

On a Winter Day

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

This beach is deserted. I am alone with it, just a single speck on this pale shore. It is shingled with coral fragments flung here by the insane typhoon anger of sea and wind.

The day is dying quickly, as days do in the tropics. The sun is well along on its single-minded slide to the horizon. Peeking from behind the clouds, it gently gilds the wave-tops of a truly wine-dark sea.

Temporarily faithful to its name, the great Pacific is actually at peace, but only until it feels the rough coral bottom angling sharply upward to become this island. Touching that unyielding slope, the rolling swells pull themselves erect, as if to avoid the hard, jagged caress. Higher, higher, and faster, faster, they draw themselves up, finally toppling forward in a grand rush of white, foaming suicide. They die as hissing foam soon smothered by their following brethren. This goes on without end.

Within the hour, sky and sea will bleed together into a common darkness from time to time washed silver by the moonlight. The waves will not know. They will continue their death-appointments in the dark as in the light, on and on.

This is the island of Minami-torishima—"South Bird Island." Some maps show it with its English name, Marcus Island. Far from the main islands of the Japanese archipelago, it is alone on the Pacific's cobalt face and near nothing that might inspire it to imagine the existence of other islands, other continents. This island seems the single landmass on a world of otherwise unbroken ocean; an afterthought, an accident, a fluke.

Although Minami-torishima is about one-third of the way from Japan to Hawaii, it is administered as part of the Tokyo metropolitan area. As I sit here in the day's last moments, it is hard to comprehend that the metropolis called Tokyo shares the same planet with this





island. The concrete and the crowds and the unending energy, the rush and the crush and the pressure, cannot be but fiction.

I rise and begin to traverse the wide beach, meandering toward the line of foliage that might only charitably be called trees. A tilted concrete pillbox stands near, a silent memory of the war that once swept over this ocean.

Toward the center of the island, a skeletal tower points skyward. Every minute of every hour of every day it sends out a radio beacon into the cathedral vault of the tropic sky. Ships and planes use it, finding their way in the roadless spaces of sea and air. To maintain this invisible guiding light, 38 men are stationed here. Each will spend a year on this tiny coral triangle. And myself, number 39? I am a visitor, come to marvel at this far place and record its light and color on little rectangles of film.

Seabirds soar and wheel, sharp-winged silhouettes against a darkening sky. Over the slow roar of the surf, I hear their keening cries—A greeting? A farewell? I will never know.

Alongside the runway, our aircraft stands ready for departure. From the chow hall wafts the fragrance of an imminent evening meal; I breathe deep of it as I walk past. Again the seabirds cry.

I clamber aboard. After some roars and rumbles and bumps we are off into the sky, finding our way with the help of the beacon. Hours later, with my sunburn already turning to memory, we drop down through thick overcast to a slushy wet landing on a Tokyo winter night.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.