

3/6/15

Dear Joan,

Today I was given a copy of an essay you wrote, I believe in 1968, *In Bed*, published in The White Album in 1979. I am writing to you on a computer screen that is tinted by an app which gives it a low yellow light, while I am donning an ice-pack overtop my head, and eating my new standby favorite night-time treat, Coconut Bliss—the only sweet thing I can eat, a non-dairy, naturally sweetened, frozen dessert.

In the last year, I've have come fully into my life as a Migrainer. I am 31. I am a woman, I am an artist. And, I am, in many ways, the incarnate of my maternal grandmother, Marcie, a migraine sufferer as well.

Needless to say, barely to the end of your first sentence, I was moved to tears. I read through the essay because, well, you are *Joan Didion* and I am a great and long-time reader and admirer, but I didn't *need* to read the words to feel them or even to anticipate them. They were plain; thank you. When the pain is as precise and consuming as it is, it leaves no space for anything but exactitude. I have realized a level of clarity and trust within my creative practice that I believe is a gift from the pain.

The pain has re-taught me the meaning of language, as if for the first time, again. Words like *joy*, *freedom*, *surrender*, and *gratitude*. I think it has taught me all my words, again. The pain taught me about disappointing others and myself, about how easy it is to do so and how illusory it is. It taught me about expectation and flexibility. About love. It reminded me to run in a circle around the table with my dog as often as I possibly could, even to just get back into bed again and hand the leash to whomever was over that day to walk him, or if I hadn't asked for help—as I so often hadn't—to just let him back into bed with me, where we'd stay, in love and in pain.

You write, "And I have learned now to live with it, learned when to expect it, how to outwit it, even how to regard it, when it does come, as more friend than lodger. We have reached a certain understanding, my migraine and I." I want to say, YES. Only, *can you outwit it?!* For me, I pray to learn to love it, less to ouwit it and more to learn from it, to let it be my teacher. I find, almost as soon as I am realizing the trigger is in my midst—be it an artificial scent or bright light or barometric pressure, sulfites from wine cooked in a stew, they're everywhere!—it's too late and I have to ride the wave. And, as you so powerfully noted, once I am on the course of the migraine, the drugs are only so helpful. After the drugs cease to be useful I am left with controlling my circulation through hot water on my hands and feet, and ice on my head, and meditation for my pain. With a course of daily preventative drugs (anti-convulsant), the migraines are now reduced, thankfully, from 7 days debilitated to only a couple hours down—depending the trigger, air-travel seems to be the worst, debilitating me for up to 12 hours still—though they last in my system over the course of 2-3 days from trigger to end.

So, without taking too much of your time, I want more than anything to applaud you for your brave and direct piece of writing. It has stood the test of time—as have so many of your pieces.

I wonder if you know that in 1964, Oliver Sacks published his book Migraine, which is, as far as I can tell, still the most comprehensive book on Classical Migraine and Migraine Aura out there. He has been another literary hero of mine for many years and, by a stroke of luck, I was able to meet him this past November, during a month in which I had 18 days debilitated. Incidentally, I was on steroids when I met him. He was very gracious and very shy. It was 4 months before he found out

about his recent tragic diagnosis, and we spoke much about our daily swims—his were continual, mine were (and still are) on migraine-hiatus.

Do headaches still plague you? Do they affect your writing? Your productivity? How?

Each part of my life has finally begun to bend around this new boulder in my stream. And finally, I think the edges of the stone are beginning to soften.

Thank you for your time and again for your written word.

Sincerely and Warmly,

Cara Levine