

---

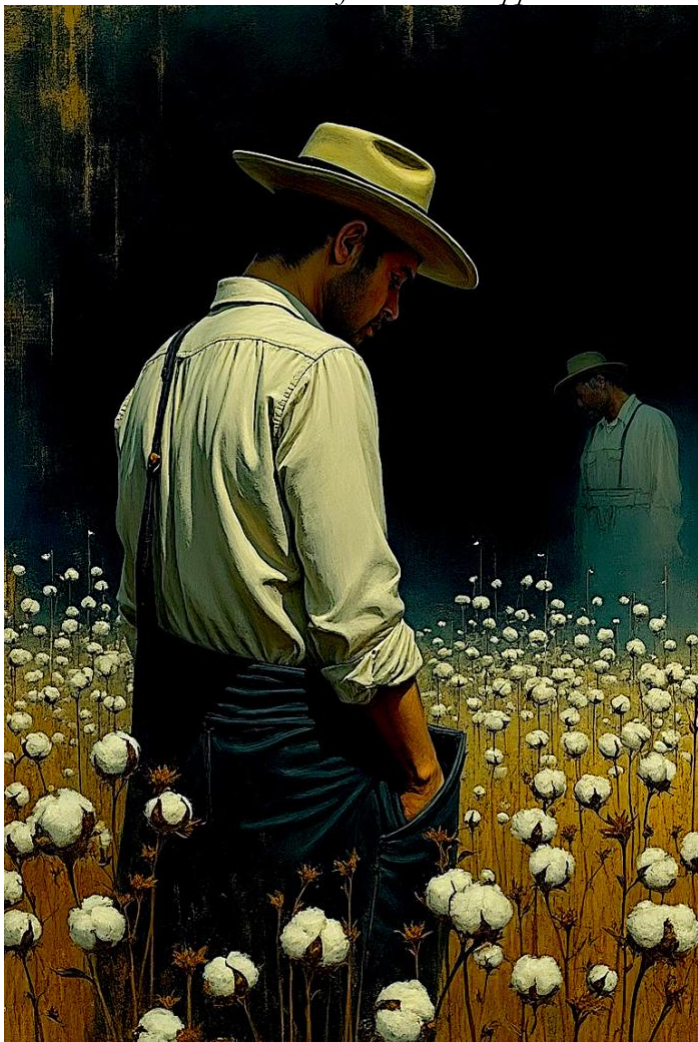
THE 2025 O:JA&L PAMPHLET SERIES

*A Writer's Portfolio*

---

# MUSING THE CROSSROADS:

*Poems of the Mississippi River Delta*



LARRY D. THOMAS

---

HOT BUTTON PRESS: *Contemporary Controversies*

*An Imprint of Ojal Art Incorporated*

---

Copyright © 2025 by HOT BUTTON PRESS: *Contemporary Controversies*  
An imprint of OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L)

All rights reserved on behalf of OJAL Art Incorporated, O:JA&L/BHP/HBP<sup>CC</sup>/HBP<sup>CA</sup>  
and Larry D. Thomas.

Publishing since 2017 as OPEN: *Journal of Arts & Letters* (O:JA&L) and its imprints  
BUTTONHOOK PRESS,  
HOT BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Controversies*, and  
HIGH BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Art*,  
OJAL Art Incorporated is headquartered in Montana.

**OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters**



**HOT BUTTON PRESS**  
*Contemporary Issues*

Formatted in Create Space.  
Set in Garamond and GARAMOND ALLCAPS.

Made available online and/or printed in the USA and elsewhere  
as a novelty and commemorative document  
celebrating the publication of Larry D. Thomas's PDF collection of poems.

This project was made possible, in part, through support from Grayling and Wraith,  
a growth marketing company.



**Cover Image:** *Harvest of Shadows* (AI-assisted digital image) by O:JA&L staff creative.  
Proprietary image. 2025.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses deepest gratitude to the publishers and editors of the following journals in which several of the poems herein were first published:

*Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*

*Deep South Magazine: Southern Culture & Literature*

*Delta Poetry Review*

*Red Dirt Forum*

*Valley Voices: A Literary Review*

Ebook version:

FOLLOW THE LINKS BELOW to explore other works by  
Larry D. Thomas:

**Letting the Light Work**

A poetry chapbook

**GEMS**

A poetry pamphlet

**BESTIARY: Far West Texas**

A poetry pamphlet

## CONTENTS

Alligator Gar	5
Cotton Pickers	6
In the Waiting Room	7
Poinsettias	8
A Bluesman, Fishing, Muses the Crossroads	9
After Beale Street Shuts Down	10
A Wooden Shell	11
Plea	12
Sweet Time	13
Window	14
About the Author	15

## ALLIGATOR GAR

Your teeth are needles,  
your scales bejeweled  
with the hardness  
and the shape  
of diamonds.

In the dark bayou  
defiled with debris  
and the dead,  
bloated bodies  
of lesser fish,

so polluted  
it's dazzling  
with the sheen  
of gasoline,  
you rise

to the surface,  
your long body  
undulant  
as the arms  
of a danseur,

and you descend,  
spreading your gospel  
in total silence  
through the deep  
Jerusalem of the gloom.

## COTTON PICKERS

(after *Cotton Pickers*, conté crayon and goache on paperboard by John Biggers)

Though two-dimensional,  
four workers,  
two men and two women,  
loom with the leaden  
density of bronze.

The only...

Bare hands and feet  
are colossal, exuding  
every nuance of brutal labor.

The only thing...

Weary heads, eyelids, lower lips,  
milkless breasts, picking sacks,  
and threadbare garments  
droop with the deadly,  
amaranthine pull of gravity.

The only thing hidden...

The gaping opening  
of an empty picking sack  
of heavy canvas  
is the maw of oblivion,  
poised to devour them.

The only thing hidden from view,  
though it haunts  
every deliberate stroke  
of the artist,  
is cotton.

## IN THE WAITING ROOM

After my daughter's relatively minor surgery,  
while she was coming to in the recovery room,  
I kept pacing, too nervous to sit.

A muscular black hand, so stark against  
the whiteness of the room it glowed,  
motioned me over to the battery-  
operated wheelchair where the old domestic sat.

She asked if I had a loved one in recovery.  
I said yes, my daughter. She took my hand  
in hers, patted it, said everything would be all right.

I couldn't help but notice the whiteness  
all about us: the room, her shoes, stockings,  
uniform, the endless square miles of white  
linoleum she had scrubbed on her hands and knees,

the gleaming porcelain of a thousand toilets:  
how because it had to, her Blackness prevailed,  
radiant in her nights of white darkness.

## POINSETTIAS

(Rodney Cemetery, Mississippi)

Its plots required no money,  
only permission from the voluntary  
association which oversaw their use,  
as volunteers and contributions  
from living loved ones were available.  
The cemetery was once abutted  
by cotton fields, fallow and red as dried blood

during the aging sharecropper's  
yearly visits the Saturday after Thanksgiving.  
His eldest brother, father, mother, her parents,  
her youngest brother, and her stillborn  
baby sister were buried there where care,  
hard to come by as salvation,  
vanished decades before.

The volunteers weeded and trimmed grass  
as they were able, once or twice a year.  
After clearing the gravestones  
of his loved ones, he'd drive  
to a nearby town for poinsettias  
whose sturdy, plastic stems he'd press  
deep as he could into the unforgiving earth.

Their bracts were fashioned of stiff,  
velveteen fabric, resistant as possible  
to the sun and rain certain to bleach  
and buffet them; burgundy enough  
(if there at all when he'd visit the next year)  
to greet him with the feel of flaccid silk  
and pink so pale he could but imagine it.



## A BLUESMAN, FISHING, MUSES THE CROSSROADS\*

(Biloxi, Mississippi)

and how, though there's terrible beauty in nacre  
and coolness in breezes pregnant with the purity  
of salt, Satan, if He had His way, would barter hell  
for but one league of the angry Gulf. He thinks  
of all the crabs the Devil'd have for toys, spiked, fixed  
with pincers and armored as they are against  
the cannibalistic appetites of their own fathers.

The bluesman thinks of how, for trinkets, the Devil'd have  
sharks' teeth, rows of them in a single jaw, ever replenishing,  
serrated for tearing, even in the safety of a mother's womb,  
flesh from the body of a sibling. He thinks of how the skin  
of a friendly dolphin's tough as tanned gray leather  
rubbed to a sheen with oil and stretched to the point  
of splitting over a battering ram snout.

And he muses the venom oozing from the tentacles  
of men-of-war, but a dab of which rubbed on a man  
like cologne, can arrest his very breath. Yes, the bluesman  
knows the Devil, if He could, would make that league  
of rough Gulf His score and Himself the gifted Guitarist  
mastering with ease throughout eternity  
His cherished angry riff of violence.

(\* In blues lore, **Robert Johnson** sold his soul to the Devil at a  
crossroads to become a guitar virtuoso.)

## AFTER BEALE STREET SHUTS DOWN

(Memphis, Tennessee)

the color's still blue  
in the waning hours  
of this cold, moonless night,  
teeth-chatter and cracked  
blue lips too cold to bleed.

The winter trees,  
sparsely leaved with blue-  
black crow-plume, creak  
deep within the rings  
of winters past,

having weeks before  
given themselves over  
to their hard, sapless hearts.  
Blue sleet, adding insult  
to injury, keeps falling.

Even the hawks,  
riveted to the tops  
of useless telephone poles,  
are glazed with a varnish  
of clear blue ice.

## A WOODEN SHELL\*

of what was once  
a slave quarters

is empty, windows  
and doors boarded up,  
a dirt floor swept to a dull shine.

Rough logs  
are barren, reeking  
of old resin, archives of nightmares  
and fitful, feverish sleep.

Small windows  
have no drapes, shades

or blinds. Interior walls  
loom like the late,  
dark canvases  
of Goya.

\*As Blacks left the South in the 20th century, many of the cheaply constructed wooden structures of former Black slave quarters quickly deteriorated and were destroyed. Others were used for equipment storage, garages, etc. Of the few structures remaining today, many are vulnerable either to complete demise or to suburban and resort development.

## PLEA

(an old bluesman on his deathbed)

After the tattered bellows of my lungs  
rattle back to their cobalt lender  
my last delinquent breaths;  
after phantom drumsticks

strike the scarlet membranes  
of my heart so hard it breaks,  
rabid with the rhythm of heaven;  
after my eyes open so wide with wonder

their lids lock like the spring rollers  
of rolled up window shades;  
and after my body's rendezvous  
with the red orange glow of holy fire,

I pray you pour my detritus into a cigar box,  
tote it to the mighty Mississippi,  
and hurl it to the snarling, gambling current  
to deal the dog-eared deck of rapture.

## SWEET TIME

In late autumn, near sundown,  
they watch one another  
as if stalled in a game  
of distant dominoes,

the old sharecropper  
rocking on the porch of his shack  
and the lone crow roosting in the old  
Arkansas pine clinging to the far bank

of the river. Each takes his sweet time,  
staring down the other,  
though both know only too well  
who'll play the winning domino.

## WINDOW

(Eudora Welty gazing through a window)

She doesn't know  
why cells divide.  
She contemplates  
the gender of God,

whether religion  
is a matter of mind,  
gut, or both.  
Is her window flat,

concave, convex,  
or all of the above?  
Is it glass or molten sand,  
cooled and cut to dull

the sting of weather?  
Or a monocle  
through which she gazes  
upon the world,

drawn by wonder  
to the chartreuse frenzy  
of a granddaddy oak  
so rapt in its single act

of reaching  
it shimmers  
like the jingles  
of a frameless tambourine?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LARRY D. THOMAS, a previous Buttonhook Press author of a poetry chapbook and two poetry pamphlets, served as the 2008 Texas Poet Laureate and is a member of the Texas Institute of Letters. He has published twenty-four print collections of poetry and numerous poetry chapbooks, both in print and online. A third-generation Texan who currently resides in the Chihuahuan Desert of southwestern New Mexico, Thomas is generally known as a Southwestern poet but has focused his literary efforts during the past eight years on writing and publishing poetry inspired by the Mississippi River Delta. Of deep Southern heritage (his grandparents and his parents, into their late twenties, worked as sharecroppers until his father obtained employment at a Mobil service station), he has published a large number of poems in national Southern literary journals, including the *Arkansas Review*, *Valley Voices*, *Delta Poetry Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, and *Red Dirt Forum*.

## THE O:JA&L PAMPHLET SERIES

BUTTONHOOK PRESS

### 2020

Safe Spaces: A Pretty Lie

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice by Rachel Custer

Against Art as a Radical Subjectivity

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice by Rachel Custer

Songs on the Way to God: A Theory of Poetics

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice by Rachel Custer

The Artistic Power of Silence: On Letting Art Speak for Itself

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice by Rachel Custer

Special Edition: Experimental Discourse

...are serious offenses, and...

A closet drama in two acts by Anthony Hamilton

How to Love a Headstone

Poetry by Sloane Asakura

The Last of the Gallants

Poetry by Atar Hadari

### 2021

Salt

Poetry by Amanda Leal

Deer in Fog at Twilight Near Squalicum Lake Road

Poetry by Richard Widerkehr

Democracy has Lifted Up Its Voice

Poetry by Mike Puican

2YC Review: The Works

Poetry and creative prose by members of the Two-Year College

Caucus at AWP

Promises

Poetry by Ellis Elliott

Home

Poetry by Amanda Leal

Study of Burkas

A poem by Dana Sonnenschein

The Open Window

Flash vignettes by O.G. Rose



Light in the Cathedral: Russian/English Poems

Poetry in two languages by Andrey Gritsman

2022

Poems for Families

Poetry by Kirby Olson

Mogollon Rim

Poetry by Allisa Cherry

Hanno

Poetry by John-Michael Bloomquist

Poem scrawled on a maize-sheaf for her (last offering)

Poetry and art by Arturo Desimone

The Curve of the Open Page

A poem by Bruce Bond

Murder in the House: The "Nutshells" of Frances Glessner  
Lee

Poetry by Jessica Purdy

War and Riff

Haibun by Keith Polette

Family Photo of America

Poetry by Lynn Potts

Chester River Reverie

Poetry by Priscilla Long

Salton Sea

A short story by Mike Murray

The Fiddler

Poetry by Tim Hunt

A Balloon Called YOUNG AMERICA

Poetry by Jennifer Clark

High Fashion

Featured Collaboration

Poetry by Adjei Agyei-Baah & Fine Art Photography by Jerome  
Berglund

2023

Rain Comes to the Central Valley

Poetry by Adrienne Pilon

DECIDUOUS

Poetry by Jean Kane

[Potter's Valley Road](#)

Poetry (Americana) by Richard Widerkehr

[Old Barn OR How Things Go On](#)

Poetry by Penelope Schotte

[Nothing To Be Sorry For](#)

Poetry by Lynn Cohen

[Small Lantern](#)

Featured Haiga Collaborations

Haiku by Hassane Zemmouri and Photography by Megali Bretou  
& Bea Bauer

[A Sport and a Pastime](#)

Haiku (Americana) by Ron Scully

[Night Train](#)

Haiku by Jerome Gagnon

[The Aquarian Foundation](#)

Poetry (Americana) by Jeffrey Gray

[Once There Was a Way](#)

Poetry by Steve Myers

[Local Habitations](#)

Poetry by Edison Jennings

[Occasions for Listening](#) (Excerpts from a WIP)

Spencer Silverthorne

2024

[Needful Things](#)

Micropoems by Ronald J. Scully (Americana)

[Designation](#)

Poetry by Wendy Taylor Carlisle

[California Summer](#)

Poetry by Michael Lee Johnson

[Once Is Enough](#)

Formalist poems by Peter Austin (Americana)

[Garden](#)

Poems by Jianqing Zheng (Americana)

[Let Me Say This Up Front](#)

Poetry by David James (Americana)

[GEMS](#)

Poems by Larry D. Thomas

2025

**BESTIARY: Far West Texas**

Poetry by Larry D. Thomas

**WEST Toward Squalicum Mountain**

Poetry by Richard Widerkehr

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters



**HOT BUTTON PRESS**  
*Contemporary Issues*

---

2023

**Lamentations: Icons of War**

Arab-Israeli Conflict image-as-poem collection by Tony Brinkley

**In Praise of Columbus**

Poetry by Kirby Olson

**Perseus with the Head of Medusa**

Editorials on Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics by Contributing  
Editor Mick McGrath

**Democrats by 'Trippin'**

Editorials on Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics by Contributing  
Editor Mick McGrath

**Let's Talk About Female Academics**

Editorials on Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics by Contributing  
Editor Mick McGrath

**Diversophiles Everywhere!**

Editorials on Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics by Contributing  
Editor Mike McGrath

**The End of the "Black Victim" Narrative?**

Editorials on Issues of Contemporary Aesthetics by Contributing  
Editor Mick McGrath

2024

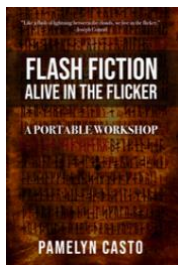
**Woes Innumerable** (HOT BUTTON PRESS)

Based Fiction Mick McGrath (Americana)

2025

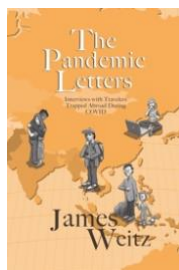
More titles in press

BUTTONHOOK PRESS TITLES ON AMAZON  
*available now*



Pamelyn Casto

**Flash Fiction:**  
**Alive in the Flicker** *A Portable Workshop*



James Weitz

**The Pandemic Letters:**  
**Interviews with Travelers**  
**Trapped Abroad During COVID**



BUTTONHOOK PRESS  
AN IMPRINT OF OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS

*Supporting artists and writers worldwide*

O:JA&L'S 2025 PAMPHLET SERIES

\$4.95 (USA)

\$7.95 (Canada)

