

“CROSS ROAD BLUES”

by David Walter Hall

Copyright © 2003 David Walter Hall

CHARACTERS

Robert Johnson

20 years old, black, skinny, Black Southern accent, wearing an old dark two-piece suit and fedora, no tie.

Robert Johnson (1911-1937) is the famous blues singer.

Stranger

White, older, White Southern accent, wearing a light three-piece suit, and long coat. Wearing a top hat. A

sort of crazed Willy Wonka.

MUSICIANS

two acoustic guitars, double bass, violin, African percussion

a choir of eight mixed voices

We are at a deserted crossroads somewhere on the Mississippi Delta. It is 1931, the beginning of winter, around 11 o'clock at night

A blues begins to play: two guitars accompanied by double bass.

[ROBERT JOHNSON enters, carrying a guitar on his back. He finds a spot and sits down.]

Strumming his guitar, ROBERT JOHNSON begins to sing. He is gradually accompanied by the choir.

ROBERT JOHNSON: 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 days keep on worryin' me, there's a hellhound on my trail,

Hellhound on my trail, hellhound on my trail.

If today was Christmas eve, if today was Christmas eve

And tomorrow was Christmas day.

If today was Christmas eve and tomorrow was Christmas day,

All I would need is my little sweet rider

Just to pass the time away, to pass the time away.

You sprinkled hot foot powder, mmm, around my door,

All around my door.

You sprinkled hot foot powder, all around your daddy's door.

It keeps me with ramblin' mind rider

Every old place I go, every old place I go.

I can tell the wind is risin', the leaves tremblin' on the tree,

Tremblin' on the tree.

I can tell the wind is risin', leaves tremblin' on the tree.

All I need is my little sweet woman

And to keep my company, hey, hey, hey, hey, my company.

[Finishing the song, ROBERT JOHNSON puts down his guitar and shuts his eyes.]

After a pause, a violin begins to play.

[Enter STRANGER, carrying bottle of Bourbon, accompanied by dancers.]

The music develops and incorporates percussion and full band. As it dies away, the dancers disappear from view.

[ROBERT JOHNSON awakes.]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Scuse me uh, sir, you got the time of night?...

STRANGER: Ah sure do... [walks on]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Son of a bitch.

STRANGER: What you say boy?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Uh, nothin.

STRANGER: You better said nothin.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I don't want no trouble. Please sir. I ain't done nothin. I never even been round here fore tonight. I swear it.

STRANGER: Oh look at you. You think I got nothin better to do with my evening than go rounding up little nigger boys like you. I ain't gonna lynch ya. You want the time, here! [throws off watch] ... I see you got a guitar, so I guess you must be able to play somethin.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well...

STRANGER: An I suppose you play those bullshit nigger tunes bout how your sweet baby done left you so alone.

ROBERT JOHNSON: ...uh yes, I guess that's mora less what I play... but no...

STRANGER: Well let me hear you. You play me somethin and if I like it then my pocket-watch is yours.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I'm sorry but I don't believe I know you sir. And for all I know there's ten more boys just like you hiding behind that tree with a rope and a nasty old grin on their faces. I believe I'll decline to give you a show, case you decide to jump, least I still got a chance to run.

STRANGER: Well ain't that mighty smart of you.

ROBERT JOHNSON: And I don't think you'd like what I play neither.

STRANGER: Oh I do apologise. I was merely being friendly. You know I've been travellin too. I'm a long, long way from home. Can I sit?...

ROBERT JOHNSON: I ain't stoppin you.

STRANGER: Well alright then. Thank you, mistah...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Johnson. Uh, Robert Johnson.

STRANGER: Nice to meet you Mister Johnson.

[*pause, STRANGER sits*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: You fancy tellin me your name?

STRANGER: My name. Mmm, no.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Son of a bitch.

[*pause*]

STRANGER: You know you ain't really so bad. You smoke? [*offers pack of cigarettes*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Thank you. [*takes cigarette, STRANGER lights it*]

STRANGER: Drink? [*offers bottle*]

[*ROBERT JOHNSON takes bottle saying nothing*]

[*long pause*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: It's a cold night.

STRANGER: [*thinks*] Yes. Looks like we've missed the rain though.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Tha's true. I wouldn't mind a little rain now if it wasn't so cold. A little rain ... Sure it don't mean a thing. You know you the first to stop here. People been lookin at me all night like I's some sorta rat. Line of them trucks came by a while back, I tried to flag one down. I could see their faces, colored folks... they just swept by like they was scared of something.

STRANGER: You got somewhere you need to be?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Not really. No, not really. I'm just tired, you know. Don't wanna spend another night out here. Some pretty white women went by too. I watched em cross over when they saw me. They was going to some party or other, in one of them big houses. I don't know how long I been here and I was just thinking about laying down my head.

STRANGER: You talk like you the only one.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well I don't know. And now some big white fella just comes strolling by, screaming nigger to the heavens, and I think my day's finally come. Then you give me your watch, and you sit down an wanna talk friendly of a sudden.

STRANGER: Well I never did say that you could keep the watch.

ROBERT JOHNSON: What is your name, sir?

[*pause*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Whitefolks are always playing games. Tell me why that is. What've I ever done for it? Why can't you jus leave me be?

STRANGER: I'm not playing anything. You want me to leave you here? Leave you to die by the roadside?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Now hold on. Who said anythin bout dying?

STRANGER: Sometimes I know things. You were dying in those eyes when I saw you.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Why can't you leave me be?

STRANGER: You must forgive me. I would tell you a lot more Robert. I would tell you every secret I've known. I really would, but I just can't. You know what I mean. A man like you must have secrets.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sure. I know what you mean.

STRANGER: So we agree. Now, I admit this is mighty strange and all. Me finding you here in the middle of night.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Oh you "finding" me now? Look, I've got a sore head. I've been walking all night long. I just want some rest. Please, sir, I don't need no conversation. Thank you, for the whiskey, and the cigarette, but I don't need no company right this minute. I just wanna rest my head. Leave me be.

STRANGER: You Negroes sure are stubborn.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Please...

STRANGER: The way I see it, you ain't got much choice. I'm here now. If you run this way or that way, you know I'll keep up. I'm only talking. I've been travelling all night long too. Ain't we friends? Ain't we partners?

ROBERT JOHNSON: We're nothing. You're nothing. I'm nothing. Now leave me be.

STRANGER: You believe that? You think you're really nothing Robert?

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*sarcastically*] You tell me.

STRANGER: You sure look like something to me. Heap of something. You smell like something too.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Do you do this every night?

[*silence*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Do you?

[*silence*]

STRANGER: Let me tell you a story, something I heard the other day. Starts with a young guy sitting in a bar, drinking, minding his own business. He's been there all night and he gets to talking with a stranger he sees at the other side of the bar. You know the sort of desperate drunk talk you hear in any little joint in these Southern towns – braggin all about bein so poor and lost, like there's a trophy for starving – this old guy and his new friend. Well they get drunker and drunker, so then they decide they'll head off and find themselves a couple of whores. ... Out in the street, and something leads them to cross over into the colored side of town. Now just as they're going past a jook bar, the kid catches his eye on a girl he knows, sitting by the window. Truth is, once upon a time he was in love with this girl, the clean cut white boy and niggerette. Course nobody ever knew. They were so scared their families might find out, he used to meet her half-way up in the hills, just so as nobody might see. They'd meet high up in the woods and fuck each other like wolves, every way you could imagine. In the end he left her, cause he could never face the guilt, thinking of what might happen if anyone ever found out. ... So he hasn't seen her now in two years, and she's sitting there laughing in the window, and he don't know what he's thinkin. He turns and tells the old guy to wait right outside, and he goes on in to find her. I don't know what it was he said to her in there, but eventually she comes outside with him, and the three of them head off towards the railroad yard. Now the old guy, he still has no idea that these two have ever met before. Soon as they're out of sight from the road, down behind where the freight trains all load up, he takes out a knife from his jacket...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Who does?

STRANGER: The old guy. This kid ain't the sort to go carrying a knife around. Anyway, he holds the point to her throat and starts putting his other hand all over her. The kid's in shock. She starts screamin and cryin. He sees the tears running down her cheeks, and he starts thinking about the virgin Mary, his lady of solitude, and all the sins he's committed. The feeling takes hold of him so bad nothing could feel real at all. And in the darkness the old guy starts ordering him to strip her down. Between the shouting and the tears, he can't think at all. And the man keeps shouting, "strip this bitch, strip her naked". This dark feeling takes control of him, and all he wants to do is to make his sin complete. So he starts ripping her pretty little dress off, and her pretty little silk drawers.

ROBERT JOHNSON: This ain't supposed to be true now is it?

STRANGER: Sure it is.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Why would any man do that?

STRANGER: Will you let me finish?... The kid's got one mind in the past now, and one right in the darkness of the night. He's thinking about all her dirty little fetishes, the shit she used to love to do. The old guy's still holding the knife to her, so he makes him bend her over a big barrel of oil, and he starts fucking that big brown ass of hers. Then the old guy turns them round and slides into her cunt. [*really sadistic*] She's not even screaming now, just sweating and crying and praying to God to make it all over soon. ... And once they're done fucking her, they tie the dress round her neck and hang her body from a telegraph pole, still wearing her bright green party shoes.

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*sickly, intrigued*] What happened to 'em?

STRANGER: See now, this is the interesting part. Someone must have spotted them as they left the place, and made a fuss to somebody, cause they both got arrested a few days later. It goes all the way to the county court. They try the older man first... and he stands up there and he denies everything, only problem is, they got a dozen witnesses who saw him standing waiting outside the bar that night. So he gets hanged, just like the girl. Now the young man, well, he's always been told about honesty, and figures that's the best thing he can do now, so he gets on the stand and he tells that judge every last detail about what happened. He says to the judge that he just did it to her like that because that's the way she used to like it. This old judge ain't never been so disgusted in his life.

He says to him, “but why did you do it?” The kid looks him right in the eye and says, “because I love her.” The judge looks right back at him, all stony eyed, and he knows that somehow that kid meant every word of what he just said. ... So the judge declares him insane, and sentences him to spend three months recovering in an asylum. He’s out now, and every single week, without fail, he walks across right through the colored side of town and places a bunch of flowers on her grave. That’s a true story.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Now what in the hell is that supposed to mean?

STRANGER: You know what the moral of the story is?

ROBERT JOHNSON: What? That everything’s supposed to be okay just cause you’re sorry about it afterwards.

STRANGER: No no no. The moral is that, honesty is the best policy. Don’t you like it?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Bullshit!

STRANGER: Which way you heading anyway?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I don’t know.

STRANGER: You don’t know!

ROBERT JOHNSON: Really I don’t. I guess that’s why I stopped here. ... You from round here?

STRANGER: Uh-uh. [*as in no*]

Music begins to play: a work-song with guitars, bass and choir.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well, that way take me back to Hazlehurst, that’s where I’as born. Like I say, I got a wife there now, and she take care of me every time I come. She always tell me she been missin me, and I believe her too. But I got some friends in Robinsonville, that’s bout twenty miles thatta way, ain’t seen me in a while. They’re real musicians, real as they come. I go back there maybe they’ll let me come play with them.

STRANGER: You wanna be a musician?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah. I mean, yeah that is what I want. If I go Hazlehurst, well, I’d have a steady woman. They’ll need me in the fields. I’ll get work, pickin cotton. I could pawn my guitar. Get a little money.

STRANGER: But that ain’t good enough...?

ROBERT JOHNSON: You never work a day pickin cotton, did you?...

STRANGER: Never had to. [*he said it kinda sly*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: ...For one day, maybe you could... last a day, but... *You* come home hands all cut up, aching back an feet. Eyes all full of dust. You just wanna lie down for bout a week. But you can't cos *we* gotta do it all again tomorrow. I ain't no workhorse neither. I's just a pony, that's what folks always said. I work twice as hard out there an come back w'half as much as them big dumb boys. They pay you by the bag, you know. No daily wage. You gotta work cos ain't that what you whitefolks think we good for...

STRANGER: I suppose you think we all the same.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I know well enough. ... how the man says thank you when he smile – so glad cos God made all these niggers to work for him. An havta tend like we don't hate him as much as we do, cos they all the same, they'll throw you off the place like you throw a pebble. We grew up, ten of us, and mosta the time just my momma keepin charge. We been kicked around so much, man... You know. My grandmother was born a slave, grandpa too, and the others too I think, all goddamn four of 'em. Tha's bad. But my poor momma had to sell one outta herself just for us to scrape by. I ain't edicated like you. An I ain't white like you. Times is tough and that's white-people-up-New-York-City-fault. An why I gotta suffer that?

STRANGER: Listen son, wasn't me made no one a slave. Don't you look at me like I still owe you something. You don't like working, well go find your friends then. Go be a musician.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You don't understand nothin. Like I told you. I don't even play good. I play harmonica, but you don't make no life outta that. You can't even make much life outta guitar, less you one of the best. Look I'm sorry...

STRANGER: Tell me, which is it that really matters to you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Nothin.

STRANGER: Now how does that figure?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Cause it don't.

STRANGER: Some day boy you'll need somethin. I know you too well.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Oh yeah...

STRANGER: There ain't a soul alive that don't need something.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Maybe you never met one like me.

STRANGER: Maybe I know what you don't. Gotta be some place you'd rather be?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sure... You ever been to Tchi-ca-go?

STRANGER: Chicago? Yeah, I'm up there a lot.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sometimes I think like I might try to make it there some day. Good money up there for
a musician. Names up in big white lights. I'll bet you full of stories.

STRANGER: You wouldn't like it.

[*pause*]

Work song ends.

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*laughs*] You know what they say?

STRANGER: What?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well... They say you can go to an old crossroad just... just like this, middle of the
night, an you bring along your guitar. If you wanna learn how to play anything at all, you just take
your guitar an you sit all alone and play. When it comes midnight, a big black man will walk up
there and take your guitar and he'll tune it an give it back to you. Hear a lot of folks talk about it.
People sellin themselves to the devil, comin right back in the morning playin like lightnin guitar.

STRANGER: You don't believe in that do you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: No way. Just what they say, ain't it?

STRANGER: Never should believe in what they say.

ROBERT JOHNSON: No.

[*long pause*]

STRANGER: You want my advice?

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*no answer*]

STRANGER: You take it from me. Do what matters to you, do that one thing.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Ain't it so simple?

STRANGER: Ain't it? Why, what's holding you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I got too much responsibility, an for myself.

STRANGER: You don't look so responsible you know. Maybe that's just the light. An seriously, some day you better see. All them things you hold on to, all them things you call so good, they ain't worth so much, and if you really want what you want, well then they ain't worth nothin at all. Look at yourself, what you got, all tied down to what your daddy taught you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: My daddy died.

STRANGER: All tied down to the shit you believe. You wanna be someone, do that one thing. The only good left, is that one thing, that thing in you.

ROBERT JOHNSON: An what? End up just like you?

STRANGER: Just my advice. Nobody has to take it.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I don't know who you are mister. I'm tired, and I don't need no advice.

STRANGER: You believe in destiny?

ROBERT JOHNSON: You mean you think I got a choice?

STRANGER: Only thing written in stone's gonna be on your grave, even then... No. But don't you believe people have some place they're going, not because they can't choose, but because there's a torch burning guiding them all the way?

ROBERT JOHNSON: That's bullshit. Most of the time, there no torch, no light, everybody just runnin around in the dark, never goin nowhere...

STRANGER: Why?

ROBERT JOHNSON: ...there ain't no place for a black man to go. That's all.

STRANGER: But you said "most of the time"...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well all the time then.

STRANGER: An nobody's special?

ROBERT JOHNSON: No.

STRANGER: An you ain't special?

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*hesitates*] No. Course not.

STRANGER: See I don't believe that. I think we all got a little destiny. Now maybe some people's it ain't much. Some people just gonna plant corn and pull cotton till they get so old their backs break and

their eyes can't see no more an that's their fate. Sometimes it's a woman. But uh, some people got a brighter light.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You a preacher or somethin'?

STRANGER: No. Course not. Preachers don't know shit...

ROBERT JOHNSON: An you don't know nothin bout women.

STRANGER: ...Preachers been reading too much Bible, don't know nothin bout life down here. I believe that some of us got something so precious inside. Like a pearl right down in the belly of the sea. "Pearl" ain't right. No. It's more like somethin's alive, an animal. Like a pack of hounds. An how can you say that ain't real when you must see people all the time makin the world fall right down for them?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sometimes a man got ambition maybe.

STRANGER: But it's so much deeper, don't you see? Ain't nothin to do with what nobody wants. Some folks it's like they can't help going, they can't help being and doing it. Something beautiful really. That pearl, them hounds, whatever it is.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah...

STRANGER: You know it. I saw it in your eyes.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Don't be playin now. You been seein a lot in my eyes.

STRANGER: Take it from me, you lucky.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Maybe *you* just drunk.

STRANGER: You got a soul haven't you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Course. One thing I'm sure of.

STRANGER: Well then you know. There's something fighting in you. I've seen a lot of things and I've met a lot of men like you. What I'm saying is you got something fighting, and it can't get out or go nowhere, an you just lying here by the road. You wanna make something of yourself, you gotta let that free.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Till you realise there's some things wrong you can't never set right. No matter what you do. And still after all this shit you tell me about your little one things, there's sweetness not

far from me I know. If you came from what I've lived like I have you wouldn't be talkin bout fighting so loud. All's left is that little sweetness. An that's all you got.

STRANGER: Picking cotton?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well no. Ain't nothin pretty gonna get you there. But there's still somethin, somethin behind it. Not everybody sees.

STRANGER: Well... show me.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Ain't there sweetness in this?

ROBERT JOHNSON strums a few chords on his guitar. The band enter with accompaniment, and continue playing when he sets the guitar down again.

STRANGER: Sure.

ROBERT JOHNSON: If it wasn't for music, half the folks I know woulda given up years ago. That's what so many people live for out here, and it don't matter where they goin, what's happenin in them or whatever makes them go, they live for it cos that's so much stronger. That's the soul of the whole world right there. That ain't nobody's destiny. It's cos we all together, we all a part of somethin, in church, out on the fields, it's everywhere an we a part of it.

STRANGER: You play don't you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sure.

STRANGER: And where does that music come from when you play? You just hear it in the air? You feel it come rushing by on the wind? Course not. Always comes from inside you. Like I said, anything worth anything has to come from inside you. All that blues, all that beauty, all that life, it comes from right deep inside you.

ROBERT JOHNSON: An whatta bout the Lord? Afta all, everything that's good has to come from Him.

STRANGER: Don't give me that shit. The Lord wants you out breaking your back, or layin down railroad tracks? Everything that's bad must come from Him too. You ever think about that? How you think you got here? If the Lord's so good and all, why ain't you lying on the beach in Africa right now?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Because... I don't know.

STRANGER: You play guitar, right? They say that's a sin. If you real good, you gonna turn the world upside down. That's music. You gotta turn over everything God ever made. Turn the ugliest feelins into sweetness, twist some noise round and make it holy, rip your mind inside out. That's when you let your soul out, an you rise over all the things creation put in your path. You play long enough, maybe one day you'll overcome the Lord Himself. You know you committing sin every time you sing a note.

ROBERT JOHNSON: It don't feel like no sin.

STRANGER: Bullshit. Don't you go tellin me your sinning don't feel good now. You play, you sing, set it free. You see your friend play blues, well ain't that his soul getting out? Rising past what he can't do, cos it's all locked up in some old man who can't never be free. That ol man, he can't get what he want, maybe he plays an part of him goes free.

ROBERT JOHNSON: He ain't killin nobody doin it though. Maybe you got it, but you oughtta know there's always somethin more. Ain't about just runnin away. I ain't free, an I don't even care no more. The music is more than that. It's real. And he don't sing it cos he hate his life, he gonna sings cos he loves it, and he's gonna live it some more.

STRANGER: Bullshit.

ROBERT JOHNSON: And you can go to hell.

STRANGER: Aw... you know I was just talkin. I know more than you'd imagine.

ROBERT JOHNSON: No you don't. You just sound like a war now. You ain't blues. Some days you just gotta live, and there's nothing more to it. Lay down your sword and live.

STRANGER: Ain't like that. There's no God in the blues. It's just you. Just a man fighting. You keep thinking that way, then it's all for nothing, still strung down to you and you still strung onto the world. Look right at yourself. Why can't it? Why can't you be free? If it's your only power, your destiny, the animal inside you. Why can't you set it free?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Cos you don't know... Blues itself is almost everything. Blues, yeah, it's almost everything.

STRANGER: And then what?

ROBERT JOHNSON: What makes you think you know me so well?

STRANGER: [*with drunken extravagance*] Because I'm you...

ROBERT JOHNSON: No you're not.

STRANGER: We'll see.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I know you better.

STRANGER: Do tell.

ROBERT JOHNSON: It was you, wasn't it?

STRANGER: Who?

ROBERT JOHNSON: The kid.

STRANGER: What kid?

ROBERT JOHNSON: The crazy kid who killed his girlfriend.

STRANGER: Come on, that was just a story.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You said it was true.

STRANGER: Well... ain't everything?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Maybe. ... Look you're just another old drunk story. Got a woman in your soul

somehow. I'll bet some old girl musta treated you so bad now. Took way all your little
everythings. You been cast down and broken, just grindin away like an old steam train long
pulled off the track. Drown yourself in whiskey an hobo in every night.

STRANGER: [*angered*] Ain't *you* ever let a woman into your soul?

**The music changes. A soprano begins to sing a plaintive melody and is eventually accompanied by
the choir.**

ROBERT JOHNSON: Once. Yeah, once. [*with a surly kind of pride*]

STRANGER: Your wife?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah, I mean, no. My wife I got now up Hazelhurst. She don't mean nothin really.

But, oh don't even start... [*sinks into a dream*] I was married before, a long time ago. All my
angels came took me away that time ... I was a kid ... She was, maybe *she* was my destiny. Real,
you know, used to look at me like she was really onto something... and I was in love.

STRANGER: But you were young...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah.

STRANGER: And now...

ROBERT JOHNSON: I know. Still young...

STRANGER: What happened to her?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Gone.

STRANGER: Well gone where?

ROBERT JOHNSON: She... she dead.

STRANGER: How?

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*hesitates*] Havin my baby. Lossa blood. Never thought I'd see so much blood come outta such a small thing.

STRANGER: An you was how old?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I'as seventeen, she was sixteen po thing. What else you wan me to say? So long ago now. There's nothin a say.

STRANGER: Really?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Goddamnit yeah. She died in my arms. Her mother stanin there. An I hadda look her right back. She's cryin an thinkin "what's this boy done to my daughter? What's he done?" That look like she's steamin me into the road. Tears sour and... Goddamn. Bless her she trieda be so nice an all. But I was sittin there lookin at that cold dead meat on the table jus fell outta my baby, an I felt Virginia dyin... Lord... an then she was dead. An the white doctor an everyone just lookin at me blood all over, shiverin and cryin, Lord an her pappa's eyes on me. Crazy too. Everyone was crazy. Roomful of crazies we all were. All her famly, doctor, neighbours, a dead girl, a little dead baby boy, an me a kid who never saw a thing like it fore in my life. I was... was vanishin. I felt myself disappear. Hell was openin up an my soul was slidin down an alla me was goin down with it. Blood everywhere.

STRANGER: Nothin?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Goddamnit I'm still here ain't I? Didn nothin happen really. She died. I left. I've kept on movin. Now I'm talkin to you.

STRANGER: [*smugly*] Ah, and ain't that why you feel so blue.

The music stops.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I'm sorry, I don't expect you... I don't normally go talkin to people. Cause I don't usually, and I'm usually fine not talkin.

STRANGER: It's alright. You're smart. You're interesting.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You don't need to go tellin no black man he's ineresting. I know who I am. Sure ain't everybody inerestin these days? Don't mean shit. ... That why you askin me all them goddamn questions? You book-learned... an you drunk. You just wanna study me like you read some book. Soak in a little back road culture, hear a little blues, spoke like we live it.

STRANGER: I'm sorry. I was just being friendly...

ROBERT JOHNSON: No. Don't.

STRANGER: What?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Stay.

STRANGER: What?

ROBERT JOHNSON: You... you inerestin too. Man needs company. Keep talkin.

STRANGER: Now why you say that?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Because, I didn't think you'd ... I mean, like I say, I don't need folks worried about me, least of all whitefolks. Don't tell nobody things cos it just means you leavin yourself open. You know I'm twenty years old, an I got a girl in near every town from here to Memphis lookin afta me, and doin a good deal more on top of that. An I don't need nobody worryin over me. But look, uh, I've told you too much bout me, why not you tell me bout you now?

STRANGER: There's nowhere to start.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well where was you born?

STRANGER: Right here.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Okay. And you grew up?

STRANGER: Everywhere.

ROBERT JOHNSON: An where you heading?

STRANGER: Same place as you.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Please.

STRANGER: What time is it?

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*looks at watch*] It's nearly midnight.

STRANGER: Maybe you oughta start playin that guitar of yours.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I gotta be alone first.

STRANGER: Ain't you?

[*dramatic pause*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Pass me that bottle. [*Takes bottle, drinks long swig, passes bottle back.*]

STRANGER: Here's to your little life story,

Little strife,

Glory dripping from a scythe.

Jawbone chasin up a stream.

Rebel boy tryin to live his dream.

Another hero

Sleeping by the road.

I'll bet your stories are really something,

Bet your style just the thing,

Bet they catch you every time.

I'll bet your dick ain't worth a dime.

So I'm told...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Listen. You...

Music begins, incorporating all elements, and becomes synchronised with the STRANGER's speech,

building towards a final climax.

STRANGER: Listen to me!

Ain't it true?

What are you

That ain't been lived before

Or crushed or used

To help make something more

For someone holding shares

In men, or killed

And who cares?

ROBERT JOHNSON: My, my...

STRANGER: Who?

Blood and flesh and motor oil,

Dead some day, boulders and soil

And lost and nowhere and no one cares

But the dead, the wolves

And bears will win and you've already lost

Cause you believe in you oughtta care.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You got me wrong... Just stop all this messin. You startin to scare me.

STRANGER: Nah... I know you think you something,

Every fool's the same, course you do,

And still you wake up every morning

Wondering why you got the blues.

Just an error of judgement,

Ain't nothin more:

Liftin your feet off the floor

One by one

And walkin and talkin

And being a bum.

Ain't worth a quarter,

Ain't worth a dime,

God oughtta kill you

But He'd be wasting His time

And He's wasted so much on you already.

Here's to you! [*drinks from bottle*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Don't you keep takin that name in vain.

STRANGER: Why?

Cause he slung you out of Eden?
Cause he made the world so poor
You just sit prayin all forever then
And never get no more?
Or, maybe,
Has He sent you?
You His son?
Oh save me Robert!
Devil's got a gun!

ROBERT JOHNSON: You'd know about that, wouldn't you?

STRANGER: What are you insinuating?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Nothin.

STRANGER: *[laughs]* Call me whatever you want. But uh... Let's say I was...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Look, this sounds silly but do me one favour.

STRANGER: What?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Just tell me you ain't no devil. I don't mind no games, but please tell me you ain't him.

STRANGER: Let's say I was.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Let's not.

STRANGER: Let's just say I was!

[silence]

STRANGER: Your daddy ain't really dead is he?

ROBERT JOHNSON: What?

STRANGER: You told me your papa died. Don't you lie now... I said, your daddy ain't really dead. ... He
just left your mama when you was too young to know, ain't that right? You been lookin for him
all over for years.

ROBERT JOHNSON: How the hell...

STRANGER: Don't play me dumb boy. You wanna hear a secret? ... I said, do you want to hear a secret?

ROBERT JOHNSON: How did you know...?

STRANGER: Well uh, how else can I put this but: Robert Leroy Johnson... I am your father!

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*believing him*] ...But how? I mean, how could you be? But you're...

STRANGER: I ain't your goddamn father! You dumb nigger shit sit down!

ROBERT JOHNSON: Who the hell sent you? Who sent you? Who are you? Tell me who you are!

STRANGER: I told you to sit down!

ROBERT JOHNSON: Who are you?

STRANGER: Sit down!

[ROBERT JOHNSON *collapses, terrified*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: Please... I'm cold. I'm tired. I don't wanna play no more games. You don't know the night I've had.

STRANGER: Yes I do! And it's my turn now. If I was would you sell your soul?

ROBERT JOHNSON: No...

STRANGER: Robert you know you're so full of shit.

One stroke life's all God to fit
All battles then your backs on it
Means nothin to you at all.
A man who calls himself a rat
Sleeps in ditches like a cat
Claims it don't get better than that,
The winds just rise and fall.
Claims to rather live life sore
Being desperation's whore.
Answer this: what matters more,
Who you are or what you could do?
Nothing matters to you when you're free.
And this pale green pride, this dignity...

ROBERT JOHNSON: Please, just shut the hell up. Okay... Shut up and stop standin there givin me all your
voodoo like I don't know what it is that you sellin.

STRANGER: You wanna know what I could sell you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: What?

STRANGER: I'm selling you freedom!

ROBERT JOHNSON: And why should I care!

STRANGER: Think God gets lonely,

Think God gets bored,
Of the wind, land and sea
Playin the same three chords
Around and around
Like a pig on a spit?
The battleground sound:
Suns rise, suns set,
Heaven hear that noise
But why should He care,
Since He sent His boy
To die down here.
And why should you
Live life like meat
Another slave spinning to
The burn burning beat?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I ain't no slave! I ain't never been a slave!

STRANGER: No, but you ain't no Lord

And you've never smelt no truth
And your life ain't no more
Than a cat on a roof.
I'm tryin to help you see

False life is slain by liberty

Truth fall down on bended knee:

No, nothing matters to you when you're free.

ROBERT JOHNSON: But how... How do I know this ain't just some kind of bad dream? How do I know you even gonna do me right?

STRANGER: Let me make this very simple... I ain't lied to you yet. It's a fair trade. I'll give you one thing. I'll give you music, the power to play and the power to be everything you gotta be, freedom. And with just a twist of your soul, it'll be mine, and you'll be free. See I can make you a king. If you're man enough to drop it all right here, that's all I'm askin.

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*with a grin*] No more blues?

STRANGER: [*grinnier*] Well you still gotta make a livin, don't you?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Am I crazy?

STRANGER: I don't know.

ROBERT JOHNSON: [*subdued*] You're Satan himself, ain't you! ... You keep talking like that.

STRANGER: Like what?

ROBERT JOHNSON: In rhyme, in rhyme!

STRANGER: What do you mean?

ROBERT JOHNSON: And you knew about my papa... No! This shit ain't real. I must be imagining it.

You're not real. Lord make it go away! Lord please take him away!

STRANGER: Don't you know me by now?

ROBERT JOHNSON: None of this is happening, you know that? You ain't here, I'm not even here. This is all just a dream. It'll all just disappear. You wait and see. Please God!

STRANGER: You say you ain't seen my face before,

Well I've been knockin on the door

And I've been callin on the phone

Since the day you left your home.

I'm every man you ever met,

I'm every girl you haven't yet.

I'm five in the mornin,
I'm murdering thirst,
Shivering sunshine,
Your mind full to burst.
The long walk back,
From the losing game,
One-eyed mongrels,
Hungry and lame.
I'm trouble come early,
I'm saviour too late,
Bluer than blisters,
Darker than fate.
Oh I've been rollin in your mind,
Through the mud, through the rain,
Every corner, mean, unkind.
I'm your baby's blood, right down the drain.
The bitch that begat you,
A nail in your side...
Did I say blood?
[ROBERT JOHNSON breaks down]
Oh yes...
I'm the blood o' your baby, I'm the blood o' your wife,
I was life when it cut you in half like a knife.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Why are you doing this to me?

STRANGER: Why are you doing this to yourself?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Is that it?

STRANGER: I don't know. Not any better than you do. ... Told you. We're just the same.

ROBERT JOHNSON: What does it matter? What does anything matter? All I wanna do is live. Why can't you leave me be?

STRANGER: All this talk of living, shit and lies!

Don't you wanna die a little?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I guess that's it. It just don't make no sense. If I got my devil right here, then where is my angel gone?

STRANGER: I thought you said she died.

[*pause*]

ROBERT JOHNSON: You can talk and talk and talk, and still it don't change one single thing. You was right about one thing, I know I'm nothing. But we all nothing. I look at myself... I look at myself and I don't even know who I am. I look at you and it's exactly the same: just year after year of nothing at all. And yet, I know... know I gotta go out doin something. ... So okay then. God help me. Devil, if you want me, well I'm gonna take you on!

STRANGER: You sure?

[*ROBERT JOHNSON nods*]

The STRANGER takes ROBERT JOHNSON's guitar and passes it into the hands of the dancers, who "tune" it and eventually return it to ROBERT JOHNSON, accompanied by heavily percussive music.

STRANGER: Oh I've been waitin for this moment

Since the day I saw you born
And now you're standin side me
All lookin helpless and forlorn.
A stick, a gnarled up ugly thing
Swayin in the corn.
Now you hotted in my hand,
Jus one more little thorn.
One more die,
One more roll,

One more lousy little soul.

ROBERT JOHNSON begins to sing "When I Lay My Burden Down"*

[*STRANGER continues, vulnerable, like it's really his soul on the line, not ROBERT JOHNSON's*]

One more cold

Death bell toll,

Evil ringin through that soul.

I tell ya!

Oh you can sing, you can sing,

Sing what you will.

The lord above can't stand that trill.

The mean things howlin in your mind,

The biting, rasping dogs of time

That haul your corpse from door to door,

They got you pinned down on the floor.

None gonna save you now.

Oh when the railroad turns to rust,

When the highways turn to dust,

When the high winds stop and fall,

When the river ends its crawl,

When the sun don't lift its eyes,

When your mama don't hear your cries,

When the moon shadows hang from the poplar trees,

And nothin is left but you and me,

Don't you be sorry.

Let me warn you, as a friend,

This big old war ain't gonna end.

But the rules right now are changin

Like they never changed before

And with that achin soul of yours
Nailed beneath the floor... [*stamps, ROBERT JOHNSON winces*]
Free to take the world
And you wanna take on me.
You got a lot of balls kid,
But 'ain't so easy kickin free.
I'm takin a gamble here,
Just like you – don't forget it.
You sold yourself to me.
I know you'll be liable to regret it.
I'll give you wings to fly
But I know you just a boy,
So easily deceived, so weak,
You gotta try out every toy.
A poet in a cannon
Shot right from here through time,
Still some girl will sing you down,
She'll break your heart, not mine.
You'll see her in a bar
And wonder on your soul
Sunk beneath these crossroads,
Dyin for one more stroll
Below the stars.
A man's pain you'll feel,
It'll all seem so real
As the waves of blue and black you beat out draggin along that soul
Gonna send the darkness crumbling down on everything you hold.
And you'll curse this night you met me,

And you'll curse the endless road

You gotta walk because you just can't live

With no love inside your soul.

ROBERT JOHNSON stops singing. Music stops, briefly.

Dead and gone

The rising sun.

The life that shone

Is not the one.

The love you held

Ain't comin back.

The girl who bled – to death

Lives on but blue, but black.

The choir return.

Earth's gonna shake,

It's not for you,

Black crows flock,

All you can do

Is soar and sing

Above the rest.

It's the only thing

That you got left.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Oh lawd. My soul, my soul. Have mercy. Save me!

[*violin music begins*]

STRANGER: No... He won't save you,

Don't you know what you are?

Didn't you just sell your soul

To play your guitar?

Oh pity!

Stuff you got now baby, it's gonna blow their minds. Why you'll be teaching the stars how to shine.

Lettem know you a man with power. Nothin left for you but that. But I told you that. Don't say I ain't been fair. [*with desperate pride*] You're my boy now. My boy.

ROBERT JOHNSON: What have you done? Tell me what you really done? Tell me who you really is?

STRANGER: You know who I am.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Tell me.

STRANGER: You know.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Tell me.

STRANGER: You know.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I've changed. I've changed my...

STRANGER: You can't do nothin now. You and your guitar, that's all you are. But I'll be there holdin on.

All you got is what you feel. So move now. You're lighter than ever.

ROBERT JOHNSON: But I want it. I can't leave.

STRANGER: You hear that wind howlin? You hear it howl? And it ain't no wind now. That's you Robert.

Can't you hear it blowin? Can't you feel yourself goin?

ROBERT JOHNSON: But I gotta... I gotta go home.

STRANGER: I'm sorry Robert, I'm sorry. You can't go home now. I'm sorry.

[*Exit STRANGER*]

Music stops.

[*Blackout.*]

* When I Lay My Burden Down

Glory glory, hallelujah,

When I lay my burden down.

I'm goin home to live with Jesus,

Cross Road Blues

David Walter Hall

When I lay my burden down.

All my troubles will be over,

When I lay my burden down.

I'm gon meet my lovin mother,

When I lay my burden down.

Glory glory, hallelujah,

When I lay my burden down.