



Source: Saul Hudson, Reuters, 'Bush refuses to rule out Iran nuclear strike', *The Age online*, 20/04/06.

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For many years I've wondered what it would be like to live in another country. Since my life is lived in words, the idea that I might be surrounded by a language I don't know is overwhelming. I've traveled to many places and imagined that I might live in them. Paris, Venice, Shanghai. French, Italian, Chinese. It isn't that people do things differently in these places or that I might find it hard to make friends. It's the language around me, the constant babbling, the unfamiliar intonation patterns, the rhythms of call and response.

There is no hard proof that a language can be learned. I know people who seem to speak fluent French or Italian or Chinese, but they don't know what it's like to be inside the other person's tongue. Of course, this is also true in my own language. When I speak with another person, I can only guess that what they are saying means the same as it would mean if I were saying it.

Yesterday, I returned to my guesthouse in Shanghai to find a policeman at my door. He was a round, sweet man, but he was speaking to me in a fierce tone. He asked for my passport. He spoke my language quite fluently which was a great surprise. I took him to my room and showed him the passport. He explained that this place wasn't safe for foreign guests. A woman from the Philippines had been murdered there four years ago. I might be robbed.

'I am not mean policeman,' he said. 'Tell you to go out. I tell you for your safety, you understand, for your safety, you must move to a hotel.'

Then, there was another problem. All foreign guests must register with the police within 24 hours of arrival. I knew this, but I hadn't done it because of the nature of my work. I wanted to stay under the radar. The policeman explained that I had to register and that it was his duty to tell me this. Because I hadn't registered, he said, I would be 'punish.' He said this word 'punish' with some relish. I wasn't too scared though, because I figured the punishment would be a fine and I had lots of money.

Finally, my Chinese friends showed up and we all went into a vacant room to discuss the situation. We sat on the two beds and one of my friends went out to get some cold drinks. The policeman told me everything again, looking directly at me, but speaking Shanghai dialect. No one understood him. They kept asking him to speak Mandarin. It didn't really make a difference to me. I understood perfectly what he was telling me because I

had heard it all before in my own language.

'I must tell you,' he said, 'you will be punish, but no, you will not because you are my friend, but for your safety, I tell you, for your safety, you must move to a hotel.'

And that's what we finally decided. I moved that afternoon to a small hotel on the other side of town. It's true that if you speak a language that no one else speaks, it is impossible to know if you are communicating. Everything for me is translation. My language died out 500 years ago. Perhaps some linguist will find the texts that will help her decode the language for future generations. Still it won't be the same. I speak my language in my head, in my dreams, in the moments when no other phrase will say exactly what I want to say. There is no one to respond.

The next day I woke up very early with a sudden jolt. I remembered the policeman. He was speaking my language. How could that be? I had no hard proof, but I was sure that I was not mistaken. I went back to my old guesthouse because he had told me that he would check to make sure I had moved out. Could he be one of the old ones? I thought that I was the only one left in the universe. But I remember the words he spoke flowed into me. That's the way it should be when two people speak the same language. Of course, he made some mistakes, small grammatical errors that indicated that it wasn't his first language. But how could he have learned it without contact with one of my kind? The thought obsessed me that there could be another, that I wasn't alone with thousands of words that no one could understand.

The more I thought about it, waiting around for the policeman (who I began to think of fondly as 'my policeman') the more I believed that I had imagined it. He must have been speaking English, the language that I speak the most often. Perhaps now, I have become so accustomed to this language that it seems like my own. If you speak a language as old as mine, a language that has words for things that no longer exist, you must make do with another language, one that feels relatively good on your tongue. And then you hope, (dare I hope?) that someday, someone, even a policeman, will speak your mother tongue.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.*