

# *Speaking Practice*

*“Let it matter what we call a thing.”*

*Solmaz Sharif*

## How to Talk About Your Hometown in English

Sometimes it is the promise of a riverbank.

Sometimes mud.

Sometimes a body in the fog  
growing soft around the edges.

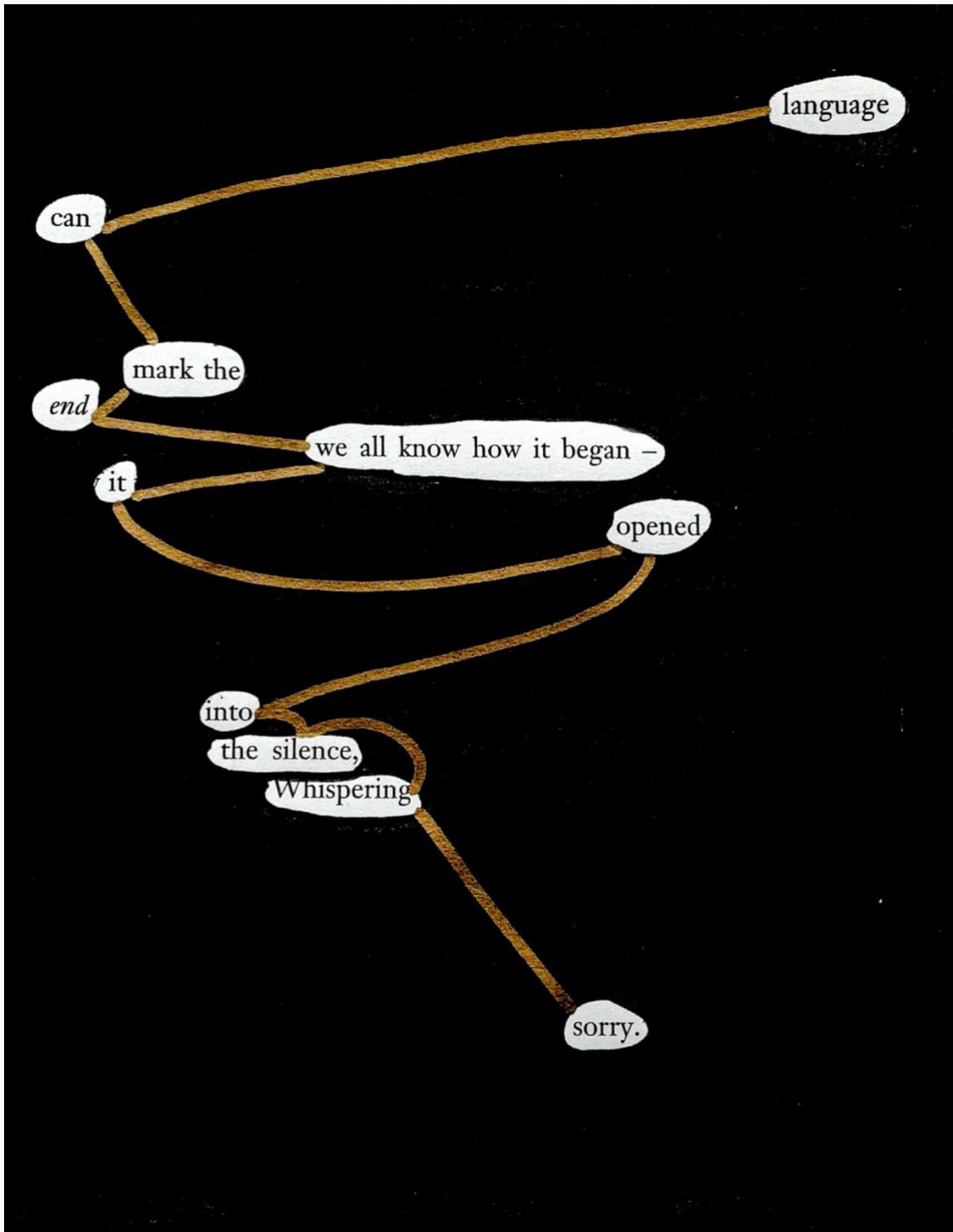
Sometimes it becomes a flaming dot on the horizon  
children point to asking, *dad is that a boat?*

Sometimes when my family asks  
if I could pass the bread, I see it  
floating close, like I could almost touch it.

A hometown is a stiff thing,  
most certainly dead.

I know this.

Sometimes my hometown speaks to me  
and I don't understand.



## Mother Tongue

1. My tongue is my family. We share everything: a body and blood. When my tongue and I play house together, I am a gymnast's mother, lusting after gold. We have so many contests to prepare for. So many judges to impress. Some days, I make my athlete practice through the night. She slides a shoulder gently out of place.
2. My tongue is an impostor. Every night, she hangs over a stranger's bed, learning how a body moves. By the time the day breaks, she's forgotten what it means to be a tongue, how a tongue sits in the mouth. The sand clouds whistle and she wrings herself into a snake. A salty wind blows, and she bends into my throat. At the hospital, they ask: *no impersonators please, just family*, and my tongue slides in there, undetected.

## Bob Chorba

These beans take hours to soften.

Sometimes it feels like they'll never stop clattering.

Sam asks why the house smells *like a sewer* –

our home breath thick and pungent

with a bubbling musk. But these are my beans.

It's important that they smell like this,

like the houses that raised me.

It's important not to open a window

until it's time to tip in the carrots and herbs,

that we use the scratchy blanket

my grandparents folded and sent in the mail.

Belonging is more than hovering over a pot and stirring

but in separate kitchens, my mother and I are trying –

her with her trousers rolled up to her knees

easing a cabbage out of its skin, simmering cherries

and tipping them into hot little jars with gold lids

she might one day sneak in our suitcases

to eat in our cold, foreign kitchens.

And me with my quick English,

kneading soda bread to my grandmother's voice.

Some days I am standing on stage

in a costume three sizes too big

putting on a comical accent.

When I wash my hands,

I catch myself in the bathroom mirror,

I catch my mother's damp forehead,

my grandmas' small hands,

all of us rushing to say something

before we forget.

## Mother Tongue ii

|              |            |      |             |            |
|--------------|------------|------|-------------|------------|
| My tongue is | a weak     | hand | digging up  | the past   |
|              | a frenzied | tool | tending to  | our roots  |
|              | a wondrous | bird | translating | my grief   |
|              | a dead     | link | salvaging   | a new life |



## Family Lexicon

the world gave me      a tongue      with no instructions      what was I to do with it  
I relished the salty      I kissed a blue moon      every time I opened      my mouth  
somebody asked      where I was headed      I misspoke      & grandma called me      *expat*  
imagine a sunrise      spilling fast & orange      past your teeth      imagine a language you own  
when I knew the words      we talked like squirrels in the trees      now I'm always asking  
*how do you say that again*      holding vowels in my mouth      & hoping      I want to be sure  
I want my mother's accent      I want someone to overhear      & say      *she must be one of ours*

## Good Immigrant

I recommend a city.

She says *not that city*.

*I have heard bad things.*

What things? *It's all*

*falafel shops and foreigners.*

You mean foreigners like

me. *No. Different.* In France

I am stopped at the border

by a woman who studies

my passport like a counterfeit

bill, a tenner I might use

to buy cigarettes. In class,

I am told to write more

about suffering,

to steal another tongue

for better sonics.

My family is happy

there are Balkan shops

on my street. The locals tell me

*things have changed here.*

No one at home will believe

what they call us, how worried they are

we might stay –

except my grandfather

who asks *and how do they see you*

then every summer

asks me again.

## Dream Talk

Since it's just us, we can look at this egg and call it a baby. One year my body was serving a purpose (thick octopus costume) then another (sea-slicked revenge suit) now I just Google hip pain a lot. I don't know how I'd care for a tadpole, but that feels important. What would I do with an electric blue jellyfish, its wet jewelled tentacles splayed in my palm? Everyone says *you'll know what to do*, like a slippery omen from the ocean's mouth. Every minute with children feels like a test. What if they think I don't get it? What if after all those piercing critiques of my mother, I do everything wrong? Every salt cliff picking its skin is an invitation to jump. Some nights I wake up thinking I've ruined my life. It's always the same dream: two sweaty hands, on the wheel of a car I can't drive.

## Mother Tongue iii

My mother was  
dancing on the edge  
of my tongue; a new  
language born into  
belonging. In it,  
we said so much,  
barely opening our  
mouths. Imagine a  
country, trickling out  
between your teeth.  
That was how it sounded  
when we spoke.

There was a tongue  
resting in the middle  
of my mother; a familiar  
silence dying in  
the distance. Outside,  
the world said so little  
with its gaping  
mouth. Remember  
darkness hiding in  
the back of our throats?  
That was how it sounded  
when we stayed quiet.

## **It Was There and Then It Wasn't**

One morning I looked at the sun  
and saw nothing. A soft egg splayed  
over a dim face. Before that,  
every conversation was a hill  
that looped at the peak  
so we were always out of breath.  
I liked poking at our sighs  
with a fork and hearing it tickle  
the good china, like a parent might do  
to a porcelain child. All those summers  
of fishing for rings in the pool  
taught me nothing. Today, our phone calls  
hang in the air like sulphur.  
When we run out of words, we go back  
to the gold under the mattress –  
how you are saving it for me  
in case I change my mind.

## **We'd Like You to Move on Now**

Am I a coward? Once I watched a girl  
swallow a fistful of mud, gobble the whole thing  
like a meatball. How did she do it?

*I just imagined chocolate.*

Anything is palatable with your eyes closed.

An airplane veering off into a cornfield  
is an animal in search of food.

A bedroom overrun with mould is just the earth  
outgrowing its body. (See? I'm trying)

There are bullets in the quiet pockets of the night  
that sing to me, snakes that braid my hair, but please  
don't talk to me about the family house.

I look at it and tar spills out the floorboards.

That year, I tried to swallow a mothball.

I wanted to build a life without memory.

I'm still there, hunched over a basin,  
waiting for my mind to think *candy*.

