

EVERYBODY'S TALKING AT YOU

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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 in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.

We came by bus from Oaxaca, arriving in the village in the early afternoon. The air was hot and still and the dusty streets deserted. We sat in the shade under an awning on the west side of the plaza. I shut my eyes against the glare and when I awoke a man was talking to me, a huge grin spread across his leathery brown face. He was saying, “My *tienda* is open now.”

Inside his store it was dark and cool and smelled of corn and burlap. We bought three bottles of apple-flavored *Peñafiel* and drank them standing up at the rough wooden counter. The man asked what we were doing in Teotitlán del Valle. I pointed at Neal and said that he was a weaver who had come to learn from the famous weavers of Teotitlán. The man nodded, then looked at Donna. I explained that she had decided to call herself *Mariposa*, was searching everywhere for herself, and probably wouldn't be here very long. He smiled, then looked at me. I told him that I was a student of language, and that I was here to listen to the sounds of the village.

“An excellent idea,” said the man. “You will hear many many things that will surprise you.” And he told us that Olivia could give us a place to stay. Up the hill, to the left.

We strung our hammocks in Olivia's courtyard, and settled into the rhythm of the village. Most of the men were weavers. They spent their days working at the huge looms crowded into brick and adobe houses, talking and laughing quietly among themselves in the dimly lit rooms. The young boys looked after the sheep and goats, whispering and shouting at them as they rambled together across the barren, rocky

fields. The women and girls cared for the crops and the mules, prepared the food for their families, and washed their clothes on the rocks in the stream. They were always in groups, and their chatting sounded like birds returning to their nests at sunset, their laughter as clear and bright as spring water from the hills.

At night, moonlight flooded the courtyard, and the air smelled sweet and warm. My hammock hung beside a rough mud-brick wall, under the eaves of a tin roof. From where I lay I had a clear view of the wide-open sky and the pinpoint stars. On the other side of the wall was the mule corral. These mules were sociable creatures, and it took them a while to settle down at the end of the day. They all had stories to tell about being out in the fields, and I could hear them moving around, muttering and nuzzling, whinnying and chuckling. And haw-heeing. All my life I thought mules and donkeys said “*hee-haw*.” But they don’t. They say “*haw-hee*,” exhaling on the *haw* and inhaling on the *hee*.

Olivia’s husband, Ismael, was a master weaver, an artist whose sarapes and tapestries sold for high prices in the finest stores and galleries in Mexico City. His inspiration came from ancient legends of the Zapotecs and Mixtecs who lived in this valley long before the Spaniards came. He looked for power and simplicity in his designs and used nutshells and onion, pomegranate, tree bark, and cactus to create natural dyes for his wool. “The earth talks through us if we allow it,” he said. “Everything speaks in its own tongue and the artist interprets so that others may understand.” I nodded. “Have you been to Monte Albán?” he asked.

It was a short bus ride to Monte Albán, the ruins of a citadel that felt like a portal to an ancient time. It was one of the earliest cities in Mesoamerica—founded by the Zapotecs in about 500 BC—and became the dominant force in the Valley of Oaxaca for centuries before being abandoned towards the end of the first millennium AD. The upper terrace is open to the sky, and a cursory glance perceives it as vast and empty. But those who sit off to one side and remain in silent observation will see the space gradually come to life in their mind’s eye. Stalls will appear that look just like the ones in the market in Oaxaca: food stalls, ceramics stalls, spice stalls, tool stalls, fruit and vegetable stalls with boxes out front and awnings overhead. The open space teems with men, women, and children milling about, carrying bundles and pointing and talking, just as they do in every market square in Mexico. The space comes alive with the same smells, the same colors, the same sounds. The plaza retains its memory of life in the glory days on the hill, and projects a sort of permanent hologram that becomes visible and audible to the patient.

I sat beside a window on the way home, my elbow jutting over the sill, the warm air rushing past my face. We rode in silence for a while then I told Ismael about the mules' conversations. "Yes, *haw-hee* is how they say it," he agreed, laughing. "Everybody gets it wrong at first, gets it backwards. I don't know why. I guess they just don't listen very well. They listen but they don't hear."

He'd seen me writing in my notebook and he added, "Are you going to write that down, about the *haw-hee*?" I nodded. "That's good," he said. "You weave your words into stories. I'll weave my stories out of wool. Let's see if we are understood any better than those mules."

