The Scale

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The doctor's office is never inviting. Every medical assistant smiles when I walk in, to no avail. The walls of the combined pediatric and adolescent medicine wing are dotted with gentle reminders and animal paintings, but they just make me feel small.

I am not complex here. I am just a body, identified by numerical code. A white, plastic bracelet around my wrist has reduced me to numbers: my birthdate, my medical record number, my appointment date. In the corner, the flat black box on the ground stares back at me. The scale. There, the number that matters most will appear. That number defines me as unhealthy or healthy, determines how many more appointments I will need, decides how I perceive myself. I am that number.

The scale was not invented to weigh people; it was invented to weigh goods. Thousands of years ago, balance scales were made of limestone and leather rather than metal. You could find one in an Ancient Egyptian marketplace: an odd, T-shaped beam with two plates, one on either side. One scale plate would cradle grain, while the other would be slowly filled with weight standards, polished cubes of stone. When the plates became balanced with each other, the grain was priced accordingly. It would be a practice of patience: scooping cups of spelt onto the scale, choosing each weighted cube with intention, watching the beam oscillate until the plates were equal. It was a tool of economy, a tool engineered to exhibit balance.

But the thought of stepping on the scale made me feel unsteady. I fiddled with my hospital bracelet. The pre-visit questions remained the same as always.

Are you in pain right now? No, not really. I hope my face does not betray me. The scale awaits my return. It has been a blissful month of not knowing.

In 30 BCE, the Roman Empire conquered Ancient Egypt. The next iteration of the scale was the steelyard scale, invented in the Roman Empire during the Common Era, decades after the fall of the Pharaoh. The steelyard scale was invented independently in China as well. It is an astonishing thought: two parallel needs resulting in respective creations of a similar design thousands of miles away from each other.

In all honesty, the steelyard scale looked more like a torture device rather than a scientific tool. It has the same T-shape, but no plates are to be found on this scale. Instead, one branch of the "T" has chains with hooks to hold up the object to be weighed and the other has hanging copper weights. The object would dangle from the hooks while someone would slide the copper along the other branch, until the branch was parallel with the ground. Just like the balance scale, the steelyard scale searches for equality of both sides.

Somehow, the lack of hooks on the electronic scale on the floor did not alleviate my anxiety. On the exam table, a blue gown is folded neatly, expectantly. I am instructed to strip down to my underwear and swathe my body in the cloth. My winter clothes add a few pounds. I take a deep breath and grab the hem of my sweater.

The intentional act of finding weight manually using balance ended during the Renaissance. After centuries of adding up polished stones and copper weights, Leonardo da Vinci invented the first self-indicating scale. It is hard to imagine its exact shape; something that was new, but also incorporated old elements of previous scales. The idea sounds outlandish: Leonardo da Vinci played a part in the ritual I was about to partake in. I wonder if he foresaw how his invention would lead to emotional turmoil and churning stomachs. The scale used to just be a tool

for quantitative analysis of items, of goods. I try to remind myself that I am more than an item, more than a body, but the scale makes me forget myself.

I shiver as the cold air hits my skin. The gown covers my front, but leaves my back exposed. Open to attack. I try my best to tie it around my body, but the ties are too flimsy. I peek my head out of the room to signal that I am ready for the weighing. I try to shield myself, contorting around the door to hide the gown, my pale legs, the exhaustion in my body.

Over time, scales became more and more complicated, just as life did. In 1770, Richard Salter created the spring scale, which no longer required weight standards. Instead, it relied on the physics of spring tension to determine weight, a simple yet effective design. The spring scale became popular within multiple areas of the economy; they can still be found today hanging from grocer's ceilings to weigh produce. Yet another scale that was not made to weigh a person, but rather to determine the economic value of goods. During the Industrial Revolution, platform scales grew in popularity. One patent created by Thaddeus Fairbanks allowed a wagon to be driven onto the platform for weighing collected crops, especially helpful for the agricultural sector.

It was my turn to be directed to the platform of the scale. This was always the worst part. The medical assistant changes the units to kilograms so I cannot decipher my weight in pounds. Then, she asks me in a quiet voice to turn around, to face away from the scale. I am required to step onto the scale backwards. I feel as if I am going to fall, like I am taking a step off of a cliff.

In the middle of the 19th century, European military examinations included weighing potential soldiers. A simple balance scale would be used and, eventually, an average weight for selection for service was established. This practice permeated into medicine for everyone in the late 19th and early 20th century, as doctors began to focus more on body measurements. If they could not quantify the

person, they could at least quantify parts of the person, the body. The scale made everything more scientific, more numerical. It simplified the analysis of the body, forgetting the soul residing within it.

I feel the scale underneath my feet. I cross the fingers of my left hand and hold my breath, like a child wishing on a star. I find myself praying to a god that I barely believe in. *Please remind me that I am more than just a body and a number.*

The first public weighing scale in America was installed in Chicago City Hall in 1922. According to historical accounts, people were fascinated by it. Weighing your body became a novelty, a pastime. Penny scale popularity boomed; for a penny, a person could weigh themselves in the market, in the department store, in the train station, out in public. Did they watch the pointer oscillate until it stopped on a number? Did they feel the dread?

Dread expands in my stomach, spreading to the tips of my fingers. I am on the scale for a total of 60 seconds, but it feels like a lifetime. Standing on the creaking metal, I am scared of my center of gravity. I feel frozen. Then, I am told to step down. Surreptitiously, I turn my head to see the number; I can search up the conversion while I am waiting for the doctor. When I look, the screen is blank. Defeated, I dress myself, avoiding my own gaze in the mirror.

Bathroom scales began to be marketed to the American public as a way to maintain beauty standards. Advertisements boasted that scales were “beauty in figure or scale” and “the *weigh* to hold beauty and health,” accompanied with pictures of women smiling. Suddenly, weight had become an aspect of life, something to check every day. Scales were in the public, in doctor’s offices, in people’s homes. It feels like that type of scale has never really left the public eye.

I see it now in front of me: a ubiquitous flat platform scale, with an indicator of weight on the wall above it. A surface with the ability to measure my every molecule, but not my essence. A number that defines my health. A culmination of

thousands of years of development and invention that pierced my heart with every use.

The scale is meant to be a tool, a way of quantifying things. It was a way for trade to be fair, where items were assigned a monetary value based on their weight. Lady Justice holds a balance scale in her hands, a symbol of equality. Yet, the scale has become something in our culture that perpetuates inequality. You are assigned a number deeming you healthy or unhealthy, desirable or objectionable. You are stereotyped based on your weight, your eating habits, and your exercise ability. Weight is everything.

The exam room is quiet. I have been underweight, I have been overweight, I have never been of the proper weight. It's either the waistband of my jeans or my restriction of food intake or my favorite breakfast or my bloated stomach. It is never enough and it is more than enough, every single day. A way of measuring burden has become my burden.

I take a deep breath. I have to remember where it began. Grain spilling onto a plate, intricate statuettes placed with care to create evenness, apples at the grocery store pulling down a spring, the light touch of fingers to find balance in an uneven world. *I am more than a body. I am more than what the scale says I am. I am intentional, too. I rise above the scale.*