



Image by Mariana Montrazi

THE PAIN THAT HAS NO NUMBER

WORDS BY

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How's your pain — on a scale of one to 10?

The question floats in the air above my hospital bed. It's been set at an angle where I'm mostly upright, and I'm just awake enough that I can respond to the nurse's questions somewhat coherently. I'm starting to piece together sentences with meaning, to remember where I am and what just happened to me.

But to answer this question, to assign a number to my pain, feels absurd. I look down at my chest. I can only see the standard light green hospital gown, but underneath it are bandages and tubes. The new sensations seem to blend into one. The tissue expanders are foreign objects pressing on my pectoral muscles, pushing me back down into the bed. Even the slightest movement of my arms pulls at the thin layer of skin stretched drum-tight over the expanders. And the drains. How many are in there? They're poking somewhere internally that I can't even identify in my mind.

And below it all, something is missing. I have been completely scooped out. This part of my body is no longer me. It is all a piece of biology sent to a laboratory to be weighed, sliced, observed, and recorded. The report saved to my medical record will describe the specimens: *Right breast, 364.1 g. Nipple flush with skin surface. Left breast, 402.3 g. Nipple raised.*

The nurse stands patiently beside the bed. I have been assigned a simple task. The only thing I have to do right now is name a number. It wouldn't even be that weird if I didn't speak; my throat is raw from intubation, and I'm floating in and out of a verbal state. I could show her my hands, all of my fingers spread. Yeah, 10. This hurts. Bad.

But how did I get here? It started with a betrayal.

My body betrayed me. Somewhere in its 32 years of running mostly well, my

body programmed itself to self-destruct sooner than most. My own cells made a plan to wage an attack, to invade my tissues, to conquer my organs, to shut them down and call it a day.

No, my body didn't want me to do any more biking, hiking, or Ultimate frisbee playing. No, I am not supposed to have children. My friendships have reached an end point. And the honeymoon I'd returned from just a few months ago is most certainly over.

How do I put a number on all of that? This pain cuts too deep. I can't even make sense of it. Truly, this pain cannot be measured. Whatever I respond to the nurse is practically meaningless.

Eventually a number comes out of my mouth. I have used this number to describe the physical pain I am experiencing. My task is done. The nurse records it, more medication is administered, and I drop back into a dark, timeless sleep.

The next day I'm released from the hospital, wheeled out and driven home with a pillow protecting my chest from the seatbelt. My surgical oncologist calls with the pathology results a few days later. No evidence of disease. Sixteen rounds of chemo had been just the right counterattack to my body's offensive.

In the weeks that follow, the physical pain begins to subside. I get in the routine of post-operation care: emptying the drains, removing the bandages, taking careful showers. At follow-up appointments my surgeon inspects the incisions, removes the drains, and injects the expanders with saline.

I make it through dozens of radiation sessions and somehow manage to keep my delicate skin mostly intact. As I continue to recover from surgery, my pain scale number gets lower and lower until one day I'm at an appointment answering the question yet again and realize I have a complete absence of pain. It's a zero today.

What now? There must be a purpose, a meaning to be found after making it this far. My body is mine to reclaim. My surgeon is barely interested in me now that my incisions have healed with no complications. My restrictions are lifted, and I have permission to go out and live. I am no longer a medical report but someone who is writing her own story.

Sometimes, facing the blank page of survivorship can feel just as terrifying as the night before my double mastectomy. There are no instructions for this phase, no one stopping by my bedside. And when the physical pain has retreated, healing from emotional pain is nowhere near linear. Waves of loneliness and grief are unexpected and less-than-courteous guests. The question is no longer what number I want to assign to my pain. It is: what do I want to do with this new body, this new life? ♡



Image by Marianna Montazzi