from Staplehurst, there is a gold seal with her given name engraved on it? And William, would you also do me the service of burning this letter once you have absorbed its contents?

I look forward to your return to London, sir, when I hope you will allow a brandy snifter to be filled for you by your fortunate friend who remains ever in your debt,

—*Charles Dickens.* ■

From Chicago Quarterly Review, Vol. 26, Feb. 2018

"Notable Essay of the Year," Best American Essays, 2019

BIRTHRIGHT

Megan Moodie

Medical odysseys have a natural plot structure: mysterious signs and symptoms we encounter along the way.

* * *

For months I complained that there was no archive for the mother in pain. I felt like I couldn't find her—the woman whose body is wrecked by childbirth or degenerative disease or traumatic accident—in literature or women's studies history or reruns of medical dramas on television. It turns out I was looking in the wrong place.

* * *

Slice the skin through the cigarette paper scars that got their name from their wrinkly striations, their obvious weakness. Pull the femoral head out of the acetabulum—you will hear a pop or a rip—and secure with gentle force. This is called traction. Expose a clear surgical field. You will have to slice out scar tissue to clear the field. Cut off the ratty, ragged edges of the labrum, that cartilage ring that runs around the entire hip joint. This is called debridement. There will be scarring.

* * *

I never want to ask "Why me?" because it's a cliché and I edit even my most private fantasy life for literary effect. It's the question I've been asking all along, though, the one I have been putting to my doctors for years. They are all handsome, McDreamy young men, my age, early forties, flushed with the excitement of successful careers that will pay back their student loans. They call me their sister. I ask them, in a thousand calm and nonemotional ways, "Why me?" For years they can't answer.

* * *

The symptoms were excruciating abdominal pain at thirty weeks of pregnancy. Walking with my left leg dragging behind me. Not being able

to sit. Not being able to stand. Constant pain that radiated from the low back through the entire pelvis, down the leg and into the foot. A hip that had fallen apart three times. These were the clues.

* * *

The smell of fear is alcohol-based antiseptic in plastic casing. The high sinus burn of bleach. They will cut me again soon, my third surgery in five years. I will bring my son's pillow, because it smells like him, the confident sweat of a boy who is not afraid. Yet.

* * *

Eventually, after seven years of mystery, an old rheumatologist reads the signs. He has the benefit of hindsight, the whole story, the symptoms that didn't look like symptoms at the time: I was a dancer. I was never going to be a professional or anything like that, but I was a good dancer and when people would watch me they would say things like, "I love to watch you dance. Because you look so happy, like you are having the most fun a person can have." And I was. Women with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, type III, are often dancers. Our loose joints make us flexible and supple and when we are still young this means we can float and stretch and we are often very good dancers. The old rheumatologist with the loud confidence of a man who has been listened to and respected for fifty years says, "Sometimes people like you end up in Cirque du Soleil."

* * *

Another word for a joint is an *articulation*. Stuart Hall, the British cultural theorist, reminded academics in the 1980s that we could use the term in this sense—as in "the articulated lorry"—to talk about two things that are held together but are not the same. Today I laugh to myself about the phrase running through my head, "Our joints are articulations." Because I can't decide if it is a cliché or the best thing I've ever written.

* * *

My archive is in my body, holding my joints together and losing its grip day by day. My archive is collagen, the sticky pink stuff, the goo at the center of all of us. My collagen has a mind of its own. Sometimes it's lazy and my joint subluxes, bones slipping where they are not supposed

to go. Sometimes it's overeager and I scar in thick purplish walls or bright-pink cotton candy twists. The code in my DNA is disordered, so the collagen is wild. Sometimes people with my condition have wild collagen in their aortas. I am lucky that my heart is not affected. Every day I have to remind myself, "My heart is not affected."

* * *

I had to have stitches after my son was born in a speeding freight-train delivery of under five hours. Can you guess? This is also a sign and symptom of EDS: fast birth. Once our body gets the signal to loosen its connective tissue, it goes to town. Like dancing, I can do this. My son is born and my lady parts are ripped to shreds and as she sutures I ask the doctor, "Are you making a quilt down there?" and she laughs. "How bad is it?" I ask. "You don't want to know." She doesn't tell me how many stitches and I don't want to look and when I go back six weeks later she says, "Your body healed this too aggressively. You made too much scar tissue." I love my OB, who helped me through a pregnancy filled with unexplained, constant pain and never C-sectioned me even when she could have, but this seemed like bullshit. How could my body be at fault? She burned my privates with silver nitrate. So I could have sex again.

* * *

EDS girls have kind of become the poster children for invisible illness. We're the ones who get yelled at in parking lots for having disability placards we're supposedly not entitled to because we look just fine. We have what the medical researchers call the marfanoid habitus: a tall, thin, long-limbed physique. Be careful what you wish for.

* * *

My writing teacher Ariel Gore mentions in one of her books that she heard it takes three generations to recover from war. She is holding out hope for her children's children. I wonder how many epochs I am carrying in my joints, generation after generation of Catholic women in Ireland having baby after baby after baby, their pelvises falling apart. EDS can pass from mother to son and father to daughter—mine comes from my paternal line, and my father got it from his mother—but it's always worse on women because nature just has that rat-assed sense of

humor. The hormonal havoc of pregnancy wrecks even the most orderly connective tissue and there they were, fighting their bodies over and over.

* * *

Now that I know things about Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, I sit around and diagnose celebrities. Katherine Heigl, I'm looking at you and your knock-knees in those fake blue scrubs. There's a certain softness under the chin. I think I can see it from a distance.

* * *

My grandmother drank her coffee black in a chipped ceramic mug. She smoked constantly and when she was choking to death from emphysema at the end of her life everyone said, "It's such a shame she did this to herself. She just could never quit." But I know your secret now, Norrie, the secret you didn't even know: nicotine is a vasoconstrictor. You felt better with it running through your veins because for those moments it felt like maybe your body wouldn't fall apart. The thing you needed killed you. And isn't that always the way? Lauren Berlant calls it "cruel optimism," this desire for the very thing that will be your own undoing. She means mostly political things, like traditional marriage for queer folks—legal recognition by state institutions that means you're suddenly being surveilled all the time. But there's a dime-store novel version of this, too, this desire for the things that hurt because they are also, sometimes, saving our lives. I spent weeks' worth of nights a hysterical mess, wishing I could have the second child that might have put me in a wheelchair. I didn't care about pain or the fact that we really didn't know what was wrong with me. I cared about my son being alone. I cared about how badly it hurt, like all that wild collagen set on fire, that I would only mother one child when I had plans for more. I cared about the desire that was so like the pain: you don't know anything else. You just want it to end.

* * *

After debridement, there are sutures. You sew together the remaining edges as best you can. Have you ever tried to fix a hole in your kid's stuffed animal? What you think is fuzzy fabric that will hold a needle is nothing but fluff? That's what happened to my left hip. Twice.

* * *

I can imagine my grandmother, at her yellow Formica table with the chrome edge. She is looking out the window of the kitchen that never had a screen, at her laundry drying on the line in the sunshine of a northern Wisconsin Saturday. Everything is green and her rosebushes, pink and yellow with fluffy blossoms, are perfectly pruned. She is drinking her black coffee and smoking a cigarette, the grey ashes flicked off round and neat. She notices her hips and her pelvis and shifts in her vinyl chair. Her legs stick a little—she was always in shorts in the summer—and she pulls them off with a wet sound. She gets up from the table, stubs out the cigarette, and goes down the steep linoleum stairs to the basement. It is dark and full of moldy moose heads and old army canteens, with a damp, furry smell like breathing in carpets at the bottom of a mine. She takes a bottle of golden whisky from behind the detergent and the little plastic bathroom cup she has hidden with it, pours herself a peg. As she takes the clean clothes from the washing machine, she drinks one cup, and then another. Her joints feel smoother now, both bound and liquid, a nice feeling. She climbs the stairs to hang the wash.

* * *

Now I am waiting for surgery. This week I rented a wheelchair and bought a commode lift for the loo that will make it easier for me to pee on crutches. I lie around a lot, with a heating pad on my leg and hip, trying to rest. Watching old episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* that I tell myself I will have to give up soon—too many cases of routine procedures that end in catastrophe and that whiff of fear starts reeking through the screen. I explain things to my son, who is now old enough to understand that Momma will go have an operation, and stay overnight in the hospital, and then need help when she comes back. Even now he tells me "Don't worry, Mom, don't bend over. I'll pick that up for you."

* * *

Where bodies are articulated, I am falling apart.

* * *

My son takes a dance class once a week. It's a hip-hop class, all little five- to seven-year-old boys, and every Tuesday I sit and watch him. He is a natural, with grace and determination and even humor in his

movements. He is dynamic to watch because he is so obviously happy. And I am happy, too, because I recognize his expression, the joy of a body doing something it is meant to do. And in the next breath, I am worried. He is carrying the trauma of birth and sexism and silence and suffering in his joints, too. I watch him. And wait. ■

PACT

Carlie Hoffman

It's not my business but each time I glimpse
a small girl, bleary-eyed, staring down
at her shoes, hair greased
from longing as the train
rattles on over rats and bits of trash
through the dark, I want
to make a girl-pact
that whatever she is
dreaming there, night flashing
at her back, she will go on
in spite of. Though it is not
my business just
a moment ago you stood
four-feet tall on the subway stairs,
the railing between them:
I'll fucking smack you
Fuck you bitch
as you tried to pull
your mother's coat
away from the years of what
comes next. Not
my business, but know
this is not about the story of a
mother and father gone bad, but worse—
it is about a woman and man
alone, so many houses ago,
picking dog hair from the meat
chucked on the living room rug,
thick in the part of the plot
of your inheritance, and as you walk
up the stairs toward the tail-end
of winter, a twist to your pace,
I can only give you this pact:
When you grow taller and repulsed
by your hair pinned back, the tie