



## Lost and Found Language

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  
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.

Oscar Mireles