

AN ATTEMPT AT EXHAUSTING A PLACE AT SHOTPOUCH CREEK

An Attempt at Exhausting a Place at Shotpouch Creek is a short investigation into the long time of the forest and mountain, where change happens so slowly and incrementally that it is virtually invisible to our senses. Biologist John Magnuson suggested that we inhabit an “invisible present” that limns the embodied limits of our perception. For novelist Georges Perec this was the “infraordinary” or the decidedly non-extraordinary. It is what happens over, under and between the monumental events and spaces that punctuate a life and a place. Over a weekend in October 1974, Perec sat in the Place Saint-Sulpice and wrote *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, an extended snapshot of the insignificant, everyday life of a small bit of the city.

Following Magnuson and Perec, over one day in April 2013 I sat along the edge of Shotpouch Creek near Burnt Woods, Oregon, and used words to sketch the insignificant, everyday life of the creek, or at least the life of this one day when nothing grand happened at all.

28 April 2013

5:25 pm.

Facing east-northeast.

All blue sky, warm.

Sitting along the path at the water's edge.

Two water channels on the slope to the south join to make a narrow stream maybe a pace-width across. A half-moon shape of a pool has eroded under constant flow and pressure from a short water-fall. A black bug with brownish wings hovers to the left, and another buzzes back and forth behind me.

The stream spreads in a quiet, shallow pool, longer than it is wide. I can't see what holds the pool in place; Shotpouch Creek is fast-moving and only feet away.

A small white bug drifts up from water.
Alder grove around the stream and pond.
Trees with multiple trunks and single new leaves but not yet on all twigs.
On a branch above me the insects have already eaten holes in most of the leaves.

One red cedar across Shotpouch Creek.
Dozens of alders.
The small water-fall is ten feet away, but the sound is deep and resonant, like an echo chamber.

5:43 pm.

White Volkswagen sedan drives southeast on road.

Insects over the pond disappear - must be a fish. Ripples.

A triangle of light reflects on the pond, showing the brown (logged) hillside across the road.

Sun is over my shoulder now midway down behind the trees on the ridgeline.

A black insect with brown wings circles my knees.

New breeze.

Leaves and grasses lowest to the ground are rhythmically moving, then calm.

Now taller grasses and leaves on the most spindly branches move in the wind.

(Looking more closely at roots trailing in pool:
Geranium. Horsetail reed sprouting in middle of stream).

Yellow bi-winged insect drifts north.

White alder twigs lie across, over, beside stream.

White flowers, like daisies, along the stream bank.

Bird call, *tweet*, from the orchard to the north.

Two almost-invisible insects hover over the dark half-moon pool.

Water-fall sounds in 1-2-1-2 pattern.

One more flying black bug.

A yellow bi-winged bug rising to the left.

A wild carrot between the alders?

Most of the alders are mature maybe 50 feet tall with trunks that would measure a dozen hand spans around or more. A few are younger, shorter, thinner.

6:03 pm.

The sun is almost at the ridgeline.

The edges of the watershed are clear here:

the ridge to the east is close, just across the creek, and the ridge behind me lies across a small valley.

Two conifers on the other side of the creek grow close together.

Blue SUV driving south, very dusty.

The road is dirt and gravel.

Bird call from the valley or orchard. Rapid. Again. Again.

Flying black insect near my feet.

A green bug rises from the grasses, flies north.

Nettles everywhere, and white-flowering carrot with ferny leaves.

Bright orange discs, very small cups, dot places where soil has been disturbed. A kind of fungus.

Dog barks up the road.

6:18 pm.

Airplane, sounds like a prop plane, may be heading north but I can't see it.

Clouds are on the horizon now, just over the ridge and coming in from the ocean.

Bird call. Again. Again. Again. Again.....

Then a different, laughing, more rapid call.

Although the sun is gone from where I sit, trees across Shotpouch Creek are still in sunlight.

Clear reflections in pond: no breeze.

Small fish jumps, water surface shakes.

White flowers on a gravel bar between the creek and a low, wet spot. Blossoms clustered like radish flowers.

More bird songs but no birds in sight.

Hear another prop airplane, somewhere west, heading northeast.

Clouds like thin ice sheets. Still blue sky to east.

Laughing bird call again.

A brown bug descends into half-moon pool.

White pickup truck with kingcab heading south. Muddy.

Colors are less saturated now.

A fallen alder leaf with galls embedded between veins.

A dull-brown bird flies in front of the cedar across the creek.

Bird calls from the orchard.

Quick, bubbly trilling from another across the stream.

6:38 pm.

Clouds are thicker.

I think it is the same brown bird now diving, pecking.

A root wad in the shallow pond, stringy.

Many hovering insects, easier to see when the light is flat and even.

Cloud cover from across watershed to other ridgeline.

Blobbish orange slug on rock cringes when I crouch down to look.

All the grasses are swaying in wind, alder leaves are rustling, shuddering.

Dog barking, very distant.

Slug hasn't moved.

Big thistles on the bank, long serrated hairy leaves.

Small brown moth bounces north over stream.

A few wild roses blooming, one under two large alders, another upstream.

Laughing bird call again.

Cedar snag on far bank of Shotpouch Creek.

7:00 pm.

Slug still in place.

Lone duck flying north.

Three turkey vultures circling to the west.

29 April 2013

10:07 am.

Looking north-northeast.

Rain all night, some blue sky, chilly.

Sitting on the gravel bar at the pond.

Silver-grey sedan heading south on road.

Angelica blooming, roots in water.

Long shrill bird call, then steady whistle, again, again.

More flowers: bleeding heart, salmon berry.

Silver-grey sedan heading north on road.

Black bird flies between trees, high in branches.

More bird song: high-pitched *cheep* followed by rapid trills.

Mud rock on the gravel bar breaks easily into pieces.

Some rocks are red, some with black swirls.

Lichen fallen from trees, a *Lobaria* from a Doug-fir

upstream? Can't see any *Lobaria* on alders.

Sun comes out and I can see through the water in the pond then the sun is behind a cloud and the surface of water turns dull and solid.

Flower sheaths and seeds float on water.

Everything is very still.

A fallen log on the right now colonized by grasses, nettles. Another log across the pond.

Ripples on water, shifting. Silver flash, more ripples.

Water strider, new watermarks with each stroke.

Another flash at the far side of the pond, not quite like a fish jumping. Another, another, another, again. Oh!

A pair of rough-skinned newts are swimming now in front of where I sit. Mating.

One on bottom is very orange, seven inches long. One on top is more gray and smaller. They swim towards the log on the opposite bank of the pond.

Now a bigger one with frilly gills and very long tail like a tadpole swims from the far end of the pond.

A salamander, I think. Lies on the bottom in shallow water.

Waterbug lands on a stick.

Mating pair of newts rest on a small log with dangly, filmy roots.

The salamander follows them.

Newts are twisting, circling.

Cool wind, seems to follow water paths.

Plants on the gravel bar: angelica, rye grass, nettles, piggy-back plant, sorrel, thistle, others I don't know.

10:38 am.

I wonder how long newts stay underwater.
A single one stops in front of me, little orange feet.
Grass has sprouted in shallow water.

Sky to west is gray. Little wind.
Alder leaf falls.
Ferns growing higher up on the bank.
The fiddleheads are still unfolding.

A pileup of newts drifts towards me.
Water dropping from leaves is making ripples in pond.
Or maybe it's raining again? I can't feel it.
Sun is completely behind the clouds but there are two
small patches of blue to northeast.

Newts, again, with salamander like a chaperone.
Bird chatter.

10:52 am.
A big-leaf maple with arching branches, leaning,
several broken off mid-limb, with new suckers heading
straight up for the light.
A dozen angelica rooted in a few square feet of
stream, slowing and redirecting flow. Rooted in late
summer when there is little water in the stream?
Twigs and leaves floating up in the pond, dislodged by
wrestling newts.

An insect with bubbles around his feet.
Another single newt, not far away.
More bird song, very sweet, twittering.

Rain.
Drops turning water surface into op-art.
Mating newts again.
Now two are following the pair.
Tissue-paper thin alder bark in curls and sheets on the
ground.

A third newt is interfering, turning the mating couple
upside down, capsizing them. It finally gives up and the
couple swim back to the far end.
Another mating pair now. The third newt tries to disrupt
this couple too, climbing on their backs.
11:09 am.

12:30 pm.
Silhouettes of alder against sky, subtle movement of
branches.
Sun is bright.
Old big-leaf maple branches are swaying slightly
back & forth (not up & down), many bent and broken
branches, now covered with moss.
Hatch of small insects is visible in front of the dark
moss background.

Cool breeze from the north.
Hatch is hovering head height above ground.
A row of salmonberry, as if planted.
An open field or small meadow on the other side of the stream. Soil looks recently disturbed, with only new and few sprouts.

Moss on some of the small maple branches is deeper than branch is thick.
A broken and leaning maple, not recent (dark wood, and there is moss growing in the breaks).
Faint twittering.
Maple branch spanning the stream.
More bird tweets and chitters.

Vertical branches on one leaning maple, with licorice ferns growing in the moss, each bobbing in a different direction. Maybe movement of one frond affects movement of the next.

Sun reflecting on water; blue sky.
Ruffled-edge mushroom on a decaying log, rusty-orange, white underneath, in dappled shade.
At first, the greens are homogeneous, mostly spring-green alder leaves. After a time, there is lime green, Spanish moss, grey-green, yellow, slate-green.
More: umber, chartreuse, jade, emerald, acid green, copper patina, turquoise.

I stand on the edge of the gravel bar, and a solitary newt swims towards me and stops, swims to the surface and gulps air. Her (his?) belly is orange and very round.

A fish darts, crazily, from one end of the pond to the other.
Newt has a brown-gray back. It moves slowly, swaying then stopping.
The salamander approaches too, prominent eyes, big head.

12:55 pm.
I moved back up on the bank to a sunny spot.
Lichen: fine filament, sage-green with small orange spider. Other with flat leaves dotted with orange cups edged in white.
Moss: long hairs, isolated tufts, clinging, like snakeskin.
Alder bark: cracking horizontally, against the grain, geometric like basalt.
A short alder branch, a hole where another branch grew.
More bugs.
A seed has sprouted in the bark, half-inch high, pink growing tip, white stalk, bright green root.
As white bark of the alder cracks and falls off, the red sapwood is exposed.

I hear lapping from ripples upstream.
Slow white clouds drifting south and east, cover the sun.

Long, fine branches of alder respond quickly to wind.
Maples behind them are slow to move.
The alder is leaning to the west, and all the branches are leaning even further around the trunk so they can grow towards the light. No branches on underside, or only small ones. Dropped branches at base of trunk.

Last year's growth underneath my feet:
Alder leaves beige with deep brown veins. They crack into pieces rather than slowly disintegrating.
Maple leaves yellow-brown, left with only skeleton veins.
A cluster of raised black dots on one.
Dried rye grass straw, hollow stem.
Alder catkins.
Moss chunks.
Piles of earth along the path - gopher or mole -
I can't see holes

1:26 pm.
Dog barks, howls.

1:30 pm
I walk to the creek edge. Rocks make shallow turbulent ripples here. Two logs narrow the water to create the pool.

White pick-up truck heading south on road. Clean.

A cedar tree with a broken top is across the creek; its side branches are vertical and as big around as the trunk. Cedar bark is splayed in water.
The sun comes out and the water and the leaves sparkle for a moment.

Acid green of new vine maple leaves against background of brown-green moss.
The maple south of the cedar also has a broken trunk and a branch growing as second trunk.

White pick-up truck heads north on road. Clean.

Another cedar south of the maple is leaning, almost parallel to the ground for about twenty-feet before it curves up.
Other logs have fallen into the creek: an alder on the west bank, much debris piled up against it, four cedar trunks in the water upstream.
Faint *whup-whup* of bird.

2:24 pm.
Clouds are quickly moving south.
A twig in pond floats south too.
Dog barks, howls. Again.
Moth flutters south to north.
Sweet bird song but no birds in sight. The orchard is behind me and in the sun; most bird song is from there.

Sun on the salmonberries across the meadow.
Trees are very still.

I walk further down the creek to the south.
The creek bank has been scoured and is steep here and there. The water has made a bowl of two linked cavities, each with a fine-grained sandy bottom and a pile of rocks temporarily containing the water.

Bi-winged yellow insect floats south to north.
White butterfly with blue-black torso.

Moss on alders is striped and patchy, thickest on the lower trunk up to waist-high, then spotty. Often mossy at branch nodes but not always. Wind catches the two opposing leaves on a nettle stalk, waving them quickly back and forth like a fast running chicken (lumbering).
Twig in pond has floated a few more feet south.

2:39 pm.
I've moved north along the creek to be in the sun.
Black bird flies across the clearing. First bird I've seen since morning.

In a meadow-clearing, I find a foot-high stump cut to a sharp spear-point by a beaver. It is still newly-cut wood, likely felled this spring. The fallen log lies toward the creek. Another stump is next to it, but the rest of the tree that belongs to it is gone.

Hear car driving south (obscured).

The water is deeper and quieter here.
Willow grows in thickets overhanging the creek, upright branches.
The tip of an alder branch is in water, and branch nods like a fishing pole.

A loud summer buzzing fly around my head.
A section of log fallen in the creek, creating a deep calm pocket of water with a sandy bottom.
Catkin seeds and black flying insects land on my paper.
Another log, a cedar on the bank, willow and nettles growing around it.

Hear car heading north (obscured)

The creek flow is relentless, insanely following gravity, as poet Francis Ponge wrote about water.
A few tall single strands of blue-green rye grass with nettles and dock. Some daffodils too, and geum and bleeding heart and horsetail reed.
Most of the daffodil flowers are gone, though, and the leaves are starting to die back.

A cedar tree, now a log in the creek, was huge.
It has fallen apart, unfolded in the water like a paper flower, wood petals on the sandy bottom.
The bank upstream of the cedar log is deeply undercut.

3:05 pm.

Yard work machinery across the road.

A fish jumps in the deeper, faster water.

Bleached branches, grass, nettles on the river rocks,
round cobbles, beiges match the color of the creek
bottom and that gray of a newt's back.

Another fish jumps, deep plop and slight sucking sound.

Sun. Vulture to the north flying in slow circles.

A few clouds to the south.

Eddies behind the log send leaves and twigs into
frenzied spirals.

Melodic then chattering bird song.

The sound of metal scrapping metal across the road.

Yellow schoolbus heading south on road.

Wind is high in the trees.

Wispy clouds.

Piles of sticks on the opposite bank, on the other side
of the gravel bar where water slows.

I find the resident garter snake on my way back to the
house, lying very still in the grass.

Yellow schoolbus heading north on road.

3:25 pm.

