

Selections from

## **Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)**

### **Note**

The lyric monolog *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)* evolved from a sequence of poems. The sampling in this document are the poems that open the monolog – roughly the first 15 minutes of the 90-minute show.

Press and media – please contact Michael Mack to receive a more complete script.  
[mmack@alum.mit.edu](mailto:mmack@alum.mit.edu)

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## Our Lady of Sorrows

Why my mother chopped off her hair,  
followed me to the school bus stop  
that morning in second grade,  
I didn't know. Or why

she bent down sobbing  
*don't let go of my hand.*  
How long did we stand by the 7-11?  
Other kids hushed, watching.

When the bus clunked to a stop  
I climbed on first, grabbed a seat in back,  
my mother outside, hand curled on my window,  
her face a blur

as the bus jerked away.  
The kid beside me punched my arm.  
*Who was that man with you*  
*crying so hard?*

I said I didn't know.  
Three times I swore *I don't know him.*

## **She Helped Me Slide the Mattress Back**

Off the bus from school  
I found our front door open.  
My mother paced inside, arms crossed.  
What did she want to show me?

I followed her crooking finger,  
her billowy flowered skirt  
upstairs to my bedroom door.  
*Go ahead, she said, open it.*

Mattress, clothes, everything  
on the floor, chair tipped over,  
drawers dumped out, checkers, pennies,  
books and model planes

swept off the shelves. I gaped at that  
lopsided heap, everything I owned,  
and my mother, her flushed jittery face,  
brilliant crimson lips . . . .

I knew what to do, gently  
drop my lunch bag,  
circle my arms around her waist,  
press my cheek to her belly.

*thank you Mama thank you*

All afternoon I folded shirts,  
stacked toys and books. My mother downstairs  
sang hymns in the kitchen  
cooking a surprise for my father.

What I can't describe  
as I swept and mopped my room:  
how happy I felt,  
how loved.

## The Couch

Sunday morning  
the living room couch  
me in pajamas  
watching cartoons  
as Mama bangs in  
blouse unbuttoned  
eyes rolled back

I drop my cereal bowl  
roll off the couch  
she bends to the mirror  
touching her face  
*it's changing, she says, it's true,*  
*am I the Blessed Virgin?*  
tears streak her cheeks with sparks

her rosary falls  
she's on the couch  
squeezing me down  
fingers racing  
her lips  
her breath in my mouth  
*Pray baby before it's too late*

she's up, spins  
off the couch hissing  
*Lucifer rules this house*  
she knocks the light  
it swings from the ceiling  
glass and shadows  
fly at the walls

now my father reaches the couch  
his shirt burnt  
she points at him and backs away  
stumbles, a shoe gone  
he says *Annie that's enough*  
grabs her, shakes her  
she's on the floor rocking herself, hugging her knees

my father grabs my arm, drags me  
across the street to a neighbor's couch  
wipes my face on his sleeve  
*Son, I gotta call the hospital*  
he crushes a pack of cigarettes  
flicks and flicks his lighter  
hands shaking, hands on fire

## Scraps

in a parked car  
engine running

my brother hugs  
his teddy bear

my sister hums in back  
hair riffled by breezes

I'm the oldest  
just tall enough to peek over the dash

I see a grassy hill  
the gravel driveway we idle on

a long low building  
white brick

and on the sidewalk  
our mother

screaming, coughing  
doubled up

she kicks and swings  
at two men

they grab her wrists  
and yank her in

For decades I had that memory, a snapshot I never mentioned or questioned. So familiar it seemed ordinary.

At thirty five, writing it, I remembered again my skin on sticky vinyl, seat belt over my lap, bushes outside.

I asked my sister if she remembered. *No, she said, but what about that highway? That rest stop? The front door open and Mama running to the woods?*

My brother remembered the station wagon. *Pontiac, he said, they were yelling about a hospital. When she jumped the car was rolling.*

Hearing his words, I saw it – *Yes! The rest stop! Mama's wild hair! The blast when she shoved open the door, and when she jumped, the look she shot Dad!*

I asked my father, but he shook his head. *No*, he said, and opened his hands. *No son, I can't even imagine it. I was very careful for you children. I wouldn't have taken you to that hospital. Or left you alone in the car.*

I must have believed him: as he spoke, this memory of mine (if it was a memory at all, if it ever even happened) this Kodak snapshot faded, shrinking out of reach.

Now it's hard to remember. Was it afternoon or evening? Can I be sure that it was summer?

All I have is what I wrote. If not for that, I might not remember anything at all.



## Cramer Geography

The Cramers dropped rocks in their toilet bowl.  
Their living room smelled like feet.  
They lived in a crooked clapboard house  
halfway down our street.

My brother, sisters and I  
stayed with the Cramers whenever Mama got sick.  
Fifteen Cramers.  
Catholic.

Mr. Cramer, pink as a ham,  
stooped in a droopy hat.  
I saw him only once or twice  
ducking out.

Mrs. Cramer (huge, buttery)  
sat in a permanent squat,  
one wet kid or another  
hammering on her seat.

The thirteen Cramer kids lined up  
stood like thumbs, the oldest in high school,  
the youngest at four  
rolled in a crib and drooled.

*Why does she look Chinese?* I asked.  
*Mongoloid* they said  
and turned up the Philco TV –  
Lucy and Ricky. Dobie Gillis. Mister Ed.

Metallic flies blitzed the kitchen,  
danced on the crusty table where we chewed  
hush puppies, onion rings, chicken,  
everything fried.

Once when my brother cried,  
Mrs. Cramer hauled him up her pink polyester thigh –  
*tut tut child*. She cooed and rocked him,  
fed him a bent French fry.

Jammed in back of their VW bus  
I sat by the only Cramer boy, Meese.  
His eyes murky and slow.  
He'd yank my hair till I sneezed

while Cramer girls pressed my palms  
with sticky sugar hearts, valentines.  
*I love you*, the candy said, *be mine forever*.  
The girls taught me my first Beatle song –

*Help!* The oldest two were high school age,  
pretty, round as muffins.  
They'd flick their hips in blue plaid skirts,  
pleats swishing.

*There's a bug on your back*, they said.  
I shrieked and whirled,  
slapped the air till they giggled  
*April Fool!*

I caught on quick, shouted back  
*There's a bug on your head! Bug on your head!*  
They looked down their powdered noses –  
*That's not how it works, kid.*

Afternoons in their gravel back yard  
we played hide and seek. Again and again  
Meese Cramer hid behind the same mangy tree,  
threw tantrums when I tagged him.

We'd play till dusk, when Mrs. Cramer wagged a sausage  
from the kitchen window. *Watch out for the Boogie Man!*  
I shivered to think him close,  
lurking in low bushes,  
finger up his nose.

A swing set tilted in the side yard –  
I grabbed its rusty chains and leaned  
back kicking, up  
till my toes touched leaves.

Waiting for Daddy to walk us home  
I swung through the dark,  
heard crickets  
in the pockets of the Cramers' magnolia tree.

## Holidays in Baltimore

Christmas that year, Daddy  
pushed aside the plywood table,  
taped a square of poster paper  
to the wall of our dim kitchen.

My brother, sisters and I  
watched his hands flash  
wands of magic markers,  
sketch a Christmas tree three feet tall.

With stubby trunk,  
green triangle branches,  
it was topped by an angel with pebble eyes,  
mouth a ruby hoop.

Breathless, we clapped as branches  
spread like wings, sparkled with bells  
and hearts, pine cones, snowflakes,  
almond candle flames.

He stepped back and clucked *Your turn*.  
We gripped markers, stood barefoot  
beneath the tree's gracious branches,  
drew whatever we wanted –

footballs, a pony, bicycle, telescope, airplane, dolls,  
Mama. Whatever we wanted.

**PRESS AND MEDIA**

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