

ROBERT WATSON

Ancient Arch, ND
Oil on canvas, 28 x 24 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

FRED BROWN

An Ancient Mariner

I bought this book today at the post office to keep some ideas in it. And I bought a pen. Now I am sitting here with no ideas. Let's think. When I was down at the post office this morning, when I bought my book and pen, I heard Mrs. Postgate and Mrs. Green talking about someone who had just come to the island. That's the most interesting thing that's happened here for weeks. This is going to be a dead-exciting book. In a hundred years someone is going to pick up this book and say, "Wow! How did she live with all this excitement?"

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I can't imagine why anyone would want to come to this island. At least anyone who could live somewhere else.

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Nothing has happened here for a week. I keep going for walks round the island whenever I can, and now I know it by heart. I could walk round the island with my eyes closed. I like the rocks under the cliffs. It's all heather at the top, and the rocks are arranged as if a giant had put them there to make it easy to get down. At the bottom, rocks are scattered all together, big and small, all smooth. They look as if they should be soft, like things made out of cloth.

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I'm not sure why I'm bothering to write this. It's another week in which nothing's happened. If I could get off of here, I'd be doing something interesting and would have something interesting to write. I'm getting off of here as soon as I can. I can't stand it here. I'd be better off dead than staying in this place, waiting for nothing to happen day after day. Maybe I'm writing this because one day I might want to look back and see what sort of person I was now.

I wonder what sort of person I will be. I hope I'll be happy and look back on this and think: *At least I'm happier now than I was then.* Maybe I'll be unhappy and read this and think: *At least I was happier once.* But I'm not happy. I can't imagine I'll ever be unhappier than I am now.

I wonder if I will ever read it.

Maybe I'm writing for someone else. Why would I want to do that? Who would ever find it interesting?

I'd have to invent things to make it interesting. Maybe that's what I should do.

I saw a wedding today. I can't think when the last wedding I saw was. I wasn't invited, of course; I've never been invited to a wedding. I'd like to be. The bride is a girl from the other side of the island, the groom comes from the village. I saw them both standing on the steps of the church. She looked very happy. He looked embarrassed. She looked very pretty, even though she was fat. I like thin people better, at least to look at. Every time I see a fat person, I think: *That's what I'm going to end up looking like after spending all my life on this island looking after my mother, who will probably die after me.* I'll never be a bride. I'll never stand on the steps of a church dressed in white with an embarrassed-looking man beside me and throw a bouquet of flowers to some giggling girls while women snivel into their handkerchiefs like mourners at a funeral and drunk men make silly jokes about balls and chains. No, I will stay home with my mother and grow enormously fat.

I saw a man today who I think must be the one Mrs. Postgate and Mrs. Green were talking about a couple of weeks ago, the new man who came to stay on the island. God help him. Is he fleeing from the law? From his wife? Has he got a guilty conscience? Is he trying to find God? He won't find anything like that here. God forsook us a long time ago and was glad to get away.

He seems to be a very old man. He was tall, but now he's stooped. He has a high forehead, going bald, dead thin, like a skeleton in trousers and jacket. He was talking to himself and that scared me a bit. I don't know why. My mother talks to herself all the time, muttering away, and she's harmless enough, even if she is still alive.

What a terrible thing to write!

I went for a walk after I made my mother's tea. It looked dark, but I thought it wouldn't rain for some time. I had just reached the village when the thunder and lightning came on. I was drenched by the time I got to the post office, so I decided to come back. I had just passed the little

cottage by the trees, the one that was always empty, when I heard someone calling. The lightning lit everything up and something like a ghost was standing in the road. It was the new person on the island.

He called out to me, "Don't be running about on a night like this, wee girl, and the rain cutting the eyeballs out of your head. Come on into the house till it passes."

I was frightened and shivering but I let him come up to me. "I've scared you half to death," he said. "I'd have scared myself completely to death if it had been myself I'd met coming up to me on a night like this. But I'm a harmless owl haverel, so come on in and I'll make a cup of tea and we can sit and chat till the rain's over."

I didn't know what to do. I was afraid to go in but I also thought I would look stupid if I walked off into the rain. And I would hurt his feelings, and he seemed a nice man.

So I went in with him and was glad I did. I had a fantastic time. He is very funny, always telling jokes and adopting funny poses and making animal noises. He told me I could put on some of his clothes if I wanted to dry mine. At first I wouldn't: I was scared stiff of him and thought of what my mother would say. *How many times have I told you? Will you ever get some sense into that thick skull of yours?* He asked me where I lived and I told him. He said, "If I had an umbrella, I'd have taken you back, but I don't have one. I've never had one of them things since I was in Yumba Umba. Do you know where that is? It's the darkest place in darkest Africa. On the one side it's jungle and on the other it's desert. No kidding. You're walking along, cutting your way through creepers with monkeys throwing coconuts at you, and suddenly it's all sand and there's camels spitting at you. I was docked there, you see, and went into this wee pub in the middle of the jungle and was having a few wee drinks with a mate a mine and somebody put something in me drink and the next thing I knew I was on a camel halfway across the desert. They were going to sell me as a slave, so they were, like thon man with the coat."

"Weren't you frightened?" Honestly, he told the story so well I was convinced until I asked the question, and then I felt silly.

"Scared shitless. Excuse the language. Us sailors is coarse spoken, you'll have to forgive me. *Sans merde* sounds a bit better maybe. More elegant like, but sure it has the same meaning. Anyway, I got to thinking what could I do to

get out of the mess I was in. I was tied hand and foot, don't you know, but I managed to get me two hands in front of the camel's nose. The rope was made a grass, and it being desert, there wasn't nothing for the camel to ate so it was hungry and it ate clean through it. Then, with me hands free, I got me feet undone. Me umbrella was still there. In them days I was never without one, so I hit the camel driver a clout over the head with it and rescued me shipmate. Alexander, he was called. We called him Alexander the Great. He was an Egyptian, like the real Alexander the Great. Well he started to get hot in the desert so I gave him me umbrella as a sunshade. As a parazone like. Well, suddenly this wind blew up, a wind like you've never seen before. You get them in the desert. Monsoons they're called. We were in the desert, and the jungle started right there, as far away as thon wall is. Well the bold Alexander was lifted into the air and carried off, clean outta sight, and I never saw hilt nor hair of him again."

"Did you ever find out what happened to him?"

"I did, so I did, years later. He landed in the middle of a clearing in the jungle when the wind dropped. There was a bunch of them cannyballs and they was trying to decide which of them was going to be the supper that night when in flies me bold Alexander. So it was a pinch a salt and a shake of pepper and into the pot. He cursed and swore like bejassus but they cooked him anyway. They all got indigestion and swore never to ate another human bean. They're all born-again Christians now, so they are."

The rain is still on, so I have decided to stay the night. The sailor, who is called Stewart, is going to sleep in the chair in front of the fire. I'm not afraid of him. I think he's a nice and kind and gentle man. But I have put a chair up against the door.

My mother said: "I couldn't get a wink of sleep Sunday night, I was that worried about you." I couldn't tell her where I'd stayed because she would have worried about that too. Her worrying really gets up my nose. She is so stupid and she doesn't trust me at all.

I went to see the sailor today. He was the captain of a cutter, whatever that is (if he can be believed; he tells me so many

stories and some of them can't possibly be true). We went for a walk halfway round the island and climbed to the top of the hill. You can see all the coast of the island from there. He said it was really beautiful. I'd never thought of the island as beautiful before then. He sat in the heather and pulled one of the flowers out from the others. He didn't pluck it or anything, just pulled it away from the others, looked at it, and smiled. I bet he could write poetry, better than in the books. His hands are big, with strong, thick scarred fingers; the flower looked very fragile and foreign in his hand, such a tiny, delicate thing.

He looked at me and smiled, the way someone does when they are really very unhappy. I wanted to hug him; there was a painful, tight feeling just under my ribs.

He took a bottle from his pocket and drank half of it straight off, without taking it from his mouth. He winked at me. "Rum." And he held the bottle out to me. I tasted it but it was horrible, sour. No, bitter and burning. He laughed, drank some more, and took his pipe out. It was a very small pipe, with a thin stem, like a straw, sticking right in the middle of the bowl. He told me it was a corncob pipe, and he told me how he had got it.

He used to be, he said, the captain of a small cutter, which was wrecked by a whale in the deep ocean.

"The whale didn't mean to wreck us, you understand. Whales is gentle and kind, and they sing to sailors on lonely nights when the moon makes everything sad. Whales is the ghosts of drowned sailors and the sea is their Heaven. I hope when I die I drowned, for I'd rather swim than fly when I'm dead."

He puffed on his pipe and seemed to have forgotten that he was going to tell me how he got it. I noticed how unlike skin his face was—more like wood or old leather. It surprised me that it moved and changed shape so easily when he talked.

"What happened? After you were wrecked?"

"I woke up on the shore rocks of an island, a bit like these rocks here. I was floating on the water. Some people found me, tall black-skinned people. They were naked. I thought they would kill me and eat me. I had heard stories of such things. They pulled me out of the water and when I was out, I felt how sore I was with the bruising from all the rocks. They carried me up onto some grass and started to take my clothes off. Well, I thought, they're civilised not to

eat me braces and everything. They rubbed oils all over me and I thought I was going to be basted. I couldn't get the energy to fight them off, as if I was as drunk as bedamned. All I could do was wonder what sort of ghost you had if you were cooked and eaten. Then I slept.

"When I woke up, I was sure I'd been roasted and eaten and that I was in Heaven, though I couldn't think for the life of me how I'd got there and there was no angels or nothing. But at least I wasn't in Hell because there was no devils with pitchforks. There was flowers everywhere. I was in a hut made of flowers, great red and blue flowers. There was insects buzzing and girls humming. The girls were as naked—saving your presence, but they were *complètement nues*—as naked as they day they was born, except for flowers in their hair, which was long and black and oily. There was men walking round doing nothing as far as I could see apart from enjoying the sun.

"After a day or two, I got to realize that I wasn't in Heaven because they were heathen people and worshipped golden statues. They made no big deal of it, like . . . nothing like the mass or anything, there was no ceremonies. They just bowed down and said a few words when they went past. They was grotesque little things, their gods, hunchbacks and three-eyed men and such. There was one of Siamese twins joined at the breast, one without arms and legs, one with great holes only for the eyes. All of them delicately made by beating the gold with wee stones.

"There was a woman I took at first to be a priestess of the cult, for they afforded her the same respect as they gave to their gods, neither more nor less. She was as ugly as I believe any woman could have been, humpbacked and twisted, with eyes that would not close and that were entirely white. One hand was wasted away and just hung here like an old forgotten glove, and her legs were thin and bent. In this country they would have hidden her well away out of the sight of everybody."

He stopped again, looking over the sea as if he were trying to find his island, then spat and pulled on his pipe.

"I called her Alexander," he said, and he smiled suddenly, correcting himself, "Alexandra." And he seemed to wink at the sea, as if it were a joke between him and . . . what? The island? The sea? The past? His pipe had gone out and he lit it before he went on.

"One night she came to my bed. I was revolted, so I was.

I felt sick to my stomach, but she nestled up again me, like some wee animal, an' slept in my arms. She came every night after that an' I got used to it as the proper . . . how would you put it now? What would you say? The proper . . . condition for me to sleep."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Not long. Not long."

He rubbed his eyes. I think he was crying.

"These men came. Men like me, the same color, spoke the same language, pigs of men with rum in them, and I drank with them till I was stupid. I drank myself to sleep. When I woke up, they were killing them, shooting them. I staggered about trying to stop it all, but they only laughed at me and offered me the rum bottle. I fell over a body, and when I stood there were all bodies, all dead and mutilated and all. And Alexander was hanging by his neck from the branch of a tree, stone-dead. I cut him down and he was stone-dead and all their gods was carried away."

I felt so sorry for him I took his hand in both of mine and held him. We sat for ages like that. Then he pulled on his pipe. It was out again. He rubbed his eyes and his cheeks dry and said, not looking at me but at the rocks, "Don't you be worrying about it now. It was just a dream I had, a bad dream about times long before I was born."

But something seemed true to me. "What about the one you liked?"

"Aye. Alexander." He corrected himself again, "Alexandra. Sure that's a bad dream too. All made up. Sure I can't even get the name right."

"Who was Alexander then?" I asked, but he didn't answer. He walked back to his house so fast I had to run to keep up with him, to keep him in sight. He went in and shut the door, leaving me outside.

I woke up in the middle of the night. The moon made it as bright as it is on some days. I walked around a bit, imagined that everyone was dead, everyone in the world, those I knew and those I had never known, until I frightened myself indoors again.

A friend of my mother's died. I had to go to look at her body. Her face was strange and waxy, not like something that had

ever lived. Like something the moonlight had touched and changed forever. I tried to imagine her young, running and laughing, crying for no reason except misery. But she did not look as if she had ever been young. The breasts under the nylon nightdress were very full. I thought they would have shrunk, deflated, but they were full and round and I wanted to touch them.

I asked the captain about electricity. He said that in the big cities the streets are always lit up at night so that it is always day. It must be like Saturday night, all strange, as if everyone were dead. But they will all be walking around. Dead people walking in strange light, light that should not really be there.

He didn't seem to think it was important at all.

I met the captain when we were going out to sail. He said I looked very sad and told me to cheer up. "Things are never as bad as you think," he said. I asked him what had happened after he'd left the place where all the nice people had been. He didn't answer at first; I thought he hadn't heard; but then he told me to sit down. He lit his pipe in that slow, careful way of his and told me.

"First I stayed to bury the dead. That took a long time, the most of two weeks. Then I took one of the canoes and paddled due west. I was on the sea for a long time. I lost count of the time and had run out of water when I was picked up by a tramp ship. I stayed with them for three years, working my passage everywhere, until I found one of the gods in a shop. I asked the shop owner where he got it and he became abusive and ordered me to leave. I threatened to cut his throat, nicked it a bit to drive the point home, and he got a bit more friendly, but he couldn't remember. I paid him a quarter of what he asked and took the god with me. After another year I still had no trace of them. Then somebody told me about a witch doctor who was very powerful who lived in one of the islands where we were. I collected my wages—I was first mate by then—and disembarked and got passage to the island.

"This witch doctor lived in a sort of beehive, so you never saw him, just the bees swarming, and heard his voice.

He said a lot of things that never made sense to me and a few things that did. He told me to put the god on a stake driven into the ground and to build a fire around it. I did, and it glowed white.

"The god will have his revenge," said the witch doctor, and he said never a word after that. I felt happy then, contented, you know. When I got back to the mainland I heard of a volcano on the island. Seven people were killed. They were looking for an ancient temple that was supposed to be there. I signed on with another ship.

"I tell you this, I was never drunk again after than night on the island."

I hugged him, and he held me. I closed my eyes and felt as if I were Alexandra in his bed. The idea freaked me, it was scary and exciting and felt right and felt wrong at the same time. He murmured what could have been "Alexander" or "Alexandra" and I opened my eyes. I thought he was going to kiss me on the lips, but he looked at me for a long time, took my head in his hands, and kissed me on the forehead. He moved away and lit his pipe. My heart was beating like I've never felt before. "I'm sorry," he said.

The Captain told me some more about electricity. He says that it is carried in wires, like iron ropes, and if you so much as touch one of them, the fire runs through you and you shake and twitch and die and if someone touched you, the same would happen to them. I don't believe all that: he is trying to humor me.

And all that about it being day all the time, he must have been walking in the moonlight on the same night as me. I wish I had met him . . . I would like to meet him where it is strange and unreal and I am not young and he is not old.

It's early morning. There is a terrible storm, the wind is actually shrieking and I can hear the waves on the shore. They sound as though they will break the island in two.

I went to find the captain, but he was not there. The storm is still raging. I thought I would be blown off the cliff,

down onto the wrecked boats. The roof has blown off one of the houses near the church.

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I have been too sad to write. We held a service today for the captain. Somebody saw him struggling down the rocks in the storm; they think he thought there was a boat in distress and went to help it. They believe that's how the boats were wrecked, when he took one and it was dashed into the other two.

After the service I went to the shore, hoping I might see a whale. I thought I did, once, but it was probably only because I wanted to.

I wonder if he is a young whale. I wonder if whales are old or young, or if they are just strangeness, living dreams that dying sailors dream while they are drowning.

Fred Brown is a teacher working with disadvantaged young people in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and a trade union activist. He was born in Birmingham, UK, but has lived in Northern Ireland for most of his life. He has published fiction and poetry in several British and American magazines.

ROBERT WATSON

Yellow Morning, ND
Oil on canvas, 14³/₄ x 25¹/₂ in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY