

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

Andrew Gottlieb

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

The ongoing challenge of writing is the tradeoff between
experiencing the object and the work to interpret the object, an exercise
that is no longer the object at all, and thus deals with symbols and
interpretation
of certain facts and 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, which is perhaps why it's called a creek.
About an hour east of Eugene, Oregon, the Andrews Forest is part of
the Long Term Ecological Research Network. One of the benefits of
that designation for Lookout Creek is that the creek, in a research area,
is closed to fishing.

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 river is a linear object
, in a way, but it's impossible
to
experience it linearly. We experience it non-linearly.
A hunk here, a hunk
there. Even floating the
course of an entire river,
that's how it is.

...perhaps not linear,

the Now in writing is a difficult fast-moving place, a vibrating, uneasy, active space where the nearest of futures—a brief vision—collides, concentrates, interacts, juggles, challenges, fuses, and somehow lands, becoming concrete, a solid 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 and 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.
Yet, 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 essay, this essay. Yet, perhaps every reader of the essay reads a different river, wades a different essay.

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

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 flowed 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 it. Inaccessible: rocks, cutbanks, riffles, holes, pocket water, deep pools, the turquoise and aquamarine colors of the 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 large exposed platform that has water lapping at its sides but a dry upper surface, so I can rest, so I can just watch the 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.

Look,

here is a river called Lookout Creek.

By look, I mean read,

but look seems a far better word for the transaction

between writer and reader.

We read but we want to look.

We write but we want to look.

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 and pools and eddies as they collide with and move 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 the 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: only a fool writes at that point.

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, obviously – 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.

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.

