

THE BAR

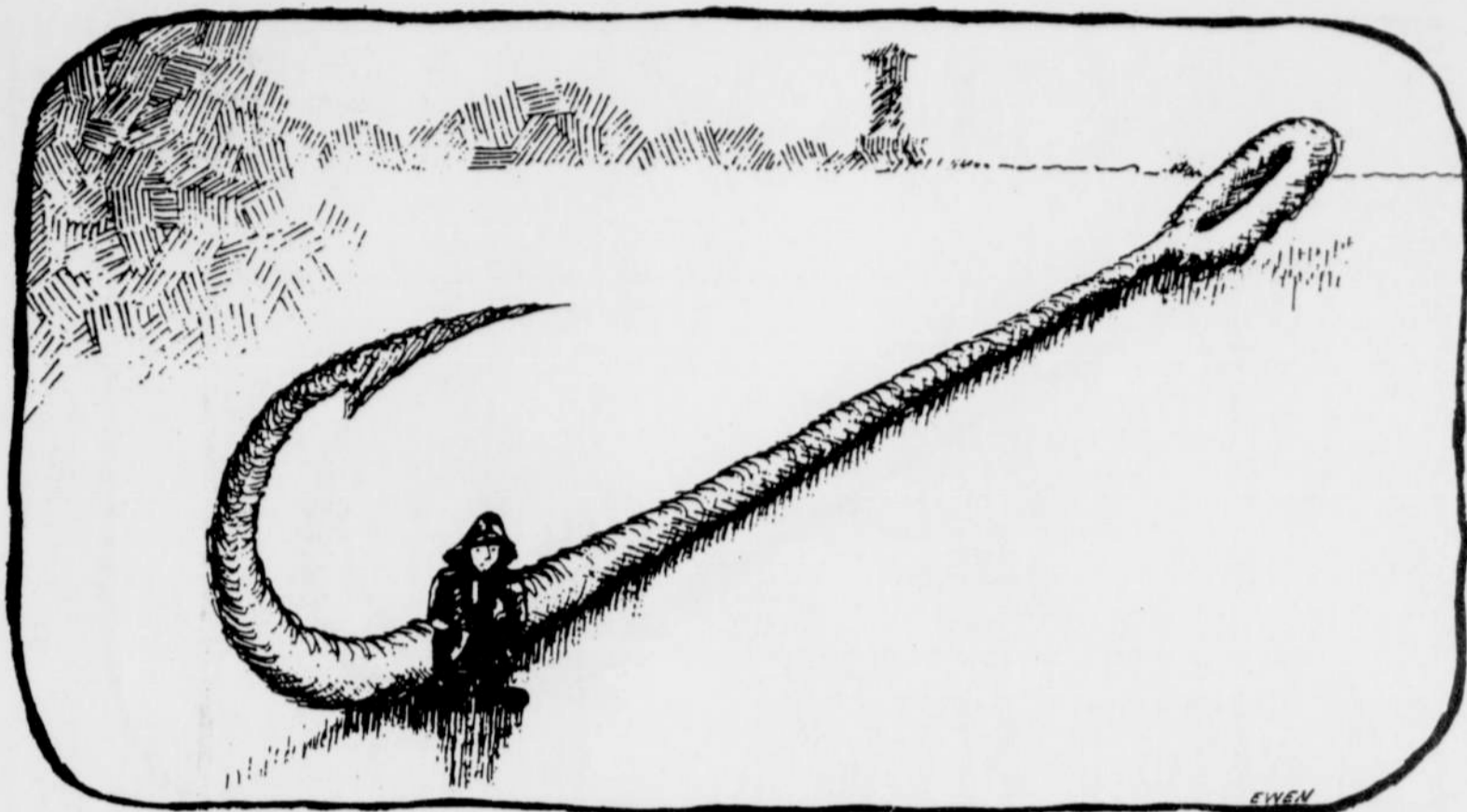
bar, and it walked with us while we chugged a few miles just beyond the surf that broke onto a reef. We passed the shining charter boats that sniffed like hounds for fish, and we saw the rusted and half buried bones of the *Peter Iredale*, a fourmasted squarerigger that was driven ashore and stranded on the beach while navigating toward the Columbia River one stormy October night in 1906. Nothing but its skull and ribs stuck out of the tidewater sand, which made it resemble a desert skeleton. Its steel plates had been stripped away by storms and tides and also by human carrion, and its bowsprit had fallen off and was buried in the sand. We turned toward the north within sight of the town of Seaside and the huge mastiff of Tillamook Head where Lewis & Clark first saw the Pacific Ocean — into the wind, and the pungent smells of squid and clams I had cut up for bait slapped me in the face.

We were fishing for dungeness crabs that day. The Skipper pointed his one-fingered hand at a string of bobbing red bullet shaped buoys that were hardly more than a few yards off the reef that paralleled the beach. Underneath each buoy was a crab pot. That was our line, he said.

I had never fished crabs. I was an albacore tuna man, but I wanted to think I was willing to try anything. We worked the line for almost 12 hours without a break, moving from buoy to buoy, more than 300 of them. I was in command of a long wood handled boathook which I used to reach out over the side to snag the buoys. If I missed one the Skipper shouted at me from the wheel aft of the house and spun the boat in a tight rocking circle for another pass. I pulled each buoy aboard with enough sodden slippery rope to throw around a hydraulic block which was operated by the Skipper and grindingly pulled pots from the ocean bottom several fathoms below. The Skipper quickly emptied the pots, which were actually wire meshed baskets that were round like large cheeses. He flung male crabs into a big wooden box, the females back into the water to breed and the young ones to grow. I emptied the bait bottles I took from each pot and replaced with two others I had already filled with squid and clams. When the Skipper was finished with a pot I pulled the rope off the block and pushed the pot overboard. I baited the empty bottles. Then I grabbed the boathook as the skipper splashed the boat alongside another crimson buoy. It was an exhausting and backstraining rhythm that reprieved my brain from the continuing sting of my former girlfriend's departure. In the afternoon I reached too far for a buoy and a choppy wave heaved me into the water. A rope flew after me and the Skipper hauled me aboard. He looked at me with disgust.

That evening we unloaded almost a thousand pounds of angry snapping crabs at an ancient cannery on the Astoria riverfront. We tied up alongside a grease blackened wharf and I started pitching crabs into a steel bin mounted on canisters. Each bin that was filled was wheeled through an open door into a vast enclosed space that was shot through with russet sunbeams from western windows. I breathed the smells of rendered and steamed fish. Gulls weaved and shrieked around my head. The Skipper taunted my wariness of pincers. They don't hurt much, he said and almost instantly a crab clamped onto my arm which hurt very much. I pulled it loose and hurled it past the skipper's suddenly surprised face. Then finally home to a gray weathered woodshingled 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 like a walnut shell through a kaleidoscope of surging mountains of water that rose and fell with the intensity of lungs. We hugged the surf rimmed shore and pulled crab pots from the ocean floor or we went far out to sea and danced with seabirds and porpoises and great gray whales, and hunted 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 *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, a few stricken or missing from our own joining them in



DAVID EWEN

a long plunge into darkness never reached by sun or stars and crushed, men and boats, into sea 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 poker chip 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 gave our mistress its name.

Some of the Skipper's peculiarities were revealed during those two or three week trips in pursuit of 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 fishboats but preferred to hunt alone on isolated deserts of ocean. Almost immediately he told me 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 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 half a century. I listened to them talk of the years they 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 *Falling Star*. I had the helm and swung hard to starboard as the puker slashed past, headed for the south jetty. I hit the air horn to warn it away from the rocks but it disappeared in the fog. I started to bring *Falling Star* back on course when the puker came at us again. I almost broke my shoulders throwing the wheel to starboard 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 bruised child. I met a woman in a bar and loved her a few nights ashore until a husband she neglected to inform me about returned from several months of fishing in the Gulf of 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 fish canneries on the riverfront. I was generally surrounded in my sleeping bag by a menagerie of snuffling, scratching and squirming housepets which included a white rat that seemed to be a pet of the rest.

May Moon and Willow were two women who lived in the house. They worked in one of the canneries on what was called the "slime line" stuffing cutup fish into cans. Willow shared her bed with a man who worked on a dragnet fishboat. May Moon preferred occasional one-night stands and had a bedroom to herself. Both offered themselves for sex to help me feel better about recovery from my former girlfriend. They acted as a team and teased me constantly, especially about my resistance to take love with them.

"Celibacy isn't going to get her back," Willow said.

"You have sex with us, you won't want her back," May Moon declared.

"I've got to work it out my way," I said lamely.

"You're not working anything out," Willow scoffed.

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 boats or piers, a tradition among fisherfolk not unlike the resolve 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, only my thumb was left free and jabbed out of a hole in the brace, absurdly useless except for hitchhiking.

I did not like being ashore. I spent the first few days hanging around the boat until the Skipper hired a temporary fishpuller 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 downtown waterfront in layers of Victorian clutter. 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, from streets in old neighborhoods or forested slopes, 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. Across the river stacks of purple/blue mountains that always seemed under clouds and often obscured by morning fog were stubbled with new growth forests. Beyond Cape Disappointment at the river's mouth was the furry dark caterpillar line of the Pacific Ocean. Looked down upon from the hills, ships anchored in the river in front of the city while awaiting berths in upriver cities were as small as toy boats in a pond, and gillnet fishboats resembled waterbugs skittering around on the water.

Astoria was at the end of the Oregon Trail and claimed to be the oldest city in the American West (a few older pueblos

CLEARCUT OCEAN

The soon to be beached trawl fishermen should have done some conservation work of their own while they were pointing to farmers, ranchers, miners and loggers as resource degraders.

Yellow rockfish and others are not replacing themselves because, just like salmon, there are too few to get the job done. It was not cows, chainsaws or dams that killed the fish. They were systematically overfished, and roller gear nets ruined thousands of square miles of ocean bottom reefs forever.

The ocean was clearcut and not replanted. In fact, pre-spawning fish were killed by the billions, the catch culled for bigger fish.

~JOHN THOMAS JR

John Thomas lives in Monmouth, Oregon.

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