

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

What an impressive essay! You are extremely successful in entering into this patient's worldview, and incorporating some of the detail and language she uses in her own writing. You also illuminated some pivotal issues about pain – its subjectivity, the concomitant loss of control that so often accompanies it, its relationship to depression, the burden on medication, and pain's effect on other family members. Your essay does a terrific job of building on what is known about this patient, then imagining more – her husband, the diagnosis, and her spiritual state. You use some beautiful language (“the anguish lingers far longer than my spirit can stand;” “appreciate the splendor of life's little treasures without the rude interference of my body”; “his spirit has dwindled away with mine”). These phrases show a remarkable sensitivity to the wearing down influence of chronic pain. The essay's last line also suggests this patient's resiliency: in spite of her suffering, a good day gives her a little hope.

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This is a very creative essay, --. I liked the way you created different dialogues between the patient and various family members that illustrated an illusion of normalcy undercut by chronic pain. The amount of detail you provided in the essay is impressive. These are the kinds of details you need to ferret out in your patients' lives (prom dresses, the food at social gatherings, family dynamics) that will make your patients real to you. Your use of the bear imagery was great. When you start to see real patients, you'll be taught to use a 1-10 pain scale to evaluate pain. That's great. But sometimes, when your R2 isn't looking, ask your patients to describe their pain as an animal. You'll learn something different! I also appreciated your insight that pain is contagious – the bear belongs to everyone.

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Thank you for sharing something about your personal experience with pain. The pain of a loved one is a terrible thing to endure (and worse for them). All we can do is somehow try to turn some part of that suffering toward good.

You are so right that chronic pain inevitably has a profound effect on one's personality, one's sense of self. The depression, loss of role function, and sense of worthlessness you note are very hard if not impossible to avoid. What so many patients resent, and what your essay captures beautifully, is how pain assumes a central place in their lives. It is front and center, and demands constant care and feeding. And sadly, pain can be so overwhelming that medical, emotional, and even spiritual resources cannot conquer it. Your final insight is probably the core of coping successfully with chronic pain. Rather

than a warfare model, patients must adopt an attitude of accommodation, coming to terms with, rather than completely eliminating, their pain.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

What a insightful observation that the word pain is never used in the poem. You will learn that some of your patients also have their own language for pain, and it is up to you to interpret it. You do an excellent job of deducing a great deal about the nature and quality of the patient's pain from her description, as well as its devastating psychological impact (anxiety, loss of control, hopelessness).

Next time try completing the assignment using "I" (first person) instead of "s/he" and see if it feels any different.

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Your use of the phrase "constant companion" to describe the pain is interesting, since "companion" is usually synonymous with "friend." Here, it is more like an evil twin. You capture the helplessness of every patient who has diligently followed a treatment routine that is ultimately unsuccessful. You also hint at the feeling that it is the pain that is in control, more powerful than the patient, and calling the shots. These are both very common feelings in chronic pain patients. And your closing lines are classic – patients come to the doctor in desperation, demanding that s/he can "make the pain go away." Often this is an impossible request. Then you as the physician will have to negotiate an alternative with this desperate, suffering patient – to convince them that, while certain steps may ameliorate their pain, they must learn to live with it. That is a hard, but not impossible, discussion.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Good work. Your essay vividly describes the monstrous nature of pain. I like the way you elaborate on the "bear" metaphor by having its roar drown out all other sound. And your ironic use of the word "friend" to describe the bear is inspired. Patients learn to know their pain so intimately that in a strange way it does become a kind of friend, or at least a easily recognizable companion. The way you ratchet up the intensity of the patient's fear and suffering at the end of the essay is very compelling. When you call out (to the reader) "Can you hear him? Do you see...?" it is very involving. This is what happens when you are really listening and seeing your patients. You become a witness to their suffering and, even if your "deep bag of drugs has seen its bottom" (great phrase!), you will still be able to give them something of consolation.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This was a really good essay. It seemed as though you took the patient's poem about her own pain and related it to an experience of your own – ACL reconstructive surgery (one of my daughters underwent the same surgery when she was a freshman in college, and I well remember her excruciating pain and depression, and very lengthy recovery). What made this essay powerful was that you borrowed the “bear” imagery of the poem and made it your own. You didn't have to imagine you were this patient because you'd actually been there. Your conclusion is an important take-home message: it is a lot easier to understand the suffering of another than we sometimes think. If we have ever suffered ourselves, we can find something in that experience to connect us with our patient. The problem is that often we don't want to.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice touch to think of a letter format – very creative. I liked the way you focused on the relationship between the narrator and her spouse; so often in cases of chronic illness it is this bond that carries people through. And it is an astute observation that the world of the ill rapidly shrinks. Your comments about the cracks and wallpaper were particularly good. I don't know if you've read it, but there's a famous short story called “The Yellow Wallpaper,” about a woman suffering from depression who is given a “rest cure” (this was the 19th c, no SSRIs) by her physician-husband and, confined to her room, slowly declines into true madness. She describes a similar relationship with *her* wallpaper! A nicely imagined and executed essay!

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I like the idea of a letter – it seems very believable that the narrator might confide some of her suffering in this form to a good friend. You are able to portray the patient's suffering and despair very well. The idea of her being a prisoner in her own body is a powerful image –it speaks to her sense of betrayal. Somehow a move to Florida seems a thin hope, but at least she is still clinging to something.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

A very thoughtful essay. As you infer, Dickinson is a true poet, whereas -- is just a patient trying to give voice to her suffering. From an aesthetic perspective, Dickinson's poem is more satisfying, reaches deeper, and is clearer the "better" effort. From a therapeutic perspective, perhaps there's not much difference between the two. In choosing works of varying literary quality, I hope to convey that people articulate their pain in different ways, with different levels of sophistication and artistry, but that it is the act of expression (the patient's) and the act of witnessing (the doctor's) that is an important component of healing.

Your analysis of Dickinson's poem is quite profound. What you say about "soul loss" cuts to the core of what makes pain so terrible – it can reduce or eliminate our humanity, and that is worse than the actual physical agony inflicted. When pain fills up all our space, we have no room for soul, spirit, purpose, self. Think about what this means as a doctor treating a patient's pain.

An excellent discussion of Dickinson's insights (and no doubt your own).

For the next point of view assignment, consider writing in the first person voice ("I"), rather than the third person, and see if it makes a difference in the experience, or how you understand the reading.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is excellent! What vivid imagery and insights! You create a wonderful scene of the mumbling physician, tethered to his beeper, asking somewhat mechanical questions about pain, and contrast this with the patient's unique, subjective experience. It is a great insight to think of pain as "selfish," demanding, and "self-important." These personifications, as well as the metaphor of pain as an unwelcome spouse, really bring into sharp focus the speaker's complex relationship with her pain. And the idea of wanting a "divorce" from pain – wonderful! Many pain patients I am sure would identify with that. The last line was very intriguing. I'm not quite sure I understood it, but to me it hinted at the doctor's impatience with the patient, as well as the patient's frustration with a physician that she was already sure could not help her.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You create a very powerful sense of how pain can overrun your life. I enjoyed the way you worked within the metaphor of the bear. By doing so, I think you discovered additional dimensions to the nature of pain. I was especially intrigued by your observations about the bear from the "outside" vs. the "inside." The whole analogy you make to the observer of pain vs. the experiencer of pain is terrific. In her classic book,

The Body in Pain, Scary writes that, to the clinician, pain is so indefinable that it comprises the very essence of doubt; while to the patient, the experience of pain is so unequivocal that it is the essence of certainty. Your speculations about the bear's "motivations" were also wonderful – you ended up writing not only about the patient's perspective, but the perspective of Pain, and, in the final convoluted but brilliant twist, inviting Pain to imagine the perspective of his victim. Whew! Kind of like a David Mamet movie! But I think this was more than an intellectual exercise, because it captures so well the kind of intimate relationship that patients can develop with chronic pain.

The way you incorporated yourself into the essay as Dr. X was also a very nice touch. It is a reminder that the patient's point of view must be received, heard, acknowledged, by someone, and that someone is often her doctor.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This sounded like the description of an actual incident, although perhaps you just have an extremely vivid imagination. In any case, your essay powerfully reveals the all-consuming nature of pain, similar to what Dickinson accomplishes in her poem. "Everything meant nothing to me." What a terrible truth to discover. In her classic work, *The Body in Pain*, Scary notes that grasping someone else's pain is so indefinite as to be the definition of doubt; while knowing the reality of your own pain is the definition of certainty. Your writing indicates you have journeyed in one form or other to the core of this experience. When you hear a patient described as a "whiner," or having a "low pain threshold," (and these may be realities also), don't forget this other (sur)reality as well.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

A very good realization that even strong, self-reliant people can reach a limit of endurance with chronic, unremitting pain. You think carefully and closely about the *root cause* of the suffering caused by pain, and recognize it is to be found at least as much in the psychological anxiety and loss of control as in the physical experience. And what a beautifully ironic line – "I am hard pressed to feel good when I feel good." This is exactly the dilemma for some – anticipatory suffering compounding actual suffering. I liked the way to incorporated the image of the beast, not necessarily as a ravenous predator, but as an aggressor who can takes its time, because it knows it is in control, not you. Nice last sentence – it reminds us that the residue of suffering is not always apparent, but almost always there.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is a very vivid and creative essay. I like the way you examine issues of loss of control, isolation, despair, and perhaps even suicidality. You are able to reproduce the patient's voice, and compassionately imagine what might lie behind this voice. I particularly appreciated your attention to the impact of chronic illness on the family as well as the patient. You clearly understand the patient's fear of being a burden and of exhausting the resources of her husband.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

--, this was a wonderful essay, straight from the heart and soul. The imagery is terrific – so rich with meaning. Your grandfather indeed sounds like a true warrior. I was touched both by his strength and determination in the face of multiple medical problems; as well as by the importance of community in sustaining us and nourishing our spirits. It seems to me that you are fortunate to have such a mensch for a grandfather; and that he is fortunate to have a grandson who drinks his tea quickly and walks with him for the crucial part of his journey.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I liked your essay very much. You understand clearly that pain, suffering, illness truly can change people, can diminish them and humiliate them. The image of the narrator's pain as a storm that will not pass is an effective one – it plays on our natural assumptions that storms come and go. But suppose the storm is permanent, and the weather doesn't clear? This image conveys very movingly the despair the narrator feels. You also suggest the importance of others recognizing one's suffering, hopefully to alleviate it; but if not, at least to witness it.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

The existential philosopher Albert Camus wrestled with the despair that resulted from his perception of the "benign indifference of the universe." Your insight about pain as uncaring and indifferent is excellent. If pain were evil, at least it could be seen as the enemy and resisted; but as an indifferent force of nature, we may feel even more victimized and helpless in its presence. Another theme you introduce is the idea of personal guilt – perhaps somehow suffering is deserved. In a way, this is almost a consoling thought, because at least it provides an explanatory logical model. The despair and sense of betrayal that people feel when their own bodies turn on them is also expressed very well, as is the feeling of being trapped, imprisoned, entombed (great word!) by the pain. Loneliness, isolation, silence... these are all the hermetic aspects of unshared, uncommunicated pain, which only exacerbate the patient's suffering. And your

essay eloquently recognizes that when the pain becomes one's identity, the former self runs the risk of being lost, and obliterated. This was an outstanding effort. You write extremely lucidly and eloquently, with a great deal of insight.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your writing skillfully reflects Dickinson's pithy little observation that incessant pain, or its possibility, can become one's past, present, and future. When this occurs, what happens to the self, to any semblance of normalcy? When "everything in life is about pain," there is room for little else. When we actually think what that would be like, without the possibility of relief, it's a devastating thought. Well-focused essay.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay makes some good points – how pain can overwhelm us, how its very subjectivity can change from day to day, how easy it is to feel that no one, not even the doctors who are supposed to help us, understands. Asking for a calendar of events from the pain was a nice touch. It shows the narrator still has a little spunk, and has not completely abandoned hope.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Very succinct and well-done essay. I liked the fact you chose to keep the woman's voice. It's an interesting experience, isn't it, to write from the perspective of someone of the opposite sex. The details you provide about the husband and baby really ground your writing. Also, you took a somewhat unique approach to "the beast." Whereas most people see the beast only as the enemy, you try accommodation, adaptation, negotiation, trying to figure out some way to get along and live with the beast. Ultimately, this is often a more successful approach to the management of chronic pain. It was a very nice touch to introduce the dilemma of "no positive findings." Is this pain psychogenic? If so, what are the implications? I can see you already have a sophisticated understanding of the complex nature of pain.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

The details of this description make me wonder if your writing is based on an actual patient, friend, or family member who is stricken with end-stage liver disease. I hope this is not the case; or that, if so, he or she somehow gets a transplant. Nevertheless, the

intense imagery shows your ability to enter deeply into the world of someone wrestling with the “beast” of undeserved suffering. As you observe, this sort of pain is not only physical, but psychological and spiritual as well.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is very evocative and intense writing. I feel despairing just reading it! You are able to describe very well some of the worst features of chronic pain – the isolation, sense of hopelessness, loss of control, and sense of being defeated by an intangible and elusive enemy. The other phenomenon you capture so well is the vicious cycle of pain leading to focus on pain leading to more pain. It is no wonder that this sort of suffering often does lead to thoughts of suicide. Sometimes the goal cannot be to restore a life completely free from pain, but to help the patient find ways of reestablishing some control over pain and identify reasons for living despite pain. Not an easy task.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice insight that, although the poem talks about pain as having “an element of blank,” what it really means is that its (omni)presence obliterates all other aspects of experience to create a terrifying, timeless emptiness. You are quite right that pain becomes compounded by fear of pain, so that it is not only pain itself, but the *idea* of pain, that comes to dominate one’s life. Thoughtful and perceptive essay. Next time try writing in the first person voice (“I”), as if you were actually the person suffering and see if you think it is a different sort of experience.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

What an interesting idea that a person might “miss” her pain. But of course it has a strong element of truth. Whenever we organize our lives around something, even something horrible, when it disappears, we don’t exactly know what to do. I also appreciated your wrestling with the limitations of language to adequately describe pain. When we as health professionals become impatient with patients’ struggle to give us clear answers to questions about pain, we should remember that words and pain scales can only give us an approximation of subjective experience.

In your final paragraph you raise the difficult issue of psychogenic pain, pain for which there does not appear to be an organic cause. Except in cases of malingering, when the patient intentionally falsifies or manufactures symptoms for gain, it is probably wisest

and most humane to consider all pain as “real,” although what sort of help you offer your patient will depend a lot on the root cause of the suffering.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I hope you can remember this important insight about the difficulty of truly “sharing” one’s pain. Sometimes we can become impatient when patients drone on about their pain, especially if we believe their suffering is not that severe. Hopefully you will always listen carefully and compassionately as patients use language to describe their pain. As you wisely observe, only through language can the isolation of suffering be reduced.

In terms of enlightenment, I think that sometimes suffering has the *possibility* of leading someone to greater growth or wisdom, but I don’t think we can say this is always the case, or that people are always able to discover how to “wake up.” When such a result emerges from suffering, it is a miracle and something to be thankful for. But we must be careful not to simplify or rationalize the experience of pain by saying that it produces a better person. I think only the suffering person can decide if that is the case.

Next time try using the first person voice (“I”) in this exercise, to see if speaking “as if” you were the person in question brings you any additional insights.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You are quite right that one of the things people fear most about pain is that it will deprive them of normalcy, the life they know; and even deprive them of who they are. Your exploration of the metaphor of the “bear” yields some good insights along these lines – that pain will “devour” or “reduce” the sufferer, leaving something unrecognizable behind.

Your final observation shows excellent sensitivity to the perspective of the patient. Although she is quite despondent, the fact that she writes the poem and continues to face life on a daily basis indicates she has not given up the struggle. This “will to survive” could be important in this patient’s treatment.

--, next time try to write in the first person voice (“I”), imagining that you are actually to narrator, to see if this approach brings any additional insights.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Excellent understanding of the psychological issues involved in chronic pain – the sense of being overwhelmed and engulfed, the patient’s guilt and sense of being punished, the frustration at imperfect or temporary treatment, and the loss of control. If you can remember that most chronic pain patients experience many if not most of these emotions, you will be better equipped to deal empathically with them.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I think you describe very well the “blank” that Dickinson is talking about. In your imagining, pain has literally obliterated this patient’s day, caused it to disappear, vanish! As you suggest, when pain is so powerful, the person feels powerless. The role of the physician is not necessarily to eliminate the pain (although that would be ideal), but to help the patient regain a sense of control over her life.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I couldn’t tell from the essay whether this was an imagined or a real experience (for your sake, I hope the former!), which is a sign of very convincing writing. In any case, grounding the experience of significant pain in the specific diagnosis of migraine is very appropriate, as this can be an agonizing condition (luckily, we now have much better treatments for migraine than Tylenol, so if this is a “real” problem, be sure to consult with one of the physician faculty). Your last line encapsulates all that really needs to be said about pain – people feel that, no matter what they do, no one will “hear” them. Elaine Scary wrote a classic book, *The Body in Pain*, in which she makes the point that pain is so real and unquestionable to the sufferer that it defines “certainty,” while it is so subjective and intangible to the listener that it seems the essence of “doubt.” In the relationship between patient and physician, this can obviously be a big problem!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

An interesting take on Emily Dickinson’s poem, suggesting that the pain she describes may be the result of psychological stress. You portray very well her sense of isolation and blankness resulting not only from pain, but from the feeling of not being understood.

I was intrigued by your exploration of “invisibility” in both of your writing samples. Invisibility can be a burden, but also a refuge as you suggest. Combined, these are two very thoughtful meditations on what patients in pain need and hope for.

P.S. Thanks for commenting on both selections, but you only had to do one. Remember for next time!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

--, thanks for sharing that difficult personal experience (I hope that no one else in your family; or that, if so, they have all since recovered). You make an important observation that sometimes the physician's expertise and experience simply can't counteract the overwhelming reality of the patient's immediate suffering. (I still think that sometimes this kind of professional reassurance at least plants a seed that the pain is limited and may give a patient hope). Your conclusion says it all – the only way to break the isolation caused by pain is to convey some empathy and understanding about the patient's plight. A medication can't do this.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You replicate very well this patient's distress and feelings of hopelessness. The sense of no exit, no surcease is one of the most frightening aspects of pain. In your last line you raise an issue that preoccupies many – although by no means all – patients. Why do they suffer? Some people try to generate answers – a test, a punishment, a means to greater wisdom and personal growth, a random event of the universe – but in truth there are no easy responses. Sometimes all you can do is witness the pain, not solve it.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

It sounds as though in your essay you are describing an actual event in your own life. If so, I am sorry for the pain – and misunderstanding! - you endured. As you suggest, perhaps the only good that can come out of such suffering is to turn it to the benefit of your future patients. Your own experiences of being dismissed and doubted can definitely be used as a reminder not to treat patients so disrespectfully. There is always a *reason* for pain, whether it is identifiable in the medical lexicon or not. If we can avoid focusing too much on trying to distinguish “real” from “baseless” pain, we'd probably get a lot farther with our patients. I'm glad they finally got to the bottom of your problem!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is a well-done essay. I particularly appreciated the way you focused on the *effort* required just to deal with life on a daily basis when one is enveloped by pain. Your essay also hints that depression and suicidal ideation can overwhelm the chronic pain sufferer. There is also the sense of having been deprived of one's normal life, and even of oneself.

These are terrible feelings for anyone to have, and we, as health professionals, always need to acknowledge them, as your writing does with great sensitivity.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

One of the things that strikes me most about your essay is the lack of control expressed in it. Pain can certainly make a person feel that way – that they have lost control of how they want to live, even of who they are. Seen in this light, the suicide that your essay hints at becomes a desperate attempt to regain control, take a decisive action that, from one perspective, would vanquish the pain forever. I hope this exercise will remind you to pay attention to suicidality in all patients struggling with chronic pain.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I liked this “prose poem” very much. It was an interesting idea to choose “headache” as the patient diagnosis, while many of your classmates chose more “serious” diagnoses” such as cancer. Of course, headache pain can be extremely disabling, as your writing conveys. The concept of pain as a “destabilizer” is an insightful one, and adds a new element to the phenomenon that I hadn’t considered before. You’re quite right – one of the worst things about pain is how much it throws you “off-balance,” and throws your life out of sync. You also touch on perhaps the key aspect of pain, suffering, and illness – i.e., the loss of control. Helping restore a sense of control on some level (not necessarily physical; as you well know, the sense of things being “in control” that derives from religious faith even when our personal lives seem out of control can be of great consolation) is one of the most important tasks of a physician.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I really enjoyed the analogy you made between “mind over matter” strategies and punching the nose of a grizzly. It showed you, as this patient, still had some spunk! Sometimes such strategies are surprisingly effective, but of course they should never be offered as panaceas. For chronic pain, there are no easy solutions, and a lot of coming to terms successfully with it depends on the patient’s attitude, as your last line suggests.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is an interesting a moving essay. It is what we hope for all terminally or chronically ill patients, that they can come to a place of peace and acceptance. As you point out,

unfortunately sometimes family members reach this point later than does the patient, making final days even more difficult. It is also true that the dying process can be rich with insight and lessons learned. However, it is important not to romanticize dying, or to think that everyone necessarily finds peace and resolution. I appreciated your final line about talking less and listening more. Might be good to keep in mind as a future doctor!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You convey effectively the sense of timelessness (without beginning or end) that pain can create. It's interesting that you use a warfare metaphor. As I'm sure you're aware, this is very popular in medicine, and of course can be a useful and invigorating model (the concept of "fighting spirit" derives from it). However, other response models are also possible, such as acceptance (not resignation). Sometimes people get tired of fighting, although as the narrator of this piece you sound determined on victory. And like a good general, you know when to retreat (the physical inroads) and where to dig in ("the battle of my mind").

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay skillfully recognizes how pain can overwhelm identity, until the patient becomes only...pain. Your idea about the "Zen of pain" is quite intriguing. My oldest daughter teaches mindfulness meditation and would encourage you to keep sitting! Breathing in, breathing out, watch yourself drowning... Sometimes you can come out the other side.

You address other important issues as well – longing for death as escape, the isolation, lack of understanding, and even fear that pain engenders. Nice work!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Great imagery of an imprisoned life with pain as the guard. Usually people think of pain as the prison when they use this metaphor, but your idea gives it a more personal, immediate twist. I really felt the frustration of your narrator who attempts so many coping strategies, with little or no success. You also touch on an important issue when you suggest the loss of control this patient is feeling. This is really core to most experiences of chronic pain and illness. How can the physician help to restore a sense of control (which is not necessarily the same as actual control)? An interesting question to ponder.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is an evocative and rich essay. The image of being born into pain, as it were parented by pain, is very powerful. Your second paragraph continues this personification of pain, by describing it as evil, all-knowing, all-powerful, teasing, vindictive, and punishing. I found it telling that your final image was of pain tattooed not on the body, as one might expect, but on the soul. You're right – pain reaches very deep.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Good exploration of the bear metaphor. I like what you did with this, by deciding that being attacked by a bear would actually be preferable to enduring this pain! You also realized that it is not only the pain, but the fear of pain, that contributes to the patient's suffering. This is a very important point.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice work incorporating so many elements of the original poem. You raise some really good questions: 1) Is courage pointless? 2) How does one accept that one's own body is one's worst enemy? 3) How far do we compromise who we are to escape suffering? Unfortunately, no easy answers. But asking these questions is an important first step toward understanding, because they are questions that patients wrestle with all the time, although perhaps not so eloquently as you've expressed them.

I liked that image of "living between storms" in "constant downpour." What a strong picture that creates of this person's life.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Wonderful, --. Answering one poem with another. You touch on what for me is a very meaningful concept – that of the wounded healer, a physician "who suffers with" the patient. I hope you don't forget about this idea as you proceed through your studies. It's a complicated idea, but potentially rich and rewarding. I really enjoyed this effort.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This essay deals with a common response to suffering – self-blame: I wasn’t appreciative enough or health-conscious enough. You also explore the feelings of isolation that often result from the experience of ongoing pain, and insightfully suggest that pain deprives us of normalcy. Interestingly, you hint that you may have been able to turn some of your suffering to a good purpose by becoming a more self-reflective, wiser person. And importantly, a glimmer of hope is still present.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I really appreciated this free verse poem. You tackle the frequently asked question, *why me?* (Personally, I think the only possible answer to that question is *why not?*). The poem also hints at the envy the ill sometimes feel toward the non-ill – all those people who blithely go about their business, not even aware of how grateful they should be. Good effort.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I liked your talking directly to the doctor – all writing, all speech is *always* an effort at communication, even if only with oneself. In this case, you beseech the doctor in ways that often occur with patients, but that physicians cannot always answer satisfactorily (at least not in terms of total pain relief). It can put the doc in a hard situation.

Your essay also does a good job of capturing the isolation and perceived lack of understanding (often accurate) that chronic pain engenders. You have a great line in your essay: “I feel like I have a deeper connection to the pain than I do to my family” – what an intense realization! Your essay also clearly shows the “two world” phenomenon that many people describe: the world of “before,” and the world of pain, the fear of the latter, and the immense longing to return to the former.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

The symbol of the house for everything this narrator had lost in his life was very effective, as was the image of this little cat staying with his injured master. These are the kinds of details that patients will mention, which may not tell you anything medically, but will convey a lot about what is important to the patient.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Wow! What a great idea – to comment on a poem with a poem! This is really good. All the details (or should I say absence of details – no taste to the food, no smell to the

flowers) wonderfully convey what this narrator’s life has become. They are so sharp and tangible that the reader (or listener) gets a very concrete sense of all that this person has lost. This poem also successfully conveys the tenuous but essential link between the speaker and the “you” to whom the poem is directed. This is very well done.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay is very good at elaborating on the “beast” image that is used in the original poem. You ratchet up the intensity by turning the beast into a demon, and then work within the metaphor of possession and exorcism. To me, this is a very good fit with chronic pain. I also liked the way you framed your pov as everything going on behind the simple question “how are you” and the simple answer “not so good.” This also seems very true to life – sometimes we have to listen to the words behind the words to understand what a patient is trying to tell us. You describe this well.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay points out the insidious, subtle course that pain can take, “creeping up” on the sufferer but eventually consuming its “victim’s” normal life. The final plea of this narrator is quite poignant, and one which, as a physician, you will hear often. It gets at the heart of medicine to think what is the appropriate response.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay does a good job of summarizing the major themes of the poem: the dehumanizing influence of pain, her use of the “bear” metaphor” to convey the frightening, intimidating nature of her pain; and the way pain has overwhelmed her normal life. Your interpretation of the last line of the poem is excellent, and certainly does suggest her desperation and perhaps depression (of course very common in chronic pain patients).

Next time try writing in the first person (“I”) as an experiment to see if you have a different experience writing *as* the person, rather than *about* the person.

POV ASSIGNMENT

--, this was really creative. It seemed like one side of a dialogue with a nurse or possibly physician (or medical student!). The connection you made between pain as a reminder of

human vulnerability and mortality is a very good observation – a connection that compounds the suffering. The essay described convincingly this narrator’s despair, suicidal thoughts, and occasional glimmer of hope. The ending was striking – it suggested all the narrator’s anticipatory suffering and feeling of being trapped in that image of a single cloud appearing in the sky. Very convincing writing.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice elaboration on the original poem. Good use of additional details. Your essay reveals the narrator’s despair and hopelessness, two of pain’s best allies. I was also interested in your intimation that the mere presence of friends and loved ones does not necessarily alleviate the patient’s isolation or sense of not being understood. This is a subtle but accurate insight.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Great idea to write a letter, especially one’s mother! Very creative! If I was the mom, I’d be on the next plane to Boston! It’s very effective you conflate the pain itself, the fear of serious disease, the frustration of being told “it’s all in your head,” the loss of hope, and the consequent depression. These are all very common elements in chronic pain. And of course, if anyone can understand, it’s going to be the mother!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I liked the idea of a letter as a form of reaching out for this pov. Your writing depicts very well the overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness that chronic illness and pain can produce. Your tackling of the doctor-patient relationship was also interesting. You captured the patient’s perspective very well – her reluctance to bother the doctor, the sense that her predicament is somehow boring to the physician, and her hopelessness at the doctor’s ability to help her further. A poignant essay.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is an extremely empathic that really made me feel something of what this narrator must be going through. The specific language you use conveys the range of (negative) emotion that this individual is feeling. I liked the satiric way you used the pain scale – sometimes that approach, although useful, just really doesn’t capture what the patient is going through. Also, your questions at the end were very moving. They suggested both the patient’s uncertainty, and her desperate need to hang on to both her ability to function, and her ability to relate to others.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is a good little essay, --. Its tone suggests a kind of querulousness and irritation that can arise in the patient toward the caregiver (or even solicitous friend). Sometimes expressions of concern or queries for information are seen as just one more hassle in the patient's life, especially if the patient feels his or her needs aren't being met. This was a very intriguing slant on how chronic pain can affect relationships. P.S. Did you ever get the packet I put together for you on miscarriage?

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Hi --. Thanks for this very good essay. It illustrates convincingly how pain can engulf every aspect of a person. You added a very interesting twist – that is the development of a “false” personality to “please” others, or appear to be a “good patient” (do you remember we discussed this theme one day in class?). I liked this patient's commitment to an honest representation of himself. He has enough to contend with without worrying about satisfying others' ideas of the brave patient. The ocean image at the conclusion created a very vivid image.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Good elaboration of the themes explored in the original poem. You provide lots of believable details about how this narrator tries to cope – through distraction, giving in, attention. You get to the core issues here – how devastating it can be when pain takes over one's life, how suicide can become an attractive option. You also raise the frequently asked, but difficult to answer question, *why me?* Unfortunately, as your essay suggests, sometimes patients do answer this question through guilt and self-blame. This is a response to be on the look-out for, since obviously it can compound a patient's suffering. Like many patients, your narrator questions God. This aspect of your essay indicated awareness of an important dimension of the illness experience for many patients, ie., its spiritual significance. Congratulations to you for bringing this up.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Excellent essay, and really true to the spirit of Dickinson's poem. It would be just like her to think ironically of her pain as a “constant companion,” and to relish the fact that this can bring a kind of peculiar “comfort” as well as obvious distress. Your image of the

pain taking over the room is superb. Dickinson herself was very oriented toward houses and rooms within houses, and the small, neglected corners of rooms. Your idea of having a conversation with pain is really creative, and very Dickinsonian – she too might have tried to strike up a dialogue. Finally, Dickinson was a solitary individual, so your final image of finding a “small pocket” of welcome solitude remains true to the sentiments of the poem. All in all, extremely empathic effort!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay is really good, --. Its tone expresses the narrator’s deep-felt need to communicate the nature of her experience, and how difficult it is to do so. I also like the way you worked with the bear metaphor, suggesting that it emerged out of the narrator’s desperate effort to make her listener understand what she was going through. Your final theme of lack of safety is very compelling – a good way of understanding --’s lament that there is nowhere to hide.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay makes a nice distinction between the narrator’s ability to face death with grace, and her inability to continue to struggle against her pain. The details you use to enlarge on the bear metaphor are very effective, as is the deer imagery. These two animal metaphors create respectively fear and pity in the reader. I found the last line of your essay appropriately ambiguous. Since this narrator is ready to die, is it a good or bad thing that she’s still “alive to feel this”? I suspect she isn’t sure herself.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Great idea to make this an excerpt from a personal journal. Sometimes people will express in this format very uncensored thoughts and emotions that they share with no one else. This narrator obviously feels alone, without anyone to truly understand her experience. Yet just as obviously, she hasn’t given up, because she feels she is entitled to happiness just as much as the next person, despite her illness. This stubborn commitment to find happiness where she can may be one thing that allows her to keep going. Good insight!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice recognition that all pain has both physical and psychological components, and that the result can be overwhelming for the patient. Your plea to the physician is very

affecting. I think many patients would like to remind their doctors of the multiple levels on which pain affects them, but they are afraid or intimidated to do so.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay explores with great sensitivity and specificity the threats to identity that occur with chronic illness and pain. This is a terrific phrase: "...as if I have been reincarnated as a lifelong patient." It communicates powerfully a (horrible) rebirth into an unfamiliar and dreaded existence. Your many empathic details create a very strong sense of reality, and making the narrator a physician brings the essay even closer to home. Your last line is also tremendously effective – I can image this narrator looking ahead, seeing her fate and future clearly, yet longing for that "secret turn" that might change everything for the better. I think this is called hope. An outstanding essay.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Really nice conceit in this essay. The way it's structured, the reader wonders, what is occupying this speaker's time so intently, and the usual possibilities cross one's mind. When we discover that pain is her "occupation," the harsh irony is very forceful. Your essay also perceptively suggests that patients pursue remedies not only to find surcease from pain, but to save their souls. The personification of the narrator's pain also helps the reader to grasp its intensity and viciousness.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

--, your essay demonstrates excellent awareness of the multifaceted nature of pain, both physical and emotional. The tragedy that you identify so well is that often the desperate patient feels she can keep nothing back of herself – there is nowhere to hide – pain demands everything and then more. This dissolution of identity is a factor in making chronic pain patients so demanding and difficult to treat. The language of the essay is very evocative and succeeds in creating a distinct and unique picture of this suffering person.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your essay develops an interesting thought about why Dickinson personifies the pain. It may have something to do with an attempt to gain more control over the situation, since having a human enemy is a familiar experience to most of us, and holds out the hope that reason or mercy can sway the outcome.

I think you understand very well the essence of the poem – the “immortality” of pain (wonderful way to express its seeming endlessness) and its all-consuming nature.

You offer some great ideas about how, as the patient’s physician, you might approach her experience of pain. I hope you will not completely abandon the idea of metaphorical description as you proceed through your medical training. Making room for the patient’s idiosyncratic recital of her experience as well as the rather unimaginative terms we in medicine tend to rely on (sharp, dull, stabbing, burning, aching etc.) can really deepen your own understanding.

Reflecting on the narrator’s perspective, you come to a crucial realization – writing about your own pain helps you understand it better, and thus gives you a little more control over it; while writing as a form of communication with others can reduce the burden of isolation pain often imposes. Very profound awareness!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your approach to this assignment hints at an important insight- sometimes the most important thing we can do for the suffering other is *just listen*. This does not mean reassure, rationalize, minimize, empathize, pity, provide information, suggest new interventions. It means *just listen*. Excellent point.

Another interesting and poignant point you make is the problem of regret. This “woman in pain” wishes she had lived her life differently, with more appreciation. But now it is too late. Regret is a paralyzing emotion. To transform it into a motivator to influence future attitudes and behavior is not simple, but is an important part of the healing process. The first step in this process is allowing your patient to grieve for what is lost. Then, one hopes, she can begin to see what is left.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice combination of the poem with your interview of a real patient. In different ways, they are probably saying much the same thing – how easily pain can take over one’s life, often in a subtle process that catches the person unawares. By incorporating the “timelessness” of Dickinson’s pain, you show how even the narrator’s memories of pleasant events (ie., dancing) become contaminated. You end with a great question. What do you suppose the doctor will answer?

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Your writing portrays the awful isolation that the chronic pain patient can feel, and how futile escape into fantasy is. Then you ask that impossibly difficult question: why? Of course there is no answer, but listening to answers that the patient herself suggests may give important insights into issues that are compounding or complicating the pain. For instance, in your essay you imagine that she worries she is being punished or being taught a lesson, or is unlucky. Your narrator also tries to find some lesson in her suffering, something that will make her experience less meaningless and futile. Finally, she makes it pretty clear she is a fighter. All of this knowledge may be important in helping this patient learn to adapt to her pain.

P.S. This is completed unrelated, but I know your mom from the family practice residency. She is great – I really respect here! I’ve known you were in this class, but I still haven’t figured out who you are. Come up and say hello some time. Hope the rest of the year goes well for you.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

The sense I get from this essay is of an older woman who is isolated and lonely and really wants her doctor to understand something about her experience in order to make difficult treatment decisions. You use lots of very good analogies and metaphors – pain as a prison and the patient with a life sentence; the endless tunnel; the mugging victim. Each of these conjures up a slightly different, but all equally hopeless image of this patient’s suffering. After reading your essay, I really hope her doctor listens to her carefully, and tries to help her decide on how to achieve the best quality of life given what is important to her. Thanks for a compelling effort.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Nice idea to imagine a *young* person experiencing significant unresolving pain. We tend to think of pain as something to middle-aged or old people experience, but rarely a young individual. And, as your essay perspicaciously points out, because it is less expected, it can lead to additional problems – fear of being seen as different from one’s peers; guilt about not taking proper care of oneself; contemplating lying to one’s physician. A very good job of entering imaginatively into a frightening space.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

It was an ingenious idea to “flesh out” the -- poem by imagining it as the result of a doctor visit. The questions you imagine for the doctor are great – exactly what the physician would probably ask. The real question is – is he listening to the answers?! In

your summary, this patient seems not so much accepting, as resigned, which accurately reflects the despair reflected in the poem.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

The feelings and mood of this essay are very well-expressed. The level of detail draws the reader into your worlds, both the previous world of normalcy and the present world of pain. The idea that it would almost be better to think of the previous pain-free existence as a dream or fantasy was fascinating – a kind of coping strategy to foster acceptance of the current reality. The essay is full of longing and loneliness – unfortunately, feelings very common in chronic pain sufferers.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Good idea to elaborate on the central metaphor of the poem – pain is a bear – by referring to another artistic medium. By telling the story of that movie, you lay the groundwork for many useful ideas about the nature of pain that you then explore further in your second paragraph. The reader moves back and forth in imagination between the victim in the movie, the ravaging beast in the movie, and the current experience of the narrator. It's very effective.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You address the multifaceted nature of pain – it is not only pain itself that causes suffering, but the fear and anticipation of pain, the feelings of helplessness, and the loss of control. Your last line suggests an embattled patient struggling with a vengeful and unforgiving adversary. This is an accurate depiction of many people's experience of pain.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This is a moving picture of a patient who is suffering greatly, but is not ready to quit. She continues to take pleasure in simple things, and the love and support of her family. Yet your essay doesn't neglect the terrible ways in which pain has come to dominate her life. I liked the analogy to a riptide. This was a very good way to develop the feelings of helplessness. Also, the insight about not fighting, but accepting, is really apropos. A fine job!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

I enjoyed the indirect, analogical way you approached the question of pain by talking about the train. This sounded very believable to me – exactly how an old man might work his way into a difficult subject by drawing on memories of the past. Then you proceed to show how this is a failed analogy – because, unlike the train, pain cannot be consigned to memory. The last line is excellent – by feeling only pain, all true feeling has been destroyed. This essay demonstrated both empathy and insight. Good work!

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

--, this was a wonderful essay. The tone was so convincing – that pseudo-chatty tone we use when we’re trying to sidle up to sharing something really personal, but we don’t want it to sound too personal. Then moving to the TV show was a great way to develop the analogy of bear and deer (and actually because people watch so much TV, I’ve often heard patients start off a self-disclosure by saying, “I saw this TV show...”). I loved the way you first backed away from the show by returning to the happier memories of childhood, which helped me, the reader, understand the bond between the narrator and “--.” The repetition of the line about sitting on the couch, just me, the TV, the pills – and then the addition of dread – was really powerful. And what a marvelous touch at the end – writing a poem about the bear! Outstanding.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

This was a terrific essay. It is the only one I have read so far that emphasized how lack of cross-cultural communication can complicate issues of pain. The thoughts of the grandmother as she first waits and then is examined by an insensitive physician remind me strongly of feelings haltingly and reluctantly expressed by many of our elderly Southeast Asian patients in clinic. You capture so well their sense of alienation, of being misunderstood, their confusion about dates and other information they do not feel is important, their suspicion (unfortunately sometimes justified) that the doctor is not paying attention, or is disrespectful about traditional remedies that have helped the patient previously. The idea that not only the pain, but the callousness of the physician, was responsible for creating that sense of blank was an excellent insight. The final few lines perfectly reflect the limitations and failures of these translated interviews, where nothing of importance gets conveyed. Thank you for this very creative and true effort.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Great essay! Your description of migraine is excellent – accurate, and detailed, but primarily focused on the patient’s subjective experience. Your lingering on the “false glamour” of the aura made it seem as though you almost couldn’t bear to go on to the rest of the experience. The analogy of pain to a screaming child is convincing, especially given the hypersensitivity of most migraine sufferers. I also liked the way the essay introduces an important relational bond – between the narrator and her dog. You end with the failure of language (“no new metaphors”), but hint at lessons learned. It is unclear whether your final phrase is sincere or ironic, and the reader/listener is eager to know more.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

You have some very good insights into what the author is trying to express in this poem. I liked your thought about the capitalizing of Bear – I’ve also wondered why the author did that, and I like your explanation. You also understand very well the author’s feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and helplessness.

I appreciated your observation that you found it “difficult to empathize” because nothing in your past experience has really prepared you for this level of suffering. It *is* hard to understand this very subjective and ill-defined (from *our* – ie., the non-sufferer’s-perspective) experience, which is one reason for including the humanities readings.

For the next assignment, try writing in the first person voice (“I” instead of he/she). Maybe that will bring you a little closer to the patient.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Very creative to answer one poem with another poem! What makes this poem so poignant is that you base your poem on the familiar childhood poem “Now I lay me down to sleep,” an innocent expression of faith and trust. In your version, the faith and trust are still present, but the narrator’s suffering has been illuminated. I also admire your experimenting with the formal structure of poetry (abab rhyme scheme for one). Very few people bother with this anymore, but it’s an interesting discipline to see if you can find the right words to convey your thoughts and feelings within this self-imposed limitation.

POV ASSIGNMENT #1

Through your essay, you demonstrate a strong grasp of the suffering of this patient. Your insights about the narrator’s isolation from friends are sadly often accurate. Because

people are uncomfortable and, as you point out, fearful around suffering, they tend to avoid people in pain. This only compounds the loneliness. The attribution of intelligence and motive to the pain helps to personify it, and transform it into a clever, cruel opponent. The warrior image provides important insights into this narrator. This is a person who wants to stand and fight, who likes the warfare metaphor (although this sounds more like single-handed combat!). Information like this about patients can help tailor strategies that meet their needs and expectations. Just remember, there can be other metaphors available to help patients frame their experience, and it's important to choose ones that make sense to the patient.