

## “Things that simply won’t let go”

*Photographs by Emma Tobin*

Judy Hogan is an 81-year-old environmental activist, writer, and teacher. Over the past few decades, she has fought a myriad of different environmental justice issues affecting her community in Chatham County, N.C. Right now, she is leading an effort against Duke Energy dumping and incinerating coal ash in her town. She publishes books and poetry and teaches writing classes twice a week.

This series is accompanied by selected poems from Hogan’s most recently published book, called “Shadows”, which is autobiographical about her daily life. I took a more free-form, artistic approach with this caption style because I want Judy Hogan to speak for herself.

### **One:**



"For me it’s shadows. Every day I walk across the dam, I watch for my shadow marching below me, down the hill, and some days, when the wind is still, even across the water and up the hill at the other end of the earthen dam that creates Jordan Lake. In the painting there is one small human figure surrounded by rushing water, darkly threatening clouds, with only a small window of blue that could be sky but is probably water. That little shadow is very persistent as she trudges along. Even in a wind, she doesn’t hesitate, pulls her hood up to protect her neck and ears. A step at a time a great distance can

prove possible. But, oh for the courage to believe in that shadow. I like to think that when I'm gone, and even if storm clouds dominate, and water boils and foams, and wind is cruel and relentless, that my shadow—all that is left of me and whatever words on paper survive my death—will keep on walking with firm steps, seeing more than I can see now, accepting storms, even lightning, but refusing to be dismissed, ignored, or turned aside—something eternal or stubborn, or so part of the nature of things that it simply won't let go."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poem book "Shadows"

**Two:**



"How to tell it? I have a new friend in the midst of my aging, when new friends are rare. She's a bird-watcher. I'm a people-watcher. What I learn, I scarcely know until I put it in my books. Some mistrust other people first and foremost. I attend to them with my mind open. She talked to my dog, and Wag listened. Wag is tolerant now of other people but skeptical, too. It takes time for her

to trust, but the bird-watcher turned out to be a dog-whisperer and spoke Wag's language, baffling to me. Mind over matter maybe. Wag would stop, hesitate, and then touch her nose to the outstretched hand. Me she pulled in, too, to tell of the sixteen eagle nests around our Jordan Lake. I asked how they would have fared during our hurricane. She said they have favorite places to hunker down during storms, but we had four days of wind and rain, so she's checking on them. She watches for them to fly by, way up there and catches them in her camera the way she caught Wag and me as we walked toward her, both smiling, she says,"  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

### **Three:**



"Erik Erikson said Ghandi found his true identity when he was fifty. I was seventy, still healthy, writing and publishing books, teaching writers, a small farmer with a flock of White Rock hens, and a leader in my community. At eighty, I take that

diversity of tasks for granted. I don't  
debate. It is a balancing act, and  
my balance ability is distressed  
by my age. Still, I rake and dig.  
I hold onto tree branches and my  
chain-link fence. I've said I'm  
both Penelope and Odysseus. I  
did have my once-in-a-lifetime  
love—across the ocean, despite  
the language barrier, and our  
different lifestyles. We fought,  
but we held on. He became one  
of Homer's shades, reduced to  
shadows in the Underworld, but  
still alive, still speaking and  
foretelling the planet's future if  
we don't attend to the signs. I'll  
be a shade, too, before too many  
years have passed. Some of that  
is beyond my control, and some  
is up to me. The doctors urged  
a cane four years ago, but I said  
no. "I can't farm with a cane."  
They said medicine, but I was  
wary of the side-effects, the  
medicine worse than the complaint.  
My body heals while I sleep.  
It puts me to sleep a lot. But my  
aches and pains go away. I tell  
them I have good telemeres.  
They listen. The symptoms which  
puzzled them have disappeared.  
Eighty isn't so bad if you accept  
that your pace will be slower...  
No, I'm not a shade yet, and life  
still pulls surprises out of my  
lucky grab bag. I can't complain."

- From Judy Hogan's original poem book "Shadows"

#### Four:



Most Thursday afternoons, Hogan shops at a local farmers market in Pittsboro, N.C. and passes out poems that she has written to the farmers.

"I was afraid my heart would rebel  
and keep me from leading a workshop  
on writing poetry. My friend had said  
to rest more. I had things to do,  
but I did stop to rest. Then six people  
came to learn what I knew about  
poetry. "What is a poem?" I asked.  
They suggested it was condensed  
words, that it was like a stream running  
through the soul. I told them the  
fourth grader's understanding: "A poet  
is someone who writes poetry, someone  
who loves all living things." I told  
them about Homer's Muse, about  
the Old Testament prophets who  
cried: "The Word of the Lord came  
to me." About how words could seem  
to take off, and the deeper mind to  
throw up words we weren't expecting.  
I mentioned Jacques Maritain's hexis—  
a gift we have in our unconscious  
that we need to take care of and

listen to. If the poem starts in the grocery store, make more room in your life for the Muse. Then I asked them to write a simple poem, and they all did, even the librarian. To my surprise, they all read their new poems. They trusted me and each other enough on very short acquaintance. My heart behaved and was quieted. Another unexpected gift."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poem book "Shadows

### Five:



Hogan has often felt threatened and disliked by people who don't agree with her vocal writing and environmental activism.

"Some see the world as a dangerous place. I don't. One says, "You see it as a safe place." I say, "No, but I see it differently. I know there are dangers, but I'm focused on trying to be in tune with the grain of the universe, with the way it's made. I follow my deep intuition, even when it doesn't make sense. It makes me accident-unlikely. I may have accidents, but usually they're not as bad as they could have been. So, yes, I had that flat tire on Thursday, but it happened in my front yard. I drove it across the road and

turned. When it was still bad, I pulled over and stopped to look. I had a very flat right front tire. Or I have car trouble as I pull into a service station. I work toward peace with my neighbors and fight for all of us for cleaner air and water. They respect me and protect me. I've never been harmed by my neighbors, and I've often been helped. You don't need to worry about them harming me." I have a very different orientation to the world. There are dangers and evil people. If people are determined to be my enemy, I stay away from them. In the meantime, I try to have friendly relations with everyone, if it's possible. I'm outspoken, and some people hate what I say and can't forgive me. One day I might be harmed, but this way to live suits me."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

**Six:**



"Resting is hard for me. I have so much I want to do before Shadows take me from this life. Maybe I don't need to be so inactive. Can I let go fear, slow myself down but not stop, not let fear put its claws into my soul, my trust that, if I pay

attention, all will be well."

- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book, "Shadows"

### Seven:



Hogan usually wakes up around 4 am every morning, always starting her day by spending a few hours writing in her diary and adding to whatever book she is working on.

"Beginnings are hardest. In the morning  
I sit up slowly, inch my way closer  
to a place to hold on, rise carefully,  
balance before I walk. I make sure I don't  
go too long without eating and sleep early.  
As the day waxes, my confidence returns.  
I remember what I need to, see to the hens,  
make notes in my diary, in which I tell  
the whole story. Sometimes I start to fall,  
but I catch myself. At the dam I walk  
steadily, don't fear falling. Back at  
home I'm warmer, shed layers, resume  
morning tasks and rituals, with enough  
energy for the day. By myself I see the  
years of faithful work to leave my legacy  
of stories and insights alive behind me.  
Among others I see their discomfort.  
They don't look at me. They forget  
my place in the line-up of poets. I make  
them nervous. Why? Maybe because  
I look into Death's face and am not



afraid. How does one find that particular courage? It arrives in time to be useful in the last years, but I realize I've practiced going my own way most of my life, since age twenty-one, to nearly eighty-one. Not dismissing urgencies that would keep me whole and safe, not denying love when it defied logic. Those who hated me? I stayed away, and generally, they did, too. I sometimes lose things or forget them, but I've never forgotten to safeguard my soul and keep it whole, no matter what my circumstances are."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

**Eight:**



"Proust thought Time destroyed us, those hidden memories our only salvation. For me, Time allows fulfillment, to come into my own, to learn, to heal, and even to be recognized and valued. There were people who hated me, but they didn't stop me. My own body slowed me down, reminded me I had done well and to think of those I love. I persuaded my friends

and my doctor to trust my way  
of life, my faith in myself; to let  
me continue my independent way.  
My son and I learned to live  
together. We lost some crops,  
but harvested bushels of tomatoes.  
I made spaghetti sauce and soup.  
Now there are grapes to make  
Muscadine jelly, pears to make  
preserves. I do my work as a  
writer, editor, teacher. I celebrate  
Jaki, whom I first published  
forty-five years ago. I will  
teach poetry and story writing.  
Like the moon's slow, steady  
increase of its light, I resume  
my own life of work and love."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

### **Nine:**



Hogan has poems about birds written in word magnets on her fridge.

"I slowed down, did easy work, nothing  
strenuous. The hurricane left us to mop

up and dry out. Sun came back, the better to see the devastation. Here, where we escaped the worst, life was almost normal despite rivers that flowed upstream, the milk we couldn't buy, the flooded roads we couldn't pass. I wanted more work. I made a list I'm crossing off. Something in me wants serious work, to tell some story more than poetry tells or my diary. A new book then about aging and adapting. There is more to tell than I have admitted so far. At eighty-one, how many women tell what it's like, to lose the capabilities we always assumed, to have gates closed, but the mind still open, still able to articulate paradox and justice, when everything in the human being or in the state works easily and smoothly together, each part doing its own work? Mine has been to write, tell my mind's story. I've written many books, but there is still more to tell. I will."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

**Ten:**



On right, Judy opens the front door to her home, where a sign protesting coal ash dumping is prominently placed on the front door. On left, is a photo taken by Sanford Herald reporter

Kathryn Trogon in April 2015, before a hearing for permission to dump coal ash in Lee and Chatham County. Two people in this photo have either died in 2018 or are sick with cancer now.

“Mediation? Find a middle ground?  
There is no such place. We were  
wronged. They forced killing ash  
on us, sent it through the air off  
their trucks and trains: arsenic, lead,  
Chromium Six, Silenium, radioactive  
ash. Tiny invisible particles we’ve  
breathed in that went straight to our  
brains, leaked into the groundwater,  
poisoned the earth where our wells  
were sunk centuries ago. Babies,  
the unborn, our elderly, at risk, and  
this land has been poisoned many  
times before by the old Cape Fear  
Steam plant, by the particle board  
manufacturer, by the company that  
made seatbelts. Ten factories along  
the Haw and the Cape Fear Rivers.  
The trains and trucks roaring past our  
homes. We could not leave. We had  
no money to leave, and who would  
want what we loved: our homes  
belonging once to our ancestors, back  
to slavery times? Once there were  
plantations, and before that, land  
grants. Now mainly factories here,  
thousands of workers, a few homes.  
Down our two-lane roads the trucks  
come and go, leaving their poison.  
The wind blows, the water moves  
above and below ground. We have  
been sacrificed. No more! You got  
into our midst. Now, leave, but before  
you go, clean up your mess.”

- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "The Late Years"

**Eleven:**



Hogan leads a community meeting once a month to plan next steps in the area's continual fight against the presence of coal ash in Chatham County, N.C.

"How do I describe my faithfulness to my deepest knowledge, to what I see but can't easily reveal in words. I tried not to be good as a child is good. I rebelled against old formulas, trite words. I loved Thoreau's wisdom: "If I see someone coming to do me good, I run for my life." I rejected that impulse to "do good." Yet I have always worked against evil when I saw it blazing up in corporations, in those fearful of rocking the boat, or who were terrified to be seen as bad, as trouble-makers. So I've been castigated, dismissed, written off. It hasn't been so bad. Some tender hearts have loved me, and even tough-spirited strangers have helped me out. I have a few fans of my books. I don't need acclaim, but I do need to feel loved and acknowledged by those I love and trust, those who can see with clear eyes who I am, what I care about. I've been told many times that what I want is impossible, will never happen. They say life isn't like that. You don't get what you wish for. In short, the power of evil is too great. I don't give up, however, and then people love me. Things begin

to change. What my skeptics have forgotten is the power of transformation and what love can do when it's unleashed, when we see clearly, when other people's minds open like a book that wants to be read. I can't make that happen. I can't stop it. I can, however, give it my gratitude and let it go to work."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

### **Twelve:**



Judy Hogan waits for people to show up at her community coal ash meeting on Oct. 5, 2018. One community member and a professor from UNC Chapel Hill doing research on water quality in Chatham attended. Since Hogan first started working against coal ash in 2014, interest and support from community members for the cause has severely dropped off.

"Milosz helped me see, at age eighty-one, that our worship of science and technology, our allowing a dictator to be elected president, is killing us off. The big electricity corporation has brought us a present we couldn't refuse of seven million tons of poison. They say they'll stop now. They've done enough damage. Instead, they'll burn the coal ash again and kill us faster. No one stops them. People are getting sick. They don't want to fight any more. They forget: when we fight, we love each other. We can live with our

differences. Black, white, and Hispanic; church-goers and non-church-goers. Andrew says, "You've won a victory. Have a victory party." Rhonda says, "You're defying the doctors. I predict you'll have a stroke." She's angry at her body's weakness, and at me, for trusting myself and challenging doctors, our techno-masters in a sickening world. The human body knows how to heal itself. Instead, they give us pills and then more pills, and the body then is truly sick, won't fight any more. Milosz lived under the Nazis, under Stalin. He fought and he survived. I, too, am fighting, and I, too, am surviving. Love can conquer. Give it a try."  
- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"

### Thirteen:



"Back in 1996, I wrote down my life and writing goals. One has seemed elusive: "I want to root myself here in Moncure, create an island of sanity and love around me, draw my children and grandchildren and friends here to see me, and I want to contribute as I can to my community." Now, at eighty-one, i realize, despite my love of solitude, this island exists. My son came, worried about me, to be here when I had my minor health problems.

My students keep coming, in person or by Skype. New friends and old ones seek me out. Yesterday a student from classes I taught in the eighties. Marjorie raised nine children. They all felt loved, and they spread out into the world and went where so many people suffer. Now she wants to write again, but how to get started? Virginia comes and helps Tim rescue a hen who flew to the top of the chicken fence, and then they put medicine on the head of the one black one who lives with sixteen white ones, so she wouldn't be picked on. Other days, others came. Ellen who studies eagles at Jordan Lake. The eagles know her, and she named them, revels in their high flights, recognizes them when I see only specks flying over. She writes their story. A young student wants to be here, look at all the pictures on my walls, hear my stories, follow me to the coop to bring scraps in the afternoon. Virginia comes often, loves the spaghetti sauce and homemade pizza, gives me frequent hugs and studies poetry with me. She says she feels at home here. Sometimes I worry about the unswept floor or all the boxes and papers, but nobody else does. We speak of what matters and laugh at life's absurdities and miracles. People continue to help me. Roger came to help catch hens before their journey to be processed. He'd never done that before, nor had Tim. How lucky I am to have my wishes come true here on this island of sanity and love."

-From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "The Late Years"



## Fourteen:



"Even love has its misunderstandings. Sometimes my son and I knock heads. We've learned to let go when arguments go nowhere. Everyone has her own world view, her own life story, fears, and dread. Agony is human, but so is joy. We watch the exultant eagles join the circling vultures. For one, it's work-related, for another, it's ecstatic. When our hopes and desires merge, worry disappears. When pain returns, we are constrained to work free. I write my troubles down, the better to let them go. When they reappear, I'm prepared. We all learn as fast as we can, which means some more slowly than others. A lot depends on our heritage and even more on work we've already done to cope when people hated us, when our loved ones turned their faces away. The late years lead to a homecoming or some call it a home-going. We have some say-so. For me, there are many rewards in this last stage, which Erik Erikson called "Ego integrity versus despair." We find rewards for our self-defense, our ability to listen and give a helping hand. People we scarcely knew turn up to help us. A young

woman wants to study me for clues to  
living a benign life as a freedom-fighter.  
Another woman in her middle years is  
drawn to my relaxed humor. Most terrible  
things draw our tears, but some that can  
wrench us later make us laugh. My  
doctor, as I eluded the medicines and  
survived, calls me Trouble, but she's  
smiling. Another older woman says we're  
both eccentric, but a good eccentric. My  
son is learning to protect garden spiders,  
cherish poetry, and love my homemade bread.  
I still walk without a cane, urged upon me five  
years ago. Some work I've let go. I rest more,  
but I do all I can do—gratefully. Look around:  
I have students and friends. I'm cherished by  
those I want to cherish me. I'm alive and writing  
down what my last years are like. Already I  
inherit that persistence I foresee in my shadow  
after I'm gone. She'll be okay."

- From Judy Hogan's original poetry book "Shadows"