

Considering a River: Lookout Creek, Writing, and a Brief Meditation on Flow

I will tell you of a river, Lookout Creek. Of writing about that river.
Of ways to think about and experience that

river.

The act of writing balances experiencing the object and interpreting the object,
an exercise that is no longer the object at all,
and thus deals with symbols and interpretation
of certain perceptions.

Lookout Creek flows

through the 16,000 acre H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest
on the western side of the Willamette National Forest,

emptying out

into

Blue River Reservoir. The creek, as wide and fast as it might be, is only about 5 or 6 miles long: perhaps why it's called a creek. About an hour east of Eugene, Oregon, the Andrews Forest is a research forest, a Long Term Ecological Research site, and one of the benefits of that designation is that Lookout Creek, flowing in a research area, is closed to fishing.

A river is a linear object,

in a way, but it's impossible

to experience it linearly.

non-linearly.

A hunk here, a hunk

there.

We experience it

Even floating the course of an entire river,

that's how it is.

I was determined to hike all of Lookout Creek, not along the shore, on a dirt trail, but in the water, wearing waders, walking that moving, wet trail. From its emptying mouth at Blue River Reservoir to its headwaters under Lookout Mountain...

...a place not linear at all,

the *Now* in writing is a difficult fast-moving place, a vibrating, uneasy, active interpretation where the nearest of futures—a brief vision—collides, concentrates, interacts, juggles, challenges, fuses, and somehow lands, becoming concrete: a solid interpretation of the object of the past, letters and words

in linear order on the page.

A linear order that is not the object it purports to represent that is

already long gone...

...and is perhaps not linear.

In the river, there's water above you,

and water below you.

You look hard. It looks like all the same water.

But the water at your feet is always different. You can't stop it.

It's all the same, and yet there is clearly different water

above you, about to arrive,

water at your feet, right here,

and water already past

you,

long gone.

Five miles doesn't sound like too long of a hike for an able-bodied walker
on reasonable ground. Hiking five miles in a river

is a different story.

The pressure of calf-deep water moving at a clip adds what feels like pounds
of weight to your feet.

The minute I sit and start typing the letters that accumulate to words: the object
comes, and the object is gone
as I'm watching it, the object becomes my imagination of the object,
my interpretation of what
I remember the object to be.
Then I look up and again it's...

There is just one Lookout Creek, as there is just one poem, this essay.

Yet, perhaps every reader of the essay

reads a different river,

wades a different poem.

Perhaps there are as many Lookout Creeks as there are readers of this essay.

That implies

a potentially unlimited number of Lookout Creeks and poems
in existence, creation, and interpretation.

In trying to hike all five miles of Lookout Creek, I saw a lot of the river,

but the actual distance I waded, over the course of many days,
was probably closer
to a mile.

A hunk here.

A hunk

there.

Wading, you can feel the push of the water, the pull of the current.
You can look upstream, and see water
that has not yet reached you, and you can look below you,
and see water that has flown past you.
This coming and going of water is constant. All you can do is watch.
That is to say, you can watch all you want,
but you can't change the motion of the actual object.

Where does all that water come from? This may be a question of fact or of impression, of real awe.

I tell you of a river,

Lookout Creek,

and you picture a river you know,

a specimen

that most approximates your idea of

river.

I tell you how beautiful it is,

this research stream closed off to fishing, flowing vigorously

through an old growth forest, inaccessible, much of it, even to a person wading.

Inaccessible: rocks, cutbanks, riffles, holes, pocket water, deep pools, the turquoise
and aquamarine colors of the shallows and depths revealed

in the afternoon sunlight

filtering through the tall old growth.

You picture your own favorite

river.

There is a large rock.

I feel like sitting down on this rock—this exposed platform that has water lapping at its sides but a dry upper surface—so I can rest, so I can just watch the

(Lookout Creek)

coming and going.

Though if I sit, I'm losing ground against my goal of hiking the entire five-mile length of this challenging, deeper than expected

river.

The thing with writing is it always puts you one step away from the object.

Seeing and being with the river,
standing in Lookout Creek,
watching the water rush around your calves, pulling at your wading staff,
feeling the cold,
hearing the sound of the falls, pools, and eddies as colliding
with and moving around strewn boulders, stones, fallen boles,
the chaos of the bale-like debris collected and pressed into piles
by the weight of the water,
stepping in and over the freestone bed of this river,
seeing the huge, vertical, live trunks of old growth Douglas firs
that border and help define the bank,
and, at the ground, the salal, the holly, the ferns,
the wet, dark green undergrowth
hanging over the moving, black water: at that point, only a fool writes.

Look,

here is a river called Lookout Creek.

By *look*, I mean *read*,

but ironically, look seems a far better word for the implied transaction

between writer and reader.

We read but we want to *look*.

We write but we want to *look*.

I could write that Lookout Creek stops, could tell you how I waded
 downstream
amid this rushing water—water above
 that was always coming to me,
then was passing me,
 then was below me,
water always below me,
 moving on,
the same water, it seems,
 but different,
as we've said—and I kept going downstream,
 carefully, rather than upstream,
and I came to this place in the river where the water suddenly stopped.

Stopped dead in its tracks!

There it was, the water, and I could hold it and assess it.

 However, this didn't happen
and is not in the nature of rivers.
A stopped river is something we typically refer to
 as a lake,
but even a lake usually
 has a certain motion to it.

Flow.

What questions are we asking?

Questions of cold feet, of impression.

Of motion and helplessness.

In the dark, at night, the hillsides of the headquarters of the Andrews forest look black, even darker than the sky, the contours and edges smoothing out, disappearing, and the impression is one of standing in a dark vessel, nature's cupped hands cradling this collection of buildings that allow access to the forest.

A black-tailed deer grazing only a few feet away

may be invisible.

Both of you hear the river, Lookout Creek.