

STEEL HAMMER

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Music and lyrics by Julia Wolfe
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Performed and created by SITI Company

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[Carnival music. JOHN HENRY, large man of inordinate strength, driving HIS large steel hammer. As it is very heavy, every swing will require excessive effort, the clangs well spaced between each other, and loud.

A few feet away, on either side and slightly downstage of JOHN HENRY, are SANDERS and GRAHAM. On the other side of SANDERS is COX. The illusion of a tent show audience observing THEM. Unless otherwise indicated, SANDERS and GRAHAM address the audience.]

SANDERS

[Grinning at JOHN HENRY, admiring:] Steel driver!

GRAHAM

“John Henry,” 19th Century folksong. To give you an idea of the popularity, go to iTunes: five hundred recordings.

SANDERS

Then they got tired and wrote “Less relevant items are not displayed.”

GRAHAM

Countless versions.

COX

Almost all referencing death off the bat: first stanza.

SANDERS

~~I had to do some convincing. Board of Directors: What the hell's Cliff Sanders, CEO of John Henry Sporting Goods doing at some damn tent show contest? My subordinates weren't so shocked. They know Boss likes to tell a story.~~

GRAHAM

In American folklore we have our fictional Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and the tall tales surrounding real figures: Johnny Appleseed, Calamity Jane. All white. John Henry stands alone as a black legend. For us *all*.

SANDERS

~~John Henry Sporting Goods is a benevolent establishment, we win? Every penny going as a grant to fund Ms. Chloe Graham from the folklore museum in her research endeavors, Ms. Graham assisting me in the storytelling.~~

GRAHAM

~~Also assisting is Aisha Cox, an actress and university professor specializing in African-American history, theatre, labor studies, music theory, contemporary African literature, Swahili,~~

SANDERS

We consider this a very important tribute to African American culture.

GRAHAM

*[Sings:] This old hammer
Killed John Henry
Killed my brother
Can't kill me.*

SANDERS

~~Another very important tribute is our annual Martin Luther King Day sale. Doors open 7-AM!~~ Another version of the song.

GRAHAM

~~Or,~~ *[Sings:] John Henry was a little bitty baby
Sittin on his mama's knee
He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel
Said,*

[JOHN HENRY joins in here without looking at GRAHAM or interrupting HIS work. SHE turns to HIM, surprised by HIS participation, delighted.]

GRAHAM and JOHN HENRY

*Hammer's gonna be the death of me
Lawd Lawd
Hammer's gonna be the death of me.*

COX

Or *[chants:]* This ole hammer, mos too heavy

COX and JOHN HENRY

Huh. [Should coincide with JOHN HENRY's hammer coming down.]

COX

Killed John Henry, killed him dead.

COX and JOHN HENRY

Huh.

SANDERS

The way to start is to start at the start. John Henry put his mama to conniptions bein born, he pop out lookin like a toddler, lookin ready to walk. John Henry, black as coal, born in the heat a the heart a Dixie.

GRAHAM

*[Sings:] Some say he's from Georgia
Some say he's from Alabam*

[Suddenly music out, lights out except for the light on JOHN HENRY, who has stopped working, has turned to the audience.]

JOHN HENRY

Elizabeth City, New Jersey born. But come down in Virginia I'm a prisoner. Convict, what I'm guilty of? Stealin from Wiseman's Grocery *they* claim, but they got a math problem: If the law say twenty dollars the minimum for gran larceny, and *everything* in Wiseman's store 'cludin the two big ole hogs out back sum up to *fifty* dollars, how the hell I carry out half the merchandise on my back, broad daylight with the proprietor settin right there? So they make up some'un, rename it all "housebreakin," *now* I'm a felon.

GRAHAM

*[Sings:] But it's wrote on the rock at the Big Ben Tunnel
That he's an East Virginia Man,*

JOHN HENRY

Ten years.

[Back to carnival music, general light, JOHN HENRY swinging HIS hammer.]

SANDERS

So big little John Henry grows up to be a giant of a man. And while he's growing so's somethin else: the railroad.

GRAHAM

Track was being laid for the Chesapeake and Ohio, tie by tie, rail by rail.

SANDERS

Originating in Richmond with nothin between it and the Ohio River – cept a few mountains.

GRAHAM

Hilly land had to be flattened, mountains tunneled through.

SANDERS

The men hammered.

[[JOHN HENRY's hammer clangs.]]

SANDERS

Drivin stakes into the rock, or the mountain, and then fill in the holes they made: dynamite.

GRAHAM

The extreme manual labor explains why versions of the folksong have been adapted by construction crews. By prison crews.

COX

Not guilty.

[The music suddenly goes out as GRAHAM and SANDERS turn to COX. JOHN HENRY stops working, not looking at THEM, but listening.]

GRAHAM

Again?

COX

I don't believe he committed any crime. The "black codes," suddenly *vagrancy's* against the law – a black looking for work and can't find it; suddenly it's illegal to tout an *[fingers the quote marks:]* "air of satisfaction" and you know damn well to which race *that* Dixie mandate was directed right after the Civil War, right at the start of Reconstruction.

GRAHAM

[To audience:] Reconstruction: a federal effort to level the racial playing field. For a little while. *[To COX:]* Sure, there was a backlash, but you're talking about the *real* John Henry. I appreciate that.

COX

Slavery just declared over, the Cotton Belt knew how to bring back chattel labor. Fill the prisons with black. So here come John Henry, to *them* some Yankee uppity come South, take advantage of Reconstruction.

GRAHAM

Aisha, this is *not* about the real John Henry.

JOHN HENRY

Reconstruction put a few black men in the Congress.

GRAHAM

This is about folklore, we're here to tell the story of John Henry the *legend*.

JOHN HENRY

And Reconstruction put a slew a black men in the penitentiary.

[JOHN HENRY starts swinging HIS hammer again, cueing the return of the carnival music and festive atmosphere.]

SANDERS

Big John Henry grows up to marry a sweet little lady named Polly Ann.

GRAHAM

Or Lucy, or Julie Ann, depending on the rendition.

SANDERS

John Henry loved her some Polly Ann and Polly Ann loved her some John Henry.
Loyal.

GRAHAM

In *some* versions. In others –

COX (as POLLY ANN)

*[Sings:] John Henry had a little woman
Just as pretty as she could be
They's just one objection I's got to her
She want every man she see*

SANDERS

Now John Henry was a big man, *powerful* man, just what the railroad ordered. Doggin track faster n any other trackliner, only one other ever had the nerve to challenge him and ten minutes later that challenger draggin home to his woman, her whuppin him with a broomstick cuz he say his paycheck gone, restin easy in John Henry's hip pocket.

[Sudden loud sound of a steam drill. ALL, including JOHN HENRY, look offstage in the direction of the sound. ALL in awe.]

GRAHAM

Then came along the steam engine.

SANDERS

[Distaste.] "Progress," they called it.

GRAHAM

Various mechanized drills came to be developed at this time.

SANDERS

Their primary motivation bein speed, mimickin the labor a many men in minimal minutes. But the clunky machines could never match the precision a two workers on their own, the hammer man swingin the sledgehammer down on the chisel,

[JOHN HENRY's hammer clangs down hard.]

SANDERS (cont'd)

the shaker turnin the drill.

[As GRAHAM starts speaking, JOHN HENRY takes interest, stops work to look up and listen to HER:]

GRAHAM

In one version Captain Tommy, dubbed *[fingers the quote marks:]* “the whitest man on earth,” loved John Henry like a son and told him he’d bet the white man running the steam drill that John Henry could drill faster.

COX

John Henry replied to Captain Tommy with “lightnin in his eye,”

[JOHN HENRY now starts to take on the character in the story.]

JOHN HENRY

[Playing the part, billowing with pride, sings:] “Cap’n, bet yo lass red cent on me
Fo I’ll beat it to the bottom or I’ll die –

JOHN HENRY, COX, GRAHAM and SANDERS

[All grinning to the audience and singing:] Lawd, Lawd

JOHN HENRY

[Sings:] I’ll beat it to the bottom or I’ll die.

SANDERS

They faced each other. John Henry on the ground, the White Man perched high up on his whale of a drill, the only time a man had ever looked down to John Henry. *[JOHN HENRY looking up at the imaginary steam drill.]* Well John Henry kissed his hammer *[JOHN HENRY does]*, and the White Man turned on the steam *[sound of machine turning on]*.

GRAHAM

[Sings:] Then the White Man tole John Henry,

SANDERS

[To GRAHAM, worry:] Don't sing that part.

GRAHAM

[Sings:] "Niggah, damn yo soul"

SANDERS

I said stop singing!

GRAHAM

[To SANDERS:] I'm not changing the words to sanitize it, make it palatable. I'm not appeasing your white guilt.

COX

*[Pumping HERself up like the cocksure White Man, sings:] "You might beat this steamin drill a mine
When the rocks in the mountain turn to gold"*

COX, GRAHAM and SANDERS

[Singing:] Lawd, Lawd

[SANDERS had moved into JOHN HENRY's space and stands on something (a block?) that raises HIM above JOHN HENRY. Now HE takes on the persona of The White Man.]

SANDERS

[Sings:] "When the rocks in the mountains turn to gold."

[Now all sound goes out, and JOHN HENRY and SANDERS as The White Man stare at each other. SANDERS' face still expresses arrogance. JOHN HENRY's countenance is more complex. It should not be only anger: also fear, confusion – the consequences for humiliating a white man could be dire. The silence goes on a long time. Then suddenly GRAHAM, HER body language indicating SHE is acting in some "official" capacity, whistles

through HER teeth, signaling the start of the race. SANDERS will physicalize driving the steam drill while JOHN HENRY hammers faster and harder than HE has during the entire play. As soon as the race begins COX and GRAHAM start hooting and hollering, and sound returns: music (different than before), crowds, chaos. The steam drill pulls ahead, then JOHN HENRY, then the steam drill, then JOHN HENRY, then JOHN HENRY, then JOHN HENRY – and at some point the race is suddenly over, signaled by the screaming and cheering of COX and GRAHAM (and the crowd sound), by SANDERS' White Man's shock and fury, and by JOHN HENRY's exhausted collapse. It is clear that JOHN HENRY is the victor. As JOHN HENRY's condition gradually dawns upon the onlookers – crawling, clutching HIS chest – COX, who has now morphed into Polly Ann, races screaming to HIM, holds HIM. SANDERS from HIS perch, back to being the storyteller, turns to the audience.]

SANDERS

*[Sings softly:] John Henry had a little woman
Her name was Polly Ann
He hugged and kissed her just before he died
Saying,*

JOHN HENRY

[Very weak, speaks rather than sings:] "Polly, do the very best you can."

[JOHN HENRY dies. It should not be corny/cartoon, but not too real either.]

SANDERS

Well Polly Ann wept her little heart out. [COX mimes this (no sound).] But in another version,

GRAHAM

[Grins:] This is my favorite part.

SANDERS

*[Sings, belts it out jauntily:] She walked out to those tracks [COX as Polly Ann does]
Picked up John Henry's hammer [COX as Polly Ann does]*

GRAHAM and SANDERS

[Singing:] Polly drove steel like a man [COX as Polly Ann does, powerfully]

Lawd, Lawd

Polly drove steel like a man.

[During the following verse COX will leave the hammer to walk downstage and join GRAHAM and SANDERS. JOHN HENRY's body is now hidden behind THEM.]

GRAHAM, SANDERS and COX

[Singing:] Well every, every Monday morning

When a bluebird he began to sing

You could hear John Henry from a mile or more

You could hear John Henry's hammer ring

Lawd, Lawd

[On the second "Lawd" a thunderous hammer clang, sound-enhanced with reverberations. GRAHAM, SANDERS and COX, startled, jump out of the way and turn around, seeing that JOHN HENRY has stood and brought the hammer down. JOHN HENRY turns to the audience. Though HE will speak of HIMself in third person, HE should not be completely emotionally distant.]

JOHN HENRY

After the war, nineteen-year-old John Williams Henry traveled down to the Reconstruction South looking for work. Accused of petty theft, the charge trumped up to housebreaking and larceny, he was sentenced to a decade in the Virginia Penitentiary. At twenty-one years of age John Henry was farmed out to the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad. He was five feet one and one-quarter inches tall.

[JOHN HENRY seems to shrink before the audience's eyes. This may take a few seconds. When HE is finished:]

JOHN HENRY

The perfect height for tunnel work.

[Small John Henry starts swinging the hammer. HE seems much weaker, exhausted.]

SANDERS

The *legend* of John Henry, the strongman, endured and revised itself into a thousand incarnations.

GRAHAM

American communist posters during the Depression adopted his muscled workingman image.

COX

In the comics the black steel-driving man transformed into the white man of steel: Superman.

GRAHAM

[Moved by the story:] But the folklore John Henry, the bigger-than-life man born to drive steel and to die by it, his heart giving out at the end of the greatest race: Man Triumphs Over Machine.

COX

Gave his death a poetic quality.

GRAHAM

[Sensing light sarcasm from COX, GRAHAM turns to HER, defensively:] Yes, it *did*.

COX

When in truth he *did* die on the job but what probably killed him like most all of the other tunnel workers, overwhelmingly black men in their young twenties, were the tiny rock bits thick in the air of the caves they created, taking occupation of their lungs.

GRAHAM

Silicosis.

SANDERS

No. Air.

JOHN HENRY

I WAS BORN AND RAISED FREE! THEN COME SOUTH, THE LAW MAKE ME A SLAVE!

[This outburst catapults JOHN HENRY into an uncontrollable coughing fit. COX, SANDERS and GRAHAM turn to HIM, and lights slowly fade on THEM while brightening on HIM. JOHN HENRY's coughing becomes unbearable, morphing into a horrible wheezing. As HE seems desperately struggling for oxygen, there is a blackout with the terrible wheezing uninterrupted, going on, and on, and on till suddenly: nothing.]

end

Stephen:

Get some rest boys. Morning bell rings in three hours and we're at it again

Now you know and I know that history has a way of making big men bigger and strong men stronger. But the work was dangerous and done by two powerful men, steel drivers, who struck the steel and improvised a song as they worked. The John Henry song belongs to those pick and shovel men, to the skimmers, to the steel drivers, to the men of the railroad construction camps. The ballad came to be sung by Negro laborers everywhere, and it kept the John Henry story alive. Everyone imposed their own experiences on the lyrics. Many have tried faithfully to follow the story of John Henry, but they have failed. Anyone who tries will fail.

I believe, however, that the following are facts. John Henry really lived. He was a driver or a hammer man. He beat a steam drill down and died doing it. His wife was a very small woman who loved John Henry with all her heart.

MIGRANT MAMIE REMEMBERS JOHN HENRY

Talcott. Milboro. Shiloh. Hot Springs. Warms Springs. Burnsville. Bacova Junction. I remember it. Slavery abolished round bout five year then. Never know it. No free room and board. Only music tell the tale. I sing it if I could but I tell it better. Back then, do not know how old I was, but I was young, before breasts or blood. No matter. Girls was women then. There was the slow creek of a wagon cart or some crude handmade thing pulling along by the clop clop of a mule and the vibrant off-pitch holler of the handclap.... what music has become now. The negro man. The negro preacher. The negro laborer. The negro crook. We all walk the same same roads. I come from one big family. Mamas give sixteen babies. The first baby born die of fever. The second baby born die in the womb. The third baby born me. Thirteen come after that. All live, I make sure of it. Well, earth, heaven, sky— one big place. Wasn't nuthin but big hard scrappin' black hands...poor ruff raggedy cotton scrappin' fingers.... plantation to plantation...walk the mile road feet...feet tied up.... rag feet... toes bleeding...fingers bleeding.... what was them days... tobacco farm and steel mills and always somebody with a axe or a hammer ready and miles of walking foot rags hand bleeding cotton scrappin field to field...pick this pick that. By twelve I take to killings hogs for people...Hotchkiss. Mountain Grove. Sunrise. Switch Back. Chimney Run. Sometimes they give you the innards...sometimes the feet, sometimes the head...I wasn't but nuthin then...A shadow on the doorsill...just a girl slaughterin' hogs for folks...they pay you with the scraps....pig guts ...pig feet...pig head...blood drippin behind me walkin' back down the road trying to make it home...but if night come you wait for sun up...rest on the long road. Camp up somewhere. Overcrowded shacks and shanties, no running water. Sanitation is an unuttered idea. Contagion, a

fact. Congestion a matter of existence. Insects everywhere, feeding upon the host. He come round...lay near beside me...and get to talkin' ...I remember everything he say then...whisper it soft...say his name John Henry...big old man....say to me Death is grace. Say death is reality and nature of life. Say man—every man—is an end in himself, exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose. Say neither life nor happiness the pursuit of a free man. Just as man is free man got to be free to survive in a random manner, less he perish, less he mindless. Say some things I do not know all what he talkin' about except I like how it sound. Say the torture of frustration all you finds. The problem is time, time as a horizon. Time for the understanding of being. Life. Death. Struggle. Food. Peace. Shelter. Place to rest. Rest stop. Field house. Somewhere before home. Night fallin'. Someplace 'fore pig guts get bad. This one place, I hear the sound of clunking boots on the grass behind me. He pass me. He sat directly in front of me. He was breathing making noises like a crying dog. He was large, big black man big black hands carrying a bag of somethin' other...grunting and saying somethin' in reaction to something. The sounds, the smells, making me ill. It had become stronger, the smell, the night, the not knowin, the liquor men blending the strange olfactory of death.... all camped round about together...but he wasn't like them...naw...wasn't so scary... I know he must be on the run from somethin' ...most mens was...but he lay beside me in the high grass... night making his body over, measuring his wounds. There are many besides him. Three thousand neat-ankle sons and daughters dispersed far and wide...but he the one I remember from every place alike who serve earth and deep waters. There are many sons of the sky with wings and feet, children who are glorious

but he the only one I remember...must been long before Big Bend Tunnel and all that what people tell.... I remember cause I remember everything...the insects...many rivers. I walked a whole lotta roads feet covered in rags...listening to waters babbling as they flow...but well, this long before them steel driving steam days...this long before his incarceration...that man what lay next to me...son of the Ocean, that John Henry. Must been. Maker of songs. A place for permanent dreaming. A voices of all kinds. I know this I was safe that night in the high grass I know that. That's the night I met John Henry. Never know'd what was in that bag he carry.

Barney:

When things go wrong, as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When funds are low and the debts are high,
And you want to smile but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.

Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about,
When he might have won if he'd stuck it out.
Don't give up, though the pace seems slow -
You may succeed with another blow.

Often the goal is nearer than
It seems to a faint and faltering man;
Often the struggler has given up
When he might have captured the victor's cup,
And he learned too late, when the night slipped down,
How close he was to the golden crown.

Success is failure turned inside out -
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are -
It may be near when it seems afar;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit -
It's when things seem worst that you mustn't quit.

Patrice:

~~In the fell clutch of circumstance
— I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
— My head is bloody, but unbowed.~~

~~It matters not how strait the gate,
— How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
— I am the captain of my soul.~~

Stephen:

~~If you can keep your head when all about you—
— Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,—~~

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
—But make allowance for their doubting too;—
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
—Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
—And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;—
—If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;—
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
—And treat those two impostors just the same;—
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
—Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
—And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
—And risk it on one turn of pitch and toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
—And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
—To serve your turn long after they are gone,—
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
—Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,—
—Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
—If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
—With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,—
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,—
—And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Eric:

I exist
I can shout
I can feel
My body matters
My hands matter
My ideas matter
I feel it

(Images are projected of African-American men working. Abrasive sounds of metal grinding, machinery turning and dogs barking accompany the collage of images. The pictures intensify as the sounds fade. Enter JOHN HENRY, carrying a hammer, and weary after another day of work. Behind John Henry, enter PRISON GUARD/ RAILROAD CAPTAIN/FEDERAL JUDGE).

PRISON GUARD/RAILROAD CAPTAIN/FEDERAL JUDGE: Get some rest boys, morning bell rings in three hours, and we're at it again.

JOHN HENRY: Yes sir

(JOHN HENRY enters a small prison cell. Once inside, the PRISON GUARD/RAILROAD CAPTAIN/ /FEDERAL JUDGE closes the cell door and stands guard.)

(Lights up on POLLY ANN)

POLLY ANN: John called for Polly Ann in the night. Called for her like every night since he first went to prison, in 1877

JOHN HENRY:

Polly....Polly Anne. I needs to see ya
This 20 pound hammer feel like 40 pounds tpd
My head is light and ,y thoughts are heavy
Won't you come by here Polly Anne. Polly Ann! Polly Ann!

PRISON GUARD/RAILROAD CAPTAIN/FEDERAL JUDGE: Quiet up in there boy, Before I give you somethin' to cry about

JOHN HENRY: Yes sir boss man. (Whispering) Polly Ann....

JOHN HENRY: Polly Ann was with the children, a long ways away

POLLY ANN: John Henry, you gonna get out of there soon, and we gonna resume our life, as hard as it was, it don't compare to you bein' in there and me bein' out here. Now tell me, when ya commin' home John? When they gonn' work you to an inch of your life then send you home,

barely a man but my man, I'll take you and nurse you Till you strong again, find all the pieces of you that's broken and scattered all over and sew you back together.

POLLY ANN: John was in no mood to hear that poetic stuff, cause he'd been hearin' it for the last hundred and thirty-seven years. Of course he didn't know what Polly should say. In some ways he wished she would just move on with her life, get another man and move on, get a job at CNN down in Atlanta, or go to Hollywood and make some movies.

JOHN HENRY: Polly, why you waitin' on me? You know I ain't gettin' outta here. First they say, when you work our fields, then we'll let you out of here, then they said, when you build the railroads, then, and only then, will we let you out, then they said, When you fight our wars, no no when you buy our drugs, no no no, when you work with us on this drug war thing, you play your part, then we promise you John Henry, you'll be released. Well, I been denied parole two hundred sixty seven times. Done broke mo' rocks, and built mo' parts of this country than anybody would believe' till I show 'em what I built my damn self. But I can't show nobody nothin', can't do nothin', 'cause I'm in here forever.

JOHN HENRY: Polly Ann knew it was gonna be different this time, she just knew it

POLLY ANN: John, didn't you tell me this new Warden is different? He's what they call a liberal, right? He went to UC Berkeley for God sakes.

JOHN HENRY: I don't care where he went, I'm not gettin' out Polly

POLLY ANN: But this Warden-

JOHN HENRY: I asked the Warden Polly, I asked him to please help me. And you know what he say? He say,

(The PRISON GUARD/RAILROAD CAPTAIN/FEDERAL JUDGE becomes THE WARDEN)

THE WARDEN: Well now John, you know I'm a liberal. And you know that I know that you been workin' too long, and it ain't right John, it ain't

right! But, I'm just a man and a man can't do nothin' against history, and history say...John, you know how the song go. John Henry dies with a hammer in his hand

POLLY ANN: No John! No you better not...if you die that's a punk move. Baby just hang on, keep your spirits up just a little while longer. See 'cause if you're alive, well then there's still a chance.

JOHN HENRY: Ain't no chance

POLLY ANN: Then you better do somethin', break outta jail or something. See cause I'm tired of doin' it by myself. Your children, my children they ask me they say, where is my daddy, who is my daddy?

JOHN HENRY: Well you the one didn't want them to see me in here, I told you, you can bring them for a visit if you like

POLLY ANN: The hell with a visit John Henry. What I want them to see you in here like this for? I don't want them thinkin' this is normal, no I want them to see they Daddy out in the world doin' things

JOHN HENRY: Well what you want me to do Polly Ann? I can't break these bars, I ain't no superman, just a man.

(Pause)

POLLY ANN: John, I got the new top 40 hit this week.

JOHN HENRY: Oh yeah, what is it, do it for me?

POLLY ANN: It's by this new singer named ___(name of whomever is # 1 on Top 40 list that week)

JOHN HENRY: Never heard of him/her before, what happened to Duke Ellington?

POLLY ANN: Duke Ellington? John Henry that was over 70 years ago

JOHN HENRY: Oh I thought he was after Sly Stone?

POLLY ANN: No you getting it all mixed up. Anyway you wanna here it?

JOHN HENRY: Yeah go ahead

POLLY ANN: Ok, now I'm not much of a singer but

JOHN HENRY: Polly Ann stop messin' around and let me hear

PRISON GUARD/RAILROAD CAPTAIN/FEDERAL JUDGE: Shut up in there boy, before I give you solitary confinement. I ain't gonna warn you again

JOHN HENRY: I'm sorry boss sir. Ok go head, Polly I don't have much time.

POLLY ANN: Alright.... (POLLY ANN sings a few bars of whoever is # 1 on Top 40 list that week)

JOHN HENRY: That sucks

POLLY ANN: John Henry! You watch your mouth now.

JOHN HENRY: Well it does. Me and the boys sing better than that everyday

POLLY ANN: So you want me to stop singing to you then?

JOHN HENRY: No I-I like when you sing, I bet you sing 'em better than them singers do. Polly Ann, it's time for us to go our separate ways.

POLLY ANN: No

JOHN HENRY: Polly Ann listen to me, you know it in your heart that we ain't never gonn' be together. The fact that you waited for me through all this time, well...I love you Polly Ann, and now it's time for me to go and for you to go on.

JOHN HENRY: Maybe for the first time in history, Polly Ann knew John Henry was right. If a Warden from UC Berkeley couldn't help John's cause, well what chance did he have? Polly Ann, she say

POLLY ANN: Ok John...I...I guess you're right

JOHN HENRY: I am right Polly. Will you tell the children about me?

POLLY ANN: Of course, and I won't say nothing about prison, I won't say nothing about that. And I'll make you 6 foot five instead of 5 foot two. And I'll make up something about you beatin' a steam engine

JOHN HENRY: A steam engine?

POLLY ANN: Yeah. And you died a hero. How does that sound?

JOHN HENRY: It sounds...it sounds just fine.

POLLY ANN: Goodbye John

JOHN HENRY: Goodbye

(POLLY ANN turns to leave)

JOHN HENRY: Polly Ann, wait. Honey I got to know

(JOHN HENRY sings)

Who's gonna shoe your little feet?

Who's gonna glove your hand?

Tell me, who's going to kiss your sweet little lips?

Tell me, who's gonna be your man, lord lord

Who's gonna' be your man?

POLLY ANN:

My papa's gonna shoe my little feet

My mama's gonna glove my hand

My sister's gonna kiss my sweet little lips

And you know I don't need no man, Lord, Lord
You know I don't need no man

Stephen:

...workers managed their labor by setting a "stint," or pace, for it. Men who violated the stint were shunned ... Here was a song that told you what happened to men who worked too fast: they died ugly deaths; their entrails fell on the ground. You sang the song slowly, you worked slowly, you guarded your life, or you died.

John
By Regina Taylor

For a chorus of male and female voices.

The dance is tap- time steps- (and other forms of dance) As
chorus swing hammers

- 1 - John
- 2 - Lucy
- 3 - Other woman
- 4 - Steele driving man/ Another John
- 5 - Over seer/ Carny barker
- 6 - Steele driving man/ Another John

0

We hear in the darkness-

1
HUH

As we hear Hammer striking- RINGING-
A WOMAN'S VOICE- #2 -GHOSTS IN THE SAME PITCH AS RINGING-

THE STRIKE BRINGS LIGHT UP ON JOHN/#1

2
John!

JOHN
I am

2
One

ALL
of many

3
Not the only

ALL

To die

Like...

2 AND 3

A man

1

Doing what I do

As best I can

ALL

huh

5

Name

ALL

John

ALL

huh

3

Not the only John

4

Number 3-

6

And uh-4 and uh

2 and 3

What's true---

5

(LIKE CARNY BARKER)

Flesh versus tech-no-lo-gy-

6

-The rest of the story

1

Belongs to others

4 and 6
I and uh 2 and uh-

ALL
Brothers
In blood

ALL
Huh

1
(singing blues)
Had me a woman—

2
(demands that he remember her)
What was her name—

3
(SPEAKING TO #1)
I want to be married baby

6
Like I want a whole in the head

4
(singing)
Had me some women

3+2
(demanding for him to remember-)
Their names

1
(blues)
Had me this woman
Held her in my arms

2
(demanding that he speaks her name-)

Her name—

3

(JEALOUSLY)

Named this hammer *Lucille*

(1 echos)

2

Was that it?

1

(singing)

Dream about her

Just the same

(speaks)

Been a long while since—

ALL

(blues)

Dream about here

Just the same

1

(blues)

Can feel her

In the dark

(spoken) With these hands

ALL

Huh

(Shift tempo and rhythm-)

ALL
Hands

1
That's who I am

4 & 6 (1 echos)
Got these hands from my dady

6 & 4
Like he got his from his dad

1
And so on-

3
And on it goes

5
Bought and sold

6
Like the same

3
Passed down

1
And so on

4
John this first and so on-

1
And so-

ALL
huh-

1
Convict

ALL
huh

1
Slave

ALL
huh

5
Number

1
314-/0

2
(howling)
0!

ALL
Steel driving-
MAN

ALL
Huh

(shift)
1
Swing my hammer

ALL
down
huh

1
driving holes into

ALL
Into tomorrow

1
My hammer
thirty pounds

ALL
shatters rock

ALL
My hammer
Thirty pounds
Shattering rock

(WE HEAR HAMMER RINGING AND WOMAN VOICE 32- ECHOING IN THE SAME
PITCH)

3
Hear Lucille singing

1
No mountain's gonna swallow me.

ALL
huh

(shift)
2
you're in the belly of this beast

ALL
Tunneling-

1
Can't see

what's in front of or-

ALL
around-

1
Swinging this hammer

ALL
Forty/pounds

1

two and a-3

ALL
long years

ALL
tunneling

ALL
doing time

5
(to pick up speed)
Step!

ALL
1 and a two and a-

2
Blind

3
Trying to break through to the other side

ALL
O this mountain

1
When I swing my hammer down-
Can feel

3
Sweat

4
blood
5
pus

2
Breathe

1
Lungs fill-

ALL

(elongated-)
With-Rocks-floating in the air---

(then picking up speed again)

5
side by side
flesh vs. metal

5
(pitying them)
Sisyphian

4
(boxer like)
Float like a butterfly-

6
(preparing for battle)
Sting like a bee.

5
There's only two ways to be
Give up of fight

2 AND 3
Heroes know when to give-

1
Up
2 and a 3 and uh-

5
Got to have some kind of strategy

ALL
To Reach

5
Poor fools

ALL
From here

5
Broker than broke dicked dogs

ALL
To eternity

5
Choices?

2
Staying alive

5
Huh

1
I'm no Houdini

But I try

ALL
Huh

(shift)

1
All I know is-

ALL
From can't see
To can't see

ALL
Hundreds upon hundreds

1
Like me

ALL
Names ain't writ down

1
down
so people forget

ALL
Huh-

1
The name is John

5
Like my other

ALL
Like so many Johns

3
Buried in the sand

4
Along pounded tracks

1
Hands- calloused

6
cracked

5
Mouths opened wide

6
Parched

ALL
Gimme a cool glass of water before

(Not wanting to speak the word- die
Not wanting to admit defeat-)

1
I
Am

1

So who will know I was ever here
In this spot
Pounding rock

(contemplative-)
huh-

Lights shift
Breaking through the darkness is #2-

1

Told here never to look at another
After
I'm gone
She said

2

yeah

1

The lying two faced-

2

(wantint him to remember and speak her name-)
Lucy!

1

Her name

(#1 and #2 continue to examine each other- as)

ALL

Huh, huh,huh, Huh, huh,huh,

(workers continue to work to the rhythm of “Chain Gang” as- at the same time-

Just as #1 has been swinging his hammer-now-he swings #2 around-
-jitterbug-like-)

1

I swing her around

She’s hot as fire

My Lucille

(-he kisses her)

All

Huh

(1 swings 2 around and around and then 2 swings 1 around over her back and
again-and then both 1 and 2 are on the ground looking up at the sky-breathing and
dreaming)

1
A flying machine
Lord
Have you ever seen

2
O what a sight

1
If man was born to fly
he'd be born with—

2
wings

ALL
Huh

1
I dream of sometime of later on-
My childrens children's time

ALL
Old school
Hammer time
1 and a 2 and a shuffle fullap ball/-change

-chain gang-

1-
(feeling that he may never see tomorrow/sadly-)
What's passed on-
What for to labor-

2
Don't make men like you no more

1
She said

2
John-

1

How many will put their

1 and 2
mouths

1
on

(1 and 2 kiss)

ALL
resuscitating

2
resurrecting

1
me

All (minus 1)
or some other

3
who will die today

2
drowning in his own spit-

ALL
No one knows the reswt—

2
or the next

(as 2 backs away from 1-

bringing back in the darkness)

1
and so on

ALL
left here to be
eaten up

no bone marrow- dust
is left of us

5
Consumption

4
Floating rocks

5 AND 6
In our lungs

1
My story is true
But someone elses name
Grafted to
It

ALL
Keep repeating

5
Man v. Machine

(We hear the sound of the MACHINE AND WE SEE- Increase in tempo- tapping and
swinging hammers fast and faster-
a contest between man and machine begins here_

(The tempo increases-Gandy Dancing faster and faster-

MIXED WITH SOOUND OF MACHINE
THEN EVERYTHING STOPS)

1
I won

4 AND 6
(echo)
I won!

5
Round 1

5
9 more rounds to go

ALL
(tired/spent)
huh

5
And so we begin, again

1
I gotta a hammer
That's fifty pounds, huh
I gotta hammer that's fifty damn
pounds

baby

ALL
Them others
Working so hard
insides falling
To the ground

Baby

1
That won't be me

ALL
Huh

We HEAR striking of hammer-As lights go down
-in the darkness we hear-)

2
John-

ALL
(ghosting/singing-same pitch as striking hammer)
John-