

The Big Murk  
A Novel  
2019

*Say this city has ten million souls,*

*Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:*

*Yet there's no place for us, my dear, yet there's no place for us.*

- W. H. Auden

Prologue

Some people assume that when you drown your life is over. That's what Jerry thought, too, until the first time he heard that wasn't always the case. Jerry's pap and Roger Helpins sat in rocking chairs on the porch, chewing cud, when their tone became serious, a whisper. Jerry sat on the floorboards next to his pap's boots, feeding Old Dog a can of beans, pretending not to listen.

"It's queer," Roger said. "Didn't think it happened in Arkansas. Not here."

A man had fallen in the water a hundred miles upstream near Toad Suck. He drowned promptly and no one could find the body. A year passed.

“But just yesterday, ‘round noon-thirty, Jim Doug was clearing debris from his dock and pulled ‘em up outa the water. He’d been pinned under there by a tree branch. Jim Doug ran ‘side the house and called the coroner. Went back out to see the man walking up the back steps, stiff as a log, hollering about his wife.”

“I thought they couldn’t talk,” his pap said. “Just bubbles coming up. Mudcriter sounds.”

“I swear it. It’s what Jim Doug said himself this mornin’ at Hogsnatch Feed.”

Roger continued on about how being “one of them drowned” was a thing from the city, where the drowned washed up on the river bank, crawled up the sides of ships or out from the sewers. He’d heard of a man who said that down in New Babylon, near the Old Square, they roamed the streets like tramps, accosting people for money or jumping out and scaring tourists. They had their own laws down there in New Babylon, he insisted. They were ruled by an alligator queen who lived in a cemetery. She could crumple a man just by looking at him or turn herself into a cloud of midges thick as smoke.

As Roger told his story, Jerry hung onto every word and looked out over the river. Growing up he would hear many more stories of people drowning and coming back out just as they were. In truth, no one knew why some people could be pulled out of the water just fine when most everyone else died from it. In town it was a forbidden subject so naturally everyone talked about it whenever they could find an excuse.

A trucker once mentioned it in Crumpler’s Gas and Grub — that those called “the drowned” were preserved forever in the murk. He said that people are still down there from the

beginnings of the Earth. One day soon, they would wash ashore exactly as they were and devour all the living people, their flesh soft as watermelon. The town doctor tried to calm everyone by saying being drowned wasn't real at all. It was a figment of the mind, a sinister delusion, an over-indulgence in myth. Sheriff Ron's wife, Milly, who always had something to say and whispered like a fog horn, suggested it was a perversion of natural law, a corruption of the way things were always meant to be, caused by any number of things: radio waves, too much candy, the increasing secularization of society. In veiled whispers in the Churchyard he heard it was a reverse baptism, a sign that the soul was long dead and the devil had taken up house in a body cast away from God's grace. Someone else insisted it had nothing to do with the pitiful drowned at all. You can't blame the child when the mother's the slut — an inglorious siren of the bayou's reed beds and still water. A drowned child was her punishment for coveting lustful thoughts, adultery of her heart, or swimming too soon after eating.

Lou Anne, Jerry's Sunday school teacher, was the one who told him most of all in their lessons in the church cellar, water seeping up through cracks in the cement. She said that why someone became drowned didn't matter as much as why they didn't keep their head above water in the first place.

Whatever caused it, Jerry did not know. No one did, despite their theories. What he did know was that each time someone brought it up, he felt like that day porchsitting, his pap and Roger Helpins talking about the drowned. Looking out over the river, he tried to make himself smaller. The evening sun hit the water and the whole surface of the river flared up with a knowing glare.

He understood deep in himself that they were talking about someone like him.

## Chapter 1

Jerry spent the morning busying himself, generally doing around his attic apartment, avoiding the jar of coins on the floor by the window. He had slept terribly, counting nickels and pennies in his fitful dreams. Each time he put a coin in, it clanked on the bottom and suddenly appeared back in his hand. He only had two days until rent was due. If he was going to make rent on time, he needed to go out collecting bottles from other people's trash to pocket the recycling money.

He had lived in the one-room apartment at the rundown Maison de Charme for several months, ever since drowning just before his twenty-third birthday. The Arkansas river had swept

him from Hogsnatch — his little hometown — and into the Mississippi River. He had no idea how long he had been down there and didn't remember much at all. He just knew that he couldn't move, as if he had died, but his mind had kept on being his mind. He did remember flashes, images that clung to the back of his skull and revisited him occasionally, floating up to the surface. Inky darkness. The gossamer current flecked by moonlight. The cool lilt of the rising sun. A barge passing overhead, beams of light around it, like a cloud at sunset.

He did not know how he left the river, either. He only knew that, as if becoming into himself again, he awoke at night, wandering the banquettes along the docks in the “bed of sin,” the city at the mouth of the Mississippi, New Babylon. Legend said it was where Lucifer, as a giant serpent, swam up river and coiled in the swamp. It was upon the high ground of the snake's back that the settlers first made their dwellings long ago; his scales still cobbled the streets and to this day everyone who entered reveled in his miasma, moaning and shrieking with lust.

The city dripped with dilapidated elegance, the genteel, crusted spirit of the Old South tinged at night by the glow of red lights. Everything Jerry had heard about the city was true — it was a most beautiful place that attracted the ugliness of sin. Witches and artists, communists and freaks loitered the streets and leaned from balconies. Tourists drank themselves near to death, ready to be roughed up and robbed. Whiskey ran through the gutters and the city never slept. Along the port, the street crawled with sailors and whores — white lice on the belly of an ancient fish. But of all the things he had heard, one thing wasn't true. Jerry couldn't spot a single drowned person. He searched each face for a sign their soul might be like his. He found nothing except cold stares in return. Soon he gave up looking.