

Lost and Found Language

by Oscar Mireles

It started in 1949, when my oldest brother
came home from school
in Racine, Wisconsin
after flunking kindergarten
because he 'spoke no English'
and declared to my parents
that 'the rest of the kids have to learn to speak
English
if we planned on staying here in the United
States.'

so my parents lined up
the rest of the seven younger children
had us straighten up
tilt our heads back
reached in our mouth with their hands
and took turns
slicing our tongues in half

making a simple, but unspoken contract
that from then on
the parents would speak Spanish
and the children would respond
back only in English

how do you lose a native language?
does it get misplaced
in the recesses of your brain?
or does it never quite stick to the sides
of your mind?

for me it would always start
with the question
from a brown faced stranger
'hables espanol? '
which means
'do you speak Spanish? '

which meant
if they had to ask me
if I spoke Spanish
this was not going to be a good start for
at having a conversation ...

my face would start to get flushed
with redness and before
I had a chance to stammer
the words
'I don't'

I could see it in their eyes
looking at my embarrassed face
searching for an answer
that they already knew

as I walked away
I know they were thinking
'Who is this guy? '
'How can he not speak his mother's tongue? '
'Where did he grow up anyways? '
'Doesn't he have any pride
in knowing who he is? '
or 'Where he came from? '

I tried to reply,
but as the words in Spanish
floated down from my brain
they caught in my teeth,
the rocks of shame.
I spoke in half-tongue.

my future wife
taught me how
to speak Spanish
mainly
by being Colombian
and not speaking English

and I had already known
the language of hands and love
which got me confident enough
to reach deep inside
myself
to find the beautiful sounds and latin rhythms
that laid deep within me

and although
I still feel my heart jump a beat
when someone asks 'hables espanol? '
now the Spanish resonates within me
and echos back 'si, y usted tambien? '

and today as I talk with the Spanish speaking
students
in our school
they can not only feel my words
they can feel my warm heart
splash ancient Spanish sounds off
my native tongue
that has finally grown whole again.