

Some Books Are Not For Sale

A Rural Gloom Omnibus

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For privacy reasons, some names, locations, and dates may have been changed.

Book Cover by Liz Murphy Thomas

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"My best advice to writers is get
yourself born in an interesting place."

— Pierre Berton

Prologue

My great-grandfather Delmar Thomas is buried beside his wife Lula now. Mount Horeb Cemetery near Bell, FL. As a kid I fell into a fire ant mound. Delmar rescued me. I cried. Covered in bites. He just laughed. Told me that is how you learn. This is what I learned.

Part I

Hear The Screams To Know

A Mason Jar

Elton John sang "Saturday night's alright for fighting." My uncle Lewis agreed. Weekends were spent in the types of bars found near the county line. Ample parking and no neighbors to disturb. There was a north Florida wildness in my uncle. All the swagger of Skynyrd's "Whiskey Rock-A-Roller" without the "Ain't No Good Life" introspection - "Cause the more I fight the sadness, yeah/It only seems the more that I grieve." Bar fights were common then. Fights were common everywhere in rural Florida then. At my high school fights were a near daily occurrence. A friend describes it all now as - "You actually hit people?" "Yes. Yes, I did. And they hit me back." It was a solid and simple process. The best man won. My uncle Lewis was the best man. He trained like a prizefighter to head out weekends. There was always some reason to fight. Hank Williams Jr. called it an "Attitude Adjustment." One Saturday night Lewis headed outside to fight. He was stronger and faster. Things ended quickly. They headed back inside together where my uncle bought the guy a drink. Moments later a Mason jar of beer crashed into Lewis' face. He left the bar and came to our house late. I entered the living room to hear my dad say "Lewis, you ain't got no nose..." My uncle only replying "It isn't supposed to go this way..." Blood still covered the porch in the morning. My dog Spotty had left a trail of bloody paw prints off into the yard.

Lewis never returned to those bars. He spent his time at home with a newfound interest in religion. As I last saw him he asked my favorite Bible story. It was Zacchaeus climbing up that Sycamore tree. Lewis was dead a few days later. A shotgun blast to the face ended his life. The body was removed but his bedroom was covered in congealed blood. A family friend offered to help clean. After he buried all he collected in the backyard. He wanted to say a few words but could only say "It isn't supposed to go this way..."

Dahmer's Lunch

Dixie County High School only had one rock band in the early-90s. We named our band Dahmer's Lunch. Using a small Hohner acoustic guitar loaned by my guitar teacher we stayed up weekends recording a single ever-growing album - "Atrocities of an Aluminum Shed." An aluminum shed filled with computer and ham radio equipment was where we rocked. Monday came and we spent the school day trying to get classmates to listen to our songs. Songs discussing the ingredients in pretzels. Songs that were an excuse to mention ziggurats. But most found the name Dahmer's Lunch unappetizing. It was then that the band's name changed to Señor Squid. We broke up soon after.

My guitar teacher was a family friend who regularly played at the I Ain't Here Saloon in Old Town, FL. There he sat on a corner stool and tried to sing Harry Chapin covers over drunk chatter. He brought a loaner guitar over and drank homebrew strawberry wine as I struggled with the F barre chord in "House of the Rising Sun." When my fingers started to bleed we called it a day and played chess. I would always play black since bloody fingerprints were more visible as white. There are many styles of instruction. His was to be very positive. To assure me that he was "not just blowing smoke up my ass."

There were assurances of good progress even with muted strings in my F barre chord. Even as I lost at chess to a man too drunk to stand. And he wasn't just blowing smoke up my ass.

My lessons ended as my teacher drank himself to death. Making batch of bath tub gin led to a binge that ended his life. By the end he was blind yet still found and drank a bottle of rubbing alcohol. A few days later his widow asked for his guitar to be returned. It was only mine for lessons and the lessons were over. My stepdad drank and cried for a week. He had few close friends. Several nights into this wake he angrily tossed my chess set into the yard. Several pieces were lost in the underbrush. I never learned to play guitar. I never learned to play chess. And Señor Squid never recorded another album. It all just seemed so hopeless. Growing up in Dixie County we all knew those who would only drink to get drunk. Who would eventually drink until they died. They never believed they mattered. Never believed that they would be missed. But losing that teacher was a hard lesson. And I'm not just blowing smoke up his ass.

Death Meant Little

Death meant little when young. I largely saw it all as symbolic. Lovecraftian horrors as reassurance - "That is not dead which can eternal lie..." My dog Spotty was hit by a car. A friend was murdered by his father. A friend died screaming as a volunteer fire department helplessly watched his home burn. None of it seemed real. None of it seemed final. There were ideas of angels. All just went "up there." Despite conflicting with all I had heard in Southern Baptist sermons this was my solace. Senior year of high school my mom checked me out of school. My grandpa was in a Tennessee hospital. With the limited time I had to explain I promised to bring my friends back coonskin caps. Knoxville was 8 hours north. We arrived on a cold November night. A blue line guided us to my grandpa's hospital room. Entering we were greeted with - "You're lookin' at a dead man." What was thought to be a bad case of the flu was Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. Only weeks after his 64th birthday he was given just weeks to live. I had spent much of the previous summer at his Etowah, TN home. Days started early with biscuits and gravy. He played his 1962 Martin acoustic with the house bluegrass band at the Englewood Coliseum. He asked to speak to each of us alone. My mom and brother waited in the hall as I sat on the edge of his bed. He told me to keep reading since there was a lot to learn.

Said he wanted me to have his guitar. I never heard what he told the others. We never discussed it.

My grandpa's new wife refused to honor his wishes. The guitar and all his old photos were staying with her. They were his. And he was hers. The Knoxville mall had no coonskin caps for sale. No one seemed surprised as I asked for them though. I returned to Florida with no gifts or updates. My grandpa died a few weeks later. A friend asked how he was and I could only reply - "He died." She seemed hurt that I had not shared this earlier. This was not meant to be an insult. I just did not have the words I needed. Young men in rural places could be angry but not much else. And I wasn't angry. I was realizing all were just gone. Friends and pets gone just like my grandpa. It was indescribably sad.

Hear The Screams To Know

For two years I lived in rural Cumberland Gap, TN. Housing options were limited near that small college town. Upon arrival I stayed in an apartment surrounded by medical students. My place was tiny and the walls were thin. You could clearly hear conversations in the next apartment over. One med school neighbor returned to his place daily for lunch. And daily he'd fall on his bed and scream for 30 minutes. He wasn't smart enough. His wife was going to leave him. All his dark secrets trailing off into loud sobs. Primal Scream Self Therapy. He then headed back to school. Later I moved to a somewhat more private duplex one street over. Out the back door and down a hill you could still see that old apartment. You didn't have to hear the screams to know. The people down there were barely holding themselves together.

Her Steep Slope

In southeast Tennessee level areas are carved into steeply sloping ridges. This becomes your home. When I was young my great-aunt Frances lived in a trailer atop a ridge in Charleston, TN. She shared her home with a mountain man of a husband named Clyde. Clyde earned his living scouring the hills and hollers for Cherokee artifacts and American ginseng. As a kid he showed me a Polaroid of my great-aunt naked. One day my uncle Terry and cousin Wayne headed up that gravel-specked red clay incline to visit. No one was home but the door was unlocked. Entering they picked up a loaned porn VHS and left. They did not know Clyde was dead. He had been murdered. His body tossed down the sparsely treed slope. Terry and Wayne were picked up for questioning. When accused they told their story. Clyde was family and a friend. The Detective beat them. A phone book was placed against their chest and then struck. The squared bruises this left did not resemble a fist. I saw these bruises as a kid. Their story did not change. Clyde was family and a friend. Soon after Clyde's stepbrother Lee was arrested for his murder. He had a violent past and the motivation had been robbery. Lee had Cherokee artifacts and American ginseng when they picked him up. Frances moved soon after. Her steep slope grew up with weeds as her trailer fell to pieces.

His Best Days

I visited my uncle Terry on his deathbed a few years ago. He talked about playing high school football in the late-60s. These were good memories despite creating neck and back issues that later required pain pills to function. And now his liver was failing. He watched "Stripes" on VHS but rewinded as they finished basic training. Someone brought him a fish sandwich from The Chef. This former Burger Chef location was popular as he was in school. When the chain folded they renamed slightly and remained the same as ever. That is their main selling point these days. After a single bite he declared that the sandwich tasted "Like an angel's kiss..." I was asked to hide the rest of the sandwich in a drawer so others would not know he was too sick to eat. Later a liver became available for a transplant. A GoFundMe quickly raised thousands to offset travel costs. Comments mentioned him on the football field a half-century earlier. Terry died just before his operation. He was killed by his Best Days.

Things Were Not OK

At 18 while unloading a truck at the Cross City, FL Dollar General a co-worker died. What I thought was a pulled muscle was suddenly revealed to be a stomach aneurysm. He collapsed in a pool of blood with a box of Goo Goo Clusters in his hands. The store didn't close. I finished unloading that truck and worked another 10 hours. Plans of going to Gainesville to buy a Dinosaur Jr. CD and flirt with the girl at Sunglass Hut were canceled. If asked I was told to say that "everything was ok." Things were not ok. I had to head next door to use the Piggly Wiggly restroom. The Dollar General backroom smelled of death. People still shopped all day buying generic Fig Newtons and 75¢ gallons of bleach.

Palatka

Once on a trip to central FL I stopped to refuel in Palatka. It took six gallons to top off my small tank. This was enough time to see three people check their account balance at the ATM beside the store entrance. Two then entered and exited with lotto tickets in hand. The third angrily crumpled their ATM receipt and tossed it toward an overfull trash can before driving away. I pulled up and parked to grab a drink for the road. On the way in I held open the door for a young lady leaving the store with a baby in her arms. As I scanned the shelves the cashier loudly discussed a recent spat. It was with the young mom who had just exited the store. This young mom dropped off her child and then returned to punch the cashier in the mouth. Any authentic writing on rural Florida will always just be this 10 minute stop - opportunity, hope, family, and violence.

Slacker Pagan Priest

As I was in college a Gainesville herb shop closed. "Thyme in a Bottle" learned puns will only get you so far in business. Garbage bags of herbs were tossed to the curb as their retail space was cleared. This included a large bag of white sage. I carried this bag home late one night as I returned from a show at the Hardback Cafe. That entire summer smelled of white sage. I burned it by handful. Thick clouds of aromatic smoke that set off the fire alarm. With my head spinning and the alarm beeping I felt like a slacker Pagan priest. Now as anyone mentions any new evil I never worry. I'm pretty sure I'm smudged for life.

Poetry Options Are Limited At 3am

Finding yourself penniless and stranded an hour from home is the stuff of nightmares. As it happened to me in the late-90s I just asked a couple I had met that night if I could sleep on their Camelot Apartments couch. Spanish moss dangled from Tudor-style towers. Plans to stay a few nights became a few weeks as they didn't want me to leave. When NOMORE came up from Port Charlotte for an early Gainesville show I gave up my spot on the couch to the drummer. The rest of the band slept in a park. I had no real plans for the night. After the show I explored the town on foot. Sitting outside the Archer Road Wal-Mart at 3am two young ladies tossed me a handful of change. I used it to buy us all cans of Dr. Thunder from a flickering vending machine. They then asked if I wanted to hear their poetry. It wasn't very good but poetry options are limited at 3am. We take what we can get.