

Claire McQuerry on Oaxaca

I've always found that environment plays a huge role in the writing I produce, and from that standpoint the retreat in Oaxaca was ideal. First of all, traveling to a setting like southern Mexico—a place so foreign to that of our normal experience—really does something to open the writer up to new directions in his or her writing. Larry Levis articulates it well in his essay “Some Notes on the Gazer Within” when he writes about experiencing new, unfamiliar landscapes: “What is ‘out there’ moves inside,” he writes—by inhabiting a new place, the writer is able to move beyond herself in a way that she often fails to do at home. I took the first couple of days to explore Oaxaca and to immerse myself in this new setting, including visits to a beautiful colonial church and Monte Albon, an ancient Zapotec Indian city.

The remaining days of my stay were spent writing, which is the other reason the retreat was such an ideal place. Not only did Mexico provide a time away from the distractions of email, cell phones, TV, and the busyness of work, the house there also offered a beautiful space to write in: full of light, with large windows overlooking a lush, flowering garden. All in all, my stay was very productive; it was wonderful to spend the day writing, free from distractions, and then to take a break in the evenings to go out and experience the local culture. What a gift!