

## A Language of Its Own: Poetry and Migraine

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In 1923 Peruvian avant-garde poet Alberto Hidalgo published a poem called “Jaqueca” (“Migraine”). Appearing in the collection *Química del espíritu* (The Spirit’s Chemistry), which features a number of experimental poems, “Jaqueca” consists of letters loosened on the page, without lines and in no order—the remnants, perhaps, of a poem shattered. It does not have any created speaking voice and is impossible to read in any conventional form, although the Uruguayan Juan Angel Italiano has more recently offered us an intriguing performance of the text by vocalizing the letters in altered tones that produce a sonorous experience beyond sense and beyond reading.<sup>1</sup> Seeing the letters strewn about the page or hearing Italiano’s voicing, we quickly understand that the title of the poem does not refer to the experience of the migraine sufferer but to what this poem might yield if we try to approach it with traditional expectations about poetry. Migraine here is a metaphor for the reading experience, not the experience that stimulates the writing; but what happens when this chronic condition itself becomes the stimulus for poetry?

Migraines move their sufferers across the boundaries between the physical, neurological, and psychological, depending on the moment and the place in which their headaches are categorized. In *The Culture of Pain*, David Morris discusses chronic pain as an immense invisible crisis that requires interpretation. As Morris explains, our experience of pain can be isolating; yet pain itself is deeply socially constructed (1991, 38). One of the effects of writing poetry about

<sup>1</sup> <https://juanangelitaliano.bandcamp.com/track/jaqueca-alberto-hidalgo-1923>

migraines is moving the subject to the center (perhaps displacing the doctor), making private suffering public in ways that may encourage others to take pain seriously. While some kinds of pain communicate about an underlying illness, with migraine, pain is not a message but part of a complex of symptoms (Morris 1991, 74). Oliver Sacks explored migraines in his first book (1970), describing them as an “aggregate of numerable components” (1992, 34) that produce physical events that “are drenched in emotional significance, [they are] both physical and symbolic events” that demonstrate the continuity of mind and body (Sacks 1992, xvii-viii).

In this paper I will contrast the work of two poets who structure books around the migraine experience: Mexican Claudia Hernández de Valle-Arizpe, author of *Hemicránea* (1998), and US poet Michael Dickman, in *Green Migraine* (2015). Both struggle against the silence, the invisibility and privatization of chronic headache pain. Each confronts psychic and corporeal experiences of migraine: Dickman in fragmentary post-event poems formed around five migraines of different colors. His poems explode natural images amidst the detritus of human presence. Hernández’s poems chronicle more recognizable experiences of pain that decompose into verbal wreckage and come back together in provisional recovery. Both authors use poetic structures not to heal, but to incorporate the instability of migraine into language. As Morris might put it, their “pain invents its own language” (1991, 222).

Sacks traces the evolution of understandings of migraine and makes it clear that this malady is saturated with historical and culturally imbued meanings. The origins of migraine move from classical humeral explanations (Elizabethan splenic humours) to 18<sup>th</sup> century sympathetic theories (that seated migraines in one or more of the viscera—stomach, bowel, uterus, etc.). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century migraines were linked to “nerve storms” and to emotional disorders such as hysteria; there were vascular theories, association with a hereditary taint, and with masturbation (with moral implications) (Sacks 1992, 2-6). Migraine’s symptoms cross many borders: visible ones include a flush or pallor, which led to their categorizations as red or white migraines by Emil du Bois Reymond in 1860 (Sacks 1992, 16). Although headache and nausea are common symptoms, the head pain may be described as a “blind headache,” a hemicranial headache (one side of the head), and may be accompanied by itching, blurred vision, nausea, lethargy, dizziness, or faintness (Sacks 1992, 18). There is an unstable quality to migraines, they fluctuate, and may present with a single symptom or a mass of symptoms (Sacks, 1992, 34). There are often “premonitory symptoms” such as thirst, excitement, and water retention, an unsettled state and, Sacks notes, “arousal of various types may stop migraine in its early phases (Sacks 1992, 28, 30). Peter O’Leary suggests that we understand migraine in terms of instability/stability rather than health and illness, for it is “as much an outgrowth of life as a complex of symptoms through which life might be ‘read’ and understood” (O’Leary 2002, 5)

One of the more infamous characteristics of a migraine is that it may be accompanied by an aura. Sacks has observed that the aura has a structure and is made up of a variety of modules “arranged in innumerable patterns that have a sequence” (Sacks 1992, 88). The migraine aura may be preceded by sensory hallucinations that are visual or tactile, the sufferer may experience zoom vision, mosaic vision, and alterations in mood, affect, perception, memory, speech, and hearing. The visual experience of migraine auras has frequently been expressed in painting.<sup>2</sup> Sacks presents the artwork he discusses as literal representations of the phenomena (they are not meant to be symbolic, he says) (Sacks 1992, 153), but being a viewer whose culture includes the idea of the intentional fallacy, I would argue that our interpretations of these visual representations of migraine pain can take many forms. Pictures found on websites that record visual art produced by migraine sufferers use enclosed spaces, natural and mechanical images, cubist self-portraits, tornado effects, and distinct color choices. Do many of the artists paint while experiencing pain? We can’t know, but it is most likely that they incorporate elements of the world they live in, however they may choose to represent these, and some of them may be influenced by other artists’ visions or styles. Isn’t it always symbolic to represent pain?

In *Pain: The Fifth Vital Sign*, Marni Jackson states that “pain lacks a perfect history [...] because we love, love to forget it” (Jackson 2002, 23). Yet pain can be transformative; we can learn to think with pain, to write out of pain: these ideas are suggested by Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*, where he also states that “to write is to be absolutely distrustful of writing, while entrusting oneself to it entirely” (Blanchot 1986, 145, 110)—an experience analogous, perhaps, to that of pain. In the *Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry proposed that pain destroys language—perhaps in the moment of experiencing it (remember, her topic is torture), but not forever or always. When the visual artists take charge of representing and reformulating their chronic pain they are moved from passive victims to active responders who record and make their suffering readable. In a similar way the poets whose work I explore here place us inside their experiences of migraine, so much so that they have structured these two collections around this repetitive pain. In doing so they own it and perhaps control it. Their work does not depend upon coherence or consistency but brings to mind T.S. Eliot’s suggestion that genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. In constructing their books around migraines they also situate themselves as part of a community of sufferers, a move that may be both self-defining and therapeutic.

It is intriguing that Mexican Claudia Hernández de Valle-Arizpe chose a medical term for the title of her collection. *Hemicránea* defines the condition from the outside: it is a diagnosis, a

<sup>2</sup> Websites where migraine art may be seen include: [http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/02/28/opinion/20080222\\_MIGRAINE\\_SLIDESHOW\\_index-10.html](http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/02/28/opinion/20080222_MIGRAINE_SLIDESHOW_index-10.html) or <http://www.migraineart.org.uk/#modal>

label that is set up in contrast to the experience of the mind-body-language interactions in these poems. The diagnostic title challenges the boundary between our experience of pain and how it is identified, or who puts it into language, for, as Virginia Woolf has said, in illness “things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals” (Woolf 1947, 17). After the title there is just a single reference to doctors in the first section of the book (“Algún médico te habló de alergias” [Some doctor talked to you about allergies]) (Hernández 1998, 15), while there are multiple references to painting and literature. The first four sections, “El diagnóstico” [The diagnosis], “La desesperación” [Desperation], “Los remedios” [Remedies], and “Elogio” [Accolade] are introduced with epigraphs by William Styron, Virginia Woolf, Diana Morán, and Joseph Roth.<sup>3</sup> All of these authors have struggled to communicate, as Hernández does here, to speak truthfully, as she makes pain intelligible in a non-scientific way by exploring its physical, intellectual and emotional resonances through poetry.

“El diagnóstico” begins with a fairly narrative poem in a plural voice that anticipates the migraine experience: “No es necesario que muera alguien / para que la luz del día nos arranque / los ojos” [It is not necessary that someone die / for daylight to rip out / our eyes]<sup>4</sup>. A bit later on the page the speaker addresses someone else (or her/himself) in second person: “Reconoces la señal del peligro: / es mejor volver a tu casa / o a la fina sombra de tu cuerpo” [You recognize the danger sign: it’s better to return to your house or to your body’s slender shadow] (Hernández 1998, 11). The body like the house may be an “asilo, paraíso, hospital” [refuge, paradise, hospital] (Hernández 1998, 13) but also offers another way of being, of interacting with the world: “Es necesario acostarse y mirar con la boca” [It is necessary to go to bed and look with your mouth] (Hernández 1998, 12). In these first pages light teases darkness and interior vision blooms.

Tu aura visual se alarga.  
 En un campo de luces rojas escribes.  
 Eufórico escribes en el sótano de tu casa  
 horas antes de que comience.  
 [...]
 Qué sincronía de tu cabeza  
 con los latidos del corazón:  
 Gemelitud, espejo bicéfalo, sagrado  
 binomio que sobrevive a tientas: casi vampiro. (Hernández 1998, 14)  
 [Your visual aura expands. / You write in a field of red lights. / Euphoric you write in  
 the basement of your house / hours before it begins. ... What synchrony of your

<sup>3</sup> William Styron’s memoir, *Darkness Visible* (1990), chronicles his struggle with depression; Virginia Woolf’s essay, “On Being Ill” (1930), discusses the dearth of literature dealing with illness and the body. Hernández references Panamanian Diana Morán’s poem “Soberana presencia de la patria” [Sovereign Country’s Presence] (from the eponymous book, 1964), an anti-imperialist work whose quote highlights the need to speak; Joseph Roth was an Austrian Jewish writer who fled Hitler and whose writing is known for its nostalgia for the pre-WWI Hapsburg Empire; his quote here also reinforces the need to tell the truth.

<sup>4</sup> All translations are my own.

head/with your heartbeats: / Twinship, bicephalous mirror, sacred / binomial that  
groping around survives: almost a vampire]

The poet joins physical and psychological effects of migraine, evoking a body/mind duality and suggesting the body turned on itself (vampire); at the same time she works against the “myth of two pains” (biological vs. mental) (Morris, 1991, 12), for here they are integrated (twins, double-headed). Morris notes that chronic pain serves no biological purpose (unlike acute pain that protects us from further harm) (Morris 1991, 65); in Hernández’s poetry it is a stimulus to write, to form a community and, perhaps, part of a visionary experience.

The first section of *Hemicránea* tells a story of migraine diagnosis in sentences that come together in blocks, not necessarily ending at line break. As the book continues symptoms fragment and images become more abstract: “Vieja y alta, espiga torre es la culpa / donde la ventana del domingo es la más terrible” (Hernández 1998, 19) [Old and tall, tower spike is to blame / where Sunday’s window is the most terrible] or “Hacha, puñal de mango blanco, martillo, cordel / de pinzas, pico de pluma fuente, panal de agujas. / Bisturí, pedrada, luz de estaño, ojo de águila” [Ax, white handled dagger, hammer, clothes pin line, /fountain pen nib, honeycomb point knit. / Scalpel, stony, tin light, eagle’s eye ]( Hernández 1998, 20). These fragments form the transition to “La desesperación” where the speaker becomes more clearly the victim of the “tú” [you], the migraine personified. The migraine is a being and also a locale for it is described with spatial metaphors: it is a region, a place, an environment; it is a *tremendal* [marsh] (Hernández 1998, 71), part of “la geografía lacustre del cráneo” [the lakey geography of the cranium] (Hernández 1998, 46). The line, “Y es una ábside oscuro” [it is a dark apse] (Hernández 1998, 32), appears on a page alone—in an isolated space, a breath—before the intent to translate pain to words continues.

The idea of community is suggested by the epigraphs, the first person plural, and yo-tú [I-you] conversations and while reading these poems I was struck with a sense of other voices through language use and place names throughout the book. When I asked Hernández about this aspect of the collection she said yes, in fact she used Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf’s cases to structure the first part of the book: “No quería escribir un libro personal que resultara obsesivo, y por ello la necesidad de dar cabida a otras voces de quienes padecieron lo mismo” [I didn’t want to write a personal book that would end up obsessive, and for that reason it was necessary to accommodate other voices of people who had suffered the same] (Hernández 2018). She evokes Kafka in the first section relating “el dolor de cabeza con la ansiedad, la culpa, la alimentación y las alergias en el genial y atormentado escritor checo” [headache pain with anxiety, blame, nutrition, and allergies in the affable and tormented Czech writer] (Hernández 2018). We feel his

presence in her use of the German name for rose hips (*Hagebutte* or *rosa mosqueta* in Spanish), in his basement writing, and the mention of the woman he loves. Hernández continues:

En la segunda parte: “La desesperación”, la figura de Virginia Woolf puebla las páginas y hay referencias a su vida familiar y a los días vividos durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial que tanto la afectaron, así como a ciudades inglesas como Sussex, y a su suicidio (Hernández 2018).

[In the second part, “Desperation,” the figure of Virginia Woolf populates the pages and there are references to her family life and the days she lived during the Second World War that affected her so much, as well as cities like Sussex and her suicide.]

The term *bombardeos* [bombardments] appears several times and can work at many levels relative to headaches and war, but the section begins with a direct reference to Woolf’s book *Night and Day* (1919): “Se deshoja cada libro que leo. Lo rompen mis ojos. /Ayer la perra comió *Noche y día*” [Each book I read sheds its leaves. My eyes break it. Yesterday the dog ate *Night and Day*] (Hernández 1998, 27). The imagined voice is Woolf’s and, as the poem develops, the tú [you] that she addresses is her migraine:

Me colocas sobre un piso de ajedrez,  
Al centro de un laberinto de cipreses.  
Me hablas en voz alta y yo en silencio  
Te maldigo. Maldigo la oscuridad de tu nombre.  
Y mi incapacidad para salir de ti. (Hernández 1998, 29)  
[You place me on a chess board /at the center of a labyrinth of cypresses. /You speak to me aloud and I in silence / curse you. I curse your name’s darkness / and my inability of getting out of you]

When the speaker says: “Virginia es un lugar lejano que no conozco” [Virginia is a far away place I do not know] (Hernández 1998, 30) in the poem, the distancing works on multiple levels; Virginia is a place and a person, both figurative and literal, separated by spatial and temporal distances. Hernández creates Woolf’s perspective but the vision is also her own and that of many who experience migraine.

Like Woolf’s dialogue with herself and her migraine, later in the book Hernández creates yet another perspective signaled by her use of italics. The poet describes it as “una voz imaginaria y onírica; la más íntima y desesperada; la que, como contraparte, es respuesta y reflejo de la voz más estructurada que corre paralela” [an oneiric and imaginary voice; the most intimate and desperate one; the one that, like a counterpart, is an answer and a reflection of the voice that runs parallel] (Hernández 2018). She creates another kind of dialogue, another way to tangle with the idea of duality, or the shared experiences of chronic pain. She is one of us/*nosotros*, faced with a personified enemy and *compañero* [companion]:

Nosotros, de nuevo y siempre: extranjeros frente  
a tu clima,

bendito dolor como aroma de pan en lo alto de un  
 pueblo;  
 ante la insistencia de tus poderes  
 piedad otra vez de balbuceo (Hernández 1998, 67)  
 [We, again and always; strangers facing / your climate / blessed pain like the aroma of  
 bread above the / village; / before the insistence of your powers / mercy once more of  
 babble]

Pain is a vivid element of life; it has multiple roles, like certain images or terms in the poems. For example, *tálamo* appears in the final poem (“Coda”) in the italicized voice that plays with double meanings of the word: it is at once a wedding bed, “donde duermen los amantes” and a part of the brain, “el corazón espinado del cerebro” (Hernández 1998, 76).

La oscuridad no proviene del tálamo  
 Donde duermen los amantes.  
 Es hija del encierro oval y hemicráneo.  
 Cercana al día crece su espina, inevitable.  
 La region del dolor es también la comarca  
 De los sueños y del pan azul de la vigilia.  
 El otro tálamo es el corazón espinado del cerebro;  
 una extension del alma, un lugar al que se llega. (Hernández 1998, 76)  
 [Darkness does not come from the nuptial bed [tálamo] / where the lovers sleep. / It is  
 the offspring of the oval, hemicranial enclosure. / Close to daytime her spine, inevitable,  
 grows. / The painful region is also the district / of dreams and wakefulness’ blue bread. /  
 The other thalamus [tálamo] is the spiny heart of the brain; / an extension of the soul, a  
 place to which one arrives.]

Possible meanings multiply, like those of migraine itself: it is inescapable (there is no cure, only remedies), excruciating, and revelatory—placing the speaker in “la comarca de los sueños” [the dream district]. Virginia Woolf proposed that “incomprehensibility has an enormous power over us in illness, more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow;” when we are ill, the barriers go down and we grasp meaning sensually she says (Woolf 1947, 21-2). This is why we turn to poetry, for “illness makes us disinclined for the long campaigns that prose exacts” (Woolf 1947, 21). Claudia Hernández offers her readers migraine’s resonant *balbuceo* [babbling] of language; in *Hemicránea* headache is a spring of torment, sensation, and an unexpected opportunity for beauty.

U.S. poet Michael Dickman titles his book *Green Migraine*, and the color reminds us of visual representations of the malady. It also recalls, as we saw earlier, the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Reymond catalogued migraines by color; they were red or white according to the sufferer’s appearance (whether they exhibited a flush or pallor). Dickman creates his own color wheel of connotation here for his migraine poems start with white and red and move on to include yellow, green, and black migraines. But rather than the appearance of migraine sufferers, these poems chronicle the experience through color. The book’s title also unites the seemingly

disparate focuses of the collection for the migraine chapters are interspersed among others that explore natural settings and phenomena, such as “Bee Sting,” “Dog Vertigo,” “A Cloudless Sky,” and “Butterflies,” placing the malaise in the natural world.

In “White Migraine” Dickman establishes a style he’ll use throughout these poems: short lines predominate, there is no punctuation and the frequent line breaks create fragments, edges, and sharp juxtapositions:

Every color  
there ever was  
is white

It peels the skin back from the roof of your mouth in metal petals that taste  
like snow

The roof of the world

My fingernails  
in a pile

The moon flushed down a toilet (Dickman 2015, 11)

The halting rhythm, allows a close look while it creates contrast. White is the color of nausea, of “white caviar” that “gets scooped from the back of my eyeballs with delicate spoons // The mother of pearl spoons are tuned razor sharp” (Dickman 2015, 12) – the visual turns tactile here. White is an oyster shell, an avalanche, an iceberg, “on all fours / the universal position / of love is white.”<sup>5</sup> White may also be the toilet bowl into which the speaker unpoetically vomits, but it is clear that the color swings from beauty and perhaps cool relief to damage and deficit. The poem ends like this:

I sit beneath the avalanche and wait  
My master  
plan

is happiness (Dickman 2015, 13)

Love and happiness float among images of detritus in the poem, a technique that continues in “Red Migraine,” in which nausea and eye pain are entwined with other natural images. Red is a bird with a red breast and red feathers that evoke violence and pain: “sooner or later the blood in the breast will break the window into hundreds of / pieces you can swallow whole” (Dickman

<sup>5</sup> In Hernández’s book the color is also associated with migraine pain: “[...] Es blanca toda. / Blanca la voz de los niños que juegan / en el piso de arriba sobre alfombras tan rojas / como el vino tinto que te prohibieron. / Blanco es, también el dolor que parte tu cabeza” [All is white. / White the voice of the children who play / on the floor above on rugs so red. / Like the red wine you are not allowed / White is also the pain that splits your head] (Hernández 1998, 19).



2015, 14). The bird moves from outside to inside the speaker's head and "shakes its tail feathers to scour the floor behind your forehead and scours the / floor red" (Dickman 2015, 16). By the end of the poem the speaker is:

Scrubbed down to zero  
by the rubies  
in the halo

I whispered your name into the red air  
and you answered (Dickman 2015, 16)

Like the previous poem, in the final twist the speaker reaches out for connection, relief. "Red Migraine" is followed by the poems "Butterflies" and "Deer Crossing," and while these may seem like a shift in focus, the latter includes echoes of migraine suffering: "A bestiary / hangs from the roof / of my mouth // eating grass in a pharmaceutical field" (Dickman 2015, 18). As in the other poems human experience is extended into the natural world (is it the deer or the speaker eating pharmaceutical grass?). Sensory experiences extend beyond the observer into the observed, just as the world infiltrates him/her.

In "Yellow Migraine," the opening stimulus is daffodils, then the observer turns to butter, black lemons, Pine-Sol and:

Other yellow flowers I don't see you yet

Noon  
tears down the street  
a terrible kid  
on a brand new

Now I remember the faces of tulips

Speechless

Yellow peaches  
sweat inside brown  
paper bags

Press your forehead against the pit in the perfect peach and everything will stop  
moving how about that? (Dickman 2015, 22)

Again the world penetrates the sufferer's pain, becomes a part of it. Mundane objects transform into "yellow fingers" that "work the yellow spine" (Dickman 2015, 23). These migraine poems feature a radical synesthesia, a multisensory perception of the world in which one sensory pathway is experienced in terms of another. Evidence about migraine auras note visual and aural hallucinations and heightened sensitivity, sensory distortion, which leads me to suggest that

synesthesia, maybe *the* trope of migraine expression. It certainly is for Dickman who uses it to express the overwhelming interpenetration of the senses in migraine experience. Significantly, it is a poetic technique that has etymological roots in the Greek, “feeling together, but it is also a neurological or a biological condition in which people feel pain in color, experience colored hearing or see colors internally, among other involuntarily sensory combinations.<sup>6</sup> While in scientific studies it may reveal intriguing data about how the brain works, in this migraine poetry it actively recreates the experience of severe headache and integrates these events into the surrounding world.

The “Green Migraine” and “Black Migraine” poems that appear later in the collection reiterate these techniques in different color contexts. The poem that follows “Black Migraine,” while not the last poem in the collection, brings the headache series to a kind of conclusion. “A Cloudless Sky” features the color blue, in a kind of lift off from prior pain: “A cloudless sky and I’m back / an ice-cold sky blue rag / for my eyes” (Dickman 2015, 42). The poem includes images that resonate with those in the migraine poems: “yellow grass,” (Dickman 2015, 43) “a green pill,” and “the shape of a bird” (Dickman 2015, 44), but the overwhelming sense is relief:

I can hear sunlight  
I can hear grass  
I can hear my hair

Let the ice from the ice tray shine on me

I used to live  
in a house now I live  
in a cloudless sky

One cloud is gone

One cloud is not moving a muscle

I don’t move a muscle

One cloud is a good little boy (Dickman 2015, 45)

The recovery is fragile, ephemeral, like the puff of cloud that appears still, like the infantilized sufferer (If I don’t move, nothing bad will happen). Is there transcendence? Healing? No, but like Hernández, Dickman does not allow pain to silence speech. He struggles to interpret pain, to find ways to express the inexpressible. Marni Jackson suggests that we shift the metaphors for pain from struggle and medicine as a tool in a “war,” to show that “pain is more like a democracy—

<sup>6</sup> Also spelled synaesthesia, the term comes from the Greek *syn* meaning “together” + *aisthesis* or “feeling” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

time-consuming, exasperating, multi-faceted” (Jackson 2001, 355). Jackson suggests we might frame pain in more environmental terms: it is not a foreign invasion, she notes, but an environmental problem (Jackson 2002, 356). Dickman’s book clearly supports her assertion as it situates migraine pain in the natural world, making the body and its chronic suffering part of the natural surroundings.

While many have read Emily Dickinson’s famous line, “After great pain a formal feeling comes...” in terms of emotional experience, its turn to formality resonates with these migraine poems. Morris reminds us that pain changes our priorities creating a need to construct a meaning because meaningless pain may become part of a meaningless world (Morris 1991, 47). Cuban-American physician-poet Rafael Campo affirms that strict reliance on hard science oversimplifies the illness experience. Making his own case for poetry, he urges us to give more credit to the interdependence of mind and body and to subjective experience (Campo 2003, 8). Migraines heighten sensory perception and this is part of what paralyzes their sufferers in dark rooms. Yet when the headache lifts, Jackson describes the effect as “a unique form of bliss. The world seems unusually present, and the senses feel refreshed” (Jackson 2002, 26).

The practice of narrative medicine joins sciences with the humanities to propose that listening is essential to healthcare and that we must learn to understand the complexity of people’s stories of illness. On the Columbia University Website Rita Charon explains that:

The effective practice of healthcare requires the ability to recognize, absorb, interpret, and act on the stories and plights of others. Medicine practiced with narrative competence is a model for humane and effective medical practice. It addresses the need of patients and caregivers to voice their experience, to be heard and to be valued, and it acknowledges the power of narrative to change the way care is given and received (Charon 2018).

Unless “narrative” is construed very broadly, reading for story can foreground coherence and often suggests prose. In her article “Before Narrative: Episodic Reading and Representations of Chronic Pain,” Sara Wasson reads against this model to suggest that other genres (like poetry) may “pause the momentum of plot.” She observes a value in “rupture and breach” (Wasson 2018, 6), affirming what we’ve seen in these poets: that experiences can be conveyed in different ways and *how* they are told changes how we understand them. This may be second nature to people who work in literature and other fields that deal with representation, but in connecting health and the humanities, it comes to the forefront again. In the conclusion to his book on the future of pain Morris puts it this way: “The critical (in the literary sense) and the clinical (In the medical sense) may be destined to enter into a new relationship of mutual learning” (Morris 1991, 267). As we have seen here, lyric poetry through its forms and figures is particularly suited to express the sensory distortion of migraine, to help us to experience the sufferers’ sensitivity to sound, to

convey the body–mind collaboration or rebellion of chronic headaches, for it is “flexible enough to be transformed by the experience it represents” (Campo 2003, 188).

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