

Old School

I live in a world of moving water, line squalls, secret spots and gruff charter skippers who aren't afraid to holler and curse, occasionally at paying customers.

This is a world of southwest winds, new moons, shoestring eels, silver eels, alewives, porgies and live menhaden. It is a landscape dotted with lighthouses and foghorns, double-humps and tide rips, sandbars, mussel bars, deep ruts and bright, windy flats where handsome, light-colored fish grub and gorge on sand eels, silversides and crabs.

Worm hatches in the salt ponds in spring, wet-wading under meteor showers in summer, drifting the passage reef on harvest moons, and wool socks and watch caps in the rips of late November, when all the fish are bright, voracious travelers, racing the season and the stars to who knows where. It is the chaotic serenade of a gull rookery and those scrubby little islands smelling of nesting cormorants. Fireflies, heat lightning, June bugs, cold beer.

The southeast gales drive big fish in tight if you know the right beaches, and on still nights in the back bay the mosquitoes and no-see-ums eat you alive, right through your damp shirt, DEET be damned, as fish powder a green and white streamer.

Some days it's boat talk and fish talk from sunrise to sunset. "You know how you buy a lobster boat?" asks a guy on the fish docks. "You wait until you hear someone say, *I think I'm just going to plant petunias in her*. That's when I buy."

Give me black deceivers, metal-lipped swimmers, needle fish, bucktails, soft baits and a silver popper worked across big swaths of whitewater covering an island boulder field on a soupy morning, water still in the low 60s, three or four good pops and they're on it good.

The boy and I troll an ancient lure called a Sparky along the edge of a sandy shelf as slowly as the old 2-stroke will allow — in gear, out of gear, the momentum of boat causing the curved, lightweight slice of aluminum tipped with a sandworm to wobble ever so slowly. "Dad!" he shouts. "Dad!"

Blue and white, through-wired with no bucktail, Pete's rough home-made poppers raise fish as lethargic as Lazarus. "Make 'em dance," the old gaffer hollers at me from the helm, when he was well into his 70s. "Make 'em talk. Like a young girl shaking her bottom."

Stormy weather and the fishboats are stuck in the harbor. Mario takes

out his pocket knife and scrapes an old block tin jig, flakes of shiny metal flying as he puts a good shine on it, all the while discussing the importance of changing up lures. "Fish are like women with a hat," he says. "Sometimes they just want something new." The lifelong bachelor was never known for his prowess with women, but he was hell on fish.

This is an old school world with its own language, clues and signs, spoken and unspoken. Lies and boasts, vulgarity, poetry and whispers. A tip, a look, a nod, a brushoff, two men speaking code about a night's catch, and the search, always the search, for truth.


We fish a blue wind, a gray wind, a black wind, a darkening wind, a sad wind, an ancient wind, a freshening wind. One more busted forecast, one more jarring ride home, knocking your fillings loose.

Coming back to the dock, a skipper yells: "Get me the biggest eels you can find!" Christ, that's what you want to shout coming in.

And always the stories. Most are bluntly told, mixed with profanity and humor. Rare are the ones that are lyrical, infused with the wisdom and cadence of olden days.

Narragansett, Rhode Island, trap seine fisherman W.E. Whalley, long gone now to his reward, explained how his fishing was guided by the appearance of certain flowers.

"When I see the first dandelion, scup come in. I watch the buds, and when the buds are swelled full, then our traps go in," explained Whalley in the summer of 1871. "When the dandelion goes out of bloom and goes to seed, the scup are gone. That is true one year with another, though they vary with the season. I am guided by the blossoms of other kinds of plants for other fish. When high blackberries are in bloom, we catch striped bass that weigh from twelve to twenty pounds. When the blue violets are in blossom — they come early — you can catch the small scoot-bass. That has always been my rule, that has been handed down by my forefathers."

I could listen to those old-timers go on all day. 

A Surf-Smashed Home With History

It's nice to have a place to return to year after year, through thick and thin, from childhood and the teenage years to your single-minded, hard-fishing adult decades and into whatever lies beyond.

For me, that place is a mussel bar in southern New England, a piece of a larger topography — a current-swept, surf-smashed mess of sand and glacial rubble that produces terrific, challenging fishing. I have explored the nooks and crannies of this terrain for 50 years, and I am still learning.

Not only does the place remain special after hundreds of trips, but it is still a good location to tie into a large striper from late September through November. I fished it as a youngster, surfed it as a teen and got to know the bottom well, gliding over it while hunting fish with a speargun.

Hundreds of locations along the coast bear the generic name “mussel bar.” The nice thing about this piece of water is that it has a past, present and *future*. It holds plenty of good memories, and the fishing this past fall was excellent.

In September, the mussel bar was on fire. The remnants of a tropical storm had passed offshore, and the waves rolled in crisp and green, waist-to head-high. Whenever a big set broke, schools of discombobulated peanut bunker shuddered in the white water like tiny sitting ducks. The bass went nuts, thrashing the surface as they fed. Three casts, three fish. Repeat.

The day was clear and bright, with the wind out of the northwest. Air temperature was in the low 80s, and the water was maybe 66 degrees. I fished in a bathing suit. The scene was as loud as it was visual, full of the sounds of fall. Gulls clamored and wheeled on bait and bass. Cormorants dove. Pods of bait skittered across the surface. Waves crashed. Fish erupted. I cast nonstop for about three hours, pausing only to cut back my leader and retie the soft swim bait. As the tide slowed to a trickle, the fish, birds and lone fisherman dispersed. I walked down the beach, leaned my pole against a sun-bleached log and swam in the late-afternoon surf.

I have history with the mussel bar. My great uncle Ed XXX, a grizzled old beach seiner, kept a fish shack on the back side of the dunes sometime around the turn of the last century. It was swept clear to Timbuktu in a storm, never to be rebuilt.

My brother, a handful of friends and I started surfing the bar in the late 1960s. We were the first we knew of to ride the spot. When a big swell

swept in, we'd jog out in the morning with our boards under our arms or over our heads, before the wind came up. The waves were steep, short and wedge-shaped. Some days they were big enough to scare us, but the break was always rideable.

My old fishing buddy took the biggest striped bass he'd ever caught and buried it in the sand out there one night, so as not to give away the spot. He dragged the cow back to the parking lot and then drove to my house well past midnight, where he proceeded to lay on the horn and flash his headlights outside my bedroom window to wake me up.

Eighteen years ago this October, I walked out one afternoon with my 14-month-old daughter riding in a pack on my back. My wife, who was pregnant, walked beside me. We passed someone walking back from the point who delivered a breathless report: *Fish are breaking everywhere!*

I remember feeling frustrated when two fishermen who had been trailing behind us sped up and passed us after hearing the same news. I urged Patty on, and she shot me the sort of glance that can only be delivered by a pregnant woman lumbering along a barrier beach beside an impatient husband with a fishing rod in his hand.

When I reached the bar, birds were diving. I waded straight into the surf with Carly on my back and quickly hooked a fish. I backed up and carefully bent at my knees to release it. I strode right back out and hooked a second striper — and a breaking wave knocked me sideways, causing me to stumble. I figured it was a sign that my daughter should join her mother on the sand.

The mussel bar is a good place to catch big fish at night if you don't mind sharing the windswept terrain with a few ghosts. For several seasons the spot has made the hair stand up on the back of my neck and forearms for no apparent reason. I'd glance over my shoulder, but there was never anyone there. I was puzzled. I'd fished nights since I was a kid; I like to fish alone, and I'd never spooked easily. I eventually chalked it up to the many restless souls who lost their lives along this stretch of shore in winter storms and hurricanes. I made my peace with them. There's plenty of elbow room out here, and some nights when the fishing is slow it's nice just to have someone to talk to.

Tumbling Dice

For some, gambling is all about the action. The money is just a way of keeping score.

And for a long time it was that way with me and fishing, too. Big fish were the equivalent of a big pot, a big score. They fell into a different category. They were the juice.

And most of the close calls I've had, the lies I've told and the secrets I've guarded have had something to do with the pursuit of big fish.

Large striped bass was nitrous oxide for the hopped-up internal-combustion personalities of a small group of friends and me. Just a whiff of their presence sent us off on another tide, another night with four hours of sleep.

We were secretive and driven. Shave the dice. Palm the card. Do whatever you have to do to get that goddamn fish. Our single-mindedness took a toll on work and relationships. We grew clannish, ravenous, ungenerous. No matter how many we caught or how large they were, it was never enough.

There is a lot of choppy water between passion and obsession. Hard to let go of the tiger once you've got hold of his tail. Around and around you whirl, fishing until you drop, until it feels stale and brittle and even the fish are laughing at you. For a time, we lost that wonderful state of grace you can slip into when you're on the water.

Some things pass imperceptibly between generations, a trickle of water through stone.

Growing up, my brothers and I could never square my father's fondness for poker and betting with this man who in every other way was the quintessential New England merchant — frugal, conservative, skeptical. David Miller XXX had the first dollar he ever made — and he was proud of it. And yet there was this other side to him: He loved cards, and he'd bet on anything related to sports.

A World War II veteran and child of the Great Depression, he was a smart, disciplined low-stakes player. He wouldn't have bet the proverbial farm if you'd put a gun to his head. For him, it wasn't the size of the pot, but the action and winning that mattered.

I'm not sure I can say the same about his father. William Bernard XXX was a "surfman" in the U.S. Life-Saving Service (forerunner of the Coast Guard), a commercial fisherman — and a professional gambler. My father never knew him. He died in 1922, when my dad was 2.

My father was born in a second-floor apartment hard on the main

rail line between New York and Boston. His was a difficult breech birth, prompting the doctor to summon his father, who was eventually found in a card game.

My great-grandfather, also named William XXX, was no stranger to risk, either. William the elder was one of the youngest to fight on the Union side in the Civil War, according to his obituary.

At the outbreak of the conflict he was too young to enlist legally in Rhode Island, so he went to New Hampshire, where he added a few years to his age and joined a cavalry regiment under another name. He left a leg on a battlefield in Virginia and returned to Rhode Island, where he made a living as a commercial fisherman.

I have a photo of him standing on a beach with a cane in each hand, trouser leg pinned up, net strewn in the sand, pipe between his teeth and leveling a look that could gut you from head to tail. He and his sons, all of whom fished for a living, had long, sad wind-burned faces.

It is fall, and William B. XXX is riding beside me in my Down East skiff as the wind strengthens and the seas build with the tide. I skirt the empty rip and study the water in the fading light without going into it. It's bigger and steeper than I'd hoped.

You can make it through there, son, he whispers. You're not going to get any fish unless you get back in there, anyway. You know that. The fish are in the second or third wave.

He's right. There's nothing to be gained nibbling around the edges. You know exactly where the fish are lying. You either go in after them or pack up and go home. I've got my grandfather's gold pocket watch. I have his name. And like it or not, I've inherited something more, too — that little bit of wiring that connects us to our past. Like my father, I, too, have spent my life looking over my shoulder for this ghost.

Go ahead, boy, he presses. Get back in there. There's fish to be caught. You can make it. Move!

Some nights you go. Some you don't. Every so often, you've just got to roll the dice. What the hell? You can't spend your whole life holding them. 