LALR

Latin American Literary Review

VOLUME 49 / NUMBER 99 FALL 2022

ARTICLES:

CREATIVE:

REVIEWS:

Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University
Ithaca, NY 14853
607-255-4155
E-mail: latamlitrevpress@gmail.com
Website: www.lalrp.net

LALR **Latin American Literary Review**
Volume 49 / Number 99 Fall 2022
Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell University • Ithaca, NY 14853 • 607-255-4155
E-mail: latamlitrevpress@gmail.com • Website: www.lalrp.net

Darkest Before Dawn

Paul Evaristo García

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Paul Evaristo García's stories have appeared in *Crosscut, North American Review, S N Review, Horizontes, Overtime Review, Euphony Journal, Broadkill Review and other publications.*

I came to the United States with my brothers Ramón and Filadelfo when I was fourteen. My name's Alejandro, but everyone calls me Ali. Our Guatemala village is many hours from Tuxtla by car. People are poor there in a way that's hard to understand here, where everything is big—the cars, the meals, the houses, even the people! I left school in third grade to work our field of beans, tomato, corn, squash, chilies... In my prayers, I didn't pester God too much for favors, just asked Him to take care of my parents. Sometimes people go without a doctor and die for no reason other than poverty. I thought of our mother and father when Ramón said, "Listen, Ali Baba, Filadelfo and I are going north, to work. Do you want to cross the border with us?"

The harvest was in, the sooner we left, the sooner we could help. I said, "Yes."

Filadelfo, always the serious one, said, "It will be dangerous, you know."

I nodded yes. I would have followed my brothers to the ends of the earth—not for being the youngest, but to help protect them. Ramón and Filadelfo are very different. Ramón is a joker; his wisecracks can lighten a tough situation. Filadelfo is hard, physically strong. Because he can fight, his nickname is *El Perro*. He's uncompromising, stubborn; he latches onto something till its end. Filadelfo is the one I worried would need protection.

The village raised a few *quetzales* for us. Padre Eusebio heard our confessions and gave his blessing. We got a ride to the Mexican border. They say the guards there are cruel. I've heard they'll take your money, beat you up, and send you back across. It's even said that they've murdered people. So, I was scared. Thank God, they were busy with a livestock truck and let us pass without inspection. Our bus trip across Mexico, south to north, from San Cristóbal to Nogales took twenty-six hours. There, we rented a tiny room. Nogales was a big city to *campesinos* like us. The very next day, I got lost. A group of eight people from Honduras said they had a way across the border. They were two families, with mothers and kids, even. I went with them to see where the crossing was, figuring I'd return to find my brothers and tell them. At dusk, we crossed the river and walked, walked, walked. That night, it rained, but heavy! The water rose to my knees, hips, chest. All night! How dark it was! And the water rising. There were two little girls in the group about three years old. We took turns carrying them, to keep them from being carried away by the water. I found a post to stand on. The water was to my chest that night. No sleep all that night. In the morning, some of the people were gone. The little girls, too. It was cold, but in daylight at least I could see. It was desert. I did not know people drown in the desert. I slept, woke up alone then walked another day. When the American border guards found me, I was afraid. They had big guns. They asked in Spanish where I was from.

"Nogales."

The one who looked Mexican, said, "You don't sound Mexican." I said nothing. He had a lot of muscles. I didn't want to get beat up. They tied my wrists with a plastic cord, gave me food from McDonald's, then asked me more questions and had me sign papers saying who-knows-what. The next day, they drove a busload of us *indocumentados* to the border in Nogales. You know, they didn't treat us so badly.

I found the room I shared with my brothers. They were gone, but a man there said they went to see a *coyote*. I waited for their return. We were happy to see each other again. I told them about the night in the rain. Filadelfo said, "You were lucky." He paused, then said, "We talked with a coyote today. Ten thousand pesos to cross, and two thousand more on the other side. We could never pay what they want. Maybe your way is better."

Ramón said, "We *are* wasting time and money here. We could go to an isolated crossing and take our chances in the desert."

And we left.

I thought about rain, but said nothing. I was afraid of the water after the last time, but I followed them into the river. Ramón, the tallest, could carry his bag above his head, though the current pushed him downstream. Filadelfo was a strong swimmer, even in his clothes, so he crossed first. The thing was, we could see where we wanted to go, but the water carried us away. Especially me. It was over my head. I swam as best I could, then just tread water. My brothers called to me, to swim for the bank. I tried. I was carried out of their sight, beyond their yells. Then, I caught a tree branch and pulled myself onto the United States side. I collapsed on the wonderful, sweet earth and caught my breath, then walked along the riverbank until I saw my brothers approaching. Ramón called out, "Filadelfo! Is that a water rat?"

Filadelfo said, "We're *all* wet rats. Let's hide in the bushes and dry off."

Fences, fences, fences. As far as you could see. I followed my brothers over the fence. We walked north all that day. It was desert. That night we drank and slept at a place with water for cattle. In the morning, we filled three plastic milk jugs we found, and walked north. Around midmorning, we met four Mexicans from Chiapas. They were going north, also. They gave each of us a tortilla. We were so hungry we became their friends, like dogs that follow you home. One of them had been in the United States before. He had cut lettuce in California. I asked him a million questions about work. He told me about his experiences. "In California, the field workers are all *latinos*."

"Is there work for everyone?"

"Work for everyone? Even grandparents and the smallest children work in the fields."

"So they are big fields then?"

He laughed. "Lettuce from here to the horizon. Big? Bigger than Guatemala."

"It will not be hard to get work?"

He grew serious. "Don't even *think* about work until we get through this desert and away from the border."

I said, "What do we do if we see border guards?"

"Run. Don't stop. Even if they shoot, because they'll fire into the air, or just aim for your legs."

Well, it didn't work out that way. No matter what we think will happen, God has His plan. That night, the *chiapeños* shared the last of their food. We all drank the last of our water. After that, how many days we walked, I'm not sure. Filadelfo, Ramón and I stayed together, even when we couldn't walk, then we sat on the ground, to rest. Our lips were swollen, cracked, our mouths foaming. It was hard to see, and to think, like being asleep. But my brothers were with me. Ramón said, "I'm going to hold onto you, so we all go to heaven together."

I wondered if I'd be going to heaven or hell. I knew Ramón would need help pulling Filadelfo up there. That's the way I was thinking, like a dream.

Then the ground was shaking. Or the wind was shaking it. How could wind shake the earth? I heard an angel's voice. "*¿Cómo 'tán?*"

I wanted to say *bien*, but I couldn't talk. Filadelfo gasped, "*Que le dé agua al bebé.*"

The angel sat us up with our backs together like those three-headed gods. *Heaven is Hindu*, I thought. Then he gave us plastic bottles of water. I felt my thick blood flowing again. Seeing was like looking through a tube. I could make out a one-man helicopter close by. He wasn't an angel. We were not in heaven. He was the Border Patrol.

The agent told us, "*Hay gente en camino. Que no se vayan pa' ningún la'o.*"

Like looking through a submarine's periscope, I turned my head to follow the horizon. There was nothing. Where *could* we go?

Ramón asked, "*¿De ónde es usté? ¿Dónde estamos?*"

The man laughed. "*Portorriqueño. 'tán en los Estados Unidos.*"

That *really* confused Ramón.

And he flew off. Ever since I have loved Puerto Ricans and think of them as angels.

We sat there, drinking delicious water. What joy! Before long, I felt my skin covered in sweat. My eyesight returned to normal, and I could speak. I asked Filadelfo, "What do you mean 'Give the baby a drink of water'?"

He pretended he didn't know what I was talking about. "You're delirious."

Ramón had trouble sitting up. We took turns holding his water bottle up to his mouth.

Two Border Patrol agents came in a pickup truck. Ramón was the weakest, so he rode in the cab with them. I had been through this before, so when they put us in a jail cell I told my brothers, "They are going to ask us questions and fill out papers. Then they will bring us food from McDonald's."

"Food from McDonald's?"

"Yes, from McDonald's. Then they will want us to sign the papers. After that, they will drive us in a bus back to the border."

And that was what happened.

Back in Nogales, we grew desperate. Filadelfo said, "We can't get lost in the crowd of day workers going from Sonora to Arizona each morning."

I said, "No. They're going to get to know us, especially me."

Ramón had learned about *micas*. "For twenty dollars each. They even have your photograph right on them."

I was skeptical. "Do they work?"

Filadelfo said, "Take us to them. If these *chueca* cards didn't work, they couldn't stay in business. Let's find them before *la migra* does."

So, two Americans in their twenties took our pictures. One had long blond hair in a ponytail halfway down his back. The other was a black man with an earring like a pirate. I couldn't help staring at them. In broken Spanish, they told us there was plenty of farm work on the other side; '*Muchou trebajou*', they kept saying.

The next day we got our I.D. cards. It felt strange to have a new name. Filadelfo didn't like his age. "Who is going to believe that I am a thirty-four-year-old man? Twenty dollars for *this*?"

I calmed him down. Ramón gave the Americans sixty dollars. From there, we walked across just by showing a card. I told Filadelfo, "If there's a problem, don't fight with the border guards; they have a Mexican who is covered with muscles."

Filadelfo said nothing. Ramón said, "Bah! Filadelfo would fold him up like a taco!"

We laughed, happy to be in the United States. We found a trailer to sleep in the first night. I could hear trains not far off. They ran all night. In the morning, we were on our way to eat at a house selling cheap Mexican meals when two Border Patrol vans sped by. One stopped in front of the house, the other behind. Agents jumped out

of the vans. We stopped walking. People began running in all directions. We ran away from the agents' vans. I repeated to my brothers what the Chiapas Indian told me, "Run. Don't stop. Even if they shoot, because they'll fire into the air, or just aim for your legs."

An agent shouted, "*¡Alto!*"

We ran across the tracks. I remembered the *chiapeño*'s words. *Get through this desert and away from the border.* A train was coming, but fast! I was expecting to hear a gunshot and when the train blew its horn I almost wet my pants. We crossed in front of the train. It ran between us and the Border Patrol agents. Filadelfo shouted, "We have to get on this train!"

It was a long line of freight cars. Ramón ran with it and got on first. He called to us, "Run! *Run!*"

Filadelfo ran next to the freight cars and grabbed onto a ladder as it passed. The train was speeding up. My brothers' voices, smaller, called to me. "Grab the ladder! Ali! Now or never! Get on the train!"

The freight cars became flatbeds of new autos. I ran on the ties, tried to keep up. The train was coming fast. I grabbed the ladder. It almost pulled my arms off, but I didn't let go. I was on. We were together, still.

My brothers worked their way back from car to car. They found me sitting on the bottom rung, hugging the ladder. My arm hurt. Ramón said, "Ali! I was worried we'd have to jump off!"

Filadelfo was serious, sharp-eyed. "What's the matter?"

I shrugged. They saw I was hurt. The flatbed we rode on carried brand new Japanese cars. Filadelfo tried the door of one. It opened. We got in. Keys hung from the ignition. The train picked up speed and ran all day. We listened to *tejano* and mariachi stations on the radio. I lay on the bench seat in back. The train's rocking motion, softened by the new car's suspension, rocked me to sleep. I dropped into dreams before dusk.

At dawn, the car's horn honked. My brothers were in the front seat looking at me. Filadelfo said, "Shhh, you'll wake the baby."

Ramón, in the driver's seat, grinned. "I'm tired of driving. We should stop and eat."

Filadelfo studied me soberly. "Ali, the train is slowing. We're coming to a town."

I rubbed my eyes and got up to look out the window. It was a big city of brick buildings. The train made its way ever slower. Filadelfo observed me with concern. "How are you?"

That made up for calling me 'the baby'. My arms didn't hurt as much. "Better," I said.

"Sleep is good medicine."

Ramón asked, "Well, are we ready to get off the train?"

Filadelfo said, "We have to eat."

I said, "And we have to work."

They exchanged a glance. I saw they were glad to hear me say that.

Our long line of freight cars slowed and slowed, then finally stalled with echoing, squealing clanks. We jumped off. We had all heard of Las Vegas, the city of gambling, of bright neon lights. There was no railroad station, just a hotel casino downtown. When we heard some people speaking Spanish, we asked where we could find work. They looked at us suspiciously. "¿De *dónde son?*"

"De Guatemala."

They raised their arms to point toward what they called '*el estríp*', where the big hotels were. The third hotel hired the three of us. A big building, with a thousand rooms, it was like a city, an indoor city. We started work right away. They broke us up to follow and learn from experienced workers, my brothers to housekeeping, to clean and stock rooms with towels, and make beds. I went to the kitchen with a Mexican kid named Cheo. He was only a little older, but very different. I felt slow and clumsy, like a hick, a country bumpkin around him. He'd been working there a few years, really knew his way around. And everybody knew him. Everywhere we went, the others greeted him by name. He introduced me, "New guy. His name is Ali."

By the end of the day I was exhausted and confused from all the English. Most of the workers spoke Spanish—a few were even from Guatemala—but they kept peppering their speech with English words. I had to ask them to repeat themselves. Figuring out what they were saying took time. When I asked where my brothers and I could stay that night, they said, "*Una flápjaus*."

I didn't know what '*una flápjaus*' was. An older worker said, "*Espanglich*." So, at first, even simple talk in plain Spanish took time.

La flápjaus wasn't bad; here, *en el norte,* even flophouses had electricity and showers.

That week, a labor contractor offered me a Florida job that sounded attractive, but I'd have to leave right away. $200 a week for picking tomatoes. And there would be more, if I was willing. I was willing. Fieldwork, outside work with crops, was what I knew.

I told my brothers, "Double what the hotel pays me."

Ramón said, "Take advantage of it. Ali, if it's as good as you say, we'll come join you."

We had a little going-away celebration. Filadelfo said, "I'll never call you 'the baby' again."

Nobody said anything for a while. I looked at Ramón, and Filadelfo looked at Ramón, waiting…

Ramón didn't say anything, and we all laughed.

The home in Florida was the back of a box truck in a yard filled with junk. I shared it with three other pickers. There was no toilet. We went to the bathroom on the ground around the truck. Our water was a garden hose in the yard. Florida is hot. We sweat a lot, but had to pay for a cold water shower with the hose. If I was first, the water was warm from the sun. We paid for two daily meals of eggs, tortillas, and beans.

After working a month of ten-hour days, I figured I was coming out ahead, and might be able to call my brothers and my parents, maybe even get a phone of my own. I asked where I stood.

The boss told me I owed them $300. When I showed surprise, he got angry and threatened to beat me up. He told me never to run away because he would have the police shoot me. I never saw my paychecks. He cashed them and gave me pocket money, some weeks $20, some weeks $50.

I put up with the job, even when a new guy, *chicano*, described it as '*esclavitud*'. He could read and write, so the rest of us listened to him. We also saw signs he wouldn't be working with us long. He didn't complain much. He did the work, but not as desperately. That's the word, I guess, to describe him: not as desperate. He did his share, just didn't seem intimidated by the bosses. And when he criticized anything—which really wasn't often—it would be with a knife-edged word like *esclavitud*.

What woke me up was when an old picker named Andrés got sick. Each day Andrés worked slower and slower until one afternoon he sat down in the row and waited for the van that took us back. He didn't even have his plastic bucket of tomatoes tallied, just left them there for whoever wanted it. The next day, when he said he was sick and wouldn't work, the crew boss slapped him in the face. Hard. In front of the rest of us. Andrés was old. It was disrespectful. We were all ashamed. When one of the pickers protested, the crew boss kicked Andrés, knocking him to the ground. "That's what happens when you don't work. Anybody else sick?"

I saw that what we were doing was not just desperate work, but wrong. Wrong in a big way. I didn't really understand all of it, but saw that we were supporting people who were bad. Bad like devils. What priests call 'evil'. I became scared.

The next day I worked, but not for the money. I was usually the fastest, best picker, but that day I was average, in the middle, maybe even slower than most. I was thinking all day about Andrés, and the crew bosses, about how they could slap and kick us as though we were animals. The old man knocked to the ground stayed with me as I picked thousands and thousands of tomatoes that day. I never really saw the fruit. I filled and re-filled the plastic tub on my back over and over, but was far away with my thoughts. I looked at the other pickers rushing and rummaging through the staked vines, at the bosses in the air-conditioned trucks, at the beat-up vans that shuttled us between 'home' and the fields every day. The new kid had been right; this was *esclavitud*.

That Saturday, when the crew boss gave me my pay, two twenty-dollar bills, I didn't say anything, just pocketed the money and walked away. I walked past the truck and up the road, I walked past Immokalee, walked as much as I could all night and slept by the side of the road. The Florida police could shoot me; I didn't care.

I woke in daylight to voices.

"Talk to him in Spanish."

"*No tengas miedo.*"

There were people in a van, a new one, not the beat-up, old kind for transporting pickers. They were looking out the windows at me and the woman and two men squatting around me.

"Tell him not to be afraid."

"*Que no tengas miedo.*"

Why were they telling me not to be afraid? Who *were* they? What did they want?

The van had a cross on its side.

"Ask him if he's okay."

"*¿Estás bien?*"

What could I say? I'm sleeping on the side of the road. I didn't answer, looked from them to the van and back again.

"Tell him we're from the church, that we can help."

"*Somos de la iglesia. Podemos ayudar, si quieres.*"

One of the men got up and returned to the van. The woman's expression was worried, the same expression my mother wore when one of us got hurt. I had never seen eyes so bright blue, crystalline, as though giving off light. The man next to her—his eyes also were clear, a rich molasses dark, and searched into mine as though studying something shining at the bottom of a well. He had an accent like Padre Eusebio's back home in Guatemala. Padre Eusebio was from Spain.

I sat up, asked the same question my brother Ramón had asked the Puerto Rican border patrol agent, "¿De *dónde es usted?*"

He didn't answer that, just said, "*Ven con nosotros*," and gave me a hand up.

Everyone in the van was dressed up, not formal, no jackets and ties, no heels and make-up, just neat and clean. The women wore long dresses. They were all in wholesome, good spirits. I felt dirty among them, but safe.

They took me to their church, where the Spaniard named Lucas showed me a cellar room with a bunk. "There's a shower down the hall. Rest up as if you were at home. After our religious service, I'll come get you to join us for breakfast."

I fell asleep on the bunk right away and woke to angel's voices in the sky, the people singing somewhere upstairs. I showered with hot water. Lucas returned. "Did you rest?"

"Yes."

"Come and have breakfast then."

Looking back, I can see that things are worst before they turn around. *Después de la tormenta viene la calma*, darkest before dawn. It's good to have patience, but not as much patience as a victim. Nothing would have changed if I had not walked away from the box truck and the threatening crew boss. I had to reach a bottom I could spring up from.

I ate pancakes and bacon at a long table with these new people. I met their Pastor and a blur of others. Lucas was the only one who spoke Spanish, but by then I'd learned a few words of English. The Spanish word they used most was *amigo*; they wanted me to know they were my friends. I had seen bad people, now I was with people who were kind. After those months in Florida I had trouble trusting others, but these people trusted me. For no reason. Me, a stranger. They told me I could stay until I got back on my feet and that they would help me.

Lucas said, "You were lucky an alligator didn't find you," and asked if I wanted field work.

"Well, yes, but not like before."

He said, "No, don't worry; these are good people. If you want, we can go tomorrow, so you can see."

The next day we went. There were no threats and warnings. My spirits rose. Now that I had a safe place to sleep, and some hope, I became an all-star picker again, filled my thirty-two pound basket faster than anyone. At the end of the day, Lucas came to get me. "How did it go?"

I felt like I would cry. "They treated me with respect."

"You can take that for granted. What you went through before, intimidation, slavery, well, these are different people. So, again, tomorrow?"

"Don Lucas?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

The next day and the next I hustled through the tomato fields of staked vines. Over and over, I filled my bushel basket with the hard green fruit and hefted it overhead to the worker in the trailer who dumped it and gave me a token. At the end of each day, I turned in my tokens and they paid me cash. After a week, I, too, began to trust.

On days when it rained we couldn't pick. I stayed in the church basement room and thought about my parents, about Ramón and Filadelfo. I knew how far Las Vegas was; the pretty much non-stop van trip to Immokalee had taken two full days. I bought a cell phone and calling cards, tried to reach my brothers without any luck. I considered money for a bus to Las Vegas.

Lucas said, "You'll need identification."

"To take a bus?"

"Yes. They'll let you pay, take your money for the ticket, then ask for an I.D. when you try to board the bus."

I showed him my guest worker card.

He made a face, shook his head. "*Arriesgado*. Risky. *I* wouldn't. *La migra* stops buses, interrogates passengers, *wants* guys just like you. Who look like you, who don't speak English. This *chueca* card won't impress them, would probably arouse suspicion." He let this sink in, then said, "This is a big country, Ali, bigger than Mexico, bigger than a thousand Guatemalas. Who knows where your brothers are? Only God. Better to look for them from here, where you are safe, where you have work."

The next day, planting seedlings kept my hands busy, my mind on the here and now. I was making friends. The crew boss told me I'd be getting a raise. Florida was no longer as terrible. That night, I mailed my parents a money order. I had Lucas write and tell them that I'd lost contact with Filadelfo and Ramón, but that they shouldn't worry, that I would find them. Now, at least I had hope.

A group of us, eight or ten, men and women, all ages, some kids, were eating lunch in the tomato field. A guy from Mexico City, asked one of the girls her name. She didn't answer.

"*¿Qué? ¿Que no tienes lengua?*"

She looked shyly at the ground.

He repeated in English, "Can't you talk?"

I saw she was embarrassed. I felt like telling this city slicker that he was being rude. She was my age, *mestiza*, probably from my same kind of rural background.

Finally, she said, "Altagracia."

Fine name, I thought; a few girls I knew back home had that name.

But this *chilango* didn't think so. "What kind of name is *that*? That's an old woman's name!"

Her face clouded. She looked down at her taco.

This guy was starting to bother me. I said, "There's nothing wrong with that name. A lot of young girls are named Altagracia."

"Oh, yeah, where? Out in the sticks?"

I stared at him. "Yes. Out in the boondocks, where we show respect for others."

Then it got quiet. No one said anything. The guy from Mexico City went back to eating his taco.

I felt funny, as though I had been out of line, until Altagracia smiled at me.

Then I felt better.