

CYNTHIA AMOAH

for my grandmother, when words fail

we lie in bed, gazing up at the bedroom ceiling she calls “sky”
i carefully point afar and say, “bãn” in *twi*
before speaking its English counterpart
my grandmother looks at me surely
she mimics the shape i make with my tongue
puffs the sound i make with my mouth
her watery eyes determined
and she says, “wolllllllllll” to mean “wall.”

we have been here many times before
this bed, our classroom. the wall, another word
today, i point to inanimate objects (only
the ones with *twi* pairings i am familiar with)
and teach my grandmother how to speak English.
she says, “osau, tchere mi brofo”
and this is how it began
me pointing, her pronouncing.

sometimes, i find an object that i do not know the *twi* word for
and in frustration, i chase down the word for its meaning
strip the thing for its bones, in hopes of finding something
close. sometimes, we watch *wheel of fortune* and guess
the words. before i knew it, she began teaching me *twi* too
and this is what we were for one another: a synonym
her small frame held many stories, many words
and yet, here i was, pointing.

my mind is a careful dictionary, a reasoning in English
though i am not from this language, she tells me.
some days, i am a choosing of words, thoughts in reverse.
my grandmother’s hands tremble now. i hurry to scan
my mind for its *twi* expression and arrive at nothing
before she is gone. does this mean, i have no language,
which is to say, i have no song. does this mean,
my grandmother knew the things i did not say.