

By Meghan Schrader

My Mother's Ghost

There has never been a scale in my household.
My mother looks at them and sees herself wasting away.
Feels the slap of pavement radiating up her leg bones,
Feels her feet hitting the sidewalk like she was trying to smash it,
Feels the food she never ate turn to ash in her mouth, or rather on her plate where it stayed like a
poisoned apple,
Like the trick of some old witch trying to cast her beauty out, cast her skinny out,
Because skinny means beautiful, right?

There has never been a scale in my household.
So, when I walked into my grandmother's laundry room to use hers,

My mother knew.

When I lied to her about what I ate for lunch at school that day,

My mother knew.

She saw the ashes I never picked off my plate fall from my mouth.
She felt my hips bones and collar bones and cheek bones cut into her skin when she hugged me,
And I knew they were really like stab wounds,
Like old wounds, tearing open stitches, the past staining the carpet red.
Blood splatters on the mirror of my face and she sees her reflection in me.

There has never been a scale in my household,
But my mother felt the weight of me lessening every day.
Saw me dissolving like my stomach lining,
Saw me turning ghost of her past,
Turning skeleton in her closet.
Saw chronic fatigue creep into my bones and make a home there,
Saw the cold seep into my hands and feet and knew I'd never be warm again,
Saw the hair lining the shower walls like spider webs in an empty stomach—
I mean empty room—
I mean empty daughter—
I mean—

There has never been a scale in my household.
So, five sizes of jeans smaller the only people who noticed were my mother
And every boy who didn't look at me before
And all the girls who were jealous enough to congratulate me,
Tell me how good I looked,

How healthy I was now with my pale skin and half-moons stamped under bloodshot eyes and weak muscles and legs that could no longer sustain my weight for too long.

Isn't it funny how you have to get smaller to get noticed?
Have to lose parts of yourself to fit against the curve of their molds?
Because skinny means beautiful, right?
Except to my boyfriend who made fun of my sharp edges,
Didn't realize how deep they were cutting into me.

But
Five sizes of jeans bigger and I was an obstacle in the hallway,
Something you had to walk around or step over to get where you wanted to be.
And now,
I find myself being walked through,
Being shoved aside
Because I'm no longer a road blockage or a detour,
But a plastic bag trapped on the median blowing in the wind.
And nobody sees the car wreck on the other side of the skin—
I mean the fence—
I mean the eyes—
I mean—

There has never been a scale in my household.
So, when she saw it on my list of things for college,

My mother knew.

She felt my lifelong tiredness in her body,
Felt the glass floor I had built beneath myself the past few years start to crack like weak
undernourished bones.
She asked me *why?*

*Because Ma
People like me better when I'm skinny
Because skinny means beautiful, right?*

And when my parents come to school to visit me,
They hug me,
And my bones stab them like phantom pains of a past that maybe isn't as in the past as we
thought.
I tell them, *the scale doesn't even work.*
I never use it.
It's five pounds off.
I swear.

I say it because that way I'm not really five pounds less of a woman than the one they raised me to be.

I'm not really cutting pieces of myself off for all the boys who look at me.

But the truth is,

The first boy I started to like on campus made fun of a fat girl in front of me

And I put my fork down.

There has never been a scale in my household.

Because my mother knew.

She knew the world would look at me through bloated, foggy eyes.

She knew I would break my bones and struggle to walk under the weight of their gazes and spit ashes from my mouth.

My mother knew,

And I know,

Now.

There is not a scale in my household because my worth does not increase as my weight decreases.

I am not a roadblock or a piece of trash in the wind regardless.

I am not knives for hipbones.

I am not a ghost or a skeleton.

I am not my mother's feet hitting pavement.

I am not My Mother's Ghost.

I know, I know, I know,

But do I?

When I look in the mirror,

Do I see the ghost on the other side—

I mean the girl—

I mean the disappointment—

I mean the broken promise—

I mean—

I mean,

Skinny means beautiful,

Right?