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Pain Woman Takes Your Keys, and Other Essays from a Nervous System

Sonya Huber

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Previous praise for Sonya Huber's
Cover Me: A Health Insurance Memoir

"*Cover Me* is the best kind of memoir; it is engaging, enraging, tragic, and funny. Fortunately, laughter as medicine is one thing the insurance companies have not yet managed to deny."

—T. Tamara Weinstein, *Elevate Difference*

"Wise, irreverent, honest, and utterly compelling. . . . Sonya Huber finds unexpected truth and gentle comedy in every bizarre corner of this insane labyrinth we call our health-care system."

—Dinty W. Moore, author of *Between Panic and Desire*

"What I found so compelling about Huber's story is her ability to make the personal resonate so much more loudly than the political ideas or theories, while capably insuring that her own story underscores her political stance on health care. I found myself wanting to send copies to every member of the House and Senate."

—Sarah Werthan, *Brevity Book Reviews*

"The sheer, jet-propelled energy of this memoir elevates it into a tour de force. I found it by turns hilarious and heartbreaking."

—Sue William Silverman, author of
Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir

"Huber's sure-footed prose considers how deeply connected an individual's health is to being both rooted and free, confident or fearful of securing even the most routine treatment. Once covered, she is safe under that blanket of care, and wise enough to understand that covers are easily blown, or blown away."

—Lisa Romeo, *ForeWord Reviews*

"Huber's irreverent humor makes her provocative 'health insurance memoir' worth a read."

—Karen Springen, *Booklist*

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“This book illustrates, in a way that mere political rhetoric cannot, how the lack of accessible, affordable medical care negatively affects everyone on a personal, emotional, and economic scale.”

—Joan Hanna, *Author Exposure*

“Timely, passionate, informative, and moving, Sonya Huber’s *Cover Me* is a scathing memoir of an uninsured young mother’s encounter with health care in America.”

—Floyd Skloot, author of *In the Shadow of Memory*

“In this humorous and affecting memoir, Huber details her experiences navigating the American health care system and brings a necessary dose of reality to the political debates and propaganda surrounding health care reform.”

—Women and Children First Bookstore

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AND OTHER ESSAYS FROM

A NERVOUS SYSTEM

AMERICAN LIVES
Series editor: Tobias Wolff

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Sonya Huber

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Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb
to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it.

—Audre Lorde, *Conversations with Audre Lorde*

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PREFACE

This is a collection of unconventional essays on chronic pain; my goal with these essays was not to fix or provide advice (most of us have had too much of that) but to explore the landscape. Pain is a territory known by those who are in that land. I am in a small corner of it, and the more I see of its vastness, the more I realize how little I know. I hope that in trying to put my own experience into words, I am not confounding or isolating anyone else in pain. I hope with these essays to add to the growing literature about what pain is and how it is experienced, imagined, and expressed so that its universal burden can be shared. Above all, I hope to connect with other people who have visited the land of pain or who are there now, to help us collectively understand this experience that is an inextricable part of being human, and to build treatment models for addressing pain that are humane and comprehensive as our scientific and emotional understanding of pain grows. And I hope this book is not depressing; I had so much fun writing it.

Nalini Jones, Elizabeth Hilts, Rachel Basch, and Sandy Rodriguez Barron have delved deeply into this topic with me, offering insights and encouragement at every step; my dear friend Elizabeth, in particular, walks and texts the journey with me, every painful step, and I love her more than words can say. Martha Bayne and Zoe Zolbrod at the *Rumpus* were generous enough to consider a second version

Preface

of “The Lava Lamp of Pain” after the first one didn’t work, and that publication and the response from it gave me the impetus to follow all the metaphors. Thanks to Dinty W. Moore at *Brevity*, Joe Mackall at *River Teeth*, Jennifer Niesslein at *Full Grown People*, Hattie Fletcher at *Creative Nonfiction*, and Michael Steinberg for their continued encouragement and support, and all the other editors who allowed me to connect with readers, which has been more important with this collection than anything else I’ve written. Thank you in particular to Alicia Christensen, Rosemary Vestal, Joeth Zucco, and everyone else at University of Nebraska Press, as well as fantastic copy editor Patty Beutler. Thank you to Dennis Keenan for sharing Elaine Scarry’s work with me. I wanted to offer specific and huge thanks to readers who have been in pain who took the time to comment on an essay or a blog post or send me an email; your words are the reason I kept going with what seemed at first like an impossible project. You each helped me understand that I was expressing something true. Thanks to Stan, Heidi, Glenn, Nicole, Meg, and Rosarita Huber, and to Jon and Terry Price for their support, as well as to my colleagues at Fairfield University, and my friends near and far, including Jocelyn, Anna, Gwen, Emily, Kris, and Bryan. A special thanks to everyone who gave me stickers for my cane. Thank you to the patient advocates, including Kelly of RA Warrior and the moderators of online forums, and to researchers and doctors who advocate for comprehensive pain care. Thank you to Dr. Rose, Dr. Strohmayer, Dr. Rzucidlo, Dr. Lyddy, and Dr. Snowden for their excellent, responsive, and respectful medical care; good doctors who see their patients as people and listen are true artists. Thank you to my Buddhist teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, Elizabeth Mattis Nyamgal, and the Mangala Shri Bhuti sangha. Thank you to fellow disability writers everywhere, in particular Sarah Einstein and Karrie Higgins for their inspiration, and Andrea Scarpino for her beautiful poetry. My biggest thanks to Cliff Price and Ivan for their understanding and for helping me carry the pain and laughing with me through it.

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“What Pain Wants” appeared in *Rogue Agent Journal*

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“Amoeba Girl” appeared in *Eleven Eleven*

“The Status of Pain” appeared in *Full Grown People*

“Pain Woman Takes Your Keys” appeared on Michael Steinberg’s blog

“Life Is Good^{1,2,3}” appeared in *DIAGRAM*

“The Joy of Not Cooking” appeared in *Role Reboot*

“Kidney Stone in My Shoe” appeared in *VIDA*

“If Woman Is Five” appeared in *River Teeth*

“A Day in the Grammar of Disease” appeared in *Brevity*

“In the Grip of the Sky” appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*

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WHAT PAIN WANTS

Pain wants you to put in earplugs because sounds are grating.

Pain has something urgent to tell you but forgets over and over again what it was.

Pain tells you to put your laptop in the refrigerator.

Pain runs into walls at forty-five-degree angles and ricochets back into the center of the room.

Pain resents being personified or anthropomorphized.

Pain is a four-dimensional person with fractal intelligence.

Pain wants to be taken to an arts and crafts store.

Pain likes to start big projects and not finish them.

Pain wants to clean one countertop.

Pain asks you to break itself up into neat, square segments like a chocolate bar.

Pain makes a hissing, popping hum like high-tension power lines.

Pain has ambition but is utterly unfocused.

Pain will get its revenge if you ignore it but sometimes forgets what it was angry about.

Pain wants to watch a different channel than you do on TV.

Pain looks at you with the inscrutable eyes and thin beak of an egret.

Pain stubs out the cigarette of your to-do list.

Pain will first try to do some things on that list but will end up with socks on its antlers.

Pain demands that you make eye contact with it and then sit utterly still.

Pain folds the minutes into fascinating origami constructions with its long fingers.

Pain leaves the meter running.

Pain asks you to think about the breath flowing in and out of your lungs.

Pain will ask you to do this 307 times today.

Pain does not mean any harm to you.

Pain is frustrated that it is trapped in a body that is ill-fitting for its unfolded shape.

Pain has been born in the wrong universe.

Pain is wild with grief at the discomfort it causes.

Pain wants to collect bottle caps to show you the serrated edges, which mean something it cannot explain.

Pain keeps pointing to serrated edges and scalloped patterns but cannot explain how these will unlock it.

Pain emphasizes that it is not a god, but then makes the symbol for “neighbor” over and over, and you do not understand what it means.

What Pain Wants

Pain puts its beaked head in its long-fingered wing hands in frustration and loneliness.

Pain winks at you with its dot-black eyes and tries to make the sign for “I love you.”

Pain folds up its wings and legs and spindles quietly and blinks up at you when you say, “I know.”

Pain understands that you cannot say “I love you” back but that there is something bigger behind “I love you” that you do not have the words for.

Pain also understands that the background to “I love you” is something like a highway.

Pain licks at its hot spots like an anxious dog.

Pain, when held in place, spirals down into drill bits, so it has to keep moving to prevent these punctures.

Pain asks you to breathe deeply so it can zing about and not get caught on the edges and corners of calendars, books, and electronic rectangles.

Pain’s favorite music is the steel drum, and its favorite flavor is fig.

Pain prefers any texture in which tiny seeds are embedded.

Pain shakes its head—no, it says, that is *you* who likes that texture—and will have nothing to do with spheres.

Pain wants only for you to see where it starts and you stop, but you are a transparent bubble.

Pain and its kind have waited patiently for humans to evolve into the fourth dimension, but they are worried the project is failing.

Pain feels as though Earth’s gravity is as strong as Jupiter’s.

Pain has something metallic in its bones and is captured
by the magnetic core of our hot planet.

Pain envies flesh and its soft strength and ease of movement.

Pain inhabits curved, soft bodies in hopes of fluid movement
and then cries when it breaks them.

Pain would like french fries and Netflix.