

## John Bentley Mays / THE SEWN PICTURE

*(for D. C. Berry)*

### I

I lean in one corner of the side porch, outside the voices in a circle on the side porch. I lean against a column outside the air the fan stirs. The chairs on the side porch are made of wicker-work painted green, and on each one sits a woman talking into the empty air the fan stirs.

Somebody has gone into the parlour and taken out the trestles the coffins rested on for the day and night before the burying. The trestles are in the barn now. Nobody sits in the parlour. The birds in the tapestry chair-covers are quiet now.

The trestles are in the barn. I lean in one corner of the side porch. An old hoe leans in the corner of the barn, and no-one thinks of it.

This is her house. The boys were her boys. She does not watch me, but sits listening to the fan's blades stirring the hot air and listening to the women's words drifting in slow circles in the air the fan stirs. Aunt Glory talks to her. The words circle in the air like hawks at noon, then drop slowly toward her face.

Beyond the screen that runs around the side porch, the ground is hard, bare and shady. The men sit in the shade outside, on a circle of green iron chairs in the shade. Hens pick at the peanut shells the men drop as they talk. They crack peanuts, drop the shells, and talk about cotton and heat.

Beyond the trees near the house, the fields fall away green and hot toward the quivering horizon. Beyond the horizon the land drops toward the river, then the bottom all a dark tangle that goes on and on. The words the women say circle like hawks over the bottom at noon. I lean in one corner outside the voices, waiting while the women talk.

She says nothing. She watches the words circling in the air the fan stirs. Her hair is twisted into a tight knot on the back of her head, a knot resting on her black widow's collar. She turns her face toward one voice, then another. The ivory pin thrust into the knot of hair twists one way, then another, as she turns to catch the words falling toward her. She says nothing. She knots her handkerchief, unknots it, knots it again.

The men say the hot weather will hold.

## II

I lean into one corner of the porch, watching her face twist toward the words. She does not say anything with her mouth. Her handkerchief is a tongue, talking as she knots it and unknots it. She says they are dead. She says Billy and Josiah are dead. Aunt Glory says it's a judgment on this town, because of sin hid somewhere in the dark. But she just says they are dead.

I see the young preacher's car coming down the road, stirring the dust as it comes. He pulls the car into the shade, turns off the motor. There is no sound now except the voices. I watch him as he comes around the house, circling round from the front toward the side porch. One woman says the preacher is coming. Another woman goes out to the kitchen to fetch iced tea and cold chicken.

One woman says to her he's come all the way down to preach the meeting, but he will not leave a poor widow-woman to grieve her boys' deaths alone. He walks up the steps on to the side porch. I see the holes in the sleeves of his coat, at the elbows, when he reaches for the

glass of iced tea and the plate of chicken. He twists his face toward her and says he never knew the boys, but he'd heard what fine boys they were.

The words fall through the hot air the fan stirs. I lean and wait in one corner of the porch. She twists her handkerchief into a knot and listens.

The young preacher steps down from the porch into the shade where the men sit in a circle on iron chairs. He asks them if they think the hot spell will hold for the meeting.

### III

The men take off their hats as they come out of the shade up the porch steps. The leather bands inside their hats are soaked with sweat. They mop the sweat from their faces as they talk to her. The women stop to wipe the sweat from their eyes as they wrap chicken and pork and cornbread. I hear the icebox door open and shut, then open and shut, as the women put the food away.

The women wash the dishes and talk as they wash.

I do not move from my corner. The sweat trickles down my legs and ribs and face, but inside I am as still as the fields beyond the shade. The fields fall away toward the river and the bottom. I do not move to wipe the sweat away.

The women and the men get into their cars pulled into the shade around the house. They drive off down the road. Inside the cars the men loosen their black ties and unbutton their collars. The women pull out long hat-pins, take off their hats and set them carefully on the car-seats. Underneath the cars the road stretches like a dry, red scar across the fields into the distance, toward the town.

Now there are three in the house. She and Aunt Glory sit on the side-porch drinking lemonade in the air the fan stirs. I lean in one corner and wait. The dust raised by the cars' tires drifts like a fine red fog over the cotton. I listen to the fields now. I hear the weevils boring into the bolls. I hear Aunt Glory's words now. She does not listen to Aunt Glory. She listens to the weevils boring into the bolls.

The ground in the shade is cool to my feet. Now the road is hot to my feet. The words still circle on the side porch, circle and settle toward her face, but now I walk along the road, so I cannot hear anything. The road runs one way toward the town, the other way toward the river and the bridge lying broken under the road's end. She and Aunt Glory drink iced tea on the side porch, within the circle of shade. She drinks iced tea and listens to what Aunt Glory says.

On either side of me the rows of cotton run straight toward the horizon. My feet are covered with fine red dust. In front of me, I can see the road running straight to the edge, and I see the trees in the bottom beyond the edge.

When I look over my shoulder toward the house, I see the red dust kicked up by Aunt Glory's car and know there is one in the house now, whose grey face turns from one empty corner to another.

There is one now, watching me walk down the river road.

Weevils gnaw at the cotton. Her eyes gnaw my shirt.

Her eyes say: I will gnaw until I know, until you tell me.

I keep walking away from her eyes, between the hot green fields toward the road's end above the river.

#### IV

Now the road ends at a red edge above the river, above the blanched timbers of the bridge. The red clay bank falls steeply from the road's end, and at the bottom the black water runs through the shattered skeleton of the bridge. The sun bleaches the bones the water runs through. Beyond the red edge I stand on is another edge, and beyond that is the tangle of the bottom, swallowing up the road.

A cow fell in the mud of the creek, downstream from the wide place where Billy, Josiah and I swam on the hot days. We watched the cow every day until she died. Then we watched the carcass bloat.

It took the tides of two years to wash the skeleton clean.

The ribs that stuck up out of the water were white claws. A sunken animal gradually clawed its way from inside the hide, and now clawed the water and the air.

Josiah said the cow's ribs looked like the claws of a sunken animal. Billy said they were just ribs. He told Josiah to quit talking foolishness.

Now the road ends in a red edge above the water, above the dead bridge clawing the water and the air. The claws still hold the broken planks that once were a wagon. The wagon's tongue is braced upright among the bridge's timber. Harnessed in the branches caught up behind the bridge, a mule's bloated carcass slowly turns.

Billy, Josiah and I lay naked on the bank of the wide place we swam in, drying in the sun. The sun on my shut eyelids made everything red.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Billy standing over me. He was naked and angry. That was when I told him how.

Now the road ends in a red edge above the river, above the shattered bones of the bridge. The wagon's tongue is caught in the quaking skeleton.

The men say the hot spell will hold. The water will stay low so people can come out and see the bridge and see the wagon clutched in the bridge's claws above the water.

The men say the hot spell will kill the weevils.

Her eyes gnaw my flesh.

#### V: Her Prayer

The clock in the parlour strikes once. Once is the time it is. I am an old woman who watches herself in the long mirror. — Once there was a girl in the mirror. Even as I watched, she undid the buttons on her coarse cotton blouse, slipped it off and dropped it to the floor. Then she set a tall candle on the shelf beside the mirror and leaned forward so that the nipples almost touched the glass. She shook her head and her dark hair fell over the breasts. When she swung her head gently from side to side, the hair caressed her nipples, and she imagined she lay like a minnow in the stillness of the river's depths and her hair was the deep river grass gently lashing her silver sides. — She said that I

was beautiful. She said men would want me and, when the time came, I would give myself to one of them. — When I turned from the mirror, there was a huge shadow moving on the wall. I walked into the shadow until it became as small as I was, then became nothing at all. — The candle got shorter in the burning. Two shadows dressed in the dark before morning, the one tall and hard, the other small. The tall shadow worked the fields by day, ate greens and pork at evening, sat by the fire until he died. — He slept, woke up, went out to the fields once more. Like the shadow on the wall, he shrank the closer I came to him, until one day he disappeared. — But by then, there were two small growing shadows, already looming over my smallness. — Billy came first, in the spring. Then Josiah came on a windy, winter night. — There were three to look after. Three harrowed the spring fields toward summer. One waited in the house until three came back at dusk, three shadows coming up from the fields to be fed and tended. After sunset, we four sat by the fire, four silences casting huge shadows on the kitchen wall. — Then the man died, and there were two to plow and pick. — I was alone in my bed, dreaming. In my dream, I was a little silver minnow hid in the river's depths among the waving grasses. Sunbeams falling through the hot sky shattered into countless bright motes when they struck the river's surface, then sank toward the soft mud like a slow shower of dying sparks. I watched them fall into the green gloom, I watched them fade as they fell. — Suddenly there were whispered words among the grasses and the rain of light became a hail of tiny sharp words, bright hooks falling through the water. — I listened as the two of them put on their clothes in the dark before light. I heard them catch the screen-door so it would not wake me. I heard them get the mule out and hitch up. — The sky was clearing from the west through the morning as the men worked to free their bodies from the broken bridge and the branches caught up behind the bridge. The water had bleached their eyes to white. They were white foam caught in the branches. — A man said: High water for this time of year. A man said: Bad tide. A man said: What do you suppose them boys was doing, driving a mule over that bridge, what with the water so high and all. — The branches held their white bodies close to the breast of the river. I saw Glory's boy on the river bank, watching the men working with ropes and a team of mules to free the bodies



from the branches. I said: It weren't the water and it weren't the spell of rain and it weren't the bridge. — Now the clock strikes twice. There is one in the house, a dark shadow on the kitchen table-top under the lightbulb. I look into the shadow and see an old widow-woman with eyes tiny and black and bright as a weevil's. She walks down the red road toward the town, walking into the storm blowing up, clutching a worn tapestry bag to her bosom, with the bodies of my boys inside.

## VI

They reached the place just as the damp morning light began to seep down through the branches of the swamp oak, through the thick beards of spanish moss, to the floor of the bottom.

Josiah said: There it is.

Vines like bulging veins covered the grey rock. Mosses and ferns clung to its sides and rounded top. The huge trees of the bottom held the ground in gloom, but above the rock was a circle of bleak morning sky.

Josiah said: He done told us this is where it would be. You didn't believe him. Billy said: Get on back and fetch the shovels.

I watched Josiah walk over the half-mile of wet ground to the wagon.

I was not there, but I watched Billy waiting and planning, thinking through every stab of shovel under the rock.

Josiah and Billy took turns at the work until late afternoon.

It was Billy's turn. Naked to the waist, smeared with loam and sweat, he struck furiously at the cold ground under the rock. I felt his arms flex and strike forward against the cold darkness under the rock, forward toward the hard sound. I felt him bite hard against the darkness, bite with with his one steel tooth at the soft earth, bite toward the gold.

Josiah pissed in the grasses while Billy struck and cursed. He struck again, then stopped. He struck once more, then stopped again.

Josiah watched Billy pull himself from underneath the rock, pulling his shovel after him.

Billy said: Son of a bitch. Son of a bitching liar.

Josiah said: He said it would be here. He said they done hid the gold here.

Billy said: Son of a bitch. I done ruined a good shovel.

I saw them as they walked back over the wet ground toward the wagon, carrying nothing as they walked along. I saw them gee up the mule and turn her toward home. Iron wheels turned the empty rattle down the ruts of the bottom road.

Josiah said: What are you going to tell momma when we get back up to the house. How are you going to tell her about the shovel and all.

Billy said: Son of a bitching liar. I'm going to whip fire out of him when I get back. You wait and see.

The iron wheels turned the empty rattle along the bottom road and up the rise at the edge of the river.

I said: Yes.

I said yes and I whipped the mule along the last stretch of road before the road rises to meet the bridge. I said yes and whipped the emptiness on to the old bridge swaying over the black surge. I said yes, then yes to the crack and crazy heave of wagon and bridge, to the shovel sucked down into the noise, to the water slamming up to smash the wagon and drag it into the grinding timbers of the bridge.

Now I stand on the road's edge above the river, bareheaded in the rain and say yes to the water running through Billy and Josiah, taking the green of their eyes downstream as the men try to pull the bodies from the tangle of bridge, wagon and mule.

Her eyes gnaw me as the men work.

Aunt Glory says to her: It's a judgment on this town because of sin hid somewhere.

Her eyes are weevils.



## VII: Glory's Prayer

I sew and pray. — I sew a stitch no man can see, save the Lord, and I pour out my soul in prayers to him who sees everything. — I say it is the Lord who comes clothed with the sunrise, armed with a sword of fire. It is the Lord, come in judgment on this town, come up from Zion to trample sinners under his feet. — Somebody has tried to undo my work. I keep sewing up the people of this town and sinners keep tearing. I sew and the devil tears. But the Lord judges, and I keep sewing. — The lustful man, the wanton woman try to hide their wicked deeds under the gown of night. But the Lord hears each sigh tearing at my work, and every time a stitch breaks, the sound echoes down the corridors of Heaven, the sound angers the Lord, makes him raise the winds over the sea of his righteousness. Then blazing waves of retribution surge against the frail dam of his mercy, pound again and again at that fragile barrier, until it breaks and lets loose the terrible flood. — I say: judgment because of sin somewhere and a warning to man and woman to throw themselves on the mercy of God before the flood of fire and blood sweeps over the world. — The good women in this town listen to me. We sit and sew, and they listen. — I tell them of the blood that flows from the body of God, pitch and fire against those who sin, nectar and dew for the righteous. I say: remember to whom you must give account, to whom you must show every secret in your bodies. And they listen and they remember. They tell me how they keep hidden from the lusts of men, how they keep the stitches tight. — Now we sit and sew, and wonder where the secret sin is hid. Time to look in every cupboard, every closet, every corner. — Time to look in this house. — I say: Look in this house: Look in his room. Look at my dead sister's child in his bed. I say: I know he hates the thing men keep hid in the dark. I know he wants it kept small. He listens to me sewing in the night, and he hates it because he remembers the slashing sword of the Lord. — When she died, I took her lip-rouge and paints and powders and drew the flames of Hell with them on a piece of wrapping paper. Then I showed my picture to the boy. I told him how she had lived in the fires of her vile imaginings, how she did not bank the coals of her lusts, until one day they burned from her the garment of shame. I told him how she burned in this life's pleasures and how she now burns alone for eternity in the blazing river of Hell.

I told him how she was torn open once by man, once by child, and once by the fiery plague the Lord sent against her. — I have held it in my hand, that hateful thing men keep hid in the dark, and have told him it must always be small. I have sewn upon him the garment of righteousness. When I stand before God in the last day, I will not be afraid. I have sewn upon this child of sin the clean garment of holiness. — So I sew and pray with the women, and with the mother of the two boys swept into the sack of the old death angel. I sew and wonder where the thread broke.

### VIII

Her hair was the colour of honeysuckle, yellow and almost white, and her face was grey under the electric light. She lay under a patchwork quilt, almost a shadow under the quilting, her hands moving slowly back and forth across the patches.

I said: Aunt Glory told me you're going to die because you are a sinner.

She said: The Lord keeps the fruit of my sin ever before my eyes.

After she died, Aunt Glory told me I would stay in her room. Now I lie in her bed, under the quilts, and my toes make two points up in the patches.

There is nothing in the room except the things she had. Her bed, which is now my bed. Her chest-of-drawers, emptied of her things. A picture sewn into muslin stretched and framed, a picture of a little girl who walks alone through a windy garden of sunflowers, a little girl holding her broad sun-hat so it will not blow away and walking toward the words sewn in: *You Pass This Way But Once*.

I said to Aunt Glory: Why can't I go up and see her now.

She said: Your mother don't want to see you. She's feeling poorly. You get on outside.

I watched the street through the picket fence. I tore the honeysuckle vines so I would have a hole to watch through.

People passed by every day. Mule-drawn wagons rattled by, and the cars raised a cloud of dust in the passing. Every now and then somebody would see me looking through the hole I'd made in the honey-

suckle. He would say: You, boy. How's your momma feeling today. And I would say: Aunt Glory say's she's feeling poorly.

Every few days, just before dusk, the man walked by the house. He always slowed a little in front of the house and looked up at the window where she was. Then he went on.

I lie in the bed and listen to the women downstairs. Aunt Glory calls them her sewing circle. They sew and talk and pray.

My toes make two points up in the covers.

It is dark in the room, but I can see the girl in the sewn picture. She is holding her hat so it will not be blown away by the wind that never stops.

Every few days, the man passed the house at dusk. I watched him. He never saw me.

The wind blows hard in the room tonight, so I can just barely hear the women downstairs. I want it to be small. I put my hand around it, so it will be small.

After she died, the old preacher came to the house. He said to Glory: I believe she was sorry for what she done. Aunt Glory rocked in her chair and sewed and said: She never repented, even at the last when the burning fury of the Lord was heavy upon her. Many was the time I asked her to throw herself on the Lord's mercy and tell me who got that child on her. But she said: The fruit of my sin is ever before my eyes. Then she turned her shameless face to the wall.

I put my hand around it to keep it small.

Before she died, the man passed by the house at dusk, then circled and came back. He knocked on the door and Aunt Glory let him in.

He stood inside the door with his straw hat in his hands, with his face toward the floor. He said: I come to see her before she goes.

Aunt Glory said: The Lord will bless you. You are indeed a Christian man.

Then she went back to her sewing and he slowly climbed the dark staircase.

When he had shut the door, he stood for a while by the bed, not speaking, twisting his straw hat in his hands. Then he said: I come to see you. She said: What do you want. He said: I come to see you before you go.

She said: I didn't ask you to come here. I didn't ask it. He said: I come to get you to forgive me for what I done. Don't nobody know but you and me. When you go, there will be just me, knowing what I done.

She said: You get on back where you come from. Ain't you got a woman to mind? Ain't you got two boys to rear? You get on back and leave me be.

He stood by the bed, twisting his hat. Then he said: I don't want this thing to gnaw at me.

Slowly she raised her fingers to the collar of her nightgown and began undoing the buttons. With her eyes shut, she unbuttoned the gown to her waist, then pulled it open. He looked, then cried and shut his eyes.

She said: No, you look. You see this thing gnawing at me. And you look there in the yard, see the fruit of my sin.

He said: I don't want to see it. I don't never want to see him again.

With her eyes shut, she did up the buttons on her nightgown. Then she said: Get Glory.

He went out to the landing at the top of the stairs and called down for Aunt Glory. He said: You better get on up here. I think she's having a bad time.

When my mother died, Aunt Glory put on a dress the colour of honeysuckle and her Sunday hat. She said: I'm going to the burying. You stay here and play with Billy and Josiah.

That day I showed them the hole I watched through. I said: you look through that hole at the people coming by. They can't see you.

Billy said: That's a fool thing to be doing.

Aunt Glory had wanted us to stay in the house until the funeral had passed. We watched from the upstairs window as the hearse and cars passed. I saw Aunt Glory's eyes watch me as she passed.

We watched until the last car had gone out of sight, south toward the graveyard. Then we went down to my hole in the honeysuckle.

The heat had driven everybody inside who did not have to be outside. A bird-dog limped past once, squatted to bite a flea, then moved off toward the shade across the street. He watched nothing. Nobody came by any more.

I said: Billy, you be your daddy walking by. Josiah and I will watch you. So Billy went outside the gate and walked by, slouching and shuffling, pretending to chew a plug of tobacco. Then he straightened up and said: This is a fool thing to be doing. Come in the house and I'll show you something. I said: What.

Josiah said: Billy, don't you do it. I said: What is it.

Billy said: Come on inside and I'll show you how. Let's go up to your room and I'll show you how.

Josiah said to me: Don't you never listen to him. Josiah said to Billy: Don't do it.

We climbed the stairs to my room, her room now, and shut the door. I said: Billy, show me how.

Josiah said to Billy: If you do it and he does it, then I'm going to want to do it. I said to Billy: Show me how.

Billy unbuttoned his trousers. When he pulled it out of his britches it was already hard. After he started, Josiah started to undo the buttons on his trousers, starting with the top one.

When Aunt Glory got back, Billy and Josiah were in the yard, watching people through the hole in the honeysuckle. I was in my room alone.

Aunt Glory stood in the door and said: She is gone now. No amount of crying can bring her back.

Now I am in the windy room alone. The little girl leans into the wind and holds her hat tight. I hold it in my hand to keep it small. The little girl holds her hat tight to keep it from blowing away. In the darkness I see the words on the sewn picture.

Before my mother died, she called to me. I stood in the door of her room, watching her dim face.

She said: I'm going soon. Do you know that.

I told her I did. She said: Look at the little girl Glory made for me.

I said: What is she doing.

She said: She is holding her hat so the wind won't blow it away again. Once, a long time ago, a wind came up and blew off her hat, then carried it miles away and dropped it at last in the bottom on the other side of the river. After a while the little girl gave up looking for her hat. After a long time, the hat sank into the bottom-land and became a great grey rock. A long, long time ago, robbers lived in the bottom near the rock. They lived by stealing from the settlers who had to go through the bottom to get to the good land farther on. Later, when the settlers stopped going that way, the robbers rode into the towns and held up banks. They stole so much money that all the people in the towns got the soldiers to go into the bottom after the robbers. But when the soldiers had rounded them up, they found not one gold dollar. The robbers said they'd hid the gold under an old lady's hat, and nobody would ever find it. Now the old lady's hat is a round rock in the bottom. When you grow up, you get yourself a good shovel and dig under the old lady's hat until you find the gold the robbers hid. Nobody's found it, but you will, when the time comes.

Then she said: Get Glory. I'm having a bad time.

I hold it in my hand and it is soft and small. Shovels are long and hard in my hands. The little girl holds her hat tight so the wind won't blow it away.

When I asked for a shovel to dig under the old lady's hat, Aunt Glory dropped her sewing into her lap and looked at me over her glasses. She said: Where under Heaven did you hear such foolishness.



I said: She told me before she died.

Aunt Glory picked up her sewing and started at it again. After a while she said: That's like her, telling you what ain't been talked around here for many a year. You can't never have no shovel to go digging under that rock. A long time ago, one man took a shovel and dug under that rock, and he died. Then another man dug, and the Lord smote him dead with a fever. And don't you go talking that foolishness around. Nobody wants his child to die, digging for gold that isn't there.

I said: I want a shovel so I can dig under the old lady's hat.

I hold it in my hand. It is soft and small. The room is windy. A shovel is long and hard. The girl holds her hat to keep it from being blown away again.

#### IX: Billy's Prayer

Daddy said his daddy came over the mountains in a mule-drawn wagon, led by a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. That's the way his daddy talked. — Daddy said the old man told him the angel of the Lord led the mule-train down a creek that ran out of the mountains, then down the river the creek became, until they came to a hill of good-for-nothing dirt set back from the river. Then the angel told my old granddaddy: This is the place. — Daddy used to say that was the craziest damned angel he ever heard of. — When my daddy was thirteen, he packed some chicken and cornbread and walked off the place, leaving his mother with six squalling girls and his father with his Bible. After a month of sleeping in ditches and stealing potatoes, he came to the town and got a job sweeping the mercantile store. After a while more, he married my mother and hoed out this farm. I came first. That's how I got here. — One day Daddy came in early from the fields and spit blood. Then he died. Momma went up to Glory's house to learn sewing because she was too weak to

work in the fields. That left Josiah and me to do all the work. I never liked her much after that. She could have sold this place for twice what Daddy paid for it and taken us all to town. We could have had a big house like Glory and her boy live in. I could have had a room upstairs like that boy. But she said: We got to hold on to our land. The land is what we've got. — And the land is what we had. And the cotton. Little bolls the size of thimbles, if the weevils didn't eat them. That's what we had. — One day some cousins came down from the city. When I took the boy-cousins to the wide place in the creek, they wouldn't strip to go in with Josiah and me. So we made them tell us about the city and the women in the city. They sat there on the bank telling us about the women and passing around a glossy magazine full of pictures of women. I got them to give it to me, and I kept it under a board in the floor. Josiah and I used to bring it out and look at the pictures while we did it. — One day Josiah and Glory's boy and I went down to the wide place to swim. I took the magazine and showed it to Glory's boy. I said: Someday I'm going to go to the city and buy me a big car and take them women around in it. — Then that fool Josiah said: You can't leave. — I said: Maybe *you* can't leave. Maybe *you* have got to let them sew you right into the quilt they're making. But I'm not going to be a patch in Glory's quilt. — I said: I'm going to get me a car and get those city women to go with me. — That was when Glory's boy said: I'll show you how. — That was when Glory's boy showed me how. — Josiah and I put the shovels into the wagon just at dusk, as we were coming up from the fields for supper. The woman would think we were putting away our hoes in the barn. She wouldn't think a thing about it. — Then we got up before light and put on our trousers without any light. We went out, making sure the screen-door didn't slam. We got the mule hitched up without a noise. — We rolled down the dirt road before dawn, toward the river and the rock and the women.

## X

the air in the tent was still and hot  
in the pasture where the tent had been raised the night fell from a hot  
clear sky and settled around the tent

the people had driven their cars into the pasture and left them in a  
circle around the tent  
the cars were black teeth in a necklace around the tent

the ladies beat at the air with their straw fans  
on each fan was painted the words: *you pass this way but once*  
the fans beat the still, hot air  
the ladies were butterflies caught under a handkerchief  
the road ends now in a jagged red edge above the river  
the road ends above the broken bones of a bridge  
the fans beat the air  
the air did not move  
i held the songbook in my hands  
the pages of the songbook were blank under the glare of the electric  
lights  
they had hung on the tent poles  
they sang  
their singing stirred the air  
their singing stirred the sawdust  
the tent was filled with a fine haze of song and dust  
last night the crickets sang in the trees  
they sang about the blood  
their singing made the wind blow in my room  
the people in the tent sang about the blood  
josiah and billy had no blood in them when they were found caught up  
behind the branchjam  
their eyes were white  
when they pulled josiah and billy out of the branches there was no  
blood  
in their mouths  
the river below the end of the road is black  
water runs through the white timbers

the preacher came to aunt glory before the meeting  
he came to the house and sat in the front room  
he asked her to help a christian in need  
she told him to drink iced tea while she fixed the holes in his sleeves  
she talked about the blood  
she talked to her sewing while he drank iced tea in the front room

he stood on a platform at one end of the tent  
the choir sat in a white half-circle around him  
i watched glory's patches rise and fall as he reached and pleaded, as he  
waved his bible in the air

he said  
when i came to this town at the urging of the spirit to pitch my tent  
there were two things hidden from me  
one thing i did not know was that the old death angel was riding in  
the back of my wagon  
was carrying his old sack with me into this town  
when i came to this town  
i saw a field already harrowed and ready to receive seed  
tonight i see this worn tent as though it were the sky  
i see this congregation as though it were a harrowed field ready for  
sowing

but that angel saw a field no man can see  
he goes right on down to the hidden acre  
where the boll is blown before time  
and the bell has rung for the picking  
i pitch my tent in the afternoon  
but the death angel has gone down to the field he sees  
and is fixing to pick and load and take away  
then the sun goes down and i rest from my labours  
but that angel is in his field by the river  
ready to pick and load  
ready to take his load on down to the gin no man can see  
now the time comes for the preaching  
but they are not here  
now the time comes for the sowing  
but the death angel has harvested his crop already  
and taken the crop to his gin for the baling

the patches aunt glory sewed on his coat rose and fell as he reached  
and  
raised his bible into the air

he said  
yea there is a second thing i do not see

the water runs black under the red edge  
far across the fields the tent is a bright boil on the land's flesh  
the sky is black  
crickets sing in the mockorange bushes  
the water breaks over the bridge's bones  
her hat is caught up behind the bridge's bones  
even though it is dark i can see her hat

*help me my hat has blown away*

i hold it in my hand it is small and limp can you see it it is  
small and limp in my hand

*the wind has blown my hat away*

the tent is far away now i have left the tent in the sewn picture you  
had your hat on tight your dress billows in the wind but you had  
your hat on tight he cannot see you here i see you

*the wind that blew my hat away was too strong help me get my hat*

your hat is in the river caught up behind the bridge tell me what you  
know

*i know you while i fought the wind i watched you*

you saw me hold it in my hand   it was small and limp   now it is  
nothing

*you wanted it to be nothing*

there is nothing to have now

*do not listen to yourself saying those things   help me get my hat*

tell me what you know

*i know this red edge above the river   i know the broken bridge   i know  
the road that runs through the bottom to the rock   help me*

the stitches that held your hat on were strong

*but the wind was stronger   it tore my hat from my hands and  
carried it  
into the river*

will you wait for me

*i will wait in your room until you bring me my hat*

they all know now   she knows   aunt glory knows   it is nothing now  
it is not small

*help me*

your eyes are weevils

*help me*

when the men dragged them from the river i saw black blood  
caught up

behind the bridge   the black water breaks cold against my flesh

*it is the blood*

your hat is in the blood   the blood breaks over the bridge   the  
black blood is so cold   you stand above me on the red edge   your hair  
is yellow and your dress is blue   wait for me

*i will wait for you*

wait for me until i catch your hat out of the black blood of god

*i wait*