

Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache  
*Juliana Spahr*

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The image of the creek chub is by Todd Crail. I got it off the web at <http://farmertodd.com/nanfa>. He caught the creek chub at Columbiana County in the Elk Run, SR517 and Lower Elkton Road in 2002. Thanks to Todd for permission to use on the cover.

*I*

We come into the world.

We come into the world and there it is.

The sun is there.

The brown of the river leading to the blue and the brown of the ocean is there.

Salmon and eels are there moving between the brown and the brown and the blue.

The green of the land is there.

Elders and youngers are there.

Fighting and possibility and love are there.

And we begin to breathe.

We come into the world and there it is.

We come into the world without and we breathe it in.

We come into the world.

We come into the world and we too begin to move between the brown and the blue and the green of it.

## *II*

We came into the world at the edge of a stream.

The stream had no name but it began from a spring and flowed down a hill into the Scioto that then flowed into the Ohio that then flowed into the Mississippi that then flowed into the Gulf of Mexico.

The stream was a part of us and we were a part of the stream and we were thus part of the rivers and thus part of the gulfs and the oceans.

And we began to learn the stream.

We looked under stones for the caddisfly larvae and its adhesive.

We counted the creek chub and we counted the slenderhead darter.

We learned to recognize the large, upright, dense, candle-like clusters of yellowish flowers at the branch ends of the horsechestnut and we appreciated the feathery gracefulness of the drooping, but upturning, branchlets of the larch.

We mimicked the catlike meow, the soft quirrt or kwut, and the louder, grating ratchet calls of the gray catbird.

We put our heads together.

We put our heads together with all these things, with the caddisfly larva, with the creek chub and the slenderhead darter, with the horsechestnut and the larch, with the gray catbird.

We put our heads together on a narrow pillow, on a stone, on a narrow stone pillow, and we talked to each other all day long because we loved.

We loved the stream.

And we were of the stream.

And we couldn't help this love because we arrived at the bank of the stream and began breathing and the stream was various and full of information and it changed our bodies with its rotten with its cold with its clean with its mucky with fallen leaves with its things that bite the edges of the skin with its sand and dirt with its pungent at moments with its dry and prickly with its warmth with its mushy and moist with its hard flat stones on the bottom with its horizon lines of gently rolling hills with its darkness with its dappled light with its cicadas buzz with its trills of birds.

### *III*

This is where we learned love and where we learned depth and where we learned layers and where we learned connections between layers.

We learned and we loved the black sandshell, the ash, the american bittern, the harelip sucker, the yellow bullhead, the beech, the great blue heron, the dobsonfly larva, the water penny larva, the birch, the redhead, the white catspaw, the elephant ear, the buckeye, the king eider, the river darter, the sauger, the burning bush, the common merganser, the limpet, the mayfly nymph, the cedar, the turkey vulture, the spectacle case, the flat floater, the cherry, the red tailed hawk, the longnose gar, the brook trout, the chestnut, the killdeer, the river snail, the giant floater, the chokeberry, the gray catbird, the rabbitsfoot, the slenderhead darter, the crabapple, the american robin, the creek chub, the stonefly nymph, the dogwood, the warbling vireo, the sow bug, the elktoe, the elm, the marsh wren, the monkeyface, the central mudminnow, the fir, the gray-cheeked thrush, the white bass, the predaceous diving beetle, the hawthorn, the scud, the salamander mussel, the hazelnut, the warbler, the mapleleaf, the american eel, the hemlock, the speckled chub, the whirligig beetle larva, the hickory, the sparrow, the caddisfly larva, the fluted shell, the horse chestnut, the wartyback, the white heelsplitter, the larch, the pine grosbeak, the brook stickleback, the river redhorse, the locust, the

ebonyshelf, the giant water bug, the maple, the eastern phoebe, the white sucker, the creek heelsplitter, the mulberry, the crane fly larva, the mountain madtom, the oak, the bank swallow, the wabash pigtoe, the damselfly larva, the pine, the stonecat, the kidneyshell, the plum, the midge larva, the eastern sand darter, the rose, the purple wartyback, the narrow-winged damselfly, the spruce, the pirate perch, the threehorn wartyback, the sumac, the black fly larva, the redbreast dace, the tree-of-heaven, the orange-foot pimpleback, the dragonfly larva, the walnut, the gold fish, the butterfly, the striped fly larva, the willow, the freshwater drum, the ohio pigtoe, the warmouth, the mayfly nymph, the clubshell.

And this was just the beginning of the list.

Our hearts took on many things.

Our hearts took on new shapes, new shapes every day as we went to the stream every day.

Our hearts took on the shape of well-defined riffles and pools, clean substrates, woody debris, meandering channels, floodplains, and mature streamside forests.

Our hearts took on the shape of the stream and became riffled and calmed and muddy and clean and flooded and shrunken dry.

Our hearts took on the shape of whirligigs swirling across the water.

We shaped our hearts into the sycamore trees along the side of the stream and we let into our hearts the long pendulous polygamous racemes of its small green

flowers, the first-formed male flowers with no pistil and then the later arriving hairy ovary with its two curved stigmas.

We let ourselves love the one day of the adult life of the mayfly as it swarms, mates in flight, and dies all without eating.

And we shaped our hearts into the water willow and into the eggs spawned in the water willow.

Our hearts took on the brilliant blues, reds, and oranges of the breeding male rainbow darter and our hearts swam to the female rainbow darter and we poked her side with our snout as she buried herself under the gravel and we laid upon her as she vibrated.

We let leaves and algae into our hearts and then we let the mollusks and the insects and we let the midge larvae into our heart and then the stonefly nymph and then a minnow came into our heart and with it a bass and then we let the blue heron fly in, the raccoon amble by, the snapping turtle and the watersnake also.

We immersed ourselves in the shallow stream. We lied down on the rocks on our narrow pillow stone and let the water pass over us and our heart was bathed in glochidia and other things that attach to the flesh.

And as we did this we sang.

We sang gentle now.

Gentle now clubshell, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now warmouth, mayfly nymph, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now willow, freshwater drum, ohio pigtoe, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now walnut, gold fish, butterfly, striped fly larva, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now black fly larva, redbreast dace, tree-of-heaven, orange-foot pimpleback, dragonfly larva, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now purple wartyback, narrow-winged damselfly, spruce, pirate perch, threehorn wartyback, sumac, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now pine, stonecat, kidneyshell, plum, midge larva, eastern sand darter, rose, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now creek heelsplitter, mulberry, crane fly larva, mountain madtom, oak, bank swallow, wabash pigtoe, damselfly larva, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now pine grosbeak, brook stickleback, river redhorse, locust, ebonyshell, giant water bug, maple, eastern phoebe, white sucker, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now whirligig beetle larva, hickory, sparrow, caddisfly larva, fluted shell, horse chestnut, wartyback, white heelsplitter, larch, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now white bass, predaceous diving beetle, hawthorn, scud, salamander mussel, hazelnut, warbler, mapleleaf, american eel, hemlock, speckled chub, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now stonefly nymph, dogwood, warbling vireo, sow bug, elktoe, elm, marsh wren, monkeyface, central mudminnow, fir, gray-cheeked thrush, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now longnose gar, brook trout, chestnut, killdeer, river snail, giant floater, chokeberry, gray catbird, rabbitsfoot, slenderhead darter, crabapple, american robin, creek chub, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now king eider, river darter, sauger, burning bush, common merganser, limpet, mayfly nymph, cedar, turkey vulture, spectacle case, flat floater, cherry, red tailed hawk, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now black sandshell, ash, american bittern, harelip sucker, yellow bullhead, beech, great blue heron, dobsonfly larva, water penny larva, birch, redhead, white catspaw, elephant ear, buckeye, don't add to heartache.

Gentle now, we sang. Circle our heart in rapture, in love-ache. Circle our heart.

#### *IV*

It was not all long lines of connection and utopia.

It was a brackish stream and it went through the field beside our house.

But we let into our hearts the brackish parts of it also.

Some of it knowingly.

We let in soda cans and we let in cigarette butts and we let in pink tampon applicators and we let in six pack of beer connectors and we let in various other pieces of plastic that would travel through the stream.

And some of it unknowingly.

We let the run off from agriculture, surface mines, forestry, home wastewater treatment systems, construction sites, urban yards, and roadways into our hearts.

We let chloride, magnesium, sulfate, manganese, iron, nitrite/nitrate, aluminum, suspended solids, zinc, phosphorus, fertilizers, animal wastes, oil, grease, dioxins, heavy metals and lead go through our skin and into our tissues.

We were born at the beginning of these things, at the time of chemicals combining, at the time of stream run off.

These things were a part of us and would become more  
a part of us but we did not know it yet.  
Still we noticed enough to sing a lament.

To sing in lament for whoever lost her elephant ear lost  
her mountain madtom and whoever lost her butterfly  
lost her harelip sucker and whoever lost her white  
catspaw lost her rabbitsfoot and whoever lost her  
monkeyface lost her speckled chub and whoever lost her  
wartback lost her ebonyshell and whoever lost her  
pirate perch lost her ohio pigtoe lost her clubshell.

V

What I did not know as I sang the lament of what was becoming lost and what was already lost was how this loss would happen.

I did not know that I would turn from the stream to each other.

I did not know I would turn to each other.

That I would turn to each other to admire the softness of each other's breast, the folds of each other's elbows, the brightness of each other's eyes, the smoothness of each other's hair, the evenness of each other's teeth, the firm blush of each other's lips, the firm softness of each other's breasts, the fuzz of each other's calves, thighs, the rich, ripe pungency of each other's smell, all of it, each other's cheeks, legs, neck, roof of mouth, webbing between the fingers, tips of nails and also cuticles, hair on toes, whorls on fingers, skin discolorations.

I turned to each other.

Ensnared, bewildered, I turned to each other and from the stream.

I turned to each other and I began to work for the chemical factory and I began to work for the paper mill

and I began to work for the atomic waste disposal plant  
and I began to work at keeping men in jail.

I turned to each other.

I didn't even say goodbye elephant ear, mountain  
madtorn, butterfly, harelip sucker, white catspaw,  
rabbitsfoot, monkeyface, speckled chub, wartyback,  
ebonyshell, pirate perch, ohio pigtoe, clubshell.

I replaced what I knew of the stream with Lifestream  
Total Cholesterol Test Packets, with Snuggle Emerald  
Stream Fabric Softener Dryer Sheets, with Tisserand  
Aromatherapy Aroma-Stream Cartridges, with Filter  
Stream Dust Tamer, and Streamzap PC Remote Con-  
trol, Acid Stream Launcher, and Viral Data Stream.

I didn't even say goodbye elephant ear, mountain  
madtorn, butterfly, harelip sucker, white catspaw,  
rabbitsfoot, monkeyface, speckled chub, wartyback,  
ebonyshell, pirate perch, ohio pigtoe, clubshell.

I put a Streamline Tilt Mirror in my shower and I kept  
a crystal Serenity Sphere with a Winter Stream view on  
my dresser.

I didn't even say goodbye elephant ear, mountain  
madtorn, butterfly, harelip sucker, white catspaw,  
rabbitsfoot, monkeyface, speckled chub, wartyback,  
ebonyshell, pirate perch, ohio pigtoe, clubshell.

I bought a Gulf Stream Blue Polyester Boat Cover for  
my fourteen to sixteen foot V-Hull Fishing boats with  
beam widths up to sixty-eight feet and I talked about  
value stream management with men in suits over a desk.

I didn't even say goodbye elephant ear, mountain  
madtorn, butterfly, harelip sucker, white catspaw,  
rabbitsfoot, monkeyface, speckled chub, wartyback,  
ebonyshell, pirate perch, ohio pigtoe, clubshell.

I just turned to each other and the body parts of the  
other suddenly glowed with the beauty and detail that I  
had found in the stream.

I put my head together on a narrow pillow and talked  
with each other all night long.

And I did not sing.

I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.

I did not sing groaning wounds.

I did not sing otototoi; dark, all merged together, oi.

I did not sing groaning wounds.

I did not sing o wo, wo, wo!

I did not sing I see, I see.

I did not sing wo, wo!