

Oso Creek

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If you want to find a place where time runs slow, walk down to the wetlands at dusk in late summer. Find loose seams to slip through—rabbit trails through the tangled brush, or the slant of gold light and blue shadows as afternoon cools to evening. The hum of the neighborhood fades, drowned out by the constant drone of cicadas. Wear sturdy clothes because the plants who want to greet you at the threshold have brusque hospitality. Jerusalem thorn, granjeno, and mesquite snag your hair in their fingers, but they make peace with yellow crepe flowers and glassy orange berries. Texas Ebony tips its head towards you with downy ivory blooms. Mockingbirds are eager hosts and announce your presence immediately. Pick your way through the whispering grass and watch your step. Cottontail rabbits emerge to graze and frolic—if you try to join them, they whisk themselves away. Rattlesnakes, coral snakes, and striped garter snakes lounge in pockets of shade. They will mind their business if you mind yours.

Everything comes vividly to life after heavy rain. Shallow waves of wildflowers sweep through drought-brittle clearings. You might feel like you are being watched—you are. Sea ox-eye daisies follow every step. You are a curious guest. Be on the lookout for star-shaped rain lilies, cords of white bindweed, and the rust and yellow of Mexican Hats. Find clusters of bright violet low to the ground if you want prairie verbena and look for a more somber purple if you are after silverleaf nightshade. Run your hands over the bristling stalks of wild sunflowers and the scent of camphor fills your nose. Follow the bees to find coarse bunches of saltmarsh aster and fiveneedle pricklyleaf. There is no hurry. You are suspended in time here, like a milkweed seed in the air.

This is a brackish marsh, where the freshwater from the creek runs into the salt water of the bay. You can taste a tang in the air as you enter the mudflats—that's a mix of brine and hydrogen sulphide from decomposing organic matter. Crouch down and follow the tracks stamped in the mud. Great Egrets have a long stride and three splayed toes. Plovers leave little skittering prints. You can find the spade-shaped hooves of wild hogs or deer, and hand-shaped prints of raccoons. Your own tracks join theirs. Walk slowly and avoid rolling your step to keep from slipping. The mud erupts with halophytes. These short plants sprout thick, waxy leaves and thrive in high levels of salinity. Saltworts are yellow-green and knobby. Sea purslane has lovely burgundy stems and

pink flowers. Saltmarsh cordgrass, black needlerush, and cattails rim the water, yellowish foam and membranes of algae gathering at their bases. You should not disturb these plants. Their dense root systems stabilize the sand, preventing flooding and erosion. The water itself is still and peaceful. Sit beside it long enough and you will be as well.

Birds will provide good company. When their shadows pass over you, squint against the sunset to recognize them by silhouette. If it has a white neck and wingtips, a black crested cap, and flaps industriously—it's a crested caracara. If it is all dark with broad, silver-tipped wings and sails the wind in spirals—it's a black vulture. The wheeling clouds of forked tails and tapered wings are Purple Martins. Thank them, because they are defending you from the mosquitoes. Watch the water's edge. If you get lucky, you might see long yellow legs, a dappled body, and a ridiculous periscope of a neck. Least Bitterns are shy and do not like impatient guests. Whistling ducks drop into the water in a group, squeaking and gossiping. Great Kiskadees introduce themselves by name, yelling *KIS-ka-dee* in the sharp tone of a cat complaining. Not everything is as bold as them, but everything speaks. Listen until you can hear the whole world telling you its name. Love it until your heart breaks.

Once you hear the crying of coyotes, it's probably time to go. Grey twilight flattens the landscape, resealing the seams, but the green bioluminescence of *Pyrophorus* beetles can lead you out like will-o'-wisps. Before you leave, carefully snag a few pieces of moldering Styrofoam caught in the rushes from stormwater runoff. This is a wound that festers across miles of wetlands, but any debridement brings relief. Crunch through the paths of flattened grass. Bow your head to the mesquite in parting and they graciously sweep their thorns away, clearing the door. Time will flood back over you. You stand on the edge of the road as headlights blink at you. You have to head home now, but you have given the wetlands your name and they may call you back.