appointment to meet someone? Isn’t he supposed to meet a man by the name of John How or Chow? He is unsure of how to pronounce the man’s surname, which sounds simple but a competitive co-worker or jealous underling might have set a trap. Even though it is past noon, he decides he must call Sheila, who has had more experience with the pitfalls one encounters when dealing with foreign names.

A cell phone in another time zone begins vibrating and vibrating. A hand moves it to another location.

2005

Ing Grish  
John Yau

I never learned Singlish

I cannot speak Taglish, but I have registered
the tonal shifts of Dunglish, Bunglish, 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 dungeree, 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 humdingo, 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 Chinese, Chanel, 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.