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Joe Turner's Come and Gone: the stage manager's binding song

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Joe Turner’s Come and Gone:
The Stage Manager’s Binding Song

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management) by Cate O’Brien

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2011
The thesis of Cate O’Brien is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the love of my life and the man who helped me to achieve this goal. My fiancée, Rene Hilbach-Barger.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my fellow stage managers for their love and support through this entire process. Without their guidance, patience, and endless laughter, none of this would have been possible.

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And finally my parents, who were always so proud of me, even when I decided to go into theatre. Thank you for your endless love and support.
Theresa Seamer O’Brien
Ken O’Brien
Cheryl O’Brien
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone:*
The Stage Manager’s Binding Song

by

Cate O’Brien

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Stage Management)

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Lisa Porter, Chair

The most significant and overarching goal of my graduate studies was to master the skill of managing people. While the art of stage management encompasses many disciplines, successful collaboration with fellow artists and craftspeople is the most challenging aspect. Throughout my time at UCSD, I have become aware of how I adjust my leadership style to fit the needs of each production. Every director, designer, and actor requires a nuanced variation of delivery, manner, and tone. A theme in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is the binding, or uniting, of people. In this production, I acted as a binding catalyst in artistic collaborations. Through careful observation, educated response, and thoughtful delivery, I was able to better aid the designers and director in reaching the production’s collaborative goals.
Throughout Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, the director and I shared a succinct and jocular communication style. My rapport with the director allowed me the freedom to focus my energy on designers who required a more tailored approach. While my natural inclination tends toward direct problem-solving, I learned to lead the artists indirectly to solutions or actions. When creative relationships struggle, the stage manager must assess the situation and maneuver towards a unifying resolution.

My thesis show was a fitting conclusion to my graduate studies. During this production, I anticipated contrasting creative methods between various parties, and I worked to unite any divergent communication styles. As a stage manager, I strive to bind my fellow artisans together in order to achieve a successful theatrical experience.
Scene Four

The lights come up on the kitchen. It is later the same evening. MATTIE and all the residents of the house, except LOOMIS, sit around the table. They have finished eating and most of the dishes have been cleared.

MOLLY: That sure was some good chicken.

JEREMY: That’s what I’m talking about. Miss Bertha, you sure can fry some chicken. I thought my mama could fry some chicken. But she can’t do half as good as you.

SETH: I know it. That’s why I married her. She don’t know that, though. She think I married her for something else.

BERTHA: I ain’t studying you, Seth. Did you get your things moved in alright, Mattie?

MATTIE: I ain’t had that much. Jeremy helped me with what I did have.

BERTHA: You’ll get to know your way around here. If you have any questions about anything just ask me. You and Molly both. I get along with everybody. You’ll find I ain’t no trouble to get along with.

MATTIE: You need some help with the dishes.
BERTHA: I got me a helper. Ain’t I, Zonia? Got me a good helper.

ZONIA: Yes, ma’am.

SETH: Look at Bynum sitting over there with his belly all poked out. Ain’t saying nothing. Sitting over there half asleep. Ho, Bynum!

BERHTA: If Bynum ain’t saying nothing what you wanna start him up for?

SETH: Ho, Bynum!

BYNUM: What you hollering at me for? I ain’t doing nothing.

SETH: Come on, we gonna Juba.

BYNUM: You know me, I’m always ready to Juba.

SETH: Well come on, then.

(SETH pulls out a harmonica and blows a few notes.)

Come on there, Jeremy. Where’s your guitar? Go get your guitar. Bynum say he’s ready to Juba.

JEREMY: Don’t need no guitar to Juba. Ain’t you never Juba without a guitar?

(Jeremy begins to drum on the table.)

SETH: It ain’t that. I ain’t never Juba with one! Figured to try it and see how it worked.

BYNUM: (Drumming on table.) You don’t need no guitar. Look at Molly sitting over there. She don’t know we Juba on Sunday. We gonna show you something tonight. You and Mattie Campbell both. Ain’t that right, Seth?
SETH: You said it! Come on, Bertha, leave them dishes be for a while. We gonna Juba.

BYNUM: Alright. Let’s Juba down!

*(The Juba is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance. Bynum sits at the table and drums. He calls the dance as others clap hands, shuffle and stomp around the table. It should be as African as possible, with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy. The words can be improvised, but should include some mention of the Holy Ghost. In the middle of the dance HERALD LOOMIS enters.)*

JERVAE: Just like fire.

ALL: Shut up in my bones.

JERVAE: Just like fire.

ALL: Shut up in my bones

JERVAE: Just like fire.

ALL: Shut up in my bones

JERVAE: Holy Ghost fire.

ALL: In my bones.

JERVAE: If you don’t believe, that I’ve been redeemed.

ALL: Follow me down to the Jordan stream.

JERVAE: I stepped in the water, the water was cold.

ALL: **Chilled** my body but not my soul.

*(Slow motion as JERVAE SINGS)*

JERVAE: ooooOOOOo0000ahhhhhh *(riff)*
Holy Ghost fire.
Holy Ghost fire.
Holy Ghost fire.

ALL: Holy Ghost fire.
Holy Ghost fire.
Holy Ghost fire.
Holy Ghost fire.

(LOOMIS enters.)

LOOMIS: (In a rage.) Stop it! Stop!
(They stop and turn to look at him.)
You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost.
What’s so holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming? You singing for the Holy Ghost to come? What he gonna do, huh?
He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your wooly heads? You gonna tie onto the Holy Ghost and get burned up? What you got then? Why God got to be so big? Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want?
(Loomis starts to unzip his pants.)

SETH: Nigger, you crazy!

LOOMIS: How much big do you want?

SETH: You done plumb lost your mind!
(LOOMIS begins to speak in tongues and dance around the kitchen. SETH starts after him.)

BERTHA: Leave him alone, Seth. He ain’t in his right mind.

LOOMIS: (Suddenly stops.) You all don’t know nothing about me. You don’t know what I done seen. Herald
Loomis done seen some things he ain’t got words to
tell you. [B stops, look out]

(Loomis starts to walk out the front door and is thrown
back and collapses, terror-stricken by his vision. BYNUM
crawls to him.)

BYNUM: What you done seen, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I done seen [bones] rise up out the water. Rise up
and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the
water.

BYNUM: Tell me about them bones, Herald Loomis. Tell
me what you seen.

LOOMIS: I come to this place to this water that was
bigger than the whole world. And I looked out … and I
seen these bones rise up out the water. Rise up and begin
to walk on top of it.

BYNUM: Wasn’t nothing by bones and they walking on top
of the water.

LOOMIS: Walking without sinking down. Walking on top of
the water.

BYNUM: Just marching in a line.

LOOMIS: A whole heap of them. They come up out the
water and started marching.

BYNUM: Wasn’t nothing but bones and they walking on top
of the water.

LOOMIS: One after the other. They just come up out the
water and start to walking.

BYNUM: They walking on the water without sinking down.
They just walking and walking. And then … what hap-
pened, Herald Loomis?
LOOMIS: They just walking across the water.

BYNUM: What happened, Herald Loomis? What happened to the bones?

LOOMIS: They just walking across the water ... and then ... they sunk down.

BYNUM: The bones sunk into the water. They all sunk down.

LOOMIS: All at one time! They just all fell in the water at one time.

BYNUM: Sunk down like everybody else.

LOOMIS: When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up ...

BYNUM: A big wave, Herald Loomis. A big wave washed over the land.

LOOMIS: It washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only ... only...

BYNUM: Only they ain't bones no more.

LOOMIS: They got flesh on them! Just like you and me!

BYNUM: Everywhere you look the wave is washing them up on the land right on top of one another.

LOOMIS: They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference.

BYNUM: Then what happened, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: They ain't moved or nothing. They just laying there.
BYNUM: You just laying there. What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I’m laying there … waiting.

BYNUM: What you waiting on, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I’m waiting on the breath to get into my body.

BYNUM: The breath coming into you, Herald Loomis. What you gonna do now?

LOOMIS: The wind’s blowing the breath into my body. I can feel it. I’m starting to breathe again.

BYNUM: What you gonna do, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: I’m gonna stand up. I got to stand up. I can’t lay here no more. All the breath coming into my body and I got to stand up.

BYNUM: Everybody’s standing up at the same time.

LOOMIS: The ground’s starting to shake. There’s a great shaking. The world’s busting half in two. They sky’s splitting open. I got to stand up.

(LOOMIS attempts to stand up.)

My legs … my legs won’t stand up!

BYNUM: Everybody’s standing and walking toward the road. What you gonna do, Herald Loomis?

LOOMIS: My legs won’t stand up.

BYNUM: They shaking hands and saying goodbye to each other and walking every whichaway down the road.

LOOMIS: I got to stand up!
BYNUM: They walking around here now. Mens. Just like you and me. Come right up out the water.

LOOMIS: Got to stand up.

BYNUM: They walking, Herald Loomis. They walking around here now.

LOOMIS: I got to stand up. Get up on the road.

BYNUM: Come on, Herald Loomis. (LOOMIS tries to stand up.)

LOOMIS: My legs won’t stand up! My legs won’t stand up! (LOOMIS collapses on the floor as the lights go down to black.)

SBO: Lobby Monitors OFF
Inter Music ON

Lobby Monitors OFF
Inter Music ON
SCENE TWO

The lights come up on the parlor. SETH and BYNUM sit playing a game of dominoes. BYNUM sings to himself:

BYNUM: (Singing.)
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohhh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy
Got my man and gone

Come with forty links of chain
Ohh Lordy
Come with forty links of chain
Ohh Lordy
Got my man and gone

SETH: Come on and play if you gonna play.

BYNUM: I’m gonna play. Soon as I figure out what to do.

SETH: You can’t figure out if you wanna play or you wanna sing.

BYNUM: Well sir, I’m gonna do a little bit of both.

(Playing.)
There. What you gonna do now?
(Singing)
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy

SETH: Why don’t you hush up that noise.

BYNUM: That’s a song the women sing down around Mem-
phis. The women down there made up that song. I picked
it up down there about fifteen years ago.

(LOOMIS enters from the front door.) [B at bottom of stairs]

BYNUM: Evening Mr. Loomis.

SETH: Today’s Monday, Mr. Loomis. Come Saturday your
time is up. We done ate already. My wife roasted up
some yams. She got your plate sitting in there on the
table. (To BYNUM.) Whose play is it?

BYNUM: Ain’t you keeping up with the game? I thought
you was the domino player. I just played so it got to be your turn.
(LOOMIS goes into the kitchen, where a plate of yams is
covered and set on the table. He sits down and begins to eat
with his hands.)

SETH: (Plays.) Twenty! Give me twenty! You didn’t know I
had that ace five. You was trying to play around that.
You didn’t know I had that lying there for you.

BYNUM: You ain’t done nothing. I let you have that to get
mine

SETH: Come on and play. You ain’t doing nothing but
talking. I got a hundred and forty points to your eighty.
You ain’t doing nothing but talking. Come on and play.

BYNUM: (Singing.)
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy
Got my man and gone

He come with forty links of chain
Ohh Lordy

LOOMIS: Why you singing that song? Why you singing about Joe Turner?

BYNUM: I’m just singing to entertain myself.

SETH: You trying to distract me. That’s what you trying to do.

BYNUM: *(Singing.*)* Come with forty links of chain
Ohh Lordy
Come with forty links of chain
Ohh Lordy

LOOMIS: I don’t like you singing that song, mister!

SETH: Now, I aint’ gonna have no more disturbance around here, Herald Loomis. You start any more disturbance and you leavin’ here, Saturday or no Saturday.

BYNUM: The man ain’t causing no disturbance, Seth. He just say he don’t like the song.

SETH: Well, we all friendly folk. All neighborly like. Don’t have no squabbling around here. Don’t have no disturbance. You gonna have to take that someplace else.

BYNUM: He just say he don’t like the song. I done sung a whole lot of songs people don’t like. I respect everybody. He here in the house too. If he don’t like the song, I’ll sing something else. I know lots of songs. You got “I Belong to the Band,” “Don’t you Leave Me Here.” You got “Praying on the Old Campground,” “Keep your Lamp Trimmed and Burning”…I know lots of songs.

*(Sings.)*
Boy I’ll be so glad when payday comes
Captain, Captain, when payday comes
Gonna catch that Illinois Central
Going to Kankakee

Great God almighty gotta pick a bale of cotton
Great God almighty gotta pick a bale a day
Oh Lordy, pick a bale of cotton. Oh Lordy, pick a bale a day

SETH: Why don’t you hush up that hollering and come on and play dominoes.

BYNUM: You ever been to Johnstown, Herald Loomis? You look like a fellow I seen around there.

LOOMIS: I don’t know no place with that name.

BYNUM: That’s around where I seen my shiny man. See, you looking for this woman. I’m looking for a shiny man. Seem like everybody looking for something.

SETH: I’m looking for you to come and play these dominoes. That’s what I’m looking for.


LOOMIS: Same as everybody. I done farmed some, yeah.

BYNUM: I used to work at farming…picking cotton. I reckon everybody done picked some cotton.

SETH: I ain’t! I ain’t never picked no cotton. I was born up here in the North. My daddy was a freedman. I ain’t never even seen no cotton.

BYNUM: Mr. Loomis done picked some cotton. Ain’t you, Herald Loomis? You done picked a bunch of cotton.

LOOMIS: How you know so much about me? How you know what I done? How much cotton I picked?
BYNUM: I can tell from looking at you. My daddy taught me how to do that. Say when you look at a fellow, if you taught yourself to look for it, you can see his song writ- tin on him. Tell you what kind of man he is in the world. Now, I can look at you, Mr. Loomis, and see you a man who done forgot his song. Forgot how to sing it. A fellow forget that and he forget who he is. Forget how he’s supposed to mark down life. Now, I used to travel all up and down this road and that…looking here and there. Searching. Just like you, Mr. Loomis. I didn’t know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied. Something wasn’t making my heart smooth and easy. Then one day my daddy gave me a song. That song had a weight to it that was hard to handle. That song was hard to carry. I fought against it. Didn’t want to accept that song. I tried to find my daddy to give him back the song. But I found out it wasn’t his song. It was my song. It had come from way deep inside me. I looked long back in memory and gathered up pieces and snatches of things to make that song. I was making it up out of myself. And that song helped me on the road. Made it smooth to where my footsteps didn’t bite back at me. All the time that song getting bigger and bigger. That song growing with each step of the road. It got so I used all of myself up in the making of that song. Then I was the song in search of itself. That song rattling in my throat and I’m looking for it. See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it till he find out he’s got it with him all the time. That’s why I can tell you one of Joe Turner’s niggers. ‘Cause you forgot how to sing your song. [B stand]

LOOMIS: You lie! How you see that? I got a mark on me? Joe Turner done marked me to where you can see it? You telling me I’m a marked man. What kind of mark you got on you?

(Bynum begins singing.)
BYNUM:

They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone.
Ohh Lordy
They tell me Joe Turner’s come and gone
Ohh Lordy
Got my man and gone

LOOMIS: Had a whole mess of men he catched. Just go out hunting regular like you go out hunting possum. He catch you and go home to his wife and family. Ain’t thought about you going home to yours. Joe Turner caught me when my little girl was just born. Wasn’t nothing but a little baby sucking on her mama’s titty when he caught me. Joe Turner caught me in nineteen hundred and one. Kept me seven years until nineteen hundred and eight. Kept everybody seven years. He’d go out hunting and bring back forty men at a time. And keep them seven years.

I was walking down this road in this little town outside of Memphis. Come up on these fellows gambling. I was a deacon in the Abundant Life Church. I stopped to preach to these fellows to see if maybe I could turn some of them from their sinning when Joe Turner, brother of the Governor of the great sovereign state of Tennessee, swooped down on us and grabbed everybody there. Kept us all seven years.

My wife Martha gone from me after Joe Turner caught me. Got out from under Joe Turner on his birthday. Me and forty other men put in our seven years and he let us go on his birthday. I made it back to Henry Thompson’s place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha’s gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North. We been looking for her ever since. That’s been going on four years now we been looking. That’s the only think I know to do. I just wanna see her face so I can get me a starting place in the world. The world got to start somewhere. That’s what I been looking for. I been wandering a long time in somebody else’s world. When I find my wife that be the making of my own.
BYNUM: Joe Turner tell why he caught you? You ever asked him that?

LOOMIS: I ain’t never seen Joe Turner. Seen him to where I could touch him. I asked one of them fellows one time why he catch niggers. Asked him what I got he want? Why don’t he keep on to himself? Why he got to catch me going down the road by my lonesome? He told me I was worthless. Worthless is something you throw away. Something you don’t bother with. I ain’t seen him throw me away. Wouldn’t even let me stay away when I was by my lonesome. I ain’t tried to catch him when he going down the road. So I must got something he want. What I got?

SETH: He just want you to do his work for him. That’s all.

LOOMIS: I can look at him and see where he big and strong enough to do his own work. So it can’t be that. He must want something he ain’t got.

BYNUM: That ain’t hard to figure out. What he wanted was your song. He wanted to have that song to be his. He thought by catching you he could learn that song. Every nigger he caught he’s looking for the one he can learn that song from. Now he’s got you bound up to where you can’t sing your own song. Couldn’t sing it them seven years ‘cause you was afraid he would snatch it from under you. But you still got it. You just forgot how to sing it.

LOOMIS: (To BYNUM.) I know who you are. You one of them bones people.

(The lights go down to black.)
SCENE FIVE

The lights come up on the kitchen. It is Saturday. BYNUM, LOOMIS, and ZONIA sit at the table. Bertha prepares breakfast. ZONIA has on a white dress.

BYNUM: With all this rain we been having he might have have ran into some washed-out roads. If that wagon got stuck in the mud he’s liable to be still upriver somewhere. if he’s upriver then he ain’t coming until tomorrow.

LOOMIS: Today’s Saturday. He say he be here on Saturday.

BERHTA: Zonia, you gonna eat your breakfast this morning.

ZONIA. Yes, ma’am.

BERTHA. I don’t know how you expect to get any bigger if you don’t eat. I ain’t never seen a child that didn’t eat. You about as skinny as a bean pole.

(Pause.)

Mr. Loomis, there’s a place down on Whylie. Zeke Mayweather got a house down there. You ought to see if he got any rooms.

(LOOMIS doesn’t respond.)

Well, you’re welcome to some breakfast before you move on.

(Mattie enters from the stairs.)
MATTIE: Good morning.

BERTHA: Morning, Mattie. Sit on down there and get you some breakfast.

BYNUM: Well, Mattie Campbell, you been sleeping with that up under your pillow like I told you?

BERTHA: Bynum, I done told you to leave that gal alone with all that stuff. You around here meddling in other people’s lives. She don’t want to hear all that. You ain’t doing nothing but confusing her with all that stuff.

MATTIE: (To LOOMIS.) You all fixing to move on?

LOOMIS: Today’s Saturday. I’m paid up till Saturday.

MATTIE: Where you going to?

LOOMIS: Gonna find my wife.

MATTIE: You going off to another city?

LOOMIS: We gonna see where the road take us. Ain’t no telling where we wind up.

MATTIE: Eleven years is a long time. Your wife … she might have taken up with someone else. People do that when they get lost from each other.

LOOMIS: Zonia. Come on, we gonna find your mama.

(LOOMIS and ZONIA cross to the door.)

MATTIE: (To ZONIA.) Zonia, Mattie got a ribbon here match your dress. Want Mattie to fix your hair with her ribbon?

(ZONIA nods. MATTIE ties the ribbon in her hair.)

There … it got a color just like your dress. (To LOOMIS.) I hope you find her. I hope you be happy.
LOOMIS: A man looking for a woman be lucky to find you. You a good woman, Mattie. Keep a good heart.

(LOOMIS and ZONIA exit.)

BERTHA: I been watching that man for two weeks … and that’s the closest I come to seeing him act civilized. I don’t know what’s between you all, Mattie … but the only thing that man needs is somebody to make him laugh. That’s all you need in the world is love and laughter. That’s all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other.

(BERTHA moves about the kitchen as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness that seems to envelop it. It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood’s memory.)

You hear me, Mattie? I’m talking about laughing. The kind of laugh that comes from way deep inside. To just stand and laugh and let life flow right through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you’re alive.

(She begins to laugh. It is a near-hysterical laughter that is a celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing. MATTIE and BYNUM join in the laughter. SETH enters from the front door.)

SETH: Well, I see you all having fun. (SETH begins to laugh with them.)

That Loomis fellow standing up there on the corner watching the house. He standing right up there on Manila Street.

BERTHA: Don’t you get started on him. The man done left out of here and that’s the last I wanna hear of it. You about to drive me crazy with that man.

SETH: I just say he standing up there on the corner. Acting sneaky like he always do. He can stand up there all he want. As long as he don’t come back in here.

(There is a knock on the door. SETH goes to answer it. Enter
MARTHA LOOMIS [Pentecost]. She is a young woman about twenty-eight. She is dressed as befitting a member of an Evangelist church. RUTHERFORD SELIG follows.)

SETH: Look here, Bertha. It’s Martha Pentecost. Come on in, Martha. Who that with you? Oh … that’s Selig. Come on in, Selig.

BERTHA: Come on in, Martha. It’s sure good to see you.

BYNUM: Rutherford Selig, you a sure enough first-class People Finder!

SELIB: She was right out there in Rankin. You take that first righthand road … right there at that church on Wooster Street. I started to go right past and something told me to stop at the church and see if they needed any dustpans.

SETH: Don’t she look good, Bertha.

BERTHA: Look all nice and healthy.

MARTHA: Mr. Bynum … Selig told me my little girl was here.

SETH: There’s some fellow around here say he your hus-band. Say his name is Loomis. Say you his wife.

MARTHA: Is my little girl with him?

SETH: Yeah, he got a little girl with him. I wasn’t gonna tell him where you was. Not the way this fellow look. So he got Selig to find you.

MARTHA. Where they at? They upstairs?

SETH: He was standing right up there on Manila Street. I [B at Porch] had to ask him to leave ‘cause of how he was carrying on. He come in here one night—
LOOMIS. Hello, Martha.

MARTHA: Herald .... Zonia?

LOOMIS: You ain’t waited for me, Martha. I got out the place looking to see your face. Seven years I waited to see your face.

MARTHA: Herald, I been looking for you. I wasn’t but two months behind you when you went to my mama’s and got Zonia. I been looking for you ever since.

LOOMIS: Joe Turner let me loose and I felt all turned around inside. I just wanted to see your face to know that the world was still there. Make sure everything still in its place so I could reconnect myself together. I got there and you was gone, Martha.

MARTHA. Herald …

LOOMIS: Left my little girl motherless in the world.

MARTHA: I didn’t leave her motherless, Herald. Reverend Toliver wanted to move the church up North ‘cause of all the trouble the colored folks was having down there. Nobody knew what was gonna happen traveling them roads. We didn’t even know if we was gonna make it up here or not. I left her with my mama so she be safe. That was better than dragging her out on the road having to duck and hide from people. Wasn’t no telling what was gonna happen to us. I didn’t leave her motherless in the world. I been looking for you.

LOOMIS: I come up on Henry Thompson’s place after seven years of living in hell, and all I’m looking to do is see your face.
MARTHA: Herald, I didn’t know if you was ever coming back. They told me Joe Turner had you and my whole world split half in two. My whole life shattered. It was like I had poured it in a cracked jar and it all leaked out the bottom. When it go like that there ain’t nothing you can do put it back together. You talking about Henry Thompson’s place like I’m still gonna be there working the land by myself. How I’m gonna do that? You wasn’t gone but two months and Henry Thompson kicked me off his land and I ain’t had no place to go but to my mama’s. I stayed and waited there for five years before I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead. Even if you weren’t, you was dead to me. I wasn’t gonna drag you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I buried you, I mourned you. And then I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you. I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I couldn’t drag you behind me like a sack of cotton.

LOOMIS: I just been waiting to look on your face to say my goodbye. That goodbye got so big at time, seem like it was gonna swallow me up. Like Jona in the whale’s belly I sat up in that goodbye for three years. That goodbye kept me out on the road searching. Not looking on women in their houses. It kept me bound up to the road. All the time that goodbye swelling up in my chest till I’m about to bust. Now that I see your face I can say my goodbye and make my own world.

(LOOMIS takes ZONIA’s hand and presents her to MARTHA.) Martha … here go your daughter. I tried to take care of her. See that she had something to eat. See that she was out of the elements. Whatever I know I tried to teach her. Now she need to learn from her mother whatever you got to teach her. That way she won’t be no one-sided person. (LOOMIS stoops to ZONIA) Zonia, you go live with your mama. She a good woman. You go on with her and listen to her good. You my daughter and I love you like a daughter. I hope to see you again in the world somewhere. I’l never forget you.
ZONIA: *(Throws her arms around LOOMIS in a panic.)* I won’t get not bigger! My bones won’t get no bigger! They won’t! I promise! Take me with you till we keep searching and never finding. I won’t get no bigger! I promise!

LOOMIS: Go on and do what I told you now.

MARTHA: *(Goes to ZONIA and comforts her.)* It’s alright, baby. Mama’s here. Mama’s here. Don’t cry. *(MARTHA turns to BYNUM.)*

Mr. Bynum, I don’t know how to thank you. God bless you. [B at stairs]

LOOMIS: It was you! All the time it was you that bind me up! You bound me to the road!

BYNUM: I ain’t bind you, Herald Loomis. You can’t bind what don’t cling.

LOOMIS: Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up. Joe Turner wanna bind me up! Reverend Toliver wanna bind me up. You wanna bind me up. Everybody wanna bind me up. Well, Joe Turner’s come and gone and Herald Loomis ain’t for no binding. I ain’t gonna let nobody bind me up! [After coat OFF] *(Loomis pulls out a knife.)*

BYNUM: It wasn’t you, Herald Loomis. I ain’t bound you. I bound the little girl to her mother. That’s who I bound. You binding yourself. You bound onto your song. All you got to do is stand up and sing it, Herald Loomis. It’s right there kicking at your throat. All you got to do is sing it. Then you be free.

MARTHA: Herald … look at yourself! Standing there with a knife in your hand. You done gone over to the devil. Come on … put down the knife. You got to look to Jesus. Even if you done fell away from the church
you can be saved again. The Bible say, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still water. He restoreth my soul. He leads me in the path of righteousness for His name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—"

LOOMIS: That’s just where I be walking!

MARTHA: “I shall fear no evil. For Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

LOOMIS: You can’t tell me nothing about no valleys. I done been all across the valleys and the hills and the mountains and the oceans.

MARTHA: “Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of my enemies.”

LOOMIS: And all I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their woolly heads. And Mr. Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them, grinning.

MARTHA: “Thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over.”

LOOMIS: He grin that big old grin … and niggers wallowing at his feet.

MARTHA: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

LOOMIS: Great big old white man … your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting. He tallying up the cotton. “Well, Jeremiah … what’s the matter, you picked but two hundred pounds of cotton today? Got to put you
on half rations.” And Jeremiah go back and lay up there on his half rations and talk about what a nice man Mr. Jesus Christ is ’cause he give him salvation after he die. Something wrong here. Something don’t fit right!

MARTHA: You got to open up your heart and have faith, Herald. This world is just a trial for the next. Jesus offers you salvation.

LOOMIS: I been wading in the water. I been walking all over the River Jordan. But what it get me, huh? I done been baptized with blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I’m choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation?

MARTHA: You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb.

LOOMIS: Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?

MARTHA: Jesus bled for you. He’s the Lamb of God who takest away the sins of the world.

LOOMIS: I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself.

MARTHA: You got to be something, Herald. You just can’t be alive. Life don’t mean nothing unless it got a meaning.


(Loomis slashes himself across the chest. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization.)

I’m standing! I’m standing. My legs stood up! I’m standing now!

(Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully
resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions.)

Goodbye, Martha.

(LOOMIS turns and exits, the knife still in his hands. MATTIE looks about the room and rushes out after him.)

BYNUM: Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!

The lights go down to BLACK

End of Play