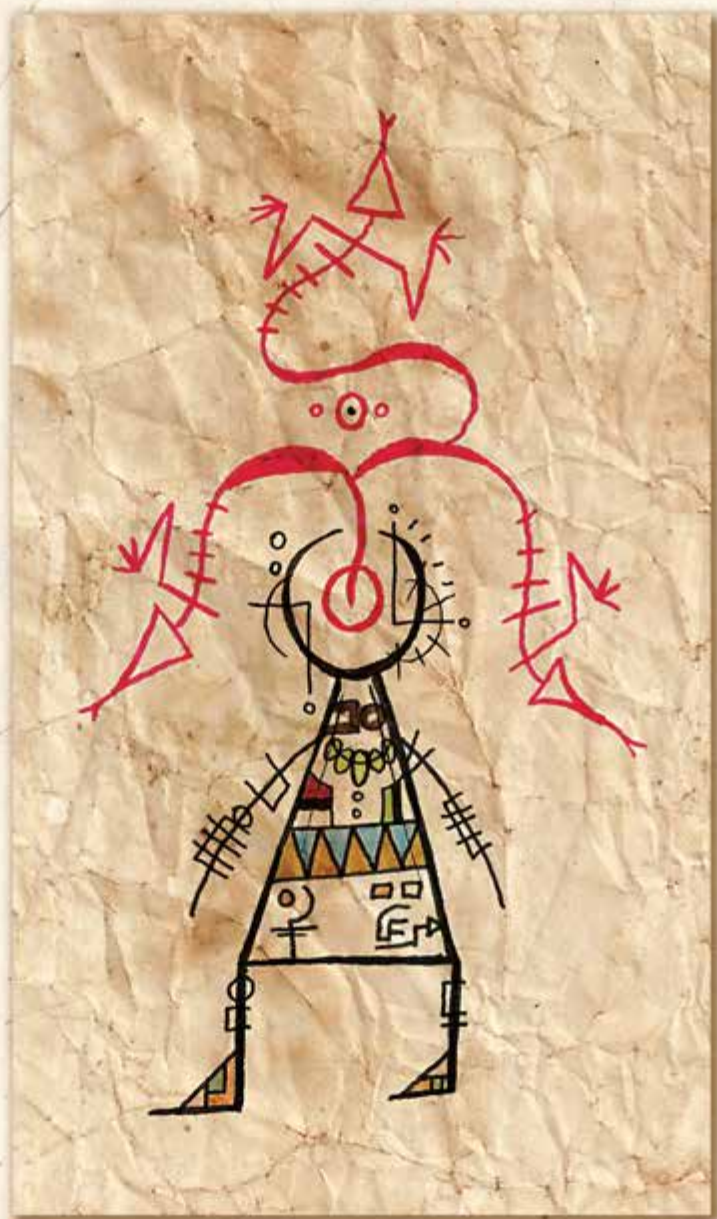


Mud Song



Terry Ann Thaxton

2017

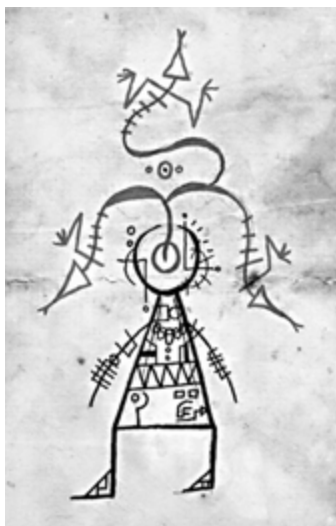
T. S. Eliot
Prize
for Poetry

WINNER OF THE 2017 T. S. ELIOT PRIZE

The T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry is an annual award sponsored by Truman State University Press for the best unpublished book-length collection of poetry in English, in honor of native Missourian T. S. Eliot's considerable intellectual and artistic legacy.

Judge for 2017: Kevin Prufer

Mud Song



Terry Ann Thaxton



New Odyssey

Truman State University Press
Kirksville, Missouri

Copyright © 2017 Terry Ann Thaxton/Truman State University Press, Kirksville,
Missouri, 63501

All rights reserved

tsup.truman.edu

Cover art: *The Fishers*, original artwork by Adam Thaxton.

Cover design: Lisa Ahrens

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thaxton, Terry Ann, author.

Title: Mud song / by Terry Ann Thaxton.

Description: Kirksville, Missouri : Truman State University Press, 2017. |

Series: New Odyssey series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017019424 (print) | LCCN 2017019647 (ebook) | ISBN

9781612482170 | ISBN 9781612482163 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Classification: LCC PS3620.H38 (ebook) | LCC PS3620.H38 A6 2017 (print) |

DDC 811/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017019424>

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any format by any means
without written permission from the publisher.

The paper in this publication meets or exceeds the minimum requirements of the
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for
Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1992.

*For my son, Adam,
sixth-generation Floridian*

“The general wildness, the eternal labyrinths of waters and marshes, interlocked and apparently never ending; the whole surrounded by interminable swamps. . . . Here I am then in the Floridas, thought I.”

—John James Audubon (letter to the editor of *Monthly American Journal of Geology and Natural Science*, 1831)

Contents

Prelude

History of America | 2

Part One

Alligators | 4

Afternoon Forecast | 6

The Dog in the Garage | 7

Florida Survival Guide | 9

Dead Owl | 11

Drought | 12

Escape | 13

What Remains | 14

Road Rage | 16

Part Two

Arbor Day, 4th Grade | 18

Big Pine Key | 19

The State Forever Under Construction | 20

Say One Word to Me | 22

The Worship of Oranges | 24

Cold War | 25

Family Reunion | 27

Letter of Forgiveness | 28

Sundays | 29

Interlude

The Truth About Florida | 32

Part Three

- Some Women | 38
- Protection | 39
- The Three Dancers | 40
- Children Without Their Own Beds | 42
- The Envelope | 44
- Near Dusk | 45
- As a Child You Learn | 47

Part Four

- Map of My Room | 50
- Landscape | 51
- Soldier's Creek Trail | 52
- Invisible Week | 54
- Mud Song | 55
- Passion Flower | 56
- Window Seat | 57
- Break Me | 58
- Florida Trail, Hopkins Prairie | 59
- Woman at Park Near Lake Monroe | 60
- Remember the Night I Almost Threw Myself Off of the Jetty into the
Crashing Waves? | 61

Part Five

- Things to Do in Your 50s | 64
- Walk or Fly, but Do Not Look Down | 65
- Tonight | 66
- When Those Days Come | 67
- Moon, Stars | 68
- In Memory of Me | 69
- Permanence | 70
- The Oldest Plant in the Yard Speaks: Spicy Jatropha | 71
- Pagan Shoes | 72

Postlude

- Terry Reminds Herself How to Live | 76

Acknowledgements | 79



Prelude

History of America

On the boat the men drank whatever the women poured while the women buoyed up the heads of sick children, and then they were peeling corn, and potatoes rose from the earth. I never paid attention in school. Didn't understand

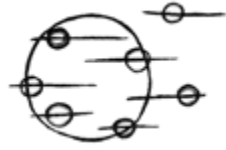
the purpose of history. Or science. Women sharpened knives not knowing they could be used against them. There was a table and probably not a turkey—which is something I learned only recently. And then some men fought with swords.

It all started at a rock. Then some guy with white hair wrote out his hope for his neighbors, absent of a queen hovering over his bookshelf. There might have been women, too, who wanted to wear their dresses as short as I did when I was a young girl.

But it wasn't until the 1800s when I started paying attention, and only because of a small cabin in the woods built by a man who wanted nothing to do with this country. There were women who hid words in their panties drawer, words

not discovered until they were dead, like witches flying above a man ashamed of his own past. After the rock, our ancestors dispersed into the wild west where whores sprouted from behind rocks and men of course had to pay to see breasts, and so guns were created to save

our freedom. My sixth-grade teacher taped the evolution poster to our classroom door—but only because, she said, the county forced her to. Otherwise, I would never have seen the parade of apes, the men, following each other into history.



Part One

Alligators

:1997:

Mating season is April. I come home one afternoon, and a neighbor stops me before I pull into my driveway. *There's one in your front flower bed*, he says.

It's a twelve-footer,
lounging between the bottlebrush tree and azaleas. The trapper nooses it, and it twists on the ground like a blender.

When it tires, the trapper covers its eyes with duct tape, then tapes its legs to its body.

Four men load it into the truck.

They promise to take it to a bigger lake.

:1974:

We were fifteen. Jill was tired of Florida heat, and dove off the dock into the dark lake at the state park five miles from my house.

:1995:

We sit down at the edge of a quarry in the Everglades, pull out our sandwiches, our apples, our water bottles. On the opposite bank one drags itself into the water and heads toward us.

:2007:

A different house, and one moseys from the small pond out back through my side yard and my husband goes out to stop it from heading across the street where two young children are splashing with their grandmother

in her pool. I run over to warn them.
Do you want to go see it? she asks the kids.
As if this might be entertainment.

:1976:

Dad swings the sickle to rid one end
of our pond of weeds.
We know that end holds their babies.
She leaps from the water
toward my brother. I watch from the riding mower
as the mother alligator chases him. Dad yells,
jumps toward it with his sickle.
Mother comes out with a shotgun, shoots it
between the eyes.

:: ::

In dreams I'm stepping through the shallow end of a pond
or swimming in a big lake and only when
I'm surrounded do I realize how many there are below and beside me.

Afternoon Forecast

This summer it has rained every afternoon, right on schedule,
just as it did when you and I drove into strange driveways

to pick up clothes for Cubans who had drifted to Florida on rafts,
looking for a new life. Mother, in the years since your death,

I've wanted to write to you in your palace of dirt,
and tell you the story of my life, and now, I finally can:

I've moved the gardenia bush to the other side of the yard
for sunlight. In its place, beneath the shade of an overbearing

camphor tree, I buried the roots of a canna lily, and just outside
my window I can watch its petals fall onto the wet earth.

From that window, the dog from next door watches me, and,
like me when I tried to talk to you, she whines and sighs,

knowing that I will never understand what she really wants. Perhaps
it is so: when you were alive, you dusted the air between us

with your secrets, and now we are barely part of the same earth.
Why is it, Mother, that even though I have planted everything

I had ever hoped to plant, the gardenia will not put forth white flowers?
Sometimes it is too much for one woman, and then I remember

that you never found the sky empty of rain clouds either.
I am doing good deeds, as you taught me, even though, unlike you,

I know it will not get me any closer to your god or keep me out
of hell. I can still imagine the people of the second exodus that you rescued,

the clothes you gathered for them: house after house, the rain beating
on windowed lives, you stood at the doorbell while my eyes

peeked through the Florida afternoon storm. I can see you,
oh Mary, oh Rescuer of Barren Lives, swimming back, climbing on board,

with me in the learner's seat, ferrying the dejected clothes to churches
for distribution. Nothing has changed, Mary: people are still hoping

they can live inside someone else's clothes, like me, like the dead leaf
outside my window, holding on to the thread of an abandoned spider's web.

The Dog in the Garage

The trees have been hungry in my dreams,
then last night my dog walked through thick mud,

could barely get her paws out, and yesterday when I locked
her in the garage, I did not notice her voice crumbling,

could not hear her paws scratching at the door,
and then I could not explain to her it was a lapse of mind.

I once found sand dollars on the beach, but I did not dance
with the music which I have always called for more sky.

My couch rests along the wall below the bird feeder
hanging outside, the pine cones and feathers

line the windowsill. The crab shell reminds me
of walking through gray mud, and distances.

Florida Survival Guide

Here, even the squirrels know how to peel
an orange. They live, sometimes,
without tails or without feet, pulled off by hawks.

For several years we lived with drought
and the county law of not watering the lawn
except on Thursdays and Sundays.

Now the pond is filled again—water from
three hurricanes in one season, and my yard
is spattered with those gray tails flitting along

aluminum poles that hold the bird feeders
above the wicked middle fingers
of saw palmettos. During the second

hurricane, we hunkered down
in our hallways with candles, flashlights,
and battery-powered radios, waiting to hear

where the eye of the storm would pass,
and I thought about a trail where I once saw
a sinking Chevy pickup truck.

Here, in Florida, you do not need a watch.
Here you begin to understand why the elderly
spend years in the swamp, waiting to wear

the grave's black hair. The night of the first hurricane,
I knew not to be fooled into false security
during the lull of the storm. Days earlier,

we'd bought jugs of water, filled our bathtubs,
emptied food from our refrigerators, and some
of us placed orders across county lines for generators.

The evening before, we moved our cars,
wisely waited in long lines to fill gas tanks.
At home, we gathered candles, brought in

lawn furniture, carried potted plants
into the garage. The morning after, I stepped out
the front door and walked over the limbs,

which the day before had hung high above
my flower bed. On the street:
trees and power poles. Neighbors came out

from under fallen trees, clinging to their own bodies
as if a ghost, without warning, would pull them up
from our muddied street like feathers,

as if their houses could no longer protect them
from this world. We stood in the street, the neighbors
and I, shaking our heads, saying nothing.

Acknowledgments

Grateful acknowledgments to the editors of the following journals where many of these poems first appeared.

580 Split: “Mud Song”; “In Memory of Me”
Adirondack Review: “The Three Dancers”
Appalachian Heritage: “When Those Days Come”
Arabesques Review: “Cold War”
Ascent: “Family Reunion”
BlazeVOX online: “Escape”; “Map of My Room”; “Dead Owl”
Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review: “The Worship of Oranges”
Cimarron Review: “The State Forever Under Construction”
Cold Mountain Review: “Window Seat”
Connotation Press: An Online Artifact: “Walk or Fly, But Do Not Look Down”; “Afternoon Forecast”; “Arbor Day, 1967”
Earth’s Daughters: “Passion Flower”
Flint Hills Review: “The Woman Reminds Herself How to Live”
Flyway: “Sundays”
Foliate Oak: “Road Rage”
Forge: “Alligators”
Fourth River: “Drought”
Ginosko: “Obedience”; “The Truth About Florida”
Lime Hawk: “Some Women”
Main Street Rag: “Invisible Week”
Painted Bride Quarterly: “Big Pine Key, Summer 1974”
Pantheon Magazine: “Florida Survival Guide”; “Say One Word To Me”
Raleigh Review: “Soldier’s Creek Trail”
Rattle: “What Remains”
Stoneboat: “Letter of Forgiveness”
Zocalo Public Square: “Near Dusk”

Deepest gratitude to Debbie Weaver for her care and attention to the manuscript. Many thanks to Katie Riegel and Laurie Uttich who read early and late drafts of these poems. Thanks to Lisa Ahrens and Barbara Smith-Mandell at Truman State University Press.

Special thanks to Don Stap.