

a gray weathered shingled house on a hill above the pink and purple sunset-stained river and a deep dreamless sleep outside under stars, the first such sleep since a lonely rupture whirled me into angry, jealous fantasies of an alien body plummeting down into my former girlfriend.

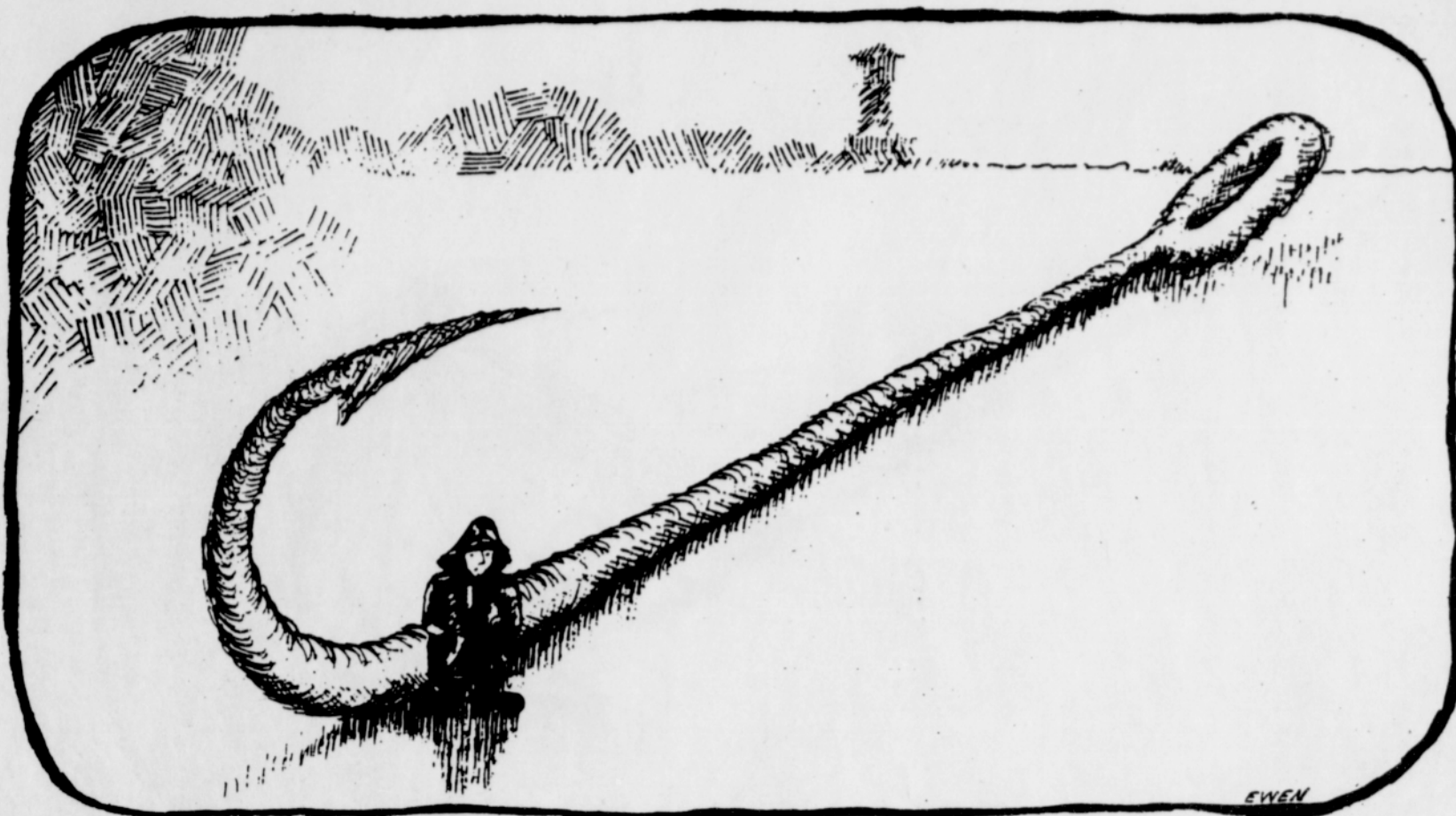
Days and weeks somersaulted with tides and suns and lonely dreams. Our tiny battered old boat rolled and tumbled through a kaleidoscope of surging mountains of water that rose and fell with the same intensity as lungs. We hugged the glowering shore and pulled crab pots from the ocean floor or we went far out to sea and danced with the seabirds and the propoises and the great gray whales, and chased the albacore tuna. On those trips the long poles were freed from the mast and spread like bony wings, with various lengths of fishing lines trailed from their tips and flanks. The skipper piloted the Falling Star through hunting waters while I stood at the lines in a narrow cockpit in the stern, swaddled in yellow slickers and braced against the swell, and watched past the bubbling jello of our wake for the big blue and silver fish. The albacore that took our lines died hard and bloody on our deck, pounding their deaths into the wood like the drums of our hearts. Long quiet or stormy days, nights windblown, clear, the sky gouged with stars, or heavy and chilled with rain and images of dead ships from other times, some others from our own joining them in a long plunge into darkness never reached by sun or stars and crushed, men and boats, into ocean dust. I heard frantic calls for the Coast Guard on our radio and kept watch for other boats that might swell from specks on the enormous horizon that surrounded us.

We were free prisoners chained to a splinter of wood in a limitless space, kin to the families of seabirds crowded onto passing watersoaked and barnacled logs, related also in the briefness of our passage to the fiery trails across the night skies, the falling stars that had given our mistress her name.

Some of the skipper's peculiarities were revealed during those two or three week trips chasing albacore, during which we seldom saw other boats and moved away from them whenever we did, which was one of his traits. He did not like to travel in schools of fishing boats but preferred to fish alone on isolated deserts of ocean. Almost immediately he told me that cocaine was his main joy and that it took a lot of dead fish to feed his nose. My spirit distilled grapes, but we shared a common interest in cannabis sativa. Things were different in the fishing fleet since the younger men bought the boats of retiring and wornout fishermen who had trained them, he said one night as we sat out on deck and passed several joints between us. He meant the use of drugs, which would not have been tolerated before. But I thought of a day late in the season that I worked for old George. We anchored outside the small California fishing town of Avila for gas and groceries. Waiting on the pier was an ancient man George had known for fifty years. I listened to them talk of the years they had prowled the Pacific Ocean together, from Nicaragua to Alaska, fishing for tuna, salmon and cod. They told me that the great days of fishing were over, that we younger fishermen would never know how great it had been, we would know only the problems.

One morning coming out of the river a party boat knifed out of thick fog that lay over the bar straight for the Falling Star. I had the helm and swung hard to starboard as the puker slashed past, headed for the jetty. I hit the air horn to warn it away from the rocks but it disappeared in the fog. I started to bring the Falling Star back on course when the puker came at us again. I almost broke my shoulders throwing the wheel to starboard again and cursed the other boat driver in a frenzy of angry fear. On another day a crabline snapped in the block and exploded its tension into my right thigh with the impact of a bullet. The pain was so intense that I simply fell to my knees on the deck and wept like a hurt child. I met a woman in a bar and loved her some nights ashore until a husband she neglected to inform me about returned from several months of fishing in Alaska. Most of the nights I spent away from the boat I slept in the yard of the house above the river, which was rented by friends who also fished or worked in the canneries. I was generally surrounded in my sleeping bag by a menagerie of snuffling, scratching and squirming housepets. I got drunk one night with a friend from a previous season who told me about the deaths of other friends who seemed to have died in a cluster, most of them drunk and falling off their boats or off piers, a tradition among fisherfolk not unlike the determination of cowboys to meet their maker wearing boots or Vikings to die in battle.

And one day I tore the ligaments of my left arm reaching too far for a buoy while we were crabbing and afterward attempted to pull up a crab pot that snarled in the screw. I was beached for almost two weeks. My arm and hand were encased in a plastic brace that shielded the lower arm like a Roman gauntlet. It was wrapped tightly with an Ace bandage, and only my thumb was left free and jabbed out of a hole in the brace, absurdly useless.



DRAWING BY DAVID EWEN

I did not like being ashore. I spent the first few days hanging around the boat until the skipper hired a temporary puller and shoved off for a tuna trip. Most of the rest of the time I walked around Astoria, which was built on steep hills above the Columbia River. I floated like an insect up and around the hills among old wood houses and churches that rose from the waterfront in layers of Victorian clutter. Some of the houses were badly weathered and deteriorated or were burnt shells rotting among weeds and wild blackberries, but most were brightly painted with small neat lawns surrounded by trees and gardens. From almost everywhere in the hills were commanding views of the river, which was four miles wide, fattened by streams and lesser rivers and bulged with bays that resembled large aneurysms. Stacks of purple mountains that always seemed under clouds were stubbled with new growth forests. Beyond Cape Disappointment at the river's mouth was the furry dark line of the Pacific Ocean. Looked down upon from the hills, ships anchored in the river at the foot of the city, awaiting berths in cities upriver, were as small as toy boats in a pond.

Astoria was claimed to be the oldest United States city west of the Rocky Mountains. Lewis and Clark ended their transcontinental trek there, though namesake John Jacob Astor never visited the small settlement he financed. The city's best years, when ships from all nations crowded its wharves and exchanged Victorian luxuries for furs, fish and timber, were long over. In its most prosperous period a saloon was said to be located every thirteen steps with a brothel inbetween to handle rowdy thousands of loggers, seamen and farmers from small coastal valleys, many of whom were shanghaied to outbound ships by an army of crimps, madames and saloonkeepers. For nearly a century most Astoria men were fishermen or worked with hundreds of women in dozens of fish canneries on the riverfront.

At least once a day I walked along the almost empty waterfront that had once been so busy, past silent, deserted cannery buildings and burned ruins of buildings on pilings over the river, remnants of a fire that incinerated the

city's heart a few days before Christmas half a century before. Forests of broken pilings ate into the river like bad teeth. Old unused fish boats disintegrated on blocks or in marshes and rocks along the riverbanks. The railroad tracks I walked on were seldom used though scores of trains once hauled canned fish into the interior and thousands of tourists to the coast. Each sunset it seemed that the sun reluctantly withdrew its last light from the old city that once prospered from reckless disregard for the resources its citizens ravaged. I wondered what being native to Astoria might be like, its dead past more palpable than present or future, its failed history a coffin that each passing moment nailed shut.

I usually hung around for awhile each day at the port docks and watched longshoremen load logs onto Japanese ships from log rafts kept together by small darting tugboats. I also spent time at the fish docks among my mistress' sisters swapping lies with their crews, catching lines and throwing them off as boats came in and went back out. I felt about other fishermen as a combat soldier does about his war comrades, aware that any of them or himself might be killed. Astoria's families mourned a long succession of parents, children, neighbors and shipmates who perished with their vessels on the ocean or the river. The fishermen warred with the wind and water; the town watched them come and go like soldiers.

In the evenings I turned into the Mermaid Tavern and drank myself senseless at a table next to large windows that overlooked the river. I watched the bobbing lights of fishing boats that barked like terriers as they wallowed past big ships going up or down river, and later in the night I would see images of my former girlfriend's face splayed upon the glass out in the darkness where I could not reach.

Finally I could go back on deck. I still had to wear the brace, but I convinced the skipper that I was able to work. I told the temporary puller we could split a wage share if he wished to remain aboard. He agreed and spoke his name as Kamiju, which he said meant clown in Okinawa where he had been stationed in the Marines, and where, apparently, he had been a clown. A day later we provisioned the Falling Star and crossed the bar in pursuit of albacore. Two hours later the wind chased us back into the river and blew up a nasty gale that whipped the bar all night. We sheltered in the lee of Cape Disappointment and dropped anchor just offshore. The looming black mass of rock folded over us that night while we smoked marijuana and slept with colorful dreams.

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