

Seafood

They are Nature's watchmen – links which connect the days of animated life.

Henry David Thoreau

When, in your car, you descend behind Shaw Hill into Lighthouse Country, one of the first things you'll see is a sign heralding the area as the Home of the Coho. In recent years, rumor has it that the Coho have found another home, or at least a good fraction of this fishy family had emigrated to other parts. But the ocean continues to provide its bounty, and if ever you find yourself thinking about seafood fettuccini, or baked scallops, while driving along the Old Island Highway, you ought to honor the coincidence by stopping in at the local seafood store.

Literary types would say the overall appearance of this establishment is like Kafka's vision of Cannery Row. A menacing storefront mannequin with a frumpish wig and dark coat greets you near the weather-beaten door, a motionless usher vibrating to strange music seemingly streaming from the nearby cedar trees. Inside, the air is thick and dark and damp and salty. Fish in every form and function: stacked, bagged, smoked and canned. Pickled rarities, mysterious sauces, the bulging, briny shapes of oysters and scallops, great orange crabs fending for millimeters in bubbling glass tanks, and the glistening pink radiance of salmon fillets. Your senses mauled.

Now, the land around here might not be good for much other than onions and potatoes, but the sea continues to provide an astonishing harvest. And yet, eventually, you have to wonder if this bounty will someday be no more than a legend because our local resources are not only being sold in homey local markets. They are being lifted right out from under our boats and our boots, and carted off wholesale under the assault of an unquenchable world demand, a demand in some way based in the bizarre globalization of cultural identity, which allows us all to eat the same fish, wear the same shirts and share the same ideas.

One of my neighbors, a mechanically minded man who has both commercially fished and worked the forest, described to me once the machinery that scoops the life from our ocean and slices the trees from our land. He spoke of the ruthless ability of these machines with a fearful respect. For the scale of technology devised for these industries is so far out of proportion to the needs of the local economy that one can only presume vast profits are accumulating somewhere, elsewhere.

The question, it would seem, is not whether man has the ability to co-exist within Nature, but whether the natural satisfaction of creature comforts has been irrevocably replaced by the abject acceptance that inordinate amounts of material and energy are required to keep a man happy. And is a man even greedy when he feels no guilt? You may as well ask an oyster.

If it weren't ultimately so irrational, it might seem ironic that the fallen blocks of socialism are being reconstructed by the fulfillment of a multinational corporate dream, a dream that defines rationality when fresh scallops from Fanny Bay are fried in restaurants in Frankfurt.