

What of the Hives

By Maddie Norris

No known beginning, the White Coat says. Idiopathic. WebMD said the same thing the night before when angry red mesas rose on my skin. They itched like a motherfucker. I turned on my phone light and found my legs a foreign cartography.

Idio—meaning private, pathic—meaning disease. A private disease, except when I sit on a table reskinned with wax paper and look at birth control posters and numbers to call for inner turmoil and the nurse with her hard-hairsprayed hair and clinically cold hands throws open the door and says, “You look awful.”

The hives, medically, can be traced back to mast cells, but the trailhead seeps into the terrain after that. Mast cells mark thresholds to the other. They surround blood vessels and nerves. They’re abundant near boundaries to the outside world, like the lungs, like the nose, the mouth, the skin. Originally thought to be nourishing, the cells are now grouped with the immune system. Come into contact with something they don’t like and you’ll get a shit storm of histamine.

The doctor looks for the cause within me. How much do you weigh? How tall are you? When was your last period? Any allergies? Family history? Are you stressed? Are you cold? Are you sick? Are you crying?

I’m put on steroids. I’ll swallow anything that promises to stop the 3 am excursions into the desert that has become my body. Every night is the same and different. It starts with small red dots on my inner thighs, then a few on my arm, then along the gate of my rib cage. The mountains join forces, pushed together by tectonic plates of unknown origins. Every night, my body invents a topographical map, red landmasses surging upward on my wrist, neck, sternum, knees, feet, crotch, front, back. I take flash photography and study the disembodied images. I try not to scratch but end up drawing trails all over myself.

The steroids—shocker—don’t work. But they do make me bawl when my roommate asks, “So how are you?”

When something foreign and unwelcome comes inside, mast cells release the histamine. Histamine then dilates the capillaries like a female dilates a male’s eyes. With more permeable walls, white blood cells and proteins and other bodily fluids leak out, pooling beneath the skin and forming new landmasses. This helps flush the system when an intruder is caught. But sometimes the intruder is a false trespasser, like cat hair or pollen. Sometimes there is no intruder. Sometimes it is only the animal of your body acting on instinct.

Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto, Terrence claims in *The Self-Tormentor*. I am human: nothing human is alien to me. So you say. But what does it mean to be human? Does it mean to feel companionship with the woman who drops her grocery bag and splats the milk? Does it mean to crave another outlining your neck with their mouth? Does it mean to feel the neck bruise as the blood congregates beneath the skin? If it's that, if it's feeling yourself within your body, then what happens when your body finds itself a foreign land? What happens when the human you can't recognize is yourself?

"It could last three days, it could last three years," the nurse says. When they don't know what causes it, they don't know how to fix it. Have you used new detergent? New shampoo? Conditioner? Soap? Tampons?

So many questions can make anyone feel like an object of study, which, in fact, I am.

I do research. I study myself, detach my mind from my body. The doctor doesn't tell me about mast cells. I find them on my own, looking for personal answers in the public domain. I sit on my bed with my door closed, my window closed, and all my lights on. Every hour I clear my browser history, try to scrape away the hives, mast cells, histamine, and endless questions about how they come and when they go. Mostly, I try to forget the images I can't stop looking at: the geological formations bubbling on red skin, the proteins and blood cells and bodily fluids forcing their way to the surface, looking for a way out. The hives and I have that in common: We both want them out.

I can't stop my life just because my body is revolting. I pick up my medications, I read in the library, I go to the grocery and stand in the frozen aisle, pretending to contemplate taquitos with the foggy glass door open while basking in the cold. There's a comfort to numbness.

Back at the doctors: no progress. I'm beginning to think they will never go away. That this is my new life, my itchy, blotchy body, and I better start hacking a new trail to survive. And yet, I still haven't given up the hope that it will be normal again, that I will be normal again.

The official name for the hives is urticaria, from the twin Latin verbs *urtica* and *urere*, to nettle and to burn. A pine-straw fire on my skin, a bodily self-injury free from the psyche, or perhaps not. Idiopathic Urticaria. A private disease, a mental burning.

Pierre Hadot writes, "Only he who is capable of a genuine encounter with the other is capable of an authentic encounter with himself." So I dedicate myself to the hives, learning their terrain, their ridges and valleys, their changing faces. My body, I decide, is trying to tell me something.

On my roommate's bookshelf is a Milton collection, the spine growing mold. She wipes the green spots off with Kleenex. The circles come off so easily, her hand swiping once at the backbone of the book, twice, three times, until, to the eye, there's nothing left. Like histamine, the tissue loosens the borders. We eat tacos on a patio pockmarked with umbrellas and I tell her what it feels like to wake up without defenses. I feel my borders loosen.

They put me on meds to stop the itching. At night, I still grow my own paradise lost, but now, physically, I feel nothing. I prod the red patches and watch them blanch, a halo lingering for a moment then muddying back to clay dirt. I remember, half a year earlier, waking up to a hand skimming my naked hips. My mind said, 'Throw up. My body stayed silent.

Idiopathic: no known cause. Sure as hell no mention of a cure. So how do you get rid of something that refuses to be named? The word idiopathic can be traced back to 1669, but tracing the beginnings hasn't gotten me very far. Let's watch the word multiply: idiosyncrasy, idiolect, idiom, and idiographic. Idiographic: the study of individual cases, the discovery of individual processes. The word didn't appear until around 1905. It takes time to learn yourself.

When did it happen? Where were your friends? Were you drunk? Were you drugged? Were you scared?

Mast cells have long-term memory. Once they've been crossed, they hold a grudge, keeping the imprint of an antigen close. Your body will remember when you forget. It will see the pollen, it will see the cat hair and the msg and the peanuts, and it will see the sweaty imprint of itself in a foreign bed. It will know it doesn't belong.

Urtica: a genus of plants known for the stinging hairs on their leaves. They grow in disturbed lands, in construction-site dirt and overturned lawn fertilizer. Run a finger along the underside of a leaf and feel the injection of chemicals cut into you. The pain of touching what isn't yours. A defense mechanism of the skin.

I take a walk in the forest, smell the wet dirt, hear the unknown creatures scurry among leaves, see the sun illuminate my body in pieces. I walk from the light to the dark to the light, feeling the ground meet my feet, my feet meet my legs, my legs meet my torso, my torso meet my head.

The hives leave slowly. There's no explanation for their exit. One night, there are fewer, the next, they're only on my legs, and then only one leg, only one patch of thigh, a single hive disappearing into skin. Time heals all wounds, they say, except, at night I find myself tracing trails on my skin, drawing red lines up my legs and onto my arms, connecting the points of my body, making visible the paths between my hidden hives.

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