

Sam Shepard, Tongues

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(This script is provided for disability access for the 2021 production of On the Cusp by NON:op Open Opera Works and is solely for the purposes of disability access.)

SCENE: *Bare stage. Black backdrop in semicircle upstage. Downstage center at the extreme edge, a straight-backed chair draped in a bright Mexican blanket (simple, traditional design). The blanket provides the only color. Directly behind the chair is a low platform raised about a foot off the stage floor, measuring about four feet square. On the platform are the various percussion instruments arranged in a semicircle, visible to the audience from the sides. The lighting is very simple, essentially white, and lit with a maximum of three instruments. Lights to black. Percussionist and speaker enter in dark. Lights up to reveal speaker sitting in chair, blanket covering his lap, white shirt with no collar. The percussionist, dressed in all black, is unseen for the moment. SPEAKER remains motionless. The right arm of percussionist appears to the left lift side of the speaker holding two maracas and in a slow, rolling motion sets a four/four hypnotic tempo. The sound is heard for a while alone and then continues as the SPEAKER begins.*

SPEAKER:

He was born in the middle of a story which he had nothing to do with.
In the middle of a people.
In the middle of a people he stays.

All his fights.	<i>Percussion accent within 4/4</i>
All his suffering.	<i>accent</i>
All his hope.	<i>accent</i>
Are with the people.	<i>no accent, continues 4/4</i>

All his joy	<i>accent</i>
All his hate	<i>accent</i>
All his labors	<i>accent</i>
Are with the people.	<i>no accent, continues 4/4</i>

All the air	<i>accent</i>
All the food	<i>accent</i>
All the trees	<i>accent</i>
All colors	<i>accent</i>
All sound	<i>accent</i>
And smell.	<i>accent, continues 4/4</i>

All the dreams	<i>accent</i>
All the demons	<i>accent</i>
All the saints	<i>accent</i>
All taboos	<i>accent</i>
All rewards	<i>accent</i>
Are with the people.	<i>no accent, continues</i>

The people named
All the stones
All the birds
All the fish
All the plants.

no accent
accent
accent
accent
sudden stop, no sound, percussionists
arm frozen straight out, holding maracas
through SPEAKER'S next stanza.

He was honored.
He was dishonored.
He was married.
He became old.
He became older.

slight spasm of percussionist's wrist
after each line

This night.
He goes to sleep in his same bed.
This night.
He falls to sleep in his same way.
This night.
This dream he dreams he's dreaming.
This night.

unseen, low tense pulsing sound of
tapping on bong, stretching head to
achieve high and low tones.

A voice.

continues bongo, mounting slightly

A voice comes.
A voice speaks.
A voice he's never heard.

stops dead, no sound

(short staccato speech)
You are entirely dead.
What is unfinished is forever unfinished.
What happened has happened.
You are entirely gone from the people.

no sound throughout stanza

In a second he mourns for himself.
For his whole life he mourns.

low roll on bongo, unseen

In the next second he's entirely dead.

roll continues, stops abruptly on the
word "next", rests

In a second he mourns for the others.
For all the others he mourns.

roll starts up again

In the next second he's entirely dead.

stops again on "next", rests

In a second he forgets.
All life with the people he forgets.

roll starts again

In the next second he leaves.

*deep resounding boom from Doumbak,
moves into tense, pulsing 6/8 time
stretching skin*

His whole body he leaves.
He leaves his whole body behind.

*abrupt stop with boom on Doumbak,
silence, long rest as SPEAKER breathes,
the breathing leads him into next voice*

SPEAKER: (*worker's voice*)

If I get this job. I hope I get this job. The other job I had I just quit.

*left hand of percussionist, visible to
SPEAKER'S right, comes crashing down
with small pipe striking a cast iron object,
hand remains in place after striking*

You couldn't hear anybody talk. Soon as you walked into the building.
You couldn't hear anybody. There was all this heat.

*left hand of percussionist quickly
disappears, sound of metallic rattling, pipe
striking rim of tambourine, glass clinking
all unseen*

Noise. You had to get up just before the light. Everything dark in the house. But this other
job—this job I can sleep late. No noise.

*again left hand of percussionist strikes
down with pipe on SPEAKER'S right*

You get up in the light. You come home in the light. Not the same risks. No danger of getting
your hand crushed.

*hand quickly disappears, sound of clacking
wood and metal, unseen*

Pay's just as good. Get the same insurance. This new job I can make something out of. I can
move. Maybe work my way up a little.

*again left hand appears, crashes down,
strikes iron object, then quickly snatches
up a small African "Talking Drum" with
seeds inside, in quick, sweeping motion
the arm holds the drum vertically, very
straight so it's visible above SPEAKER'S
head, freezes in that position*

SPEAKER: *(new mother's voice)*

Everybody tried to prepare me. They told me how to breathe.
How to relax. How to think about something else

They told me what kind of pain I'd have.
How the spasms would come. How to deal
with the pain. How to push. Nothing they
told me was like this. I don't know whose
skin this is. I touch the skin. Soft head.
Is my hand the same skin. My fingers. I
touch the head. Soft head. Just washed.
Nothing they told me. This blood. This
blood from me. Just washed. Nothing
they told me was like this. Just born. My
arm is his bed.

*very slowly the percussionist's arm starts
to describe a downward arc with the
"Talking Drum" casting the seeds inside
the drum to fall from one skin to the other,
the sound is very light and soft like sand
falling on dry leaves, the arm is kept
straight throughout. when the arm reaches
the very bottom of the arc, it fluidly
reverses the action, again causing the
seeds to make sound*

SPEAKER: *(calling)*

Where— Let's see— Is this— Wait— Now— Listen— Now— No— Wait— Let's see— Is
this— Is this the one? No— Just a minute. Wait just a minute. Just let me catch my breath.
Now! No, just a minute. Just a minute more. Just wait. It'll come. Don't— Don't try to— It's
not that it's lost. Not that it won't come back. It's just a temporary thing. Something—
Something must have— It's not that I can't hear myself. I can hear myself. I CAN HEAR
MYSELF NOW! There.

There it was. That was it. That was it just then. Just then. Just came out. Just like that. How
could that be. How come it happened then and not now? WHY NOT NOW! Nothing to
worry about. Sometimes these things just happen. Something loses something. Temporarily.
It's not that big a deal. It's not like I'm not ever going to find my voice again. Ever again.
Nothing as final as that. It's like a lapse. That's it. A little lapse. It's already coming back. I
can feel a certain familiarity.

*percussion shifts into very constant
tapping meter, under voice, almost
metronome feel*

Something in the tone. The patter. The turn of phrase. Before long I'll be recognizable to all
those around me. I'll be heard in my familiar way. Even in the dark the others will know it's
me. They'll call me by my name. I'll call them. They'll hear me saying their name. They'll
say they know me. By my sound. Soon everything will be just like it always has been.

*percussion continues tapping, fades
slowly into silence, rest, no sound, next
voice begins with no percussion*

SPEAKER: *(voice to a Blind One)*

In front of you is a window. About chest level. It's night out. In the window, in the glass, is
your reflection. There's a small table to your right. About the height of your knees. On the
table is a blue cup. The same cup you just drank from. On the wall are pictures from your

past. One is a photograph. You as a boy. You standing in front of a cactus. You're wearing a red plaid shirt.

Soft tone of a gong, one stroke, then a very faint light droning sound begins and builds slowly throughout speech but never dominates SPEAKERS'S voice

The walls around you are green. The paint is old. In places the paint is peeled away. Underneath it's white. There's a bed in the corner, with a Mexican blanket. A calendar hangs on the wall by the window. A lamp made from an Olive Oil can. Now there's the light of an airplane passing outside the window. The night is absolutely black. The light of the plane keeps passing slowly. Blinking. Red and blue. Yellow and blue. Now it disappears. A star is blinking in its place. You can't see the moon from here. Now, even the star disappears. A car goes by. Moths are plunging into the glass. Tiny bugs crawl. Electricity fades then comes back. Everything else is still. Absolutely still. Nothing is moving now except for your breath. Your chest. The shirt on your chest. Your shirt is blue. Your glasses are black. A mosquito races around your ear. The same mosquito you're hearing.

the droning tone rings out into silence, rest

SPEAKER:

(Hunger dialogue—these next two voices are made very distinct from each other in tone; for instance, sounding one voice in a high register and the other low, almost dividing the SPEAKER'S voice in half, no percussion to open)

Would you like to go eat? Isn't it time to eat?

I don't mind.

We don't have to. It's up to you.

Didn't we eat already?

Did we?

I thought we did.

That was before. Wasn't it?

Yes. I think so. It must've been.

Well, we don't have to.

No. I don't mind.

Only if you're hungry. Are you hungry?

I must be.

I'm not all that hungry myself.

You're not?

No, not really. I mean I'd have something if you wanted something.

But you wouldn't eat if you were on your own?

No, I don't think so.

You'd just be eating for my sake?

Well, I'd have something with you. A little something.

Well I don't want to force you to have something if you're not hungry.

I'm a little bit hungry. Not enough for a full meal.

I'm famished!

*very softly, sound of wood scraper,
constant gnawing rhythm under voice*

You are?

Absolutely. Starved! I'm so hungry I could eat a house!

Well, why didn't you say something?

Because I thought you weren't hungry.

I'm always hungry. I was just being polite.

I'm so hungry I could eat a horse!

Well then we should eat!

Nothing I ate could satisfy this hunger I'm having right now!

Well let's find a place then.

This hunger knows no bounds! This hunger is eating me alive it's so hungry!

Just hang on! We'll find something.

gnawing rhythm picks up tempo and volume through next passage, both hands and arms of percussionist appear on right and left sides of SPEAKER playing wood scraper gourd, this motion is a large sweeping half circle so that percussionist's arms appear to one side, disappear behind SPEAKER, then reappear on the other side continuously.

Nothing we find will satisfy it. Absolutely nothing. Whatever we find won't be enough. It will only subside. For a little while. It won't disappear. It will come back. It will be stronger when it comes back. It will devour everything in sight when it comes back. It will eat me alive when it comes back. It will be ravenous when it comes back. It will devour me whole when it comes back. It will go through all the food in the world when it comes back. It will go through all the possessions in the world when it comes back. It will go through all the sex in the world when it comes back. It will go through all the power in the world when it comes back. It will go through all the ideas in the world when it comes back. It will go through all the goods in the world when it comes back. When it comes back there'll be no stopping it when it comes back. When it comes back there'll be no appeasing it when it comes back. When it comes back there'll be nothing left but the hunger itself when it comes back. Nothing left but the hunger eating the hunger when it comes back. Nothing left but the hunger eating itself. Nothing left but the hunger.

abrupt stop of voice and sound, pause, sudden movement of percussionist's right arm jabbing out horizontally, holding a string of small, brass prayer bells which dangle down, pause, wrist of percussionist makes a downward spasm causing bells to jingle, arm remains horizontal, pause, again spasm of wrist and bells jingle, voice comes

SPEAKER: *(Invocation)*

Between the breath I'm breathing
and the one that's coming

Something tells me now

percussion-spasm of wrist, bells jingle

Between the space I'm leaving
and the space I'm joining

The dead one tells me now

percussion-wrist repeats

Between the shape I'm leaving
and the one I'm becoming

The departed tells me now

percussion-wrist repeats

Between the ear
and the sound it hears

A ghost one tells me now

percussion-wrist repeats

Between the face I'm making
and the face that's coming

A spirit tells me now

percussion-wrist repeats

Behind the voice that's speaking
and the one that's thinking

A dead one tells me now

*percussionist's arm crashes directly to
floor as though suddenly released by
voice, bells hit floor, hand releases
bells and disappears behind SPEAKER*

*immediate metronome cadence on wood
block, unseen, constant underlying tempo*

SPEAKER: *(Voice from Dead)*

There was this moment. This moment taking place. I tried to stop this moment. This can't happen now. I thought. This can't be going to happen. I thought. Not now. I thought. It's still possible to avoid it. I thought. It's not that this won't pass. I thought. Not that I won't still be here tomorrow. I thought. I will still be here tomorrow. I thought. It's inconceivable that I won't be. I thought.

full stop, short silence, then tempo resumes

There was this moment. This moment where I vanished. This moment where the whole of me vanished. The whole of my thoughts. Vanished. The whole of my feelings. Vanished. The whole of myself. Vanished. The whole of what I call myself. Vanished. The whole of my body was left.

*percussion stops, pause, voice finishes
without percussion*

SPEAKER:

There was this moment that passed. Taking me with it.

Pause—sudden rattle of mallet stick in cowbell, then silence, continuous single pulse on bongo sets in, broken intermittently by sudden urgent rattle of cowbell, then returns to single pulse on bongo under voice of SPEAKER

SPEAKER: *(Inquiry to Dead One)*

Is this you in death?
If you are dead
why isn't there candles?

Is it you, dead?
If you are
then why isn't there tears?

Is it you posing as dead?
Where are the mourners?
The grief?

Is this really you appearing?
Again appearing?

Are you asking me to believe it?
What are you asking?

Is this really you in death?
Not as you were?
Not as you once were?

Am I knowing you differently now?
Am I making you up?
Conjuring up this shape of you?
As I remember you once?
Putting you back together.

Is this me calling you up
or are you appearing?
Volunteering yourself?
Beckoning?

What are you asking?
Can you tell me?
Can you say that you know you're not here
in this world
in this world I'm speaking from?

*voice stops, cowbell “talks” constantly
now building into almost frantic
persistence, as though trying to break
through to the world of the voice—
SPEAKER’S voice cuts the cowbell off
as it breaks in, then percussion picks up
quick, jagged rhythm of the voice, playing
off different combinations of instruments*

SPEAKER: *(quick, hailing rhythm)*

I— There— I. Me. Me saying “I” to myself. That was me. Just then. That was it. Me. I speak. Me. No one else. That was me just then. Must’ve been. Who else? Why should I doubt it? Not me? Who else could it have been?

*stop, short pause, percussion goes into
4/4 stop time on cymbal, like Glenn Miller
“Big Band” sound, as voice sings in
accompaniment*

SPEAKER: *(sings first verse straight)*

“From this moment on
you and me dear
only two for tea dear
from this moment on”

(sings second verse in prolonged, exaggerated tones)

“From this lucky day
I’ll be flyin’ high babe
from this moment on.”

cymbal fades, short pause

SPEAKER: *(flat, monotonous tone)*

I’m writing you this today from a very great distance. Everything here is fine. I’m hoping everything there is fine with you. I’m hoping you still miss me as much as you once did. I know that I miss you as much as ever. I’m also hoping this reaches you as soon as possible.

Something happened today which you might find amusing. I know I found it amusing at the time. A dog came into the hotel and ran around the lobby. Nobody knew what to do.

Everyone was in a stew. Here’s hoping this finds you in good health.

All my love,

Larry

sharp accent on cymbal

All the best,

Stuart

sharp accent on cymbal

Warm Regards,
Mel
ring on bell of cymbal

Yours,
Nat
flat punch, edge of cymbal

With fond wishes,
Randy
let cymbal ring out

Sincerely,
Mathew
flat accent, cymbal

Cordially,
Josh
bright ring, cymbal

Your loving husband,
Stanley
sharp splash, cymbal

Your oldest son,
Tom
sharp accent, cymbal

Your faithful servant,
Daniel Eric
sharp crash, cymbal

Respectfully,
Mitchell Lewis Scott
very sharp accent, cymbal

Yours as always,
Rebecca
cymbal rings out

Lovingly,
Andrew
soft, bell tone, cymbal

With all my heart,

Jacob

soft, short tone

Forever,

Lucille

loud crash, cymbal, silence—percussion begins deep, driving 6/8 rhythm on hand drums (Conga, Doumbak), rhythm leads voice then fades and swells back again to foreground as voice continues

SPEAKER: (*pompous voice*)

It's not often, actually, that I find myself at a loss for words. But in this particular instance I was left speechless. Absolutely numb. No words could even begin to describe the impact of it.

Drumming gains force but remains in same tempo

SPEAKER: (*public voice*)

I'm not here today to lay down the law to you people. On the contrary. I'm here so that you can openly voice your opinions. I'm here so that you can see that those opinions are not falling on deaf ears. I'm here so that we can join together in this struggle. So that we can unite. So that together we can bring about a resolution to this problem which has haunted us for more than a decade.

percussion abruptly fades but continues a faint, pulsing rhythm behind voice

SPEAKER: (*to One about to Die*)

I don't know what to tell you exactly. I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to just make something up. I don't really know where you'll be going. That's the truth. I don't have any idea. It's all right to be afraid I guess. You don't have to be brave. Who says you have to be brave? I just wish I knew what to tell you. I could make something up. Should I make something up? All right. I might as well.

percussion stops pulsing rhythm, hands move quickly and snatch up large sleigh bells, held in both hands, the bells are shook in constant arcing motion exactly the same as the movement with the scraping gourd accompanying the "voices of hunger," bells continue through next section

When you die

you go straight to Heaven or Hell.

When you die

you disintegrate into energy.

When you die
 you're re-born into another body.
When you die
 you tum to shit.
When you die
 you travel to other planets.
When you die
 you get to Start all over.
When you die
 you get marked in the book.
When you die
 you're re-joined with your ancestors.
When you die
 all your dreams will come true.
When you die
 you'll speak to the Angels.
When you die
 you'll get what you deserve.
When you die
 it's absolutely final.
When you die
 you never come back.
When you die
 you die forever.
When you die
 it's the end of your life.

bells stop, percussionist's right arm is extended vertically to the left of SPEAKER, holding a tambourine, very slowly the arm describes an arc to the right side of the SPEAKER, as it drops the tambourine makes a slight tinkle, simultaneously with his left hand the percussionist softly strikes a cymbal, this action is continuous but timed so that the sound of the tambourine and cymbal occur between the lines of the SPEAKER

SPEAKER: *(talk song. simple voice. direct)*
Today the wind roared through the center of town.
Tonight I hear its voice.

percussion—soft

Today the river lay wide open to the sun.
Tonight I hear it speaking.

percussion—soft

Today the moon remained in the sky.
Tonight I feel it moving.

percussion—soft

Today the people talked without speaking.
Tonight I can hear what they're saying.

percussion—soft

Today the tree bloomed without a word.
Tonight I'm learning its language.

*no percussion, arms stay frozen,
silence, blackout*