

THE LIFE OF JOHN HENRY

By Chris Braak

The Life of John Henry

Characters:

The Prisoners—dressed in drab cover-alls. Sometimes they must fulfill two roles.

John Henry: A black man, powerfully-built.

Willie: A black man, slim, and sickly.

Laz: A black man, leanly built, a hard worker.

Robert: A black man, lean, but no laborer. He sings and plays the guitar.

Peter: An Irishman.

The Rest of the World:

James, Edward, and Burd are played by the same actor.

C. E. James: A rich man, he wears fancy suits, and has a refined Virginia drawl.

Edward: A guard with a sadistic eye, he wears a plain blue uniform.

Judge Burd: A man with a dent in his head. He is dressed as a union soldier and has a thick lower-class Virginia accent.

Wardwell, Benjamin, and the Gravedigger are played by the same actor.

Wardwell: A Quaker, and warden of a prison in Virginia. He is kind and well-spoken, and plainly, if richly dressed.

Benjamin: A guard, less enthusiastic than Edward, dressed similarly.

The Gravedigger: A man dressed shabbily and dirtily. He has a hat and a shovel, and his face should be in some way obscured.

Time: the late 19th century, or thereabouts.

Place: Mostly a dig site, where prison work crews are laboring to cut a hole in a mountain.

PROLOGUE

The stage is dark.
Faint light illuminates
ROBERT and JOHN HENRY,
standing in chains near
two old cots. JOHN
HENRY, not necessarily
tall, though necessarily
powerfully-built, stands
with his shoulders
slumped, as though they
must bear the weight of
the world.

ROBERT, young and lean,
has a guitar, from which
he plucks a quiet,
bluesy melody.

ROBERT

You ready to go?

JH

What?

ROBERT

You ready to leave this place? Run away and never come
back?

JH

You a damn fool.

ROBERT

I can sing these chains away soon as I want. Soon as you
say you ready.

ONE

The stage is in the dark. WILLIE stands alone in a spotlight.

WILLIE

Let me tell you now about John Henry! You ready? You all want to hear it?

John Henry was born with a hammer in his hand. Knew right away he was gwan t' be a steel-drivin' man. He looked up at them mountains in Virginny and said to his momma, "I'm gonna lay me rails straight across them mountains, straight across the whole country!"

Every train boss wanted John Henry on his team, and they paid him twenty dollars a day some places! John Henry had rhinestones on his overalls, and a tooth made out of gold, and he went from town to town layin' rails.

JOHN HENRY can be heard, shouting "hup" and then hammering a train spike. The rhythm continues throughout, but increases slowly in speed.

One day, the boss heard about this new steam drill, and bought hisself one. Said to John Henry and all his men, "Look, I got me a new steam drill, ain't none of you can go so fast as that, I gotta let you go."

But John Henry stood up and said, "I'll go on against your steam drill, boss, and show you just one man is better than that drill!"

So the boss set up a challenge. He put his drill up to the mountain, John Henry stood 'side it. Whoever drilled down thirty feet first was the winner—if John Henry won, the boss would keep his team on the job, but if he lost, the drill would stay, and the team would go.

The train whistle blew...

Sound of train whistle.
The sound of John Henry
shouting and hammering
now becomes louder,
faster, more prominent.

...and they started that race. Ain't no man ever drilled
like John Henry drilled that day. His voice so loud they
heard it in Alaska, and men there said no birds would sit
still for a week. His hammer so loud they felt it on the
other side of the world! The sweat poured off him like a
river, and filled up the Great Salt Lake!

And that steam drill screamed and screamed, and they both
shook the world so bad that everyone thought the End of
Days was on its way!

It was neck and neck the whole time, and after one hour,
when they drilled halfway, John Henry stepped it up.

The sound of hammering
and shouting grows more
intense.

He pulled ahead! Crack! Boom! Crack! Boom!

Mimes hammering a drill
into the rock.

And then, POW! John Henry breaks through the last foot of
rock, and the steam drill is trailing on behind him! John
Henry wins!

But he worked so hard...he slammed that hammer down just one
more time, and when he did his heart give out. Just
stopped right there, and John Henry collapse on the ground.
The train whistle blows again, and every man takes his hat
off when he sees what happened.

John Henry won, but he killed himself doin' it. They
buried him in that mountain, they say, right where the
train come round the bend. And then the boss throws out
his steam drill, and for all the rest of his days, he used
good men with strong arms to dig his tunnels.

The hammering continues.
The lights come up to

reveal the rest of the set: scaffolding and platforms surrounding a large, still machine like a train engine. At the bottom of the scaffolding are JOHN HENRY, LAZ, and PETE (an Irishman), drilling train spikes. They are shackled together at the legs. JOHN HENRY roars as he hits the spike one last time, then collapses back against the wall.

LAZ

Heh, John Henry, you gon' kill yo'self like that. You gotta slow down.

He hums something to himself. JOHN HENRY says nothing.

Mountain will still be there tomorrow. Heh. We ain't goin nowhere.

The whistle blows, EDWARD and BENJAMIN enter.

EDWARD

All right boys! Day's up! Time for the mess!

The men shuffle away from the work, in that marching-shuffle that chain gang members have to do. WILLIE comes to the end of the line and shackles himself on. BENJAMIN hands them plates, from which they eat. (The plates are empty; the eating is mimed.) While they do

this EDWARD leads in
ROBERT, who has a
shackle on one ankle and
a guitar.

Comp'ny today, boys.

ROBERT sits down, plays
Robert Johnson's "Dust
My Broom." The other
men eye him warily.
EDWARD listens for a
minute, confusion on his
face.

What is that? Don't you know nothin' good?

ROBERT looks up at him,
then starts to play
"I've Been Working on
the Railroad."

Haha! That's what I like to hear.

He sings along, not
especially well.

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah,
Someone in the kitchen I know.
Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah,
Strummin on the old banjo.

EDWARD and BENJAMIN
leave the men, still
singing to themselves.

Fee, fi, fiddley I oh,
Fee fi fiddley I oh oh oh.
Fee fi, fiddley I oh!
Strummin on the old banjo.

After the guards leave,
Robert continues to play
for a moment. Then he
slows the song down a
little. John Henry and

the other men sing, in a
call and response style:

JOHN HENRY

I've been working on the railroad,

OTHERS

All the livelong day.

JOHN HENRY

I've been working on the railroad,

OTHERS

Just to pass the time away.

JOHN HENRY

Don't you hear the whistle blowin.

OTHERS

Rise up so early in the morn.

JOHN HENRY

Don't you hear the captain shoutin.

OTHERS

Dinah won't you blow your horn?

The song stops.

JOHN HENRY

What your name?

ROBERT

Robert.

JOHN HENRY

What'd you do?

ROBERT

Din't do nothin'.

Pause. JOHN HENRY
starts to laugh.

JOHN HENRY

Din't do nothin'. I ain't do nothin', neither. Ain't no one here do nothin'. Look around, you see 'em? None of us did nothin'. What you do?

(Pause)

ROBERT

Nothin.

(Pause)

JOHN HENRY laughs again.

LAZ

Hey, you heard about them workers on the other side? They strikin'.

JOHN HENRY

They ain't strikin'. Where you hear that?

LAZ

Fat Tommy. He cook for them sometime. Says the workers don't want to drill no more, less they get...

He puts his hands over his mouth and nose.

...like that, for the dust from them drills.

PETER

You can't believe nothin' Fat Tommy tells you. He told me last week he made the soup from squirrels.

LAZ

He do make the soup from squirrels! They catch 'em up in the woods and throw 'em in!

PETER

They don't put no squirrels in the soup! You know how hard it is to catch a squirrel? You seen Fat Tommy run? He couldn't catch his own fat belly if he had a head start and someone lit his pants on fire.

LAZ

What you think is in the soup then?

Dogs.

PETER

I ain't gonna eat no dog.

WILLIE

PETER

You'll eat shoes then. Tell me when you're done with yours, I'll let you chew on one of mine.

WILLIE
(not amused)

You keep yo shoes on.

JOHN HENRY

Where you from, Robert?

ROBERT

Mississippi.

JOHN HENRY

They teach you to play like that down there?

ROBERT

Nope.

JOHN HENRY

Where you learn to play?

ROBERT says nothing,
just plays the refrain
from *Steel-Drivin Man*.

You gon' answer me?

Still, ROBERT says
nothing.

Hey. You answer me!

He shakes the shackle on
his leg, stands up.
EDWARD and BENJAMIN
enter again.

BENJAMIN

All right, boys, lights. Get on back to the cots.

JOHN HENRY

I said answer me.

EDWARD

Sit down. Sit down! I said SIT DOWN!

EDWARD takes a hold of the truncheon at his side. JOHN HENRY turns to him and they stare at each other intensely.

Sit down. Sit down, now.

JOHN HENRY doesn't move. EDWARD flexes his grip on his truncheon. The implication is clear.

Sit down. Sit. Down.

JOHN HENRY stares at him for a long moment, then back at ROBERT, then he returns to his seat. EDWARD speaks to BENJAMIN.

Let's get them back. *(to the men)* You're on half rations tomorrow. And you'll stay on half rations 'til you learn to listen.

The MEN groan.

Don't blame me! Blame your boy here! He's the one that doesn't know who's in charge! Now, come on.

EDWARD and BENJAMIN lead the MEN back to a place where a number of cots are laid out. As the men situation themselves, the lights fade.

TWO

Lights come up WARDWELL, the warden of the prison. He is on one of the scaffold platforms, which is situated with a chair and a desk. WARDWELL is sitting at his desk, writing letters. C. E. JAMES enters from stage right, and approaches the platform, light behind him, classical music wafting in, and the sounds of a party.

WARDWELL

I'll be back in a minute, darling. Just taking care of a few things.

JAMES

Darling? I hardly think we know each other *that* well, warden.

WARDWELL

Oh! Mr. James. I'm terribly sorry, I thought you were my wife.

JAMES

Yes, I gathered.

(pause)

You know, I just came from a party? It was really quite excellent. Music, dancing, good company. It was hosted by a Mr. Wardwell, and yet, he was nowhere to be seen!

WARDWELL

Ah, yes, I apologize. I'll be back out in a moment, I've just...got some correspondence to review.

JAMES

Take it from me, warden—you've got your work time, and your private time, and you need to keep them separate. A man

can go mad, if he doesn't take time for himself now and then.

WARDWELL

Ah, now I think you *must* be my wife. I'll just be a moment Mr. James.

Pause.

JAMES

Quite an operation you've got going here, Warden. How many prisons do you run?

WARDWELL

Hah, just the one, Mr. James, but I feel like it's growing every day. We've really made some great progress when it comes to organization. My work crews have managed to turn Richmond's prison from the necessary burden of a law-abiding society to a genuinely profitable industry.

JAMES

Lucky for you this law-abiding society's got so many criminals in it, huh?

(pause)

WARDWELL

Well, luck is a matter of perspective, of course. Believe me, I'd really rather the whole thing went out of business for want of the workforce.

(pause)

Is...I'm sorry, is there something that you needed?

JAMES

Well, I suppose if I can't convince you to come back to the party, I might as well talk business with you.

WARDWELL

Now, Mr. James, I'm only looking /over some letters...

JAMES

/I want to cut to seven cents a day.

WARDWELL

What?

JAMES

Seven cents, per man, per day. Ten cents is too much.

WARDWELL

We agreed on ten.

JAMES

I know. I'm changing the agreement.

WARDWELL

Now, look here...ten cents was barely above my costs. I've got to keep the men fed and clothed. I've got a prison to run...

JAMES

The prison's expenses aren't my problem.

WARDWELL

I beg your pardon, but they are your problem if you want to /keep using my convicts.

JAMES

/Here, look at this...

JAMES climbs up the platform, and pulls out a set of folded blueprints from inside his coat pocket, opens them, puts them on the desk.

WARDWELL

I don't understand...you brought these with you?

JAMES smiles, but says nothing.

Didn't you just tell me that I should keep my business out of my personal life?

JAMES

I said if you didn't, you'd go mad.

(Pause)

WARDWELL

What is this?

JAMES

It's a drill, powered by a steam engine. It can cut holes fifty feet long, in half the time, with half as many men, as your teams now.

WARDWELL

You want to replace my men with this.

JAMES

Unless you can drop below ten cents a day.

WARDWELL

Mr. James, be reasonable. Where...how can I do that? The money isn't there.

JAMES

I'm sure you can find something...they can do without.

WARDWELL

They're men, Mr. James, not animals. I can't have them living in filth. I have to provide a certain quality of life..

JAMES

Then you'll find another way to do it. I don't need your crews anymore.

WARDWELL

Mr. James, you don't understand.

JAMES

I understand perfectly well, Warden. This is the future, whether you like it or not. You want to keep your men fed? I'm offering seven cents per man, per day. You don't want to keep them fed? I'll buy a steam drill and go without them.

WARDWELL

But the men...

JAMES

...are CRIMINALS, warden. Even if they weren't...the world is moving on, and it'll go with or without them. Frankly, you're lucky that I'm offering this much. In ten years, there won't be a live crew anywhere on the C&O line—it'll be steam drills or nothing.

(pause)

WARDWELL

I don't believe you.

JAMES says nothing,
gestures at the
blueprints.

No. The drill's not tested. You *think* it'll go twice as fast...but you haven't built it, have you? You haven't *tested* it.

JAMES

It's been tested. They used it on the Ohio River line.

(Pause)

WARDWELL

You've pushed it too far, Mr. James. The Ohio River line used live crews. I know, because I supplied them. Your drill's a hoax.

JAMES

Every crew? At every site? Really, warden? What papers are you looking at? Are they requests for crews? What is it that's got you in here during your party? Have you noticed that the requests are getting smaller? That they're fewer, farther between?

Pause. There is
cheering from the other
room. A number of
people shout out "Happy
New Year!"

JAMES

You think it matters? Do you really think it matters? What if the drill doesn't work now, today? I've got

engineers working on it. Good, smart men. They'll make it work.

WARDWELL

You can't afford the /time to get it right...

JAMES

/Don't you tell me what I can afford! I've got a backer in Germany who's just put a million dollars behind this project. West Virginia has given me exclusive rights to the lines once the project is finished. Do you have any idea how much that's worth?

(pause)

It's progress, warden, and you can't stop it. All you can do is get in line, or get out of the way.

He gathers up the blueprints, puts them in his coat.

Your men are lucky they even *have* work. It's only because I'm a philanthropist that I offered as much as seven.

JAMES begins to leave, WARDWELL stares after him. Before he gets to the door, WARDWELL calls out.

WARDWELL

Wait.

(pause)

Seven cents per man, per day.

(pause)

JAMES

Six.

(long pause)

WARDWELL

Six.

THREE

Night. The men are chained to small iron posts, stuck into the ground. They are sleeping on dirty cots. Laz has a train spike, and is working at his chains with it. The chains clatter noisily.

WILLIE

What you doin'? Stop that.

JOHN HENRY

You ain't gonna break them chains with that.

WILLIE

Stop it, they gon' hear you.

LAZ

Shut up.

JOHN HENRY

Ain't gonna do nothin' with that.

WILLIE

Stop, you give it to me.

LAZ

Shut up!

WILLIE

Give it!

They struggle for the train spike. WILLIE wrests it away.

LAZ

Give it back.

WILLIE

They gon' hear you, and they gon' whip all of us.

LAZ

If we get free, they ain't gon' whip any of us. Give me it back.

WILLIE

We out of here in two months. Why you gon' try and get away now? They lock you up for another hunnret years when they catch you

LAZ

They ain't gonna catch me, and I ain't gonna wait no two months 'fore they let me go. You gonna give me that spike now, I'm gonna pry myself loose and get gone. Now give it!

He lunges for the spike.
WILLIE backs up, into
JOHN HENRY, who snatches
it away and tosses it
back to LAZ. LAZ
continues to work
noisily with the spike.

JOHN HENRY

You slow, boy? I tol' you, you ain't gonna break the chains with that spike. You gonna be chippin at 'em til the devil come to take you.

WILLIE

How you gonna get away?

LAZ

I'm not workin on the chains.

WILLIE

Where you gonna go?

LAZ

I'm'a dig under the post 'til I can pull it out.

WILLIE

They got dogs.

JOHN HENRY

You gonna run down to Ohio with the chains still on you?
You gonna run away from them dogs with chains on your feet?

WILLIE

They gon' let us go in *two months*.

LAZ

They ain't never gonna let us go, you dumb nigger.

WILLIE

They are.

LAZ

Yeah? They gon' let you go, maybe. Maybe cuz you slow and can't do nothin'. But I can work still. They gon' keep me here 'til I die.

WILLIE

They ain't gon' do that. They can't. They got to let you go when yo' time is up. That's the *law*.

LAZ pauses and looks at
WILLIE, then chuckles
and gets back to work.

JOHN HENRY

They din't let me go. My time came and went three times now. First time, they tol' me I had six more months cuz I broke a pick. Second time, they said I lost some nails. Third time, they don't even tell me no reason why. Just tell me I got another year.

WILLIE

They can't do that.

JOHN HENRY

Oh, you right, you right. Maybe I should write to the governor, right? Maybe I should write to President Cleveland.

LAZ

Tha's no good, John Henry. You know you can't write.

JOHN HENRY

I can't write. Maybe I just yell for him. GROVER
CLEVELAND!

WILL

Stop that!

JOHN HENRY

HEY THERE, GROVER CLEVELAND!

WILL

Stop! Stop it!

LAZ

Hey, shut up, what you doin'?

JOHN HENRY

GROVER CLEVELAND, THEY LOCK ME UP AND WON'T LET ME GO, WHAT AM I GON' DO, GROVER CLEVELAND?

PETER rouses himself
slightly from his bed to
shout at them.

PETER

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, PLEASE SHUT THESE NIGGERS UP SO A BODY CAN SLEEP!

ROBERT

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, WHAT AM I GON' DO!

LAZ

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, WON'T YOU BRING ME A HAMMER TO BREAK THESE CHAINS!

ROBERT

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, WHAT AM I GON' DO!

WILL

You all best stop yellin, or they gon' come and whup on you.

JOHN HENRY

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, PLEASE DON' LET THEM WHUP ON POOR WILL!

ROBERT

OH GROVER CLEVELAND, WHAT AM I GON' DO!

EDWARD enters. LAZ
hastily stashes the
train spike in the
blankets in his cot.

EDWARD

All right. ALL RIGHT! I know what I'm not seein', here. I am NOT seeing the poor dumb negroes under my watch hootin' and hollerin' after lights. That's right, isn't it? I'm not seein' that, am I? So what am I seein'?

(pause)

LAZ

Nothin.

EDWARD

Nothin'. I'm not seein' a bunch of dirty whoreson coons makin' a lot of noise for no reason?

LAZ

No...

EDWARD

So there is a reason your makin' all this noise?

LAZ

No...

EDWARD

You're tryin' to hide somethin'? Tryin' to hide somethin' noisy?

LAZ says nothing. There is a pregnant pause. Robert picks up his guitar.

ROBERT

We just singin'.

EDWARD continues to stare at LAZ.

EDWARD

Shut up.

ROBERT

You ain't never heard "What do I do, Grover Cleveland?"

He plays a standard blues progression in E.

Oh Grover Cleveland, they lock me up...
They lock me up Grover Cleveland.
Oh Grover Cleveland, take these chains off me...
Take these chains off me, Grover Cleveland.

EDWARD

I said shut up!

He turns and kicks
ROBERT in the side.
ROBERT starts coughing.
JOHN HENRY stands up.

What?

JOHN HENRY says nothing.

You got somethin' to say, boy?

He steps towards him,
holding his truncheon in
a threatening posture.
He is more confident,
now, because the men are
chained separately.

Huh? You want to say something'? Come on, say it. I'm
listening. You want to say something?

JOHN HENRY

Nobody was doin' nothin'.

EDWARD

You know, we count those train spikes at the end of the
day. We know when they go missin'.

JOHN HENRY

Why you tellin' me?

(pause)

EDWARD

You think you mean something out here, boy? You don't mean
spit. Not to me, not to the bosses, not to no one.

JOHN HENRY

Maybe you should send me back, then.

(long pause)

EDWARD

You don't mean *spit*.

He turns away and begins to leave, spitefully kicking ROBERT one more time.

You keep your god-damn mouths *shut* after lights, you hear me? Or I will see each and every one of you tied to the post and whipped 'til you bleed yourselves *dry*.

EDWARD exits. Almost immediately, LAZ takes the spike out and starts to work again.

WILLIE

What are you doin'? Did you hear him? He knows—

LAZ

He don' know nothin'.

WILLIE

You heard him talk about train spikes.

JOHN HENRY

He don' know nothin', or why didn' he take it? How come he let him keep it, if he know about it?

WILLIE

I don't know.

JOHN HENRY

He don' know nothin'. He just tryin' to scare you into sayin' something.

ROBERT

You think so? You think he just tryin' to scare someone?

JOHN HENRY

Maybe.

ROBERT

Maybe. Heh. Maybe. You know. You know what he wants.

LAZ

Ha!

LAZ shuffles the pole;
it drops to the ground
with a resounding
"THUNK." Everyone
freezes, looks around.
No guards are
forthcoming. LAZ begins
to extricate the chains
on his feet from the
pole. He is still in
chains, and his feet are
still chained together,
but he can move about
now.

LAZ

Come on now, who's next?

WILLIE

Not me. They gon' catch you and whup you fierce.

LAZ

What are you, thick? Get up, let me get you loose.

He approaches WILLIE,
who stands up and pushes
him away.

LAZ

Come on, Will, don't be stupid—

He approaches again.
WILLIE shoves him, hard.

WILLIE

Two months, they let me go. You ain't comin' near me.

LAZ

Fine. Stay locked up here forever, stupid. Wait for Grover Cleveland to come get you loose. You'll come with me, right John Henry?

JOHN HENRY

Where you gon' go? Can't run with them chains.

LAZ

You got a wife, John. When the last time you seen your wife?

JOHN HENRY

How you gon' get away?

LAZ

You want to see her again? You know they ain't gon' let you go.

JOHN HENRY

You got no way out.

LAZ

There a sandy pit down by the river, where the big bend is. Shallow water there, you can stand up. We can ford it, the dogs can't find us. We hide out there 'til they stop looking. Then we go down the mountain, down to Ohio.

JOHN says nothing.

We can do it. We can get free.

JOHN HENRY

How you gon' get them chains off?

(pause)

How?

LAZ

We find someone...

JOHN HENRY

Who?

(pause)

Who we gon' find? Who gon' knock the chains off for a couple of nigger *convicts*?

LAZ

Fine. You stay here then. You stay here 'til Judgment, I don' care.

He turns to ROBERT.

You gon' come with me, right? Let me dig the pole up and get your chains off, right? You don' want to stay here no more.

ROBERT says nothing,
makes no move.

You want to stay? You want to stay and get kicked some more? Get whapped on every time the guards get a toothache? Every time they have a mood to do it? You don' want that.

ROBERT still says
nothing.

What you want to stay for?

ROBERT looks at John
Henry.

You crazy. You all crazy.

He tosses the train
spike to JOHN HENRY, who
catches it, then pulls
up his chains and
shuffles off stage as
quickly and as quietly
as he can.

(Pause)

JOHN HENRY
(to ROBERT)

Why you din't leave?

ROBERT

Nowhere to go. You told him. How he gonna get them chains off?

(pause)

JOHN HENRY

You said you from Mississippi. You work down there?

(pause)

Cotton?

ROBERT

Indigo.

JOHN HENRY

My daddy worked indigo. Down in Louisiana.

ROBERT

What he do?

JOHN HENRY

Swam.

(pause)

PETER

Well what the hell does that mean?

JOHN HENRY

Ain't you goin to sleep?

PETER

How am I gonna sleep if you dumb sons of bitches won't shut your mouths?

JOHN HENRY

You ain't gotta listen.

PETER

Ha.

JOHN HENRY

You swim in Mississippi? You a little guy. Maybe when you was a boy, you swam. (to PETER) When you make indigo, you gotta take the plant and soak it in piss. Can't let no

sunlight on it, neither. So, down them plantations, they got these cellars, that got these big ol' pits full of piss and ink. But you can just let it sit. You gotta keep it stirred up. So they take a nigger and make him swim in it. Sometime a boy, sometime if you just little. You gotta swim around and around. If you stop, they whup you. If you get tired, you just gon' drown.

PETER

Jesus.

JOHN HENRY

My daddy never got big. He swam all his life. Told me he didn't know no brother, less he was stained indigo come the end of the day. (to ROBERT) They didn't make you swim?

ROBERT

Nope.

(pause)

JOHN HENRY

What you doin' here?

ROBERT

You won't believe me if I tell you.

JOHN HENRY

I'm askin', ain't I?

(pause)

ROBERT

The Devil sent me here to make a song about you.

There is a long pause.
After a minute, JOHN
HENRY starts laughing,
then PETER, then WILLIE.

PETER

What happened, the Devil can't write his own songs?

JOHN HENRY

He can't hear nothin'. He gon' deaf from all them sinners screamin'. Don't you got no Bibles in England?

PETER

I'm Irish, you dumb coon. Ireland's where they wrote the Bible.

WILLIE

What kind of song?

JOHN HENRY

Don't listen to him. He ain't gonna make no song about nothin'.

WILLIE

He made that song about Grover Cleveland.

PETER

You really are thick. The Devil didn't send him here to write no song.

WILLIE

Maybe he did. You gon' sing it when you get out?

ROBERT

Devil didn't send me here to make a song just so's I can stay locked up and no one ever hears it.

PETER

I don't know. Sounds just like the Devil to me.

WILLIE

You don't know nothin'. The Devil can do anything. He can make them chains just fall right off our feet. He can make it so them dogs can't smell nothin', them guards can't see nothin'. He can make it so a man can just walk right out of prison and can't no one stop him.

PETER

What are you gonna do then, Willie? Gonna sell your soul for a ticket out of here?

(pause)

WILLIE

I don't need to sell my soul. I got two months, then they gon' let me go.

PETER

They're never gonna let you go, boy. The never let anyone go.

WILLIE

They got to, it's the law. I just keep my head down and work. I don't break nothin', I don' lose nothin'. How they gon' stop me? How they gon' not let me go? They can't.

JOHN HENRY

You think that matters?

WILLIE

It's the law...

JOHN HENRY

What'd you do? When they got you. What'd you do?

WILLIE

I don't know.

JOHN HENRY

You don't know?

WILLIE

I was...they said I was causin' a disturbance. Yellin' too loud at night.

JOHN HENRY

Yellin'?

WILLIE

I was workin' at a dock, down Richmond way. We stay workin' 'til all the boats is unloaded. Come off sometimes late at night, sometimes it's almost dawn. One night, some fella comes to work with a jar of shine. We sipped at it all night long, so when we comes off work, we high and happy, you know?

PETER

You come off work *drunk*, yellin' and singin' in the town, right?

WILLIE

They grabbed all of us, took us off, run us up. Six months is all we got. I done four, I got two left.

JOHN HENRY

They grabbed you for nothin'.

WILLIE

It wasn't nothin'. We was breakin' the law. They gotta follow the law. They got to lock us up if we break it.

JOHN HENRY

They don't care about no law, Willie. You think they care about that? You think you a free man, Willie? You think you emancipated? You know what they see when they look at you? The don't see no free nigger. They see arms and shoulders. They see a back that can work. They grab you off the street and send you here, make you work with no pay.

You a slave, Willie. It don' matter what they tell you. You can work, they find a way to lock you up. You spit on the street, they lock you up. You look too long at a white woman, they lock you up. You do your job too slow, you do your job too fast, and what happens?

He got a back on him. He got arms on him, they say. Lock him up. He dangerous. Lock him up, send him to the work crews. Send him down the train. Get him diggin'. Get him drillin'. Get him layin' rails. Keep them trains movin'.

Them trains run everything here. Men all work for the train. We work for the train, the bosses work for the train, the judges work for the train. You gotta feed a train to keep it movin'. Feed it coal and men and blood.

You can work, they find a way to make you feed that train, Willie. They ain't never gon' let you go.

WILLIE

They will.

JOHN HENRY

They won't. And the sooner you know it, the better.

WILLIE

(his voice is rising)

You shut up. You don't know nothin'.

PETER

Hey, all right, keep quiet, now.

JOHN HENRY

You think I don't know? Five years I been here, Willie!

WILLIE

Cuz you fight with 'em! Cuz you don't work!

JOHN HENRY stands up,
rattling the chains that
keep him tied down.

JOHN HENRY

I don't work? I don't work?

PETER

Hey, shut it, both of you!

JOHN HENRY

I don't do nothin' but work here!

WILLIE

You fight 'em, and that's why! That's why they won't let
you go! But they gon' let me go!

JOHN HENRY

You gon' be workin' here 'til you die, you dumb sumbitch!

PETER

Shut your mouths up!

EDWARD re-enters, this
time with BENJAMIN.

EDWARD

What is this? WHAT DID I TELL YOU?

PETER

Aw, no.

Everyone is quiet for a
minute. JOHN HENRY and
WILLIE stare at each
other furiously. ROBERT
and PETER sink back into
their cots, trying to
hide.

EDWARD

What did I tell you? Did I tell you that if you didn't shut your fool mouths, someone was gonna get hided? I told you that, didn't I?

JOHN HENRY turns to EDWARD, though remains unafraid. EDWARD casts about for a suitable victim for his fury. His eyes light on PETER.

You.

PETER

Aw, no! No, it wasn't me!

EDWARD smacks him with the truncheon. BENJAMIN undoes the lock that connects PETER'S chains to the pole.

EDWARD

Get up. Come on. Get up!

He hits him again. EDWARD and BENJAMIN drag him from the cot. PETER has trouble getting to his feet.

PETER

It wasn't me.

EDWARD

Up.

PETER

Oh, you can go to hell.

EDWARD kicks him.

EDWARD

Up!

PETER manages to stagger
to a standing position.

You don't listen when I talk, I guess I got to paint you
all a picture. Come on, then.

He and BENJAMIN drag
PETER offstage. There
is silence for a long
moment. ROBERT picks up
his guitar, and begins
to pluck a slow, sad
tune on it.

JOHN HENRY

Put that away.

Lights fade out.

FOUR

Spotlight up on PETER,
who is standing on one
of the platforms,
speaking.

PETER

Here's the story of John Henry, just like I heard it from
my father, and he heard it from his.

John Henry was a man of a singular persuasion, strong as an
ox he was, and tall as a tree, and he didn't care for
nothing or for no one except what he could crack with that
hammer. When he was a boy he looked up at those West
Virginia mountains, and a mighty rage grew up inside him.

"You watch!" He screamed up to those mountains. "You
watch me! I'm gonna cut right through you! I'm gonna cut
you mountains in half!"

And so he found work laying rails on for the trains, and if
it seemed he never stopped working, it's because he never
did. Every day he swung his hammer, and his crew drilled
deeper than any other. He worked like a machine did John
Henry, and not a man could say they'd ever seen him lag
behind.

One day, though, the boss comes to John Henry and tells him
that he and his crew are to be replaced by a new steam
drill, that can cut twice as far in half the time. John
Henry just scoffs at this, and tells the boss to bring that
steam drill on, that ain't no engine can drill as fast as
John Henry.

The sound of the engine
begins, as well as the
sound of hammering.
Speed and volume
increase throughout
PETER's speech.

Well, the boss brings the engine out and starts it drillin,
and John Henry and his crew start hammerin. Faster and
faster they go, the engine screams loud and every blow from

John Henry's hammer sounds like God's own hand reaching down to smite the earth.

Faster and faster they race, louder and louder they get, 'til BOOM! The engine bursts from steam, and wheels and bits of drill go flying!

On "BOOM," there is the blare of a steam whistle and a sound like a thunder clap, then a long moment of studied silence.

Well, the boss comes down to see John Henry, to tell him that he's won the race. But he finds John Henry slumped over his hammer, dead. His heart had burst, right when that engine had gone.

Things change then, because they always do, and now there ain't no live crews nowhere to be found on the C & O line. And there remains some dispute today about the disposition of John Henry's soul. There's some as say that they can still hear him, roaring like a bull and swinging that hammer with a godly thunder, trying with all the might that's left a ghost to beat those mountains down.

And there's some as say he must now be in Hell, carving out new caves for the Devil to throw his sinners in. That's the one that I believe, me. The Devil's always got a need for more room down there.

EDWARD and BENJAMIN appear behind him, grab him, drag him the rest of the way onstage. The lights fade up to reveal the three men are alone.

BENJAMIN

Where is he?

PETER

Christ, you couldn't have come in a little earlier? You've just missed him now.

EDWARD

Where did he go?

PETER

I told you. I *told* you he was going to try and get away tonight.

EDWARD

Where?

PETER

He's been angling for a train spike all week.

EDWARD

Just tell us where he is.

PETER

I'm not telling you anything 'til I get your word that I'm done here. I want to go back.

BENJAMIN

You want to go back to prison? Break rocks in the yard? They'll work you there, too.

PETER

Breakin rocks in the yard at least doesn't break my spine and my arms, and my legs. I can breathe the air, at least, and there's a chance for some respectable company.

EDWARD

Aw, you don't like spending time with your nigger friends?

PETER

Nah, I'm just tired of seein guys that have made it with your mother.

EDWARD is silent.

BENJAMIN snickers slightly

EDWARD

Where did the other one go?

PETER

Your word that I'm going back?

EDWARD

Yeah, sure. I'll get you sent back. Just tell me where he is.

(pause)

PETER

Why didn't you stop him?

BENJAMIN

We didn't get there in time.

PETER

Two minutes you missed him by. If you'd looked around instead of draggin me away, you'd have found him.

BENJAMIN

Well, we didn't know that, did we?

(pause)

PETER

What are you going to do when you find him?

EDWARD

You don't have to tell me. Come on, Ben, let's tie him to the post and whip it out of him.

PETER awkwardly shuffles around, out of reach of the two guards, who maintain a respectable distance from him.

PETER

Aaa, come off. There's no need for that. You know I'll talk. Just tell me what you plan to do.

(pause)

EDWARD

Where. Is. He?

PETER

Just tell me. There's no secret. It don't hurt anything.

EDWARD nods at BENJAMIN, who has angled behind PETER. BENJAMIN lunges forward, suddenly, and grabs PETER by his arms. EDWARD steps in and hits PETER in the stomach.

EDWARD

You're not the one that decides how this is gonna go, Irish. I'm the one that decides. I'm the one that figures if you get whipped, or if you get sent back, if you get your bones broken. You get me? We're not making a deal, here.

EDWARD hits him in the stomach again.

You understand that? You understand who has the power here?

PETER nods.

This is a tiny world, boy, and I'm god here. You don't bargain with god. You just do what he tells you, right?

PETER nods again.

You go back if I feel like sending you back. You get whipped if I feel like whipping you. You tell me what I ask, and if you're smart you beg me to tell you more. Get it?

EDWARD hits him again.

Get it?

BENJAMIN

Ed...

EDWARD prepares to hit him a third time. PETER tries to speak, but can't breathe.

Ed! Hold off.

BEJAMIN drags PETER
backwards, away from
EDWARD.

EDWARD

You understand me?

BENJAMIN

He can't breathe, for God's sake. Just let him breathe.

PETER

Bend. There's...there's a bend.

EDWARD is still
advancing,
threateningly, while
PETER chokingly tries to
explain.

EDWARD

What?

PETER

There's a bend in the river! He says he can hide there
from the dogs. Said he'd...he'd spend a day or two there.

EDWARD

Where?

PETER

I don't know.

EDWARD

Where is it?

PETER

I don't know! He must...he must be able to see it, from
where we work. Down the slope from the tunnel.

EDWARD

Down the slope from the tunnel. You'd better pray he's
there.

PETER

He is. He is.

EDWARD nods. Then
speaks to BENJAMIN.

EDWARD

Hold him. Hold him still.

He steps forward and
hits PETER across the
face this time, with his
truncheon.

PETER

What...?

EDWARD hits him again,
and again.

EDWARD

Come on, boy. You don't want them niggers to catch on, do
you? They think we dragged you off to get whipped!

He hits him a third time
in the face. BENJAMIN
lets him go, and PETER
slumps to the ground.
BENJAMIN steps back and
looks uncomfortable.

How does it look if you come back without a mark on you?

EDWARD kicks him.

BENJAMIN

For god's sake, Ed. Enough.

EDWARD looks
appraisingly at PETER,
who cannot seem to
stand.

EDWARD

Drag him back to the cots. I'll see about getting him sent
home.

He leans down to PETER.

See, Irish? God keeps his promises. Even to trash like you.

BENJAMIN helps PETER to his feet. PETER leans on him as BENJAMIN helps him off stage.

FIVE

JAMES is standing on the platform scaffolds, calling out to people and gesturing as though he is giving them instructions. They cannot be seen by the audience. Through out the scene, the rhythmic sound of men hammer-drilling continues in the background, along with the low hum of their singing. The men working are not visible onstage.

WARDWELL enters at ground level, also calling off offstage. He and JAMES speak without noticing the other.

WARDWELL

No that's all right, I'm sure I'll be fine.

JAMES

Set it up over there. Harry's got the shafts on a cart, he'll be here in an hour...

WARDWELL

Absolutely not. Do not write anything down. He's not to know I was here.

JAMES

...and keep that track clear!

WARDWELL

This is purely un-official.

JAMES

I want everything in and ready before his supervisors notice anything, understand?

WARDWELL notices JAMES
on the scaffolding.

WARDWELL

What...Mr. James?

JAMES

Wardwell's not to know until it's too late.

WARDWELL

Mr. James?

WARDWELL begins climbing
up the scaffolds to join
him.

JAMES

Ah! Mr. Wardwell. This is quite a surprise! Lovely day,
isn't it? To be outside? To be alive?

WARDWELL

Ah...yes, yes it is, but...

JAMES

Sweet mountain air. I spent summers in the Appalachians,
you know?

WARDWELL

I didn't know that...

JAMES

My uncle had a cabin western Pennsylvania. I rode for
three days on the mail coach just to get there, and then I
spent most of the time chopping wood. Hours and hours of
it.

WARDWELL

I see.

JAMES

Tedious work, warden, but you come to take a kind of
pleasure in it, if you know what I mean. A kind of pride
at the end of the day, when you turn and see the neatly-
stacked cords of wood, ready to keep you warm when the
autumn frosts hit.

(to OS)

You there! Be careful with that! Leave it...no, just leave it by the boiler!

(to WARDWELL)

You'll have to forgive me, warden. No rest for the wicked, as they like to say. What brings you out here, warden?

WARDWELL

I was here to check...I've been looking over some paperwork and wanted to check on a few discrepancies. But Mr. James, what are you doing here?

JAMES

Well, this is my project, warden.

WARDWELL

Yes, I mean, of course it is, but I understood that you needed to visit your investors, in Germany...

JAMES

Aha! I see. Scheduling your visit when you knew I'd be out of the country is it?

WARDWELL

Well, no, I-

JAMES

Bad luck then. My Germans have changed their minds. They've bought another half a million dollars worth of bonds.

WARDWELL

Half a million...?

JAMES

Half a million. What discrepancies?

WARDWELL

What?

JAMES

You said you were here to look into some discrepancies.

WARDWELL

Oh. Yes. It's hardly something that you'd be interested, Mr. James.

JAMES

If there's a problem with your operation, I'd like to know about it.

WARDWELL

Oh, no. There's no problem.

JAMES

How do you know that, if you've just got here?

WARDWELL

It's purely clerical issues, Mr. James. Some errors regarding terms and release dates. Nothing that could jeopardize the work...

JAMES

Clerical errors, Mr. Wardwell?

WARDWELL

There are thousands of prisoners under my supervision, Mr. James. Mistakes are bound to happen. I can't be everywhere at once, you know. Hah. If I were to be perfectly honest with you, Mr. James, I'd have to admit that there are times when I feel as though this prison practically runs itself, and only drags me a long for the ride.

JAMES

I am not precisely overwhelmed by your confidence, warden.

WARDWELL

It's just a routine check, Mr. James. Doesn't hurt me to keep my eye on things, does it?

JAMES

It's a long way from Richmond, warden. Long way.

(pause)

Look at them, warden. Look at those mountains. Just a great big wall, cutting this country in half. And we're going to punch right through.

(pause)

I've brought a steam drill in.

WARDWELL

Now, Mr. James, I don't think there's any need for that. I've cut the labor cost to you by forty percent, at your request...

JAMES

Half a million dollars, warden. It's a lot of money. I'm not taking chances.

WARDWELL

My crews are excellent, hard workers, Mr. James. We've never had any trouble meeting our deadlines before, and always within our projected budgets. We've done this before...

JAMES

And now you have to do it better. Look, Warden: maybe where you come from, "just enough" is what you strive for. Maybe you come from a place where "adequate" is the goal, I don't know. But I do know that it's not good enough for me, and it's not good enough here. I've got millions riding on this—the bankroll of a small country—and "just enough" isn't going to cut it. We are building civilization, here, Mr. Wardwell, and the rest of the world is not going to wait for us to catch up.

(pause)

I've brought a steam drill in, and starting it on the B site. There's another coming in two weeks, and when it's operational, I'll be cutting my manpower demands in half.

As they speak, the remaining men, dressed in workman's coveralls rather than their prison garb, begin carrying in pieces of machine—gears, long drill bits. They carry them on from offstage through an exit beneath the center platform. They work

continuously, as though
the steam drill requires
a limitless amount of
parts.

WARDWELL

You can't...you can't do that, Mr. James.

JAMES

Why not?

(pause)

WARDWELL

Mr. James, be reasonable..

JAMES

You keep saying that. Do you think this isn't reasonable?
Do you think cutting my manpower demands is irrational?
That I'm just wildly making decisions, willy-nilly, and to
hell with the consequences?

This is perfectly reasonable. Your men cost me more money
than the drills. It's you that's being unreasonable,
Warden. You're expecting me to pay more money for less
work, for no reason other than...what? That you feel bad for
a mess of Negro convicts?

WARDWELL

Compassion is reason's most noble aspiration.

JAMES

Compassion? I have compassion. I have compassion for the
hundreds of thousands of people in this country that need
industry in order to survive. The people that could thrive
and excel and achieve if only they weren't locked up here
in the mountains, isolated from the rest of the nation.
I'll save them, Mr. Wardwell, and because I can do it
cheap, I can afford to save more people, and more people.

So your convicts have to languish in prison, so what?
We're talking about the future, here, warden.

WARDWELL

How am I supposed to feed them? Keep them clothed? What
am I supposed to do, Mr. James? What would you do?

JAMES

I'd get out of the prison business. You'll think of something, Mr. Wardwell, or you won't. It's all the same to me.

He begins to leave,
climbing down the
scaffolding.

WARDWELL

Mr. James! Wait!

JAMES pauses.

Wait.

JAMES

Yes?

WARDWELL

You want to use the steam drills because they're faster and more efficient than my men, yes? But what if they aren't?

JAMES

They are.

WARDWELL

They *might* be. But that's not proven. They haven't been tested yet.

JAMES

You've something in mind, Wardwell. I'm listening.

WARDWELL

Let me put one crew up against your drill at B site. For two weeks, until the second drill gets here. We'll chart their progress. If your drill is faster...I'll draw down the number of men here.

JAMES

And if it's not?

WARDWELL

Then you'll pay for the full crews. At ten cents a man.

(pause)

JAMES

It's an interesting wager, but I don't really see what's in it for me, except the chance to lose. No deal.

JAMES continues on his way.

WARDWELL

Oh, well, all right. If you'd prefer the steam drills, that's fine. I can just take my men home right now.

JAMES stops.

Half a million dollars is a lot of money. On top of the millions that your backers have already put in—you stand to lose a great deal if project goes sour, don't you?

JAMES

You're bluffing. You'd never risk it.

WARDWELL

Desperate men, Mr. James, take desperate risks.

(long pause)

Abruptly, JAMES laughs.

JAMES

That is the kind of thinking I like to hear! There may be hope for you, after all, Mr. Wardwell. You've got your bet. Two weeks, and we'll see if it's man or machine that comes out ahead.

JAMES climbs the rest of the way down the scaffold and leaves the stage.

SIX

Lights up on the men at the cots. EDWARD and BENJAMIN enter, dragging LAZ with them. They throw him onto the cot.

EDWARD

There we go, boys. Company.

BENJAMIN

Ed...

EDWARD

Hush. See this fella? He tried to get away. Tried to hide from us. But we caught him, didn't we Benny?

BENJAMIN

Ed, this ain't right.

EDWARD

He fought back hard, though. Shame about that. We sure didn't want to...well. Anyway, we thought it might be a good idea to leave him here for a little bit. Maybe once he starts to smell, you can learn a thing or two.

EDWARD and BENJAMIN exit. JOHN HENRY gets up, approaches LAZ on the cot. Puts his hand over his mouth.

JOHN HENRY

He dead.

JOHN HENRY looks around, sees that the other men are asleep, then sits back down on his cot.

After a moment LAZ sits up. He is bloody and beaten, but seems unaffected by it (because he's dead). JH sees him, then shouts,

and leaps up to his feet. He backs as far away as he can get with the chains still on him.

LAZ

John Henry.

JH

What...what you doin', Laz?

LAZ

John Henry.

JH

You dead. You ain't supposed to get up and talk no more, when you dead.

LAZ

I know. They don't like it much.

JH

Who?

LAZ

The bosses.

JH

What bosses? They can't hurt you no more, Laz, not when you dead.

LAZ

Not them bosses.

LAZ points offstage.

Them bosses.

He points above his head.

(pause)

JH

There ain't...there ain't no bosses when you dead, Laz.

LAZ

Don't let 'em fool you. There's always bosses. Someone got to keep them trains runnin', got to keep them stars movin, got to keep that sun in the sky. There's always bosses, John Henry.

JH shouts with frustration and rattles his chains. Then notices WILLIE, PETER, and ROBERT are still asleep.

JH

What happened? Can't they hear you?

LAZ

They can't hear nothin'. 'Sides, you the one makin' noise.

(pause)

JH

Why you come back, Laz?

LAZ

Get away. Take some time from workin'. Bosses don't like it, but they can't stop it. If you know how, you can get away sometime.

JH

They just let you go?

LAZ

They can't stop it. They come and get me, sooner or later, though.

JH

So how come you come down, if they gon' drag you back?

LAZ shrugs.

(pause)

I don't want to be here, no more. I shoul'da run with you. I shoul'da gone with you.

LAZ

You'd be dead, too.

JH

Maybe. Maybe no.

LAZ

You would be. They was spoilin' for me. They came with dogs, I heard 'em from a mile off, howlin' and barkin', but I knew them dogs couldn't find me across the river. I just hunkered up, keep my head down. Then you know what? I hear them guards. No dogs with 'em, but they on my side of the river.

"Here it is!" They says. Then old Edward drags me out. There's five of 'em, I think, and they just start whuppin on me. Don't say nothin', don't got no chains for me, don't try to take me off nowhere. Just whup on me over and over, and then, poof. Nothin'.

JH

If there was two of us..

LAZ laughs at this.

LAZ

They'd have two dead niggers if you was there. Drag us both back to rot on the cots.

JH

I can't stay here no more.

LAZ

So, go.

JH

I can't just go. Can't get away.

LAZ

You can. You always can. You don't wanna.

JH

What, I don't wanna? You think I wanna stay here? You think I wanna stay locked up?

LAZ

You din't run with me, did you? Din't run before. Din't try to run after, did you?

JOHN HENRY says nothing.

How many times you tried to get away? Once they kept you on, when your time was up—did you try to get away then?

JOHN HENRY says nothing.

You din't do nothin'. You got a wife, John Henry, but you ain't run off to her. You cryin' cuz you don' wanna stay, but you sho' don' seem like you wanna go.

LAZ laughs again.

Oh my goodness, John Henry! Don' tell me you like it here!

JH

Where am I supposed to go?

LAZ

You go back to your wife, stupid.

JH

And tell her what? It's five years now, she had to get on without me. If she still alive, she don' need me no more.

LAZ

You got a son, you go back to him.

JH

I ain't got no son.

(pause)

How you know that?

LAZ

Haha! You know! You know a man knows all kinds of things when he's dead. They tell you everything that don' matter no more once you dead. Why don' you go find your boy?

(silence)

JH

Because I can't do for him. Can't get no work. Am I gon'...gonna go back to pickin up bones and ash from Manassas? Robbin' dead men ain't no way to live. He don' need me.

LAZ

My wife don' want me, my son don' want me, I can' find no work, can' do no job. Don' like the job I can get. Poor John Henry. Bein' a free man would just ruin you.

JH

Shut up.

LAZ

Everyone know why you don' run off. You like it here.

JH

Shut up.

LAZ

You good at it. You the best at it. You the best man with a hammer here, everyone looks up to you. Even them guards can't tell you nothin'.

JH

Shut up!

LAZ

John Henry found hisself a place where he means somethin', ain't that right? You a big man here, and if you go back you ain't got nothin'.

JH

SHUT UP! YOU DON'T KNOW! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE!

LAZ

I'm dead, John. I don't know nothing.

The sound of dogs can be heard, suddenly, baying in the wind. Also, a train whistle.

My goodness, that's me. They comin' fo' me now.

JH

You can't tell me...You don't...you don't *know*.

LAZ

Gon' drag me back to limbo. I think that's where they got me. Drillin rocks in limbo down 'til judgment come.

WILLIE, PETER, and
ROBERT begin to stir in
their sleep.

WILLIE

Who you talkin' to?

JH

You can't tell me! You can't tell me. Just cuz you never matter. Just cuz no one care if you work or not. That's why. You wish you was somethin'. You wish them guards couldn't tell you nothin'.

WILLIE

John?

LAZ

That's right. I wish I was you, John Henry.

The baying of the dogs
gets louder.

Every dead man wishes he was someone livin'.

JH

You mad because they'd rather kill you than bring you back. That's how much you mean.

PETER

All right, John. You're...there's no one there, right?

JH

You wish you matter like I do.

LAZ

Who don' wish he was a slave alive, 'stead of a slave in limbo?

LAZ chuckles heartily,
then collapses

bonelessly to the
ground. The sound of
the dogs ceases. JOHN
HENRY starts, as though
waking from a dream.

WILLIE

Who you talkin' to, John?

JH

I thought...I had a dream. I dreamed I saw Laz.

WILLIE

Laz's dead.

JH

I know that, stupid. That's why it was a dream.

ROBERT

What he tell you?

JH

Nothin'.

ROBERT

Dead man talks to you in a dream, he got to tell you
somethin'.

JH

It don' mean nothin', cuz it was a dream. I had a dream
once I was livin' in Charleston, in a mansion. Don' mean
nothin'.

PETER

I had a dream once I was home in Ireland, before the
famine. I think I was my grandfather then.

WILLIE

I once dreamed I had to work drillin' rock for the trains
all day long. That one turned out to be true.

ROBERT

See? Sometimes they mean somethin'.

(Silence)

JH

He told me there was bosses up in Heaven. Send you down to limbo to drill rocks.

ROBERT

See? There you go. Ain't no way out of it. This world belongs to the Devil, and ain't no souls get away from him.

PETER

Jesus saves...

ROBERT

Jesus don't save no one 'cept them are rich, 'cept them are pretty, 'cept them are clever. You know who gets saved, cuz God already smiles on 'em. You stuck here, workin'? Ain't no one gonna save you.

(long pause)

PETER

Oh, you're a ray of sunshine, ain't you? You're sayin' that we're to work for the trains all our lives, then we're to work on the trains in heaven once we die?

JH

Someone's got to do the work.

Lights fade.

SEVEN

Lights up on
WARDWEL, who is
standing on the
upper scaffolding,
lecturing to the
audience as though
at a lyceum or
lecture hall. At
first, he is the
only man that can
be seen on stage.

WARDWELL

It is a common feature of our era to consider that criminality is simply a function of biological predestination. The so-called scientific minds, who have readily adopted Darwin's ideas regarding the origin of man, defy directly the compassion and tolerance required of us by the scriptures. Indeed, they would have you believe that a man is evil by nature; that his criminality is the result of his own, inescapable intellectual and moral failures.

But I and many of my fellows believe that this is not the case. When we see such an astonishing rise in illegal and immoral behaviors in Virginia, what we are truly seeing are ordinary men succumbing to the rampant iniquities of the world itself. Is it any wonder that a man with little formal school, no religious upbringing, and few options for employment but the most menial and least desirable jobs should fall prey to the wickedness he sees around him, and act out in such a way as to be deleterious to the society he inhabits?

It is a too-often made mistake that a prison should become a bottomless well, a pre-mortem abysmal Pit of earthly make into which sinners are simply dumped, there left to suffer some misguided "punishment" for their crimes, or else simply forgotten as the refuse of a society that cannot tolerate them.

It is my dream that in this new era, we can find a new use for prisons. That a prison can become a vast engine of reform, breaking down the cruel immoralities of wicked men and building, in their place, a stronger, upright, high-

mindful *Man*. By recognizing that if it is in man's nature to be tempted by sin, it is surely in no small part the sins of the world itself that create that temptation. And so, by giving men education, making them familiar with the scriptures, and by most of all giving them *work*, we can raise them up from the mire of indigent delinquency, and make decent, moral men of them.

Upon the world
"engine," the
machine behind him
rumbles, the sound
of gears turning
and steam bellowing
increases, slowly,
not quite loud
enough to drown him
out, but loud
enough that
WARDWELL must raise
his voice by the
end.

The men—JOHN HENRY,
WILLIE, and PETER—
come out from
beneath the
scaffolding. They
are covered in
chalky lime dust,
coughing. The
sounds of machinery
screeching finally
drown out WARDWELL
as he speaks.

Indeed, men who have been imprisoned for a term here are unlikely to ever have to return. They have gone on to get honest work in a variety of fields across the country. The prison, under my supervision, has used the machinery of redemption to grind away the calcified brutality of straightened circumstances, revealing the nobility of the soul that is present in even those men that seem to be the most incorrigible.

JAMES enters, as does
LAZ, now dressed as a

guard. The men begin shouting at each other over the last part of WARDWELL'S speech, while the engine is running. They shout all at the same time, overlapping, so that the stage is consumed with noise.

LAZ

Get back in there! Get!

JAMES

What's going on here? What are you doing outside?

WILLIE

Can't...can't breathe...

PETER

You get in there if you want it so bad!

JAMES

We have a schedule to keep.

JH

Can't even see in there.

LAZ

You need to get inside fo' I drag you in.

JAMES

A hundred more feet of rock.

PETER

You can go to hell! No one can work in there!

JH

You got to put some water down.

WILLIE

You tryin' to kill us! You trying to kill us!

LAZ

No one's tryin' to kill you.

JAMES

What's he complaining about?

The noise of the men and
the machine tapers off,
leaving just Willie,
covered in dust,
screaming.

WILLIE

You tryin' to kill us!

LAZ

You shut up! Get back to work!

WILLIE

YOU TRYIN TO KILL US!

He starts coughing
consumptively, falling
to his knees. LAZ steps
in and hits him with his
truncheon at the same
time.

LAZ

Get back in there!

WILLIE

Tryin...kill us..

JAMES snatches LAZ's
truncheon away.

JAMES

I need these men on their feet, mister.

WILLIE

Kill us...

WARDWELL has been
watching the scene with
a look of horror on his
face. Finally, he calls
down from his perch on
the scaffolding.

WARDWELL

What's going on here?

He begins climbing down,
so that he's on an equal
level with the rest of
the men.

JAMES

Nothing! Not your problem, Warden.

PETER

That tunnel's a death trap! You can't breathe for the
dust.

JH

You've got to put wet cloths down 'round the drill, keep
the dust down.

LAZ

Shut up!

WARDWELL

This seems like a reasonable request, Mr. James, I don't
see why—

JAMES

We don't have the time or the resources for it—

WARDWELL

But surely a few large blankets—

JAMES

Fine, Warden. You pay for it. Let me know when it gets
here. In the meantime, I need these men back in the
tunnel.

JH and PETER have helped
WILLIE get to his feet.

JH

We ain't goin' nowhere, not 'til they get that dust down.

JAMES

Is this what I'm paying for, Warden? Is this what I'm
going to pay ten cents a day for? Insubordination?

WARDWELL

Now, Mr. James, if it's not safe...

JAMES

I don't hear my drill complaining about "safe."

WARDWELL

Well, I don't think a few blankets...

JAMES

As you will, Warden. Take your time. It's not as though you're in a hurry. You're not running a race.

JAMES exits, back the way he came.

WARDWELL

Yes. Now, look, lads. I understand...I understand that the conditions down there are unpleasant. And I wish I could explain...you see...

Hm. All right, listen to me. If you go back in there now, I promise to have the blankets and water for you in no more than an hour.

The men do not move, nor do they say anything.

Please, I don't think you understand how important it is that this work gets done.

Still nothing from the men.

I don't...we're on the same side here, lads. We can help each other. Please. I don't want to...I don't want to have to force you.

The men remain silent and still.

Damn you. Guards!

LAZ stands to attention, having recovered his

truncheon. EDWARD
enters, similarly armed.

Get them into the tunnel. Now. If they won't work...damn.
Damn it. If they won't work, cut their food rations by
half for the next three days.

EDWARD and LAZ start
shouting at the men,
jabbing at them with
their truncheons,
forcing them back into
the tunnel.

And whip any man that lags behind.

Lights fade.

EIGHT

Lights up on the men,
lying on the cots,
apparently asleep.
WILLIE coughs, a great
big hacking cough.

PETER

Aw, cut it out. Get sick tomorrow, will ya?

WILLIE

Shut up.

He coughs again.
Silence. He coughs
again, this time on a
ferocious jag that lasts
for several seconds.
PETER stands up and
snaps at him.

PETER

For chrissake, cut it out! There's no guards to hear you,
now, and no one to pull you off work.

JH

We know you fakin it, Willie. Go on an sleep.

WILLIE tries to speak,
but another jag over
takes him. He tries to
get up, but cannot,
falling out of his cot
and coughing, doubled
over. PETER and JOHN
HENRY are less sure of
themselves, now.

PETER

Christ.

JH

Get him some water.

PETER returns to his
cot, picks up a small

tin, not quite a cup,
not quite a bowl.

PETER

I've none left.

JH finds his own tin
empty, goes to WILLIE's
side. Tries to get him
to drink from his own.
WILLIE attempts to
drink, but coughs again,
spluttering water
everywhere, and knocking
the tin away.

JH

(calling out)

Hey! Hey, help! Someone come and help us, here!

WILLIE coughs again, and
cannot catch his breath.

JH

HEY! HE SICK! HE DYIN'! GET US SOME WATER!

WILLIE's cough subsides,
and he gratefully starts
gulping in air.

PETER

All right, it's all right. Just breathe slow.

WILLIE

I can't...I can't take a breath.

PETER

Just breathe in deep.

JH

It's the dust. He got it in his lungs.

WILLIE

I can't. I can't breathe!

PETER

Calm down, now. Breathe.

I can't!

WILLIE

Shouting starts off
another fit of coughing.

Slow on, Willie. Slow.

JH

WILLIE tries to take
deep breaths, but he is
clearly beginning to
feel panic.

What do we do?

PETER

We got to get him...we got...he need some water. Go get them
guards. Just start yellin. They bound to come.

JH

PETER walks to the end
of his chain, and starts
shouting, while WILLIE
alternates between
coughing jags and a kind
of panicked hyper-
ventilation.

HEY! HEY GUARDS! HEY COME HERE! WE GOT A MAN SICK! HEY!

PETER

He turns to JOHN HENRY,
who shrugs.

Uh. HEY! HEY, THERE'S A FIRE! FIRE!

WILLIE's coughing is
serious, now. He's
clearly suffocating from
it.

FIRE! BRING US SOME WATER! FIRE!

WILLIE starts choking,
clearly unable to cough
anymore, barely able to
draw breath.

Oh, Christ! HELP! HELP US!

No aid is forthcoming.
PETER runs over to
WILLIE, as the man
starts to choke to
death.

JH

Willie, come on. You got to breathe. You got to breathe
in, Willie.

PETER

He can't. Look at him, he's chokin'.

JH

Come on, Willie! COME ON!

PETER

You can't. You can't get it out once it's inside you.

JH

COME ON, DAMN IT!

PETER turns offstage
again.

PETER

HELP US! Help...please...

WILLIE's choking tapers
off, and turns into a
deep, full-body shudder
as he dies. PETER and
JH stare at him for a
while.

JH

He done.

PETER

It seems...it seems like there should be more to it. When a man dies.

JOHN HENRY says nothing,
but attempts to lift
WILLIE into the cot,
then arranges his limbs
in some semblance of
sleep.

Just us left, now, I s'pose.

(long pause)

JH

How them guards know where to find Laz?

PETER

What?

JH

When he was hidin'. Dogs couldn't find him, but them guards found him anyway.

(long pause)

They beat it out of you.

PETER

Y-yeah. I'm sorry. I couldn't...I'm sorry.

JH

He almost get away.

(pause)

They gon' beat you anyway, you din't have to tell 'em.

PETER says nothing.
Sits on his cot, puts
his head in his hands.

PETER

You'd have told. If they'd taken you, you'd have told 'em. They only took me because you're stronger. They need you. You don't know a god-damn thing. Go to hell.

PETER lies down, puts
his hands over his face.

(Silence.)

ROBERT sits up.

ROBERT

You ready to go?

JH

What?

ROBERT

You ready to leave this place? Run away and never come
back?

JH

You a damn fool.

ROBERT

I can sing these chains away soon as I want. Soon as you
say you ready.

JH

Ready for what?

ROBERT

Ready to run away.

JH

Why you want me to run away?

ROBERT

So's I can make a song about you.

JH

For the devil.

ROBERT

Yup.

JH

Why the devil want a song about me?

ROBERT

Don' know. He just do. He tol' me you supposed to run away some time, run off to them mountains, and then I make a song about it, and sing it up and down the C&O line.

JH

Then...then everyone knows I got free, right? Maybe...maybe they try and get free, too?

ROBERT

Maybe. Maybe, if you run away, you get to be a hero.

JH

I ain't a hero. I ain't even good.

ROBERT

Ain't nobody good, John Henry. Ain't nobody bad. The world is the devil's mill, and every man is just here, gettin' ground down to dust. Some of us just make him work for it.

JH

There ain't no life for me out there.

ROBERT

Ain't no life for you in here.

JH

If it's all one, then why should I go?

ROBERT

Cuz if you run, then you free.

(silence)

JH

Can you really sing them chains away?

ROBERT smiles, then starts to play on the guitar.

ROBERT

(singing)

Come on, come on, let's go to buryin'
Come on, come on, let's go to buryin'
Come on, come on, let's go to buryin'

Well over, over on the new buryin' ground.

Well, the hammer keep a ringing on somebody's coffin
Well, the hammer keep a ringing on somebody's coffin
Well, the hammer keep a ringing on somebody's coffin
Well over on the new buryin' ground.

The chains rattle and
fall to the ground.
ROBERT keeps playing as
he leaves the stage.

JH

Wait. Wait! You said...you said you was gonna take mine
off! You said you was gonna help me get free!

ROBERT returns, his
guitar slung over his
back, dragging JOHN
HENRY's hammer.

ROBERT

You a damn fool, John Henry. What kind of a song does it
make, if you just get to walk away? Whew, this hammer must
weigh forty pound.

LAZ sits up in his cot
again, still battered
and bloody. He hands
JOHN HENRY his train
spike.

LAZ

You gon' need this, I 'spect.

JOHN HENRY holds hammer
and train spike as, LAZ
and ROBERT exit. He
considers them, then
shakes PETER awake.

JH

Come on, we leavin'.

PETER

No. I can't.

JH

What, you stupid? We leavin'. Get up.

PETER

I can't leave. I don't...my time isn't up yet.

(long pause)

JH

Well, I'm leavin'. Hold this.

He passes the spike to PETER, who sets it in one of the links of the chain. JOHN HENRY raises his hammer above his head.

Hold still.

PETER

Oh, good Christ preserve me, and don't let him crack my head like an egg.

JOHN HENRY swings the hammer, hits the train spike. There is a great CLANK. He does it again. Then a third time.

It's no good. You've punched through, but the link is still holding. The spike's not big enough.

JH

Like hell it ain't.

JOHN HENRY drops the hammer, seizes the chain, and starts to pull. With a mighty shout, the chain snaps and comes free in his hands. He threads it out from the shackles on his feet and looks

about, bewildered. He looks at PETER, the invitation implicit, but PETER shakes his head and returns to his cot. JOHN HENRY gathers the chains up, throws them upstage, and exits. Lights fade.

NINE

Lights up. The cots are gone now. ROBERT is sitting on a crate, leaning casually. He is playing the guitar and singing. He has a jug of moonshine with him, that he has been drinking from.

EDWARD

...can make ten dollars a week on one of them trains. I ain't staying in this dead-end, you can believe me.

ROBERT

(sings)

I got to keep moving,
I got to keep moving
Blues falling down like hail,
blues falling down like hail
Mmm, blues falling down like hail,
blues falling down like hail

EDWARD

(to Robert)

What...hey, what are you doin' out here?

ROBERT

(sings)

And the day keeps on remindin' me,
there's a hellhound on my trail
Hellhound on my trail,
hellhound on my trail.

EDWARD

(to Robert)

Hey! God-damn it, answer me! (kicks him) What you doin' out here.

ROBERT

Yes, suh. Ain't doin' nothing, suh.

Pause. ROBERT is silent.

BENJAMIN picks up the
jug of moonshine.

Where the hell'd you get this?

EDWARD

You gonna tell me how you got out here, boy?

ROBERT

Got a hellhound. You got a hellhound comin' after you,
yeah?

EDWARD

What?

ROBERT

He comin' up. I see him. Down in the dark, I see him
there. You see him?

EDWARD

Shut up.

ROBERT

Comin up, gwan to bite you. Gwan to rip you.

EDWARD

Shut up. Shut up!

He takes his billy-club
and starts to hit ROBERT
with it. BENJAMIN grabs
his arm.

BENJAMIN

Come on, now. He's drunk. (to ROBERT) Get your ass to
the cots, nigger. You're goin get hurt.

ROBERT

He know. Don' he know? He can feel it. You feel it, suh?
You feel his breath on you? Hot on you neck? Hellhound
see what you did.

BENJAMIN

I told you to shut your mouth/ and get your ass out of
here..

EDWARD

/See? What did you see? What did you see, nigger?

ROBERT

He seen it. He see you now. He comin up for you. He comin up, up, up, gonna get you. Gonna breathe fire on you.

EDWARD

What did you see?

BENJAMIN

Keep your god-damn mouth shut! (to Benjamin) He didn't see nothin', he's talkin' drunk and stupid./ Leave off him.

EDWARD

WHAT DID YOU SEE?

BENJAMIN

Leave off him! LEAVE OFF!

EDWARD smacks ROBERT
with his club again,
kicks him

EDWARD

You answer me when I'm talking to you, hear? You god-damn ANSWER ME!

EDWARD grabs the
ROBERT'S guitar, and
threatens to smash it.

WHAT DID YOU SEE?

ROBERT suddenly begins
to grovel at EDWARD
feet.

ROBERT

No, massuh, oh no, don', please don'. I don' know nothin', I ain't do nothin'.

EDWARD

Tell me what you saw. Tell me!

BENJAMIN

He didn't see nothing!

ROBERT

Please, I ain' do nothin', please don', massuh, please.

EDWARD

TELL ME!

BENJAMIN

ED! He's just drunk. Leave off.

ROBERT

Oh, please, massuh, please...

EDWARD slowly lowers the guitar while ROBERT continues to whimper. He finally tosses it aside and spits on him.

EDWARD

Get back to the cots.

ROBERT cradles the guitar, wraps himself around it. EDWARD and BENJAMIN begin to leave. When they are sufficiently far away, ROBERT chuckles out loud.

ROBERT

He done seed you. He comin' fo' you. He gon' rip you right up.

EDWARD turns, tears back towards ROBERT. He yanks the guitar from his hands, then smashes it on the ground. ROBERT is sitting there, stunned. EDWARD knocks him down, puts his club against his throat, choking him. BENJAMIN

tries to grab his arm,
but EDWARD throws him
off, hits him across the
face with his club.
BENJAMIN falls, EDWARD
begins to choke ROBERT
again.

JOHN HENRY enters. He
barrels directly into
EDWARD, knocking him to
the ground. He pins him
down, and begins
punching him in the
face. EDWARD twitches,
then is limp. JOHN
HENRY continues to hit
him for a few seconds,
then stops.

BENJAMIN is getting to
his feet. JOHN HENRY
stands up to meet him.
They stare at each other
for a moment.

BENJAMIN

Get out of here. You get the hell out of here.

JOHN HENRY leaves.
BENJAMIN looks down at
the body of EDWARD, who
is dead. ROBERT begins
to sing again.

ROBERT

(sings)

I got to keep moving,
I got to keep moving
Blues falling down like hail,
blues falling down like hail
Mmm, blues falling down like hail,
blues falling down like hail
And the day keeps on remindin' me,
there's a hellhound on my trail
Hellhound on my trail,
hellhound on my trail

TEN

ROBERT
(singing Steel-Drivin' Man)

John Henry hammered on the mountain,
He hammered till half past three,
He said, "This big Bend Tunnel on the C. & O. road
Is going to be the death of me,
Lord! Is going to be the death of me.

Simultaneously, we hear the sound of barking dogs and men shouting, as JOHN HENRY climbs the scaffolding in the back of the stage, as though climbing the mountain. The voices grow louder, bright lights like torches shine from offstage; two men hunt for JOHN HENRY across the stage, but pass directly beneath him without seeing him. JOHN HENRY breathes heavily for a moment, the instrumental part of "Steel-Driving Man" quietly fades out in the background.

J.H. begins to move again. As he does, the rhythmic sound of a shovel, clattering on stone and shoveling dirt can be heard. The lights dimly illuminate the GRAVEDIGGER, standing on one of the platforms.

JOHN HENRY
Who you diggin' that for?

(Pause.)

Hey! I said who you diggin' that for?

GRAVEDIGGER
You.

JOHN HENRY

You ain't dig me no grave. I ain't dead yet.

GRAVEDIGGER

You will be by the time I finish.

JOHN HENRY

Stop.

Pause. The GRAVEDIGGER
continues to dig.

I said STOP!

JOHN HENRY snatches the
shovel away from him. The
GRAVEDIGGER starts to cackle,
gleefully.

GRAVEDIGGER

Heheheh. You can't stop me diggin' like that, John Henry.
If it were that easy, I'd give up diggin' long ago.

JOHN HENRY

Shut up.

He threatens the GRAVEDIGGER
with the shovel, raising it
over his head, then tossing
it away.

You seen any men come up this way? Lookin' for someone?

GRAVEDIGGER

Who they lookin' for, John Henry? You? You escaped? You
think they give me a reward if I shout out for 'em now?

JOHN HENRY grabs the
GRAVEDIGGER by the front of
his shirt and half lifts him
from the ground.

Oh, lawd, you think jes' everyone got it in for you, huh,
John Henry?

JOHN HENRY

You said you diggin' my grave. A man don't trust you if he got sense.

GRAVEDIGGER

You ain't got nothin' on me, John Henry.

JOHN HENRY

I killed a man, fore I came up there. That's why they after me. They gon' kill me.

GRAVEDIGGER

Probably.

JOHN HENRY

You know a way down? To the other side of the mountain? If I...I can get down to Ohio.

GRAVEDIGGER

Where you gonna go after that?

(Pause.)

JOHN HENRY

I don't know.

GRAVEDIGGER

You got a wife?

JOHN HENRY

Outside. In Virginia.

GRAVEDIGGER

Can't get to her from Ohio.

JOHN HENRY

Shut up.

Pause. The GRAVEDIGGER retrieves his shovel, and starts digging again.

How long it take, to dig a man a grave?

GRAVEDIGGER

Long time. Fifty year, sometime. Sometime, not so long. Sometime a day.

JOHN HENRY

How long it take to dig mine?

GRAVEDIGGER

(chuckles)

You know they gon' bury you in sand? Hard to bury a man in sand.

(sings—"Steel-Driving Man,"
but slow, painful, like a dirge)

They took John Henry to the White House,
And buried him in the san',
And every locomotive come roarin' by,
Says there lays that steel drivin' man,
Says there lays that steel drivin' man.

JOHN HENRY

I had enough of locomotives. I ain't never want to hear no locomotive again.

The voices of the searching
men can be heard again,
nearby.

Damn it, you tell me now. How do I get down the mountain?

GRAVEDIGGER

Ain't no way down.

JOHN HENRY

Don't you lie to me! Tell me how!

The GRAVEDIGGER shakes his
head.

They gonna take me back...I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back there. You tell me how I get down from here.

GRAVEDIGGER

(looks seriously at J.H.)

Ain't no way down 'cept up.

The sound of voices and dogs gets louder. JOHN HENRY panics, climbs higher on the scaffolding. The lights dim on the GRAVEDIGGER, but the rhythmic clink and shuffle of his shovel can be heard throughout the rest of the scene. As JOHN HENRY reaches the top platform, the lights reveal JUDGE BURD, sitting in a heavy wooden chair.

BURD wears an old Union military uniform. He has a large dent in his forehead. He sits, slouched in the chair, glowering with rage, and speaks directly outward—not to the audience, but to some listener than no one sees or here. He speaks with a growling, Virginia accent.

BURD

He doesn't die, here. He dies from consumption.

JOHN HENRY

I know you...

BURD

Acute silicosis of the lungs. From inhaling particles of rock.

JOHN HENRY

I know you!

BURD

Silicate infects the aveolae. White blood cells are sent to protect them.

JOHN HENRY

You the judge that sent me here. You the judge that locked me up!

BURD

The white blood cells die, and fill the lungs with pus.

JOHN HENRY

You listen! You listen to me!

BURD

A man drowns in his own lungs.

JOHN HENRY

You got me sent up, when I didn't deserve it! You got me locked up when I didn't do nothin'! But you see me, now? I'm out. I'm free. I got out, and you can't do nothin' to me now. You see me? YOU SEE ME?

BURD

I am the Master of this World, and I will break his will, and I will break the will of every man. There is no will but mine.

JOHN HENRY

Look at me, you bastard!

BURD

He does not die, he runs. He will run from the machines and the mountain and the locomotives. He will run and die alone. And the men will sing his song, afraid. They will work then, and work until they die.

JOHN HENRY

I don't...I ain't dead, yet.

BURD

Man is ground down beneath my wheel. The future is all of iron and steam.

JOHN HENRY

I ain't dead...

BURD

There is no future for him.

JOHN HENRY

No. No!

He lunges forward, seizes
BURD by the shirt, lifts him
from his chair. BURD looks
at him, astonished, says
nothing.

I AIN'T DEAD! I AIN'T DEAD YET! YOU DON'T TELL ME! YOU
DON'T TELL ME WHEN I DIE!

The sound of voices and dogs
grows loud, now, almost
intolerable. The sound of
the GRAVEDIGGER's shovel
grows louder, then changes to
the sound of hammers on train
spikes. Beneath the noise,
the railroad workers are
singing "Ol Lazarus."

BURD

I am the Master of this World. You must run and die. That
is my will, that you are broken.

JOHN HENRY

You ain't my master. You ain't mine.

Lights fade.

ELEVEN

JAMES and WARDWELL are standing on the scaffolding in front of the machine, on opposite sides. PETER is there, still dressed as a prisoner. WILLIE and LAZ are now both guards. PETER is holding the drill bit, waiting for someone to come and hammer it, but JOHN HENRY is nowhere to be found.

JAMES

Do you want me to tell you about John Henry? I will, oh, I will! He was a man of great strength but little resolve, who promised to dig a tunnel right through the mountains of West Virginia, but never seemed to get around to doing it. He claimed he could drill a hundred yards of rock a day, claimed he could work a hundred hours and never stop, claimed he could work harder and faster than any machine ever built by man.

So when the time came to dig a tunnel through those West Virginnny mountains, a man appeared with a drill powered by steam. A drill that would never get tired, a drill that would never complain, a drill that would never, ever stop. This man promised a railroad to the people of West Virginia and Virginia, of Ohio and the Carolinas, and he said that his machine would give it to them.

But John Henry stood up and boasted that he could do a better job than any drill, and demanded that the bosses throw the drill into the sea. Instead they offered up a challenge. John Henry and his crew would race against the drill, and the bosses would use whichever team was fastest.

The day of the race came, and the drill was laid out in gleaming array, the engine hot, its wheels turning smoothly, ready to work. But where was John Henry? Nowhere to be found. Morning became afternoon, and still no John Henry. Afternoon turned to evening, and still no

John Henry. Three days they waited, and did John Henry ever show?

ROBERT plays Steel-
Drivin' man, just
instrumental at first.

Had he run away? Had John Henry seen the task before him, and come to realize that no man could do the work of an engine such as this? That no man, alone, could conquer a mountain?

ROBERT
(singing)

John Henry went up on the mountain
Came down on the other side
The mountain was so tall, John Henry was so small
He laid down his hammer and he cried,
Laid down his hammer and he cried.

JAMES

No man can conquer a mountain, no man can do the work of a machine. John Henry ran, and they tell his story up and down the C&O Line. They tell that steam and iron are the only way to lay down track, and a man is nothing but a man.

(to WARDWELL)

Well, Mr. Wardwell! It looks like the last day of our challenge, and haven't got enough men left! We've still got twelve feet of rock to cut—the hardest rock in the belly of the mountain, and your crews have let you down. Tell whoever's left to pack and go.

WARDWELL

They'll starve in Richmond, Mr. James, there is no money to feed them.

JAMES

They'll starve out here, Warden, for I've no money to pay them.

WARDWELL

These are you fellow men, Mr. James—

JAMES

They are cogs in the engine of progress, Wardwell, as are we all. They will turn, or they will break, but the engine will still go on.

WARDWELL

For God's sake, Mr. James!

JAMES

God gave us coal and iron, warden, so that we would use them. Do you yield the challenge?

WARDWELL

I...

JAMES

Do you yield?

JOHN HENRY enters from upstage. He is not wearing his chains. Everyone stops to look at him.

WARDWELL

What are you doing here, son?

JH

I's here to work.

PETER

No, John, you were away. You were free.

JH

There's nowhere free. There's just work, and the men that do it.

PETER

You should be free, John. God, I've sinned against you, I sinned against all of you, and I'm sorry for it, but you should be *free*.

JH

Don't matter now.

PETER

Forgive me, please.

JH

Don't matter. That rock ain't gon' cut itself.

PETER

Please...

JH

(shouts, to JAMES & WARDWELL)

This rock ain't gon' cut itself!

JAMES

This is your crew, Warden? One man with a hammer, one man with a drill? You're going to take on my engine with this?

WARDWELL

At least God will see that we tried.

JAMES

Ha! Save your pennies, Warden, because I don't think that that alone will buy you a ticket on my train.

JOHN HENRY picks up his hammer, and stands in front of the machine. JAMES waves his hand to someone offstage. The machine, hidden by the scaffolding, is fully illuminated for the first time. It is a huge thing of gears and turning wheels, whose function is vast and inscrutable. It shudders into motion, and it is loud, and grows louder, a groaning, screaming, pounding sound JOHN HENRY begins to hammer the drill that PETER holds, faster and faster, while the machine grows louder.

JOHN HENRY begins to
scream as he speeds up,
shouting every time he
swings. The sound of
the hammer also becomes
louder, until each blow
sounds like a
thunderclap. The noises
build to a climax. At
their peak, the lights
go out, and all sounds
suddenly cease.

The lights come up
again, and none of the
men are on the stage
except for WARDWELL, who
is standing in the
center of the
scaffolding. The
machine is in the dark
again, and the wheels
are no longer turning.

WARDWELL

When the century turned, men were needed to lay tracks and dig tunnels for the growing nation's growing need for railroads. The people were hungry for progress, and there was no shortage of men to feed it to them.

Singing can be heard
from offstage, a low,
slow hum of "Steel-
Drivin' Man."

Many men were recruited from prisons, bought and paid for as forced laborers to spend their days in tunnels beneath the earth. Men by the score and the bushel were bought and sent from the prisons of Richmond to work on the C&O line.

The other men carry JOHN HENRY on a kind of bier, his arms crossed, his hammer in his hands. ROBERT follows behind, playing the guitar. They slowly move across

the stage with a kind of
funereal march.

When I saw...when I read the reports on the prisoners'
health, I found that one in ten men that worked on that
line had died. Some had died while they worked, some had
died once they were brought home. They died from
consumption and pneumonia. They died because of the rock
and dust that had filled their lungs.

There is a long list of men that died in prison. But for
the men that died abroad, giving their lives to the trains
and the work—they were brought back to Richmond, and buried
in the sandy soil beside the prison.

The men set JOHN HENRY
down in the center of
the stage and stand
around him.

There names were unrecorded.

The men begin to sing
out loud, now. This
version of the song is
slow and dirge-like, in
a minor key.

MEN

John Henry died in the evening
Left his poor widow to cry
Well, they laid John Henry by the railroad track
So he could hear the trains go rumbling by
Lawd, Lawdy
So he could hear the trains go rumbling by.

John Henry, O, John Henry!
Sing it if yo' can,--
High an' low an' ev'ry where yo' go,--
He died with his hammah in his han',--
Lawd, -- Lawd, --
He died with his hammah in his han'.

Blackout.

End of play.