

# Of the Living and the Dying

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley



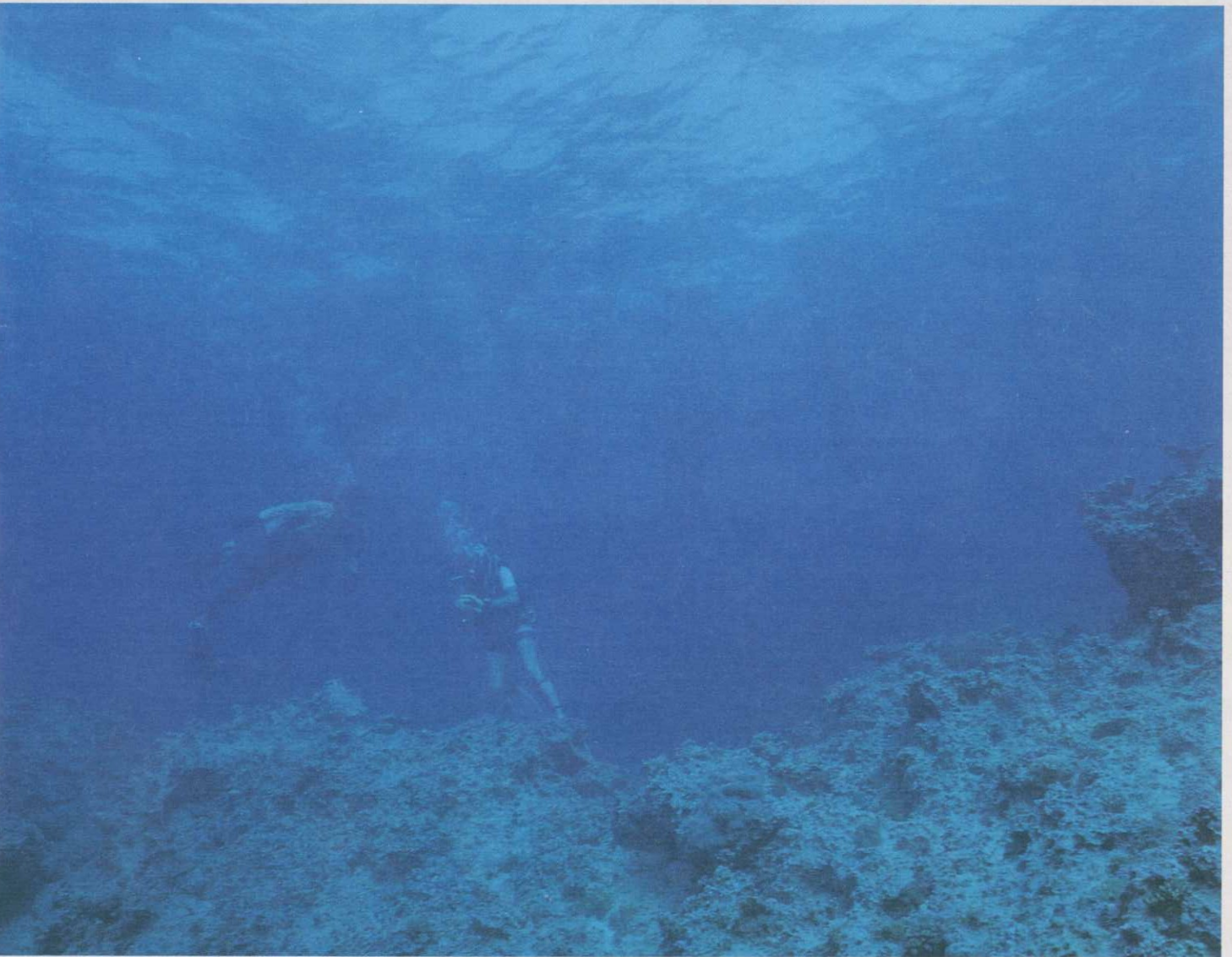
On the coral-studded channel bottom, a red hawkfish perches atop the intricate expanse of a table coral. He waits, like his namesake, for an unsuspecting meal-to-be to wander by; he will streak from his lookout, snatch his victim with lightning speed, and return once again to his vigil. He waits and watches, and I, waiting, watch him.

This ancient and deadly little drama is set on a stage of hypnotic beauty. Bright fishes flit through shafts of silver-blue light, crinoids and sea fans sway easily with the pulse of the current. The water is clear and clean and in every direction, both the sea and its gently undulating bottom are aswarm with life. I feel I am looking back through a liquid lens of

time, to those ages before our species walked the earth, even to those ages before any living thing set foot on the land.

Only a few dozen kilometers west of Okinawa's teeming city of Naha, this channel, and the cluster of small islands around it, are a yet unspoiled corner of Japan. How long they may manage





to remain so is an open question.

A couple of hours by car to the north of Naha, is another scene entirely. Where once wondrous stands of coral grew thick in the inshore shallows, a silty death shroud blankets the bones of a now-dead reef. A handful of stunted, hardy corals try to grow, but they will soon die, after the next rain washes

more fertilizer- and pesticide-loaded silt into the sea. This is the legacy of development. The great forests of Okinawa are stripped away and the sunburnt red soil bleeds down to the ocean. The reefs choke and wither and die.

I hang motionless in the water and survey the devastation. I remember the

hawkfish and all the life around him. And I fear for them.

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