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THE SQUID HUNTER

Can Steve O'Shea capture the sea's most elusive creature?

By David Grann

The giant squid has consumed the imaginations of many oceanographers. How could something so big remain unseen for so long—or be less understood than dinosaurs?

On a moonless January night in 2003, Olivier de Kersauson, the French yachtsman, was racing across the Atlantic Ocean, trying to break the record for the fastest sailing voyage around the world, when his boat mysteriously came to a halt. There was no land for hundreds of miles, yet the mast rattled and the hull shuddered, as if the vessel had run aground. Kersauson turned the wheel one way, then the other; still, the gunwales shook inexplicably in the darkness. Kersauson ordered his crew, all of whom were now running up and down the deck, to investigate. Some of the crew took out spotlights and shone them on the water, as the massive trimaran—a three-hulled, hundred-and-ten-foot boat that was the largest racing machine of its kind, and was named Geronimo, for the Apache warrior—pitched in the waves.

Meanwhile, the first mate, Didier Ragot, descended from the deck into the cabin, opened a trapdoor in the floor, and peered through a porthole into the ocean, using a flashlight. He glimpsed something by the rudder. "It was bigger than a human leg," Ragot recently told me. "It was a tentacle." He looked again. "It was starting to move," he recalled.

He beckoned Kersauson, who came down and crouched over the opening. "I think it's some sort of animal," Ragot said.

Kersauson took the flashlight, and inspected for himself. "I had never seen anything like it," he told me. "There were two giant tentacles right beneath us, lashing at the rudder."

The creature seemed to be wrapping itself around the boat, which rocked violently. The floorboards creaked, and the rudder started to bend. Then, just as the stern seemed ready to snap, everything went still. "As it unhooked itself from the boat, I could see its tentacles," Ragot recalled. "The whole animal must have been nearly thirty feet long."

The creature had glistening skin and long arms with suckers, which left impressions on the hull. "It was enormous," Kersauson recalled. "I've been sailing for forty years and I've always had an answer for everything—for hurricanes and icebergs. But I didn't have an answer for this. It was terrifying."

What they claimed they saw—a claim that many regarded as a tall tale—was a giant squid, an animal that has long occupied a central place in sea lore; it has been said to be larger than a whale and stronger than an elephant, with a beak that can sever steel cables. In a famous scene in "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," Jules Verne depicts a battle between a submarine and a giant squid that is twenty-five feet long, with eight

arms and blue-green eyes—"a terrible monster worthy of all the legends about such creatures." More recently, Peter Benchley, in his thriller "Beast," describes a giant squid that "killed without need, as if Nature, in a fit of perverse malevolence, had programmed it to that end."

Such fictional accounts, coupled with scores of unconfirmed sightings by sailors over the years, have elevated the giant squid into the fabled realm of the fire-breathing dragon and the Loch Ness monster. Though the giant squid is no myth, the species, designated in scientific literature as *Architeuthis*, is so little understood that it sometimes seems like one. A fully grown giant squid is classified as the largest invertebrate on Earth, with tentacles sometimes as long as a city bus and eyes about the size of human heads. Yet no scientist has ever examined a live specimen—or seen one swimming in the sea. Researchers have studied only carcasses, which have occasionally washed ashore or floated to the surface. (One corpse, found in 1887 in the South Pacific, was said to be nearly sixty feet long.) Other evidence of the giant squid is even more indirect: sucker marks have been spotted on the bodies of sperm whales, as if burned into them; presumably, the two creatures battle each other hundreds of feet beneath the ocean's surface.

The giant squid has consumed the imaginations of many oceanographers. How could something so big and powerful remain unseen for so long—or be less understood than dinosaurs, which died out millions of years ago? The search for a living specimen has inspired a fevered competition. For decades, teams of scientists have prowled the high seas in the hope of glimpsing one. These "squid squads" have in recent years invested millions of dollars and deployed scores of submarines and underwater cameras, in a struggle to be first.

Steve O'Shea, a marine biologist from New Zealand, is one of the hunters—but his approach is radically different. He is not trying to find a mature giant squid; rather, he is scouring the ocean for a baby, called a paralarva, which he can grow in captivity. A paralarva is often the size of a cricket.

"Squid, you see, hatch thousands of babies," O'Shea told me recently, when I called him at his office at the Earth and Oceanic Sciences Research Institute, at the Auckland

University of Technology. “Most of these will get eaten up by larger predators, but during periods of spawning the sea should be filled with an absolutely fantastic amount of these miniature organisms. And, unlike the adults, they shouldn’t be able to dart away as easily.”

Rival hunters once viewed his plan skeptically: if no one could find the animal when it was sixty feet long, how could anyone discover it when it was barely an eighth of an inch? Lately, though, many have come to see O’Shea’s strategy as a potential breakthrough. “It offers several advantages,” Clyde Roper, an American who is perhaps the world’s foremost expert on squid, told me. Roper is a giant-squid hunter himself, who once descended underwater in a steel cage, in search of his quarry. “First, you could find the juvenile at shallower depths. That makes it a lot easier to catch. Furthermore, there are more of them around, because at that stage, even though mortality is high, the adult female will release up to four million eggs. That’s a hell of a lot of baby giant squid running around.” He added, “It’s a matter of a numbers game, pure and simple.”

In 1999, O’Shea studied what few had ever seen—the corpse of a baby *Architeuthis,* which was discovered off New Zealand. He described its curious morphology: two eyes spread disconcertingly far apart; a parrot-like mouth concealing a raspy, serrated tongue; eight arms extending outward from a torpedo-shaped head. Each elastic limb was lined with hundreds of suckers, ringed with sharp teeth. The skin was iridescent, and filled with chromatophores—groups of pigment cells—that allowed it to change colors. A funnel near its head could shoot out clouds of black ink. The specimen also had two extraordinary-looking clubbed tentacles. (When a giant squid is mature, they can stretch up to thirty feet.)

Armed with this rare expertise, O’Shea has spent the last five years mapping out where to find a baby giant squid and puzzling over how to catch one and grow it in a tank. This year, he told me, he would venture out during the summer nights of the Southern Hemisphere, when giant squid released their babies. “Come on down, mate,” he said. “We’ll see if we can’t find the bloody thing and make history.”

The bodies of dead giant squid have been found in nearly every ocean: in the Pacific, near California; in the Atlantic, off the coasts of Newfoundland and

Norway; and in the Indian, south of South Africa. But no place is considered better for hunting giant squid than the waters around New Zealand. It is here that currents from the tropics and Antarctica converge, and the resulting diversity of marine life creates an abundance of plankton for squid to feed on. And it is here that, in recent years, more dead giant squid have been recovered than anywhere else.

I arrived in Auckland on a morning in late February, and O'Shea greeted me at the airport. He looked much younger than his age, thirty-eight. He wore khaki pants and a khaki-colored shirt, a uniform that evoked a safari ranger. He is small and trim, and has brown hair, which was sticking up as if he had just run his fingers through it. Peering through spectacles that made his eyes seem abnormally large, he confessed with some embarrassment that he had come for me the previous day. "I've been preoccupied with everything that's happening," he said.

He spoke in a soft yet intense murmur, and whenever I addressed him he would turn his head sideways, so that I was talking directly into his right ear. (Later, he told me that he had damaged his left ear in a diving accident.) He reached into his wallet and pulled out his business card; beside his name was a picture of an iridescent squid. While I was looking at it, he grabbed one of my bags and hurried to his truck, which, as soon as he opened the driver's door, exhaled a strange, pungent odor. "I do apologize," he said, as he rolled down the windows. "You'll find that everything around me smells of dead squid and ciggies." In the back seat was a metal pole that was three feet long, with a net on the end. I soon discovered that he carried it with him wherever he went, often slung over his shoulder, as if he were a butterfly hunter.

Over the next few days, we began making preparations for our maiden voyage. At one point, we were speeding down the highway, heading to the store for supplies, when he slammed on the brakes and reversed, in the middle of traffic. "I almost forgot," he said, parking in a lot that overlooked a harbor. He leaped out with the net and darted down a wharf, a lit cigarette dangling from his mouth. He leaned over the edge, the winds buffeting his face, and held the net high over his head. For a moment, he didn't move or breathe. "There," he said, and lunged with the net, slashing at the water. As he pulled the net in, his pant legs wet with spray, I glimpsed a dozen silvery sprat—a minnow-like fish—dancing in the mesh. "I know I look a bit like a bugger," he said. "But these

things are rather important."

After he flung the net into the water several more times ("Believe it or not, there is a technique to this," he said), he returned to his truck and tossed the sprat into a white bucket in the back seat. We travelled farther down the road, the sprat jostling behind us, and eventually stopped at an aquarium called Kelly Tarlton's Antarctic Encounter and Underwater World. (In its brochures, O'Shea was hailed as the "world-renowned squid man.")

He grabbed the bucket, and we headed inside. "This is where I keep them," he told me. He led me into a damp room with fluorescent lights, in which there was a round glass tank; inside, darting from side to side, were seventy baby squid, each an inch long. O'Shea explained that these squid, which are found in coastal areas, were a smaller species than *Architeuthis*. "Look at them," he said. "They're bloody marvellous, aren't they?"

O'Shea is one of the few people in the world who have succeeded in keeping not only coastal but also deep-sea squid alive in captivity. Unlike an octopus, which, as he put it, "you can't kill, no matter how hard you try," a squid is highly sensitive to its environment. Accustomed to living in a borderless realm, a squid reacts poorly when placed in a tank, and will often plunge, kamikaze-style, into the walls, or cannibalize other squid.

In 2001, during a monthlong expedition at sea, O'Shea caught a cluster of paralarval giant squid in his nets, but by the time he reached the docks all of them had died. He was so distraught that he climbed into the tank, in tears, and retrieved the corpses himself. "I had spent every day, every hour, trying to find the paralarvae, and then they died in my grasp," he told me. For two years, he was so stricken by his failure that he refused to mount another expedition. "I knew if I failed again I would be finished," he recalled. "Not just scientifically but physically and emotionally."

He couldn't stop wondering, though, about what had happened in the tank. His wife, Shoba, a computer scientist who was born in India, told me that sometimes in the middle of an unrelated conversation he would suddenly say, "What did I do wrong?"

O'Shea became determined to correct what he called "my fatal mistake," and began a series of painstaking experiments on other species of juvenile deep-sea squid. He would subtly alter the conditions of captivity: tank size, intensity of light, oxygen levels, salinity. He discovered that the tank in which he had stored his paralarvae during the expedition had two lethal flaws: it had a rectangular shape, which, for some reason, caused the squid to sink to the bottom and die; and its walls were made of polyethylene, a plastic compound that, it turns out, is toxic to deep-sea squid. "Knowing what I know now, I feel like a fool," he said. "It was like walking them to their execution."

In the mid-nineteen-seventies, Clyde Roper managed to keep ocean-dwelling squid alive for fourteen days—then a record. O'Shea, using cylindrical tanks made of acrylic, had kept his latest coastal specimens alive for eighty days. Earlier, he had maintained a batch of deep-sea squid for more than seventy days, which he then returned to the wild, satisfied that his experiment was a success.

He held up his white bucket. "Watch this," he said, and dumped the sprat into the tank. Though the fish were bigger than the squid, the squid shot toward them, with their arms curved over their heads, hiding their tentacles; they looked metallic, except for their bulging green eyes. Then the squids' arms sprang open, and their tentacles exploded outward, lashing their prey. The fish squirmed to break free, but the squid engulfed them in a web of arms. They drew their frantic prey into their beaks, and the squids' stomachs turned bright red as they filled with the blood of the fish. Staring into the tank, I imagined what a full-grown giant squid might look like swallowing its prey.

When the squid finished eating, O'Shea said, "If I can keep *these* squid alive, there's no reason I can't keep the giant alive. I'll just need a bigger tank."

He was nervous about what would happen to his squid during our expedition—he had left the animals alone for only one day, on Christmas—and he anxiously arranged with an employee at the aquarium to care for them in his absence. "You need to treat them with reverence," he said.

We then headed to his university office, where he had to gather various things for the expedition. It was in an attic-like space, and seemed entirely devoted to what he

described as his "lunatic obsession." Pasted to the walls and stacked on tables were pictures, many of which he had sketched himself, of giant squid, colossal squid, broad squid, warty squid, leopard squid. In addition, there were squid toys, squid key chains, squid journals, squid movies, and squid-related newspaper clippings ("WARNING! GIANT FLYING SQUID ATTACKING VESSELS OFF AUSTRALIA"). On the floor were dozens of glass jars filled with dead squid that had been preserved in alcohol, their eyes and tentacles pressing against the glass.

Many squid scientists wait for decades before getting their hands on the remains of an *Architeuthis.* O'Shea, however, has developed a large network of fishermen informants, and in the last seven years has collected a hundred and seventeen corpses. Together, these specimens offer a clearer picture of the giant squid. O'Shea has concluded that although the animals could be as heavy as a thousand pounds, most weigh between a hundred and four hundred pounds. (Females are typically heavier than males.) His squid collection also provided some of the first clues about the animal's diet. In an article recently published in the *New Zealand Journal of Zoology,* O'Shea documented the "gut contents" of his specimens, which included arrow squid and chunks of another *Architeuthis* ("proof of cannibalism").

In another recent experiment, O'Shea dissected a squid's statolith: a bonelike particle in the animal's ear that helps the animal balance itself. A statolith builds up rings of calcium deposits over time, he explained, and, like the rings on tree trunks, the layers of bone might help scientists determine a squid's age and growth rate.

Initially, O'Shea told me, he had thought that he would dissect his corpses in his office. But, after he made an incision in one, the specimen released a noxious odor, a mixture of rotting flesh and ammonium (which keeps the animal buoyant in the water). Students and faculty fled the building, and he was soon forbidden to make further dissections there. "I became quite unpopular after that," he said.

He began to pick up various jars. "Oh, here it is," he said, holding up what appeared to be a stem of tiny grapes.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The eggs from the ovary of a giant squid. I have a freezer full of 'em."

The phone rang. He stared at it without moving. "They'll only want something," he said.

He stuck a pair of tweezers inside the jar, pulled out a strand of eggs, and placed it under a microscope. "Go ahead, mate, take a look," he said. When I looked into the eyepiece, I could see at least a hundred eggs, each no more than two millimetres wide. O'Shea said that he planned to attach the eggs, which may produce pheromones, to an underwater camera, in the hope of luring a giant squid close enough to be captured on film.

He sat at his computer, typed for a few minutes, then stopped abruptly and ran out of the office. He returned moments later, carrying two hula hoops. "We're almost ready," he said.

The phone rang again. "Oh, bloody hell," he said, and let it ring. He picked up another jar, this one containing two black shells that appeared to lock together. "It's the beak of a giant squid," he said. I ran my finger along its sharp edge, which pricked my skin. He said he had found it inside the stomach of a sperm whale.

He began to race around again, and before long his arms were filled with a box of specimen jars, the hula hoops, a net, a hammer, a rope, a worn leather briefcase that was only half buckled, and several rolled-up maps. "O.K., I think we're about ready," he said. "I just need a smoke, and we'll be off."

For months, he had been carefully working out our destination, studying squid migration patterns as well as satellite readings of water currents and temperatures. His plan was to go south, where he had found the paralarvae before. At the last minute, however, he changed his mind. "We're going north," he said. As we got back in his truck, he added, "I should warn you, there's a bit of a cyclone coming our way."

For as long as sailors have been going out to sea, they have been returning with stories of monsters. The Bible speaks of "a dragon that is in the sea"; the Roman

encyclopedia "Naturalis Historia" tells of an enormous "polyp" that was "smeared with brine and had a terrible smell." As the science writer Richard Ellis demonstrates in his 1998 book, "The Search for the Giant Squid," from these disparate accounts emerged a common portrait of a singular beast: a huge sea creature, with fearsome appendages—arms or horns or feet or legs or tails—that jutted out of its head. In the Odyssey, Homer describes a beast called the Scylla:

> She has twelve legs, all writhing, dangling down
>
> and six long swaying necks, a hideous head on each,
>
> each head barbed with a triple row of fangs . . .
>
> No mariners yet can boast they'd raced their ship
>
> past Scylla's lair without some mortal blow.

In Norway, sailors sometimes reported sightings of a tentacled predator, which they dubbed the Kraken. (The word is a colloquial term for a tree with the roots still attached.) In 1755, Bishop Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan included the animal in his "Natural History of Norway," claiming that the Kraken was the size of a "floating island," with horns as long as a ship's mast. He went on, "It seems these are the creature's arms, and, it is said, if they were to lay hold of the largest man-of-war, they would pull it down to the bottom."

Meanwhile, American whalers were exchanging their own stories of a "devilfish." In 1851, Herman Melville, who had worked for three years on a whaling ship, published "Moby Dick," in which he describes a sailor who is witness to "the most wondrous phenomenon": a "vast pulpy mass" with "innumerable long arms radiating from its centre, and curling and twisting like a nest of anacondas."

Around the same time, Johannes Japetus Smith Steenstrup, an eminent Danish zoologist, decided to investigate the rumors himself. As Steenstrup sorted through the available evidence, he was drawn in particular to several accounts of a strange beast caught in the Øresund Strait in the fifteen-forties, and brought to the king of Denmark, at whose court it was preserved in a dried state as "a rarity and a wonder." Named a "sea monk," because its smooth-looking head evoked men of the cloister, it

resembled, in an original sketch, a large squid. In an 1854 lecture, Steenstrup declared that the sea monk, like the Kraken, was "firstly a cephalopod"—a classification term which derives from the Greek words for "head" and "foot," and refers to animals whose tentacles sprout from their head. To the amazement of his audience, Steenstrup then held up a glass jar containing the jaws of a giant squid, which he said had been retrieved from a dead specimen off the coast of Iceland. He named the creature *Architeuthis* ("ruling squid")—marking, as Ellis has noted, "the official passage of the giant squid from the realm of fable into the scientific literature."

Just as seamen had previously exaggerated the evidence for the giant squid's existence, the scientific community now exaggerated the lack of it. Most scientists were still disputing Steenstrup's findings when, in November, 1861, the crew of the French steamship Alecton, in the middle of the Atlantic, saw a Kraken rise up before them. The captain decided that he had to capture it, and ordered his men to fire their muskets. The bullets seemed to have little effect, so they hurled harpoons, which appeared to glance off it. Finally, they wrapped a noose around its tail, but, as they began to haul the creature on board, its enormous weight caused the rope to slice through its boneless flesh. All that remained was a piece of the tail, which was soon dispatched, along with a detailed report, to the French Academy of Sciences. The report inspired Jules Verne's depiction of a menacing giant squid, but it did little to secure the organism a certified place in the animal kingdom. Arthur Mangin, a French zoologist, declared that the rotting tail was the remains of a sea plant, and urged "the wise, and especially the man of science, not to admit into the catalogue those stories which mention extraordinary creatures . . . the existence of which would be . . . a contradiction of the great laws of harmony and equilibrium which have sovereign rule over living nature."

Scientists continued to doubt Steenstrup's thesis until one day in 1873, when a fisherman off the coast of Newfoundland saw a creature floating on the ocean's surface and struck it with a hook. The animal was alive, and reached up and tried to seize him; the fisherman then grabbed an axe. Over the years, the story was embellished, but one fact was undeniable: the fisherman returned to shore with a tentacle from a giant squid, which was nineteen feet long. It was placed in a museum, in St. John's, Newfoundland, where the public could see it. At last, even the most ardent skeptic was forced to admit

that the Kraken was real.

As the winds and rains from the cyclone began to descend on New Zealand, O'Shea stood in his back yard beside his boat, which rested on a trailer. The boat was not exactly what I had imagined it to be. It was barely twenty feet long and seven feet wide, with an outboard motor. There was no galley or head, and no place to sleep, except for a forward berth the size of a broom closet. "I suppose you were expecting one of those American yachts, weren't you?" O'Shea said with a smile.

Initially, he had planned to charter a vessel with a traditional squid squad—a professional crew and a team of scientists. Squid hunters from Japan, America, and Europe crisscrossed the sea in this manner, and O'Shea had been on such a voyage when he found his paralarvae. But such expeditions cost millions of dollars, and O'Shea is an academic who must cobble together funding for his research from private sources, like the Discovery Channel. He had already sunk a significant portion of his family's modest savings into his quest, and as a result he was unable to afford a hearing aid, among other necessities. "If I don't find a giant squid soon, I'll be ruined," he told me.

Yet, according to other hunters, part of the genius of O'Shea's scheme is that it can be executed relatively cheaply. Juvenile squid swim in shallower waters than adults, and he didn't need to descend, say, in a submarine. He also didn't require a ship that could accommodate a huge tank. By December, O'Shea had decided that he would go forward using his own fishing boat, and he whittled down his crew to three people: O'Shea, myself, and a graduate student in marine biology named Peter Conway, a gentle thirty-two-year-old vegetarian who rolled his own cigarettes and had never been on such an expedition. "The big swells make me a wee queasy," he confessed at one point.

O'Shea told me that he was not willing to wait for the cyclone to pass: there was only a short period each year during which adult squid migrated into the region to spawn and release their eggs. And so we set off in the truck, with the trailer in tow, and headed north, listening to Neil Diamond's slightly nasal tenor on the stereo. ("He's bloody brilliant, isn't he?" O'Shea said.)

Within a few hours, the exquisite landscape of New Zealand, with its long white shores and volcanic hills and sheep farms, was obscured in blackness, as the storm intensified. The trailer rocked in the wind, which was approaching gale force. According to news reports, a nearby river had burst its banks, forcing local residents to evacuate. Civil-defense teams were being called up, and the power had gone out in several cities, including Auckland.

The police were warning motorists to stay off the roads, but we continued farther up the northern peninsula, past towns with Aboriginal names like Te Kao and Te Hapua, until we arrived at a wooden cabin, in the afternoon. We would stay here during the day, O'Shea explained, then launch the boat at night, when the squid rose upward in the water column to feed.

The cabin had no phone and no heat, and it was musty inside, as if it had been abandoned for years. "Not bloody much, is it?" O'Shea said, as he brushed some ants off the kitchen table. He didn't seem too dismayed, though, and while Conway and I unpacked our bags he spread his equipment across the floor and began to assemble a peculiar form. First, he took a round plywood board that was the size of a stop sign and drilled holes around its perimeter. He wove cable ties through the holes, then attached the board to a tube of fine-meshed netting that was large enough to accommodate him inside it. He was still working when Conway and I went to bed; when I got up the next morning, I found him in the same position. "It's coming along nicely," he said. A candle was burning beside him, and he held a sharp knife over the flame. Using the hot blade, he cut several holes into the sides of the net.

The slow, methodical work had put him in a reflective mood, and he told me how he first became interested in the giant squid. "It had never been my plan," he said. "When I was four or five, my parents got divorced, and I was sent to live with my grandmother. I didn't have many friends. I was one of these horribly geeky kids. I had glasses and a heart murmur and arthritis, and I spent all my time on the beach, looking for shells. I collected thousands of them. When I was thirteen or fourteen, I started to go out on commercial fishing boats in the summer to try to find the rarest kinds. I remember once, I was on this boat, and the fishermen pulled in this shell. I knew there were only one or two in all of New Zealand, and I let out this loud scream, and the captain came

down and yelled at me for screaming, but I didn't mind. I was so excited to find it."

He burned another hole in the net, filling the room with an acrid smell. He said, "After I graduated from the university with a doctorate in marine biology, I went to work for the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research. In 1996, I got a phone call saying that a fisherman had found a giant squid down in Wellington, and did I want it. I'd never seen one, so I raced down to the jetty, and took one look at it, and it was the biggest bloody thing I'd ever seen. I knew it wouldn't fit in the car, and so I borrowed a trailer, and strapped it down with the tentacles draped over the car.

"Before long, the press got wind of it, and they started calling and asking me all these questions, and I didn't know anything about the giant squid. I spouted a bunch of nonsense, and I soon realized no one really knew *anything* about this blasted thing. It was this great unknown, this complete mystery. And I've been trying to solve it ever since."

He seemed slightly embarrassed by his candor. "What we need now are Coke bottles," he said. He had brought several empty one-litre containers with him; he sliced each bottle in half, so that the top part resembled a funnel. He inserted each funnel, the wide part facing out, into the holes that he had made in the mesh netting. He then sealed them in place with a glue gun. "We're ready for the final touches," he said. He slid a hula hoop inside the bottom end of the mesh sheath; the result looked like a Victorian skirt. Finally, he clamped the bottom of the net to a small glass container.

He climbed onto a chair and held the contraption up: it was roughly six feet long and cylindrical in shape, with a round hardwood top, a funnel-studded net draped along the sides, and a little glass jar dangling on the bottom. "Whaddaya think, chappies?" O'Shea asked Conway and me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A giant-squid trap."

O'Shea pointed to the funnels excitedly, and explained that the paralarvae would swim

through them and get trapped inside the net, eventually ending up in the glass jar. This rough-looking device had been carefully conceived: the net was made of extra-fine mesh, which would do less damage to the animals; the board was marine plywood, which would keep the net vertical in the water; and the Coke bottles were exactly the right size to trap the paralarvae. "It's ugly as sin, I admit, but it should do the job," he said, adding, "I'm a poor scientist, so it's a bit of Steve O'Shea invention."

He spent the rest of the day building a second trap, then announced that it was time to go hunting. The worst of the storm had blown out to sea, but the weather remained volatile, with gusting winds and dangerously high waves. Two surfers had drowned. "We'll have to do some reconnaissance," O'Shea said. Before sundown, we took a drive with the trailer, trying to find a safe place to launch the boat. We pulled into an inlet surrounded by volcanic cliffs. "This will have to do," O'Shea said.

He backed the trailer down the beach, and we put the boat in the water. I climbed on board, and O'Shea and Conway followed. It was cold, but O'Shea was barefoot, and he was wearing only cutoff jeans and a baggy T-shirt. "Righteo, then," he said, and gunned the engine.

O'Shea had no radar, but he had a navigational system with a small flickering display that signalled the location of the shore and the depth of the sea. It would be our only guide in the darkness.

"It'll probably be too rough out there for any fishing boats," O'Shea shouted over the noise of the engine. "But we're going to need to be careful of container ships. They can come up pretty fast." It was now twilight, and he squinted at one of the buoys that marked a safe route through the channel.

"What color is that?" he asked me.

"It's green," I said. "Can't you see it?"

"I'm not just deaf," he said. "I'm color-blind."

As we left the harbor, it began to rain, and the smooth channel gave way to swells. The boat leaped over the crests, its aluminum hull vibrating.

"A bit rough, ain't it?" Conway said.

"She's sturdier than she looks," O'Shea said of the vessel. He glanced at the forward berth. "Underneath those cushions are the life jackets. You don't need to wear them, but just so you know where they are."

The sun disappeared over the horizon, and for a while the sky released a flurry of bright colors, as if it had its own chromatophores. Then it grew dark, and the waves announced themselves not by sight but by sound, as they clapped against the bow. I slipped on my life jacket.

O'Shea said he knew just the spot for hunting, and he stared at the glowing dots on the navigational system. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"There," he said, pointing into the distance.

I peered over the windshield and saw something shadowy looming over the waves, as if it were the prow of a ship. As we got closer, I realized that it was a large, jagged rock. More rocks became visible, hundreds of them, all jutting skyward. A channel, forty feet wide, flowed between the rocks, and the water stormed through this opening as if it were racing down a chute. O'Shea sped straight ahead. As we approached the rocks, the boat began to tremble while the swells climbed from ten to seventeen feet; the bow plunged downward, the boat sliding wildly in the water. "Hold on, mate," O'Shea said. "Here comes a big one."

The boat soared upward, and I felt momentarily suspended in the air, as if I were a cartoon character who had just stepped off a cliff. Then the boat fell straight down, and another wave crashed into the boat, sending us hurtling backward. My notebook and pen slid to the deck. The peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches we had packed for supper tumbled out of their containers. "We just need to make sure they don't take us broadside," O'Shea said.

The currents were pulling us toward the rocks, and I could hear the massive waves crashing into them. I was holding a flashlight, and I shone it in front of us: there was a twenty-foot wall of water. I turned around, and discovered that another enormous wall was pressing down on us from behind.

"You won't find this in New York, will you, mate?" O'Shea said.

For a moment, I wondered if O'Shea was fully in command of his faculties. But we made it through the gap in the rocks, and he skillfully steered the boat into a protected inlet. It was indeed the perfect spot.

We dropped our anchor. O'Shea grabbed his homemade nets, and placed several glow sticks inside them. "The squid are drawn to the light," he said. He tied the nets to a lead weight, which he then dropped in the water. We watched the light grow dimmer as the traps sank. "Well, let's see what's down there," O'Shea said.

Though oceans cover three-quarters of the Earth—the Pacific alone is bigger than all the continents put together—the underwater realm has remained largely invisible to human beings. For centuries, there was no way for scientists to peer into the depths, no telescope that could gaze into the abyss. (A pearl diver can venture down no more than a hundred feet.) Until the nineteenth century, most scientists assumed that the deepest parts of the ocean—where the temperature was frigid, the pressure intense, and the light minimal—contained no life.

In 1872, the British government and the Royal Society launched the first major oceanic expedition, transforming a two-hundred-and-twenty-six-foot naval warship into a floating laboratory, equipped with microscopes and vats of pickling alcohol. Christened the H.M.S. Challenger, the ship, with five scientists, roamed the globe for three and a half years. The crew was constantly dredging the ocean floor for specimens, and the work was repetitive, and brutal; two men went insane, two others drowned, and another committed suicide. The scientists, however, were enthralled with their discoveries. They catalogued more than forty-seven hundred new species—proving, as C. Wyville Thomson, the chief scientist, later noted, that living beings "exist over the whole floor of the ocean."

The voyage gave rise to the field of oceanography, but it also exposed the twin obstacles that would impede underwater exploration for generations: prohibitive costs and primitive technology. Even when scientists could finance expeditions, their equipment allowed them to study animals only after hauling them on deck—the equivalent of looking at a human corpse, then trying to imagine it alive.

In the nineteen-thirties, two wealthy Americans, Charles William Beebe and Otis Barton, used twelve thousand dollars of their own money to design a hollow steel ball with two quartz peepholes, which they called a "bathysphere," named after the Greek word for "deep." The vessel, which was four and a half feet in diameter, was tethered to a ship with a cable; if it snapped, the men inside would die at the bottom of the sea.

In 1934, near Bermuda, Beebe and Barton went down five hundred feet, then a thousand feet more, as greater and greater pressure pushed against the steel walls; they stopped at three thousand and twenty-eight feet. It was far deeper than anyone had ever gone. At one point, Beebe peered out, and spotted something that was at least twenty feet long. Later, in his autobiography, "Half Mile Down," he wrote, "Whatever it was, it appeared and vanished so unexpectedly and showed so dimly that it was quite unidentifiable except as a large, living creature."

In 1960, the United States Navy dispatched its own team of scientists to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest spot in the ocean floor, in the Western Pacific. (It is seven times as deep as the Grand Canyon.) The voyage was considered among oceanographers to be the equivalent of landing on the moon, but America was caught up in the Cold War, and, because such exploration had little military relevance, similar projects were soon abandoned.

According to one recent study, as much as ninety-five per cent of the oceans remains unexplored. It is believed that the seas contain as many as ten million species, of which fewer than half have been identified. By the nineteen-sixties, the giant squid had become, for oceanographers, an emblem of all that was still unknown about the seas.

In the mid-nineteen-sixties, Frederick Aldrich, a marine biologist from Canada, formed the first official squid squad. He distributed posters around Newfoundland that bore an

illustration of a giant squid and the words "WANTED! DEAD OR ALIVE." On one hunting trip, he spent four days in a submersible that he had baited with raw tuna, but, like so many of his expeditions, this one was fruitless.

In the nineteen-nineties, as more squid hunters took up the chase, Clyde Roper decided to let the one animal that was known to prey on *Architeuthis* find it for him. For several years, in oceans ranging from the North Atlantic to the South Pacific, he and his squad paddled out to sea in inflatable kayaks and delicately attached "crittercams"—specially designed underwater cameras—to the bodies of sperm whales. To Roper's disappointment, the crittercams didn't spy a single giant squid. In 1999, Roper, who is sixty-six, underwent a quadruple-bypass operation; though he has promised his family to desist from all the fund-raising that such expeditions require, he recently told me, "I'm hoping to make one more voyage."

Meanwhile, the competition between rival squid squads has intensified. Xander Paumgarten, a publicist who helped to promote a 2000 expedition by Jacques Cousteau's son Jean-Michel, told me, "There's this all-out battle between these guys. Some of them totally hate each other." Roper told me that many of the hunters now work in secret. O'Shea shares his research with several colleagues, whom he calls "gentlemen," but there are some experts he calls "cannibals," with whom he refuses to speak. "A lot of these people are vicious," he said. "They want you to fail so they can be first."

Last January, before I ventured out with O'Shea, I joined the squid squad of Bruce Robison, one of O'Shea's leading counterparts. Unlike other hunters, Robison has two underwater robots, which have superior imaging capabilities and speed through the water more quickly than divers or most submersibles. The robots belong to Robison's employer, the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute, which was founded, in 1987, by David Packard, the billionaire technology guru. Situated a hundred miles south of San Francisco, the institute has an annual budget of thirty million dollars. On the expedition I was joining, Robison and his squad planned to sink a robot worth ten million dollars in Monterey Canyon, the deepest underwater chasm along the continental United States.

Robison and his squad are "opportunists," as he put it, meaning that they film more than just squid. ("If you only look for one animal," he said, "you'll always be disappointed.") Nonetheless, the squad had planned to spend six days in the same general area where, in 1980, Robison came closer than perhaps anyone to capturing an adult *Architeuthis*. That day, he had been trawling with a net nearly two thousand feet down; he decided to bring the net to the surface, and snapped its steel jaws shut. The bars clamped down on the tentacle of a live giant squid. Before the net reached the boat, the tentacle had torn off—leaving only twelve feet of it. "There was this big thing hanging off the front of the net," Robison recalled. "The suckers were still grasping." Robison's discovery offered the most accurate recording yet of a giant squid's depth in the water column. "Until then, most people thought they were only near the bottom," he said. Robison later dissected the tentacle and performed chemical analyses; the consistency of the tissue, and its high level of protein, led him to speculate that the giant squid was "a relatively strong swimmer." Robison told me that he had taken a bite of its raw, rubbery flesh. "How could I not?" he said, adding, "It was bitter."

When I arrived at the institute, Robison and his squad were already on board the ship. The vessel was named the Western Flyer, for a fishing vessel that John Steinbeck had sailed on during a 1940 expedition, a journey he later chronicled in "The Log from the Sea of Cortez." The Western Flyer was one of the most incredible ships I had ever seen. It was a hundred and seventeen feet long, with three layers of decks, and it had an unusual rectangular shape. Its boxlike frame rested on two pontoons, each running the length of the boat, allowing the Western Flyer to remain almost still in the roughest seas.

There were twenty-one people in Robison's squad, among them computer scientists, marine biologists, chemists, and engineers. To my surprise, there seemed to be no one on deck when I stepped on board. As I opened the main door, though, I was greeted by a clatter of men and machines. In the center of the cavernous room, surrounded by crewmen communicating through headsets, was the remotely operated vehicle, or R.O.V. It was hanging from a cable attached to a crane; it was the size of a Volkswagen and weighed some eight thousand pounds. At first glance, it appeared to be nothing more than a jumble of wires. The front of the machine, or at least what I presumed was the front, had two large spotlights, which could be rotated. On the top of the machine

was an outer shell with a single word painted on it: "TIBURON," Spanish for "shark."

"Welcome aboard," Robison said.

Robison was standing near the R.O.V., coördinating much of the activity. He resembled an eighteenth-century whaling captain, with white hair and a white beard; even his eyebrows were inordinately thick and wild. He began to explain how the robot operated: a coated fibre-optic wire connected the ship to the R.O.V., sending signals back and forth. The machine was propelled by electric thrusters and had flotation devices that allowed it to hover with neutral buoyancy, much like a giant squid, despite weighing four tons. What's more, the R.O.V. was outfitted with eight cameras, providing, as Robison put it, "a complete portrait of a three-dimensional universe." He added, "Our mandate is to go and see what no one else can."

He led me around the rest of the ship, which had a dining room, a computer room, a laboratory, and a freezer for preserving specimens. On the upper deck, along with the bridge, were quarters equipped with televisions, which displayed the Tiburon's live feed. "The dirty secret is that you never have to get out of bed," he said. He left me to settle in my own private room. I soon realized that the boat had already set sail: it cut so smoothly through the water that I hadn't noticed it moving.

That afternoon, we drifted over the Monterey Canyon, and stopped to make our first probe. A team of half a dozen engineers and technicians prepared the Tiburon.

"How do we look on the starboard camera?" one asked.

"Good to go."

"Do you have thrust?"

"Roger that."

The crew stepped back and the lights on the Tiburon began to blink. A trapdoor slowly

opened, revealing the ocean beneath, and the Tiburon hovered above it like a spaceship. The crane then lowered the R.O.V. into the turbulent water, its snubbed head pitching forward, its fibre-optic cable trailing behind it, like an endless tail.

I walked toward the stern and into the control room, where I expected to find Robison. It was dark, except for nearly two dozen glowing monitors, which broadcast color images from the Tiburon's myriad cameras, each one capturing a different angle. Robison sat beside the pilot, who steered the R.O.V. with a joystick.

Strange gelatinous creatures began to appear, which gave off dazzling displays of bioluminescence. There was a crustacean that walked through the water like a daddy-longlegs spider, and fish with jaws that were unhinged. There was a *Tiburonia granrojo*, a red balloon-like jellyfish that Robison and his squad had discovered and named for the R.O.V., and that was one of hundreds of new species that the squad had uncovered. There was a diaphanous animal, which they still hadn't identified, and called simply "the mystery mollusk." And there was, when the Tiburon reached the soft, craggy bottom of the ocean, a constant snowfall of decomposing skeletons and microscopic organisms.

Over the next several days, as the Tiburon descended as deep as two miles, we saw hundreds of squid: blue-eyed ones, translucent ones, polka-dotted ones. Observing these squid in their natural habitat, Robison said, provided clues to the behavior of their giant relative. When the camera zoomed in on an individual squid, we could see water entering the muscular sac, or mantle, that contains the squid's internal organs; it then inflated and contracted, shooting the water out through a funnel and propelling the squid like a bullet through the ocean. Watching the animals outrace the robot, I had a sense of why Clyde Roper once said of squid, "The only ones you catch are the slow, the sick, and the stupid."

Another reason for their elusiveness is their unusually large eyes, which enable them to discern predators in places where light is nearly absent. (The giant squid's eyes are thought to be the largest of any animal.) Squid also have highly developed brains for an invertebrate, and have nerve fibres that are hundreds of times thicker than those in human beings—allowing them to react in an instant. (For many decades,

neuroscientists have relied on squid neurons for their research.) “By observing squid in their natural habitat, we have discovered that they are much more intelligent, much more complex than anything we suspected,” Robison said.

As we watched, the squid seemed to be using light patterns, colors, and postures as a means of communication. They didn’t just turn red or pink or yellow; ripples of color would wash across their bodies. And they would contort their arms into elaborate arrangements—sometimes balling them together, or holding them above their heads, like flamenco dancers. Robison explained that they use these movements and color changes to warn other squid of predators, to perform mating rituals, to attract prey, and to conceal themselves.

Several times, when the Tiburon got too close to them, the squid ejected streams of black ink. In the past, scientists assumed that it served solely as camouflage or a decoy. Robison told me that he and other scientists now believe the ink contains chemicals that disable predators; this would explain why he has seen deep-sea squid release black nimbuses in depths where there is no light. “As much as we know about squid, we still don’t know that much,” he said.

Robison noted that the behavior of giant squid, in particular, was poorly understood. No one knows just how aggressive giant squid are, whether they hunt alone or in packs, or whether, as legend has it, they will attack people as well as fish. After Robison caught the tentacle and descended in a submersible to the same spot, he said, “It occurred to me that there was a pissed-off squid out there with a grudge against me.” (Other scientists suspect that the giant squid’s violent reputation is undeserved; O’Shea, for one, contends that *Architeuthis* is probably a “gentle beast.”)

The expedition ended without a glimpse of *Architeuthis*, but, at one point, several jumbo squid did appear on the ship’s screens. They were only a fraction of the size of a giant squid—between five and eight feet in length and a hundred or so pounds—but they looked frighteningly strong. One night, several of the ship’s scientists dropped a jig, a device specially designed to lure squid, over the side of the boat. They caught two jumbo squid. As they reeled each squid in, screaming, “Pump him up!,” the weight and strength of the animals nearly pulled the men overboard. Several minutes later, Robison

and I went to the ship's laboratory, where a scientist held up one of the jumbo squid. The creature was nearly as long as Robison is tall, and its tentacles were still lashing and writhing. "Now imagine a giant squid with a tentacle thirty feet long," he said.

After the squid was dissected, part of it was given to the cook. The next day, it appeared on a silver platter. "From beast to feast," the chef said, as we sat down for supper.

"Shall we take a peek?" O'Shea said, leaning over the stern of the boat. It was after midnight, several hours since we had dropped the traps in the water; the rain had stopped, but a cold wind swirled around us. As the boat rocked in the waves, O'Shea pulled in the line, hand over hand, because the boat didn't have winches. The traps weighed at least fifty pounds, and he climbed up on the side of the boat to get a better grip, his bare feet spread apart. As the first net emerged from the water, O'Shea shouted for Conway and me to haul it in, and we laid it on the deck, as icy water spilled around our feet. "Hurry, chappies," O'Shea said. "Get the torch."

Conway shined the flashlight into the net. There were no squid, but there were swarms of krill, and O'Shea seemed buoyed by the discovery. "We're definitely in squid eating country," he said.

He dropped the nets overboard again, anchoring them in place, and began the next phase of the hunt—towing a third, larger net behind the boat. "We'll trawl for fifteen minutes at about one and a half knots," O'Shea said. The maneuver was a delicate one, he explained: if he trawled too deep or not deep enough, the paralarvae would escape the net; if he trawled for too long, the net would suffocate what he caught. We drove the boat around for precisely fifteen minutes, then pulled in the net and dumped its contents—a thick, granular goop—into a cylindrical tank filled with seawater. The tank instantly lit up from all the bioluminescence. "There's plenty of life in there, that's for sure," O'Shea said.

He found no *Architeuthis* in the tank, but he was undaunted. "If it were easy, everyone would be doing it," he said.

By all accounts, O'Shea is tireless and single-minded: he works eighteen hours a day,

seven days a week, and he no longer watches TV or reads newspapers. He never attends parties. "I'm not anti-social," he said. "I just don't socialize." His sister told me, "We'd love him even if he chased mushrooms, but we just wish he'd spend the same emotion on people as he did on squid." Shoba, his wife, who often calls him to remind him to eat lunch, said, "I don't want him to stop. I just wish he could temper it a little bit and see that there are other things out there."

People inevitably compare O'Shea's quest to that of Captain Ahab. But, unlike Melville's character, O'Shea does not think of the creature he pursues in grand symbolic terms. Indeed, he is constantly trying to strip the giant squid of its lore. He considers books like "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" to be "rubbish"; his studies of dead specimens have led him to believe that the longest recorded measurement of a giant squid—fifty-seven feet—is apocryphal. "Now, if someone really wanted to prostitute the truth all they have to do is take the tentacle and walk and walk and walk," he once told me. "The bloody things are like rubber bands, and you can make a forty-foot squid suddenly look sixty feet." Unlike some other hunters, he thinks it is ridiculous to imagine that a giant squid could kill a sperm whale. He thinks of the giant squid as both majestic and mundane—with a precise weight, diet, length, and life span. He wants it, in short, to be real. "We have to move beyond this mythical monster and see it as it is," O'Shea said. "Isn't that enough?"

After a while, he stood and dropped the trawling net back in the water. We worked until after sunrise. When we still hadn't found any squid, O'Shea said, "An expedition that begins badly usually ends well."

At the cabin, Conway and I took a brief nap while O'Shea plotted our next course. In the afternoon, we ventured into town for supplies. O'Shea warned us not to use his real name; he had recently campaigned to shut down a nearby fishery in order to protect the wildlife, and he said that he had received several death threats. "This is quite dangerous country for me," he said.

I wasn't sure how seriously to take his warning, but, when I accidentally used his name, he became tense. "Careful, mate," he said. "Careful."

Later that day, O'Shea was standing on the cabin porch, smoking a cigarette, when a villager approached. "Are you the guy chasing them monsters?" he asked.

O'Shea looked at him hesitantly. "I'm afraid that would be me," he said.

"I saw you on the telly, talking about them things," the man said. He reached out his hand. "After I saw you, I named my cat Architeuthis."

O'Shea brightened. "This mate here has a cat named Archie," he told Conway and me.

O'Shea invited the man in for "a cuppa," and soon he and the stranger were bent down over his maps. "They say you can find the big calamari out here," the man said, pointing to a reef.

Before long, another villager stopped by and was offering his own advice. "I'd try over here," he said. "Billy Tomlin said he once found a big dead one out in these parts." O'Shea took in the information. Fishermen sometimes embroider the truth, he said, but they also know the local waters better than anyone else.

That night, we went out again. Although we continued to haul up enormous quantities of shrimp and krill—sometimes there were so many that they could barely move inside the tank—we found not a single squid. As the night lengthened, O'Shea seemed, for the first time, to grow dispirited. "The weather's causing havoc with the currents," he said.

After each haul, he'd study his charts and choose a new spot with renewed hope —"This could be it," he'd say—only to be disappointed again. When the sun rose, at six-thirty, casting its bright rays upon the sea, O'Shea raced the boat over to the two anchored traps. He said that he had often had the best luck at dawn; the creatures seemed to rear their heads before vanishing deep below. "Let's see what we got," he said, hauling the nets on board.

"Anything?" Conway asked.

O'Shea held one of the nets up to his eye, then dropped it in disgust. "Diddly," he said.

"We have to go farther out," O'Shea said the following night. We sped far into the Pacific, leaving the safety of the inlet behind. The hauls remained dismal; after each one, he aimed the boat farther out to sea, saying, "We have to go deeper, that's all."

Conway, who was looking increasingly pale, said, "Haven't we gone out enough?"

"I know the squid are out there," O'Shea said.

The less he found, the harder he seemed to work. He is not a big man, and his childhood illness had left his body somewhat brittle, yet he never slowed down as he pulled the net in with all its weight, then returned it to the water. His fingers were covered in blisters, his clothes were soaked through, and his glasses were stained with salt from the seawater.

"He's a bit of a fanatic, isn't he?" Conway said quietly.

As the cold nights wore on, we worked in a kind of fog. We were getting little sleep during the day, and it became harder to pay attention to the mounds of larval fish, shrimp, krill, and jellyfish; not even the sight of dolphins jumping in the waters nearby relieved the drudgery. At one point, I felt fatigued, and lay down in the forward berth. I could fit only if I bent my knees toward my chest. As I closed my eyes and listened to the waves smashing against the hull, I could hear O'Shea grunting as he pulled in another net and cursing when there was nothing inside.

On yet another night, at around four in the morning, as we pulled in the trawling gear and dropped the contents in the cylindrical tank, Conway shone a flashlight and asked, "What's that?"

O'Shea peered inside, and blinked several times, trying to keep himself awake. "Heaven help us!" he shouted. "It's a fucking squid!" He stared blearily into its eyeball. "It looks

like Archie," he told us.

Although the creature was only the size of my thumbnail, I could see it, too—its tentacles, its fins, its eyes, its arms, its bullet-shaped mantle.

"This could be your dream squid," Conway said.

"Quick," O'Shea said. "Let's drain some of the krill before they crush it."

He held the cylindrical tank in the air, his arms shaking from exhaustion, as the waves pounded the side of the boat. "Steady!" he yelled. It was hard to see in the darkness—there was no moonlight—and as he poured some of the contents into a strainer, struggling to balance against the violent waves, something happened.

"Where did it go?" O'Shea asked.

"I don't know," Conway said. "I can't see it anymore."

"Jesus Christ," O'Shea said.

He grabbed a specially designed tank, which he had purchased expressly for transporting a baby giant squid, and poured the rest of the cylindrical tank's contents inside it. "Where is the bloody thing?" he said. "Where is it?"

He reached in with his hand, stirring the water frantically. "It has to be here," he said.

He pulled out one shrimp, then another, holding them under the light.

"It's gone," Conway said.

But O'Shea didn't seem to hear. He sifted through the mounds of plankton, trying to find the baby squid's microscopic tentacles. At last, he stumbled backward, and put his arms over his head. "It's a fucking catastrophe," he said.

He fell back in the captain's chair, and sat motionless. I tried to think of something to say, but failed. "It was right there," O'Shea said to himself. "I had it."

After a while, he tried to drop the traps in the water again, but he no longer seemed able to muster his strength. "I can't take it anymore," he said, and disappeared into the forward berth.

That afternoon, O'Shea was sitting on the cabin porch, sipping a glass of whiskey. "Want a spot?" he asked.

"That's all right," I said.

He spoke in a whisper, and much more slowly than usual. He said he had pinpointed a new location to search, but I told him I thought I would stay behind and catch up on my work. He looked at me for a long moment. "That's what always happens," he said. "People get bored and give up. But I can't pay any attention to what's going on around me. I just have to stay focussed."

He took a sip of his whiskey. "I can already hear the critics saying, 'The great squid hunter lost his blasted squid again.' Do you know how it feels when everything goes to custard like this?" He fell silent again, then added, "I'm not going to stop. I'm not going to give up. I don't care if someone finds the squid first. I'll *still* go until I find it myself."

The next morning, when he pushed open the cabin door, he looked despairing. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing."

It was the end of the expedition; he had to go back to Auckland to lecture. We loaded up the gear and returned to the city. When we got there, O'Shea went to the aquarium to visit his specimens. In his absence, seventeen squid had died. The employee in whose care he had left them had posted a sign on the tank. It said, "They have a new trick . . . It's called 'jumping out of the tank and committing suicide!' "

O'Shea checked the temperature and salinity of the water in the tank, and offered the

remaining squid some sprat. Then we drove to his house. As he got out of his car, he said, "You may want to take a look at this."

He led me into the garage, which was cluttered with tools and appliances. He started to clear off an enormous box. "You better put this on," he said, and handed me a gas mask.

I slipped it over my face, and he opened the top of the bin. Inside was a dead giant squid. "It's a twenty-seven-foot male," he said.

The carcass was ivory white and was floating in embalming fluids; its arms were so long that they were bunched together in folds, and its suckers were the size of a child's fist. "I'm preparing this one for a museum," he said.

He told me that he had buried one squid corpse in his garden, under a patch of watermelons. Leaning over the box, he picked up the dead animal's mantle, which was bigger than he was. "That's the head," he said.

He turned it over, and I could see a massive, lidless eye staring out at us.

"See here, this is the mouth," he said, speaking rapidly again. He stuck his fingers inside the white cusp of flesh, revealing a sharp black beak and a serrated tongue. "It'll cut right through your cartilage," he said.

Though O'Shea didn't have a mask on, he took a deep breath and, with great exertion, lifted half of the creature in his arms. He grabbed a tentacle and started to extend it. "Look at it. They're fantastic, aren't they?"

He ran his fingers up and down its limbs, opening and closing its suckers. For a moment, he shut his eyes, as if he were trying to imagine it underwater. Then he said, "The dead one is beautiful, but it's the live one I want." ♦

David Grann has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2003.

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