

Seven

Lin

On a scale from zero to ten, how much pain are you in?

Seven.

The nurse clicks something on her screen.

She does not look surprised.

I wonder what would happen if I said ten.

Would an alarm go off?

Would someone run in?

Would I get a balloon?

Seven is safer.

Seven means: bad, but not dramatic.

Seven means: I am still sitting upright.

Three is the kind of pain you take grocery shopping.

It follows you through the aisles while you compare tomatoes.

You lean on the cart a little more than necessary.

Nobody notices.

At three, you answer messages.

You make tea.

You tell people you are fine because explaining would take longer.

Five is different.

At five, you begin negotiating.

If I shower now, I cannot also cook.

If I cook, I cannot clean.

If I go out tonight, tomorrow belongs to the sofa.

Pain turns ordinary life into accounting.

You begin spending energy you do not have.

At six, you stop making plans without checking your body first.

People ask:

“Are you free Saturday?”

You do not know.

Saturday has not happened to your abdomen yet.

Seven is where things get interesting.

At seven, I can still laugh.

This causes problems.

Apparently, people believe pain and laughter cannot exist in the same body.

If I make a joke, I must be doing better.

If I put on mascara, perhaps I was exaggerating.

If I answer the door, the pain cannot be that bad.

I have learned that suffering is more believable when presented professionally.

No smiling.

No earrings.

Preferably pale.

Eight is the pain that makes me quiet.

Not screaming.

Not crying.

Quiet.

I breathe differently.

Shorter.

Carefully.

As if my own body is a sleeping animal I should not wake.

At eight, I can feel my pulse in places where I did not know I had one.

I press heat against my stomach until my skin turns red.

Sometimes I still answer the phone.

Sometimes I still say:

“Yes, I’m okay.”

This is technically a lie.

But “okay” is a very flexible word.

Nine is where the scale begins to annoy me.

What exactly is the difference between eight and nine?

One stab?

Two?

Does nausea count?

Do I add a point if I cannot stand?

Subtract one if I manage to shower?

What if this pain has been here before?

What if I know its name?

What if knowing its name does absolutely nothing to make it hurt less?

Endometriosis.

A long word for something that can make a bathroom floor feel like a reasonable place to spend an afternoon.

At nine, I do not think:

This is nine.

I think:

Please stop.

Please stop.

Please stop.

Ten remains unused.

I keep it in reserve.

This seems sensible.

Ten is for something worse.

There is always something worse.

That is what repeated pain teaches you.

Not bravery.

Arithmetic.

You recalibrate.

Yesterday's eight becomes today's six because you survived it.

The impossible becomes familiar.

The unbearable becomes something you schedule around.

People call this strength.

Sometimes it is just adaptation with good PR.

“On a scale from zero to ten?”

The doctor is waiting.

I look at the little faces printed beside the numbers.

Zero is smiling.

Ten is crying.

I am not doing either.

There is no face for tired.

No face for angry.

No face for having learned how to breathe through something that should still frighten you.

No face for cancelling dinner without wanting to explain why.

No face for having pain so often that you no longer know what your normal was before it began.

The doctor looks at me.

I look at the scale.

A whole human experience reduced to eleven boxes.

Zero.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

Nine.

Ten.

I choose seven.

Seven means I can still speak.

Seven means I came here myself.

Seven means I have had worse.

Seven means the pain is real, but familiar.

Seven means I know how to sit in a chair while something inside me feels like it is tearing.

Seven means I have become very good at seven.

The doctor types the number into the computer.

For the computer, the answer is complete.

For me, it has barely begun.