

### **My Time on the Sofa**

That February the white sofa  
was my gurney,  
my plinth, my bier. Laid low

by a headache no doctor could  
define or ease, sick to death  
of the bed upstairs, I stayed

in my favorite reading place  
even though I could not read.  
The sun's sharp fingers

shrieked through the high, unshuttered  
window, all those days  
it was so cold, ten below

and no new snow, not a cloud in the sky.  
Alone in the afternoons,  
I forced myself upright

to cast a row of magazines against the glass,  
then lay back down, arm thrown across  
my eyes. From the radio came

news of the world in British accents,  
my cat offering his occasional  
neutral comment.

At night my daughter  
recited a library book about headaches,  
and my husband fed me

a few more pages of the novel  
I'd abandoned.  
When, finally, I had to get up,

my head was hot with pain,  
leaving a scorch mark  
on the white pillow.

## Describe Your Headache

When the doctor . . . asked me if my pain felt like pins and needles, I said: “No, it’s more like rubbing against a hot driveway impregnated with broken glass –” and [he] . . . said, “Oh, right, you’re the poet.” – Lucia Perillo, *I’ve Heard the Vultures Singing*

*Describe your headache*, the neurologist says.

It’s like a chainsaw’s gone off inside my head.

It’s like someone’s taking a pliers and twisting the muscles behind my eyes.

It’s like a bowl of Screaming Yellow Zonkers is popping hard behind my forehead.

It’s like a choir of off-key angels is shrieking in my brainpan.

It’s like my brain’s manic hamster is spinning its wheel with sharpened toenails.

It’s like somebody left all the lights on, and they’re never coming home.

It’s like God has trained a magnifying glass on the insects in my skull, frying them blind.

It’s like I’m sitting on stage, the ventriloquist’s dummy, and someone else is closing my eyes for me, over and over and over.

It’s like somebody left the lights on –

*You already said that.*

But it’s like somebody left the lights on, and the lights are the sun, and it’s

February, the light is careening off the crust of the dazzling snow and the blinds won’t shut.

It’s like that chainsaw’s completely silent, but cutting down my forest.

It’s like a fistful of wasps blasting their venom into my frontal cortex.

It’s like target practice by overactive children armed with cannons.

It’s like the Devil is running an internal ice pick from my hairline to my left eyebrow.

It’s like I’m in the circus and the knife thrower is aiming straight at my eyes and not missing, never missing. His aim is perfect, his knives white hot.

It’s like the pain is a mad dog in a dream I can’t escape no matter how far I run.

It’s like all the medicine you hurl at it becomes the punch line of a bad joke.

It’s like –

*I’m giving you new medicine.*

It’s like nothing will work. It’s like –

*I said –*

It’s like the grinding of gears, a machine with no off switch.

It’s like acid rain’s been substituted for tears.

It’s like the axons and dendrites are shooting stars, electrified.

It’s like the songbirds all died and I can only hear crows.

*I’m giving you –*

It’s like I’ve sinned and this is my curse.

*Come back in six weeks. Tell me how it works.*

### Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Headache

I

Under my pallid forehead,  
The only moving thing  
Was the arc of the headache.

II

I was of two minds,  
Like a head  
In which there are two kinds of pain.

III

The headache drilled in the winter chill.  
It was an insistent part of the diagnosis.

IV

A woman and a headache  
Are one.  
A woman and her husband and a headache  
Are one.

V

I do not know which to dread more,  
The onset of the headache  
Or the thudding of the aftermath,  
The headache taking hold  
Or just before.

VI

Sunlight filled the high window  
With staggering bolts.  
The finger of the headache  
Breached it, in and out.  
The pain  
Lit in the high beams  
an inescapable wick.

VII

O brilliant Joan Didion,  
How have you survived your pain?  
Do you know how your 1968 essay  
Comforts the head  
Of this poet who studies you?

VIII

I know formal poems  
And lilting iambic pentameters  
But I know, too,  
That these headaches inform  
Everything I compose.

IX

When the headache eased for the night,  
It left a mark  
On a long calendar of days.

X

At the prick of a headache  
Screaming with a swift note,  
Even Superman  
Would cry out in agony.

XI

She traveled to Nebraska  
In a heated car.  
Once, a terror assailed her,  
When she mistook  
The horn of a semi  
For a headache.

XII

The doctor is busy.  
The headache must be commencing.

XIII

It was February all spring and summer.  
It was hurting  
And it was going to hurt.  
The headache roosted  
Beneath her skull bone.

(apologies to Wallace Stevens)

## God on the Head Pain Unit

Today God is a girl named Sarah with a headache. Her eyes are killing her. She leans in the doorway of the green room, where we wait to see the doctors every morning, the opposite of rounds but still that's what they call it. Something about the fluid behind her eyes, how it builds up and hurts like the devil, no pun intended. God isn't kidding around.

Then Mary comes in (I know, but like I told you, God isn't kidding around here) and Rachel pats the chair beside her so Mary folds her long limbs there, and Rachel takes her hand off her own forehead to gather Mary's long bare feet and put them in her lap. Mary's got both hands on her head; it's the universal signal for I'm God and I've Got a Freaking Headache. The room seems to be teeming with biblical names but I'm Pam, and there's no Pam in the Bible, and here comes Cody; there's no 17-year-old kid with a limp 23-inch Mohawk shining down his left shoulder in the Bible either, although you know, there ought to be; it's a righteous sight to behold, it's a goddam burning bush if you ask me. And you should ask me, because today I'm God, and I've got a headache, and in fact I've been God for almost four years; that's how long I've had this holy headache, this sanctified transformed migraine, and I have created my own universe of hideousness out of the black-hole darkness and out of the killing light because I made these heads and said they were Good and I made this pain and said it was Good and now Sarah goes away to talk with the doctors who know they are really Good, and in comes Rebecca, whose pain knows no ending and no beginning, who walks not bent over but perfectly upright, in her lavender silk pajamas; she could carry a jar of water on her head for miles down these hospital aisles without spilling a drop, she is that still when she is moving, and it would hurt, but she is God so she could do it, all of us would do anything if those doctors said it would – excuse me – if those doctors said it might help.

And so we are God, our eyes on the sparrow but only watching, not curing, moving our hands over the face of the waters and saying I have made this, it is good, and now I'd like to have a day off.