

The Call of the Creek

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I discovered the creek almost as soon as I moved in down the street from it. The scent of flowers and the burbling of the stream floated out from the nature trail entrance, the nature trail that runs alongside the creek for a stretch. The ducks, fish and rocks captured my heart instantly and the creek has since become a place of solace for me. It's an escape from the rush and rustle of modernity; aside from the occasional chatter of people in their backyards, birdsong and burbling stream are the only soundtrack of this back pocket of Iowa City. The creek is only accessible to a select type of person; those who only wear shoes when it's absolutely necessary, who revel in bats flying overhead and deer by the road, who stop to pet every dog and pick every flower. Those who traverse the creekbed may also frequently find themselves in antique shops and corners of the library, where the same kind of solitary peace can be found.

The area is not sunny, per se; sunlight shimmers off the water, but the plants and rocks stay in relative shade. Not dark either, just a rich, damp light, the shadow cousin of forest green. With the warmth and moisture of the summer come millions of mosquitos and gnats. The bats and fish might welcome them, but they swarm anyone brave enough to venture down to the water without bug spray and, for those people, make the experience wholly unenjoyable; it's hard to concentrate on your footing or cool rocks when you are constantly swatting at gnats.

All of this sets the scene for the story of how I found my favorite creek treasure. On this particular day, I decided that I would walk the creek and see where it took me. I descended from the street to one of my favorite spots, a small outcropping of rocks and junk that people had thrown into the water over the years. This was where I found the 1945 Mercury dime; nestled in the sand at the bottom of the creek. I rinsed it off in the stream and tucked it safely into my string bag.

Then, I started following the creek. I climbed over the rocks and simply followed the current. The water clouded up with dirt everywhere I stepped, and my boots were almost pulled off my feet in some spots, sucked down by the mud at the bottom of the stream.

At one point in my journey, I passed under two very busy streets and had to walk carefully through the water in complete darkness, save the light at the end of the tunnel. The sloshing of my boots and the rushing water echoed around me, mingling with the rumbling of cars overhead. I stayed close to the wall, watching my feet to make sure I didn't trip over anything. Because I was staring at the ground, when I reached the end, something flashed next to my foot and I started. When I realized it was just a fish, I shook my head and continued on.

As the water grew deeper, I slowed my pace to keep splashing at a minimum so my boots wouldn't fill up. I hopped from rock to rock, walking in the water when I could, since long stretches of the bank were steep and muddy. I climbed over the rocks and through the brush along the side at times, doing everything I could to keep moving forward. After all, I didn't want to go back through everything I had already experienced, and I had faith the creek would get shallow again.

One stretch of the bank was filled with more plants and sticks than the rest. When I reached this part, I stood on my toes to get a better view of the area and hopefully find a path through it. I eventually figured out the way that would hopefully hurt the least (there were a number of thorny plants along the bank), and stepped into the brush.

A woodpecker caught my attention partway through, and I stopped to find it in the nearby tree. It wasn't far up, only a few feet higher than I was on the bank, and just a few yards away. I watched it for a few minutes, listened to its woodblock carving song, and when it flew away, I turned back to continue through the plants.

But when I turned around, I was greeted by the leering face of a skull. Not a human one, but that of a raccoon or a possum, perhaps. It had been stuck onto one of the sticklike plants, presumably by someone else traversing the creek. Why they didn't take it home, I had no idea, but I removed it from the stick and inspected it in my hand.

Its surface was smooth, the bone clean of any flesh or fur. The teeth were mostly intact, but shifted in their sockets when I touched them, like a loose tooth in a child's mouth. The entire thing was a yellowish off-white color, not unlike that of an elephant's ivory tusk. Two parts, which I later learned were called the *zygomatic arches*, reached out from either side of the skull before curving back in, creating two thin, handle-like curves. This was how I had picked it up and how I now carefully placed it in my bag; my pointer finger on one side and my thumb on the other side of the skull's middle, the arches acting like the handle of a pair of scissors. There was little else in the bag, so once the skull was settled, I drew the strings tight and continued on.

Once I had fought through the brush, the water was shallow enough that I could wade through it if I walked slowly. I had hoped that I could make it to shallower water, but I never got that far, as nature won over before I could. All it took was one too-forceful step, and the water finally overflowed into my boots. I cursed, and climbed begrudgingly up onto the bank. Getting the boots off my feet was a struggle, since the water had created suction. Eventually, though, I did manage to get them off, with a combination of wiggling my feet around and pulling with all my strength. Once they were off, I decided that walking home barefoot would be more enjoyable than walking with wet socks, so I made my way to the sidewalk, boots in hand.

It was a long-standing belief of mine that shoes were non-essential items, so that wasn't the part of the walk back that startled me. What *did* make it different from the hundreds of walks I'd taken was the sudden return to car horns, bicyclists, and traffic laws. Down in the creek there were no red lights or stop signs, only the push of the stream that urged me forward, towards whatever was next.