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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.

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green forms of life, it's less troubling—there's no blood to spurt or guts to ooze. Vegetables and roots digest nutrients from the soil without producing any effluent that needs removing; we may peel a parsnip or pare an eggplant, but it isn't necessary.

Preparing animals for the table was a regular part of my growing up, and I am not unduly squeamish about it. In fact, I'm always curious to find out what's inside a new creature—is there a liver, a gizzard? Where's the heart, the stomach? On Sundays, Grandpa used to take a chicken from the coop, lay its head on an old tree stump, and whack it off with the cleaver. The body lurched around the yard, its red fountain pumping, while I, toddling shirtless in diapers, chased after it. A plaything I could never catch, the bird was always faster, even without its head. Eventually, Gram fetched the chicken, dunked it quickly in boiling water, then splayed it out on her aproned lap to pluck off the feathers.

> *"The Ainu world," writes [Hitoshi] Watanabe, "was full of divine visitors: all the natural resources exploited by them were* kamui-*spirits in temporary guises. In consequence all their gathering activities implied social intercourse with* kamui."

When I was older, my stepdad took me fishing at the local pier, showing me how to slit open the belly of our catch and pull entrails out by hand. I wasn't keen on the task but managed it without gagging, and still enjoyed the tasty dish Mom fixed.

During the counterculture movement of the 1970s, I was a vegetarian for several years. And often hungry. It was a feeble attempt to participate in a harm-free world. *The Secret Life of Plants* had not yet been published, so I assumed that plant life felt nothing when picked or chopped. It turned out that even plants emit a frantic wave pattern when they are about to be exterminated.

My spiritual leanings eventually took other forms and I returned to selective meat eating—mostly fish and chicken, with an occasional pork chop or lamb burger. That animals eat one another came to seem the natural order of things. Snakes eat mice, lions eat gazelles, chimps eat small monkeys, birds eat insects, and we humans are primates with canine teeth.

> *When they come on their visits to the humans, the gods. . . have business (*irauketupa*) in mind. Their business is trade with the humans, and how this god-human barter is effected is the central mystery of the Ainu religion. . . . If they intend to engage in trade on a visit, they put on their best costumes. The word for these costumes is* hayokpe. . . . *The* hayokpe *of a god is a tangible disguise which the humans can physically see. . . . For instance, the god of the mountains . . . comes wearing a bear costume. The god of the sea, . . . who rules the food animals in the ocean, comes in the guise of a . . . killer whale. . . . The guardian spirit of the land . . . assumes the form of an owl.*

When I was about fifty, it dawned on me quite suddenly one day that I'd never been fully responsible for my own sustenance, start to finish. I happened to be at the stables waiting for a riding lesson and was watching the shy pea hens, plodding ducks, pregnant goats, and snappish geese when I realized these were all "food." I begged off the lesson and went home to spend the afternoon under the oak tree, contemplating how this lapse could have occurred. What Girl Scout badge, what basic lesson in life, had I missed?

I'd grown my own veggies, knew how to save seeds, collect rainwater; I could prune fruit trees and dry the harvest. Living on a wilderness property, I'd learned to harvest bay nuts, leach acorns, and process animal hides, including one road-killed skunk I was especially proud of. For many years, I'd gathered and served wild mushrooms—*Lactarius*, *Armillaria*, *Boletus*—without poisoning myself or anyone else with unidentified *Amanita* or *Cortinarius*. Finding food, being around animals, tolerating death—these weren't the issue. It was putting them all together in a sequence leading to the cook pot.

By midlife, I had lived through fire, flood, drought, and earthquake and had no more illusions about the benevolence of nature. Each had come to my neighborhood, my own land, and left its scar. My naïveté having been duly eroded by these potent experiences, I no longer took arable soil or potable water for granted. This made my discovery at the stables all the more troubling. I did eat animals but let others do the "dirty work." I pledged to correct this. Someone had gone through the effort of collecting those oysters, and someone else ought to honor them by completing the cycle. I took up the challenge.

I put four oysters in a shallow pail of water and laid out the equipment I'd need in a clearing behind my house, an old hunter's cabin on the edge of town. A fitting place for this venture. I sat on the ground in front of the pail, reached in, and took out the first oyster. My right hand was carefully wrapped in a thick towel, my left held the oyster knife. I searched for the seam on the shell. The blade slipped in and, with a sharp twist of my wrist, the two halves separated. I set it aside, denying myself the immediate pleasure of gulping it down, and took out another. Again, the blade went in easily and the shells separated.

But this was beginner's luck. The next two would not permit access. I couldn't find the hinge, couldn't get the knife to go in. It was like that frustrating dream in which you have to make a phone call but can't remember the numbers, or you remember the numbers but can't get your fingers to press them correctly.

Oysters aren't like other shellfish I am familiar with. Living near the Pacific Ocean most of my life, I've often gathered mussels to cook over a fire pit dug in wet sand. They are simple to pry off the rocks at low tide—a pocket knife, church key, or just a good tug usually suffices. And mussels are easy to eat—pressure from the internal steam makes them open right up; their coral-gray flesh can be lifted out with your fingers. As easy as opening a coin purse and taking out a quarter for the parking meter. By contrast, extracting oysters seemed more like getting the family jewels out of the safe-deposit box or convincing the Loomis armored car driver that you'd like just a peek inside.

> *A human hunter does not choose and kill a bear or a deer. It is, instead, the deity masquerading as an animal who chooses the hunter and blesses him by leaving the animal costume as a present.*

Was there some rightness in these bivalves not yielding readily to my human desire? Our hunter-gatherer ancestors spent days tracking caribou across tundra or sweating for hours in the sun digging witchetty grubs from beneath thornbush. I had tracked this tasty food all the way across a paved road. Why should the gift of their flesh donate itself to my cause merely because I happened to knock at the door of their shell? How arrogant to assume I could readily cleave the tough covering of an animal whose place of origin was unknown to me, using a tool I had not made and had no experience with.

I felt embarrassed, and humbled. I may have been halfway through the shucking, but I sensed some mystery rite was just beginning. It seemed authentic because of the fear that suddenly rose up in me: I was tempted to exit this drama and rush to the nearest grocery store for a nice clean jar of oysters that someone else, even a machine, had prepared. What force was trying to lure me from my trial? Was I reluctant to have killing on my hands . . . was that why I couldn't find the opening? I pictured a young person on their first vision quest suddenly realizing that there might *really be* spirits in the forest and weighing this unseen danger against the potential disgrace of hightailing it back to camp and sneaking into a warm tent.

Maybe men, with their more substantial biceps, were better at this than women. It was usually the men who went out to hunt with curare-tipped arrows while the women gathered roots and tubers, kids in tow. What was I doing trying to slaughter my own prey? Perhaps it wasn't heroism I lacked, only strength. I decided to fetch a hammer.

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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