

**Leavin", an opera Of the Great Migration in three tragedies**  
**Libretto by A. B. Spellman**

**Tragedy one**

**Characters:**

**Ruby Monroe, a young black girl**

**Horace Monroe, her father**

**Lucile Monroe, her mother**

**A minister**

First set; Scene one: a cotton field in Mississippi in the late 1920s as shown in a photomontage. At stage left is a quartet of singers: soprano, alto, tenor and baritone. The three active characters are presented in dance. If a full production, several field workers also are represented by dancers.

Ruby (s) is lagging far behind the others. Her father Horace, (t) admonishes her affectionately to keep up.

(The worksong does not require refined voices and may be sung by orchestra members. It may be sung under the soloists or interspersed between the arias)

**Chorus:**

I woke  
up this morning feelin'  
young and free  
then the  
boss man took and sent his  
mule for me.

I said  
lordy mule you see the  
night's still black  
caint he  
wait till daylight 'fore he  
breaks my back?

Mule said  
you don't need no daylight  
not for  
What you see  
'Cause all  
Day long you looking at the  
ass of me.

*Horace calls:*

Ruby!

*Chorus:*  
Well the  
days are burning  
and the  
nights are cool  
but I wake  
every morning  
to this  
ugly mule.

Mule said the  
difference between  
me and you's  
that I  
eats much better  
and got  
better shoes.

*Horace, after doubling back for Ruby with his wife, Lucile:*

Ruby, oh Ruby, I swear 'fore God  
that you dream more in the daylight  
than you do at night. (*He looks at her sack.*)  
Lord, Lord, Ruby,, have you been picking air?  
The sun's almost on top of us  
but you got nothing there.

Your mamma's got two-hundred pounds;  
I got a hundred fifty.  
But you, poor moonbeam; you, poor daydream  
you got nothing there.

*(Horace with chorus:)*

It's reach and grab my Ruby,  
Stuff your sack.  
Reach and grab sweet love child. Bend your back

*Ruby (annoyed) and chorus*

Reach and grab my poppa,  
stuff my sack.  
Reach and grab this cotton.  
Break my back..

Is this the best of me, Poppa?  
My head between my knees?  
Back bent like mamma's till it hurts to straighten up?  
When you see me looking at the sky Poppa  
it's 'cause I can see another world in the clouds.  
It's 'cause I want to look at something else  
besides these hateful rows of Mississippi dirt  
that are long as the day is long.  
It's all I've ever seen, Poppa..  
All I've ever known.  
I see the same thing every day:  
These rows that reach to where the world bends  
but never go nowhere.  
On my best days they look like train tracks  
and the picking's got a rhythm  
like the engine of a train.  
So if I can't go nowhere but this bottom land  
at least my thoughts can leave.

How do y'all do it, Poppa, Momma?  
Where does your mind go when you pick?

*Horace:*

My mind goes to you, sweet Ruby.  
My mind goes to your ma.  
It hurts my soul to see y'all  
in these fields all day  
Crookin' your backs  
for the little bit of money that we make.  
At night after supper  
I watch you read and do your numbers-  
things I never learned to do-  
And I think,  
my Ruby ain't no dirt worker.  
She don't belong out here in these cotton fields.

There's a reason every Mississippi bluesman  
has a song about a train.  
Everybody knows this life's a mule's life.  
Everybody wants to go.  
You can rise up from this stoop work.  
You can fly high, my Ruby,  
You can fly way, way past your parent's dreams.

*Ruby:*

But I can't dream my way up outta this cotton field, Poppa.

*Lucile:*

You was born in these rows, Ruby.  
You was born out here  
in the heart of cotton.  
I carried clean towels with me  
for the day you came.  
You cried your first song over yonder  
by the windbreak.  
I worked these rows every day  
with a sling around my back  
and you sucked my breast  
while I grabbed cotton.

I didn't miss no days because your poppa and me  
decided the day you was born  
to put some money away  
so you wouldn't live your life in dirt  
like we did.  
That was our dream, Ruby.  
That was our dream,  
that you wouldn't have to dream your way  
out of Mississippi.

*Horace:*

Dreams are the doorway out, Ruby.  
A soul can't move that does not dream.

*Ruby, Horace, and Lucile:*

But we won't just dream of going.  
The day comes when we have to go.  
We'll roll away from all these hateful rows of cotton,  
from this heavy air that feels like breathing mud,  
from this place where standing up means dying.  
From this black dirt that sinks all into you  
and covers up your soul.  
We'll turn  
these cotton rows to railroad tracks  
to take us out of here.

Let the boll weevils harvest the cotton.  
Let the fields dry up and blow away.  
Let old Shorty Long bring *his* children to the fields  
and pay them the nickels and dimes that he pays us  
for stooping all day in the sun.

But Lord let us be gone from here  
to someplace where our lives can be our own.

*Horace:*

You ain't doing us no good out here Ruby.  
You ain't picked a half a sack.

Why don't you go out to the woods you love so much  
and find us some fresh meat for supper.

*Ruby passes her sack to Horace and skips off.*

*Ruby:*

Thank you Momma. Thank you Poppa. Thank you.  
I'll have supper ready when y'all get home.

Scene two: the woods.

This scene is sung entirely by the quartet; the part of Ruby is danced.

Quartet:

Ruby is walking in the woods.  
It is the woods that make her city.  
The trees are cityscapes to her,  
the living things of wing and fur  
these are the people of her woods.

She loves the music of the woods.  
The secret lyrics of the leaves.  
Not just the airs the song birds sing:  
she hears the songs of voiceless things  
she knows the eloquence of silence.

She loves the canvas of the woods.  
The scenes of life and death and more.  
She loves the dance of light and shade  
the brilliant sun that flares and fades  
she loves the drama of the woods.

She plays with death within the woods.  
She takes a stick and lifts the snake up,  
then throws it up above her head  
then catches it and strikes it dead.  
She plays with death within the woods.

Ruby is hunting in the woods.  
She knows the places rabbits slumber.  
She doesn't use a bow or gun  
she swings her club and it is done.  
Tonight fresh meat for everyone.

*Scene three: interior of a very humble, two-room clapboard house.  
Ruby is at the counter, rolling biscuits. String beans are in the pot, rabbit is  
frying in the pan. Horace and Barbara return from the fields.*

*Horace:*

That's the way I like the house to smell  
When I get home from work."  
(*He takes a spoon and tastes the broth.*)  
Ahh...string beans with fatback and a little drop of vinegar.  
Cornmeal dumplings 'bout to go in,  
rabbit frying in the pan.  
Lucile, you know that you're my only biscuit roller  
and when you ain't here  
the house might as well be a hole in the ground  
that I could lay down in,  
But I swear 'fore God  
Little Ruby is catching up to you."

*Lucile:*

Horace! Horace! Don't you do that!  
Don't make jokes about graves.  
Don't make fun of death like that.  
Death is how God works his fields on earth.  
Death is how he tells us that our work is done  
and calls our souls to him.  
If you make jokes about it  
then you're telling God you don't fear his hand.  
If you don't fear God's hand, Horace,  
He will surely lay it on you.  
You already scare me  
with that sugar diabetes that you got.  
Death comes to all of us  
in God's own time, Horace.  
Don't call death down on yourself  
just to make a joke.

*Ruby, trying to lighten the room:*  
Aw, come on Momma.  
God ain't gon' be too mad at Poppa.  
Nobody can be, he's such a silly man.  
Didn't you tell me that you fell in love with him  
'cause he made you laugh?

*Lucile:*  
Everything ain't funny, Ruby.  
Death ain't ever funny.  
You know your Poppa's got the sugar diabetes.  
Sometimes he can't feel his toes.  
It was bothering him in the field today.  
I worry 'bout him Ruby,  
more than he worries 'bout his own self.

How can morning come without his smiling face  
to turn it on?  
How can I walk out into the cotton fields  
if he don't have his hand on my arm?  
How can I stoop to work from can see



to can't see if he's not there to rub the pain  
from out of my back and make me laugh  
through the long bent hours?  
If your poppa dies, Ruby,  
I can't grab enough cotton  
to keep us in this house,  
And you know that old man Long will put us out.  
We'll have to go live with my brother in Los Angeles  
and I can't stand his wife.

*Horace:*

Come on Lucile.  
I ain't dead yet.  
That rabbit Ruby's fried up  
is lookin' good enough to cure whatever ails me,  
And the string beans smell like yours  
and the biscuits in the oven are callin' my name.  
Don't you hear them, Lucile?  
Wait a minute. I believe one called for you.  
and I believe I saw some cobbler from Sunday  
In the icebox.

*Lucile:*

No cobbler for you Horace.  
I know you been sneakin' 'round here  
when I wasn't lookin' and stealin' hunks of it.

*Ruby:*

Stop fussin' y'all. Dinner's ready. Let's say grace.  
Go 'head, poppa.

*Horace:*

Naw, y'all go 'head. I'm gon' lie down.  
I been feelin' off all day.

*Scene four: the interior of a simple rural one-room church. People, including Ruby and Lucile, mill around a casket wherein Horace lies.*

*Minister:*

Church, we are gathered together to send to God's lovin' arms  
the blessed soul of Horace Monroe.

Our text for today is Corinthians 1:50 to 57.

"Now I say, brethren, that flesh and blood  
cannot inherit the kingdom of God;  
Neither doth corruption inherit corruption."

*Lucile to Ruby, tearfully:*

That's a good man layin' there.  
It's gon' be a mean life without him, Ruby.  
And not just 'cause he won't be here  
to bring home the little bit of money  
they paid him for all them hours  
of stoop work in the fields.

*Minister:*

"Behold, I show you a mystery;  
We shall not all sleep,  
but we shall all be changed."

*Lucile:*

No, we'll go up to Los Angeles.  
I do pretty good with my patterns.  
With the money that me and Horace saved  
I can start a little business out there  
making dresses,  
And you can go to school where you belong.  
We'll be all right in Los Angeles, baby.  
You'll see.  
We'll be all right.

*Minister:*

"In a moment,  
in the twinkling of an eye,

at the last trumpet:  
For the trumpet shall sound,  
and the dead shall be raised incorruptible,  
and we shall be changed."

*Lucile:*

Naw, Ruby, right now I'm worried  
that I won't never laugh again  
till I see Horace at the rapture.  
I'm thinkin' that my feet  
won't never again be warm in the bed  
if I can't stick 'em between your daddy's legs.  
Oh he used to holler when I did that.

*Minister:*

"For this corruptible must be put on incorruption,  
and this mortal shall have put on immortality,  
then shall be brought to pass  
the saying that is written,  
death is swallowed up in victory."

*Lucile:*

Remember how loud he used to sing  
at all the Sunday meetings?  
Man couldn't carry a tune in a bucket  
but he never would believe it when you told him.  
He'd just sing louder.  
Lord, the deacon would get mad at him.

*Minister:*

Oh death, where is thy sting?  
O grave, where is thy victory?

*Ruby:*

Momma, I got to say it.  
I'm mad at God right now.  
there's a lot of men God could have taken  
like the mean old cracker

who works us so hard in the fields  
and then pays us such a little bit  
that we stay broke as bent back hogs.  
But why take Poppa?  
You keep saying God got a plan  
but what kind of plan  
can make the world better  
by givin' Poppa to the worms  
in this Mississippi dirt  
that I hate so much.  
I'm mad at God, Momma.

*Minister:*

"The sting of death is sin;  
And the strength of sin is the law."

*Lucile:*

Now Ruby, you don't mean that.  
Go say goodbye to your Poppa.  
Go over to the casket and give him one last kiss.

*(Ruby complies.)*

*Minister:*

Therefore, my beloved brethren,  
be ye steadfast, unmoveable,  
ever so much as ye know that your labor  
is not vain in the Lord..

*Ruby:*

Momma, he's not cold! He's not cold!

*Lucile:*

Ruby, I know you don't want to let your poppa go,  
but you got to stand aside and let them close the lid.

*Ruby:*

No, Momma, No! Don't let them take him!

He's still warm.  
God heard me, Momma.  
He gave Poppa back to us.

*Lucile:*  
Come here Ruby.  
It's been two days.  
His breath ain't fogged the mirror.  
You know we can't pay for all that embalmin'.  
If we waits any longer  
this delta heat's gon' swell him up.  
We got to get him in the ground.  
Walk with me to the churchyard.  
We got to throw the first dirt on him.

*Ruby:*  
No Momma.  
You got to listen to me.  
They say sometimes the diabetes puts you in a coma.  
He's still warm.  
He ain't dead.  
Don't let them bury him.

*Lucile:*  
Be still, Ruby.  
You acting the fool.

*Ruby:*  
No! You can't bury him.  
He's still warm.  
He's still warm, momma,  
He's still warm!.

*End of act one.*

**Tragedy two**

**Characters:**

***Maureen Snipes, a 16 year old white girl***

***Patti Snipes, her mother***

***Clevon Wilde, an 17 year old African- American boy***

***Monroe Wilde, Clevon's father***

***Roscoe Wilde, Maureen's father,***

***Sam Brunell, Roscoe's friend.***

***Scene one: A dirt road through a woods in Florida, ca 1923.***

***Clevon walks along, carrying a hoe & singing:***

Clevon:

If ever heaven sang a song  
it would sing this kind of morn:  
Wildflowers waving by the road  
and songs of things just born.

If ever heaven dreamed a day  
it would dream a day like this.  
That's what the new-born songbirds say  
all through the rising mist.

The breeze is soft  
the air is sweet  
the land is wide awake.  
now I must find a girl to meet  
give her my heart to take.

Sing with the birds

dance with the flowers  
and shine just like the sun.  
Dress music up in lovely words  
and sing to everyone.

If ever heaven sang a day  
today would be its song.  
With everything so fine and sweet  
That nothing can go...

(A woman screams from the woods!)

*Maureen is sitting on the ground on a path through the woods. She has fallen off her horse and been bitten by a copperhead snake.)*

Get away from me! Get away from me! Help! Help!

(Clevon is startled & very frightened to hear a white woman screaming in distress. He turns to run.)

*Maureen:*

Get away from me. Help me!  
You there: colored boy!  
Come help me, please help me!

*Clevon:*

Lord have mercy Jesus!  
That's a white girl screaming.  
there's no faster place  
for a Negro to die  
than next to a screaming white woman.  
But if I run she might set  
them crazy crackers on me for not helping her.  
A Negro can't win with these fools.  
But helping her  
is the Christian thing to do,

So I better see what's the matter.

*(Clevon enters the woods. He sees Maureen on the ground with two copperheads near her. He kills them with his hoe.)*

*Clevon:*

Did they bite you?

*Maureen:*

Yes they bit me!  
Why do you think I'm sitting here on the ground  
with my belt tied around my leg?

*Clevon:*

That looks bad.  
The poison needs to come out  
Or you could lose the leg.

*(He pulls a hunting knife from his belt.)*

Don't worry. I've done this before.  
I have to cut little xs where they got you  
& then you'll have to suck the poison out.

*Maureen:*

They got me on the outside of my leg.  
I can't reach my mouth to the outside of my leg  
you'll have to do it.

*Clevon:*

Me?  
Do you know what will happen to me



if a white man shows up  
and sees me with a knife in my hand  
and your leg in my mouth?  
There ain't enough tree limbs  
in the woods or enough rope  
in this county  
to satisfy all the meanness  
they would wrap around my neck.

*Maureen:*

You know you've got to do it.  
Hurry up! I can feel the poison spreading.  
There's nobody but you and me  
and two dead snakes in these woods.  
Just like you don't want to die  
from lynching, I don't want to die  
from some stupid snake bite.  
Now come over here  
and get to sucking.

*Clevon, as he makes incisions in her leg:*

I've seen you in town from time to time.  
I've bought feed from you  
at your daddy's store.  
I hope you won't get mad when I tell you  
that you get a boy's imagination going.  
There's something about the way you move;  
It's like you dance your way across the room.  
And then you seem so sure  
of everything you do and say  
like there's nothing in the world  
that makes a question for you.  
I imagine you as the queen of everything,  
but I never imagined this.

*(He lowers his lips to her leg.)*

Maureen:

Girls imagine, too,  
but I better not tell you  
what I imagine when I see you  
in the store.  
Lordy Lord!, my daddy would skin me  
to the bone  
if he knew what thoughts I have sometimes.  
Even now with poison trying to crawl  
up the veins of my leg...  
Well, let's just imagine  
death crawling around the forest floor  
and spitting poison into my leg.  
Let's just imagine  
the killing works of copperheads  
and not think of  
whatever we think  
when we wander around sacks  
of feed and seed.

*Clevon, finished:*

Damn, that's nasty.  
Is that your water bottle over there  
hanging from your horse's saddle?  
I need to rinse my mouth out.  
How did you get bit anyway?  
You know that you got to watch for snakes  
in the woods.  
There's all kinds of things that kill  
in these woods.  
As hateful as your daddy is  
you might be one of them.

*Maureen:*

Let's don't talk about my daddy.

Let's don't ever talk about my daddy.  
It's hard to see these copperheads  
because their colors blend  
into the grass and flowers.  
But my horse saw them  
and she r(e)ared up  
and throwed me off her back.  
That's when they got me.

*(She stands, wincing in pain.)*

*Clevon:*

Hold up!  
You don't want to walk around on that leg  
because it gets the blood to moving  
and there's still some poison in there.  
I better carry you to your horse  
and you can get over to Doc Watson's  
so he can take care of you.

*(He carries her to her horse.)*

Well, I guess I'll see you  
at the feed and seed store sometime  
and you and me can think  
about fertilizer together.

*Maureen:*

My name is Maureen.  
It's alright that you touched me.  
I am not my father,  
certainly not my mother.  
I get whipped a lot because I don't think...  
Well, I'll just say  
I get whipped a lot.  
I'm glad you came by

when you did  
because I don't know how  
I would have got out of this  
without you.  
I know why you thought of running  
when I hollered.  
It's a goddamn shame  
when a colored boy is scared  
he'll get crucified for helping  
a snake-bit white girl.

*Clevon:*

My name is Clevon.  
And you're right:  
When I heard you scream  
I turned to run.  
When there's just two of us,  
if you're in danger,  
I'm in danger too.  
The few white boys  
I'm sort of friendly with  
would be the first  
to put the rope around my neck.  
It happened just a month ago  
a few short miles from here  
and it was meaner than a hanging.  
I mean, the things they did  
to that poor Sanford boy  
because somebody said  
he touched their sister...  
This ain't no kind of way to live.

I'm getting out of here, Maureen.  
I got a cousin in Connecticut  
who's got a job for me.  
Soon as I can save the fare,  
I'm getting out of here.

*Maureen and Clevon:*

Well, that's enough of death and fear.  
There's better things to say.  
It's a warm, bright day  
and the breeze is soft,  
and the leaves have that gentle green  
of early spring.  
We can think spring things.  
We can sing spring songs.  
When we meet in the store  
We can think about (my, your) arms  
lifting this warm, soft body  
  
and toting it across the forest floor.

We can think of things  
we cannot talk about  
as if the wrens and larks  
might sing our songs  
into the hateful ears  
that run our town.

We can think of things  
we shouldn't think about.

*Maureen:*

You know,  
I was on my way to go swimming  
in that creek down the way.  
Nobody's ever there early mornings.  
I could meet you there  
one day next week.

*Clevon:*

You sure 'bout that Maureen?  
You sure 'bout what you're cranking up?

**Maureen:**

No, I ain't sure 'bout nothin'.  
So don't come if you're too scared.  
You know,  
I love that song you were singing  
When I screamed at you.  
I play it all the time in our Victrola...

*(They exit)*

*Scene two: Three weeks later. A comfortable rustic parlor.  
Sam Brunell, a mid- sixties white man, and  
Roscoe Snipes, Maureen's father, a man in his mid-forties.*

**Sam:**

Evening, Roscoe.

**Roscoe:**

Evening Sam. Sam  
I want to tell you that I'm sorry as heck  
that I whipped that nigger of yours so bad.  
I shouldn't have done that.  
When he smart-mouthed me  
I lost my temper  
and went to whaling on him.  
I whipped him and whipped him  
and before I stopped myself  
He was just a bloody mess.  
I knowed he was your nigger  
but I couldn't think of that  
once I got the buggy whip in my hand.  
I just can't stand it  
when they forget their place like that.  
But that was wrong of me.  
I shoulda told you about it  
and let you punish him.

*Sam:*

What did the boy say to you, Roscoe?

*Roscoe:*

Well I had these croaker sacks  
of chicken feed to load into my buggy.  
He came walking by,  
and I said: "hey, boy  
come grab these sacks  
and haul them up into my buggy."  
Hell, I was going to give him a quarter.  
But he says: "I ain't no boy  
and I ain't studying no croaker sacks.  
I got work to do."

So I says, "what did you say to me, little nigger?"  
and he just rolled his eyes  
and kept on walking.  
That's when I lit into him.

*Sam:*

Well, he sure had no call  
to talk to you like that,  
but he was in town on my business.  
I sent him to the telegraph office  
to send a message to my sister.  
I got the lumbago in my leg  
and couldn't go myself.

Roscoe, I don't mind you  
whipping the boy some  
for back-talking you,  
but when are you going to learn  
that you ought not to whip them  
so bad that they can't work?  
Now I'm going to be behind  
with my crop this year  
not to mention that I got to listen

to his mamma whining about  
how bad off her boy is  
and how his face is going to have scars  
for his whole life.

See this strap here?  
see how wide it is?  
I can whip the snot  
out of a nigger with this strap  
and he can still work.

*Roscoe:*

Well I'm'a make it up to you, Sam.  
I got my eye on a strong young boy  
that I'll send over.  
I'll even pay for him  
until your boy gets better.

*Sam:*

That's mighty white of you, Roscoe.  
Well, that's enough about smart-mouth niggers.  
Let's talk some Klan business.  
Tell me about the klavern in Indianapolis.

*Roscoe:*

Well, Sam, I was talking  
to the King Kleagle from Oregon,  
and you know that we run Oregon.  
And he said that they ain't worried  
about niggers in the North.  
They ain't got enough of them up there  
to be a problem.  
They are working on stoppin'  
the Chinese from pourin' in  
and taking all the jobs.  
they will work for anything  
and they ain't got no culture at all.  
And then a Kladd from New Jersey



said he gets new members  
because of all the Irish  
and Italians that are just a-swariming.  
They found proof of this plot  
by the pope to take over America.  
He said them Guineas  
and shanty monkeys is as low as niggers,  
and he wasn't joking.  
I told them  
we would send them some of our niggers  
in a great big crate  
and they could see how much they like them.  
(They laugh.)

*Sam:*  
Well you see, Roscoe,  
your Nigra is basically  
a tropical animal.  
It is a proven scientific fact  
that he can't survive in a Northern climate.  
If you had stayed in school  
past the sixth grade  
you could read your eugenics  
and know that.  
Hah! Just joshing you, Roscoe.  
Have another lemonade.  
So tell me, how was the Klonvocation?

*Roscoe:*  
Sam, you shoulda been there.  
The weather was glorious.  
I was up on the highest hill  
and I looked down over a hundred,  
two-hundred thousand people,  
Men and women  
all in shiny white gowns and hoods.  
There was a bi-plane flying overhead  
with a flaming cross painted

on the bottom of its fuselage  
and acrobats doing scary stunts  
on the wings.  
You would have went crazy  
for the food, Sam.  
There was I don't know how many rows  
of tables a city block long  
just loaded with food. I mean,  
casseroles, barbecue, fried chicken,  
all kinds of desserts.  
Somebody said  
there was two and a half tons of beef.  
There was twenty-five hundred pies.  
The Women's KKK  
did themselves proud last week  
though I wish they would stop bitching  
about getting the vote.  
Can you imagine anything stupider  
than letting women vote?  
I'd just as soon let niggers vote.  
Anyhow Sam,  
there was a great big children's area,  
and glee clubs, and boxing, and bronco busting,  
and fireworks, and a tour of Valparaiso University  
and the governor spoke...  
Scene fades)

***Scene three, An orange grove in Florida,  
Maureen awaits Cleveon***

*Maureen:*

Alone.  
I am deep, deep, deep, deeply alone.  
Alone at supper with my folks all talking.

Alone at school with my friends all rowdy.  
Alone in church with the preacher wailing.  
Alone in this sweet grove of orange blossoms  
where my secret heart comes tipping out to me.  
All I've got is this love that fills me up  
like a second soul and it's no friend to me.  
Every time I think it cain't get no bigger  
I think about him and it grows and grows  
and I swell so much  
I feel like I will explode into little grains of love.  
And still this love makes me more alone.

I want to holler out this love to the whole damn town  
but I caint. I caint.  
This is a terror love.  
My dreams of love are nightmares  
full of men in sheets that ride death horses,  
They shoot and burn,  
They crush the coloreds.  
Time was, I never thought of this.  
it seemed to be the way the world was made.  
Those days, I never was alone.

My daddy rides and burns with them.  
He laughs and drinks and brags with them.  
My daddy is the enemy of love.  
My momma brings the drinks to them.  
She laughs at tales of how the coloreds shake  
when they fire up crosses in their yards.  
My momma is the enemy of love.

I used to laugh with them.  
Now I sneak into the yard to cry.

I'm so alone! Alone! Alone!

*Stage left.*

*Clevon stands before the edge of the orange grove.*

In just a minute's time I will put my hands  
around her waist and she will step to me  
and we will pull each other close enough  
to have one breath, one heart, one soul.  
We will drink from each other's tongues.  
We will think each other's thoughts.  
We will be outside of now, outside of here.

Our clothes will fall down to the ground.  
Her legs will spread and wrap around me.  
I can't say what we will do next  
it's always new.

The heat will set our skin on fire  
so hot I think I'll see a light  
So bright that it should fire the night  
I feel like they will see our love  
from miles away.

I know this and I want to run  
away from where I want to be,  
Away from Maureen and the fire  
she lights in me.

But now I see her waiting there  
I look at her and do not care.  
The orange blooms exhale  
their sweetness to the air.

I look at her and I am lost  
no matter what will be the cost.  
This fear is fuel for the flames  
that burn inside of me.

I tell myself to turn around,  
to leave my heart upon the ground

Let it take root there in the dirt  
and leave me free.

But now she turns and looks at me.  
I wave to her, she waves to me.  
And now the night is burning up  
behind her eyes.

*Maureen and Clevon as they approach each other*

*Maureen:*

How did we fall in love with death?  
How can we be in love with death?  
It came that day beside the creek  
When I stripped down to take a swim.

*Clevon:*

I saw you there and turned away.

*Maureen*

I didn't know Negroes could blush.  
A reddish light spread in your skin.  
You looked like you'd inhaled the sun.

*Clevon;*

I felt that way.  
Even though we'd planned to meet  
I turned to run.  
You called me back.

*Maureen:*

It was too late. The thought was fixed  
Into my mind. I dressed myself  
And said your name.  
You looked so scared of little me.

*Clevon:*

I was afraid.

For my whole life  
I've been taught to never say a word  
to a white girl.  
Don't touch them, Clevon.  
Don't stand close, Clevon.  
They told me what the klan would do:  
Beat me, skin me, burn me, cut off my balls  
and make me eat them.  
Soak me in pain  
Until I begged for hanging.  
And then you called my name.

*Maureen:*

It was too late.  
There was this need I didn't know  
that came pouring over me.  
If you were a white boy  
I'd have asked you home for supper.  
I'd have looked for you in church.  
Walked home from school with you.  
But you're a Negro, and we have to wait  
until our folks are sleeping  
and love out in the woods.

*Maureen and Clevon:*

It is too late.  
It will always be too late.  
I look at you  
and see that you were made to fold into me.  
I see a heart that swings in time with mine.  
I see a soul so free and giving  
that at night it shines and shines.

I look at us together and this glowing love  
burns hotter till we're cinders in the flame.  
We know the way this world is made  
but still this love burns through.

*They embrace:*

Not even death can as great as this  
for still this love burns through.

*Scene 2:*

*At stage left, the interior of a humble farm house; at stage right, the kitchen of a more prosperous home.*

*At stage left, Clevon arrives, met by his father, Monroe.*

*Monroe:*

Boy, where you been this late at night?

*Clevon:*

I just walked out for a little while, Daddy. I couldn't sleep.

*Monroe:*

Clevon, you good at a lot of things, but lying ain't one of them.  
I can see the lie all over you.  
Now tell me: Where you been?

*Clevon:*

No, it's the truth Daddy. I couldn't sleep.  
It was too hot in my bed, so I took a walk to cool off.

*Monroe:*

Clevon, it's late and I'm too tired to argue with you.  
Tell me the truth so I can go back to bed.  
Where have you been so late?

*Clevon:*

All right Daddy.  
I went to see somebody down the road.  
and then I came right back.

*Monroe:*

Come on Clevon.  
A little bit of the truth is just a piece of a lie.

If you got a girl, that's all right.  
You don't need to sneak around in the middle of night  
to see her.  
Who you going with?

*Clevon:*

Daddy, please don't ask me that.  
We just want to keep it to ourselves right now.

*Monroe:*

You think that I don't understand why, Clevon,  
but I do.  
When me and your Momma  
God rest her soul,  
first started courting  
We were shy about it.  
Didn't want nobody to know.  
We used to meet out in the orange groves.  
Can you believe that?  
In the orange groves!  
Didn't think nobody would find out  
but that's where everybody goes.  
So when I decided to tell her momma and poppa  
they already knew.  
That's when I found out  
there's nothing secret  
about lovin'.  
Nothing secret at all.

***Scene four: Stage right: the living room of a comfortable Southern home.***

***Patti Snipes and her daughter Maureen are talking***

*.Patti:*

Where have you been this late at night, Maureen?

*Maureen:*

I couldn't sleep, Ma.



Been feeling a little sick on the stomach,  
so I went out for some air.

*Patti:*

You been looking a little peaked lately, Maureen.  
You were throwing up this morning.  
You sure you're okay?

*Maureen, changing the subject:*

Oh, I'm fine. Where's daddy?  
I don't see the Model T outside.

*Patti:*

He had to leave early to drive over by Braggtown  
to see Old Sam Brunell.  
Seems like some young nigger  
who does field work for Old Sam  
sassed your daddy  
and you know he don't allow back talk  
from no damn spooks.  
Took out his buggy whip  
and laid into that smart mouth boy  
till he fell out screaming.  
Now Old Sam is mad at your daddy,  
not because Old Sam's a nigger-lover,  
he sure lord ain't,  
but because the boy can't work  
and Sam needs him in the field.

Your daddy wants to do right  
by Old Sam because they used to hood up  
and ride out together  
before the lumbago slowed Sam down.  
I think your daddy's going to offer  
to bring Old Sam that Wilde boy  
from down the road to help out  
and he's going to pay his wages like old Sam,  
who's cheaper than a Jew,

wants him to.  
I swear,  
I don't know what this country is coming to  
when every shine on the corner  
thinks he can talk back to a white man.

Maureen, are you okay?  
You look like you're going to throw up again!  
Maureen!  
Oh Lord, she fainted.

*Stage left, Clevon and Monroe:*

*Monroe:*

Clevon, I hope that you protect that girl.  
Do you pull out like I told you to?  
I don't want to deal with no mad daddy  
knocking on my front door  
with a shotgun.  
You're too young to have marriage  
shoved down your throat;  
and if you love her like you say  
you don't want to put a baby on her  
when she's got her whole like  
in front of her.

*Clevon:*

I try Daddy, but sometimes she won't let me out.  
And I do love her, Daddy.  
I love her so much it scares me.  
If she shows up in my dreams  
I wake up every night  
and I tremble and shake.  
I love her so much  
I think about her and I want to run  
from the picture in my mind.  
The only time this stupid love don't scare me  
is when I'm with her  
and I'm loving on her

and she's loving on me  
and then it's all so good  
that it's got to be right.  
Oh Daddy, I don't know what to do.

*Monroe:*

What are you talking about boy.  
Wait a minute! You really are scared!  
What have you got yourself into, Clevon.  
You ain't stupid enough  
to be messing with no white girl, are you?  
That's worse than playing in quicksand, boy.  
Who is she? Who is she, Clevon?

*Stage right; Maureen and Patti. Maureen has come to and is sitting up:*

*Patti:*

Maureen, damned if you ain't pregnant.  
Stupid, stupid girl.  
How could you do this to us?  
How could you do it to yourself?  
You've got to marry the boy  
and even so, everybody's going to be counting the months  
and calling your young'un a bastard  
after it gets here.  
The Snipes name means something in this county.  
Between the Snipes and my family  
we owned most of it before the war  
and that damned Lincoln took it from us.  
Even so, my grandpa built the church  
we go to,  
and your Pa works real hard  
keeping the niggers in line.  
Everybody respects him for that.  
But don't you worry,  
He's going to make sure  
the boy marries you  
and treats you right, too.

Stupid, stupid, stupid girl.  
How could you do this to us?

*Maureen:*

I can't marry the boy, Momma.  
I can't have the baby, neither.  
I need you to help me get rid of it, Momma.

*Patti:*

What do you mean, you can't marry him?  
You been foolin' with a married man?  
And hell no, you can't get rid of it.  
This is a Christian home, Maureen.  
Killing babies ain't Christian,  
and I'm not going to burn in hell  
for all eternity  
because you can't keep your legs together.

Here's what you're going to do  
You're going to bring the boy over  
with his momma and daddy,  
We're going to have a nice supper.  
and we're going to talk about a wedding,  
if I can keep your daddy from shooting him first.

*Stage left. Clevon and Monroe:*

*Monroe:*

Oh lord, Clevon. What have you been doing?  
Who is she, boy? Who is she?  
Please tell me it ain't that Snipes girl  
I saw you grinning at.  
You can't be that crazy.  
You *know* who her Pa is!  
Last week  
he damned near whipped that poor boy to death  
over in Braggtown  
for just talking smart to him.  
That mean bastard has lynched three Negroes

in the last ten years,  
And he didn't just hang them, Clevon.  
He burned them,  
And before he burned them, he...  
I don't even want to tell you  
what he did to did to them poor boys.

*Clevon:*

Don't worry, Daddy.  
We been careful not to let anybody know.  
She ain't told nobody  
and I ain't told nobody,  
and we been careful not to get caught.

*Stage right:*

*Patti and Maureen:*

So who's the daddy, Maureen.  
I hope it's not some white trash  
from cross the tracks,  
'Cause if it is  
your Pa is going to take a strap  
to your behind.  
and then he'll see to it  
that you get married.

*Maureen:*

No, Momma.  
the father ain't no trashy cracker.  
Please Momma; can we stop talking about this?  
Can you please just take me to somebody  
who can get rid of this thing  
before Poppa finds out?

*Patti:*

Well you got a hell of a nerve.  
You sneak around  
and get yourself knocked up  
like you ain't got no home training

and then you....  
Lord Jesus Christ in the morning!!!  
It's that Wilde boy, that Clevon  
who I saw you laughing with  
the other day.  
Don't lie to me girl.  
That's a nigger baby stinking up your womb.  
I can smell it from here.

*Maureen:*

Momma, he's not some tarbaby  
without a name or a soul.  
He's a boy; no, more than a boy.  
He's a man. He's a good man.  
He knows how to see to the bottom of me.  
When I talk to him, he doesn't just listen,  
he hears me.  
He hears more than I've said.  
When he's with me,  
he's with all of me.  
I love him, Momma  
and I hate this place  
that won't let me have his baby,  
The baby that I want  
more than I want anything in this world.  
And now in this place,  
in this time  
that's just another love  
that turns into death.

*Clevon and Monroe:*

*Monroe:*

Fool! Fool! Fool!  
You love her?  
That ain't love.  
Love is the twenty-tear struggle  
me and your momma went through  
to make a place for you

in this redneck world'  
Love is trying to nurse  
your momma through the yellow jack.  
When I knew it could kill me too.  
You ain't in love, fool.  
You're in heat.  
You ain't in love,  
You're in heat.  
You been careful?  
Boy, you've killed yourself.  
And they won't just kill you,  
They'll hang me, too.  
These hateful crackers  
will come through here  
and shoot every Negro  
they can find.  
They've done it before, Clevon.  
over a smaller thing  
than a colored boy laying up  
with a klansman's daughter.  
Shooting you would be a mercy, Clevon.  
Folks won't be able to tell you  
from a side of beef  
when they get through with you.

We got to run, Clevon.  
We got to run now.  
I'll go load the wagon.  
You tell the neighbors  
so they can run too.

We got to run, Clevon.  
We got to run now.

*Clevon:*  
You go ahead, Daddy.  
I'll catch up to you.  
I got to say goodbye to her

or I won't feel right for the rest of my life.

*Monroe:*

Fool! Fool! Fool!!

There won't be no rest of your life,  
There won't be no rest of nobody's life  
If we don't get away from here  
before the sun comes up.  
We got to run now.

*Clevon:*

Don't worry, Daddy.  
I'll catch up to you.

*Monroe:*

Fool! Fool! Fool!!

*Patti and Maureen,*

*Patti, grabbing a piece of firewood and hitting Maureen repeatedly in the head:*

You love him!  
You love him!  
You love a stinking nigger  
who lives in the dirt where he belongs?  
You love an animal  
who's just a gorilla that can talk?  
When did the devil take you over?  
How did Satan turn your crotch  
Into an outhouse pit?  
You're not my daughter;  
You're some nigger loving chippy  
who's too low to walk the docks of Tampa  
with a mattress on her back  
picking up sailors for a dollar a throw.

You've killed your precious nigger, Maureen,  
and you've shamed your family.



Even after all he's done,  
how can your father live in this place,  
how can your family show its face in church  
with you sporting a baby nigger in your womb?

Maureen? Maureen?  
Oh Lord, she's dead.

(A model T Ford is heard chugging into the yard. Roscoe emerges and two bloodhounds run over to greet him. Clewon notes the scene and turns and runs. A train whistle is heard in the distance.)

Help! Rape! Murder!  
That Wilde nigger raped and murdered my baby!

*End of act two*

**Tragedy three:**

***Characters: Lulu White, a madam. Picture a light brown-skinned Mae West;***

***Johnny Dodds, a jazz clarinetist;***

***Tony Jackson, a pianist-singer who is obviously gay. His style bridges ragtime & jazz;***

***Carrie Nation, a militant Temperance leader of a certain age;***

***Tom Anderson, a saloon keeper, called the Mayor of Storyville.***

***Scene: New Orleans: the parlor of Lulu White's brothel, a well-appointed mansion with mahogany walls, floor-to-ceiling mirrors and paintings of beautiful light-skinned women posing voluptuously in evening gowns. A funeral band plays a swinging backline song in the background. Lulu White, Tony Jackson and Johnny Dodds enter:***

*Lulu White:*

That was a hell of a funeral.  
All the way back from the graveyard  
I felt my soul  
lifting up to heaven

with Black Benny  
the way that band was rocking and rolling.  
I don't know how many thousands  
came out to see the march.

*Johnny Dodds:*

I've seen some great second lines;  
played in quite a few.  
but I've never seen or heard  
one strut and blow like that.  
Everybody raised up for him.  
It's like they wanted to give him back  
every beat he ever hit  
on that big bass drum  
in every funeral he led.

*Tony Jackson:*

The Excelsior brass band  
has never, ever played better,  
played harder, played more truth.  
Lord, did they move me.  
The only thing that band was missing  
was Black Benny himself.  
that man could get more sound,  
more rhythm, more music  
out of a bass drum than any man  
who ever lived.  
It's like he had the whole continent  
of Africa inside that thing.  
He'd have people strutting  
for blocks around.  
I've seen kids jump out of school windows  
to join the second line  
when he marched the Excelsiors by.

*Lulu White:*

All the ladies loved  
that big, black beautiful man.

I used to catch my girls  
meeting him at the back door  
on their off days.  
I told them, "girls,  
don't let that giant stud ruin you  
for all the paying trade."  
But I tell you this,  
Black Benny wouldn't let the drunks  
and bullies out in the streets  
beat and rape any whores.

***Tony Jackson:***

He even defended a pansy  
like me more than one time.  
And man could he fight.  
Did any of y'all  
ever see him in a free-for-all?  
Didn't matter how many  
they put in the ring:  
five men, seven men,  
all big, all built like bulls,  
all blindfolded. Didn't matter.  
Black Benny was always the last man standing,  
grinning behind his blindfold,  
Taking home the money.

***Johnny Dodds:***

And I tell you something else:  
I used to love the love he showed  
little Louis Armstrong.  
I was playing with Kid Ory  
And Black Benny would come in,  
all six-foot-six of him  
with this little kid  
just out of the Waif's Home  
handcuffed to his arm with a handkerchief  
so he wouldn't get lost in the crowd.  
Ory would call Louis up to the stand

and that little boy would set the room on fire.  
Everybody would go crazy  
And the floor would be covered with change.  
Benny would wait until Louis was through  
and make sure Ory paid him something  
then take him home to his momma.  
He didn't have to do that.  
It's just the kind of man he was.

What did Jelly Roll used to sing?  
Didn't he ramble?

*All:*

He rambled.  
He rambled through the town.  
He rambled all around.  
He rambled till the butcher cut him down.

*Tony Jackson:*

The only thing that messed up the day  
was Kidneyfoot Ella spitting in his face  
as he laid in his coffin.  
I know why she did it:  
She didn't like him  
messing with that crazy whore  
Coke Eye Laura who stabbed him in the throat.  
But Black Benny was gone;  
she should have let him have the peace of death.

It was the crazy way  
they loved each other.  
Benny could be dead drunk and whip any man  
in New Orleans, but he couldn't beat  
that skinny little four-foot-nine  
high-yeller girl.  
I saw them fight  
from one end of the District  
to the other and Benny was straining hard,

sweating through his clothes  
but Ella would give him back  
More than he gave her.  
he knocked her down,  
And she picked up a three foot  
piece of pipe and whacked him  
'Cross the knee and brought him down  
Then cracked him in the head with it.  
That fight put both of them in the hospital.  
By that night they were at it again.  
Tore all the stitches.  
They had to chain them to their beds.

I hope I never have the kind of love  
Those two had for each other.

***Johnny Dodds:***

New Orleans will not be the same town  
without Black Benny wailing on his bass drum  
and helping people out.  
But if he had to die,  
now is as good a time as any.  
He would not have wanted to see  
the District shut down like this.  
Black Benny was the soul of the District.  
The rumble of its heart,  
the love in the center of this crazy place.  
It's like crazy Coke Eye Laura  
was the hand of the power  
that's shutting our living down.

How did it get like this, Lulu?  
I thought the mayor had it under control.  
I've certainly seen him down here enough,  
drinking and whoring for free.

How did we lose our District?

*Lulu White:*

It turned on us about ten years ago  
when Carrie Nation blew through town.  
We always had to put up with reformers  
and do-gooders who were trying  
to make New Orleans more respectable;  
With Temperance people who wanted  
to get rid of all the vice we sell.  
But I truly do not think that the Lord cares  
if a man comes 'round here  
to have a drink and do the kind of nasty  
that he can't do with his old stiff,  
proper wife.  
But then here comes this little old lady  
breathing fire like a dragon  
out of story books  
Aad she's hauling an axe.

First she went by the House of All Nations  
where they sell the kind of freak action  
any respectable madam would evict a man  
for asking for.  
Bless their hearts,  
those girls told it like it is.  
Carrie Nation asked them who forced them  
into whoring.  
"Why no one, Miss Natioin.  
There's no other work for us.  
It's either this or be without a home.  
Being in the life in a place like this  
Is better for us than starving on the street."  
Madam Johnson even told her  
she prayed every night  
and was sure she was going to heaven.

Well, Carrie Nation didn't like any of that,  
so she went to Josie Arlington's house  
a few doors down from here on Basin street,

and Josie, who y'all know is a big hypocrite,  
told her she had just found Jesus.  
She was going to spend her whole \$60,000 fortune  
on a home for wayward women,  
but she had to get a little richer first.

Then Carrie Nation went to Tom Anderson's saloon,  
The Annex, and this time she broke out  
her famous axe.

*Scene 2: A large saloon: large mirror, long bar, painting of a reclining nude.  
It is crowded with men.*

*Tom Anderson, dapper in a tuxedo, greets Carrie Nation:*

**Tom Anderson:**

Miss Nation! I've been expecting you.  
I bid you welcome,  
welcome to my humble establishment.  
I seldom have the honor of receiving  
ladies like you who are extoled  
across the nation,  
nay, across the globe  
for your unstinting rectitude,  
your singleness of purpose  
in the obliteration of the simple pleasures of men.

*Carrie Nation:*

Mister Anderson is it?  
Men like you are the reason that almighty God  
put me on this earth.  
An upright man from this city  
once said of your kind:  
"It is no easy matter  
to go to heaven by way of New Orleans."

*Tom Anderson:*

May I offer God's gift to earth something?  
A simple repast? A cold libation?

I'm certain that we can confect a drink  
that is devoid of the ardent spirits  
according to your tastes.  
And may I check your axe?

***Carrie Nation:***

I'm not here to engage in badinage  
with the likes of you, Anderson.  
I see you as you are:  
a minor demon on parole from hell,  
sent to earth to recruit good men  
with the demon rum.

***Tom Anderson:***

Now surely you engage in hyperbole  
Miss Nation.  
No commandments are being broken here.  
There's none among the ten  
against an occasional drink.  
These honest men are here  
for a little polite conversation  
among friends.  
There are no neighbor's wives  
among these ladies to be coveted.

Here, bring Miss Nation a crate to stand on.  
I believe she has a word to say to us.

***Carrie Nation, from the crate, angrily:***

Enough, thou fell viper,  
thou oleaginous lizard.  
I have confronted your kind  
and their hapless victims  
in such halls of degradation  
in cities across America,  
and my axe has brought them down.  
You empty their pockets  
of their meager wages.



You poison their souls with drink.  
You corrupt their very hearts  
by availing to them sad, fallen women,  
and from them they carry foul disease  
home to their poor wives.  
Then in their drunken shame  
the brute in them rears up  
and they beat their wives and children.  
Men like you  
are Satan's greatest work,  
Tom Anderson,  
and I mean to bring you down.

(There is jeering from the men.)

You hoot and hiss and shout insults at me?  
when all I am laboring for  
is to snatch your miserable souls  
back out of hell,  
For you are already remanded to hell  
for your endless sins.  
Be men, why don't you?  
Why let yourselves be slaves to Pabst  
and Busch and Schlitz?  
Stinking immigrants  
who came over here to addict  
Christian men for their profit.  
You smoke foul tobacco,  
you drink the ardent spirits.  
Through the blind lust for liquor  
This man binds you to slavery  
With the chains of drunkenness?

**Tom Anderson, mirthfully:**  
Slavery? There's greater freedom here  
than they can find at home.  
I think of myself as a liberator.

*Carrie Nation:*

I leave you to God's judgement, Anderson.

But I raise my axe

to your foul product.

(She charges behind the bar

& destroys all the liquor within her reach with her axe. Then she exits.)

*Tom Anderson:*

That's all right boys.

I put all the good liquor away

before she came

and left out the cheapest stuff

for the kiss of her holy axe.

First drink's on the house.

*Scene 3; back at Lulu White's.*

*Lulu:*

And then the pimps and bully boys

went to robbing and killing sailors

and pissed off the Navy Department

and now they're shutting down the District.

***Johnny Dodds, looking around:***

I have always heard that this place is plush,

but I had no idea that it was this fine.

Lulu, you should have let some of us colored boys

sneak in the back door every once in a while.

***Lulu:***

Now Johnny, you know that I'd never let

you broke-ass jazz musicians anywhere near

my fine octoroons.

Y'all ain't got two of nothing;

not even two socks that match.

No, Lulu White's

was for society ofays. Hell,

I didn't even let most white men in.

My redbones were too classy for musicians  
like you. They were smarter than you,  
and they surely had more money than you.

***Tony Jackson:***

And now it's over.  
You know what I can't help thinking 'bout?  
I'll never have a piano  
as good as your white Steinway Grand  
to play on again.  
This was the classiest job I'll ever have,  
though I hear those Chicago gangsters  
are good to work for  
if you don't mess with the women  
in the club  
and you know I won't be doing that.

***Johnny Dodds:***

And now it's over...  
I'm going up to Chicago too.  
King Oliver's taking a hell of a band up there  
with my brother on drums  
and Louis Armstrong playing second trumpet.

***Tony Jackson:***

And I've got a job lined up  
At a plush Chicago lounge.

***Tony Jackson & Johnny Dodds:***

I know Chicago ain't heaven  
but we got music  
to keep us whole.  
The song will fill us up  
when our suffering souls' go flat.  
It will feed us when the work runs out.  
Music will put clothes on our backs  
to fight the Chicago hawk  
when it screams across the lake.

New Orleans gave us the sound  
that's new to the world  
and the world's got to come to us to hear it.  
Nobody makes music  
the way we do  
with every note as new as time  
and time is rolling on  
in that sweet New Orleans two/four  
with the ragtime top  
and the blues on the bottom.  
They don't know it, but they need us  
to put the life  
in the midnight dark.  
Our music is our home  
and we take our home wherever we go.  
We will move across the world  
planting blue notes as we go.

***Lulu White:***

But look at them out there:  
Poor babies trucking everything they own  
in wheelbarrows and two-wheel carts  
to God knows where.  
It breaks my heart.  
What will they all do?  
Lord save me from people  
who want to save me.  
What will the girls do?  
It's not like they got a better choice  
than whoring.  
There's no tourists doing mattress work in the life.  
They don't work the District for the fun of it.

*Lulu starts a blues, Tony Jackson accompanies her & sings harmony & Johnny Dodds joins in with his clarinet.*

*Lulu:*

I heard Mamie Desdoumes  
sing this one the other day:

They ask me why  
I sing so much 'bout trains.  
Young folks ask why  
I sing so much 'bout trains.  
"Cause they the way outta here  
And they the way back home again.

Don't wanna leave  
But I sure would hate to stay.  
Don't wanna leave  
But I sure would hate to stay.  
It's the way you feel  
When they break your life that way.

Let the train roll down,  
Let the highway reach the moon.  
Let the train roll down,  
let the highway reach the moon.  
Tell my hounddog man  
That I'll be with him soon.

I hear the whistle blow,  
The hoot owl called my name.  
Train whistle's blowing,  
The hoot owl called my name.  
If it don't get better  
'Least it sure won't stay the same.

*Johnny Dodds:*

Damn! I gotta run.  
All the saloon and dance hall musicians  
are meeting on the corner of Basin and Canal  
to play a front-line dirge for the women

and I promised I'd be there.

(The scene closes on massed musicians playing *Nearer My God To Thee* before a montage of women of all races pushing wheelbarrows and two wheel carts full of their worldly possessions.)

**Coda:**

*The present. The White House is in the background.*

*The quartet sings:*

See that man leaving the White House?  
His name is Barack Obama  
and he just finished two terms  
as president of the United States.

Nobody we have given voice to today  
could have seen him coming  
in imagination or dream.

**(Refrain:**

A life without hope is the death of the soul.  
We left that death behind.  
The death of the soul is a life without hope.  
We left that death behind.)

For that man to lead,  
For that man to live,  
We had to change America.  
We made our song  
America's song.  
We taught the world the blues.

We could not change America  
without a place to stand.  
We could never stand up in the cotton fields.  
Jim Crow was too mighty.  
He had the ubiquity of air.  
He told us what water to drink,

How to comport ourselves,  
What work we could do  
What we could learn.  
He told us who we could see in the mirror.

**(Refrain:**

A life without hope is the death of the soul.  
We left that death behind.  
The death of the soul is a life without hope.  
We left that death behind.)

It's not that the cities of the North  
Were warm in their welcome.  
Oh no! We had to fight for every block.  
We fought for every job,  
For every school,  
For every vote;  
But at least we could fight and live.

And when we were strong enough  
We turned back to the South  
Where Jim Crow covered everything,  
And we marched on him,  
Put our hands around his throat,  
And broke his crooked spine.

But his children live  
And they want to rule again,  
But we will not cower in the dirt  
Before them.  
We are strong enough  
To beat them down  
Because we know that we're strong enough  
To beat them down.

A life without hope is the death of the soul.  
We left that death behind.

The death of the soul is a life without hope.  
We left that death behind.

So look at that man leaving the White House.  
He was strong and wise  
Before the world.  
Know that most of America  
Claimed him as their own.  
We have made him;  
We have raised him up.  
We will return his kind  
To power again.

The life of the soul  
Is the breath full of hope.

We sing that hope to you.