



DRAWINGS BY PAULA PIUKKULA

# SCHOONERS

FROM PAGE 11

were expropriated from Mexico). Lewis & Clark ended their overland trek there, though namesake John Jacob Astor never visited the small settlement he financed and sold when his ambitions to dominate the Pacific fur trade failed. The city's best years, when tallmasted ships and sternwheel riverboats crowded its wharves and the river swarmed with the winged sails of fish boats, were long over. Astoria had been infamous for its sleazy waterfront saloons and brothels; many of its rowdy loggers, reckless mariners and careless farmers were shanghaied to China-bound ships by an army of crimps, brothel madams 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.

I got to know a robust old logger who shot bear hunters and protected eagles. Every day he gave flowers to waitresses in a downtown coffee shop where I met him. He told me greed killed off the old forests and wiped out the salmon that were once so plentiful folks claimed they could cross the river on their backs. His basso voice seemed to bellow from a barrel even when he spoke quietly. He said Astoria started going downhill when the red lights were taken off the whorehouses and put on traffic signals.

At least once a day I walked along the almost empty riverfront that a century earlier had exchanged Victorian finery for raw furs, fish and timber. I walked past silent deserted fish canneries that had once shipped salmon everywhere and the burned ruins of buildings on pilings over the river, remnants of a fire that had burnt out the city's heart more than half a century earlier and deteriorated almost as slowly as classical ruins. 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 rusted and broken though scores of trains once hauled canned fish into the interior and thousands of tourists to the coast. Each sunset it seemed the sun reluctantly withdrew its last rosy light from the old city that once prospered from reckless disregard for the resources its citizens ravished. I wondered what being native to Astoria might be like, its dead past more palpable than present



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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 Asian 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 onto the big blue pond. I felt about other fishermen as a combat soldier does about his war comrades, aware that any of them as well as himself might be killed. Astoria's families mourned a long succession of parents, spouses, lovers, children, neighbors and shipmates who perished with their vessels on the ocean or the river. The fishermen warred with wind and water; the town watched them come and go like wartime sailors and soldiers.

## LOOK INTO THE EYES OF A DYING FISH

There were three seagulls. They flew over the water which was green, hunting a fish that had been hurt. They hovered over the tiny harbor where all the fishermen empty their nets on Terminal Island, waiting in the Sunday afternoon sky for the weakening fish to finally become too slow for their swoops.

And the fish, a white gash in its back, a wound from somewhere, was weakening. It surfaced many times, gulping the oxygen so desperately needed as life oozed from its small body and stained the water already polluted by the imperious civilization ashore. Overhead, the gulls waited their chance, three ominous reflections riding the wind-speckled water.

Each time one of the noisy birds came close, the dying fish let its body fall deeper into the water, farther than the hunters were willing to venture with their hungry beaks — but each time the climb to the surface was harder, slower.

For a time the fish was safe. It was too close to a ship for the gulls to risk a dive. But the current against which it could no longer struggle slid the fish back out into open water.

Two of the gulls made shallow dives but the fish just managed to duck under in time: then it was over.

As the two gulls were skidding back into the sky, the third made a silent glide and grabbed the fish as it resurfaced for another draught of precious air. The successful gull had to evade the other two as they tried to steal its catch, and a fishing boat chugged out to the ocean a few minutes later.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER  
(North Long Beach Herald American, 3/27/1969)

**Bikes & Beyond**

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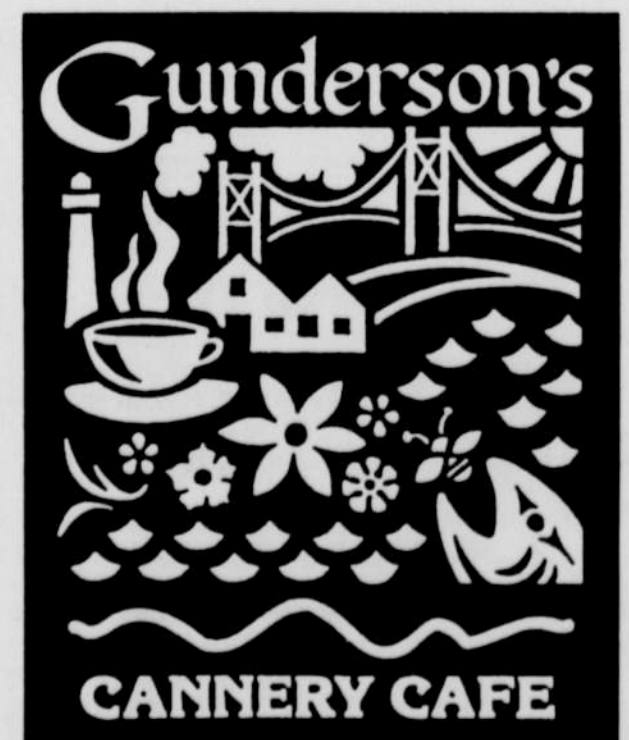
In the evenings I turned into the Mermaid Tavern and drank myself senseless at a table next to large windows that overlooked the river. The windows were sacred. The loggers, longshoremen and mariners who patronized the Mermaid did not throw furniture, beer pitchers or each other through them whenever a fight erupted. Nor did they knock each other against a large wood carving of a mermaid inside the door. I looked out the hallowed windows and watched the bobbing lights of fish 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 was fit to go back on deck. I still had to wear the brace, but I convinced the Skipper I was able to work. I told the temporary fishpuller 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 spent military duty and where, apparently, he had been a clown. A day later we provisioned *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.

The morning was a mariner's prayer, scrubbed clean and fresh by the night's storm. The sun caught fire to rolling swells that heaved us gently in their troughs as we recrossed the bar. We dropped the tuna poles beyond the *Columbia Lightship* and ran west. We reached our destination when the sun was there with us. Seabirds trailed into its final fire, gliding with the wind over gelatinous lumps. Only one hungry albacore grabbed for a hook and it fought desperately while I struggled to bring it aboard. The fingers of my left hand were without the assistance of a thumb and kept slipping on the taut wet line. Finally I bent over the stern and speared the tuna's gills with a gaff hook and jerked it aboard. Minnows and blood spewed onto the deck from its mouth and gills, and its large body, shocked by its sudden extraction from the water, heaved and pitched in a frenzy for oxygen. Far away in the last light in the west a long drumroll of clouds took the shapes of jungled islands for an instant, then the light faded to a smear of rust. The darkness chilled me while I waited for the fish to die before I dropped its blue and silver corpse into the hold.

We hunted albacore a few hundred miles offshore in warm currents from Japan for two weeks. We trolled back and forth with and against the swell, plowing the water with our hooks like farmers. The Skipper worked the wheel in the house while Kamiju and I shared the cockpit in the stern. Kamiju pulled six lines that trailed aft from the tuna pole on the port side and I pulled six lines on the starboard side. Whenever an albacore took a line the Skipper swung *Falling Star* into a circle to encompass the fish it traveled with, and we raced for seabirds when we saw great flocks of them dive for living islands of plankton in the hope that tuna were feeding from below.

One evening after sunset we started rolling up the lines and were about to shut down the motor for the night when we were struck by a school of albacore. In an instant all lines had fish on them, including one I had been coiling which was jerked out of my hands. Kamiju pulled at a wire attached to a bell inside the house. The Skipper appeared in the doorway. How many? he shouted over the motor and evening wind. All lines got fish, I yelled back. He disappeared into the house and switched the wheel onto automatic pilot so that *Falling Star* would make wide sweeping loops. He crossed the deck and wedged himself into the cockpit between Kamiju and me. The deck quickly filled with frantically dying albacore. They kept coming at us, following us around our orbit through the ocean. No sooner was a line cleared of a fish and tossed back into the water when another fish grabbed at it. We pulled them aboard for nearly two hours. By the first hour I was exhausted, my healing arm protested with pain, and I spent the rest of the time praying for the fish to stop. Kamiju the clown laughed and kept up a running stream of erotic wit. The Skipper was silent. I heard his hoarse breathing and smelled the rancid sweat that steamed from underneath his slicks. All three of us lurched against the pitching deck as *Falling Star* rolled and tumbled through its rotations around the ocean. We stumbled into each other and hit each other with fish. Lines tangled, hooks got caught on clothing or on things in the cockpit. A gaff was lost overboard. My hands were slimy with fish scales and guts and stung from dozens of hook punctures mixed with salt water. Above the chaotic sounds of wind and water and the straining of the boat motor I heard the death drums of hundreds of albacore all over the deck. The entire stern and walkways on either side of the house were piled with dying fish. Some fell into the cockpit and flopped around our feet. I also felt about to die.— When they quit as suddenly as they struck. We stood awhile and numbly waited for a line to stiffen but none did. Behind us the last dying fish beat their bodies into the bloody deckboards. The Skipper shook his head like he was emerging from a dream and climbed out of the cockpit. He lurched and slipped over the fish until he reached the house. He swung the boat in a reckless turn that threw Kamiju and me into each other and threatened to broach the boat. When he got the prow pointed downhill the skipper leaned out of the house and shouted for us to stack the



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