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Digital ink jet print, 13 x 19 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MEREDITH SABINI

Four Oysters

Discovering our
hunter-gatherer roots

Four oysters gave their lives for my supper. I ate them raw. And wondered, as they slid down my gullet, at what point did they cease to be living creatures and become “food?” You might think it would spoil my appetite to contemplate this while eating, but it did not. I am called to reduce my ignorance about nature’s cycles of life and death. In dreams, the Ancestors have encouraged me to restore the ancient ways; tribal peoples minimally infected by modernity—the Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Malay of New Guinea, the Achuar of Ecuador, and the Ainu of Hokkaido—inspire me.

In the traditional world-view of the Ainu. . . humans (ainu) . . . are totally dependent for their survival on the other species with which they share the world. . . The non-human species are known as kamui, which means “deity.” . . The kamui are “gods” in the Paleolithic sense.¹

The oysters came from the gal who’d hosted our annual neighborhood potluck. As we were cleaning up the next day, she found a mesh bag of oysters at the bottom of an ice chest, still chilled. Not liking them herself and not sure who’d brought them, she offered me the lot. I love oysters.

But I’d never shucked a fresh one and lacked the proper tool. A trip to the fish market that afternoon, and I owned my first oyster knife, a wide, blunt blade the length of my index finger. When I confessed my ignorance about how to use it to the lanky young man behind the counter, he took an oyster from the display case and showed me where to insert the blade. He also cautioned me to wrap the hand holding the oyster in a thick towel in case the knife slipped. I mentioned that I was beneficiary of a dozen oysters of unknown origins; he reassured me they live a long time if kept cold.

I don’t relish killing living things and have little occasion to do it. But I am suspicious that my aversion stems from the kind of cultural conditioning that I’d prefer to shed. After all, I do eat things others have killed for me. With

¹ Quotes about the Ainu are taken from “Inter-species Communication and the Ainu Way of Life,” by Donald Philippi, in *Language of the Birds: Tales, Texts, and Poems of Interspecies Communication*, ed. David Guss (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 186–201.