

## About The Cover

# Death is a Fisherman

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Death is a fisherman, the world we see  
His fish-pond is, and we the fishes be;  
His net some general sickness; howe'er he  
Is not so kind as other fishers be;  
For if they take one of the smaller fry,  
They throw him in again, he shall not die:  
But death is sure to kill all he can get,  
And all is fish with him that comes to net.  
Benjamin Franklin (*Poor Richard's Almanac*. Sep-  
tember 1733)

The fishing boat hooked by the moonlit waters of Cao Xiuwen's painting leaps amongst the fish and water weeds. While the fisherman nets his catch, the whole scene dances in its own web; the interconnected nature of aquatic flora and fauna. Cao Xiuwen's fisherman is the top predator in this web: a hunter among the water lilies, reaping the piscine plentitude, food for his family.

But Cao Xiuwen's fisherman has an unwelcome guest for dinner, as he does every time he dines. The fisherman and his family will share their meal with death: the web they dance in ties their own fate to that of the fish and of the river. Like the fish, they do not see the trap until they are caught inexorably in tragedy and death. In this issue of *EcoHealth* we have a special focus on this fisherman's bane: methyl mercury—organically bound mercury formed from inorganic mercury by aquatic anaerobes, and a frequent byproduct of the burning of fossil fuels. Methylmercury bioaccumulates along the aquatic food chain from bacteria to plankton to invertebrates to herbivores and then piscivorous fish. Thus, the simple act of a shared meal

becomes the culmination of a complex series of disparate events, connected and consequential.

Cao Xiuwen's fisherman appears one with his environment—the archetype of sustainability. He catches only that which he can carry: fish for the table and a couple to sell in the local market. A guardian of his resources, he throws back the smaller fish so that there will be food for tomorrow's fisherman and their families. The irony, captured by a twist of meaning in Benjamin Franklin's poem, is that the smaller fish, by the very nature of bioaccumulation, have fewer heavy metals. Thus, Death is not so kind, indeed Death cruelly punishes the kindness of this fisherman. With continued burning of fossil fuels, the problem of methyl mercury continues to grow, and with increasing pressure on aquatic resources, the fisherman's bane becomes ours.

We leave the market with our bag of fish. We sit down to dine. To our left, the fisherman. To our right, his wife and family. In front of us, our shared fate.

## THE ARTIST

Cao Xiuwen was born to a peasant family in 1956 in Zhonghong Village near Shanghai, China. From an early age, she was trained in embroidery and weaving by her mother; her father was a carpenter. She began painting in 1975. Her "A Girl Gathering Herbs" won a prize at the Shanghai Art Exhibition in 1978. Her works have been exhibited in the United States, Germany, France, Belgium, Japan, and the Netherlands. Two paintings are currently in

the China Folk Art Museum. In 1980, she became a member of the Jinshan Chinese Folk Artists' Colony and remained there in residence.

An individual fisherman is shown in Cao Xiuwen's "The Fisherman" as he nets fish from a colorful body of water. Henry Kissinger bought an earlier version of this painting on one of his visits to China in the 1970s.

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## COVER ART

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**The Fisherman** by Cao Xiuwen, 2008. 40.64 cm × 40.64 cm. Gouache on rice paper. Reproduced with gen-