

Mola Mola · *Bill Roorbach*

ONE OF MY FAVORITE BOOKS when I was eight and nine years old was called *Fishes*, a picture book with a few facts written up for kids. I loved the frogfishes and the goosefishes, the batfishes and toadfishes, creations so ugly they made me wonder about God. I liked the more colorful fish in the book too, and the more strange, such as the blunthead puffer or the honeycomb cowfish, or the naughty-sounding slippery dick. The deeply camouflaged angler fish had a long cartilaginous fishing rod attached to its head from which hung a luminescent blob that bobbed in subtle currents before its owner's mouth to attract, as the text explained, smaller fish into its reach. The California sheephead was black with a single wide vermilion stripe around its middle, something along the lines of a saddle shoe or a woolly bear caterpillar, as I thought back then. My favorite fish in the book, however, was the ocean sunfish, an enormous, blunt, bullet-shaped thing, seemingly cut off in the middle and wearing a ballet skirt which was its caudal fin. The caudal fin on most fish is easy to call a tail, but on the sunfish there is nothing to rightly call a tail. The fish is cut off at its tutu, with not a leg to dance on. I stared at this fish for hours, read the text over and over as I lay in bed late at night, studying illicitly and listening to my brother snore.

Thirteen years went by. I continued to read and to fish. Novels, mostly, and freshwater. During the *Jaws* era I was at the Jersey Shore with a bunch of friends on a wild and obnoxious weekend of sleeping under the boardwalk and taunting the police and drinking beer and stealing towels from clotheslines and trespassing, none of which is germane here, just this: As we tried on a beach across from the jail in Ocean Beach to rest and wait for our friends X and Y to be let out, someone shouted Shark! Shark! and the water emptied itself of bathers in a swift and splashing display. This had been happening over and over again at beaches around the world (I'd heard of a scare in Lake Ontario!) because of the movie, and we tough hungover guys were cynical. But sure enough, sighting off the lifeguard's pointing finger we saw the fin, waving, circling slowly. It looked more rounded and weak and translucent than I would have expected, but I was respectful. I had actually *screamed* in the movie, at the part where the fish bites the boat at the very quietest moment in an intentional lull in the action.

"*Hammerhead!*" a teenager shouted, as if he knew, and his confidence was enough to send that single fearsome word up and down the beach, muttered, shouted, confidently passed along.

The lifeguard spoke excitedly on his walkie-talkie: "Shark! Shark! Hammerhead! Station six!"

The Head Lifeguard arrived, walking slowly, unexcited, professional, skeptical. A hundred fingers pointed out the fin. He snorted contemptuously. "Sunfish," he said. He leapt tanned to the water and mounted his underling's red and white surfboard to the gasps of the crowd and paddled out to the fish, his legs dangling in the water. "*Hammerhead,*" the teenager cried, and we watched spellbound as nothing whatsoever happened. The Head Lifeguard circled the fin, stuck his hand in the water and seemed to pat the fish. A couple of other intrepid souls ventured out on *inner* tubes, for pete's sake, but not I. I was willing to pull any number of pranks in the dead of night, be chased by the cops, shower in randomly picked backyards, sleep in the damp sand under a porch, bail less fleet friends out of the quaint jail, but not to swim near possible sharks on my own (or anyone else's) say-so; and there were plenty of young women around to impress, too, if that gives you any measure of my fear. "Sunfish," the inner tubers confidently cried when they reached the circling fin, and I remembered that big fat bullet of a fish in my childhood book:

Ocean Sunfish: *Mola mola*. To ten feet in length and eleven feet in height (including dorsal and anal fins), and weighing up to 4400 pounds.

"What's it doing in New Jersey?" someone said. "It's been a very warm year," someone else said. "Everything's coming north with the jellyfish." I was twenty-one years old.

Another thirteen years have passed. I still love to read and to fish. I haven't been chased by the police for some time and have begun to regard them as my friends. The last time I talked to a cop, as a matter of fact, was to report my tackle box stolen this past summer on Martha's Vineyard, an island off Massachusetts where, coincidentally, *Jaws* was filmed and where I keep a borrowed rowboat named Big Wiggly, which is powered by an ancient six horse-power Johnson outboard motor, or oars.

A perfectly friendly stranger, a woman with whom I had been chatting and fishing all morning, had jumped in her red Cadillac with my tackle

box when I went to get lunch. An old man fishing with us off the wharf saw her take it, but he'd assumed we were friends. "Imagine a lady thief!" he said. The cop I spoke to was a woman, too, my age. I never got the box back, several hundred dollars worth of tackle and reels, etc., possibly karmic payment for the thefts of my youth.

And that was not the only bad luck I had last summer. Higher than usual water temperatures disrupted the fishing, not just for me but for the commercial fishermen, and the charter operators like Captain Squid, who told me it was the worst fishing in the forty years he had been operating his boat. The water in Menemsha Bight was too warm for bluefish or striped bass or much of anything else and, although for a period in August the bonito were running, I never had a bit of luck. One smallish bluefish, a couple of big stripers who got away. There were lots of porgies, sure, but porgies are for tourists, greenhorns, bonepickers. Every day I was out there throwing lures and baitfish and flies into the hot water and waiting, quite happily, for nothing. There are those in my life who continue to suggest that I didn't know what I was doing. Philistines. No one else was catching anything, either. For the first time in my ocean fishing career I bought fish instead of bait at the Larsen family's fish store.

On days when it was not too windy I took Big Wiggly out. She's well named, and only a rowboat, as I have said, meant for fresh water, and not much good in rough seas. Even on the best of days she can be difficult — there's no exercise quite so aerobic as, having stalled in a strong current, you find yourself pulling on the tough little starter rope a few hundred times as a channel full of rocks and snags and boats and barnacled pilings spins by. Many days the little Johnson worked well, however, and I'd take a friend or two and go fishing. Or not-fishing. On the day we spotted the second ocean sunfish of my life, my old friend and former roommate Jon was with me, and Juliet, my girlfriend. The two of them have enormously different personalities on land, but get them out on a boat, fishing, and they are the same. Smart as they are, if there are no fish they get bored. Fishing dilettantes. An hour here, an hour there. "Drop me off on the jetty." That kind of thing. But then again they are always the ones to catch the fish. I'll go two weeks with nothing, only to watch with some anguish the bend of Juliet's pole (borrowed, of course, from me) as she catches the fattest fish of the summer. Jon's theory is that if you fish too much you use up your luck/hour units. He's a musician, which to my mind explains everything.

On the sunfish morning we pushed off in Clam Cove, a safe harbor in Nashaquitsa Pond where a friend allows me to leave the boat. We bailed Big Wiggly and loaded her up with life preservers and fishing rods and bait and oars and gas and my new (much smaller) tackle box, and putted out past the boats moored there, past the clam breeding floats where cormorants like to sit and air their wings, then through a tiny channel into Menemsha Pond, a great tidal basin and breeding ground for shellfish. There are eight or nine big handsome houses tucked into the scrubby woods and dunes around the pond. A few of the old-time fishing families—Larsen, Poole, Mayhew—still live right there, a short boat ride to Menemsha Basin, still the heart of the fishery.

In Big Wiggly it took about a half hour to putt-putt across the calm water of the pond to the red and green nuns which mark Menemsha Creek, the channel. Here we passed three blue herons standing on one leg at the shore, as if beside a river, and passed snowy egrets and ducks nesting. Terns swirled shrieking over the dunes, protecting their own nesting grounds, or dove headfirst into the water behind us, coming up with sand eels, of which I was jealous. Good bait. There were plenty of seagulls, of course, four or five species, bothering the terns and each other, making a racket, busy at their various jobs. As always too there were the two salvaged fishing boats propped up on large beams of driftwood in the dunes across from Pease's Point. KEEP OFF! DONT TY UP! They had been there like that for years, someone's guilty project and duty which someday a hurricane will end, bringing good with evil.

Past the last red nun and the rocks was the Coast Guard Wharf, where my box had been stolen, then Dutcher Dock and the basin, where the lobster boats and draggers and commercial line or gillnet fishermen shared space with the sailboaters and yachters. Summer dinks, I had heard the former call the latter. I was sensitive to this, being myself a summer dink, but my contempt fell always in line with that of the fishermen. In the summer there are perhaps sixty boats of various sizes docked there, and a few extra moored at the wide end of the small harbor. The Coast Guard station was there, too, with its own long dock (the very place my tackle was stolen) and three boats.

There was always something interesting going on: People fishing for bait; a sailboat being run aground despite the markings; an apoplectic summer dink yelling to the laconic harbor master about the fact that *he too*

pays *Chilmark* taxes. “Sorry Cap, we’re full.” That “Cap” spoken with a tone pushed just past the edge of respect yet never quite contemptuous.

Captain Squid himself ran a car-n-boat gas station there, where he sold fishing tackle and hats and Ring Dings and other indispensable items of sea and land. Retired fishermen — wizened old salts — sat on lobster pots most of the day there and talked, and watched, and spat at the feet of the summer dinks. Jon and Juliet and I pulled up four feet below the level of the dock in tiny Big Wiggly and debarked, inexpertly, a quick stop for gas and juice and a snack. I was wearing my long-billed fisherman’s cap and a flannel shirt, but Captain Squid’s helpers made fun of me anyway, as always, telling me the bonito had been in that very morning, “Everybody caught two!” “Yep! Even this little old nun who wasn’t even trying!” I teased them a bit too, but no one laughed. I sat there pondering for the thousandth time the how and why of the fact that two oily teenagers — gas station attendants — could mortify me.

Jon, oblivious, came grinning out of the store and tripped off the dock and fell into the boat. I felt my summer dinkness showing as the harbor master began to stroll our way. Big Wiggly (did I mention this?) wasn’t registered. Juliet seemed to take forever; the old salts were staring as Jon dropped an oar in the water and recovered it. The boys at the pumps shook their heads. The harbor master ambled closer, pulling at the long brim of his hat. Not a smile in the crowd. Then here came Juliet, wearing a dress, a pink dress for Christ’s sake, a sun dress, and bearing a big bottle of Perrier for the ride. You can’t fool anybody, except maybe a tourist or two. Summer dinks.

After an embarrassing forty pulls on the starter rope I got the Johnson going while Jon and Juliet stumbled over each other and the fishing tackle, getting us untied. We putted past the boats and out of the protection of the basin, into the bay by way of an inlet framed by two massive stone jetties, sphinx feet between which the pond emptied itself furiously down to low tide and was filled by the sea with equal fury up to high. There was also calm in the channel — three or four times a day at high and low tides when everything stopped and turned around. In August there were nearly always irritable people fishing from the jetties. They were irritable because there were so many of them, and so many tourists and kids and seagulls underfoot, and so many lures of the inexperienced flying through the air, just ahead of their dumb questions, which would be answered, wrongly or

rightly, by someone with a full day's further experience. I felt for all of them, but I couldn't quite reach them; I had been both the irritable jetty fisherman and the person with the dumb questions, sometimes on the same day. I was glad to have a boat, even so insignificant a boat as Big Wiggly.

Outside the protection of the jetties was Menemsha Bight, a part of Vineyard Sound, which was in turn part of the Atlantic Ocean. A bight is a bay which I like to think was named after the fact that it is shaped like a bite out of a piece of toast, though the dictionary points to an early etymological relationship to words meaning bow.

We shot with the current like a sluggish arrow from the mouth of the creek and out across the waters of the bight, trolling. A slightly rough day, with an onshore breeze, which I appreciated, because if Big Wiggly decided to break down we would be blown to shore instead of over to the cliffs of the Elizabeth Islands, some miles away across the sound. Before long, Jon was lying down in the bow of the boat, listlessly holding his rod out over the water. Juliet had stopped fishing altogether, was checking her hair for split ends, bored and cold. Those two didn't seem to realize that fishing is more than a matter of catching fish. After an hour of torturing them, I gave up, too. The wind had picked up and clouds had drifted in from the mainland and it *was* cold. I fished a little longer, to exercise my prerogative as irritable captain, then headed back, through the inlet, past all the summer dinks fishing, who waved, past the real fishermen, who did not, past the poison ivy- and wild pea-covered dunes that line the creek, past the herons, the geese, the Coast Guard station, past an old salt pissing off the stern of his boat. And back across the pond.

The sun broke out. Ah! Warm again. Juliet asked me to stop, and after some irritable consideration of her request, I did. We drifted in the calm water, a slight breeze propelling us. It was lovely again. Warm. The seagulls wheeled. The boat rocked quietly. We lay back, each on our bench, using our life vests as cushions, and thinking with quiet satisfaction of the many possibilities of this and other worlds.

"Shark!" Jon cried. He pointed. I struggled to rise. Immediately I saw the fin, a couple of hundred yards away. It was rounded, waving.

"Sunfish," I said, confidently, although I wasn't so sure. It had been thirteen years. "Sunfish." I pulled once on the starter cord and the motor started, always a good sign, and we splashed over to just upwind of the

fish. I cut the motor, hoping the wind would take us close without scaring the creature. Its fin circled lazily, flopping back and forth with the demure motion of a southern belle waving her hanky. We drifted sideways directly to it with the breeze. As we drew close I saw with some pleasure that it was not a shark. "Sunfish," I said again, enjoying the sound of myself being correct. The fish was not tubular, as I had imagined for twenty-six years because of the profile drawings in *Fishes*, but flat. More a gargantuan pumpkin seed than a bullet. A pumpkin seed cut in half, and wearing a tutu. Four feet long, four-and-a-half feet wide (counting the dorsal and anal fins), perhaps a foot thick. We bumped it. It effortlessly sank itself a foot or two as we passed over, then reappeared and surfaced on our starboard side.

Oh, calm fish! We drifted away, silent, pleased, staring. When we thought we were far enough away I started up the little Johnson, made a wide loop around the sunfish, returned upwind and cut the motor again. We drifted back to the fish. It looked at us, supremely innocent and accepting, with an eye the size and approximate color and mobility of a cow's. It floated, waving its fin, one flat side up, looking first at Jon, then at Juliet, then at me, then back at Jon again. It had scars on its body, propeller wounds, perhaps, a familiar injury to baskers such as manatees, for example, and mermaids. Its mouth was not pretty, a stained and perpetually open wound of a thing, a hard-lipped pore, an orifice, obscene looking, about the size of my own.

This time when we bumped the fish it stayed up, floated along with us, with intention, stirring its small pectoral fin to turn itself so as to get looks at us from various angles. Jon put a hand out, tentatively, and patted it. "Rough," he said. "Wow. It's like sharkskin. Sandpaper."

It was white with a ribbing of gray. We guessed it must have weighed as much as I did, which was as much as a heavy middleweight boxer, or close to two hundred pounds. I think we were wrong—on the light side—by half or more. Its dorsal and anal fins were twins, keep and sail, positioned at the end of its truncated body just ahead of the caudal skirt. The top fin, or dorsal fin, the one we saw waving, was a greenish gray, about eighteen inches high, ten inches wide at the base. The anal fin, at the bottom, was white. The total effect was of a stubby, lazy rocket. It had a male presence, which all of us felt, though there was no evidence to tell us this. He drifted with us. We patted him, we stared at him, we talked to

him. He made friends of us, forgave us for the wounds he had received at similar hands. He was a thousand miles from home, or more, had drifted, we conjectured, in the unusually hot Gulf Stream, had bailed out near the Vineyard, was surprised by the cold water in Vineyard Sound, swam until he found a warm current—the sun-heated pond water as it left the basin approaching low tide—and followed it into the huge brackish pond. And now he was sunning himself. We posited the ride in the Gulfstream because it was hard to imagine the thing swimming twenty feet, much less a thousand or more miles. Juliet wondered if he was lonely, if there were others of his kind around. Jon made a half-serious joke about putting a hook in the fish's hard mouth and reeling him in. We made disrespectful jokes about lifting him into the boat, and saying at home that we'd caught him for dinner. "You leave him alone!" Juliet said.

"Joking," Jon said.

We all patted the fish. A kind of pure happiness descended on us. I was transported back to my childhood book, and a certain innocence. A rare creature, bigger than I, alive. Normally talkative Jon grew silent, stroking the fin presented to him. Juliet, chilly and unhappy an hour before, spoke baby talk: "Are you lonely? Do you have a girlfriend?"

And after awhile Jon suggested poking him with an oar, just to see what he'd do, to see, specifically, if he could move, for we had begun to worry that he was hurt, or sick. I picked the oar up and touched him with it, lightly. I prodded a little. He didn't move. He seemed to like it. I poked him sharply, and you have never seen anything alive move so fast. Blink! he was upright, slim, almost fishlike, Blink! his caudal fin, the tutu, twitched, and he was gone, deep and fast.

Well, we were cold, anyway, and though we missed him, and I felt guilty to have bothered him, we knew it was time to go in. We'd spent an hour with him and fairly glowed. I steered back upwind, toward the inlet at Nashaquitsa, and we all kept a sharp eye. "There!" but it was a lobster buoy. "There!" but it was a floating cormorant. "There!" and it was him, waving. We went back to him, got upwind, drifted down over him, and he stayed with us, trusting boy, stayed with us even when I poked him again, having understood somehow that science was science and we wouldn't hurt him.

Just when Juliet said she was cold and maybe it was time to head in, and just as Jon was agreeing, and just as I was wondering how to get away

from the fish so I could start the motor, he pumped once with his high dorsal fin and his anal fin, which shot him ten feet away, then let himself sink. We drifted over him, watched him drop into the deep green of four fathoms of water, and disappear. We putted home exultant. We had caught a very big one. A rare one.

At home I looked in my adult fish books, and finally found a reference in the *Peterson Guide to Atlantic Coast Fishes*:

Ocean Sunfishes: Family Molidae

Large to giant pelagic fishes of worldwide distribution in warm waters. They are very strong swimmers; reports to the contrary are based on observations of sick and dying individuals. They swim by sculling with their high soft dorsal fin and anal fin.

I liked that “large to giant.” And Jon remembered seeing a drawing of a sunfish in John Hersey’s *Blues*. I was skeptical. Why a sunfish in a book about bluefish? We found it though, sure enough, at the head of a chapter titled “October Tenth.” Hersey and his Stranger (a supposed neophyte fisherman, who serves as the narrative interlocutor) see a fin, just as we did. The Stranger yells “Shark!” and Hersey calmly steers abaft of the thing and fills the tyro in: *Mola mola*. He describes the fish as having “what I can only call a cute little face, with big teddy-bear eyes and a tiny thumb sucker’s mouth.” This was a bigger individual than ours, eight feet long, with three-foot dorsal and anal fins. Hersey’s information gives the maximum weight as six to eight hundred pounds. He says that the only means of propulsion is a “feeble slow sculling” of the dorsal and anal fins.

Webster: “Ocean Sunfish. A large, sluggish, oceanic fish (*Mola mola*) with a greatly truncated tail.”

Sluggish! Feeble! Not our Sunfish! I felt like they’d observed Don Mattingly on vacation in Bermuda and concluded that he was fond of the sun and slow and prone to lying down on colorful towels.

Back to my *Peterson* “they are very strong swimmers” *Guide*: “Most records of this species are based on sick or stressed individuals . . . In the tropics, [Sunfish] swim strongly, and the scarcity of records in the Caribbean and elsewhere is misleading.”

The Random House Dictionary yielded up the fact that *mola* is Latin for “millstone”—apt enough for such a rough round fish—and that they are

also known as headfish, which I like, but then goes on to offer this empty description: “Mola. Any of several thin, silvery fishes of the family Moliidae, of tropical and temperate seas.”

Then to an old edition of the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (this was only summer research, after all!) where looking under “mola” yielded nothing. “Sunfish” yielded a long description of the freshwater variety, the sort pictured in silhouette on all those sailboats. But then there was this: “The totally unrelated ocean sunfish or headfish is allied to the PUFFER.” Puffers, of course, are the little fish that balloon when angered, and that poison six to eight Japanese gastronomes every year.

Under “puffer,” for some reason—I could find no other evidence of family relationship—was a description of the Ocean Sunfish. Once again the nonsense about sluggishness, but also the unimaginable fact that they are sometimes harpooned for sport, and an assessment of their food value: None, “except for the oil from its liver.” And also the best general description I found: “Its appearance is that of a huge head with fins attached, as its body does not taper.” They gave the record weight as one ton, which didn’t jibe, of course, with other reports. *Mola mola* is not well known. Descriptions I’ve found even in more sophisticated later research are filled with words like “seemingly” and “possibly” and “reportedly.”

Back to *Peterson* for feeding habits: “Ocean Sunfishes apparently feed largely on jellyfishes, the Portuguese man-of-war, ctenophores, and other soft bodied pelagic invertebrates and larval fishes.” I could almost hear the *suck* as I imagined the meeting between a soft bodied pelagic invertebrate and the hard open mouth of my friend, which was not to my mind a cute thumbsucker’s mouth, but something more along the lines of the opening at the business end of an old Electrolux.

One Tuesday a week or so after our *tête-à-tête* with the young headfish I was on the Coast Guard wharf in Menemsha, fishing happily for bait, enjoying the roar of the current as it came into the inlet on a rising tide. I kept my tackle box close by, and eyed a woman fishing across the channel suspiciously. I was safely away from the crowd that made me so irritable. I fished the water, and the water fished me, and I stood in the sun, warm, and fished, growing slowly relaxed, and unsuspecting, and un-irritable.

“Shark!” I heard a boy call, way over on the jetty. “Yi! Yi! Shark!” Someone else. I looked up in some excitement and watched for the fin, and

sure enough it was our friend, oh, it must have been him and not another so far north, and he waved his fin, basking his way into the pond, twenty miles an hour in the current, looking as if he were having fun.

“Shark!”

Everyone was yelling, and throwing lures idiotically in his path, and brandishing expensive gaffs. Summer dinks.

“Sunfish!” I yelled. “Sunfish! Leave him alone!” The sunfish floated past the jetties, and past the rocky banks of the inlet, and past boats full of fishermen, and past me. I waved, I actually waved back. I could see the propeller wounds on his side. I cried “Sunfish,” again, and had the satisfaction of hearing the cry “Sunfish!” go up, followed by the advice, all along the channel: “Leave him alone!” And a woman’s voice, “Leave that fish alone,” from the wharf, some distance inland. It was the lady cop, yelling at some excited boys who were throwing rocks. They ran away as she approached, giggling furiously, firing the last of their rocks ineffectually into the channel. The lady cop stopped and shook her fist, calling after them, but I saw she was smiling. When she turned she saw me watching, threw her arm up and waved. And I waved back, I actually waved back, and pointed to the sunfish, who waved his fin as he floated in the creek, waved his fin clear up past the nuns and into the pond, waved his lazy fin, floating with the current till he disappeared from view.