

## **The Weight of Their Judgments / The Worth I Now Choose**

What if—

before the shame ever settled into my skin,

before I learned to apologize for taking up space,

before food became both comfort and addiction—

like a tiger I had to let out of its cage every single day—

the world hadn't expected me to chase perfection?

I wasn't told to hide.

Not in words.

But I learned.

From teachers who called me “smart” but never “strong.”

From the preschool snack table—

where the teacher gave cookies to everyone else,

but handed me apples.

And I couldn't understand why.

I just knew I was different.

And that it meant something bad.

In school, my name was popular.

So they called me “Big Ashley.”

There was also a “Little Ashley.”

It didn't necessarily bother me—

but it became an identity I never asked for.

Assigned to me before I had the chance

to decide who I wanted to be.

I felt like a foreign body,  
transplanted into an environment that didn't know what to do with me.  
I wanted so badly to belong—  
to blend in.

But how do you hide  
when you're nearly 5'11" in fifth grade?  
I towered in every photo,  
always hiding in the back,  
never knowing how to pose without apologizing.  
My body became a spectacle—  
before I ever had the language to describe it.

Looking back, I didn't know it then,  
but I was living with lipedema.  
A chronic, misunderstood disease  
that made my body feel like it was betraying me—  
even though it was just trying to protect me.  
No one told me.  
No one caught it.  
So instead, I caught blame.  
And shame.  
And the gym class shame—  
I didn't want to wear shorts.  
My legs felt heavy and bulky, like they didn't belong to me.  
Other people could see them,  
and that made it worse.  
Looking back, maybe they weren't as bad as I believed,

but in middle school, they felt horrendous.  
Too much. Too visible. Too wrong.  
My grade was penalized because I wouldn't change into those shorts.  
Even that felt like a punishment—for existing in this body.  
It felt like the teachers were against me too.  
Trying to manipulate the system just to protect myself was exhausting.  
And the truth? I carried so much shame,  
I couldn't stand the thought of changing in front of other kids.  
I wasn't just uncomfortable—I was terrified of being seen.

Not every moment felt heavy.  
I didn't feel bad about myself all the time—  
not until someone made fun of me.  
Not until they chased and taunted me relentlessly on the playground.  
The same boys who would later become grown men—  
and apologize.  
But does that excuse them?  
Does an "I'm sorry" erase the years I spent wondering what was wrong with me?  
Wondering why my body was their entertainment?  
Ignorance was a kind of bliss, too—  
because sometimes, I didn't even realize I was the butt of the joke  
until after I was already laughing too—  
trying to fit in, trying to belong,  
trying not to make it worse by letting it hurt out loud.  
Why my joy was always interrupted by someone else's joke?

I wanted to wear the baggy clothes my friends wore,  
but the problem was—  
I grew into them.

My body didn't stay within the lines  
of the stores my friends shopped in.  
Suddenly, my size was a problem to solve.  
And I had no idea why.

I perceived I was eating just like my friends.  
But my body responded like it was under attack.  
I didn't know I was living with an inflammatory disease.  
No one told me that something inside me  
was turning everyday food into fuel for swelling.  
There's research now—about gluten, inflammation, lipedema—  
but back then, I just thought I was broken.  
Weight could appear overnight.  
And so could shame.  
I was blamed for what my body was doing  
in silence,  
without my consent,  
without my understanding.

I had a kind heart—gentle, soft, and always assuming the best in people.  
But I was met with rejection, judgment, and hatred  
for simply existing in a body like mine.  
And it shocked me.  
Because I hadn't done anything wrong—  
except show up as myself.

The world didn't say,  
"You don't belong."  
It just built everything

as if I didn't.

So I tucked myself into corners,  
lowered my voice,  
shrunk my presence,  
traded sparkle for survival.  
I wanted to hide so much,  
that I didn't exercise—  
not because I didn't want to move,  
but because I didn't want to be seen moving.  
Fat people get mocked for sitting still,  
and shamed for trying to change it.  
There was no winning. Just watching.

I quieted the bigness of my laugh,  
folded myself into yes-girl obedience,  
sucked in my stomach  
and stuffed down my hunger—  
for food,  
for joy,  
for being known.

And when shame showed up,  
it didn't knock.  
It already had a key.

Because I wasn't just living in a bigger body—  
I was living in a world  
that couldn't see past it.

I learned early that pain has cousins:  
Food. Addiction. Body dysmorphia.  
They fed each other at my table.  
And I fed them, too—  
with every “I’m fine” that wasn’t,  
every diet disguised as discipline,  
every prayer that begged for less of me  
instead of more of God.

But what if...

What if the world made space for bodies like mine—  
without conditions?  
What if care didn’t come with shame?  
What if I had never felt like a problem to be solved  
but a person to be celebrated?

What if I had learned that strength  
isn’t always found in muscle or movement,  
but in showing up anyway?

What if I hadn’t wasted years  
trying to get small enough to feel safe?

Because I was never the issue.  
The bias was.

And now—

I imagine a world  
where no child learns shame from a label.  
Where clothing fits bodies, not the other way around.  
Where health isn't gatekept behind judgment.  
Where joy is not a reward for weight loss—  
but a birthright.

I imagine a world  
where we don't have to recover  
from how we were treated  
for simply being in our skin.

That's the future I see.  
That's the world I'm writing.  
That's the gospel I live now.

So let them keep their glances.  
I've got a mirror and a Maker who says I'm good.  
Let them whisper.  
My voice is louder than their shame.

This is the weight I choose:  
Worth.  
Dignity.  
A life no longer delayed.

The weight of their judgments /  
The worth I now choose.