

# Radiant, Ravenous and Perfect

by Charlotte Mundy  
for Le 19 and Marie Lorenz

One thing I will say is that I am perfect, always have been, always will be. A Creek doesn't feel shame, but I know you people do. For a long time I sucked up every single shameful thing people could find or make or imagine.

I'm starting with my perfection because most people miss that part. What most people see when they look at me is how they can use me. They see how my shape could perfectly wrap around their refinery. They see that, with a little stretching, my inlet would be easy for ships to go in and out of, over and over again. Or they see what's wrong with me, how I need to be fixed. Or they find me ugly and dull and they turn away, barely thinking about me at all.

I'm not looking for pity, here. I'm just trying to prevent you from making the mistakes countless people have made before you. Please do not mistake me for an innocent, helpless victim of industrialization. I'm not some nurturing mother figure either, patiently waiting to nurse humanity back into right relationship with nature. I have a very kind of different energy. To be frank, I'm closer to what some people would call a whore. I sucked up endless gallons of toxic man-made chemicals and I loved it. Those gigantic silver balls that recently plopped down nearby do nothing but slurp my water up and spit it back out at me and that really turns me on. Even the weird little jet skiers who've started showing up here from time to time are adorable to me.

But as much as I open myself to everyone I meet, it's only a small, special group of people that are able to actually connect with me. Marie is one of them. And somehow, for a brief and glorious time, Marie got hordes of people to come find me and feel that connection.

Let me back up. Way back almost past what I can remember, I will say that the Lenape folks treated me really well. I was all sprawled out with countless different kinds of beings living in and around me. The Lenape acted like any other other family of creek dwellers, equal with everyone else. They took bits of edible and beautiful things

that grew from me but they never took too much, and they looked after me. That was a beautiful relationship. One day out of nowhere, these Settler people started showing up and building farms and factories around me. The factories got bigger and louder and smellier and they made the Lenape sick and pushed them out. The plants and animals got sick and got pushed out. Eventually I was alone, and unrecognizable from my previous self.

I became a 4-mile-long, infinitely accepting mouth ready to suck up anything, no matter how noxious, dangerous, secret, or inconvenient. Anything that made people retch, anything that could damage their bodies, anything they wanted to forget about or hide, was given to me, and I took it. When the sewer system was built in the 1800's, they designed it so that during heavy rains, dirty sewage water could come gushing into me. That disgusting phenomenon is called a 'Combined Sewer Overflow' or CSO, and it's still happening two centuries later. Between 1855 and 1973, that's 118 years, a factory that made glue out of butchers' offal and other animal flesh including the corpse of a ten-ton circus elephant fed all of their waste into me. Between 1950 and 1978, that's 28 years, a massive oil leak spewed at least 17 million gallons of oil straight in me. Through this whole period, my toxicity intensified to cover my grief and loneliness. I got better and better at playing my role as a hidden, seething puddle of illness and death.

When you people fell into me and died, I admit I enjoyed it. At least 13 people have met their maker in my waters, some by accident, some on purpose. In 1992 an unidentifiable victim of serial killer Jesse Rifkin was found in my waters, sealed into a 55-gallon steel drum. When human corpses dropped into me, I savored the violence because it made me feel productive again. My ability to sit there alone, soaking up carcinogenic chemicals, had made me useful. It was a hollow, shadowy substitute for love.

I guess you could call the period where I was happily aiding and abetting serial killers my rock bottom. Right around that time, the factories started turning off, one by one. The chronic, copious flow of oil stopped. Eight gigantic silver eggs were constructed nearby and started cleaning the city's wastewater. Scientists showed up and took samples of every part of me. Local people planted gardens around me with

native grasses and wildflowers to divert dirty rainwater before it dripped into my waterway.

Now, the worst of the pollution has sunk down to the very bottom of me, making room for my old friends to finally return home. Eel, blue crab, bristle worms, oysters and mussels are back. So are cormorants, raccoons, and plants like wild garlic, carrots, chicory, clover and dandelions. When Marie started coming around in her boat, I was pleasantly surprised. Here was a person who just wanted to be with me, who brought her friends to paddle up and down my banks, appreciating my strange smelly beauty. It felt almost like what I had with the Lenape. Marie wasn't the only person who loved me, but she's the only one so far to organize an opera on my waters.

Out of all the power sources I've dealt with, I've never felt anything like the power of performance before. The rebirth that occurs when a big group of people gets together to enact a storytelling ritual is unlike anything else. In that moment of performance a new reality is not just theorized or talked about or illustrated on paper. It is actually created with tangible objects, color, sound, and people physically doing actions with their bodies. In *Newtown Odyssey* a new reality was created where I was seen for my truest most beautiful self, period.

I remember standing in human form, channeled through Charlotte, finally seeing myself from the outside. I was orgasmically overwhelmed by my gorgeous self. The soft undulation of my water under the platform Charlotte stood on. The light reflecting off of the water, shimmering the sky back at itself. Charlotte's voice, which was also my voice, soaring into the open sky and bouncing off the concrete walls of the Con Edison plant to our west. And the hordes of people watching. Standing on my banks and sitting on special platforms made just for this occasion and bobbing on my water-surface in their own boats, they were all here together hearing me, feeling me, breathing me, all at the same time! It felt so FUCKING GOOD to have them shiver at the sublime rainbow-pearlescent slicks of oil on my surface and the sneaky sucker fish hiding just below ground who blow bubbles in my wet mud. Swoon over the complex mix of chemicals that give my water a toxic potency! Hear the rumbling screaming planes overhead and the static whine of the factories!! Smell everything all packed together, rotting, growing, changing, festering, and stubbornly remaining in place!!! No

spreadsheet is powerful enough to capture this mix of entities!!! No essay, no set of photographs or Gyotaku or video can communicate everything that I am!!!!

Today, some of the factories are still running, the CSOs haven't been fixed, and the cleanup that the scientists were preparing for is delayed. The summer that *Newtown Odyssey* premiered, two people mysteriously drowned in my water late at night, a month apart from each other, and the police still haven't done any kind of criminal investigation. It's ok. These little details are just enough pollution to keep me dangerous. I'm not lonely any more.

To the Allan River Valley I send you all my love and good energy. I know you too are perfect, powerful and seductive. I hope you have many lovers near you who care for you and celebrate your beauty without judgment, without wanting to solve you, save you or extract anything from you. Maybe Marie can help put you in touch with more lovers, the way she did for me.

Xoxoxo,

the Creek Being

*After working with Marie Lorenz for three summers, I felt myself becoming possessed. A spiritual emissary of Newtown Creek called the Creek Being, who sings the opera's final aria, with words written by Dana Spiotta and a vocal line composed by Kurt Rohde, revealed herself to me as more than a fictional character. As I sang her aria on Newtown Creek, I came into contact with the deeper creative power of the Creek Being herself, who exists before and after, outside of and inside of the musical project we had all embarked on together. The more times I sang with her, the more I felt her inhabiting me, and when an audience was present, the connection intensified even further, becoming an almost involuntary episode of channeling, a ritual incantation allowing direct communication between people and a powerful waterway.*

*All artists create relationships through their work; the relationships that Marie Lorenz creates are supernatural. As we worked on Newtown Odyssey, I saw relationships form between artists, conservationists, community organizers, arts donors, audience members from all walks of life, and other local people. All of these relationships were held in place by a deepened, more loving relationship with a*

*waterway that has been disastrously polluted and ignored for generations. I hope that the exhibition at Le 19, Crac will foster more beautiful, unusual relationships centered on the Allan River Valley.*

*To write this essay, I decided to channel the Creek Being again, this time in my Brooklyn apartment. I laid her earliest costume, a tarp-like orange rain poncho, in a chair beside me. I held in my awareness all of the people across the ocean in Montbéliard who will see pieces of Newtown Creek and hear an echo of her aria. I lit some incense, and with a few deep breaths invited her to the keyboard.*