



# Latin American Literary Review

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## "Barrio Boston" and "Earth Day"

Scott Ruescher

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:** My involvements in Latin American communities—including residence in a Latino neighborhood of Boston in the 1970s, volunteer literacy work in a bilingual school in Cambridge, and now volunteer publicity work for The Neighborhood Developers, an affordable-housing nonprofit on the "near North Shore" of Boston—have been interspersed with vacation travels and service trips to Mexico, Puerto Rico, the Northern Triangle, and South America. The two poems that appear in this issue of *LALR*—one set in Colombia, one set in a Boston barrio—represent both kinds of involvement and two stylistic approaches to the salvaging of my experiences in poems.

**ABSTRACT:** One related poem in my 2017 collection of poems, *Waiting for the Light to Change*, won the Erica Mumford Prize from the New England Poetry Club for poetry about travel and international culture; another appeared in an arts-education issue of the *Harvard Educational Review*; others were published in *Chautauqua*, *The Common Ground Review*, and *Pangyrus*; and one more appears in *Borders to Bridges*, a collection of arts-based curricula for K-12 teachers, edited by Lynn Ditchfield.

### *Barrio Boston*

Halfway back to the home of Néstor and Consuelo  
On Eighteenth Street, *Calle Diez y Ocho*, among  
The street-corner *arepa* stands, the stacked rowhouses,  
And the storefront *panaderías* of Barrio San Luís,  
I'd reached that stretch of road where the numerous *motos*,  
Rattling diesel trucks, frequent local buses, and dozens  
Of dented yellow taxis with more efficient engines  
All blow blue smoke into the otherwise fragrant  
Andean mountain air. In the seismic city of Pereira,  
On the slopes of Nevado del Ruiz, in the dramatic  
*Eje cafetero*, the "coffee axis" of Colombia,  
In the volcanic agricultural region in the central  
Cordillera, I was almost as far as that dilapidated,  
Drab, cement-block convenience store  
Called, to my New Englander's surprise, *Kiosko Boston*,  
Near a picturesque warren of ramshackle shelters  
On the bank of a raunchy *barranco* below, a rank  
Residential ravine like those I'd seen in Guatemala,  
Where people prop their corrugated roofing sheets  
Of fiberglass up with walls of sticks and blocks.  
And I was glancing around with the same curiosity  
As that of the seven or eight dusty yellow canaries  
That had just landed in the diamond-shaped gaps  
Of a chain-link fence protecting a precious lot of rubble,  
Near a mango tree that was defying all convention  
By bearing fruit in spite of all the contamination,  
When I saw him up ahead, a man I swore I'd seen  
On those same streets of Guatemala before, if not on those  
Of Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Mexico, and El Salvador.

Scrawny and scrappy, in synthetic work clothes that looked  
Like part of his actual body, a bronzed brown blur  
Of sensuous creases and folds, he had risen from the ground  
With an enormous bouquet of tropical flowers held  
Like a rifle on his shoulder. I saw assorted species  
Of bromeliad and heliconia. There was a bird of paradise  
With orange petals flaming from the red and gold sepals  
Like candlesticks on the pole of an acolyte's torch  
Along the three green branches that extended from the stalk.  
In a hurry to get back, I wouldn't have broken stride  
If I hadn't noticed that he had knocked to the ground  
The ballcap he wore to keep the sun out of his eyes  
On his way back up from kneeling down to tie his shoes,  
From buckling a notch or two tighter the belt he used  
To keep his trousers from falling without warning  
To his ankles, from wiping his brow, and from taking a sip  
Of water from a Fanta bottle. I would have kept going  
Like the dusty-yellow canaries that just then took flight.

Without hesitation, moving into action, surrendering  
To it even, as if choreographed, programmed,  
And destined to do it, as if born to lend a hand  
To this inconspicuous man, I took the steps necessary  
In his direction. I knelt to retrieve the cap, that is,  
That had landed with an almost visible sound  
On the peripheral ground, in three descending steps  
Bending into a crouch in the brown powdered dust  
Between a red candy wrapper and a gold lottery ticket  
That some poor working stiff who dreamt of quitting  
His job stocking shelves at the *supermercado*

And buying a *finca* near the hot-spring *termales*  
 Above the nearby pueblo of Santa Rosa had discarded.  
 Grabbing the hat by the bill, I followed through  
 On the exhale, as if working through an *asana*  
 In a yoga class back home, rising from the same crouch  
 That he had just arisen from, swiveling my head  
 In its own tight ballcap, looking up and into the umber  
 Features of his gaunt face, into his caramel-colored eyes  
 And his thin, toothless grin, and handing it to him  
 With a ceremonious smile, that hat mass-produced  
 In China, Ghana, India, Brazil, or Vietnam,  
 And monogrammed with the logo, a jaguar or a puma,  
 Of some dumb conglomerate, like Dow or Monsanto,  
 That sells pesticides and disease-resistant seeds  
 To flower farms and coffee plantations in the fertile valley  
 Around the volcano, in doing so clarifying for now  
 With unconditional love my confusion about the world.

When he nodded *Gracias* and went on his way  
 Up the busy thoroughfare, between the mall on his left  
 And the depot on his right, toward the hilltop *centro*,  
 I just stood there, certain that he could sell those flowers,  
 Scavenged from the compost heap of some big *vivera*  
 Behind the long greenhouses on the outskirts of the city,  
 If not at high-end prices to well-dressed designers  
 At air-conditioned warehouses near the airport  
 Who'd trim their stalky stems and steep them with ferns  
 In deep glass vases, for placement on the steps  
 Of elegant public spaces, in the vaulted lobbies  
 Of restaurants and banks, department stores and malls,  
 Then for next to nothing to a housekeeping woman  
 From a barrio better than *Boston* on the outskirts of town  
 On her way back, say, to the bus stop with her bags  
 Looking for something to brighten up the foyer  
 Or the kitchen table, at the end of her daily marketing.

## Earth Day

Now that we'd dug a hole deep enough for the root ball  
 Of the hawthorn tree that would fill it; now that the two nice guys  
 In the big orange Department of Public Works pick-up truck  
 Had shoveled compost into it; now that we'd helped  
 The arborist place the tree upright in the hole like a flag; and now  
 That we'd finished spreading compost around the base of it  
 And he was leaning on his rake with a smile on his handsome face—

It was a pleasure, in that residential block of Highland Street  
 Between Maverick and Central Streets on Bellingham Hill  
 In Chelsea, overlooking Eagle Hill and Logan International  
 Airport in East Boston, across the mouths of the Mystic River  
 And Chelsea Creek in Boston Harbor, right precisely there,  
 Between the gray granite curb and a mortared stone wall  
 In front of a house with a cement stoop and vinyl siding,

To hear Eric, the gentle, young, and good-looking arborist  
 From the Greening the Gateway Cities division  
 Of the Department of Resource Conservation in Boston,  
 Furrowing his brow and frowning with feigned embarrassment,  
 Explain to a curious teenager there with her classmates  
 From a task force on environmental justice at the nonprofit,  
*La Colaborativa*, that was instrumental in keeping the community

Of Chelsea fed and vaccinated throughout the pandemic,  
 In response to her question about the gender of the tree,  
 That, come to think of it, he couldn't actually remember offhand  
 Whether hawthorns like this, famous for their fragrant flowers,  
 Were monoecious, gender-specific, binary trees that exist  
 As sexual complements, "and by complements," he said,  
 "I mean symbiotic opposites, not flattering remarks spelled

With an *i*," that depend, for reproductive success,  
 On butterflies and bees to deliver the fertile pollen in summer  
 From the ovulating flower of a tree of the opposite gender,  
 Or whether they're dioecious, hermaphroditic trees instead  
 With bisexual flowers, and therefore can be considered,  
 As another teenager huddled around the tree well with Eric  
 And her classmates pointed out—all of them the children

Of refugees who fled the endemic poverty and gang violence  
 In the conservative Catholic and evangelical-Christian countries  
 Of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, in the Northern Triangle—  
 Code-switching from accented English to colloquial Spanish  
 And hip-hop Spanglish in her one remarkable, multivalent sentence,  
 With her reddish-brown skin, her jet-black hair, her cool sneakers,  
 And her silkscreened t-shirt, as models of a gender identity,

Fluid and nonbinary and confusing to the conventional  
Hetero-normative values, that a surprising number of people  
Have recently been experimenting with, even here in Chelsea,  
Where a woman named Peg, who'd crossed the Tobin Bridge with friends  
From a task force on poverty at the Church of the Covenant  
In the exclusive Back Bay, to the delight of everyone there  
Confirmed on her phone that the hawthorn is, indeed, a nonbinary tree.