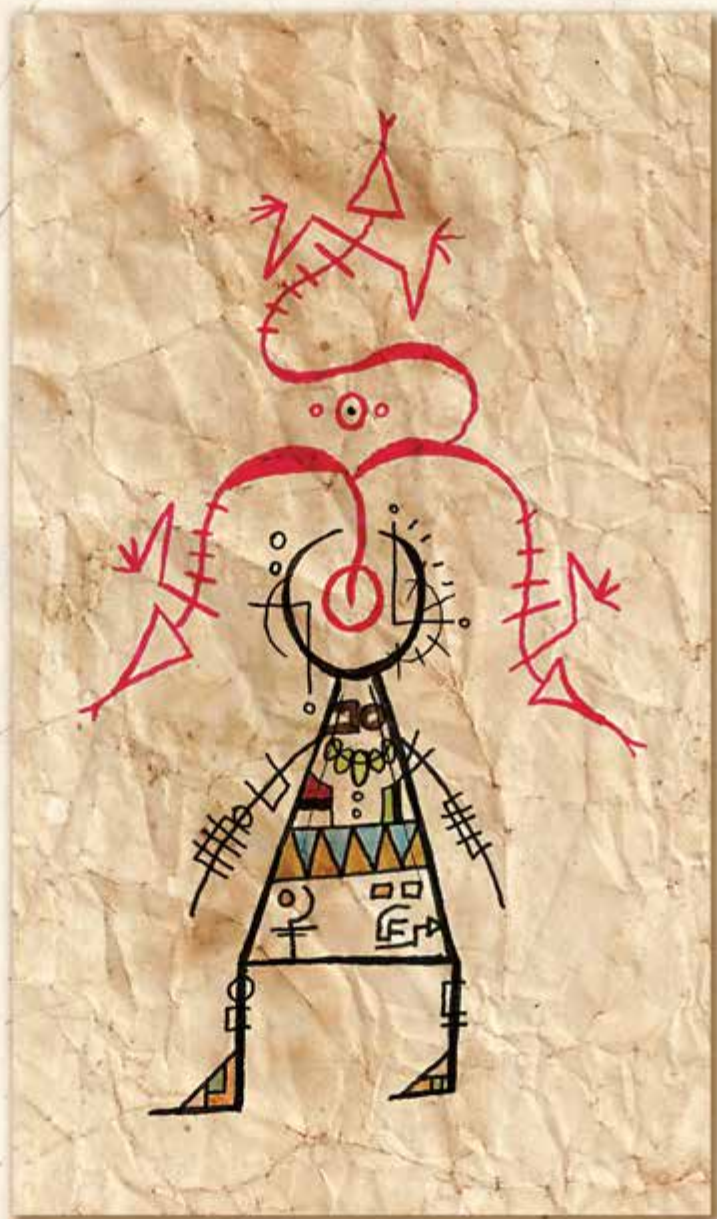


# Mud Song



Terry Ann Thaxton

2017

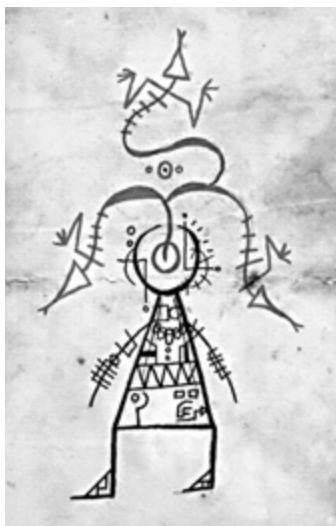
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# Mud Song



Terry Ann Thaxton



New Odyssey

Truman State University Press  
Kirksville, Missouri

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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>

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*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)

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# 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

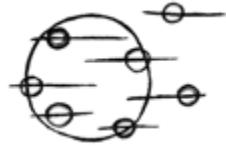
the purpose of history. Or science. Women sharpened knives not knowing they could be used against them. There was a table and probably not a turkey—which is something I learned only recently. And then some men fought with swords.

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.