



**Larry D. Thomas, *In a Field of Cotton: Mississippi River Delta Poems* (Photographs by Jeffrey C. Alfier) Blue Horse Press, Redondo Beach, CA, 2019, 45pp.**

Larry D. Thomas, the 2008 Texas Poet Laureate and author of eleven full length books of poetry and twenty-two books overall, fashions *In a Field of Cotton* as homage to his connections and sympathies for the places and people that make up the Mississippi River Delta. Eleven of the twenty one poems are paired with photos from around the region by Jeffrey C. Alfier; each artfully matches the mood and tone of the poems themselves.

The chapbook is divided into three main parts: I: “Staring Down the Dark”; II: “A White Cloud So Close to the Ground”; III:” Aching For Tone,” plus a one-poem epilogue, “Cotton.” The poems from the first section seem to be varied in their approach to Delta topics, whereas the second section deals a lot with cotton and the people who have labored in its fields (Thomas tells us in his introduction that all four of his grandparents, “worked their entire lives as tenant cotton farmers,” and that his parents also “hand-picked cotton into their late twenties” until his father found work at a gas station.) The third section focuses a lot on blues and gospel music and its connection to the Delta. In each section, Thomas does not settle for stereotype or sentimentality; instead, the poems, while very much in sympathy with the often exploited working man and woman, offer an unflinching kind of modern-day Naturalism in their attitude towards nature and life.

The very first poem in the collection, “Chilly in the Silvery Fog,” extends the negative associations many people have with snakes by offering readers the image of an albino python the poet saw around the neck of a man at the New Orleans Voodoo Museum alongside a view of the mighty Mississippi River itself a “giant brown python/... wearing down/ the levee, shining and tumescent/ with its meal of mice and men.” Two companion poems in the chapbook’s first section “Boar,” and “Sow” give as unsentimental a picture of pigs as is possible, since in both the large animals are presented as cannibals, the boar having eaten his own children and the sow dining on a boar who fatally injured himself trying “to straddle her fabulous girth.... She dined on his carcass/ for days, grunting in the shade.” With this savagery in the very domestic animals Delta folks count on for their own food, we cannot be surprised by a poem about “Baby Ruth,” a woman “conceived by rape” who can only survive into adulthood by working as a church’s cleaning lady, or workers stuck in “shotgun shacks,” who must labor hard hours for “bags of beans and rice,” in the poem “Hard Wine.”

Section II’s poems aren’t all about the cotton fields and the people who lose their lives within them, but the fields certainly are the predominant image and culprit of “A White Cloud So Close to the Ground.” In “Hard Lines” a man works the fields days into night, thinking of his wife, who is “all/ he’ll ever know of softness in the world.” In “Cotton” the workers have to do so much picking that they dream of cotton in their sleep. And in the final poem of the section “The Wake” a young man has died in the cotton fields from a snake bite and the women in the shotgun shacks mourn for him as they prepare his body for burial, but also for themselves, and their relentless lives of labor and pain, as they await to descend “one at a time/ the unforgiving rungs of death.” Time and again, then, Thomas allows our sympathy to find its place not from any consoling words of his writing, but from our understanding and insight into what he portrays with careful and honest skill.

Thomas’s love for Delta music comes out strongly in the book’s third section, though we don’t get to visit mainstream America’s version of the blues or gospel, but rather in “Pearl’s Cotton Club,” “Juke Joint,” and “Lightnin’” we learn of blues singers and venues that are far more obscure and might otherwise be forgotten. In the final poem of the section “Sweet Chariot,” the title’s nod to a famous gospel song gives context to the poem’s character, an old man in a nursing home bed, whose “fingertips are calloused/ from countless hours/ of strumming the baling wire/ of cigar box guitars,” and who kicks off his cotton sheets, to find himself in his death throes in a “field of cotton/ ready for harvest.” The cotton fields then are inescapable, though Thomas realizes how much the blues and gospel represent the attempt to transcend that painful reality of share cropping and shotgun shacks. After reading, “In a Field of Cotton,” no one who pays attention to the artistry in these poems will ever wear their cotton clothing or listen to their blues or jazz collections in the same way they did before.

**Joe Benevento**, poetry editor for *GHLL* and Professor of English at Truman State University, has published thirteen books, which include four novels, a book of short stories and eight books of poetry. His most recent volume is the poetry chapbook *Playgroundout* this year with Unsolicited Press.