

BY THE WAY



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SURROUNDED BY LANGUAGE

We left Barcelona in the morning and drove northwest towards the mountains. It was early July, so it felt good to be leaving the clammy heat of the coast. Our final destination was a wedding in Toulouse but we were spending the night in the Pyrenees along the way.

We'd made reservations at a tiny place called *Estamariu* that was listed in an online directory, but which I could not find on my map of Spain. Just before reaching Andorra, which is at about 7000 feet, we turned off the main road and inched our way

up a narrow rutted lane that zigzagged back and forth, hugging the side of the mountain. After what seemed like a long time the track leveled off and we arrived at the village we were seeking. It was just a handful of houses huddled together on a shelf, surrounded on three sides by terraced fields that rose up in a graceful sweep to the towering peaks above. The streets were so narrow that at one point we had to fold in the rear-view mirrors on the sides of the car. The houses were mainly two story structures built of native stone hewn from the rugged surroundings. Over a deep-set door, 1817 had been carved into a massive lintel made of



ancient lumber. It was early afternoon and the streets were deserted.

Our home for the night, the *L'Era de Cal Bastida*, was a charming place with six rooms on two floors. After settling in, the ladies retired for a siesta and Geoffrey and I strode off to survey the terrain. We walked up the track we'd driven in on, past a corral where a dozen or so heifers stood and stared at us, past the stone church and the graveyard, past terraces carefully shored up with the same stone used to build the houses. Two men were harvesting a field, rolling hay into bales with a tractor. They told us the terraces were mainly used for growing hay, to feed the livestock during the inhospitable winters. We walked on uphill.

A weathered-looking man sat on a patch of grass under a gnarled, stunted tree, smiling. He was uphill from the track and we hadn't noticed him when we stopped to look around. We said yes, we loved the view. He invited us to sit down, and we did. "My name is Diego," he said. We introduced ourselves, and he remarked that we spoke very good Spanish, so we explained that we were from Argentina. "Oh yes, Argentina," he nodded. I mentioned that we were also translators.

"Translators?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Ah well, you are in the perfect place: here you are surrounded by language!" He pointed north, south, east and west and said, "French, Spanish, Catalan, and Basque." Then he pointed down and up and added, "Also the language of the earth and



As we rounded a bend we stopped to look back, gazing out at a breathtaking view of mountains behind mountains behind mountains shouldering their way to the blue horizon, and the free-fall swoop to the valley below. We stood in silence, gazing. Until a voice behind us asked, "You like the view?"

the sky. Here on the mountain we hear them all blowing around us in the wind, and after a while they all seem the same. No difference between one language and the other." He laughed. "Maybe not an ideal situation for a translator trying to make a living!" We talked for a while and I noticed that,

like so many Spaniards, regardless of their level of education, he seemed possessed of a sincere respect for language and an instinctive appreciation for the art of expression.

That evening we sat on the terrace outside the *L’Era de Cal Bastida* and had dinner looking out over the lights in the villages far below. Geoffrey told our wives about Diego. “I think he was speaking metaphorically about how in Europe one is surrounded by many languages, all the time, as a matter of course. With so many countries so close together, there is an inevitable contact with lots of languages. This is something we miss when we live in places like the US or Argentina, where public discourse is mainly monolingual. Unless we are constantly exposed to both our source and our target languages, we have to work hard to keep our ear attuned to the genuine syntax and current subtleties of the absent one.”

I agreed, and said that I’d been dealing with that very issue in the project I’d been working on recently. It was a book of whimsical stories and poems full of esoteric puns and word play, cultural references and rhymes. A challenging task that stretched and bent my mind as I labored to keep up with the author, trying to grasp the essence of his work and inhale it so that I might see his vision and hear his song. Sometimes, late at night, I saw words as clouds that moved and changed shape and took on lives of their own. Sometimes they seemed more like water balloons that hugged the contours of their meaning as I shoehorned them into new shapes and spaces, struggling to resist a literal interpretation while still being loyal to the text. One day, when I was resting my brain from working on this book, I came across “Drawing Class,” a Billy Collins poem in which, although he obviously wasn’t thinking about translation, he seemed to be talking to me:

*If you ever asked me
how my drawing classes are going,
I would tell you that I enjoy
adhering to the outline of a thing,
to follow the slope of an individual pear
or the curve of a glossy piano.*

*[...]
I would add that I can get lost
crosshatching the shadow of a chair.*

Geoffrey grinned. “Yes! I’ve tried to ‘adhere to the outline of a thing’ as I translate it. And I can certainly get lost in the crosshatching, changing one word for another, rearranging a sentence this way and that, straining to hear the author’s voice coming through from the original.”

“Maybe we should come back here and work for a while,” I suggested. “If Diego is right, we could sit out on the hillside and listen to languages blowing in the wind until they all sound the same. We could step back and forth from one to another and understand them all.”

Our plan was to descend on Toulouse in the morning, but that evening we were tucked away in a remote village somewhere on top of the world, sitting on a terrace where the air was crisp and clear, and time seemed unimportant. Lillian leaned over to Elaine and said, in a stage whisper, “What’s Basque for ‘Let’s take a stroll’?” And so, with no further ado, we walked up the hill and looked at the quiet terraces in the moonlight.

Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives Austin where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. “The Spanglish I spoke with my bilingual peers during my childhood was a perfect education for a translator, as it taught me how to deconstruct both languages and create a hybrid form with rules of its own.”