

It was dusk by now and the moon was just emerging over the horizon, peeking through madrone and Doug fir. At that low angle, the cold white orb was enormous. It glared at me like a searchlight, eye to eye, as if challenging: “Is this all you have to offer—an ignominious end for the creatures you choose for this ritual?” Smashing them with a hammer would be a defeat for both of us, I knew that. It would mean an undignified death, like the squirrels flattened onto the asphalt by Michelin tires.

Had I not risked bodily injury when I raced out onto roadways to pull off animals in order to give them a decent burial? Had I not sat with dying relatives as they paddled slowly up the river Styx? Surely I could do more for the sacrament of my daily bread than crudely bashing in their shells. The entrance was blocked for a reason. The moon is a harsh mistress. I put the hammer down.

By slaying the animal, the humans set free the spirit of the deity trapped inside the disguise and enable him to return to his own world. . . . The humans feast and drink, dance and sing in honor of the visiting deity. . . . Feasting and drinking are the most important cultic acts by which the Ainu attained communion with the deities. . . . The performance of the necessary ritual acts for the “animals” is a religious act essential for human survival.

Nearby were some stones around the base of a fir tree, beautiful jaspers I had carried back from a far northern shore. They too knew the motion of tides, the pounding of waves. I surveyed them to find the right size for my palm, the right heft for the mollusk. As I knelt among the stones, I felt myself drift into the interstices between present and past, here and there, as the veil between the worlds drew back. I slipped out of modernity into *illo tempore* of primordiality. I became a hunter-gatherer:

I am in the wilderness alone. It is dark now and puma will soon be roaming, and bear. I have to work quickly, the intense odor of shellfish attracts the predators. This may be the only flesh I consume for days, so I must crack them carefully in order not to damage any of the meat. I pound one rock against another until I have a sharp point. I insert it into one end of the mollusk and flick my wrist. The shells divide. Delicate flesh, held neatly in the

curves of glistening nacre, is now visible. The creature lies innocently inside. Surely it knows that the roof of its abode has been lifted. Surely it feels the cool air waft over its body. Tenderly I tell it I have come. I invite it to leave its home and come into mine. Taking flint once more, I sever the tough round muscle at the base, freeing the creature from its mooring. Resting the shell against my lower lip, I tip the salty juice into my mouth. Then I let the oyster slide down my throat. I feel the animal pass slowly through the full length of my chest cavity.

Perhaps a marine biologist could estimate the rate of oxygen deprivation or a nutritionist could describe how digestive enzymes work on protein. But scientific objectivity is not what I sought. Not physical information but metaphysical.

I felt the oysters being-in-me and dying-into-me. Knowledge like this is not extinct, merely covered over by eons of forgetting. By civilization. This ritual with the oysters escorted me back. Together we journeyed to that place where matter and spirit are undivided. My body was the vessel for their meeting.

As for when the oysters made the transition from this world to the next, I am not sure. But I do know that I communed with them the whole way, with gratitude.

Meredith Sabini is a widely published essayist and poet who compiled the popular anthology *The Earth Has a Soul: C.G. Jung on Nature, Technology, and Modern Life*, and contributed to *The Sacred Heritage: The Influence of Shamanism on Analytical Psychology* and to *Least Loved Beasts of the Really Wild West*. A dream specialist by training, she is founder and director of the Dream Institute of Northern California, a nonprofit cultural and educational center in Berkeley. She is a native of the Bay Area and is of Amish ancestry.

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