aware of being the only one not looking at his son. “Think hard about what you’re going to say, because it’s the last question I’ll answer.”

“What’s an economic bloc?”

There was total silence for a few seconds.

“Can anyone,” Teófilo José’s voice pained him, “can anyone explain it to him?”

His buddy Isaiás Ray said that it was like a soccer game, in which each team is made up of various player/countries. “The team that sells something to the other one without buying anything wins,” he said to complete the illustration.

The men continued in silence. Teófilo José, sorrow weighing down his shoulders, took a big swig of beer and then got up and headed toward the bathroom.

“That Fragozo!” said John Arturo, wiping off the water drops that had formed on the beer can, “the company sure did screw him over.”

“I told him at the time, I told him not to let himself be a guinea pig,” put in Roger Fernando, “but he got mad at me. The thing is, you’re afraid,” he told me, ‘you don’t want to progress.’ And now you see. They got him hooked. I may be a stick in the mud, I answered him at the time, ‘but I won’t let them put cables in my head.’”

“Shut up already,” a murmur from Isaiás Ray stopped them, “the kid’s listening to you.”

Six pairs of eyes fell, with the harmony of a drunken symphony, on the figure of the eleven-year-old boy, who scratched with his tennis shoe at a piece of gum stuck on the floor. The brief and trembling sunlight that sketched rays on the floor ended its death throes. The men felt the uneasiness of an irrelative winter, of intermittent colds, a sickly winter. The boy thought that night would finally come, with Christmas dinner, the thrill of fireworks blooming in the night sky, and the joyful awakening to a brand-new bicycle. The spell was broken by the slamming of a door. His father exited the bathroom, zipping up his pants, but he

didn't return to the table; instead he passed by the front counter, lightly stroked his son's knee and went up a narrow, semihidden staircase to one side of the cash register. The boy interpreted the caress as a call. He followed his father. When he reached the last step, he found himself on a long balcony with a metal handrail on one side. A gust of frozen wind blasted his face with the force of a thousand icy needles. He adjusted his sweater and crossed his arms. From there he could see the Rio Bravo: a thin thread the color of dirt, as if coffee grounds ran in its great bed. José Paul remembered his teacher, who lamented that every year the river looked more like a dinosaur skeleton, that once it had been magnificent, but now was scarcely alive, for its flesh had deserted it. He could also see the city, Reynosa, that extended along the length of the river without growing in height: they didn't build tall buildings. On the other hand, the canals that scarred the city and the thin zigzag of the arteries from downtown contrasted with the wide, straight, equidistant streets of the new colonies created by the maquiladora companies for their employees, colonies of repeating lines of houses, identical for only the first days, when they were as yet uninhabited by the laborers and their numerous families.

A loud noise startled him. It came from the office whose door was at the end of the hallway; there was a big half-open window, and the boy approached it. Standing on tiptoes on the top of the baseboard, he took hold of the windowsill. He looked in between the slats of the red Venetian blinds and saw a spacious room with a polished wood floor, empty except for the white metal desk and the crystal chandelier that hung from the ceiling. His father, standing in front of the desk, rested his fists on the metal and looked with hatred at the small, dark, skinny guy who smiled and opened his hands like a peaceful and tolerant Christian. Teófilo's voice was hushed. He said it was unfair to pay a thousand dollars for an unguaranteed Taiwanese chip of the lowest quality, and he protested that his previous purchases had had defects. "They don't last, they short out, they shock you, they burn," he reiterated before the calm gaze of the man who, for his part, explained the risks of dealing with countries from an enemy trade bloc.

"In any case, buy American. They say the Simpson Dream III turned out very good."

"As if I didn't know, I was the tester," he said, and as he talked he passed his index finger over the burn that crowned the bioplastic interface, "but they cost a fortune."

Instinctively, the boy stroked the nape of his neck and remembered the morning the principal of the school came to his classroom accompanied by an engineer and a nurse. They announced that they were living a historic day, since they were going to implant the most modern and sophisticated North American technology ever: a personalized bioconnector that went into the base of the cranium. Terror set the children's imaginations on fire, except for Paul, who remembered having always seen something like that in his father's head. The principal asked for a volunteer. Paul stood up. Half an hour later, the boy was enjoying neural teaching, and learned in seconds what before had taken many boring hours.

His foot slipped on the baseboard; his frightened heart skipped a beat. Inside the room, the dialogue continued between the irredeemable buyer and the inflexible seller. The first asked for credit, installment plans, a discount; the other responded no. The first felt the little box that sheltered the interface; the second caressed his own cheeks. Teófilo José shook his head from side to side while he took an olive green envelope from a bag he had in his pants and extracted a wad of green bills. He counted out the amount of dollars he needed. He handed them over to the guy. The boy saw his father store in one bag the packet with the chip and in another the remaining few bills and turn toward the door without saying goodbye to the salesman. The boy, immobile, watched his father pass by wearing a threatening frown and talking with a phantom interlocutor. He went down the stairs behind him, followed him when he bid farewell to his friends with a wave and a brief exchange, and caught up to him in the street, hoping for a few words. Before entering their house, he saw him furiously punch the red stop sign.

Before dinner, José Paul went to the bathroom wanting to relieve himself, but held it to avoid announcing his presence, for through the small patio window next to his parents' bedroom window he could hear his mother's voice, warm and sad:

"Well, *viejito*, what's done is done. I hope now it will last you. Besides, it's not your fault you're addicted. Although I still insist that the company should pay for these costs, they're the one's responsible, they got you into this."

"Please, Mercedes, don't keep saying that. From the very beginning, from the moment I signed the papers making myself responsible, I was screwed. The union already said that they can't help me . . . that I ac-

cepted the risks, that they've had no prior case of the pleasure chip causing addiction, his voice wove sadness with hatred, and seemed to dilute in the salt water of tears. "In the end, my weakness got the best of me; once again I bought a shitty import."

A thudding noise that sounded to Paul as if the closet door had been punched reminded him of his need to pee: he crouched in front of the toilet and concentrated on not making any noise. He suspended the operation when, among his parents' words, he caught some reference to Christmas presents. Afterward there was silence.

Then the silence was broken by two strong knocks on the bathroom door and his father's voice asking him to hurry. The boy zipped up his fly, his hand getting splashed a little, and opened the door. As he exited, it seemed to him that tiny red veins had been installed in his father's eyes and that his eyelids formed little dark bags; he felt sorry for him and ashamed of himself, since he thought for a second that his father had caught him eavesdropping.

The hours elapsed as if an infinite train were passing before the boy's eyes as, seated on the porch steps, he awaited his mother's shout calling him to dinner. From there he saw Clementina, his older sister, arrive: pants tight and cheeks aflame, she said goodbye to a jovial and talkative young man. She ruffled the boy's hair as she passed him. Alone once more, Paul reflected sadly that his sister had shown up without any presents. A flower of fire in the sky made his heart tremble. It was time for the fireworks. The time when people came out of their houses and hugged each other and contemplated the gift that the municipal government gave the city in the form of fleeting, dazzling signs, simulated stars, ringlets of burning colors. And there he found, drawn in the sky, a diffuse moment of freedom and pleasure that seemed to grow and burst in his own chest. Alone, with his arms open wide, he bathed in the halos of illusory fire, until reality reimposed itself with a shout and the hiss of steam that escaped from the pot of tamales someone had uncovered.

At the silent table Paul concentrated on eating, breathing in the smell of the freshly seasoned beans and chewing softly to prolong the taste of the sugar tamales. The north wind picked up then. A blast of wintry air, carrying a load of sand, pricked the boy's arms. His mother got up quickly to close the dining room window, while asking her children to put on sweaters. Fragozo seemed unaware of everything. He appeared upset about something. He ate quickly, voraciously, and without raising his eyes.

Dinnertime ended.

Fragoso pounded his chest three times with the palm of his hand to force a prolonged belch, and stood up. Without looking at anyone, his eyes lost as if focused deep within himself, he went into his bedroom, followed by the sadness of his family, from whom sprung a collective sense of defeat. Paul, leaning on the closed window, heard his father's moan of pleasure: "He's already connected himself to the dreamer," he thought. His mother permitted herself a grimace while looking at Clementina, who whispered a prayer, picked up the dirty plates, quickly took them to the kitchen sink and returned with a rag to wipe up the crumbs and clean the grease-splattered table.

The Christmas tree blinked in the corner.

At its base lay the empty boxes, useless, wrapped like presents, covered with ocher-colored mold.

"It's time to go to bed," Mercedes said to her children.

"We'll clean the house tomorrow," she added, seeing that her daughter kept working in the kitchen, "it's late and the baby Jesus needs peace to be born again."

So as not to sleep, José Paul counted the wheezes and snores, the pauses and hitches, and listened to the in-and-out of Clementina's breathing. Every time he half-closed his eyes the gold-colored bicycle appeared, equipped with a plastic simulated engine, and drowsiness invaded him.

The lights were out and the house was still. He went out into the hallway. The desire to laugh overpowered the silence while he taped one end of a string to the wall. Then he went back to bed and tied the other end to his wrist. In spite of his efforts to evade slumber, at some point his mind wandered beyond his will and he fell asleep.

That's why he was so startled to feel the tug of the string on his wrist. He laid still, with his eyes closed, pretending to be sound asleep. But no one approached except the rustle of clothes, bare feet in the hallway, and a faint and peaceful voice that he recognized by its maternal tone. A little later the nocturnal serenity returned and José Paul, guided by the blinking lights of the Christmas tree, surveyed the living room. At the base of the tree sparkled a little red box with his name on it. He opened it.

Minutes later, the boy was seated on the edge of his bed. He caressed the new quartz watch. He thought of the useless letter written to Santa Claus a couple of weeks earlier. In it was deposited the yearning of months. Maybe years. A new, modern bicycle, not like the one that lay

discarded on the back porch and that his father had bought four years ago second- (or third-?) hand. Neither new paint nor the oiled spokes nor the covered seat had made it look new.

He stopped thinking about the watch upon opening the window and breathing in the wind blowing from the north, a wind that increased in intensity, burdened with the minuscule grains of cold that it brought from the North Pole. He felt his cheeks turn pale as he went out onto the patio and quietly half-closed the kitchen door, taking care that the latch didn't fall. By the time he'd picked up the old bicycle, he'd already made a decision; he was sure that the only way to get the new bicycle was to do it himself. He remembered how his father had come charging out of his bedroom a few days ago with a grin of terror on his face and the base of his neck smoking, remembered the singed hair and the smell of burnt skin. Once again the treacherous chip had melted in his neck. The burns in his skin were what seemed the most grotesque, the most detestable to everyone else. But, according to Frago, if he cried out like a madman each time the crisis came upon him it was because he really was dying. If he ran from the bedroom with his eyes popping out of their sockets, bawling like a steer in the slaughterhouse, and if later he laughed with the rapture of a child, it was because of the irresistible pain that penetrated his head, the terrible imaginings that plunged him into death.

He thought of this while he pedaled, while he listened to the noise of cars that were celebrating the night that only comes once a year. He rode past the front porches of houses where the lights and the shouting echoed the public rejoicing, and he crossed street corners of resigned symmetry. A little way further his objective appeared.

A tall gate.

A concrete wall.

In the center, a building whose map was lodged in his memory, in spite of the fact he'd only been inside once before, clinging to his father's hand on Children's Day.

"I work here," his father had told him. "The chips are placed in these boxes and then they pass through on those rollers to the packaging department, over there."

He leaned the bicycle against the wall. Standing on top of it, he grasped the edge of the wall and climbed up in a flash, boosted by the fear of feeling a noose snare his ankle. The inner patio was dark, silent, solitary. Just gray pavement that reflected a ray of moonlight in its center. He seemed to see a light filtered through the window of the guard-

house. He ordered his imagination not to think of bizarre enemies, of slimy worms that might be crawling on the ground, of hooks that could get tangled up in his hair.

And he jumped.

He didn't stop to think.

He ran toward the building, his body hunched over, his arms folded against his chest, thinking that this way he would be a smaller object, less noisy, unimportant. And then he circled the building, hugging the walls until he found a window. He tried to open it. He used all his strength, he concentrated, he felt like the veins in his neck and arms were going to burst, but he couldn't do it. In his head he told himself no, he would not be a failure, surely he would find something on the ground with which to break the glass, maybe a rock. On all fours and with half-closed eyes he began to comb the ground. Gradually he approached the area of the parking garage, where a privet hedge grew whose leaves gave form to the company's logo. He walked between the distribution trucks, peering into the cabs and trying the handles. He tried to open the trailers and crawled under the chassis.

Nothing.

No iron or forgotten screwdrivers, not even a bolt.

He retraced his steps and sank down next to the thunder tree. He sat down on something hard that made him cry out. He felt around in the grass surrounding the tree and found a metal bar. The happiness of finding it stopped him from noticing the smell of burnt tobacco that floated in the air.

He placed the bar in the window and hung from it to lever it open. The creak of the metal sounded like a drum beat in a funeral march. José Paul didn't notice. He disappeared into the opening.

A few minutes later his figure reappeared in the window.

He jumped to the ground.

He ran toward the wall with the wind against him, with the air cold on his hot sweat, with fear that a hand would descend on his shoulder with the strength of an eagle's talon. As soon as he reached the wall he realized he wouldn't be able to climb it. He hadn't anticipated that when he left his house. Distress wove up his throat like a spiderweb, choking him. He walked quickly toward the gate, hoping to find something that would help him escape. It looked like the gate might be ajar. For a few instants he watched the guardhouse. It remained dark and silent. He warily approached. He slowly opened the gate. Paul felt a terrible, tremen-

dous dryness in his mouth and throat as he exited the grounds and pulled the gate back as he had found it. He thrust his hand into his pocket to make sure the chip was still there. And he got on the bicycle and rode back home, without even suspecting that behind him, in the guardhouse, a cigarette was being relit and a hoarse, sad, loving voice was wishing him luck.

Even though the sun shone brilliantly and the people radiated smiles, nothing could compete with the happy face of José Paul, who pedaled with the strength of the tide. With each puff of wind the boy felt that a murmur of voices congratulated him, that his new bicycle provoked the envy of his neighbors, and that with it he could journey far beyond the Rio Bravo, he could leave Reynosa and travel along the riverbanks, along the toll road and the forgotten paths and across bridges. And no sooner had he so decided than he was on his way, racing along a footpath, traveling faster than the greenish current flowing at his side. The road was of soft earth, as if he were riding across a sponge and the wind were pushing him toward his destination. Thousands of summer butterflies molded their colors onto the bike and the boy's clothes, he felt them like rain, like a new gift from heaven. With them he seemed at times to fly on a cloud above small, green hills.

He heard a shout.

A far-off sound.

A sound that formed his name and repeated itself.

José Paul labored to open his eyes. His mother looked at him from his bedroom door.

"Aren't you going to get up?" she repeated. "Your father wants us to have breakfast together."

My father, thought the boy.

"Yes," he responded. "I'm coming."

As soon as his mother withdrew, José Paul raised his hand to his neck and unplugged the chip. He was silent for a few minutes, thinking that if he gave the chip to his father he would become furious about the theft, and instead of thanking him for his efforts, would surely punish him. As he swung his feet onto the cold floor, he felt a pain he hadn't noticed before, something like a whirlwind in the pit of his stomach.

"I really have to think it over," he said to himself, "I'll have to think it over."

Elia Barceló

S P A I N

Elia Barceló (1957–) was born in Alicante, Spain, and now lives in Austria, where she teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Innsbruck. She published her first science fiction story when she was twenty. Since then, Barceló has been a devoted writer of fantasy and SF, although she is also attracted by other modes of writing that concentrate on the extraordinary, such as the terror and detective genres. Barceló won the *Ignotus* award in 1991 and has been nominated for it on four other occasions. About thirty of her stories have been published in Spain and in several European and Latin American countries; some of them have been anthologized and others have been translated into French, Italian, and Esperanto. Her three SF novels to date are *Sacred* (Sagrada, 1989); *Yarek's World* (*El mundo de Yarek*, 1994); and *Natural Consequences* (*Consecuencias naturales*, 1994.)

In 1993 Barceló began editing *Our Own Visions* (*Visiones propias*), an annual anthology dedicated to new fantastic writing. She has also published a scholarly monograph on Cortázar entitled *An Uneasy Familiarity: Terror Archetypes in Julio Cortázar's Fantastic Short Stories* (*La inquietante familiaridad: Los arquetipos del terror en los cuentos fantásticos de Julio Cortázar*), and has collaborated occasionally with the Spanish journal *El País* and the magazine *Ciberp@ís*. Recently, Barceló has started writing detective novels and novels for young readers, since she firmly believes in the power of literature to spiritually nourish children and adolescents on to adulthood.¹ Two of these novels have been published so far: *The Case of the Cruel Artist* (*El caso del artista cruel*, 1998) and *Fatma's Hand* (*La mano de Fatma*, 2001).

In the line of "dangerous vision stories," "First Time" presents an apparently happy and supercivilized Europe where a new influx of immigrants (the *oris*, translated here as *formers*) act as paid slaves and are considered subhuman. Barceló's technique of using a young girl as a barely literate narrator clearly shows how young people's moral education has degenerated to a point that torturing and killing "formers" is considered little more than a mild transgression, a