

Note to the reader: *Hearing Voices (Speaking in Tongues)* is a feature-length theater work performed by a single actor. The work evolved from a sequence of poems, which here retain their original verse form rather than appearing in a standard script format. They also retain their original titles, but the titles are for reference only, and are not spoken. This excerpt begins at the work's very beginning.

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

### **The Gospel of Saint Luke (a fragment)**

*(NATHAN is flipping the pages of a Bible, apparently looking for something.)*

Luke . . . Luke . . . Luke . . . .

*(When he finds it, he begins to read.)*

From the Gospel of Saint Luke. . . . .

“And the angel of the Lord appeared unto her and said, ‘Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.’

“And when she saw the angel, she grew troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be . . . .’ ”

“And the angel said unto her, ‘Fear not, for thou hast found favor with God. The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee. And the power of the most high shall overshadow thee.’ ”

*(NATHAN closes the Bible and puts it down.)*

### **Our Lady of Sorrows**

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

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

When the bus clunked to a stop  
I climbed on last, grabbed a seat in back,  
my mother outside, hands 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 don'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 and 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, books. My mother downstairs  
sang hymns in the kitchen  
cooking a surprise for my father

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

## **All I Have**

I'm in a parked car  
engine running

my brother beside me  
hugs his teddy bear

my sister's in back  
humming Happy Birthday

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  
a brick wall

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 questioned it or mentioned it. So familiar it seemed ordinary.

*(NATHAN unfolds a sheet of notebook paper from his back pocket, refers to it.)* At thirty five, writing it down, I remembered it all 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 our station wagon. “A white Pontiac,” he said, “they were yelling about a hospital. When she jumped the car was rolling.”

Hearing his words, I saw it! *(In his excitement, he drops the sheet of paper)* 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, sat down. “No,” he said, and opened his hands. “No son, I can’t even imagine it. I was careful to keep you kids away from all that. I wouldn’t have taken you to that hospital. Or left you alone in the car.”

I believed him. I must have believed him because 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 it was summer?

*(NATHAN picks up the sheet of paper and looks at it, dismayed.)*

All I have is what I wrote. *(Slowly, carefully, he folds the paper back into his pocket.)* If not for that, I might not remember anything at all.