

A Language Is a Story

I. Cases of infanticide in rodents rise along the jars in our basement *and you're letting them did you know?*  
*God There's still things in the moving boxes the jewelry the tongues Wish you'd take*  
*them out You never contribute What is family for, then?* it's their young and dandruff, you add, scraps  
of food and anything dirty they can find, but mostly what they've made themselves, as if digesting your genes were  
something pleasurable. *You can't digest jeans*, dad says, *why would you?* and you only say *The landlords must've left the mice Call*  
*them tomorrow They're scurrying down there if you look closely.*

II. We've not talked yet nor will we for some time. This is not because I don't want to talk about rodents but because  
you're perpetually chewing the candies you thumb out of your coat pocket, fudge setting in between your teeth. Curved  
into the back seats, our heads float atop jackets twice our sizes like lifebuoys of hair and forehead. I tuck my knees up to  
my chin, can hear your coat rustle as it pressures onto the seat and with eyes still puffy from sleep, you veer off my  
shoulder.

III. It is the summer of lemonade bubbling in our palms, cheeks seared salmon-red by the sun; the summer we pluck all  
the Polish words from our house like we used to pluck coins from the park fountain. For years, we'd count our days in  
calendars; now we do it in boxes we heft into the car, names we sharpie onto them.

The engine chugs one last time when dad says *You are home now* as we come to a house, and already we can hear the mice  
scurrying inside. You can't tell if it's home, only that it's tiny in size and constantly moving with herds of whiskers and  
floorboards still swarming with traces of feet the size of toothpicks.

IV. I am barefoot on the linoleum floor, the house cold against my soles. In the sink, there's a cluster of plates I'm  
meant to wash. I walk with bruised knees, joints cracking like old pipes. Coffee stains ring the table like orioles. Dad asks  
if we'll wash, but our game is still on. *5 points if you place your next cup right in the middle of an already existing ring.* It's aureoles,  
you say, and pinch my shoulder. *Can't ever get tongue right.* Must never get tongue right.

V. I nonchalantly skip math class and in the library look up *to polish* with my back stacked against stacks of books like flocks of paper wings and it's clear why-

*early 14c., polishes "make smooth or glossy" by friction or coating (of the surface of wood, stone, metal, etc.), from Old French poliss-, present participle stem*

*of polir.*

-the settlers that polished

the land with their tongues named it Poland /themselves the Polish in accordance with what they did best and most & now it's so clear why we must stop & why it polishes our tongues down to pure muscle & why we muzzle it down to meaningless letters.

VI. A leaflet fallen out of the dictionary says Academic English Proficiency Can Take 5 Up To *your degree-of-idiot* Years. I crumple it up deep down my pocket & At dinner ~~we tear the leaflet up~~ squeeze dad's tongue dry. Would he *be so polite* as to invite English onto his tongue? Has he touched the nouns? There are verbs scattered on his plate, but he won't eat. You yell, kick chairs. Ankle sprained. *Speak. Speak.* Dad says *no*, takes his 50s newspaper although we are now in the 20s. *Stop reading!* Dad says *no proper Polish press here.* He says, *How glad we are the war's over!* Father thinks a country is its wars, routes and roads and the coffee people drink. We think it's how it lays on a tongue, whether it leaves a mouth politely or claws its way out of a throat. Wish Polish would uncarve father's tongue, Wish Wish *Wish he wouldn't sound so different.*

VII. When we've wished enough you confess with the duvet pulled tight over our heads *When I dream* there's the two of us, *sepia-stained*, so young we can barely reach *the hems of dad's jeans*, lying beneath pillows piled on our bodies. *Dad sits cramped into the crack* between our beds *and takes our chins in his palms*, leafing through us to see *if we dream in Polish* as we tell him we do. Leaves bruises to blacken our sleep if we don't. *He told me once he'd crack my bones open, squeeze me the size and shape of his fist, and I giggled. Always giggled* when I didn't know what to say in case things hadn't been a joke *and always the scraping the scuttering the mischief of mice scurrying up our sleep. Shut up* about the mice already will you.

VIII. Wish I could take dad out, but he is housebound on a leash. *Non-Polish world Non-Polish tongues outside*. Outside the streets swirl in grey ribbons. Plastic bags cut into the soft skin of my palms. In January snow would be white, but a dog peed on it. Cuffs of my jeans damp. Socks soaked through. Radiators off because you bathe too much. Must tell you to shower more. The kettle works, still. Would like to bathe in the kettle. Kettle too small, body too large. Bones should shrink out of sheer willpower if I want to. You tell me it isn't possible. You sprained your ankle, and it grew back the wrong way, twisted the leg inside out. So, no. Won't straighten just because I want. I know Can't straighten just because one wants *God dad didn't mind the girl it's just the Language and how will you know if you never talk*.

IX. From having conducted sufficient research we know that: Once squeezed dry, language turns the color of pomegranate, crunches up its words like phalanges. Must keep it tied in dad's throat, *unwilling*, unable to exit. From in-between the lines, we extract our stories. Must know where we come from. *Why here?* Must know why there's never friends at dinner, only us and an empty seat the size of a mother. Must know why the children that always kick each other's shins grow polite when they enter Must know why it's always so quiet. *But Dad is trying, I'm telling you*. He pours over the dictionary until his back swells like a parenthesis. *Tomorrow he will not walk*. Tomorrow I will tell I wish his bones wouldn't crackle or someone might think he's made of wood and like to a cooing baby *that wouldn't be nice now would it?*

X. *Oh the leaflets have started coming in* Teeth bare as a wishbone but can't crack them and the wishes never come true. The tongue, you say, we have to take his tongue. We reach into his throat, finger by finger, nail by nail. *I know*

*I know how dad is grieving,*

(as if home-grieving was something you could unhook a person from,  
like you unhook fish from a rod.)

XI. The six feet resentment I have towards him materializes in the Polish language ~~which we've cut out and are now holding~~ which we are unlearning, for other things, such as feeling or sensations. Flowers have no smell for us anymore, and the soft skin of fruit either. We pluck it all we might and merely dirty our fingernails. *Wish we hadn't*, you say as you

stick the flashlight into your mouth so that he doesn't see. At two a.m. we're meant to be dreaming in Polish. *Wish we hadn't* sounds flat and foreign Only *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. At least the house is quiet which means can finally listen to jazz since dad's un-jazzed when music on.

XII. The house always creaks. The building's old, bearded with vines. *Thank god not hair* Would be strange. Must be kind to the house; it was brought from across the Atlantic, and the ocean had set salt in cracks of its bricks. *Even now we hear how* The salt crunches when we're in socks. Wear your slippers, dad motions. *Socks more comfortable*. Dad utterly unfit to puzzle of America. ~~Dad was brought along with the house from across the Atlantic.~~ Dad hauled the house *with him* across the Atlantic. Must've been something then; now, at fifty, mostly naps off the insomnia that rings around his eyes.

XIII. *Did you know you kick sbins in your sleep?* dad slants his eyes downwards as if wanting to say something Words bounce down his throat, but he drives till the sky clears out the color of lilac *Did you know if you look down there's still the mice in our backyard* *Wait have they evolved* *No only spread* *Wish we could talk but we don't speak their language.*