



Travis Chi Wing Lau // Michael J. Leach. *Chronicity*. Melbourne: Melbourne Poets Union, 2020.

How does the temporality of chronic pain become registered in poetic form? This has long been a question that I have been pursuing in my own crip poetic project as a disabled poet living with scoliosis-related disabilities. If, per Elaine Scarry, pain really does “actively destroy” language, what might that mean for the time of illness and disability that might also be equally “unsharable”?[1] While I have long resisted Scarry’s assumption that pain is fundamentally “unsharable” because of an unreconcilable chasm of meaning between the body in pain and its witness, I take seriously the linguistic challenge of poetry to do this communicative work of realizing that which is often felt yet seldom described with precision. Does pain have time, and what does this mean for disabled and chronically ill bodyminds that are so often framed as “out of time” or disrupting the normative time of healthy development and progress? Michael Leach’s collection meditates on precisely these questions by inhabiting pharmacological practice and theory itself, the very life of medicine.

Leach’s training in Pharmacoepidemiology and ongoing pedagogical work in health humanities shapes a set of poems that not only interrogate the limits of medicine’s attempt to manage and contain pain’s unruliness but also the impossibility of knowing pain’s contours, especially its temporal ones. In “The Pharmacokinetics of Paracetamol,” the reader follows the physical journey of a paracetamol (or acetaminophen) tablet as it is consumed. Via a second-person address, the speaker traces a body’s absorption of the pain reliever via “branches straight into / most tissues” and its “move[ment] between / two compartments: / blood & urine.” Yet, accompanying this spatial description of the tablet’s movement throughout a body is an explicitly *temporal* one: “The [paracetamol]- / time plot / will / reach its max / then / drop by half-lives...” Leach ventriloquizes the pharmacological language of a drug’s half life twice in the poem to emulate how paracetamol gets filtered over time by the liver and eventually “excreted via the urinary tract.” Pharmacokinetics, after all, is a branch of pharmacology focused on how chemical substances are administered and processed by organisms. Leach here brilliantly spatializes the otherwise invisible transit of a pain

reliever throughout the body via the shape of the poem itself, which follows a downward trajectory. He also captures its half-life through a series of lines in future and future-perfect tense, marked by a repeated use of “will” or “will have” that concludes in “Your pain will’ve / become / a distant / memory.” The literal dissolving of the tablet leads to the metaphorical dissolution of pain into temporally “distant memory.” Yet Leach’s use of the future and future-perfect here reads two ways: as the ideal, intended effect of consuming paracetamol or as wishful thinking for someone in chronic pain whose pain in fact cannot be made so easily into “distant memory.”

Almost every poem in *Chronicity* takes a different poetic form, ranging from the triangular “thought” “Moving in a / Jagged / Line” of “Blue Thought” to the ovular stanza that is produced by two poems, “An Abbreviated Case Study in Geriatric Orthopaedics” and “Longitudinal,” printed on adjoining pages, to a series of lines composed as rays extending from a central point in “The Pages of Pharmacy History.” Leach plays with poetic form as a way of disorienting the typical linearity of pain narratives but also as a means of exploring the multiple temporalities of care itself, be it in the clinic or in the longer histories of medicine. What is the relationship between the physician practicing now and “the old chemist” whose “old pre- / scription / book” is archaic and unreadable yet ultimately shapes the physician’s fields of practice and knowing? How do they both ethically face the “uncertainty’s hell” of pain and suffering alongside their patients longing for a wellness that can feel inaccessible or even foreclosed? Each poem in *Chronicity* speculates through a patient history, a case study, an intimate anecdote toward a different potential answer in verse that is neither certain nor final—a poetic stance in stark contrast to the positivism and epistemological certainty of medicine that is revealed to be the tender, relational work of clinician and patient negotiating together the challenges of living with bodyminds in pain.

Leach concludes the poem “Blue Thought” with an invocation to the first-person plural:

I  
Am  
Afraid  
That many  
People struggle  
With mental illness.  
We need others to  
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Our trains of blue

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BETTER DAYS.

I believe this is exactly what Leach's collection does best: it interrupts what we think we know about pain and its chronicities. This "interruption," as pain itself so often is, can displace us from rhythm and routine toward the imagining of "better days" even as we might be "afraid that I shall / Ache." Leach compassionately allows them to coexist: speculative futures and the very real, embodied fears that come with them.

[1] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.