

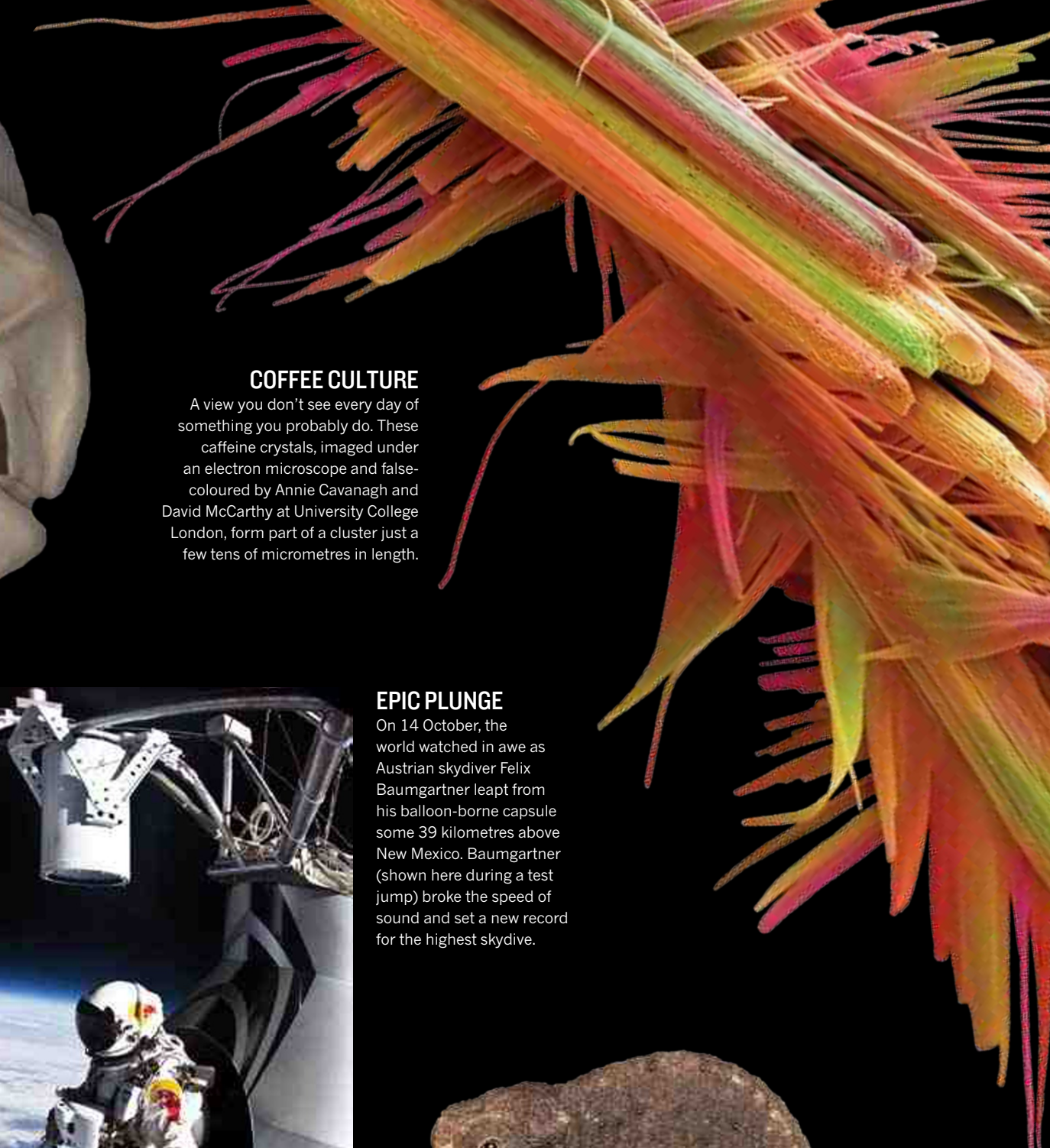
FROM THE WOMBS OF BATS

These apparitions — seemingly dreamed up by Swiss surrealist H. R. Giger — are embryos of the black mastiff bat (*Molossus rufus*). Biologist Dorit Hockman of the University of Cambridge, UK, took the picture using a standard dissecting microscope for inclusion in a system that documents embryo development.



THUNDER GOD

This image of the Thor's Helmet Nebula (NGC 2359) was taken by the Very Large Telescope array on Mount Paranal in Chile, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the European Southern Observatory this year. The organization's next major project — the Atacama Large Millimeter Array — is due to be completed in 2013.



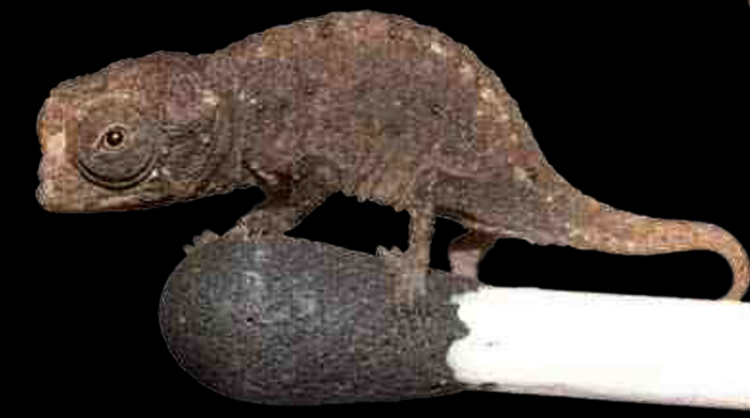
COFFEE CULTURE

A view you don't see every day of something you probably do. These caffeine crystals, imaged under an electron microscope and false-coloured by Annie Cavanagh and David McCarthy at University College London, form part of a cluster just a few tens of micrometres in length.



EPIC PLUNGE

On 14 October, the world watched in awe as Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner leapt from his balloon-borne capsule some 39 kilometres above New Mexico. Baumgartner (shown here during a test jump) broke the speed of sound and set a new record for the highest skydive.



NO MATCH FOR SIZE

This dwarf chameleon (*Brookesia micra*) from Madagascar was formally recognized as a new species in February. Admittedly, this is a juvenile, but adults are not much larger: males reach just 16 millimetres in length and females grow to a whopping 30 mm, making this the smallest lizard in the world.



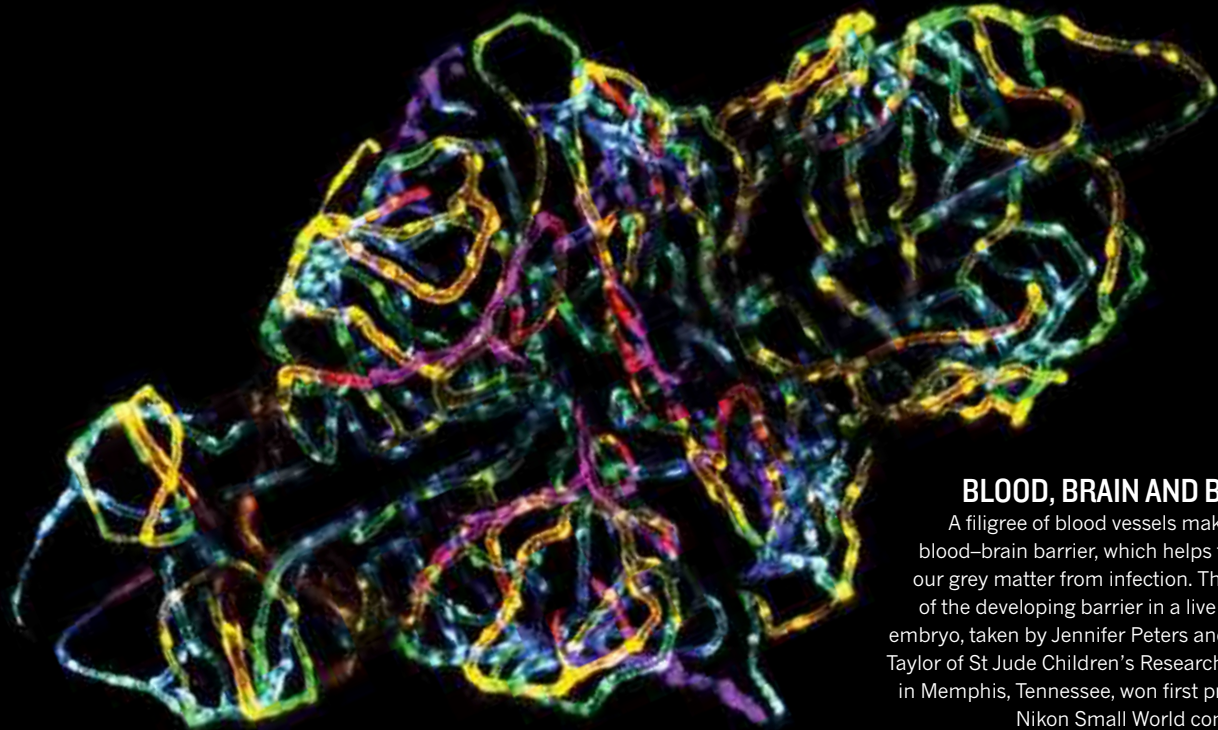
FREEZE FRAME

The extent of Arctic sea ice hit a record low this year, pegged at 3.41 million square kilometres on 16 September by the US National Snow and Ice Data Center in Boulder, Colorado. This is 3.29 million square kilometres less than the average extent recorded between 1979 and 2000.

IMAGES OF THE YEAR

With every moment of our lives seemingly Instagram'd, Facebooked and Twitpic'd, has the power of the photographic image faded like a Polaroid ravaged by sunlight? Not a bit of it. The camera is always on hand to record the wonder of the natural world and the thrill of exploring it. This year it showed us a man falling to Earth faster than the speed of sound; the nightmarish denizens of the deep oceans; and the delicate tracery of a brain's protective shield. These, and more, are some of *Nature's* favourite pictures of 2012.

Images selected by *Nature's* art and design team
Text by Daniel Cressey and Mark Peplow



BLOOD, BRAIN AND BEAUTY

A filigree of blood vessels makes up the blood-brain barrier, which helps to protect our grey matter from infection. This picture of the developing barrier in a live zebrafish embryo, taken by Jennifer Peters and Michael Taylor of St Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, won first prize in the Nikon Small World competition.



NOT IN KANSAS ANY MORE

Nebraska, actually. The United States saw its share of extreme weather this year, from the most extensive drought in half a century to the violence of Superstorm Sandy. Fortunately, this tornado-spawning mesocyclone in June passed farm buildings in Gurley without giving them a one-way trip to Oz.

PLASMA BURST

This solar filament, some 350,000 kilometres long, erupted from the surface of the Sun on 31 August. Seen in the extreme ultraviolet by NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory satellite, the eruption became a coronal mass ejection moving at about 1,400 kilometres per second — its particles grazed Earth's magnetosphere several days later, sparking an auroral display.



AND THIS IS ME ON MARS

Since it landed on 6 August after its '7 minutes of terror' descent, NASA's Mars rover Curiosity has delighted scientists and the public with streams of data and images from the red planet.



MONSTER RAGWORM

This specimen of *Nereis pelagica* was found in the White Sea off the Russian coast. Photographer Alexander Semenov says that the predatory worm was about 25 cm long and as thick as a finger. It is not known whether he still has nightmares about it.

ARCTIC ICE: ANNA HENLY; WINNER, THE WORLD IN OUR HANDS AWARDS/VEOLIA ENVIRONMENT WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR 2012/BBC WORLDWIDE/NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM; BATS: DORIT HOCKMAN/UNIV. CAMBRIDGE/2012 PHOTOMICROGRAPHY COMPETITION/NIKON SMALL WORLD; NEBUJA: B. BAILLEUL/ESO; BAUNGARTNER: JAY NEMETH/RED BULL CONTENT POOL

CAFFINE: ANNE CAVANAGH/DAVID MCCARTHY/WELLCOME IMAGES AWARDS 2012/WELLCOME IMAGES; CHAMELEON: FRANK GLAW; BLOOD-BRAIN BARRIER: JENNIFER L. PETERS/MICHAEL R. TAYLOR/ST. JUDE CHILDREN'S RESEARCH HOSPITAL/NIKON SMALL WORLD; CYCLONE: CAMILLE SEAMAN; SUN: SDO; AIR TEAM/GSC/NASA; CURIOSITY: MALIN SPACE SCIENCE SYSTEMS/JPL-CALTECH/NASA; RAGWORM: ALEXANDER SEMENOV