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An Artist's Guide to Herbs: Wild Lettuce by Harmony Holiday

On the cannibalization of black pain and how we free ourselves from it.

Part of the [Spectacular Herbs](#) series.





Preface

I wrote this a couple of months ago, decided to feature wild lettuce before the virus swarmed the world, before Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd were killed by police, before we were reminded what it was like to collectively witness the public lynching of a Black man who looks like our fathers and brothers and cousins and friends. This piece is about Black pain and one of the earth's potential healers. This past week has taught us that some of what I say here is true, a reckoning was on its way, being at home watching ourselves get slaughtered did exacerbate that, and it is healing to refuse to silently hurt in these ways any longer. Taylor, Arbery, and Floyd are healers too. A healer is someone who teaches us how to name what hurts.

“But if I had screamed, even if only once, I might never have been able to stop. A first scream sets off all the others” — Clarice Lispector

The First Scream

Awareness of pain begets more pain, more awareness of pain, a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy that can only be broken by deep healing or deliberate forgetting. So we outsource our pain, avoid the reel. Black pain for sale as song, film, scream. Black people are the Western world's Christ consciousness. We

have been sacrificed, made sacred, so that the rest of the society can play dumb and numb and profane, enacting the sad fairy tale demanded of consumers under capitalism, wherein happiness and comfort are the apotheosis— rooted in the material, in accumulation of commodities and clout while the soul flails and atrophies.

Black bodies and souls produce and internalize experience so that white citizens can devote themselves to consumption, leisure, ease, and the sweet lethal boredom of denial. The supreme commodity here is numbness. From its vantage Blackness is cannibalized and treated as evil, pain, sorrow, exegesis. Narcissism mixed with envy and obsession with Black expression that leads to endless theft and endless othering. The fixation on “killing” pain as it’s called in this society, then ties into a desire to kill Black people, enact genocide on the representatives of pain and suffering, the noir symbols of the ricocheting scream, the evidence that this system is falling.

The vessels that absolve or absorb suffering—ache, the sensation of trouble, the pressure of it all—cannot be martyred en masse any longer. Even Black citizens feel entitled to numb apathy now, and the killing of pain or its submergence under hedonism is the obsession of the most popular Black music. Because we are finally refusing to be the west’s pain body, a reckoning is coming, all that tension has to go somewhere else to dissipate, and Black people have to learn to live without the expectation of pain, to believe ourselves worthy of pleasure. And the rise of opiate use won’t save us from the need for new human scapegoats in our genocidal culture any more than the mythologies of a Black middle class ethic will. It’s the falling away of scapegoats that makes painkillers so necessary. Learning to name and face what hurts might break this cycle.

What is pain? What are we really killing when we eliminate it? Where is it rooted within the human experience, why can projecting it onto an oppressed group provide some relief? What plants and herbs uproot and soothe pain without colonizing the soul? Is pain the human destiny that we must experience to transcend, or an obstruction we invent to stave off the deeper sensations that we reach when we walk through it and forge beyond? Is pain produced from the tension of our fear of the bleak never ending sublime of getting over? Does Black suffering ease the West’s pain like a drug and as we reject this savior

complex how do we find meaning beyond it?

What hurts?

If we trace it backwards, make the pilgrimage in reverse, re-enter some long-sealed womb of remembrance in search of the earliest pain, the one that lingered and altered the imagination, there's an ancestral murmur there. There's some blurred knowing that to be made, to be birthed, someone has had to suffer our occupation. Just to make whatever we recognize as the self we have to take over another's biology. The first pain I remember was empathy for that symbiotic becoming, for my mother and father, who had suffered to make me, and I could tell by the way they battled with one another how intensely they had pursued their generative suffering, their evidence of its beauty or truth in their seed. Backing deeper into the abyss of pain's sources, I think about the holds of slave ships during that mass abduction, the people who suffered to make me an eventuality even before my parents did. Were there pain killers there, among the cargo on those prisons of torpor and suffering? What numbed those eternal Black heroes in transit? Was it sex, or song, or some maimed prolonged adrenaline rush that lasted until today as it rinses me this morning with their phantom screams and chants?

I don't know what pain is, do you know what pain is?

I know that as a Black woman my pain and suffering and discomfort are not meant to be acknowledged as real. I know that for that reason I possess so much optimistic amnesia that I almost have to thank that disregard for my full humanity that makes my suffering a blur to me. I know that some science says pain is subjective, as if the body decides what to warn us about and what to allow to fester silently and sigh and grow before it sharpens into the warning that pain is, and we panic. I know that Black slaves experienced pain, and I wonder how they killed it, how that element of the story becomes abstract and distant and how if we trace our pain back to that exact ambiguity, between killing Black people and killing our pain, we will unlock its true root and be unmasked. I know that emotional pain has a will of its own and seeks eternal

life, must be changed into maddening bliss before it disappears. I know that a lot of lower back pain originates in the kidneys and my understanding of this is that much physical pain is water and other fluid in the body refusing to drain, causing inflammation, pressure, anxiety, discomfort, hurt, narrowing and slurring of functions. What hurts? What blocks and coagulates the interior water? I know that acid can cause pain, like the lactic acid that gathers in the muscles and gets stuck there after strenuous workouts or during any form of stress.

What haunts me is that so many exist in constant pain, dull or acute, physical or emotional or some hybrid of both, but so chronic that we don't even notice it, couldn't tell you where it originates or what it feels like, that this is one of the biggest threats there is to peace or something like it on this planet, an almost undefinable, immeasurable set of aching sensations and the reckless numbness they entice us toward. If we don't understand or articulate our own pain for long enough to experience ourselves unmediated by its excess deflected onto products, we teach it to ourselves as projections, we detest the people who remind us of it, we love the people who cause it in hopes that loving them will make them stop hurting us, we seek the drugs that numb it in hopes that forgetting is prophecy, we begin to live at the mercy of our silent pain bodies.

We cannot trust our own motives until much interaction becomes vague and inauthentic modes of licking wounds and killing pain, sabotage and self-pity become common, and we lack the capacity to snap out of it because this collective stupor makes us *feel* better, eases our pain or sells it back to us as projections, someone or something to blame. What would it take for us to trust what pain is trying to tell us, to savor pain and become literate in its confessional nature, and turn it from secret to intimate fact. What are we so ashamed and haunted and confounded by what hurts as to delude ourselves into thinking it can be killed or displaced?

I don't know what pain is, do you know what pain is?

Wild lettuce is a mild opiate sometimes called opium lettuce. Many who suffer from chronic pain claim it exceeds cannabis in effectiveness, without causing

any disorientation, works as a social lubricant, staves off insomnia, and kills both emotional and physical aches. When I discovered it, I felt some sense of vicarious shame for our society that overcomplicates and convolutes remedy to such an extent that big pharma can create an epidemic built on the exploitation of human pain, which no one knows how to identify until it is too severe to deny, and meanwhile, secret, sacred gardens are brimming with a safe alternative so simple it feels suspect in this context that punishes simplicity.

Wild lettuce contains compounds lactucin and lactucopicrin, at the highest concentration in any known plant. These are forms of latex-like sap that ooze thick and milky from the stem and resemble opium but don't cause the dependency that opium does. Wild lettuce was used during the Civil War as a painkiller when traditional opium became scarce. The lactucopicrin interacts with neurotransmitters to stop the communication of pain signals to the brain for a time. Since it possesses anti-inflammatory benefits as well, wild lettuce is unlike pharmaceutical pain killers in that it works on the sensation and its source simultaneously, instead of just forcing the body to pretend nothing is wrong, this wildcrafted plant helps the body settle and address what's out of balance with rest, which also helps the body heal. Wild lettuce helps teach the brain not to overreact to pain and become frantic, it re-educates the body to treat pain like information and not an enemy to mobilize against.

On YouTube, where all the exiled naturopaths and self-diagnosing zealots and desperate pain sufferers and former addicts go to compare notes, in that specific YouTube vortex, the accounts of those experimenting with opium lettuce are lo-fi and effusive. One in particular, a man with lumbar scoliosis, sits in his room and describes almost nothing else making a dent in his pain (including cannabis), but finds near immediate relief with wild lettuce, along with an alleviation of anxiety and stress along with the physical pain. We don't know what pain is, or we won't admit its universality and the way it intervenes on everything with pangs and silences—we don't know how to describe pain attentively, maybe it's too painful, but we know relief. It's clear when someone long plagued by shrill bodily or emotional discomfort lifts that veil and returns to the less obstructed expression of the self. Wild lettuce is a mild, relaxed way of treating pain, so that the mind has time to retrain neural pathways to not fixate on what hurts, so that the forgetting becomes authentic and not deceitful,

so that what we don't feel isn't just numbed suffering, and pain dissolves and gives us a glimpse of the miraculous, the confidence to trust the earth medicine that big pharma wants us to see as impossibly quaint.

The white sap of wild lettuce should be a known alternative to pharmaceuticals and narcotics. To use it, we should first be asked, and ask ourselves and those we love, what hurts? We need to learn how to notice pain before it becomes morbid and desperate and bitter and inconsolable. This will mean addressing generational pain too, not to roil in it like victims, but so that naming what hurts becomes as common as pretending nothing does. Naming pain means not being afraid of it, not running from it and allowing it to abuse and hunt us, it takes away its power over our imagination and makes us braver in our vulnerability, and more alive, because you can't be completely present if you're pretending to feel nothing. That suicidal numbness or indifference becomes actual suicide. We need to know about the remedies that are so simple they seem unreal, because those are the ones that usually help break chronic cycles.

I don't know what pain is, do you know what pain is?

The ego feels no pain, perceives threats to it as pain, invents pain to contrive integrity from it. The ego is a lie and makes pain its accomplice.

Somewhere between masochism and the fact that the ego blocks communication with the body when the body is saying things it does not want to acknowledge, things that mean it's on a path of diminishing returns, is the reason why a remedy like wild lettuce is dismissed or quieted, will continue to be, and seems meagre and adjunct compared to the complex and destructive medications we're familiar with as pain killers. We love drama, and we especially love acting like victims of our biology. We also value productivity, and taking a garden herb and getting back to work doesn't seem intense enough for the endless labor we make into lives on Earth. Egoism makes us oblivious to what we feel and then when it tips in the opposite direction, causes us to obsess over and direct our cognition toward pain, and develop anxiety around it which increases it. This lets pain form neural pathways that make it part of our hard drive, our idea of who we are when we decide to notice any pain we might be

in, becomes tied to that pain as an emblem of courage, strength, piety, honesty, vulnerability, authenticity. Why would the mind and body allow the potential of simple fix to an aspect we use to understand ourselves, which pain becomes?

Killing pain before addressing its cause is a dangerous logic. It's killing a kidnapper before you learn where the hostages are. And so the mind and the body, especially the nervous system, are left with infinite potential triggers and cannot be trusted and that angst only deepens the irreconcilable. Black pain is irreconcilable, how do we get out of it without sabotaging ourselves and our society's dependence on minstrel versions of our suffering? Lettuce might not be enough, but maybe the garden it takes us back to is.

No Pain

Maybe I don't know what pain is, but I know what no pain is. You wake up with the sun and float toward a ritual. There's intimacy and freedom in every gesture. You cannot feel your body, it glides, no fluid is trapped anywhere, you're as flexible as a newborn, welcome as a queen. Your eyes shine with curiosity. Your thoughts feel like premonitions and they dazzle, reveal outlaw yearnings that only you can satisfy in the flesh. You're in love with yourself, who you do not even feel weighing you down with habit and personality and ego, you're Black but almost forget what that means, loosen the stigma and trust indiscriminately because the air, the water, the food, the state, the ideas, aren't all out to kill you. You're a Black woman but right on time those who you love and who love you know to ask, *what hurts* and you all laugh, *I don't know what pain is, do you know what pain is?* But we're not being ironic, we mean it, we forgot, we are completely human and everyone else remembers our pain so well that we forget to obsess over it, longing becomes rare and idiotic, a bore. It's almost evil to feel so well but most important and healing of all, is that we feel no guilt for our sense of well-being, we feel entitled to it, we take it on, apologizing to no one.

When we who have Black bodies learn to be ruthless with our testimony, to weaponize our honesty about what hurts, when we decide to live as if we do not deserve constant dull aches and pains and traumas and phantoms, when we

stop being the willing unconscious scapegoats for all the brutalization this culture harnesses as fuel, the whole construct will crumble. And it will hurt, but we won't be the ones doing all of the feeling, finally. The only thing that will redeem the west and ourselves is Black testimony, especially the unbridled testimony of Black women who have been gagged and bound metaphysically and are finally being acknowledged by some as wholly human and tender and belligerent and real as any living soul. Pain is not our value, we are finally learning, enduring pain will not lead to salvation, and as we turn to what heals the pain instead of obsessing over its causes, there might be some collateral casualties. The epidemic is not only the pain killer but also the pain itself, the lies we tell to hide it until it's so severe it runs our lives, colonizes the collective imagination, strips us of our idea of agency and self-possession.

If Black women can disentangle from this maze and learn for ourselves what hurts, even before we are asked, even if we are never asked, then the rest of you have a ghost of a chance. It's dangerous to wait much longer and danger has a way of letting us admit we're feeling something, and inspiring us to follow that intuition toward solace. It saves us from becoming a bunch of sociopaths whose one true thrill is some pent up rebel gesture waiting to sabotage everything in its path. We don't want to be saved, we want to be asked *what hurts* and to know how to answer, and to understand our many-layered, interdependent remedy.

Eartha Kitt is laughing in her blunt green garden, she offers us some white latex-like sap and oracular stillness, opium lettuce, in the palm of the Black magic hand stretching it to grin. How many of us don't know we're in pain because no one ever asked and we're afraid to ask ourselves? I don't know what pain is, do you know what pain is? The sharp cellulose of this would-be feather lettuce gives me hope, the hope almost hurts, like stolen excitement, the wish to heal the doomed of our society of its famous boredom. I want us all to be as delirious as the aching kid who takes his first dose of opium lettuce and is so relieved he has to turn on a camera and recount it, testify. I want to turn on a camera and testify to a sense of relief that makes me giddy. I want all of us to be so relieved we have to tell somebody we don't know what hurts and we love that ignorance. The idea of a natural, garden-grown pain killer that works better than much of what's on the market, a secret conjure, reminds me what

Blackness is, the suffering we would heal by just acknowledging it, the privacy we would recover by denying we ever did. Pain's story despises happy endings, it's not meant to go away, what it seeks is permission to know itself and trust what it tells us. That's how I feel, like so much pleasure comes from confessing what hurts I could almost get addicted, I could almost surrender my suffering to the joy of telling its story.

Harmony Holiday is the author of Negro League Baseball, Go Find Your Father/A Famous Blues and most recently Hollywood Forever. She is also the founder of Mythscience, an arts production house devoted to cross-disciplinary work that helps artists re-engage with their bodies, the Mingus School, its first series of events, and the Afrosonics archive of jazz and everyday diaspora poetics. She worked on the SOS, The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka, transcribing all of his poetry recorded with jazz accompaniment that had yet to be released in print. Harmony studied rhetoric and at UC Berkeley and taught for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. She received her MFA from Columbia University and has received the Motherwell Prize from Fence Books, a Ruth Lilly Fellowship and a NYFA Fellowship. She is currently working on a book of poems about reparations and the body, a collection of essays on the same topic, and a biography of jazz singer Abbey Lincoln. She lives in New York and Los Angeles.

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