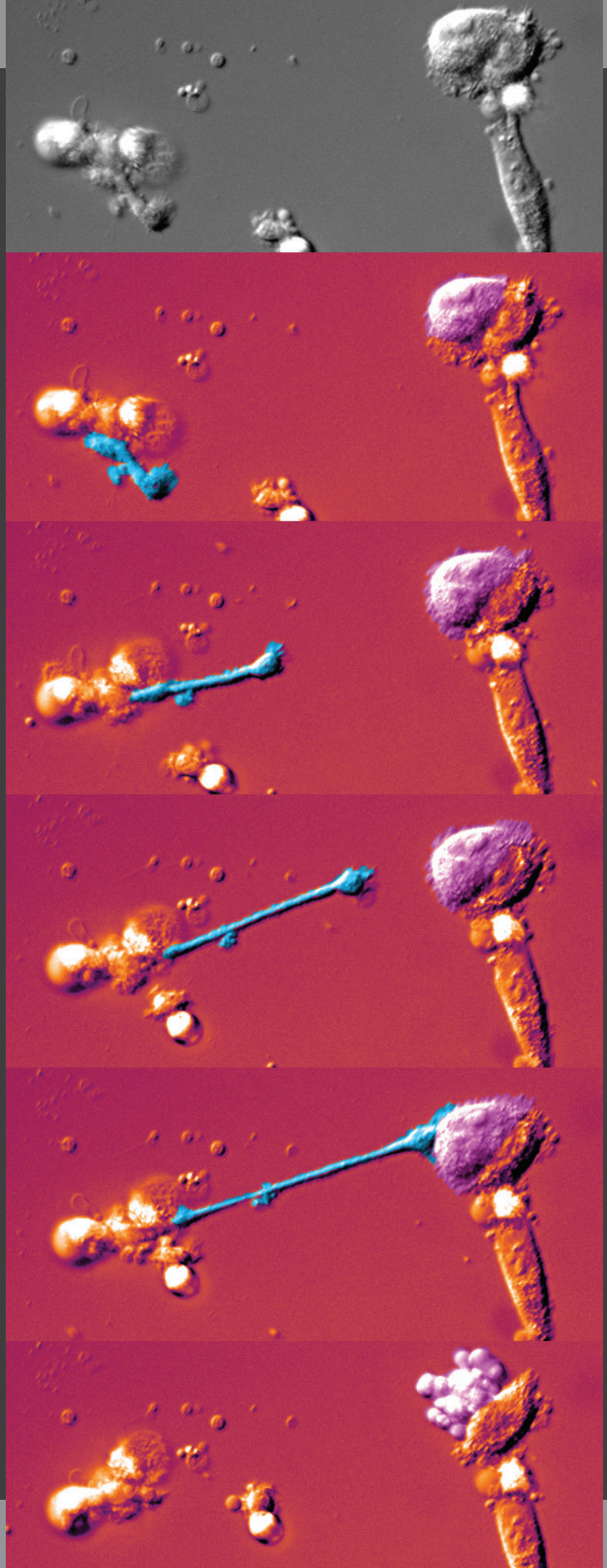


STRETCH-TASTIC

In this episode, blue-costumed Elastigirl spots an evil Purple People Eater lurking in the distance. Mustering her stretchy superpower, Elastigirl reaches farther and farther until—*gotcha!*—she snags the purple villain and injects poison. Minutes later, the Purple People Eater explodes. *Elastigirl Saves the World from Cancer!* At least until next time.

This series of images shows, in reality, a human natural killer cell (blue) attacking an A375 human melanoma tumor cell (purple) in a petri dish. Captured by Pitt's Per Basse, it's one of the first series of images to uncover this aggressive behavior of natural killer (NK) cells live in action. Basse is an MD/PhD/DMSci, associate professor of immunology, and assistant director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute's Cell and Tissue Imaging Facility. He's interested in ways of better engaging immune systems contending with cancers and says he almost fell out of his chair when he witnessed the NK cell's elasticity. Neither he nor any of his fellow NK researchers knew of this hidden superpower.

"It's encouraging," he says, noting that NK cells in the body don't have much space to move among tumor cells, which are packed like grapes. "If they can stretch out like this, they could stretch out in all sorts of directions, like amoeba crawling between other cells."

Basse's photo series was one of 20 winners of UPCI's 2015 "Images of Fighting Cancer" contest. The winners were showcased at the Science as Art exhibition at Pitt's Science 2015 event in October; they are now on permanent display in the research wing of the Hillman Cancer Center, home to UPCI—which, by the way, was founded 30 years ago by Ronald Herberman, whose lab discovered NK cells.

Meanwhile, research into the mysterious superpowers of NK cells continues. "I like to say they'll *stretch* far to help us get rid of cancer," Basse quips. ***—Cara Masset***

—Images Courtesy Per Basse