Out of Time

Soggy Again

The alarm on my wristwatch rang this morning, as usual. Seven o'clock. But today I responded in a different way than I normally do. I stopped the insistent beeping, leaned out of bed, and hid the watch in one of my briefcase pockets, out of sight. Thus began my little experiment in timelessness, an experiment planned ahead and expected to last three

days, approximately half of my stay in the green and misty forests of the central Oregon Cascades.

I am visiting the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, about fifty miles east of Eugene. These are the woods of my childhood, familiar and foreign in peculiar balance. The bushy greens of tilting pines are a familiar sight that returns me to the years of elementary school, junior high, and high school, before I went away to college. Vivid, impressionable years. Years of comfort, family, and adolescent struggles. In some ways this is my original landscape, my originating landscape. This is the landscape I still see in my dreams at night, although for decades now I've called freeway-strewn California foothills, narrow buckling New England streets, rural muggy small-town Texas, and brilliantly brown Sierra peaks "home." For a week now, I'm back in Oregon, back in rainy green, dwarfed again by widow-making firs, soggy again to the bone.

Slovic, Scott. 2005. Out of time. In: Pett, Stephen; Clark, Amy; Reeder, Gordon. *Flyway: a literary review*. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, Department of English: 76-97.

Prerelevant

I arrived at “the Andrews” yesterday at midday. Scheduled to meet geologist Fred Swanson and poet-essayist-housebuilder-gardener Charles Goodrich at noon, I pulled into the headquarters parking lot at precisely five seconds after 12:00, fastidiously punctual even for me. We spent the afternoon chatting over lunch in the field station library. Fred demonstrated a geologist’s penchant for story, relating the history of the research performed at this site and going into detail about his own special interest in landslides and other natural catastrophes and how ecological systems respond to such events. I wasn’t taking notes, but I tried to retain as much of this information as possible, keying in on particular phrases. Windthrow. Longterm. Temporal mindbending. Prerelevant.

Impressed by the hundreds of experiments that have been conducted at the Andrews since its founding in 1948 and by the idea that the nearly 16,000 acres of the forest are full of monitoring devices and research plots, I wondered whether there was a clear plan for each of these studies or whether some of the data was simply being collected in hopes of later determining its relevance, its meaning. Fred explained that it’s often the case that scientists gather information that doesn’t seem relevant to issues of the day but that later takes on meaning.

That later takes on meaning. How often do we have the luxury of gathering information, storing it, bringing it out again on that “rainy day” when we need answers. Sitting in the Andrews library, a repository of data about the myriad studies of stream flow, biodiversity, and the rotting and regeneration processes of this temperate rain forest, I am straining to hold on to the information flooding into me through Fred’s

narrative, metaphor-rich language. I want to know this place. I should know this place. This is the place of my youth, and yet I'm a stranger.

I continued to wear my watch throughout the afternoon and evening. Kathy Moore and her husband Frank and their colleague Dawn, the mother of one of my former graduate students, showed up to accompany us to several longterm ecological reflection sites and to dinner. The afternoon was one of companionship and conversation. Time still dominated. "What time is our reservation for dinner?" "I guess it's time for the Corvallisites to hit the road." I returned to my apartment, read myself to sleep, and plotted my escape from time the following morning, promptly at 7:00.

Inspiration, Expiration

My room in the Rainbow Right apartment has a low window with a perfect view of green, green, and more green. There's the pale lime-green of lawn, followed by a dense thicket of young Douglas firs with light new growth and darker-green inner branches, and then come the tall and ancient trees down closer to Lookout Creek, about thirty of them, each over two hundred feet tall and more than five hundred years old.

Watch or no watch, I'm here to work, so I put on my layers, grab the umbrella, and slosh my way down to Lookout Creek to observation plot number one: a giant fir tree that fell during a big storm in 1996 and now straddles the creek, about a three-minute walk from where I'm staying. Yesterday Fred suggested that this is one of the scenes I might wish to contemplate during my week at the Andrews. No problem, I thought. I can come here and contemplate. Then he said: "You might want to climb out on the fallen tree and sit above the creek while you do your observations." Hmmm—not so sure about

that. Then he proposed: “You could also go through the underbrush over to that gravel bar that washed up in the ’96 storm.” Not much more enticing. I could just see myself trying to clamber over the four-foot diameter of the fallen, moss-covered tree, slipping awkwardly into the miscellany of rocks and branches, and spraining an ankle or worse my first morning in the woods.

When the time came on morning one to do some observations, I headed out into the rain down to the fallen tree and found that my preferred observation method was simply to stand on the tree near the trail. No need to perch myself above the rushing torrent. The view was fine from the log, but the main challenge was balancing the umbrella on my head while holding a small, folded piece of paper in one hand and pen in the other. I tried to make some initial observations, still self-conscious, not yet settled into this new place. It always seems like this when I begin a new project—the stiff self-consciousness. And this time I felt even more awkward than usual. How to conduct “longterm ecological reflections”? A mere human, standing atop a fallen giant that came crashing down in the forest after living about seven times longer than the average person. I felt like a flea standing on a dog. What could I say about this place? It’s green, it’s cold, it’s wet. The rushing creek drowned out my thoughts—almost like the effect of the rhythmic crashing of waves on a seacoast, except here the sound of moving water is even more constant, coupled with the clicking sound of raindrops on my umbrella.

The sun broke through the clouds for a moment, brightening the mossy twigs near my head. I noticed the stillness of the trees, the movement of dripping water. In the creek, the fallen giant was a picture of stillness, massively immobile, while underneath the water rushed. I thought of how many things in the world exist in opposition to each other.

This weekend, running with my father in the mountains, he used the word “orthogonal” to describe phenomena that exist in opposition to each other. Stillness and motion. But I did not feel orthogonal to this landscape, just out of synch. Too fast-moving, too impatient. Gazing out over the fallen log and the rushing creek, I noticed a small insect rising before my eyes, then dashing away (or being dashed away by the breeze). I could scarcely force myself to see it before it vanished. I was a bug to this landscape. I was a flea on a dog’s back, aspiring to perform longterm reflection.

Perhaps a walk in the woods would help to generate some thoughts. Guided by one of the researchers, I drove six miles up a narrow paved road called 1506 that eventually became a gravel road, stopped at the obscure entrance to the Lookout Creek Old Growth Forest Trail, donned my pack, then made my way into the dark, damp depths of temperate rainforest. Unlike the manicured, public trails I’ve always hiked in the past, this trail was magnificently rugged and chaotic. Huge trees lay atop each other like pick-up sticks that will never be picked up. They are subsiding into the earth, as they should. Fallen logs crossed the trail, so it was necessary to creep under them. I found myself especially interested in the shallow roots of uprooted forest giants. So little underground to hold such trees to the dirt. I tried to imagine the steady tilt of tall trees becoming a rush and roar of windfall. I’ve never actually seen a tree fall in the forest, but here I was on a rainy day when the soil was loose, surrounded by thousands of tilting giants, any one of which could come down with a moment’s notice.

Somehow the map didn’t make it clear that this Old Growth Trail requires major altitude changes, including movement up from rain into the snow zone of higher elevations. I knew the trail was about three and a half miles long, but to be alone in the

woods like this, perhaps the only hiker in this entire forest on a wet day like today, intensified my feeling of isolation. Eventually the physical process of straining uphill on the narrow trail had its desired effect. I stopped thinking so much—stopped thinking about thinking—and started simply breathing. I tried to figure out what I heard as I walked—the gurgles of rainwater, the occasional whooshing of steep streams, distant caws and cackles of birds, and my own breathing—in and out, in and out.

I recalled Richard Nelson's notion that when you're in a place, you bring the place into you by drinking its water, eating what lives there, and breathing in its air. I concentrated on breathing this forest into myself as I hiked.

As my breathing intensified and I begin to sweat, I found myself thinking about my dog Silly's last breath. I saw her take it five days earlier when Susie and I brought her to the vet's office to be euthanized. Silly, a fourteen-year-old golden retriever, had reached a point where she could no longer stand up on her own. For about a week I had carried her outside several times a day to relieve herself, but finally she couldn't even stand when I set her down on the grass, and she was so weak she could scarcely lift her head anymore. We made the difficult decision to "put her to sleep." The entire process took only a few minutes—the shaving of a small area on her lower back leg, the insertion of a large syringe full of pink sedative, Silly's instinctive flinch at the prick of the needle, and then her sudden collapse from her prone position on the metal table when her heart stopped and she'd taken her last breath. She was not there anymore, just a hunk of skin and bones.

As I walked through the old growth forest—ancient living trees, giant snags still standing, deadfall everywhere in the process of fertilizing decay—I found myself more

fascinated with my own meager breaths. Nothing momentous about a single tiny person walking and breathing in the woods. But the rhythm of my breathing had, for the moment, joined the other rhythms of this forest—the rhythms of water and air, of movement and stillness, of living and dying. This felt good to me.

I Had a Dream

Woke up this morning without an alarm clock, without any clock at all, and I felt myself emerging from a dream. I'm not someone who normally remembers dreams, so the fact that this one stayed with me out of sleep is unusual. I dreamed that I was living in a small, watertight space, surrounded by flowing water. My central concern was staying dry. I couldn't see out of this living space, had no idea what the environment was like. Everything was dark, but there was an abiding sound of flowing water, and my room seemed to shift occasionally, like a strange, semi-sensory-deprivation amusement park ride.

As I tottered stiffly out of the bedroom, it began to dawn on me that I must have been dreaming about reflection plot number one, the fallen log across Lookout Creek. Beyond the log in the area I haven't yet been able to visit because of the treacherous footing and thickets of debris is the pile of stones at the torrent's edge. Last night, before going to sleep, I read Fred Swanson's notes on the reflection plots and saw that he called this pile of rocks a "gravel bar." I must have been dreaming about the gravel bar, imagining the effects of incessant nearby water flow. But instead of playing the role of a human observer, standing nearby and gauging the mechanics of flow affecting rocks, I imagined myself to be inside one of the stones. I imagined this three-room apartment for

research staff to be a stone at the edge of the creek, temporarily stable but subject to the whims of the physical world. Strangely, this was not a sad or disturbing notion. It felt comfortable not to be in control, but there was nonetheless a strong desire to stay dry.

Hiding the Clock

As I walked into the kitchen the morning of day two to heat some water for coffee, I recognized the absence of regular ticking. The day before, after hiding my watch in my briefcase, I had come into the kitchen to prepare for the day's excursions, but there had been a persistent ticking in the room. During breakfast, I had assumed the ticking was somewhere in my head—sound patterns internalized through years of living by the clock. But as I put on my boots, I glanced at the wall near a poster on the ecology of a Pacific Northwest Old Growth Forest, and there was a large clock with images of twelve colorful birds representing each of the hours. I debated for a moment, then stepped over and removed the clock from the wall and placed it in a kitchen drawer. When I return to time in a few days, I'll hang the clock back on the wall, if I remember. But it seems important to be consistent in removing myself from clock time during this several-day experiment, if I'm to bother with it at all.

You might wonder about the clock in the upper righthand corner of my computer—how could I avoid looking at that while trying to experience freedom from seconds, minutes, and hours for a few days. Well, that clock said 2:15 a.m. as I gazed at the mid-morning scene from my window and wrote this sentence. The irrelevance of such clock time made it easy to ignore the numbers.

Taken by a Notion to Experiment

Free from the constraints of a schedule, I found, as Edward Abbey once put it, that I was taken by a notion to experiment. No, I didn't seek out a rabbit or a small bird to brain with a rock. Nothing that brutal. In the thinning light of late afternoon, I drove down to Road 1501 and over to the clearcut on private land that Fred suggested I visit occasionally during my stay at the Andrews. This morning, thwarted by snow when I tried to drive up Road 1508 to the Blue River Face cut and burn, I drove down in the direction of 1501, but not far enough. This forested country feels quite disorienting to me—vistas concealed by dense masses of trees, only roads providing narrow strips of visibility.

Buoyed by good feelings after an afternoon run, I hopped in the car and tried again, and this time I made it down to the gravel road that passes through the lower portion of clearcut 1501. I didn't know the name of this place, so that's what I called it in my notes: "clearcut 1501."

The cut is close to Highway 126, and the traffic was audible as I sat at the base of the treeless landscape and considered what to do. I heard airplane engines above the clouds, a jay of some sort chittering invisibly in the trees beyond the clearcut. Misty clouds wafted among moss-covered alders beginning to grow on the distant edge of the twenty-acre barren hillside. This was really a quintessential clearcut, it occurred to me. Almost nothing remains—minimal debris, scattered stumps in various stages of decay, and some small fir seedlings no more than a few years old.

A fresh rainshower was coming in as I got out of the car, but it blew through in a few minutes. When the waning sun pushed through the clouds for a moment, I was

stricken with a notion to experiment by taking a walk around the contours of the clearcut—a circumambulation of sorts. Normally writers and New Age folks do this at sacred places, such as Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County—the walk around the base of Mt. Tam is called a "circumtam." My friends Gary Snyder and David Robertson sometimes escort groups of university students and true believers on such hikes, pausing now and then to read poetry and take pictures. Today I was by myself, and I had no poetry to read. And this was probably not a sacred landscape, although it was clearly a *scarred* one. What does one call a walk around a clearcut? I asked myself, as I began to claw my way up the steep and rugged hillside at the eastern edge of the cut. Well, I guess you could call it a "circumcision"!

I don't know how long it took me to hike up and down, then up and down again, following the undulations of the land around the perimeter of the cut. I don't know whether I was breaking some property laws by walking this land, owned by a private person rather than the government. As I began coming down the upper part of the western side of the cut, a white-haired man pulled up in his SUV behind my small green Nissan in the distance, letting his dog out of the car to roam around. I felt furtive and guilty and made my way into the shelter of still-standing trees at the edge of the clearcut, not wanting to be reported to the landowner if my transgression, my circumcision, were noticed. Here at the forest's edge, I found fallen, rotting logs to be soft paths down the steep slope, a striking contrast to the thickets of slash and blackberry vines that made the going tough on the logged-over hill.

I have never spent so much time at a clearcut before. Typically, I am flying over them in planes or hurrying past in a car. Once, while visiting Bob Pyle in southwestern

Washington, I asked him to take me to see some of the gaping clearcuts near his home—but we merely stood at the edge and shook our heads. Today, watchless and temporarily out of time, with nothing to do but run and walk through the woods or sit inside listening to rain fall and grading papers, I felt strangely free to commune with the clearcut, to gaze at it and crunch my way around its edges. It did not feel like a good place. Up close, it looked like a kind of junk yard, a forty-degree hillside littered with debris. The only signs of animals I noticed, apart from distant bird calls, were deer turds here and there … and shotgun shells down by the road.

When Abbey killed the rabbit with a stone and then crowed about it in *Desert Solitaire*, he said his experiment made him feel more deeply enmeshed in the world, part of the tangle of predator and prey. My experiment made me feel strangely truant, a kind of truancy I cannot overcome. Lured by the freedom from time, I indulged myself with a walk where the woods once stood. I did not heal anything with this circumambulation, this circumcision. Back at the apartment, I plucked a sliver from my finger. I washed a pair of dirty socks in the bathroom sink. But I could not wash the feeling of that place, "clearcut 1501," from my mind. I wondered if another walk in the deep, dark woods would help.

Tilts and Thresholds

The first things you notice when walking into an apartment here at the Andrews Forest are the safety items sitting on the counter: a heavy-duty radio and a hardhat. The first item seems reasonable enough, considering the remoteness of the locations people visit out here to collect climate data, water samples, and demographic information on spotted

owls and other species, sometimes in iffy weather and at night. The hardhat seems more dubious, as the chances of rockfall are limited and the effects of treefall so catastrophic as to nullify the value of a plastic hat. I quickly decided I'd carry the radio with me on all of my excursions this week, but I'd leave the hardhat on the kitchen counter.

This morning, day three, I decided to visit the Lookout Creek Old Growth Trail again before stopping at one of my favorite reflection sites, the Log Decomp site. I didn't know how high I'd get when driving up to the Old Growth trailhead, as it's been snowing heavily at the higher elevations for the past three days. I made it about six miles up Road 1506 to its isolated intersection with 350, but my city car couldn't get any further and it seemed risky to try. I could hear the car's bottom scraping against the snow in the middle of the road, and the tires were slipping on truck tracks now increasingly filled with slush. With about three inches of snow on the road and the depth increasing as I made my way up Lookout Ridge, I decided not to enter the deep forest for a three- or four-mile trudge on the steep trail to the exit point higher up on 1506. I pulled back from that challenging walk and decided instead to explore the road a ways, where I could at least be sure not to get lost.

Today I had intended, like two days ago, to examine the threshold between the snowy and clear sections of the trail, to contemplate the transitional margin between the two kinds of walking. On Monday, following the dips and rises of the steep trail, I found myself shifting back and forth between snow and no-snow, savoring the threshold, the relative security of the clear trail and the riskiness of the ever-deepening snow at higher elevations. Today there was only snow, deeper and deeper snow, as I walked up the road. Had I been wearing my cross-country skis, this would have been a pleasure jaunt—in my

skidding boots, the walk felt more like a trudge. About a quarter-mile up the road from where I abandoned my car, I noticed heavy tracks in the snow, apparently moving up the road. The tracks were hours old and partly filled with recent snow. Mountain lion? Lynx? Perhaps an elk? I didn't feel directly threatened by such tracks, but there was something vaguely ominous about them, about knowing I had unseen companions with me on this snowy walk.

In addition to considering thresholds of snow and no-snow, I had intended this morning to contemplate the tilts of trees and land. This is not a simple, perpendicular landscape, with flat ground and uptending vegetation. Soon after arriving here, one notices that most of the land is sloped, many of the trees (especially those two hundred feet or taller) tilted. To my mind, tilts imply danger—the danger of mudslides, rockfall, or the cataclysmic upheaval of timber. On the Old Growth Trail itself, I was captivated by the many fallen giants, uncut, rotting in the dark forest depths, roots uplifted, sometimes still caked with mud and still grasping boulders. Interesting how at the base of a tilting snag, there often seems to be no tilt at all. Tree after tree seems sturdily upright, but a glance at the sky—or from a distance—shows major tilt … and risk.

Walking on the snowy road, the air almost windless and misty, I felt little threat from the tilting trees. The presence of wind would make this a very different kind of place, each tree suddenly posing a significant danger. There was no overt and urgent danger during my walk this morning, nor was there a pressing need to turn back and resume another task back at the apartment. Watchless, I had no idea how early or late it was. I had indicated on the sign-out sheet back at headquarters that I expected to return by "early afternoon." There was plenty of time.

Still, after a mile or so of snowy hiking, I decided to turn around. It seemed to me that enough was enough. I wasn't tired, wasn't bored. It was beautiful and peaceful in the deep woods on a snowy morning. The faint itching of a possible blister on the top of a toe on my right foot caused some concern. The large footprints in the snow, just parallel to my own clunky bootprints, caused slight uneasiness and curiosity. I wondered, too, if my little car would make it down the curvy, snow-covered road, bordered by steep drop-offs into rushing creeks with no guardrails. I decided I had reached the edge of my risk-benefit threshold. The risk of becoming mired in the snow now outweighed the benefit of peaceful exercise. The recognition of limits did not come with a momentous sigh of recognition, just a pause, a pivot, and a continuation of the walk, now downhill.

I wonder if our society, too, will come to a recognition of limits someday, not through cataclysm, but merely through pause, pivot, and continued motion in a new direction.

Log Decomp

It sounds like a kind of tepid punchline. So, what did you do on your Spring Break? I sat in the woods and watched logs rot.

This is what I've actually done this week. It's been one of my favorite experiences at the Andrews. One advantage of the Log Decomp Site just up from the intersection of Roads 1506 and 1508 is that it's low enough to be free of snow when the higher elevation sites are icy and inaccessible to people driving cars like mine. I haven't been able to reach one reflection site, the Blue River Face cut and burn all week—too

much snow. But today I stopped by to watch the logs rot for the fourth time, the third time by myself.

There's something special about this place. It's more peaceful than anywhere else I've visited at the Andrews—mossier and quieter (at least when the owls who live nearby aren't hooting). This is where Mark Harmon and his colleagues are conducting the 200-year decomposition study, now in its twentieth year—I'm intrigued by the choice of 200 years for the duration of the study, launched less than a decade after the 1976 bicentennial of the United States, as if there might be something magical about such a time span, which represents forty percent of the current lifetime of the trees still standing in this area. There is something peculiarly anthropocentric—no, Americano-centric—about the choice of a 200-year "longterm ecological research" project, beginning in 1985. Why not 250 years? Why not 500?

At the actual decomp study site, a number of mossy logs have been placed hither and thither, some with white buckets attached, devices used to study gaseous releases from decomposing wood—the scientists are monitoring, among other things, how much carbon is stored in dead wood, a phenomenon linked to global warming. In all six of the log decomp study sites at the Andrews, there are some 530 logs, formally decaying under the scrutiny of scientists. The logs at this particular site lie amid towering Douglas firs, western hemlocks, and mossy-bearded Pacific yews. En route to the decomp, I now have a habit of bending to smell the red, fleshy tissues of the huge logs that fell across the trail and have been sawed apart to maintain trail access—they have a ripe, mint-like smell, it seems to me. The tissues of wood look like filets of salmon, except more jagged, like something a hungry bear might have left behind.

When I visit “Log Decomp,” I tend to keep walking to a ferny glade around the corner. A dip in the path has filled with clear water from days of rain, and the ferns, mosses, wildflowers, and russet maple leaves look like creatures in a seaside tidepool. There being no tide here, these must be “trailpools.” A herpetologist would probably detect signs of rough-skinned salamanders here, but I see only plantlife. The only motion is caused by fast- or slow-falling droplets of water, either actual rain or just residual wetness sliding off branches above.

Today I walked further than usual, all the way to the end of the trail spur. The canopy thinned and more light came in. I noticed many silent, shaggy yews. This is a quiet place. No rushing water and, for today, no branches sighing in wind. Some drops of water, and everywhere around me the silence of decay and the silence of mossy growth. Even as I passed through the enormous tree trunks that were sawed through to keep the trail open, that violence seemed forgettable, the sawing itself distant and unimportant. Like so much violence in the human realm, morality subsides as fiber erodes.

Continental Drift

Last night I dreamed again of the gravel bar and cross-stream logs not far from the forest headquarters and my apartment. I wake up each morning and tramp down the wet trail to my observation place—this has quickly become a routine, and today, my fourth in the woods, is no different.

Each day I find myself becoming bolder, more comfortable in this place. Some of this may be due to the fact that the rain has let up and with it the rush of Lookout Creek seems to have subsided, become quieter and less threatening. Perhaps this is merely an

illusion—I'm not a measurer of streamflows—but this is how it seems, how it *sounds*, to me.

Yesterday, wearing running sweats and Teva sandals, I stepped through a side channel of the creek and went out onto the gravel bar deposited by the February 1996 flood. There I found a boulder covered with pale green moss and sat for a while, reflecting and taking notes. The first thing that occurred to me was that the island of small rocks, newly leafing alders, and young firs and hemlocks seemed "permanent." I wrote the word "continental" on my piece of notepaper. Everything on the island appeared, from my vantage, mossy, fixed, old. I recalled Fred's brief lecture about the place four days earlier, his mention of the flood less than a decade ago that created this new island—at the time, the information was "prerelevant" to me, unrelated to anything I knew I should be thinking about. Today, after several days of visiting this place and looking at it from different angles, the solidity of the stones, mud, logs, and new growth here felt startlingly contradictory to the actual newness of this landscape in the context of geological time. This gravel bar was an infant, yet to me it felt permanent.

At the same time, there is a vibrant sense of upheaval here, as if the entire sweep of water, hillsides, and trees is a sort of waterfall, frozen in form during the brief moment when I'm here to witness it. My friend John Felstiner is fond of describing waterfalls as "flux taking form"—he's referring to the "paradoxical dynamic" in Western nature poetry of the past two centuries, and in nature itself, by which "raw energy can show design." The Lookout Creek gravel bar also strikes me as "flux taking form," as I can see the future of this place written in the not-flooding creek and in the many tilting skyscrapers, pausing now en route back to earth. Just because we don't see actual change,

our eyes being as temporary as the rest of our being, doesn't mean change isn't happening right before our eyes. This gravel bar, it occurs to me, is a rare clearing in the forest, a viewpoint—strangely like a clearcut, but without the debris of tree limbs, the steepness, the stumpage and with many more rocks, mossy with new life. A kingfisher zipped past as I sat on my wet boulder, following the flow of the creek. An airplane groaned overhead, unseen above the clouds, its sound competing with the rush of water—and then there was only the water.

On day four, I took a different angle on this scene, following my increasing comfort here and stepping carefully out to the middle of the fallen log, then sitting cross-legged to write in the middle of Lookout Creek. Here I noticed not only yesterday's gravel bar upstream of the fallen log, but another large gravel bar downstream, this one without alders and small evergreens, just a graceful curve of stones, like a Goldsworthy sculpture.

In contrast to the solidity and apparent—if illusory—permanence of the two gravel bars and the log on which I sit above the moving water, there were two LBJ's (little brown jobbies) flitting near the edge of the creek. I tried to watch them for several minutes, but found it difficult, agitating. Their jerky movements seemed nervous, the purposes of their jumps from perch to perch unclear. Their ephemerality was exaggerated by juxtaposition with so many unmoving rocks and trees, but I knew that even trees fell and rotted, and even rocks drifted when the stream flooded. Sitting there on the temporarily sturdy log above fast-moving water gave me a pronounced sense of the continuum of fixity and change: everything I am able to know is, within one time frame or another, both stable and mutable.

Last night, when dreaming about the gravel bar, I remembered a disturbing passage from the book I've been reading lately, John Perkins's *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, a memoir about his role in destabilizing economies and political regimes in developing nations, at the behest of corporations and the United States government. Perkins notes that "For every $100 of crude taken out of the Ecuadorian rain forests, the oil companies receive $75. Of the remaining $25, three-quarters must go to paying off the foreign debt. Most of the remainder covers military and other governmental expenses—which leaves about $2.50 for health, education, and programs aimed at helping the poor…. Thus, out of every $100 worth of oil torn from the Amazon, less than $3.00 goes to the people who need the money most, those whose lives have been so adversely impacted by the dams, the drilling, and the pipelines, and who are dying from lack of edible food and potable water." Because of this brutal inequity, Perkins concludes, "All of those people—millions in Ecuador, billions around the world—are potential terrorists. Not because they believe in communism or anarchism or are intrinsically evil, but simply because they are desperate" (xx).

It occurs to me that America's catastrophic impact on the rest of the world is akin to the occasional flooding of Lookout Creek. Our corporate culture, supported by the government, is changing the world's cultural landscape. What the corporate and governmental leaders fail to understand, however, is that when such changes occur, the agent of change, the flood itself, cannot remain unchanged. Not only is our nation's violent mistreatment of other cultures prompting violent reactions, but there is a profound corruption, a kind of rot, at the heart of our apparently stable society. Morris Berman establishes an ominous parallel between contemporary America and the late Roman

Empire in his recent book, *The Twilight of American Culture*. In the ecstasy of exerting today's power, we perilously ignore the lessons of fixity and change that become clear to us after a few days walking in the woods, reflecting upon gravel bars and fallen logs. Remember, even continents drift.

Transition to Clock Time

I had intended to spend today, day four, on my own again, walking any trails I could find without too much remaining snow. But as I pulled out of the parking lot at headquarters, I noticed John Moreau ahead of me in a pale-green Forest Service SUV, pulling the snowcat on a trailer. At the turnoff to Road 1506, the main route to my reflection sites, John pulled up ahead of me and came walking back. "I'm headed up to Carpenter Mountain today to check some met stations in the snowcat—got room for two." In an instant, my plans for a quiet stroll at the log decomp site were scratched. I recalled a photo from my apartment, showing a giant vehicle in a snowstorm with glowing headlights and tread like a tank, the caption reading, "'John Moreau Collecting a Precipitation Sample for Water Chemistry Analysis,' H.J. Andrews, Watershed 7, January 1990." Seemed like an opportunity to learn something new.

I parked my car down by the cement bridge, not far from the log decomp site I'd be visiting later, and jumped in with John for the ride up to the snow. We left the jeep at the junction of 1506 and 350, not far from the Old Growth trailhead where I'd hiked earlier in the week. It took only a moment to learn that riding in a snowcat is essentially the opposite of a peaceful woodsy experience. The grinding roar of the engine comes from right in between the two seats in the cab, and the powerful tank treads do indeed get

you up the mountain, but with the cost of a kidney-pulverizing shake. And the entire purpose of our journey into snow country was to collect meteorological data and check three of the forest's major climate stations. This was to be a re-immersion into clock time and scientific measurements.

At the first station, as John went through a calibration checklist and changed the paper in a meter of some sort, I noticed the time, 11:40, on his wristwatch sans band, which he placed on the work counter. It was the first time I'd looked at a watch in nearly four days. Fifteen minutes later we climbed back into the snowcat and continued our errand, pausing occasionally to take readings from snow poles on the road or placed back in the forest: 1.3 feet, 1.9 feet, 2.2 feet. We noticed animal tracks on the road ahead of the tractor and tried to identify them: elk, deer, rabbit, perhaps bobcat or coyote. The vicious tread of the machine swallowed up most of the tracks, leaving a snowy washboard pattern in our wake.

Higher up the mountain, we had to leave the snowcat and hike a hundred meters through deep snow to the met station. I walked in John's snowshoe tracks, but my boots still sunk another six or eight inches into the snow. Hardgoing, this transition back into clocktime and scientific measurements, this hike into deep slush. The met station, John explained to me, measures ground temperature, ground moisture, wind speed and direction, air temperature, precipitation height and weight, among other things—all of this collected in an electronic data recorder inside the small building up at the station and also sent back to headquarters via radio telemetry. "It's eight degrees Celsius," he reported, explaining the snowmelt raining down from trees all around us.

John used a large core sample pole to take five snow readings, and I helped record the data on a sheet of paper—depth 23.5, sample length 20.0, weight 19.5, and so forth. After lunch in brilliant sunlight, gazing out at Mt. Washington, Belknap Crater, and the Three Sisters, we rattled back down to the jeep in the snowcat, and John offered to drive me up to the Blue River Face cut and burn site, which I'd been unable to visit so far this week, since my little Nissan couldn't handle the snowy road. "Let me return the snowcat to headquarters first. I'll meet you at Log Decomp Number 3 in forty-five minutes," he promised. Although I still wasn't wearing my own watch, I felt myself being enveloped again by clock-time and numbers. The timeless decomp site I'd been visiting all week now had a name: "Number 3." And instead of having as much time as my mind needed to engage with this place, I now had an appointment to hitch a ride up to another reflection site in forty-five minutes.

For the better part of an hour, I walked among the old growth and rotting logs at the decomp site, enjoying the extraordinary quiet following the skull-shattering roar of the snowcat. I marveled at the former "trailpools," which had already absorbed all of the shin-deep water from the day before. I looked at the distinct glow of sunlight passing through mossy beards on yew trees. When John pulled up, I was waiting near the road, holding a handful of epiphytic moss in my hand, counting the individual strands—twenty-five, twenty-six. How easy it had been to return to a numerical frame of mind.

Up at the Blue River Face, where scientists are experimenting with alternatives to clearcutting—leaving some of the big trees, burning slash to regenerate the natural forest—I sat on a blackened stump among a sea of small rhododendron plants, counting Douglass fir seedlings and trying to estimate the distance between each of them. About

fifteen feet. I climbed into John's jeep and noticed the time was 4:21. Back at headquarters, I went inside to erase my outing details from the sign-out board and noticed that when John had driven down to return the snowcat he had changed my ETA from "early afternoon" to "18:00."

I had known this would happen eventually, this return to clock time, but when I woke up this morning, I resisted the temptation to put on my watch again and return smoothly to my urban, professional, clock-checking identity. Tomorrow I would spend the day walking again in the usual places: gravel bars, log decomp, and possibly the clearcut, if not the cut/burn, wearing my watch again, just to see how that affects the experience, if at all. How awkward it had been at first, pulling away from time and numbers—how strangely rapid and natural this return to measurements.

Hanging the Clock

This morning, day five, I woke at early dawn and went to the kitchen to re-hang the clock I'd removed from the wall three days ago. For the past few days, I've kept the clock in a kitchen drawer, hiding it from me and myself from it. I've known all along it was in there, ticking steadily, keeping track of time. Perhaps it has not really been time I've tried to avoid this week, so much as the monitoring of time. A person who lives somewhat inordinately by clock time, uses the wrist watch as a whip, I figured this week in the woods might be a rare chance—a week with few appointments, perhaps none at all—to experience a somewhat different state of mind.

Of course, I've known all along how the week would end. The plot of this experiment was mapped out from the beginning: hide the clock early on, hang it up again

at the finish. And despite the flexibility of my daily schedule here at the Andrews, I've clearly had things to accomplish, or at least to attempt—visits to particular sites, taking notes, massaging notes into reflections, reading books, grading papers. And each day, before heading into the woods, I've dutifully marked the sign-out board in forest headquarters, indicating where I'd be going and when I'd return: midday, early afternoon, before dark. I wonder if I've behaved any differently than usual without the clock on the wall of the apartment, a watch on my wrist while hiking and observing. To some extent, any differences in behavior were predetermined by the decision to experiment with the avoidance of time-keeping devices. I hid my wristwatch because I *intended* to avoid making decisions this week according to a strict schedule, and thus I *did* act more patiently and flexibly than usual, or so it seemed to me at week's end.

Although I've certainly not suspended the temporal frames that structure much of my life, and the lives of so many others in this society, I probably have managed, in a small way, to moderate the press of time on my daily behavior this week. I've always know I'd be hanging out here for about six days, with a big appointment at the end: a 5:00 rendezvous at Hovland Hall, OSU's Philosophy Department, at the end of the experience. Then a drive home to Reno the following day, return to the office the day after, and class again the day after that. The entire experience of a clockless week has been artificial and circumscribed—you might even say it's been "scripted."

I find myself comparing the relative orderliness of my life, with or without clocks, with the storyline of nature. It seems to me that there are certain predictable, or *scripted*, processes in nature, too. Rules that must be followed. "Water moves downhill" is an obvious one. Everywhere in the Andrews, at least this time of year, you can see this plot

occurring: each trail I've walked has presented tiny mountainside rivulets carrying water to larger runoffs, then to creeks, and finally into rivers. Yesterday, up on the high slopes of Carpenter Mountain, the downward movement of water was conspicuous—it almost seemed to be raining on a brightly sunny day, as showers of melting snow fell from every branch of every tree. No avoiding this process, the tug of gravity, except through the evaporative force of heat upon fallen water. Other inevitable processes also govern this place and the objects and beings in it: photosynthesis, plant growth, animals eating and evacuating the waste. Things around here may not operate strictly by clock-driven schedules, but there is order nonetheless.

I guess the main purpose of my little clock-hiding gimmick has been to test the attachment of my own mind to temporal measurements. I have a few small personal habits—checking the keys in my pocket, pushing the hair away from my forehead. But perhaps my most persistent habit, or tick, is feeling for my wristwatch and checking the time. This has become almost unconscious in my normal life, but it means, it seems to me now, that I'm always compartmentalizing my activities, finishing one task and moving on to the next. This is how I get things done, I suppose. But after a week here in the woods, without my watch, I begin to wonder whether "getting things done" is the same as living.

Out of "Out of Time"

The phrase "out of time" sounds like a threat, doesn't it? Perhaps a line from a tough-guy movie: "Buddy, you're out of time and out of luck."

That's not really how I've meant it in my title for these reflections. What I had in mind was an assertion of freedom: what would it be like to step out of time for several

days and act as if there were simply day and night, rain and shine, no other minute parceling out of hours, minutes, and seconds?

The Andrews Forest, located not far from the woods of my childhood an hour's drive west of here, also seemed like a unique setting in which to pursue this experiment. Perhaps in a small way it *would* be possible for me to suspend time or scroll it backwards, spending part of the week simply wandering in forests like I did as a child and adolescent in Eugene, near Edgewood School or on the slopes of Spencer Butte, south of the city. A chance for some "temporal mindbending," to use one of Fred Swanson's phrases.

It had been my plan to spend Saturday morning, April 2nd, the day of my departure, taking a more specific step backward in time and driving up Highway 126 a few miles to Paradise Campground, where I would run on the extraordinary McKenzie River Trail, one of Oregon's most magical forest pathways. I last ran here about thirty years ago—1975 or 1976, I believe. My father drove us here on a cloudless summer day—the two of us, my younger brother Steve, and my friend Bill McChesney. That was a time of innocence and fitness, bold plans and playful energy. Bill and I ran all the way to a reservoir filled with snowmelt and then leaped again and again into the icy water until Bill complained that his "brain was freezing" and decided to stop. A few years later he became a U.S. Olympian unable to compete in boycotted Moscow games, then a salesman of high school graduation trinkets, and then the victim of a car accident on a rainy coastal highway. Steve is now a busy Portland surgeon, my father and I itinerant researchers and lecturers. I wander far and wide around the planet, meeting with colleagues and seeking beautiful places to run—sun-flooded beaches in Australia, wooded campuses in India, elegant city parks in Taipei, the slopes of Mt. Blanc in

France. Tomorrow, stepping back in time, I would run again on the soft pine needles of the McKenzie River Trail, through the dark passageways of the forest of my youth.

But upon returning to headquarters after my morning circuit of the reflection sites, there was an e-mail from my mother, expressing concern about incoming snow in the Cascades and proposing that I drive down to Eugene that evening to have dinner with them and spend the night.

Had I already said my goodbyes to the Andrews Forest reflection sites? I recalled trip to the vet with Silly last week, and how, when the vet asked if we'd like another minute by ourselves with our dear old dog after she was dead, Susie said, "We've already said our goodbyes."

I could stay in these forests for months, perhaps longer, extending and deepening my observations, but for now, five days of visits to the gravel bars and the log decomp site and a few stops at the 1501 clearcut and the Blue River Face cut/burn, four days without wearing a watch and one final day back in clock time, have prompted plenty of reflections. I feel I've said my goodbyes here.

But I cannot leave without running the MRT again, after three decades. It's raining again today, mostly drizzling but sometimes pounding down. The trails are truly soggy. I've made a promise to myself, though—in some ways, this trail run is the central purpose of my stay here in the McKenzie River drainage.

Thirty minutes out, thirty minutes back. Thirty years out, thirty years back. I've got my watch on again, so keeping track of time is no sweat. Thirty minutes out, thirty years back. Temporal mindbending. This morning, driving down Road 1506 after visiting the

decomposing logs for what turned out to be the final time, I pulled over to the side of the road and made a note: “Change is a physical phenomenon—time is psychological.” For some reason, it seemed important that I write this down.

Dressed in rain gear and my gray New Balance running shoes, I drive twenty minutes east to Paradise Campground, just as I had planned to do tomorrow. Highway 126 had little traffic, and the campground is empty. I find the trailhead sign and pull my little green car to a stop.

When I lean against the “McKenzie River Trail” sign to stretch my Achilles tendons, the gray and fraying sign wobbles and nearly falls over. I recall this as a fresh, new sign for a dazzling new trail system. Wooden signs seem to rot in the woods just as experimental logs do.

Moving east on the trail, I quickly find my rhythm, breathing smoothly, feeling my shoes squish the soggy trail, slapping in the mud, sinking into moist pine needles. Faster and faster I run, sometimes skirting the full river, other times turning with the trail into dense old growth glades. Memories flood my mind—thoughts of the past week in the Andrews, thoughts of my last run on this trail thirty years ago with father, brother, and friend, inside my teenage self. Faster, faster. No one else on trail. Shimmering leaves of Oregon grape, glowing moss-beards on hemlock and yew. Dancing across patches of what I call “feather moss,” clambering over fallen logs. Faster, faster. I remember a recent e-mail announcing my junior high coach’s eightieth birthday—Coach Andrews would be shouting at me now, “Is that all you got in you, son? Come on, Tiger!” I goose the accelerator and sprint uphill, trying not to sprain an ankle on tree roots, careful not to slip on rain-slickened muck. Flashes of light on shimmering leaves, dark tree bodies, the

rushing river flashes silver where the woods recede. Rushing, breathing, moving, running, thinking. I cannot see, cannot see myself. Only my young hands, my dancing feet. I am flying through the woods, breathing, breathing. I cannot think my name, cannot speak it.

Red cedar, pungent branches on trail. Multifaceted, giant cedar trunks, splaying out like fig trees. Giant trees, red cedars. Thinking of our family house in Sunriver, named "Red Cedar" because of street name. Red cedar, shining branches, like ferns. Flashes of leaves, serrated, Oregon grape. Puddles on trail. Breathing, breathing.

I think of my friend, father, and brother, running just behind me. Breathing, breathing. The forest opens to embrace us, to enclose us. Sense of being together, squinting back tears. Pushing harder, harder. "Come on, Tiger, is that all you got in you?" Glancing back, no one is with me. Where is my friend? Alone, moving through the forest.

No pen, no paper, just a breathing, running mind, absorbing, remembering. Bright leaves push the light back, dimly glowing leaves take it in. Reflection, absorption. Supposed, supposed to be reflecting, making sense of this experience. Not my way. My mind a mossy thinker, taking, taking in, not glinting out.

Thirty years out, thirty minutes back, breathing, breathing the forest in. A week of images, thirty years of memories, sixty minutes of rushing sounds, sights, smells, sixty minutes of wobbling, squishing feet on soft forest trail.

Later, driving back to the Andrews, sweaty hands on steering wheel, it occurs to me that I may not be terribly good at longterm ecological reflection. What I do is "longterm ecological absorption." The impressions I've gathered during this past week in the

Oregon woods will surely remain with me, move me, sustain me. Perhaps in thirty years, I'll return to this forest and consider what changes have occurred with the Lookout Creek gravel bars, the fallen logs, the decomp sites, the cuts, clear and otherwise. It's three p.m. now, about time to begin driving to Eugene. For now, my out-of-time experience is over—I am out of "Out of Time."

Author's Bio:

Scott Slovic is professor of literature and environment and chair of the graduate program in literature and environment at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is the editor of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Milkweed Editions' Credo Series, and the University of Nevada Press's Environmental Arts and Humanities Series. His recent publications include *What's Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values* (University of Utah Press, 2004) and *Wild Nevada: Testimonies on Behalf of the Desert* (University of Nevada Press, 2005). This essay is the product of a week-long residency in March 2005 at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest near Blue River, Oregon, sponsored by the U.S. Forest Service and Oregon State University's Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word.