

Ing Grish

John Yau

*Yau, I need to speak Singlish, to express Singaporean feelings,*

—CATHERINE LIU

I never learned Singlish

I cannot speak Taglish, but I have registered  
the tonal shifts of Dumglish, Bumglish, and Scumglish

I do not know Ing Grish, but I will study it down to its  
black and broken bones

I do not know Ing Gwish, but I speak dung and dungaree,  
satrap and claptrap

Today I speak barbecue and canoe

Today I speak running dog and yellow dog

I do not know Spin Gloss, but I hear humdrum and humdinger,  
bugaboo and jigaboo

I do not know Ang Grish, but I can tell you that my last name  
consists of three letters, and that technically all of them are vowels

I do not know Um Glish, but I do know how to eat with two sticks

Oh but I do know English because my father's mother was English  
and because my father was born in New York in 1921  
and was able to return to America in 1949  
and become a citizen

I no speak Chineese, Chamel, or Cheyenne  
 I do know English because I am able to tell others  
 that I am not who they think I am

I do not know Chinese because my mother said that I refused to learn it  
 from the moment I was born, and that my refusal  
 was one of the greatest sorrows of her life,  
 the other being the birth of my brother

I do know Chinese because I understood what my mother's friend told her  
 one Sunday morning, shortly after she sat down for tea:  
 "I hope you don't that I parked my helicopter on your roof"

Because I do not know Chinese I have been told that means  
 I am not Chinese by a man who translates from the Spanish.  
 He said that he had studied Chinese and was therefore closer  
 to being Chinese than I could ever be. No one publicly disagreed with him  
 Which, according to the rules of English, means he is right

I do know English and I know that knowing it means  
 that I don't always believe it

The fact that I disagree with the man who translates from the Spanish  
 is further proof that I am not Chinese because all the Chinese  
 living in America are hardworking and earnest  
 and would never disagree with someone who is right.  
 This proves I even know how to behave in English

I do not know English because I got divorced and therefore  
 I must have misunderstood the vows I made at City Hall

I do know English because the second time I made a marriage vow  
 I had to repeat it in Hebrew

I do know English because I know what "fortune cookie" means  
 when it is said of a Chinese woman

The authority on poetry announced that I discovered that I was Chinese  
 when it was to my advantage to do so

My father was afraid that if I did not speak English properly  
 I would be condemned to work as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant.  
 My mother, however, said that this was impossible because  
 I didn't speak Cantonese, because the only language  
 waiters in Chinese restaurants know how to speak was Cantonese

I do not know either Cantonese or English, Ang Glish or Ing Grish

Anguish is a language everyone can speak, but no one listens to it

I do know English because my father's mother was Ivy Hillier.  
She was born and died in Liverpool, after living in America and China,  
and claimed to be a descendant of the Huguenots

I do know English because I misheard my grandmother and thought  
she said that I was a descendant of the Argonauts

I do know English because I remember what "Made in Japan" meant  
when I was a child

I learn over and over again that I do not know Chinese.  
Yesterday a man asked me how to write my last name in Chinese,  
because he was sure that I had been mispronouncing it  
and that if this was how my father pronounced it,  
then the poor man had been wrong all his life

I do not know Chinese even though my parents conversed in it every day.  
I do know English because I had to ask the nurses not to put my mother  
in a straitjacket, and reassure them that I would be willing to stay with her  
until the doctor came the next morning

I do know English because I left the room when the doctor told me  
I had no business being there

I do not know Chinese because during the Vietnam War  
I was called a gook instead of a chink and realized  
that I had managed to change my spots without meaning to

I do not know English because when father said that he would  
like to see me dead, I was never sure quite what he meant

I do not know Chinese because I never slept with a woman  
whose vagina slanted like my mother's eyes

I do not know either English or Chinese and, because of that,  
I did not put a gravestone at the head of my parents' graves  
as I felt no language mirrored the ones they spoke.