

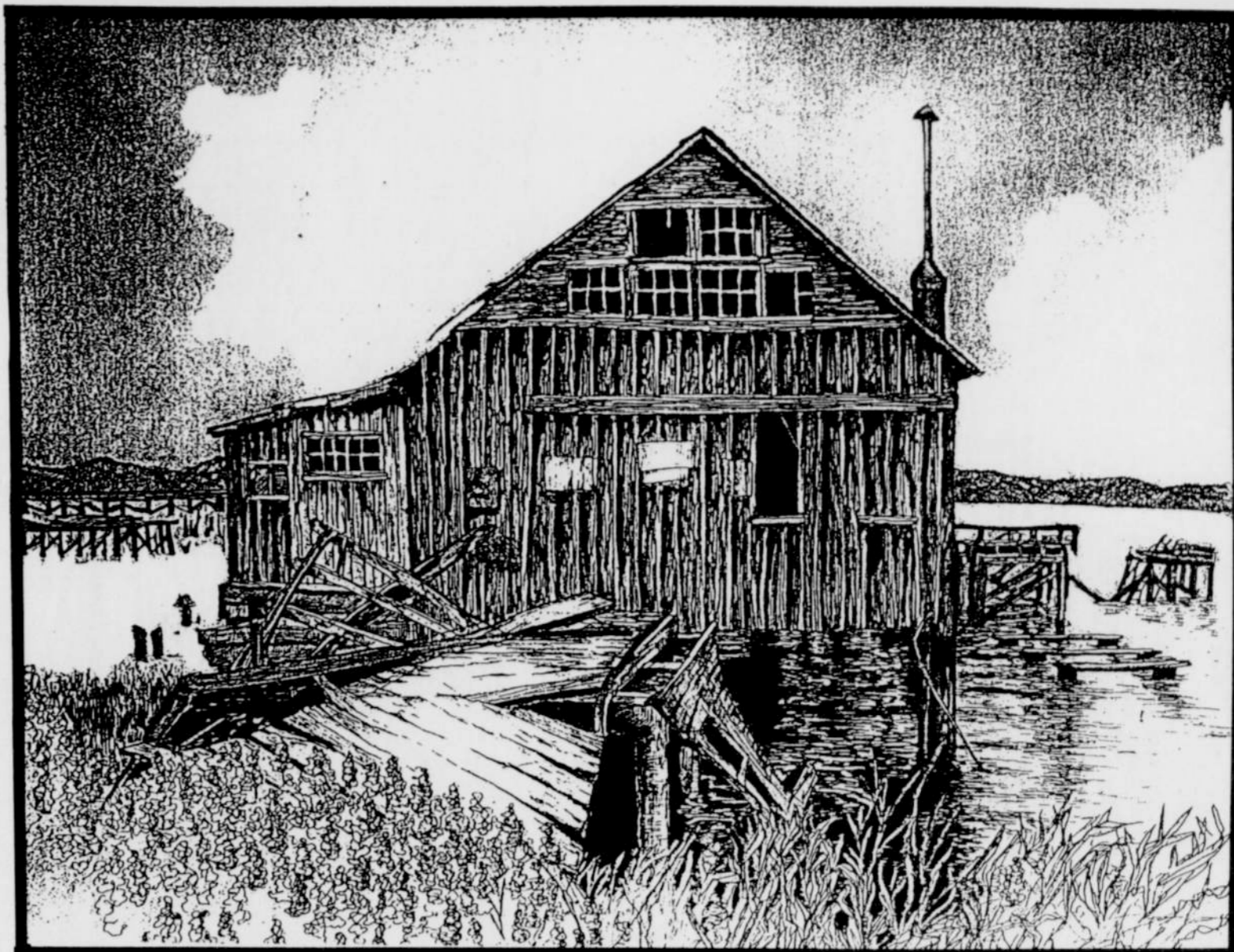
corpses in bins down in the hold. It took almost the rest of the night and filled half the hold. We covered the dead fish with blankets of ice, layer by layer like one would frost a cake.

None of the other nights were as eventful. We killed the motor after each sunset and drifted with the current, smoking up our supply of marijuana and awakening long before dawn each morning. The boat was usually surrounded by blue sharks and birds were asleep on deck or clinging to the mast when one or another of us stepped out on deck for the day's first piss before the coffee was ready. Each morning the sharks scampered away in terror and the birds flew off shrieking when the skipper started the motor and the screw took a bite out of the ocean. Kamiju and I climbed into the pit astern and carefully eased out the lines on each side to prevent them from tangling. From sunup to sundown we plowed through a gentle blue lump and pulled aboard albacore that gulped our hooks.

The weather changed, preceded one twilight by a sheet of clouds that lay over the sky like a shroud over a corpse. Wind blew cold and nasty in the darkness before dawn. Daylight was gray streaked with sleet and flying spray. The old boat shuddered like an epileptic in the wild ocean. We skittered through its trough all that day running for shore. We were thrown around crazily, tossed halfway up the spumy sky on the breaking crest of a mountainous swell one instant, then fell sickeningly down its back, repeated incessantly as if a furious mother had grasped a child by the shoulders and fiercely shook it. For the first time I felt a little seasick and Kamiju laughed at me.

In the late afternoon we came abreast of an abandoned lighthouse on Tillamook Rock a mile offshore from Cannon Beach and turned north against the wind and current and beat ourselves senseless against unceasingly oncoming swells. Tons of water crashed into the bow and washed across the deck to the stern. We were beat around so roughly it was virtually impossible to stand even when we clung to supports. We sat at a table in the house whenever it was not our turn at the wheel and stared wordlessly out at the seas that roared past after punching *Falling Star* in the nose or watched whoever wrestled the wheel. The Skipper had come down from the topside bridge when it got too nasty to remain up there. His face and beard were a blur of windlashed rainwater and his slicks dripped large puddles at his feet when he took over the wheel inside the house. We took turns at the helm and peered out the wet and fogged windows while fighting to stay on our feet. We watched anxiously for deadheads which were partially submerged logs that had got away from timber rafts on the Columbia River, so called because of their capacity to put holes in the sides of wood boats like *Falling Star* and sink them. We looked also for other boats running for home like we were but didn't see any. I was relieved after an hour at the wheel by the Skipper before dark. I dropped down into the dingy dim foc'sle and crawled into my cramped bunk that stank of ancient fish, dirty clothes and countless seasons of unwashed deckhands. I lay awake in the darkness and stared up through a small hole at the Skipper's black rubber boots as he fought the wheel. I listened to the water pounding against the hull next to my head. Sometimes on gentler nights the water against the hull sounded like voices of children calling out my name.

We stumbled gracelessly across the bar after midnight. Huge black swells grappled to crush us or roll us over but we escaped and limped into the main channel and quieter waters. The lights of Astoria climbed its hills as if they were on Christmas



trees, and the beams and taillights of automobiles and trucks on the high arch of the steel bridge that crossed the wide river shone like gems. We tied up behind a rotting abandoned cannery building and carefully walked along a collapsing dock. We were cold, wet and exhausted and stumbled across Marine Drive on tottering sealegs. Traffic hardly noticed we three who had battled Davy Jones. If any saw us at all in the darkness they probably thought we were drunk. We drank a beer at last call at a fisherman's tavern. The place had salt. Knotted hawser butts and rusted ships' lanterns hung from ceiling beams. The walls were cluttered with nets, floats, corks, photographs and faded prints of sailing schooners, steamships, battleships and fish boats, some shown grounded on the beach or hull-over and breaking up on a reef. Wall tapestries of deer and elk covered large front windows. The place was called Hazel's, and she stood behind her bar like a warm sea.

We unloaded tuna the next afternoon. I was not much help. My left arm was sore and stiff from my turns at the helm the day before. We untied from the rotting pier and slipped into

the stream away from the crumbling cannery building. A flock of seagulls perched on the cannery roof leaped into the air in pursuit, drawn by the pungent smells of the dead fish in our hold. The weather was sour and the river gray and choppy. A big ship bellowed for us to get out of its way. We hit the horn in taunting shrieks and stoutly chugged past as a pilot tug escorted the steel behemoth to an anchorage just offshore the city's downtown. We tied up at a cannery. The Skipper climbed up on the dock while Kamiju put on a pair of slicks and went down into the hold. Soon a steel bin was dropped to him on a cable and he started filling it with frozen albacore bodies. Each time a container was filled with stiff fish it was winched up to the dock and a forklift pushed it into the cannery building. The Skipper was somewhere inside, carefully watching the scales as each bin was weighed and credited to *Falling Star* before being wheeled into another part of the large fish barn where cannery workers lopped off the hides, heads and tails. The albacore were cleaned, cut into bits and stuffed into cans which were stacked on trays and steamed in huge cookers. At some point in the process the tuna lost their wild ocean flavor.

The weather cleared two days later. The Skipper and Kamiju visited me at the house above the river late in the afternoon. The river was pink from the lowering sun and mountains on the Washington side were blue. Above them purple and brown clouds scuffed across a yellow sky. Big ships anchored in the river in the lee of Tongue Point turned on their city lights. We sat at a window and watched the sunset while passing around a joint. The Skipper asked if I would help him

THE OLD FISHERMAN DIED IN THE WATER

A tiny anchovy went mad in the quiet waters of Fish Harbor Sunday afternoon. Ernie and his new-found dog were sitting on the back deck of a boat when the small silver-bellied fish broke water and danced its gleaming body through insane flopping circles around a floating clump of rotting seaweed. Far off a jet turned in the blue sky filling with fog and a large freighter disappeared over the hazy rim of the world.

The dog barked at the fish and Ernie spit at the sun-washed dance floor. Out there, where the big freighter was chugging through Angel's Gate was where they had found old Chuck Verran floating face down.

"That old man was just about the last of the old fishermen on this island," Ernie said, taking a swig of wine and spitting over the side again. "Only Blackie's left, and maybe a couple of others."

Ernie, when he's not in jail or sleeping near trash cans or atop cakes of ice in Terminal Island's fishermen's icehouse, is a commercial fisherman. Old Chuck (when he was alive) used to say, "Ernie, you're about the best hand on a fishboat I've seen, but on the beach you ain't worth an empty bottle..."

"I think he was trying to get back to his boat," Ernie said. "We'd been drinking a little and he went off to get some shuteye. He must've slipped or something — He had a bad heart. He was an old man, you know, 70 or more. He said to me once, when I told him he should take care of himself better, 'Ernie, I'm already living on borrowed time.'"

The newspapers said old Chuck was found in the outer harbor, near the breakwater. The men on Fireboat One found his body fully clothed, floating at just about the time the sun came over the canneries, making the water glow pink and orange like it usually does. That was the last sunny day for more than a week. The skies and waters stayed gray and dreary until the old fisherman was buried in a shoreside hole.

"I ain't going to his funeral," Ernie had said then. "He's gone. They're just planting the old hulk that carried him around."

Sitting on a moored fishboat with a shaggy dog that had just adopted him, Ernie — dark and tanned, wearing always black trousers and shirt because he doesn't have to wash them so often — remembered when old Chuck was shipwrecked on an island off the coast of Mexico.

"It was a long time ago, Clipper Island they call it. The Navy left there after the war and left food and water and quonset huts still standing just in case somebody got shipwrecked — the waters are pretty rough down there."

"Well, Chuck's boat turned turtle and he and the crew swam for shore. When rescuers finally got to them a couple of months later, the guys had set up a still and were brewing their own liquor. They were having a ball, eating that chow and coconuts and drinking their homemade juice and just laying out in the sun. When they were finally found, Chuck and the other guys threw rocks and coconuts and told them to go away..."

Ernie was shipwrecked once himself. A freighter came out of the fog off Monterey and put a hole in his fishing boat big enough for a whale to swim through. The boat sank in three minutes and Ernie was in the water three hours.

Ernie stood up and walked across the boat deck, stopped a second at the gunwale and then jumped into Fish Harbor's polluted water. A strong tide had flushed out most of the scum poured into the harbor by the imperious civilization ashore and the afternoon sun dappled on the silvery curves of Ernie's smooth plunge.

Two fishermen on the pier who had just released back into the harbor a bird they rescued and scrubbed clean of oil with dishwater, saw Ernie drop over the side of the boat and they fell down laughing. A few moments later they too dived into the dirty water. There was much laughter and splashing and after awhile all three clambered like first amphibians onto a slippery, oil rotted log secured by cables to the ancient and equally decrepit pier. Ernie's dog barked at them from the boat deck and old Blackie, Honorary Mayor of Terminal Island, glanced a sunbeam off a bottle of cheap wine he raised in salute from the pier. Wino John the shipwright was with him. He often quoted Omar Khyam in conversation: "I came out the same water I went in," he said.

A red wine sky over the old cannery buildings ended the day. Ernie, Blackie and Wino John finished a last bottle on the boat and dropped it into the black waters for a journey by the tides. Ernie lingered with his dog after the others went ashore. On the beach, until the boats go out again for the summer catch, he's washing dishes in a waterfront cafe.

"You know, there's a place behind Pete The Greek's where Blackie and me and old Chuck used to drink wine and watch the ships go by. Both those guys knew every ship — where it was coming from and where it was going, who owned it and what signals it put out. Blackie's a lot like old Chuck. They were the best hands in the fishing fleet maybe 30 years ago — Chuck was still fishing when he died, but old Blackie's been on the bottle so hard and long he hasn't been out in years. Him and Limey Bob used to run around until a fisherman found Limey dead over a gas pump one day about a year ago."

Ernie said a railroad once altered a stretch of tracks on the island because Honorary Mayor Blackie kept stumbling over the rails after a few bottles of the grape. "And now he's just about the last one left from the old days when the fleet was three times as big and busy, and maybe when I'm one of the old ones all of us might've left this island for someplace else."

A fishboat, white as all of them are, with a name of a saint or a woman, came into Fish Harbor low in the water with its catch and pulled up alongside a cannery wharf. They come in like that all day and night every day from just about everywhere on the Pacific Coast, and there are fishermen all over the world like Ernie, Blackie, Limey Bob and dead old Chuck, drawn to the lonely magic of the ocean by a madness not unlike the dance of the silver-bellied anchovy.

"At least old Chuck died in the water," Ernie said.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER
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1287 COMMERCIAL ST.
ASTORIA 325-5221