



Whereof One Cannot Speak: On the Limits of Language to Describe Pain

Ed Simon Explores the Incomplete Poetics of Physical Suffering

[Ed Simon](#) September 21, 2026

When the pain first arrived, it was during an uncharacteristically temperate Chicago summer more than a decade ago. First as a slight tingling in my right jaw, barely noticeable, which I could basically ignore as I walked past the red-bricked town homes of Hyde Park while spending a summer seminar at the University of Chicago. Only in the morning after the first day that I noticed this sensation in my teeth which I couldn't quite localize did the real pain commence. Awakened by the crushing, burning agony that now radiated along each one of my upper and lower lateral incisors, canines, and molars, it felt to me as if someone had heated an iron rod and pierced the flesh on my neck just behind my ear and pushed it through my jaw until it burst out through my right cheek.

That image was one that's come to me in subsequent years, but during the pain itself, there was no imagination or metaphor, only the piercing, heightened, exemplary feeling itself which had expanded to obliterate all other concerns. For around 36 sleepless hours, I slathered thick, viscous glops of Benzidine on my teeth and gums, erroneously assuming that the origin of the pain was dental.

If I'd been a character from Kevin Brockmeir's novel [*The Illumination*](#), wherein some mysterious, supernatural shift in the universe suddenly rendered everyone's pain visible as a kind of bright glow, then at this moment my head would have been awash with blinding light. Without dental insurance my anguished mind didn't just assume, but accepted, that the pain would be never-ending, that is until on the second day I came out of my exhausted and lingering half-sleep to find that at some point near the dawn the uninvited guest had simply left, at which point—lacking the language to encompass what it had felt like—I largely forgot the feeling. That is until it would return.

We grasp towards our meager and incomplete descriptions of ineffable pain, we inevitably fall short, and yet like anything our words still serve us, even if only as a half-measure.

“It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world,” writes philosopher Elaine Scarry in [*The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*](#), “a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe,” or, paradoxically, sometimes both. Scarry's book remains the greatest theoretical treatment of the unintelligible experience of pain; not its physical symptoms or its biological etiology, but the actual subjective *feeling*, for she writes that pain “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.”

That sentiment, I believe, is universal. Is your pain burning or aching, throbbing or cutting, stabbing or radiating? Pain makes poor poets out of all of us, as we madly gesture towards whatever inadequate metaphors should serve in the moment in an attempt to convey severity to anyone who might be equipped to help. Just think of the anemic Numerical Rating Scale for patients to rank their pain from 1-10, as if the suffering were giving *Rolling Stone* magazine album evaluations, or the Wong-Baker FACES Scale whereby the afflicted match their agony to abstracted faces ranging from a beaming and unconcerned cartoon through to a grimacing and afflicted individual, with discrete iterations in that great in-between from best to worst. How can one easily impress upon others George Orwell's observation from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that “nothing was so bad in the world as physical pain” if you haven't been to Room 101 yourself? Has anyone ever found that the picture of the little frowning man is ever commensurate with the feeling of an iron rod being jabbed through your head?

Such methods speak not to a failure of medicine, but rather the far larger failure of language. So exemplary is the experience of pain, whether it be the bubbling itch of a sunburn or the sick slick slice of a paper cut, that the tools of description naturally flounder when faced with the singularity of such sensations. Nevertheless, as Scarry argues, once pain subsides, that it “begins to tell a story.” Halting, incomplete, and tentative though it may be, the realm of narrative—of making meaning—attempts its return.

My own way of remembering the Chicago pain, with that image of my tender head punctured by a metal spear, has been molded over time as the guest itself would periodically return. This is the period of the “Element of Blank,” as Emily Dickinson calls it, how in pain we “cannot recollect / When it begun—or if there were / A time when it was not.” Strangely it's only pain's corollary and near-twin of ecstasy that's similarly ineffable. What the 16th-century mystic and Spanish nun Teresa of Ávila described her excruciating theophany whereby an angel penetrated her soul

with a “long spear of gold... thrusting it at time into my heart...to pierce my very entrails,” so that she is on fire with the love of God, the “pain was so great, that it made me moan,” so that the line between the abjection of pain and the transcendence of orgasm are apparently quite permeable. Ecstasy, however, is all too often fleeting, while pain prefers to stay for a while.

Fallible animals though we are, unable to ever comprehend that this too shall pass, we interpret both misery and bliss as eternal states. My next meeting with my guest was while living in Washington DC, where I found an emergency dentist who seemed genuinely frightened to inform me that the pain’s origin was neither an impacted tooth or a root infection; later in Pittsburgh the pain spiked my blood pressure to over 200 and I ended up calling an ambulance. At the emergency room, resisting morphine offers because of my recovering alcoholic fear of addiction, I finally relented to the opium reverie (successful only after the second administering), a sensation which requires its own poetics, whereby Mikhail Bulgakov, a physician himself, described pain as having vanished “without a trace as though it had never been.” I also felt a warm floating, and wondered if I had pissed myself, though in such a state I was incapable of anything as mundane as worry (though as Bulgakov, an addict himself, would note in *Morphine*, “Then comes pain, horror, darkness”). Pain comes in many varieties, sometimes disguised as pleasure.

Various diagnoses have been proffered for my occasional jaw pain, with my GP ultimately concluding that I most likely suffer from a variation of trigeminal neuralgia, a kind of nerve condition, not dissimilar to migraine pain, that’s been nicknamed the “suicide disease.” Ironically it was another health emergency that gave me an incomplete solution to these periodic but protracted incidences of pain, when a late-night vagal response due to dehydration and blood pressure medication triggered a seizure, and I was hospitalized for a week. During that time, I kicked coffee cold turkey, its own terrible pain for somebody that used to consume around two-to-three pots of the black stuff every day, so that (surprise of surprises!) I discovered that I no longer had high blood pressure.

Consequently, the long periods of jaw pain disappeared when I no longer bathed my nervous system in caffeine (well, I still shotgun black tea, but it’s not the same), but the trigeminal neuralgia didn’t disappear. Now, normally at least once a day, though sometimes more, if my blood pressure spikes enough, I might feel that old familiar iron rod being javelined through my lower skull, a genuinely indescribable pain that would be unsurvivable if not for the fact that—normally—I know that it’s duration will only be for a minute. My brief sojourns in hell.

How fortunate then are we to have metaphor, incomplete though it is, to turn pain into words, rather than transmuting our words into pain.

“Whereof one cannot speak,” the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his *Tractatus*, “thereof one must be silent,” and though he was making an argument about the status of metaphysical claims, it’s applicable to the failures of description when facing pain as well, though admittedly literal silence is frequently not the result. Rather there can be screaming and shrieking, gasping and gritting, the abstract poetry of pain, what Scarry describes as an “immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.” Maybe because of this there are precious few great literary

works about the topic. Virginia Woolf said of literature that it can “express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, [but it] has no words for the shiver or the headache.”

Violence for sure; from *The Iliad* to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* literature has explored that universal theme which by definition requires pain and gives a kind of after-the-fact descriptive shape to its results, but the actual subjectivity of the experience, the aloneness of the whole thing, is approached obliquely. David Budbill, in a 2017 poem from his collection *Tumbling toward the End*, flits around “When the pain you’re in // is so great you can’t think about or pay attention to anything / but your own pain,” and while his is a good poem, the subject isn’t about pain so much as it is the occlusions of description (which of course has to be the case). We can only convey pain by the shadows that it casts upon the wall.

Nonetheless, the charged significance of *literature*, as opposed to the stick-figures of the Wong-Baker FACES Scale, is that if it cannot suture the chasm between experience and description, that it can at least gesture across that chasm. Not having a uterus, I can’t imagine the pain of endometriosis, yet Sally Rooney gives some shape to that illness in *Conversations with Friends*; being unafflicted by lupus, I can’t quite visualize the experience of that disease, of an immune system in rebellion, but in Megan Cummins’s *If the Body Allows It: Stories*, there is an invitation to the reality of how “joints were swollen,” when her central character Marie “woke feeling as if her insides were swollen, too, ready to burst through her skin.” Fortunately I’ve never been imprisoned by a deranged fan, had my foot severed from my broken leg with an axe and the wound cauterized with a blowtorch, and yet I too wince in horror when reading Stephen King’s description in *Misery* of the “blade squeal against bone” as his captor wrenches the axe free.

While in pain, we return to an animality; maybe more accurately we become mere materiality—we transform simply into stuff. We are meat that “must eat and breathe air and sleep,” as Polish poet Wisława Szymborska writes, we are creatures with “think skin and blood right underneath, / an adequate stock of teeth and nails, / its bones are breakable, its joints are stretchable.” To be tortured, whether by a prison guard or our own bodies, is to exist in that null-point of existence, whereby we all become Job scraping boils from his cankered flesh with broken, filthy pottery shards.

When it comes to descriptions of pain and sickness, Susan Sontag infamously implored in her essay “Illness as a Metaphor” that “We are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy,” and while her point about the risks of rhetoric is well taken, there is also a necessity to our metaphors, fragmentary though they may be. We grasp towards our meager and incomplete descriptions of ineffable pain, we inevitably fall short, and yet like anything our words still serve us, even if only as a half-measure.

Before the incommensurability of our own language and pain, we must at least be thankful that we’re not as the condemned from Franz Kafka’s story “In the Penal Colony,” whereby the punished are strapped into a machine of steel needles and harrows which slice into the flesh, rendering in skin and blood the words which describe the condition of the punished, so that what’s difficult to interpret with the mind, can now be “deciphered with his wounds.”

How fortunate then are we to have metaphor, incomplete though it is, to turn pain into words, rather than transmuting our words into pain. Our desperate and necessary attempt at formulating an expression of a chapped, crinkled, and poorly cut cuticle's sour ache, of the ripping of a calcite nodule across the tendons of the knee, or the blooming, radiating, electric shock of trigeminal neuralgia. The poetry of pain is a failure, yet it's poetry regardless.



Ed Simon

Ed Simon is the Public Humanities Special Faculty in the English Department of Carnegie Mellon University, a staff writer for Lit Hub, and the editor of *Belt Magazine*. His most recent book is *Devil's Contract: The History of the Faustian Bargain*, the first comprehensive, popular account of that subject.