

1953

I
n
t
h
e
s
u
m
m
e
r
o
f
1953 I hitchhiked
down to Florida and got work
on a shrimp boat out on the
beautiful Gulf of Mexico.

Each day we would slap lazy in the sun in the warm baby oil glass water at Marquesas Keys, a little unbridged atoll down at the end of nowhere and the beginning of nothing. Each night we would see hundreds of other shrimp boats drag their nets in a fifty-mile circle. Each boat had a light on its mast. The stars, the moon, and the boatlights made a circus of diamonds on the dark Gulf. We would winch the net up. The net had tons of wet life shining in it. The net had a slip knot at the bottom. We would reach under the net, pull the slip knot open, and huge blobs of slimy gill life's flashing eye teeth would spill out on the deck. We shoveled it all up with our night black shovels onto small white tables on the side of the deck, threw the Jellyfish, Silverfish, Stingfish, Starfish, Sponge, the Afterbirth and all overboard, iced the shrimp in peach baskets, and stowed them down in the ice in the cement vault in the hold. While we were working the boat dragged for the next full net. The low sides of the boat heaved up and down in four directions. Sometimes our work tables were down to water level. We would balance on the heaving deck looking through sea splash over the swelling dark water seeing the truly beautiful lights of hundreds of other shrimp boats revolving out in the night. Suddenly, I thought I was seasick. I was furious. This was an experience I wanted to enjoy with my entire being. I was ashamed. I couldn't work. I was paralyzed in a deep panic. I had never been at sea before. We ate our old cook's green sauce chicken that smelled like marine oil from the galley that stink-reeked diesel fuel as the boat heaved relentlessly. Life that I had presumed was only inside animals was before me glistening with all its visceral slime on the deck. I had intense nausea. I wasn't seasick. I was out in the middle of exotic secret darkness having what I knew was the ecstatic time of my life. Life itself in all its wild variety was flying around me like a circus of hyper-spectacle, and I was in a total panic for three days and nights. And being 19 and foolish, my mind a brilliant toy, I was ashamed and furious at myself like a little wet Jewish King Lear raging against the totality of life for cheating me out of a totally enthralling experience. I worked like a dog couldn't work to understand what was the cause of this panic in me for ten years and one quiet summer afternoon ten years later, in 1962, I was playing chess in a comfortable, warm cottage in the country with a very lovely woman. In 1962 I remembered the bulging glistening net spill life out on the deck. I saw her beautiful hand move a black knight. A night black shovel appeared in my mind. Suddenly, I had a flash of that same panic and understood its cause. Better yet, I realized that until that moment, I had carried this panic inside me nearly all of my life. From early childhood it had ripped up at and spoiled my life. The world was mine. My life was mine. After this, I never contained more than a bittersweet seed of this panic which had almost crippled me. After this, minuscule rare panics sighed gentle in my dark inner gulf how blameless and beautiful Life's liquid circus is when night black panics slice our joy. Perceptions of life don't cut, dead panics slap our bright toy.