

Skipper and I suggested Ben do likewise, which he did. I climbed the ladder to the topside bridge and wedged against the upper wheel. I gripped the rail as the boat lunged shakily to starboard and clung to the deck with much less elegance than a spider. My legs pumped like oil rigs. I was frightened, certain with sad perception that we were not going to make it this time. Regardless of all the dangers the old boat had survived, *Falling Star's* luck had run out and she was about to die.

I lose all of my girlfriends, I thought, trying to make a joke of it, wishing I was down below in the house telling it to the others, wisecracking in the shallow paleness of my fear. I stared at the buoyline, saw a big tankership plowing out to sea, seeming to almost run over bouncing smaller boats that clustered around it like flies. I saw also two heaving blue swells launched from the opposite side of the bar, one on top of the other in a sort of piggyback fashion. They raced toward us. I watched them, mesmerized. My brain calmed with sudden clarity almost omniscient. I waited as the twin waves approached, two blue stallions straining for the finish, lifting other vessels in their path and setting them loose because we were their prey. They were living things, gnashing and boiling, whipped to roaring frenzy by a fierce wind. I could see each detail, each tiny ripple like the intricate webbed flesh of leaves, every cell in interlacing rhythm, reborn every grasping inch, here and there a brief slash of silvery white spray across their faces, the late morning sun broken into gleaming prisms, water reflecting on itself, at the last second hurling in close for a combination punch, slamming into our port beam with a shuddering crash that threw us down, the second fist finishing us off.

Falling Star rolled over as if to make love to the water, its long body engulfed, undecided at first, then violently surrendering — as my former girlfriend had the first night we made love, holding one another, breaking for a moment as she lay on her back in the darkness, then she rolled onto her side with an almost sad moan, the last sound I heard from the stricken *Falling Star* the instant it fell back from the reeling slap; and without fear or surprise I also surrendered, riding the boat over as if I was standing on a descending escalator.

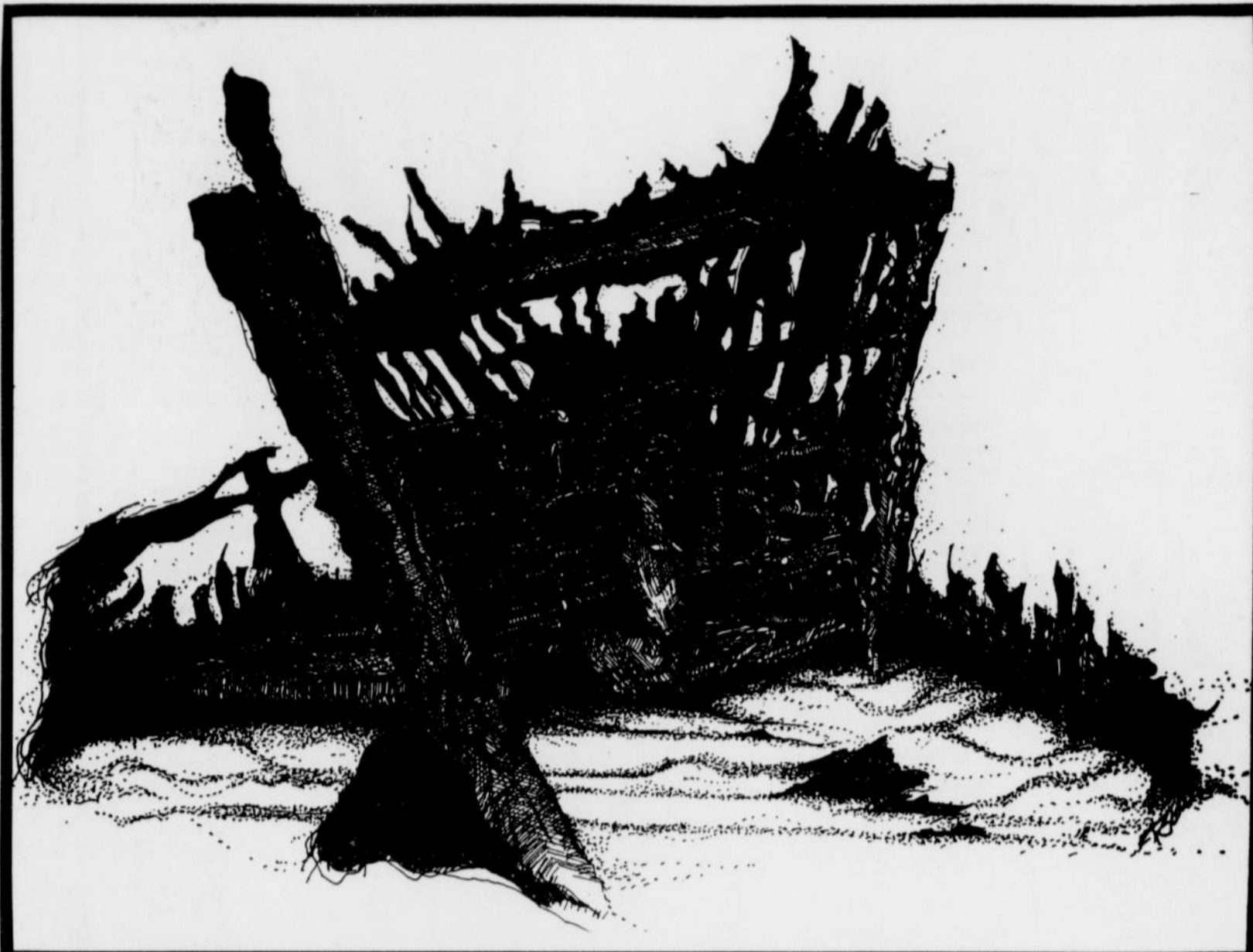
For a second I wondered if *Falling Star* would come back but its entire length was under water which was already swirling around my knees. Almost in a dream I considered that the boat might roll completely over, which would probably trap and drown me. I thought to jump clear but surf pounding on the jetty dissuaded me. I saw a boat running out of the main channel toward us, a boat quite like *Falling Star* except for its brown paint. That same instant I was aware *Falling Star* would not roll on its back. It was settling into the river by its stern instead, like an old arthritic dog. My deck had become the narrow railing that was slipping quickly underwater. I grabbed a long-bladed fishknife from a sheath on my belt and started cutting through a tangle of lines, cables and chain. I heard the Skipper shout at someone in the house, which was no longer below my feet but directly at my back. He forced the motor, straining to somehow pull *Falling Star* back up on its keel. I saw the last crabs spilling into the river. You have to win once in awhile, I whispered in acknowledgment of their triumph. I noticed also the red buoys that trailed from the capsized boat like streamers and felt relief that I would not have to clean them or the crab pots after all.

Water rushed to my waist as *Falling Star* sank deeper. I felt immersed in silence that lasted only a few seconds yet was absolute, and sounds afterward seemed more distinctly separate. "You okay?" a voice inquired. I looked at the Skipper's worried bushy face peering down at me from the port gunwale. He had the expression of an anxious child concerned about how to get down from a roof. I wanted to laugh and tell him a joke I thought of when I saw the crabs fleeing into the water.

"I'm okay," I said and cut loose some of the lines that held crab pots to the boat. I thought less weight might help *Falling Star* get to its feet. I was not sure I was right about the principle; I was looking for something to do that might be useful.

"Give me your knife," the Skipper ordered. I handed it up to him and climbed across the capsized deck to the upended port side which was all that was left for a deck. I saw the open window and was aware of how the other three escaped the overturned house. Kamiju smiled. Ben quaked with fear and uncertainty. "What happened? Did you see what happened?" he gasped in shocked disbelief. I thought of the joke suggested by the crabs when they abandoned ship. "The crabs jumped overboard in a daisychain and pulled us over," I said. Kamiju laughed but Ben was unamused, as was the Skipper. He cut a rope that held a stack of pots to the fallen mast and the surge tore them away from the boat. The pots went to the bottom and the red buoys joined others in forming a necklace around *Falling Star*.

The brown fishboat hove to about a hundred yards outside of us. It was wracked by swells and its captain must have decided it was too risky to get closer. The Skipper cursed the other captain. I could see boats coming directly at us from the main channel and figured they must have been radioed out by the brown troller. The Skipper suddenly jumped through the window into the house. I impulsively followed and dropped into waist deep water. Water poured into the house and into the foc'sle where the lifejackets had been stored. The hissing rushing sounds of water drowned the coughing spasms of the dead motor which the Skipper grimly attempted to restart. He was bent over like a boy trying to pick up a bicycle. One hand gripped the only portion of the wheel still above water, the other punched hard at the starter. He seemed like one of the motor's pistons as he jerked back and forth, jamming his fist into the



PAULA PIUKKULA

button. Then just as suddenly he gave it up. He could not break the water's hold. *Falling Star* was not his anymore. His eyes were intense and angry. "We better get out of here," he said and I climbed out, turning and giving him a hand up. He tried to stand but the boat's convulsions were too much and he nearly fell flat trying to sit down on the planked hull.

A small boat approached us the same instant that a part of the stern fell straight down which lifted the bow clear of the water. We were almost pitched off the hull. The man at the helm of the small boat drove his bow into our side, barely avoiding the overturned mast which jabbed straight at him like a spear. Kamiju was the closest and the Skipper motioned to him. He leaped aboard the small boat, slipped and fell on his butt. He looked around at us and grinned as the boat backed off and made room for a gillnet fishboat that plowed stolidly through tangled rigging and only just missed the mast. I heard the fisherman shout he could take two aboard. Ben jumped. The Skipper was perched above him, and without really thinking I shoved him off with my left foot. A loud stream of abuse flowed from his mouth as his body hit the other deck and sprawled heavily, but the roar of the gillnetter's motor overwhelmed his shouts as the boat backed out from the mass of tangled water-whipped lines and cable.

Falling Star slid deeper into the river and I scrambled higher up the bow. I stroked and patted the wood planking. I whispered my sorrow to the dying boat and apologized for everything I had said to shame it in the past. I looked around. The big tankership was clearing Cape Disappointment and about to disappear into the blue brushstroke of ocean. The brown tuna boat sat and rolled with the swells, watching over me, ready to pick me up if I jumped or fell into the water. It was too big to rescue me, would probably hole itself on the mast or tangle its screw in the wildly dancing rigging that thrashed the water and beat against the upended hull. Only a smaller boat could dash in and out of the wreck without fouling itself. I looked for the boat that had taken Kamiju off, saw it circling outside the gillnetter. Kamiju stood in the bow, braced against the bucking and rolling, leaning forward as if he was ready to reach out a hand and pull me off my tiny island. I wondered what I looked like from that distance, probably not very stoic, I decided, shuffling my fanny closer to the prow each inch that went underwater. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw that the house had almost disappeared, then at my left arm. The brace was wet and the sodden Ace bandage had unraveled into a flapping pennant.

The small boat raced straight toward me. I got ready to jump and hoped that I would make the deck instead of falling short into the water. I could hear Kamiju shout for me to hang on, curious about where the clown imagined I would go if I chose not to. I realized it would be close. The bow was about to go under with my last patch of dry wood and I worried that suction would drag me to the bottom of the river with *Falling Star*. But I was not frightened. I was calm with certainty there was nothing I could do but wait for whichever occurred first, my rescue or possible drowning. "Hey Taxi!" I shouted and waved at Kamiju. I laughed at an absurd image of standing atop the sinking bow, water

lapping at my chest and neck, waving goodbye with the Ace bandage flowing in the wind.

I jumped. Kamiju's arms reached out to catch me as I landed on deck and lurched off balance.

The gillnetter fell in behind the small boat and together we circled the wreck. Only the final inch of the bow was above water and part of the mast and a pole. The red buoys continued to surround *Falling Star* and marked its death. I saw a shining white boat coming toward us and thought it might be a Coast Guard rescue vessel from the Cape Disappointment station.

My eyes barely caught the last of *Falling Star*. A large swell rolled over its final tip of bow. When it passed the boat was gone. A swirl of bubbles rose to the surface for a few minutes. I thought I felt the stern hit the mud and saw the boil of displaced water as the rest of the boat rolled over and crashed on the river bottom. Loose boards floated amidst the ring of buoys.

The gillnetter pulled alongside the Coast Guard boat. The Skipper and Ben jumped aboard. Next was our turn. Kamiju clambered across while I held the boats together. I thanked the man who rescued us. He smiled around a pipe in his mouth and touched a finger to his yachting cap. I leaped into the Coast Guard boat. After salvaging a few loose boards where *Falling Star* sank, the helmsman turned his craft toward the Washington shore. The gillnetter and the boat that saved me were by then anonymous among the crowded shipping in the buoy line. The brown tuna boat was also out of sight.

I asked the Skipper if he might someday forgive me for not allowing him to be the last man off his boat. He glared at me, then wiped his mouth with the hand that had only one finger and thumb. "Why do you think I should?" he asked.

"The guy said he could take two," I said. "You were the closest."

"Know how I lost my fingers?" he asked and shoved the mangled hand toward my face. I shook my head. "I thought I knew what I was doing," he said.

Before I could ask what he meant he went into the wheelhouse and stood next to the helmsman.

The skipper's father, who had been a merchant sailor as well as a fisherman, picked us up at the Coast Guard station and drove us across the four mile bridge to the Oregon side of the river. He spared none of us his contempt at the loss of *Falling Star* but reserved special abuse for his son the captain. Two days later an insurance company tried to accuse the Skipper of purposely sinking the boat. That night he got drunk and started a fight in a bar, lost and spent most of a night and day in jail until Kamiju and I raised bail. Other fishermen, some he had known all his life and a few who had lost their own vessels, criticized him for capsizing his boat and treated him like a Jonah. He took it pretty hard. "I feel like I'm going crazy," he said one afternoon while we sat at the bar of the Mermaid Tavern and watched boats and ships bobble past a confused network of rotted piers and charred pilings that held up canneries and saloons before the old waterfront deteriorated and burned. Three albacore boats were tied up at a fuel dock. A rabble of shrieking gulls whirled around them. "I've been thinking of suiciding," the Skipper said. He brushed his one-fingered hand across his forehead then tangled it in his unkempt beard. "One thing I'll tell you for sure," the Skipper said and held aloft a half empty glass of beer. "This is the only schooner I'm ever taking across a bar again."

I saw my former girlfriend in Portland a few days later. We were civil and civilized with each other and drank coffee together in a small downtown cafe. People were starting to leave work and poured onto the sidewalks. She told me about herself and new boyfriend. I told her about *Falling Star*. Her eyes went cold. An unfriendly smile dimpled her face. "First you lost me," she said. "Now you've lost your precious boat."

I met her hard stare.
"I'll find another," I said.

The artists on these pages are local Oregon coastal. *Alice Ann Petrie* lived in Newport when she made this drawing of a docked fishboat in the early 1980s; she and her husband Don Petrie now live in Beaverton. *David Ewen* drew his version of a fisherman for the first publication of 'Schooners Across the Bar' in Michael Marsh's *AXIS* magazine in 1974. Two drawings by *Paula Piukkula* are from a series of pen & inks of derelict fishboats and decrepit cannery buildings on the Astoria riverfront; the third is of *Peter Iredale* eroding on its own well attended beach. *Charlotte Bruhn* has drawn several views of Astoria.



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