

BY THE WAY

TRANSLATOR ON THE ROOF

BY TONY BECKWITH



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In San Miguel Allende, time stands still but people change. Nestled in the highlands of central Mexico, San Miguel was built by the Spaniards on the road they used to transport silver to the coast. Its narrow, cobblestone streets and quintessential colonial architecture give it a surreal quality which made me feel as though I had stepped into a different dimension, a different place and time—and in fact I had. I arrived on a bus from Mexico City and by sundown had rented a place to live and was signed up at the Instituto Allende art school to take classes in ceramics and writing.

It was the mid-1970s and I had taken a sabbatical—what is now referred to as a gap year—from a career in advertising that no longer inspired me as it once had. In the throes of a midlife crisis, I was trying to reinvent myself, looking for something else to do, and San Miguel seemed to be an ideal place to start.

In the aftermath of World War II the G.I. Bill spawned a new generation of art students in the United States, many of whom drifted south in search of new landscapes to paint in places where their dollars would stretch a little farther. San Miguel became popular with artists who found that the clear mountain air made colors brighter and sharper, while the remote location allowed them to enjoy a laidback lifestyle in idyllic, indulgent surroundings. The painters were soon followed by writers, and musicians, and their friends, and San Miguel

gradually turned into an art colony with a thriving, cosmopolitan social scene. It was just what I was looking for.

Blanche—who took a gap year from being a New York theater director and never went back—had lived in San Miguel for several years. She was friendly with some of the people in my writing class, and she invited me to join her translation circle. “We meet at my place on Tuesdays. I think you’ll enjoy the group.” She was right, I did. But what I really enjoyed was the translating. I grew up bilingual, speaking English and Spanish, and had always been a *de facto* translator and interpreter, as most bilinguals tend to be. My time in the advertising business had given me years of experience writing in both languages; I had always wanted to be a writer but somehow had never got around to it, mainly because I had no idea what I wanted to say. I now saw translating as a chance to take what someone else had written and then “write it” myself in another language. Not quite the same as creating my own original work, but it was a start. I also saw the translation process as a sort of road map for what I was trying to do, which was to re-express myself in another “language” — translation as a metaphor for transformation.

There were about ten of us in the group, all working from Spanish into English. Blanche lived in a studio apartment perched on the flat roof of a two-story building a couple of blocks from the center of town. We met on her terrace in the afternoons, surrounded by geraniums in rusted buckets and, occasionally, a line of laundry drying in the sunshine. We had a clear view of the spire of the church on the far side of the central plaza, silhouetted against a brilliantly blue sky. It was the 1970s, and we smoked cigarettes and drank black coffee and life was good.

A couple in the group had taken courses in translation studies at American colleges, and there were occasional discussions about translation theory and technique. But mostly we were newcomers to the field, feeling our way and learning from our own efforts as we struggled to do what proved infinitely harder than we had imagined. We worked on poems and prose passages by Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, Jorge Luis Borges and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez. We all agreed that we also wanted to work on texts drawn from popular culture and daily life, believing that it was important to attune our ears to the vernacular of the street and hone our ability to capture the syntax of the common man. So we translated newspaper articles and posters,

hand bills and graffiti. We also produced English versions of some of the lyrics sung by Celia Cruz and Armando Manzanero.

Sometimes it was hard to pull away from the circle and we stayed on into the evening, switching from coffee to wine, and talking for hours on Blanche's terrace under the stars. On these occasions we set aside the works-in-progress that we produced and critiqued during the meetings, and the conversation took a more esoteric approach to translation. We discussed the endless subtleties of language, the myriad complexities of meaning, and the various ways in which the translator can be faithful to the author. It was a diverse bunch, and we speculated on the many ways in which our respective lives had prepared us for the linguistic and cultural challenges of literary translation. One by one we confessed to developing a more intimate, more critical relationship with our languages; we spoke of epiphanies when we suddenly understood things like the difference between "frowning" and "furling one's brow" and how these insights helped us bridge the gaps between an original text and a translation. We marveled at how exciting it was to take responsibility for a particular solution after grasping the nuances of a few words in ways that would have seemed impossible just a few weeks earlier. Literary translation, we realized, was a serious pursuit; yet we still enjoyed moments of hilarity as we played with code-switching to convey colloquial expressions, and *more bang for your buck* became *more beso for your peso*. As the summer slipped away we sensed that we were growing as translators, and felt a new respect for each other and, more importantly, for ourselves.

The group's free-roaming conversations inevitably led to ever-deeper reflections on the nature of language and the phenomenon of speech. How did language originate, and why? We theorized that humans have language because the senses that evolved for our survival provided experience that required expression. So, at what point was a grunt just not good enough, prompting one of our ancestors to articulate a sound that was inextricably linked to a specific meaning? Questions begat answers that begat more questions in the comfortable company of colleagues who had become friends and fellow-travelers on the road to new understanding.

Blanche—who said, "To begin anything with a certainty is to embark on a very short, uninteresting journey"—was never in a hurry for these soirees to end. Neither was anyone else. And that is the story of how my life changed forever in San Miguel and I became a translator. Δ