

THE ANCIENT MARINER

The vast blue-green expanse of the open sea stretched out in front of the ancient mariner. It stretched in front of him as he was standing on the shore. Silhouetted against the tall, swaying coconut trees and the dark green undergrowth, the mariner looked more like a tourist in his near-nakedness, rather than a soul of the sea. But there was no one to look at the old man; white hair which came to his shoulder, blowing across with the sea breeze, in tandem with the single piece of once-white cloth wrapped around his waist, the upper torso and the arms – muscular and with signs of great use; for the ancient mariner was alone. He was alone on that godforsaken island with no ship, no food, no water and most of all, no will to live. He looked out on to the sea. An empty sea, a vast shimmering plain of nothingness that stretched away endlessly until it blurred at the edge of the horizon into the hazed rim of a vast and empty sky. The reflection of the sun – bright and blinding – somewhere high up in the cloudless sky, played a game of shining, sparkling hide-and-seek with the still waters.

But no one could see the ancient mariner's face. It wasn't because of the brightness of the sea in front him, but because the photograph had been taken from behind; the photograph of the ancient mariner.

“What power! What beauty! The very stillness of the shot is what makes it so alive!” The lady in red, with a glass of wine, gloated away to her dimwitted friends, showing an expertise in art that a five-year-old would scoff at.

For it was not a still art. The photograph was what experts – real experts call an “abstract”. Abstracts don't usually depict power – if any, they shy away from it. The state of mind is what an abstract is all about. It has no central theme, no one particular object of attention. Take the Mariner for example. The photographer may be trying to “see” – to visualize the mariner himself, or the open sea, the reflection of the sun, the trees, the sand, the bushes – anything. No one but the photographer knew.

But apparently, the woman in red knew it too! “Oh, Myra! You're so ray-ight!” South-Texan drawl, blue sweater. See what I mean?

The woman in red turns to me. I conjure up my best smile. She returns it.

“I say, darlin’,” she starts. I try not to wince. “Could you tell me who this photographer is?”

Oh boy! Here we go!

“Sure ma'am. It's me.” The expression on the faces of those four women is a million-dollar-one.

“Wh-What?” she stammers, her shock still visible on her pretty, powdered face.

“I said it's me. This is my piece. Ma'am” I added in the end. I am still smiling and they are still gawking.

“How-How...? Never mind! Gre-great work, honey. Come on, girls.”

“Yeah, great work, mister.”

They silently and very quickly troop out of the room. I still can't understand why people react to the truth the way they do. I mean, what's wrong if I'm a pretty good hand at the camera? I just don't get it.

Well, I've been trying to answer that question now for the past thirty years and am not able to find it. So, I just get on with my work.

I plunge my mop into the bucket and start mopping and make my way out of the room. I catch a last glimpse of the ancient mariner as the doors of the ladies' room in the Christie's auction house, London, closed on my single greatest work.