

Interlude

On the Mermantau

Early morning in the Atchafalaya Swamp, fragmented colors ricochet off contours of knobby-kneed cypress roots. A great heron perches on a branch. The swamp's mud reeks of sulfuric eggs. Its dank residue easily stains your pant legs. Fishing camps loiter on graveyards of pine needles. Wood shakes and twigs surround fire pits. There is no hill or vantage on which to stand over the lush, buzzing scene. Just a deep expanse and a skyline of trees.

Growing up, my grandparents' fishing camp even then felt dated. A mounted bass, perched over the kitchen entrance, pointed to another time. A finger cut on a fishing hook must be cleaned with soap. The Mermentau River south of Abbeville is technically a bayou. It has little flow. It's wide enough to swim, fish, and even water ski. The water is espresso colored. You avoid touching the bottom, afraid of snake holes and alligator nests and soft mud that oozes through your toes. The water's surface plays tricks on your young imagination. Little heads surface around you. Bubbles perhaps. Turtles? Snakes? You splash at them to calm yourself until the ski boat returns. You hear a splash in the distance from the water's edge. "Water moccasins," says Dad, "falling from the trees." Every splash? You hear splashes constantly.

Torso-sized spider webs stretch across tree limbs. Suddenly, you realize, you are surrounded by colonies of life, and potential threats. Your older sister gets to drive the boat. You want to drive the boat. Your uncle that night feeds you stories about alligators outrunning children. "Faster than dogs," he says. You don't believe him but still wonder. Maybe you'll get to see an alligator.