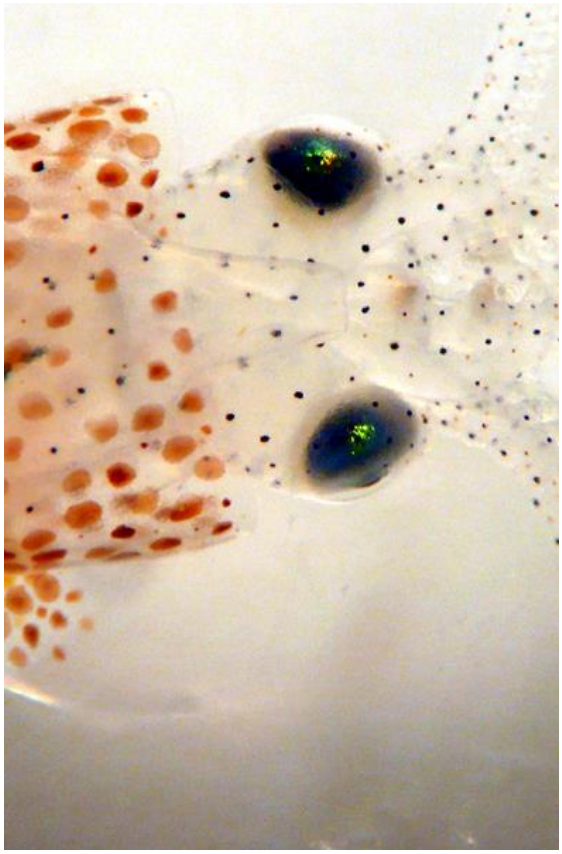
Squid

By Andrew Leggett

When I heard about one hundred and twenty-eight baby bobtail squid being sent to the International Space aboard Space X's Falcon 9 rocket, I was wildly excited. Here, they would be able to study the effect of zero gravity and the variance of other conditions that prevail upon the development of a life form, taken from Earth in its infancy, over its lifespan. Under the microscope, they looked like translucent blobs, with brown spots, two dark eyes and pseudopods that reminded me of catfish whiskers.

The first known infection was of an astronaut, an Australian medico who trained with NASA. On return home to Parramatta, Dr Julius Kovalenko, an intense care specialist who worked at Westmead Hospital, experienced night sweats, griping abdominal pain, and visions of strange molluscan couplings; distressing dreams of anal penetration by a spiked hectocotylus, which deposited a viscous fluid through the wall of his rectum into his peritoneal cavity. He lost consciousness and suffered a respiratory arrest, requiring intubation with positive inspiratory pressure ventilation. His abdomen distended and visibly undulated over a twenty-four-hour period, until his flailing form gave way. His bowels exploded, issuing forth a turgid mass of



adolescent squid, shortly after which his blood pressure drastically fell. He was pale, exsanguinated, and promptly died.

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Fortunately, at the time, I had been five minutes away on the labour ward, on the other side of the hospital campus, repairing the episiotomy incision I had made to assist a baby's head to make it through his mother's stretched vulva without tearing her apart. When I heard the Code Black call, I had no choice but to take the poor woman down from the stirrups, hand her over to the midwife and run to the emergency department. I always tried to be the last to make it to the cardiac arrest calls. I did my best to avoid being obliged to intubate, ventilate and do chest compressions on dead people, especially children. Then, having to pass on the bad news to family members who'd heard the ribs crack from where they stood on the other side of the curtain. This time, though, I ran. Code Black meant one of ours was down.

When I saw Cindy writhing in agony on the emergency room floor, along with several other colleagues, my instinct was to rush in immediately to help her, but Dr Todd, the clinical director, pushed me back.

"Don't go anywhere near her without full PPE," the old man ordered. Several other doctors were already struggling to don the gear as quickly as they could. I joined them, battling with the layers of gloves, gown, overshoes, mask and face shield.

Just as I was ready to go in, Cindy screamed and soiled herself explosively. I saw the tentacled

jelly thing burst through the back of her scrub trousers. I picked up a black stiletto shoe that Cindy kicked off in the midst of her dying throes and ran at it, roaring.

"Not so fast!" said old Todd, grabbing me in a choke hold from behind. "Don't go anywhere near that thing without a flame thrower."

It went on through the night, we emergency physicians, battling the parasites with acetylene torches, sometimes setting fire to the curtains around the cubicles, then having to drop the weapons and reach for fire extinguishers. A number of patients managed to run out the door and onto the street after being inoculated by the squid hectocotyli. It's too early to speculate as to why they didn't, like my dear Cindy, immediately succumb. They were the first of the ambulant host carriers. It's hard to know on whom to turn the torch, these days.

Here I am again, fighting the good fight. Yet something deep inside me wrenches against the futility. I can almost hear my mother's shrill voice commanding me: "Physician heal yourself!" My mother was one whose compassion organ must've shrivelled like an ephemeral flower for lack of watering when she was young, but somehow managed to grow an oasis of omnipotence, grandiosity and entitlement well enough in the midst of her childhood's emotional desert. I find myself feeling weak and frightened, wobbly at the knees and not at all confident. I wonder if this was something like my grandfather might have felt when he was hiding out from the Japanese when he went down with malaria on the Kokoda trail. I was brought up as a Baptist boy, but I couldn't bring myself to pray to something that I didn't really believe in. If I was to pray, what would come out of my mouth would be something like Jesus' last cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" God, forgive my blasphemy.

The only thing I know for sure now is that when I feel that griping just before my bowels explode, I'm done.
