

I'm going to tell you a story now. It's about this fish you see here, tattooed on my arm. I started getting tattoos of endangered animals last year, in the middle of a period of heavy discouragement. I have been a climate change activist for nine years now. It's my primary work and informs every part of my life, including my parenting. When I began working on this issue, we thought we had time. We thought we had a hundred years until the worst effects of climate change would be felt, and until the so-called tipping points were reached, when natural processes took over and accelerated warming out of our control. There might have been fifty activists in Boston, in 2007, working on this issue, and knowledge of the crisis in the larger culture was incredibly scant. Now we have a movement of thousands in Boston alone, and millions nationwide. I take some credit for this work, but in the process I have grown tired and discouraged, and the science has grown immeasurably more terrifying. We are in a race against atmospheric physics and chemistry, and we may well lose it.!

I was tired of agitating, writing and talking. I was tired of attempting to persuade with reason. I wanted to turn my attention to something creative, and I was craving images and visceral things. I set out to have my body tattooed with the images of a dozen or so of our most threatened, local, iconic creatures. The mild pain of the tattooing process was somehow comforting, as was the sense that I might go into my grave at the same time as these animals went into extinction. In the meantime, I would carry their stories and tell them. Here's one story, I call it "Cod Forgive Us":

There's a Winslow Homer painting—perhaps you can picture it. On a dark ocean with whitecaps on the waves you see a fisherman in a dory. His bare hands are on the oars and he is looking over his left shoulder at the schooner that he launched from. Just behind the ship is a bank of fog moving towards him. It might be half a mile away. If he loses his ship in the fog he knows he may die of exposure, thirst or hunger, or drown if his boat capsizes. It was a common death for fisherman at the time. Between 1830 and 1900, 3800 fisherman were lost at sea from the town of Gloucester alone.

In front of the fisherman in the boat is a large white fish. It looks to be the size of my dog, so that would be 40lbs. The fisherman most likely caught that fish with a simple and ancient technique of “hand-lining”. He dropped a line with a hook and bait on it into the water, and waited for a tug. When a fish had bit the bait he yanked it to set the hook, and then brought the line up, slowly, hand over hand. Cod don't put up a fight. They're bottom dwelling fish who swim slowly with their mouths open and eat whatever comes into them. Their soft white meat is the tender flesh of a slow, dull fish, not a fighter. Slowly sweeping the bottoms of the northern oceans, cod feeds on everything that enters its open mouth, including its own young. This passivity gives them sweet crumbly flesh--not the lean muscle of fighting fish like anglers. Their meat is white and appears bloodless.

The New World was discovered thanks to cod. For centuries the supply of this humble fish seemed inexhaustible. It was rumored to be possible, at the time of the first settlers of America, to drop a basket into the ocean and bring it up full of cod. There were five foot long codfish off the coast of Maine when settlers first arrived.

Dried cod is 80% protein. Salting preserves it, and so it became the ideal food for long ocean voyages. Fueled by cod, explorers and settlers came to Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and New England, where they built economies on codfishing. Cod was the lure and the promise of a new land, and the backbone which sustained it.!

You didn't get this in American history class (or at least I didn't), but for all the rhetoric about freedom and self-determination, the leaders of the American Revolution had economic autonomy foremost in mind when they declared independence from England, and that autonomy was built on cod fishing. Fishing made many men rich, and could sustain any man willing to risk the hard life of the sea at that time.

And for all the rhetoric about the evils of slavery spouted by Northerners, it was New England salted cod that sustained the slaves of the West Indies. Cod was a vital part of the triangle trade that included slaves and molasses, Africa and the Caribbean.

Let's go back to that fisherman. He's still out there, but now he works on a factory ship that catches and processes 54,000 groundfish an hour, 24 hours/day. The ship catches fish by means of giant trawler nets, which drag the bottom of the ocean, leaving behind a watery desert devoid of life. The factory-ship workers still endure high risk. On deck they may be caught and drowned by lines or nets paying out fast, and below deck they may be mangled by machinery. Their occupational death rate is higher than that of miners.

In the 1990s, it became clear that the 300 year party was over for New England codfishing. Catches had been in decline for a decade or more, and drastic regulation became necessary in order to allow the cod stocks time to rebuild. Few people

suspected at that time that the prospect of extinction loomed. While large processing operations began to import Russian and Norwegian cod, and the big trawlers went elsewhere to fish, it was small, inshore fisherman who lost their livelihoods, and their whole lifestyle. Fishermen became whale-watching tour operators, landscapers, handymen. Some would wait it out. Fishermen love their lives, and many suffer depression as well as unemployment when they're landlocked by quota cuts.!

Scientists have warned that there is no guarantee the cod will return. Overfishing has allowed other species space to gain prominence in the ecosystem formerly dominated by cod. Climate change has warmed New England waters and sent the cod in search of cooler water in which to spawn. Fishermen may wait with infinite patience, but the days of abundant cod are likely gone. Meanwhile, the market marches on, and our fish markets offer up Russian and Norwegian cod—for now.

Who is entitled to the life of a fish? Small fishermen, big corporate fishermen, children eating fish sticks in a school cafeteria, you and me enjoying fish and chips, or the fish itself?

The story of cod is the story of human restlessness. In the time it took to deplete cod stocks, we have explored, exploited and colonized the globe. All the land is spoken for, and the oceans are emptying out.

This same restlessness and drive has been responsible for our species' success as well as all of our brilliant innovations, great works of art, music, literature, our spiritual questions and the passion of science for understanding how the world works. It's our distinguishing quality as a species. How could we not validate and encourage it?!

Cape Cod is the summer home of my family. My parents met there in 1960, when my father was studying Biology at Harvard, and my mother was a senior at Colby College, spending her summers working for her tuition in the town of Woods Hole, Massachusetts. My father proposed to my mother at the Nobska Lighthouse, and they were married in 1963.

Woods Hole is a community of scientists, many of whom own small family cottages and have summered there for generations. My parents and 7 grandchildren have the good fortune to spend a month there each summer, attending the century-old Children's School of Science. Every July we go, and as many as thirteen family members, ages 5-75, shack up together at the Woods Hole cottage, which is 600 square feet in size.

Our Cape Cod is a place of merry times. Board games and singsongs at night, cookouts; jaunts to town for ice cream; sailing when invited by sailors; ferry trips to the islands; daily afternoons on the beach.

Henry David Thoreau describes a shipwreck on the beach near us on Cape Cod. A boatload of 145 Irish immigrants is broken against the rocks in a storm. When Thoreau arrives on the scene, on foot, he finds their countrymen gathering bodies on the beach, somberly but without overt grief. Some of them are also using the search to gather seaweed for their farms. That same beach now hosts swimmers, windsurfers, toddlers and their parents, honeymooners, college students on break, children in camps—studying ocean life, and young Irish people working the ice-cream shops and clam shacks. The Cape still buffeted by dramatic storms, but mainly in the winter. Summer drama is limited to occasional sightings of great white sharks in recent years. Our lives are so easy, so sweet, thanks to the bounty of this place and the hard lives of our ancestors who tamed it.

Here's another animal, on my shoulder: It's a Great Blue Heron. They aren't endangered, yet. Here's my heron story—it's a short one.

In the Spring of 2014 glacier scientists broke the news that the West Antarctic Ice Sheet was now in irrevocable decline, meaning that it is melting so quickly that it will not be stabilized even if climate change were stopped immediately. An enormous mass of ice, it contains enough water to raise sea levels worldwide by ten feet. Since then, there is further news of another Antarctic glacier deemed critical, which raises that number to 20 feet. What that means is that whenever we're by the shore, we can look up for a marker twenty feet higher than current sea level, and know that everything beneath it will be underwater within a few centuries—most likely less.

On a magnificent August day in 2014 I took a bike ride with my son and my sister on Cape Cod. We left Woods Hole and followed the bike path for 20 miles, past the Great Sippewissett Marsh, a protected natural wetland. I saw egrets, cormorants, grey herons, and then a single great blue heron in the marsh—stepping delicately with its long legs through the bright green grass, its body silhouetted against the bright blue of the sky, reflected in a glassy ocean. We finished our ride at a coffee shop, eating pastries and espresso. That marsh is already gone, I thought. Nothing we can do now can prevent it from being submerged as climate change progresses.

In the Old Testament story of Babel the humans of the Earth, who all speak a common language, attempt to build a city that touches

the heavens. God found this threatening, and knocked down the city with a storm.

We tried to be like gods and God knocked down our city with storm—a storm like Katrina, maybe, or Sandy. We scattered, wandering, and we lost the common tongue that we shared with animals. Now we are separated from them by our houses, our pavement, our central heating and cooling. We eat their flesh without personally skinning their bodies or draining their blood. We consume the remaining cod as fish sticks, bland and white, with ketchup. We raise pigs in cages no bigger than their own bodies, so that we can eat their fattened pain. We keep chickens in giant pens and they never see the sky or peck the earth. We've made the creatures that we share the planet with into "resources", we pretend they exist for us. But they don't. They go and we go. Our tower will be felled and we will wander in a desert of our own making, the landscape of ecocide.!

I miss the Old Testament God in our world. We've sanitized God, made Him or Her or It too nice. The Old Testament God wasn't nice, He was just. And that's how I see the Earth now. We aren't deserving of the Earth's mercya—we've done nothing to earn it. The justice we have earned will again come in the form of storms, as well as drought and famine and twenty feet of sea level rise in a few centuries.

We are scattered. We must regather, slow down, hear the languages of the animals and people of the world again. I can't tell you how to do this, because the journey is both personal and unknown. I believe it has something to do with Slowness. I'm sure it has something to do with connection. I'm afraid it has everything to do with grief and loss. In any case, we have to do it. Our survival, and the survival of all

Cod Forgive Us, by Andrée Zaleska a
Sermon for Hope Central in Jamaica Plain, 5/2/2015

*we love, depends on it. So Cod Forgive Us, and let's get to
work.*