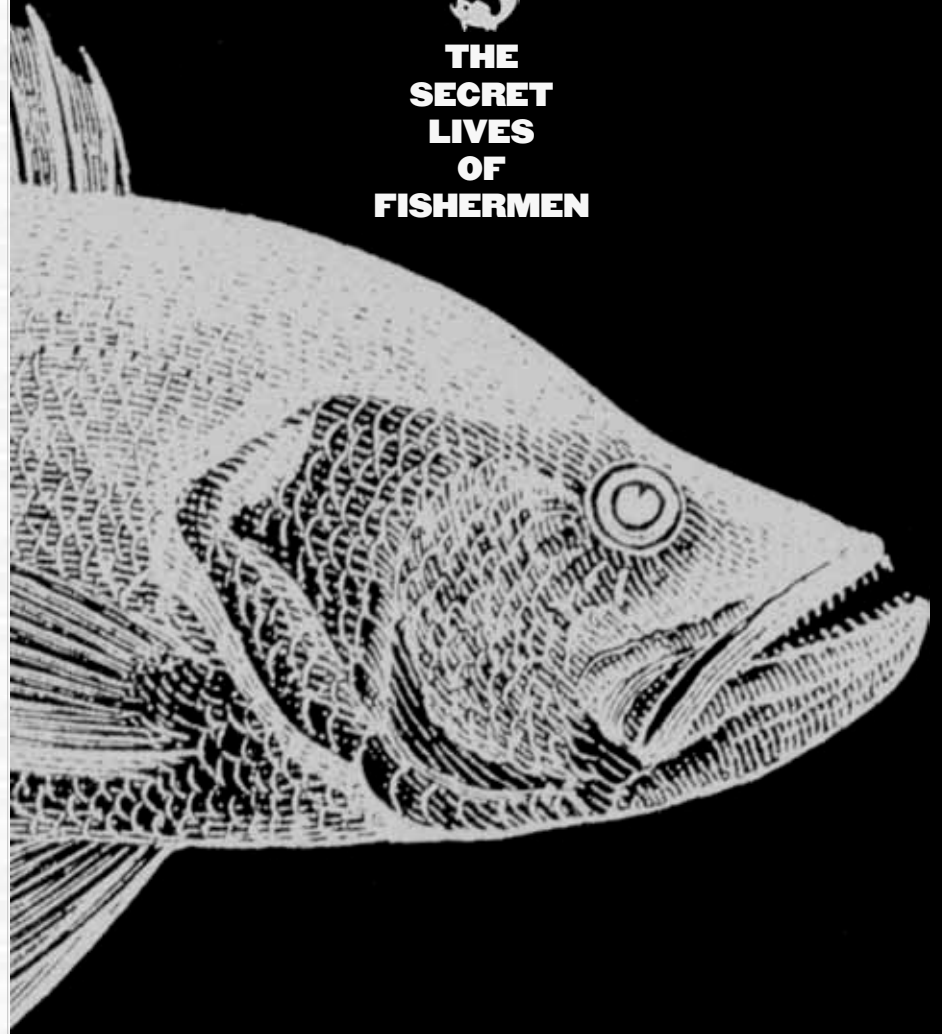
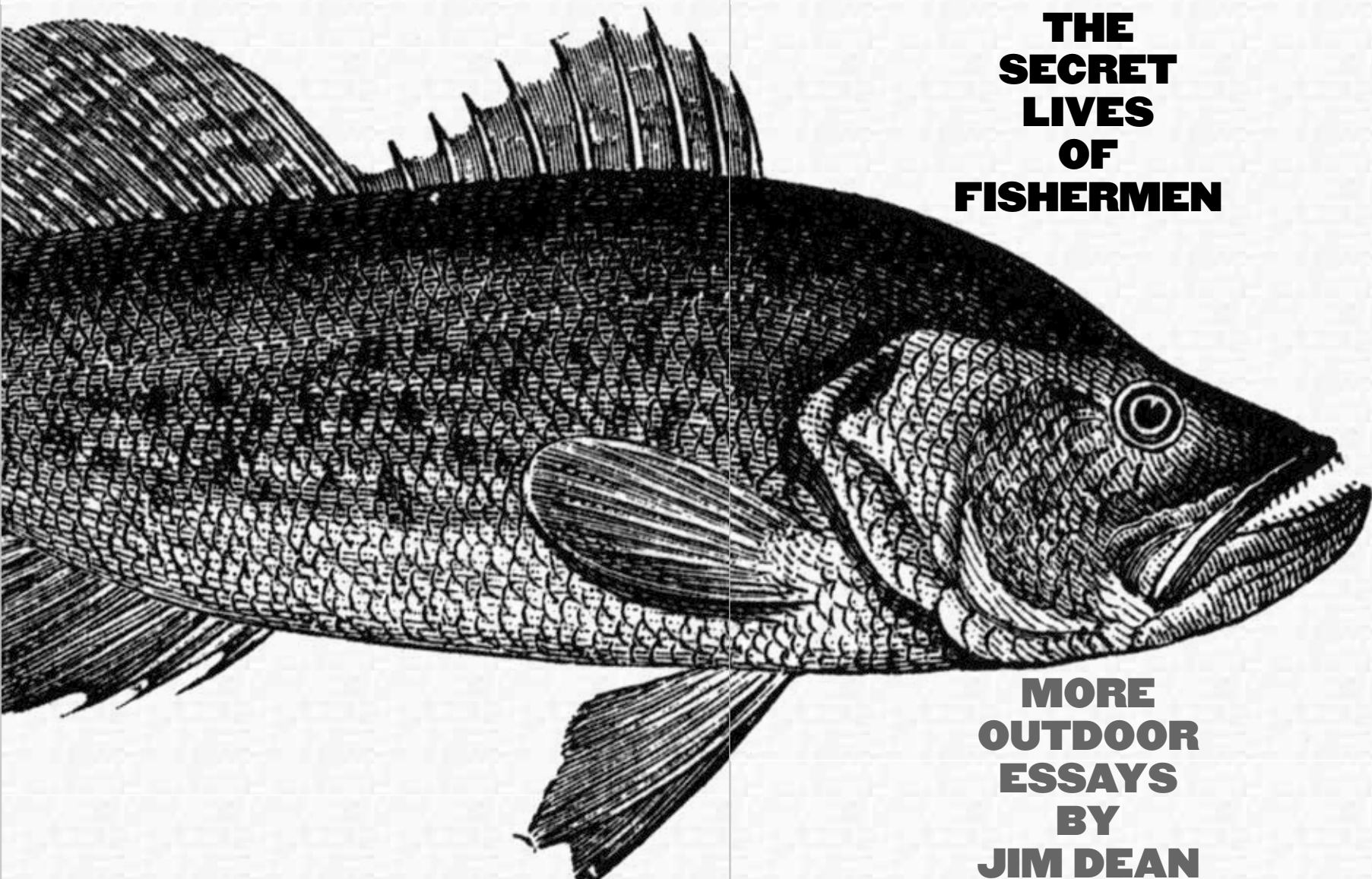




**THE
SECRET
LIVES
OF
FISHERMEN**





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OF
FISHERMEN**

**MORE
OUTDOOR
ESSAYS
BY
JIM DEAN**

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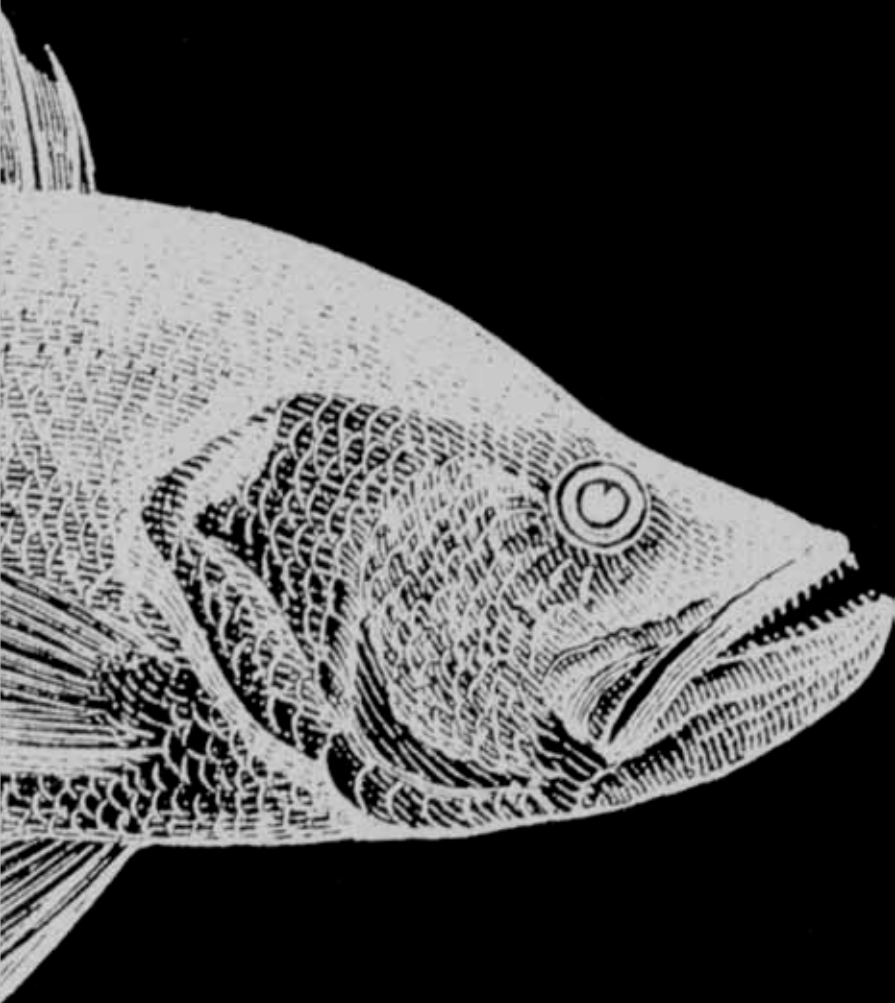
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For my children, Scott & Susan



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THE MARSHMALLOW PURISTS

Maybe it's the fact that we are away from home and are overcome by the joyous anticipation of adventure. Or maybe it's because we can't resist the urge to redefine our identity in the presence of those who don't know us. Or perhaps it's just that, regardless of age, we are all still kids full of barely contained devilment. Whatever the reason, I have observed that the practical joke is never more tempting than when we gather with new companions to share our common obsession with fishing or hunting in distant places. The most even-tempered among us is very likely to become either predator or prey.

My friend Matt Hodgson, for example, pursues his ruling passion for fly fishing seriously, but like many who have been at it a long time, he sometimes grows weary of the near-religious pedantry and politically correct intolerance that he encounters among some anglers who have been newly baptized in the oft-contrived rituals of this sport. "It gets tedious," he observed as he told me this story.

On a recent trip to fish the Yellowstone River in Montana, he and his companions found themselves one morning in the company of a guide who seemed far too inclined to preach the gospel. "Now, I don't know how you fellows fish back home," he sniffed, "but here we fish only with flies and we release all trout. I would much prefer that you fish with dry flies, but if you have some other notions, we should discuss them."

Matt had hardly anticipated such a sermon. Not only is he unlikely to be taken for a rube, but his experience as a fly fisherman and fly tier far exceeded the guide's.

"Well, to tell the truth," Matt replied, "what I had in mind was a technique we prefer back home in North Carolina. Why don't you fellows go on ahead, and I'll run back into town and get about two hundred yards of stout cord and some 3/0 hooks. This looks like a really good place to set a trotline. You don't right offhand know where I could get a mess of chicken necks for bait do you?"

Sometimes the best way to crush a stereotype is to play to your adversary's worst fears. For a moment, the guide looked as though he had caught a bullet with his teeth, but when the laughter died down and he realized that Matt had no intention of stringing chicken necks across the Yellowstone, he relaxed and joined his peers for an enjoyable day of fly fishing.

Those of us bred and born in the brier patch of southern culture are frequently called upon to diffuse an unfortunate (or fortunate) stereotype when we travel to distant lands where our mother tongue is automatically linked with toothless ignorance and inbreeding. But sometimes it's fun to keep those suspicions alive too.

In the late 1970s, some friends and I journeyed to Pennsylvania to fish the storied limestone streams where Vincent Marinaro, Charley Fox, Ed Koch, and others had spawned a new and highly sophisticated technique for catching wild trout on flies carefully fashioned to imitate terrestrial insects. We had spent the winter tying flies, reading the literature, and preparing ourselves for this crusade to Mecca.

We drove all night and rendezvoused with our Keystone State guides on the stream shortly after dawn. They seemed a bit reserved, but they looked at our tackle and apparently decided that we at least looked like fly fisherpersons. My friends, however, were not about to let such an educational opportunity pass.

As we tromped down to the water, we swapped those precious bits of information that are thinly disguised to reveal our knowledge and establish our credentials. Fly boxes were shared and patterns compared. Just when it looked as though we might be accepted, one of the Pennsylvania

paint-cracked, perch-scale plug. I am pretty sure that most pleasures in life depend on some contrivance; surely my bass fishing does. Even sex, after all, is mostly a brain game. I love to fish those big lakes. I crankbait and Carolina rig the deep structure. I pig 'n jig and spinnerbait the brush. I catch some big fish because everybody does. But my soul is set on dark water Downeast fifty years ago, and that's where I am happiest.

Perhaps this partly explains why I canceled the order for a bass boat this year (though I may reconsider if it doesn't threaten my mortgage). It may also explain why I began collecting antique bass tackle years ago. It probably explains why I left the timber standing in a pond I built at the farm a few years back and why I have planted cypress trees and lily pads in all the ponds there. I am looking for something I misplaced years ago. And it doesn't have much to do with catching fish.



REVENGE OF THE SNAPPER

Anyone who spends a lot of time fishing or otherwise poking around on freshwater rivers, lakes, and ponds is sooner or later bound to conclude that the snapping turtle is appropriately named. One look at those fearsome jaws mounted on the end of the thick coiled spring that serves as a neck is more than enough to instill respect, even if you've never heard the old adage that those jaws, once clamped, won't open again until it thunders. Unless you're inordinately cautious, encounters with mature snappers tend to be memorable. Ask Phil Cable or Bill Williams.

Back before it became the centerpiece of a high-priced housing development, Sunset Lake was an old black-water millpond in western Wake County that occasionally yielded an outsized largemouth bass. Phil fished it regularly in an aluminum johnboat during the early 1980s, and on one of those trips, he spotted a large snapper that was busily churning up the bottom in shallow water, apparently feeding in a bluegill bed. As it rooted, the turtle's aft end and tail were exposed. Naturally, this toothsome sight made Phil hungry. Snapping turtles are good to eat, and here was supper. Furthermore, the tail was a convenient handle, indeed, the only safe one.

"I eased the boat over, grabbed the tail, and hoisted about twenty-five pounds of ticked-off turtle into the boat," said Phil. "I wedged it into the space between the transom and the backseat next to the battery. Then I went back to the front seat and resumed fishing. I could hear it scrabbling around, and it wasn't long before I noticed that water was

to nibble a bit of fruit and toast a bagel or slop a half cup of skim milk over some dried twigs and wheat chaff. That might be good for the heart, but it doesn't speak to the soul.

It wasn't always this way. Not so many years ago, the kitchen was the heart of any house—especially any farmhouse. For one thing, at four o'clock in the morning in winter, it was likely to be the only room in the house with any heat in it. Indeed, the front rooms in most farmhouses, with their black horsehair sofas, were open only for weddings and funerals (old farmers never die, they just close up the rest of the house and live beside the cookstove). And when you live in a kitchen and rise before daylight, breakfast probably isn't a Pop Tart.

It may be premature to mourn the passing of the country breakfast, but just in case, let's light a candle and hold a brief service. And, yes, I'll wait while you get your bib.

The first item likely to be on any plate is a scratch biscuit made of flour, lard, and sweet milk or buttermilk. I suppose this has always been the essential centerpiece, but let me recommend a variation. It has been many years since I had one of my grandmother's clabber biscuits. She milked the cow and kept the unhomogenized milk in the refrigerator until it soured, then used this clabber to make sourdough. The biscuits were big and fluffy, just the thing to spread with molasses, homemade jelly, jam, preserves, or butter (never margarine). If it was girth you were after, you'd stuff a clabber biscuit with a slab of country ham, fried fatback, sausage, scrapple, bacon, or country-fried steak. And if you really wanted to test your galluses, you'd split a pile of biscuits on a large platter and smother them in redeye or sausage gravy.

Another bit of breakfast magic rarely encountered today is the crackling biscuit (small bits of fried pork fat are added to the dough). I would not say that I would kill for a crackling biscuit, but I might maim.

Of course, there were fresh eggs when the hens were laying, but eggs were fried hard or sunny-side up—seldom scrambled and almost never poached. I remember that my Northampton County grandmother would discard the

whites from soft-fried eggs until she had a pile of yolks. Then she'd crumble bacon and toast crumbs over them, mash everything into a paste, and eat it with a fork. She was, understandably, just about as wide as she was tall, but she was happy in her work and her soul was well fed.

Another breakfast item that seems to have fallen out of favor is the sweet potato—baked, split while hot, then slathered in butter and mashed with a fork. Rare was the wood cookstove that didn't have leftover sweet potatoes, biscuits, and corn bread lined up behind the ever-present pot of coffee, and rarer still was the person headed for the field who didn't stick a sampling in his overalls.

Sometimes breakfast would also include a special treat like flapjacks (invariably soaked in Karo syrup), toasted pound cake, or salt-rising bread. But muffins and waffles were fairly rare. Like French toast, they seemed to belong to another social strata.

Nutritionists have always told us that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, but they now say we shouldn't eat this stuff. So where does that leave us?

I don't know about you, but I'm going to resurrect a tradition from my childhood. I'm gonna start eating breakfast for supper.