

aluminum slate with underwater paper held fast by rubber tubing, and fresh tips in the plastic pencil secured to the corner of the slate with a shoestring and frayed brown athletic tape. My trusty watch face fixed to the slate is still ticking after four rugged years. As I slip under the shallow water, my ears fill with the crackling of shrimp and the low rumble of shifting sand. A frog kick pushes me quietly through the water while I peek up at the sunrise on my way to the octopuses' dens.

Eventually the female pushes up from underneath the pebbles at her den's entrance and bobs her pea-sized eyes up and down. When a little wave rolls by, tossing glare and shadows all over the place, she changes from dark brown to washed-out ochre and spills out over the rocks with the surge. Like a predator would, I almost lose sight of her, but her movements against the grain of the swaying algae give her away. I note the time. An hour later she's still looking for food. Her sucker-lined web blankets over rocks, and a flush of white spreads across her eyes and arms. Now and then she twitches, probably snaring little crabs. The male had been up at his den's entrance for an hour before the female emerged from hers, and had pushed a few armfuls of sand from inside his burrow. As soon as she'd crawled out and started to forage, he'd gotten out too. At best he has spent some of the past hour being dragged behind her by his specialized mating arm, and he's fought off a few rival males. But mostly he's just crawled through the seagrass keeping her in sight.

Breaking briefly from his watch, he ducks into a little hole in the sandstone, but instead of finding much-needed prey inside, it's his bad luck that he's chosen the home of a damselfish. Unable to make a quick retreat and catch up with his mate, he is held hostage in the hole, and is pecked relentlessly by the puny fish, which doesn't understand that letting him go would be a win for all. One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes, and the stalemate continues. To my shock, a tuft of algae I glimpse out of the corner of my eye reveals itself to be the female, who had waited there instead of continuing to forage. She crawls over to the damsel, flares her arms and web, and grabs the male, pulling him past the stunned damsel to safety. Off they crawl, around the seagrass bed and back to their dens, where they sit in silence and watch the fishes go by until sunset.

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ZARIA FORMAN

Maldives #2, 2013
soft pastel on paper, 41 x 60 in



courtesy the artist