

I had spent some of my fall semester translating literature from Spanish and studying the language, so as I prepared to spend two weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico, I thought I would have at least a fair sense of the language. I don't think I was being naïve exactly, my hopes weren't inflated, but it was still a surprise when I realized how different it is to look at a language and to hear it, or speak it. I have only studied written languages in the past and, even though some of these were the ancestors of Spanish, I found myself quickly overwhelmed, drowning in the language, in part by the speed, but mainly because I knew less than I had hoped. I spent the majority of my two weeks writing and reading, but going out around town shopping, or out to dinner, or to an internet café to write or go online, I gradually – with the help of my colleagues at first – began to keep my head above the surface, to understand what was being asked of me, and to make my intentions or needs clear with a few simple words. I had a tendency to use the root form of the word rather than the endings, which I knew, but somehow either froze up or second-guessed myself. But no one laughed or corrected me, or even made clear that they noticed (though they must have). But by the end of my stay, I could get around restaurants and cafes without English, give instructions to the taxi, and make requests of our housekeeper.

Aside from the opportunity for immersion in a foreign language, Oaxaca was really a great place for an artist's retreat. For the first couple days, I only left the house to get supplies or to go to dinner; otherwise I was working. I did my sightseeing later on. But from my window, which looked out over a bountiful floral garden, I could see the domed arches of a cathedral. I could look up from my desk and catch the darting motion of a hummingbird in the garden. There is a history to the place that can be felt in a glance: the architecture of the buildings, the cobbled streets. As much as I enjoyed the ruins of Monte Alban, the many restaurants and markets, I was most impressed by and interested in the people. They were friendly and welcoming, never impatient or ridiculing with my beginner's Spanish, and for a city in one of Mexico's poorer states that relies on tourism, an industry that has suffered recently, they do not demand or expect tips. It was a very relaxed atmosphere – in the markets I was greeted, not pressured – and I found this, juxtaposed with the time I spent working, a perfect combination.