

Dogfish Dreams

Late one night, we waded out as far as we dared to go,



A fiery sky lights the west, hanging like a postcard. From atop the dune, I stop and stare. As sunsets go, it's a beaut, a real stunner. Stretching from Devil's Bridge off the Gay Head Cliffs to Cuttyhunk, it is a visual feast that will take me to night's doorstep. Already my trip is a success.

Descending to the beach, I head to a favorite spot, drop my fishing gear, and take a seat, leaning back on my elbows to await darkness. It will not be long. The light is going, going, gone. The heavens at their zenith have turned cerulean, allowing a few faint stars to appear. Time to get busy.

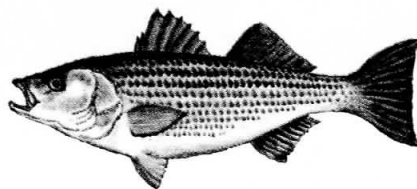
Standing, I pick up my flyrod, strap my stripping basket around my waist, and step to the water's edge, where the sea awaits me. Will I find fish? All I know for certain is that I can't be certain. Who knows what the tide will bring? But hey, that's the intrigue of it all. The unknown. It's what brings me back time and again. To find out what may join me in the night. To better understand my place on the planet. An ancient quest that no doubt has haunted the human mind since the dawn of time.

After fumbling at first, the rod becomes my metronome, each swing of the cast pacing my existence. I settle into the rhythm, relaxing into the night. Off to the east, the lights of Menemsha twinkle against dark distant hills. Overhead the infinity of the universe rides from horizon to horizon. Its enormity is staggering, at the limits of our comprehension, forever challenging the imagination. Above me I spot the Northern Cross peering down. Nearby is Cepheus and his bride Cassiopeia. They are here too. Somewhere in that vastness surely other life exists – life I will never live to see. Yet I find comfort in their presence. In sharing this glorious cosmos. Rock on, my friends, wherever you may be.

In the solitude of the night, my mind opens to the past. I first fished here thirty years ago and the more I remember, the more I am reminded. Many memories glide by, but I come to rest on an event decades old. In the dead of night, late in the ebb, my friend Phil and I decided to see how far out on Dogfish Bar we could go. Totally risky. Something we all know you should never do. But armed with youth and inexperience,

we were immune to caution. We set off unafraid, fearless and naïve, wading farther and farther from shore. I can't be sure how far we got, but I know we continued for quite a while. I venture we were nearly a half mile from shore. For all the world, it felt like we were standing in the middle of Vineyard Sound, completely encompassed by black waters and a black sky.

We came to a spot where, with each step, sand eels erupted from the bottom, cascading over the surface as they fled the crushing weight of our feet. It soon became apparent we were being followed. Trailing



behind us were striped bass partaking in the moveable feast. Some of them swirled within arm's reach. At first it was unnerving, then it became thrilling. We were feeding the fish as if they were pets. If we moved slowly, they would stay, but take a quick stride and they bolted off, leaving wakes in the starlit waters, only to return moments later to resume their free meal. It is a moment etched in my mind.

Returning to the present, I note that, so far, I'm fishless tonight. Time to ease down the beach, find more productive waters. I cast as I go, inching eastward, intently listening for the soft sound of slurping striped bass. Perhaps a different fly can do the trick. In the amber glow of my light, I investigate my fly box for a new offering, a fly that might prove irresistible. Each one has its own merit; each has earned its place. Each has a story to tell. Yes, hand-tied flies are more than just feathers. After selecting one, I tie it on, return to the water, and send it to sea.

Minutes later, I feel a light tap on the line. I tighten up, but to no avail. Damn, missed it. On slow nights like this one, it is difficult to keep focus. Yet one must. That strike caught me by complete surprise. Still, my hopes are heightened. Two casts later, another tap. This time I'm faster on the draw. Bingo, I'm hooked up. The rod bends beneath the heavens as line leaves

the reel. Can't lose this fish, it may be the only one tonight.

It's not huge, but it fights hard and I'm elated. Moments later it is on the beach. Kneeling beside it, I am suddenly no longer alone. In the beam of my light, I greet this nomad, its sides shining up like liquid silver. We have both traveled a long way to meet. Leaning forward to free the hook, we come eyeball to eyeball. I right the fish in the waves, awaiting its full strength to return. An instant later, it blasts off as I salute it. The two of us share this night. Hell, we share this world.

Another hour slips by. My expectations ebb with the tide. Not much doing. Now, that difficult question arises: do I hang in or do I head on back? For the time being I opt to stay. In these tranquil hours, fish or no fish, I find freedom. Momentarily removed from the struggle of our day-to-day lives, I'm free to reflect. Free to hope. Free to ponder the present and future. That freedom has never been more important, for we are surrounded by the strangest of times. We are being tested again and again, tittering on a precarious edge. Everything is going to be alright. Right?

Eventually, I decide to head for home. Digging in my pack, I pull out a powerful flashlight to find my way. I switch it on and paint the dunes, searching for the narrow opening that leads me back. It takes a minute or two to find it, but there it is, near a large piece of driftwood I saw on my way here. My bearings assured, I enter the trail to ascend the dune. Ahead, a dark grassy meadow widens. Along the horizon I see Sagittarius and Scorpio, slouching westward. Sagittarius is my birth sign. I stop midstride and tip my hat to the Archer – across 26,000 light years. Nice to see you, my friend.

The path wanders and I wander with it, meandering through the dunes. Eventually the roof of my truck appears, glowing in the night. I'm pleased to see it. Walking alongside, I drop the tailgate, shed my waders, stow my rod and gear, and climb behind the wheel for the ride. Soon enough I'll be between cool sheets, where the strongest tides are the ones that call you in your dreams. ♦

— ED MITCHELL