

THE LYRICA CANTOS I-III

CANTO I

Is the Lyrica Lady real? My fibromyalgia
pain wasn't something you could see.

And our bodies also
Heavy with weeping.

The Lyrica Lady, a well-kept white woman in her fifties or maybe early sixties sits in a dark room and speaks directly to me—she is opening up, being honest. I am provided no reason to mistrust her. Against the back wall a single yellow calendula leans in its vase on the sill of a closed window, trimmed in crimson curtain.

Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
And the old voice lifts itself
weaving an endless sentence.

But I felt it all over. Is the Lyrica Lady real?

The medical experts will have their say. Welcome to the University of California, San Diego Pain Management Program and today's seminar on fibromyalgia. Settle in. Five white men in black suits sit, evenly spaced, around a wedge-shaped conference table. Two have beards. Maybe a few of these specialists are seated here, cringing before the cameras, for political reasons—payback for a corporate partnership, homage to the next influx of grant funding. Sometimes the seated fellow is a branding gesture, the med

school maybe showing off a noted and decorated expert, raising profile, reaching out to a competing university, bumping themselves up a notch or two in the rankings. I'd better listen. One of the physicians is about to speak.

And, out of nothing, a breathing,
 hot breath on my ankles,
Beasts like shadows in glass,
 a furred tail upon nothingness.

My fibromyalgia muscle pain is real.

Sonny gazed into the screens presumably in search of an answer, a reason to feel hopeful about his future. But in truth he always settled for whatever provided the most immediate distraction, and this veered from infomercials for exercise machinery to talking heads on the networks to commercials for pharmaceuticals. Sonny enjoyed most of the magical cures portrayed in the thirty-second narratives for medicines: a woman younger than his own mother cannot sit through her grandson's recital without stepping out for a bathroom break. A man at a ball game with his friends must run, literally run, to the men's room with the bases loaded. With the meds these enfeebled bladders are suddenly supersized, vast and empty. Side effects be damned. Sonny sipped his coffee and wondered if he would eventually have a weak bladder. What would happen to him, would he lose control, just a little, when he sneezed at work? Would he find himself wetting his pants a spot during an ordinary fart? As was often the case, Sonny had found distraction from his empty grasping, but the distraction was a worrisome one. Even if the worries were long-term, they were no less real to him.

NOTES FOR CANTO I

stanza 1: “My fibromyalgia . . . see.” direct quote from Pfizer. “Product Centers: LYRICA Fibromyalgia TV Commercial.” Advertisement. *Pfizer for Professionals*. Web. 10 Feb. 2009. https://www.pfizerpro.com/patient_education/lyrica_tv_ad.jsp.

stanza 1: “And our bodies . . . weeping.” Pound, Ezra. *Canto I. The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions, 1993.

stanza 2: based on Pfizer (Web).

stanza 3: “Grave incessu . . . things..” Pound, *Canto VII*. Translation: *Grave incessu* [Latin “solemn movement”]. Translation references 1. Terrell, Carroll F. *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Vol. I & II. Berkeley: California, 1980; 2. Edwards, John Hamilton, and William W. Vasse. *Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Berkeley: California, 1957.

stanza 3: “But I felt it all over.” direct quote from Pfizer (Web).

stanza 4: based on UCSD/CMA Pain Management Program. “Fibromyalgia.” YouTube. 13 July 2004. Web. 25 Feb. 2009.

stanza 5: Pound, *Canto II*.

stanza 6: direct quote from Pfizer. *Lyrica*. Advertisement. CBS, WSHM, Springfield. 10 Feb. 2009. Television.

***Sonny’s episodes have no cited origins.

CANTO II

The hibernants go into their caves.

YouTube Katatawnic is thirty-seven but she probably feels much older. She likes to call herself a “walking pharmacy” because she has so many meds, but for her it all revolves around the fibro. Sure, Katatawnic’s got a full drag of diseases weighing her down, but with the fibro fog when she can’t think straight and the flare-ups that land her in bed for days—her life revolves around fibromyalgia. And with Kat’s many related diseases and conditions her medication roster is overflowing. Dose management alone requires scheduling, pill sorting, pill counting, refills, and being sure to have an arsenal of “as needed” meds on hand for flare ups, migraines, GERD. I imagine that when Kat is not counting her pills, or swallowing them, she is in the waiting rooms and phone trees of insurance companies, pharmacies, doctors’ assistants, and nurse practitioners.

Some days I had to push myself to leave the house and do everyday things.

My eyes pan away from the dark corner and the modest flower, past the wood shutter nearly closed. There’s a mahogany buffet holding porcelain glazed in crème: round plates, minimalist saucers, clean lines. They form a row of undersized halos behind Lyrica Lady’s platinum white hairdo. This is a swanky home, I think. The lines of Lyrica Lady’s face suggest disposable income and facelift tightness in her skin. I look at her impeccable (and perky) Beatles haircut, her subtle makeup, her plush surroundings and I know she’s done alright for herself. Confident. She wears a brazen but not reckless V-neck blouse. In the V hangs a tastefully affordable necklace, dark wood beads—comfortable and unapologetic.

And there is, undoubtedly, blood on their silver.

Diana C. Wolf says, “I get terrible headaches and sometimes they just, ah, get in a pattern where they get worse. Um, like this morning. Like I just, um, woke up and, ah, sometimes when I sort of sleep deprive myself it actually, um, helps because the less I lay in bed, the less stiff my muscles are. Um, but then from time to time this morning I’ve just been getting sort of like the stabbing pain. Like right here, like eent! Like that. You know just like some, like somebody sorta like going like this like eent! eent! eent! Jabbin’ me in the back of the head. Or, actually to be more accurate, more like a, sorta’ like a pair of scissors going eent! eent! eent! like in the back of the head like that. Yeah, that’s basically what it feels like. Or sometimes it’s more like a clenching. Like Eeeeeeeent! Like this, where the pressure is so much you basically want to drill a hole in your head to let the pressure out.”

Three month duration. That’s the chronic in chronic widespread pain. It has to last three months.

Sonny believed his dotage on the medicine commercials was mostly about irony—easy laughs over the warnings and disclaimers, the deadly side effects and cautions, this negative undertow while the images and narration were always so joyful, so gratifying, so confident. He had not anticipated the heightened sense of his own body’s aches and pains, irregular functions, suspicious twinges in his abdomen. Nonetheless, Sonny felt a comfortable distance from the truly diseased people portrayed in the ads. His aversion to doctors and medicines provided a sense of removal from the sort who become reliant on the drugs. And yet, he found himself vulnerable in a whole new way. He never anticipated becoming

emotionally involved with the people in the screens, but that's what happened. A Lyrica TV commercial he had come to know suddenly stopped running and was replaced with a new one. He searched for the first ad online and stumbled upon a whole universe of real-life YouTube counterparts to the fairy tale Lyrica Lady. Regular people testifying about their disease and treatment without the romanticized redemption portrayed in the ads. Where the Lyrica Lady had amused and dazzled Sonny with her delighted imaginary life and ludicrous disclaimers, the YouTube testifiers drew him in deeper with their authenticity; some harrowing earnestness in their desperate need to share the suffering. In the low-fi videos about fibromyalgia pain and medical tribulations, the YouTube testifiers shared with Sonny the burning sensation on their skin, the demobilizing ache of their joints and the crippling headaches. Sonny played priest taking confessions in the church of pain. And he watched and re-watched, and watched again until he knew every tic in the testifiers' faces, every stutter and shake of the camera.

NOTES FOR CANTO II

stanza 1: Pound, *Canto LII*.

stanza 2: based on Katatawnic. “(2/3) More Drugs; Intro to How Lyrica Has Changed My Life.” *Katatawnic’s Kraziness*. YouTube. 23 July 2008. Web. 19 Feb 2009. “GERD” is the acronym for “gastroesophageal reflux disease.”

stanza 3: direct quote from Pfizer (Television).

stanza 4: based on Pfizer (Web).

stanza 5: Pound, *Canto LXXXVIII*.

stanza 6: direct quote from Wolf, Diana C. “Fibromyalgia Coffee Break-Early Mornings, Cymbalta Withdrawal, Ugggh!” *Videos from Diana, Jovani and Alex*. YouTube. 8 June 2007. Web. 24 Feb. 2009.

stanza 7: direct quote from Daniel Clauw, MD (UCSD).

CANTO III

When you take it give me a slice
A medicine that gives immortality.

The physicians are still talking—business-like, appropriately dour. Do they have a common purpose? Bill McCarberg, MD, sits at the apex. He’s the founder of Kaiser Permanente Chronic Pain Management Program and a Volunteer Professor at the University of California, San Diego. Volunteer Professor? I wonder if that title is an intended slight towards him. Does Bill wonder if his MD colleagues say behind his back, “Bill sure knows how to put together a seminar video but he’s not much of a doctor,” or, “Bill’s got a great yacht and his wife has a great ass, but he doesn’t understand the research process for beans.” I don’t know. Bill says, “The case today is going to be presented by Dr. Shullman. Marty, tell us about the case.”

But I’m not the person to just lie down and quit. Not with all these people counting on me.

YouTube Katatawnic takes satisfaction in her reclining sofa with a hideaway fold down table and a built in vibrating back massager. Her too short unflattering haircut, her tank top, her clutter—Kat’s inattention to these things makes her seem more real to me. She sits surrounded by brown glass bottles of vitamins and plastic prescription bottles, explains that the boxes on the floor are there to collect empties and larger bottles in. With considerable pride, perhaps in the complexity and number of the various meds she has to consider each day, Kat reviews the properties and necessity of each prescription, of every vitamin and supplement in her arsenal against pain and panic, firewall pills for reflux, a stopper for restless leg.

I also have suffered.

It nags at me. Looking at Kat's living conditions, seeing her settled into a barricaded sofa, blinds drawn, webcam on. These things say perhaps too much about what has become of her life, surrounded on three sides by pills, vitamins, pills, water, and more pills. Daylight bleeds through at the edges of the blinds while Kat describes her reclining couch with its vibrating seat and flip down shelf. I can see from the mountains of stuff piled on the hideaway shelf that it's been out of hiding for some time. This says solitude. Between flare-ups and mood swings, with her heavily medicated and erratic sleep, Kat doesn't get many visitors. Her sofa has become a single reclining chair converted into a sort of closed off pill station for one. To her side a table for more prescription bottles. In front of her, separating me from Kat in the manner of a hospital tray suspended above her recumbent thighs, she works magic with her compartmentalized translucent plastic pill box.

His right leg suddenly thick with pins and needles, Sonny closed his laptop, pulled himself to standing, and hobbled through his kitchen towards the bathroom. Looking around he felt mildly disgusted at the filth and discord. His daughters' shoes, four pairs flung every which way by the back door, two flies patrolling a bowl of coffee grounds, banana peel, and cucumber skin on the counter—rot that should have been composted hours ago. His eyes were tired and his back ached, but mostly Sonny felt burdened with shame for the way Katatawnic made him feel. Though he had grown to appreciate the moments when she would flirt with the camera, it was not the flirtations that Sonny liked in Kat's videos. Instead he watched for the moments when she showed her sorriest state, her satisfaction in having given over entirely to the process of

medicating herself. Blind to the folly of her own enslavement, oblivious to how absurd she looked showing off her pill sorting and management system. As if people would be taking notes, modeling their medication program after hers! But in Kat there was also an authenticity that Sonny felt on a much deeper level than his snide amusement, his guilty pleasure. His sedentary fixation. Barricaded by medicine bottles and vitamins, speaking about her pain and anxiety, Kat seemed more naked and real to him than seemed possible on his small screen, in his computer's tinny speakers. More real to him than his own dull rhythms and breaths. He washed and dried his hands, and then unwrapped a leftover chicken leg from the refrigerator. With greasy fingers Sonny reached for the salt shaker. And the last of the pins and needles in his leg faded when he returned to the fridge for mayonnaise.

NOTES FOR CANTO III

stanza 1: “When you . . . slice.” Pound, *Canto X*. “A medicine . . . immortality.” Pound, *Canto LVI*.

stanza 2: based on UCSD cited above, and including a direct quote from Bill McCarberg, MD.

stanza 3: direct quote from Pfizer (Television).

stanza 4: based on Katatawnic. “(2/3) More Drugs.”

stanza 5: Pound, *Canto X*.

stanza 6: based on Katatawnic. “(2/3) More Drugs.”