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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 Luis,
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,
“as another teenager huddled around the tree well with Eric
And her classmates pointed out—all of them the children

With an 𝖬̃,” 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.