

AMERICAN ALBUM

Body Collector in Detroit Answers When Death Calls



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

WAITING FOR WORK Mike Thomas, a corpse collector, waiting on his porch in east Detroit for a call from the county morgue's office, and with his children at the home of their mother. "I know that's kind of weird to hear; I mean waiting around for somebody to die," Mr. Thomas said. "Wishing for somebody to die."

By CHARLIE LeDUFF
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DETROIT — With all the spectacular ways to die in this dying city, the fate of a man named Allan was almost pathetic. There he lay, in a weedy lot on the notorious East Side, next to a liquor bottle, his pockets turned out.

But as it goes with such things, one man's misery is another man's money. The body retrievalist for the county morgue had arrived on the scene. He was happy. He sang strange little ditties. Cracked odd

little jokes. Said things like: “We got plenty of room in this here van, yes sir.”

Do not judge him. A happy attitude is necessary in his profession. It keeps the mind from shattering, salts one’s sanity. Call the job dirty. Call it 14 bucks the hard way — \$14 a human body, \$9 an animal. He said he made \$14,000 last year. He made most of it at night.

His tax forms officially read “body technician.” Unofficially, Mike Thomas calls himself body snatcher, grim reaper, night stalker, bag man. Whatever you call it, it is one man’s life.

For Mr. Thomas, the demise of Allan was a cheerful occasion because, you see, work had been dead. There had been an odd lull in homicides, suicides and even natural passings here in one of the most violent American cities. It was the height of summer and people were supposed to be outside and killing each other, dropping dead from sunstroke, etc. Mr. Thomas wondered how he was going to feed his children the next week.

“I ain’t making nothing on these bodies,” he said on his porch, the screen door half gone. “I know that’s kind of weird to hear; I mean waiting around for somebody to die. Wishing for somebody to die. But that’s how it is. That’s how I feed my babies.”

He is happy to have the job, there are so few in Detroit. Unemployment hovers around 14 percent, more than twice the national average, according to the United States [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). The slow death of the car industry has led to the slow death of the blue-collar Motor City and now the State of Michigan in general. About 300,000 jobs have disappeared from the state since 2000 and another 65,000 factory jobs are expected to be gone by next year. Mostly car-related jobs.

One of the few people working long hours most weeks, it seems, is Mr. Thomas.

There used to be money in Detroit. Known in the 50's as the Paris of the Midwest, it had a population of 1.8 million, 83 percent white. It now has fewer than 900,000 and is 83 percent black. It is the poorest big city in the nation, with a third of the population living below the poverty line.

Detroit is an annual competitor for the ignominious title of Murder Capital. Last year there were 359 homicides. Halfway through this year, there were 220. There are about 10,000 unsolved homicides dating back to 1960.

Mr. Thomas, 34, subscribes to a simple theory: Unemployment leads to drugs. Drugs lead to misplaced passion. Misplaced passion leads to death. And that's where he comes in.

"There's 360 ways to die, and I done seen them all," he said, dressed in black, waiting on a hot evening to be summoned to the latest body. "I seen an old lady standing dead at her stove, her purse hanging on her elbow. I done picked up the pieces of a man who stepped in front of a train. I done picked up people just around this corner, here, from my house."

People he knew. People from his neighborhood, like Steve, who Mr. Thomas said should have known better than to rob a stripper. Like a prophet on the hill, Mr. Thomas explained the meaning not of life, but of death to guys from the neighborhood congregated on the porch, who robbed the beer truck in the afternoon and so came bearing gifts.

"You see," he begins, "80 percent of people die naked and 70 percent die in the toilet. That means most people die naked in the toilet. I can't explain it. It's like Elvis. But as far as the afterlife goes, I believe through what I seen that those who commit horror and sin are doomed to repeat life, which is hell."

He is a macabre observer of the economic times. Mr. Thomas and some of his workmates say they notice some disturbing trends. By midyear, 8,559 people had died in Wayne County, which includes

Detroit, and more and more, technicians see bodies remaining in the cooler longer because family members don't come to pick them up. They attribute this to the breakdown of family values as well as the lack of financial resources of people to bury their loved ones.

According to state statistics, the vast majority of homicides occur in the predominately black city, and the preponderance of suicides occur in the mostly white suburbs.

“My theory?” Mr. Thomas offered. “White people kill themselves. Black people kill each other. Chinese people don't die.”

“True, true,” shouted one young pilgrim, though no sighting of a white or Chinese man could be made within a 20-block radius of the porch.

Michael Thomas was born in rural Alabama in 1972 and moved with his family to Detroit a year later when Coleman A. Young was the city's first black mayor. Like most people in the city — black, white or Arab — the Thomas family came for the factory jobs and achieved the middle-class life. Mr. Thomas grew up on the East Side, raised through his teenage years by a white stepfather, for whom he was always having to go to fists with the other black kids in the neighborhood. He is short and broad-shouldered.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Thomas was sent to prison at the age of 17 for carjacking. He served four years, kept to himself, got out safely and worked a string of hamburger jobs until his uncle connected him with the job at the morgue five years ago. He supports three children and has a fledgling rap career on the side. The autobiographical song “Transporters” is a neat little trick that can be found on the Web (www.myspace.com/gangstaclyde).

“One thing my stepfather taught me was the value of work,” Mr. Thomas said on his way to another scene. “A man who don't have work don't feel much like a man. A man without work, well, he takes the only way he can and that's usually no good.”

A call came from the southwest side of town, with its Tudor style homes with brick and aluminum siding. A man had killed himself. He was white. Early 50's. He had lost his job at the boat yard earlier that day, a detective said. He came home, drank himself into a depression and put a bullet in his head — the second white man to kill himself this day.

It was a sad, quiet scene on the street. The man's family standing there silently stunned. Cans of cheap beer in their hands.

Mr. Thomas was sanguine. "We got plenty of room."