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Honors 212 C

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Untaught, Unspoken, Yet Understood

Tâi-oân-ōe.

language that I now know

I speak the words,

flowers blooming in the gentle rain

after a decade of frozen winter,

familiar to my mind

to me but not my tongue

definitely not my eyes.

Language that I was never taught

words which I cannot learn

that have always been there

always will.

Language that I used to know

a child speaking green words among blue people

what good is just one telephone?

Language that I cannot form
a sparrow believes its wings are clipped
one try is enough
why ever fly? a cage is safe
and can be put on an airplane anyhow.

Language that I cannot forget
Family members converse.
You understand us? Do you speak it?
Chit-sut-á nāa. Only a little bit.
The rest is locked away
but it is there all the same
find the key again someday.

Language that I have always known
flowing through our family gatherings
bubbling out of the hot sulfur springs on Mt. Yangming
revealing itself through my grandparents' smiles
as they tell me how big I've gotten since they last saw me
identity that cannot be eclipsed
The language that I will always know.

This poem, heavily inspired by Carrie Ayagaduk Ojanen's "Tiimiah, something carried", is about my own experience with the language Taiwanese Hokkien (often but somewhat inaccurately referred to as just "Taiwanese"). I am Taiwanese-American, and aside from English and Mandarin Chinese I also grew up speaking Taiwanese Hokkien. As far as I am concerned, I have always known the language because my parents have always known it, and my parents have always known it because their parents did too—I have no memory of ever learning it. However, one year, while attending a children's summer camp in Taiwan, I noticed that most of the other kids could not understand what I was saying. They spoke exclusively Mandarin Chinese to me and to each other, and I was met only with puzzled stares when I did try talking to them in Taiwanese Hokkien. I did not know it at the time, but I now suspect I was experiencing signs of the language's decline. Even if Taiwanese parents knew how to speak Taiwanese Hokkien, why teach their children a language that such a limited part of the world spoke, especially in the face of Mandarin Chinese and its hundreds of millions of speakers? My family tells me that I suddenly switched to Mandarin and stopped speaking Taiwanese Hokkien after that—I never stopped being able to understand the language when I heard other people speaking it, but I barely spoke a word of the language for over a decade. During that time, I came to understand more about my identity as a Taiwanese American, and I decided this last Fall that I should probably start speaking it again before my Mandarin Chinese blocked it out completely. I was relieved to find that it was a lot like riding a bike; the sounds felt awkward in my mouth then and still do sometimes today, but what was important to me was that I could still speak—even if I still stumble and pause more often now than I might have when I was little.

The elements of Ojanen's poem that particularly resonated with me and inspired me to write my own were her mention of her "tongue against the ink / is English"—I interpreted this as being

about the awkwardness of representing a non-English language using a Roman alphabet—as well as the overall subject of a language that is important to her but is in some danger of being lost. Nowadays, Taiwanese Hokkien is very rarely found in written form. In the poem, the Taiwanese Hokkien phrases, “*tâi-oân-ōe*” (literally, “Taiwanese language,” the term usually used in Taiwan to refer to Taiwanese Hokkien) and “*Chit-sut-á nīa*” (“only a little bit”) are phoneticized using what is known as “*Peh-ōe-jī*”, which I actually had to find an online translator to produce—even though it is a language I have known my whole life, I only recently became aware of the existence of *Peh-ōe-jī*, and even the Taiwanese Hokkien phrases I have written in this poem look incredibly foreign when I am looking at them on a page rather than hearing someone speak them.