

On the Heat of My Tongue

How do I describe
that when I first mumbled “mama,”
they didn’t know if it was English or Chinese

How do I describe
that it’s a futile search
for what sounds my lips first molded to,
what language first constructed my thoughts,
when I am still finding my definition of “first”

How do I describe
that it’s neither
fork nor chopsticks
feeding me morsels of sound
that fuse on the heat of my tongue

That I don’t detach my tongue and switch to a spare
like one might a screwdriver or a wrench
But my words do rust,
they tarnish and crumble
when I no longer forge their shapes
And when I try to reassemble the syllables,
they become screeches of metal on metal,
ugly to my ears
clumsy between my teeth

That sometimes I call my mom over the phone
and forget how to cry in Chinese,
fluent in “anger” and “sorrow”
but not in *nu* and *ai*
She begs Merriam Webster
to relay her daughter’s voice,
but I know
and she knows
we’re searching in different dictionaries,
and the shelves between us only grow