Where the Tiny Things Are: Feathered Essays

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I knew oyster farmer who lived on the Puget Sound. He had so many oyster beds that he could barely see the ocean floor. Who needs the ocean floor when you have stacks of opaline shells tucking the whole fecund ocean between their halves? The oyster farmer offered me an oyster. No lemon. No mignonette. No Tabasco. The whole point of being an oyster farmer is that you don’t need anything else. You can survive on the protein of oysters. The world could fall away and you would still have a house, a beach, a vocation, a dinner, and a moneymaker. Not everyone can grow oysters. Most people can’t even open them. He is a gifted farmer. He knows how to seed the oysters directly in the sway of currents to bring the sweetest water, the most succulent plankton and algae passers-by. Oysters are the great filters of the ocean. The farmer does what he can to make sure the algae and the plankton swing by the beds abundantly or the oyster might turn to eating plastic and heavy metals and all the coffee Seattle runs down the storm drain and makes its way into the Puget Sound.

Palmed in the oyster farmer’s hand, the oyster cinches shut. But he is a gifted farmer and a gifted metaphor-maker. He turns rock into sustenance. One knife jab and the hard shell turned to pulsing organ. Sexy oyster. All the genitals in one. Lick me, it seemed to say, so I did. The oyster tasted as shiny as the sun, which is why they grow in the sea in
Seattle—Seattleites like to keep the sun underground. Save it for a rainy day.

But this oyster was one of the last oysters, rain or shine. The farmer could not make a filter for the filters. The tides were turning red. The oyster industry was in collapse. As carbon dioxide warmed the skies, it also changed the chemical make-up of the ocean. The ocean went from Tang to limeade and there was not a mollusk in the world who preferred sour over sweet. Not a Kumomoto or a Sweetwater. Not a Hood Canal or a Fanny Bay. The names themselves suggested doughnut and apple pie, ice cream and caramel. You once put lemons on an oyster as a counterpoint. Now all you have is point point point, make a point. Blue point oysters. A redundancy. As redundant as the farmer who walks along the beach, stares out across the water, and sees the bottom of the vinegary, sexless ocean just fine.