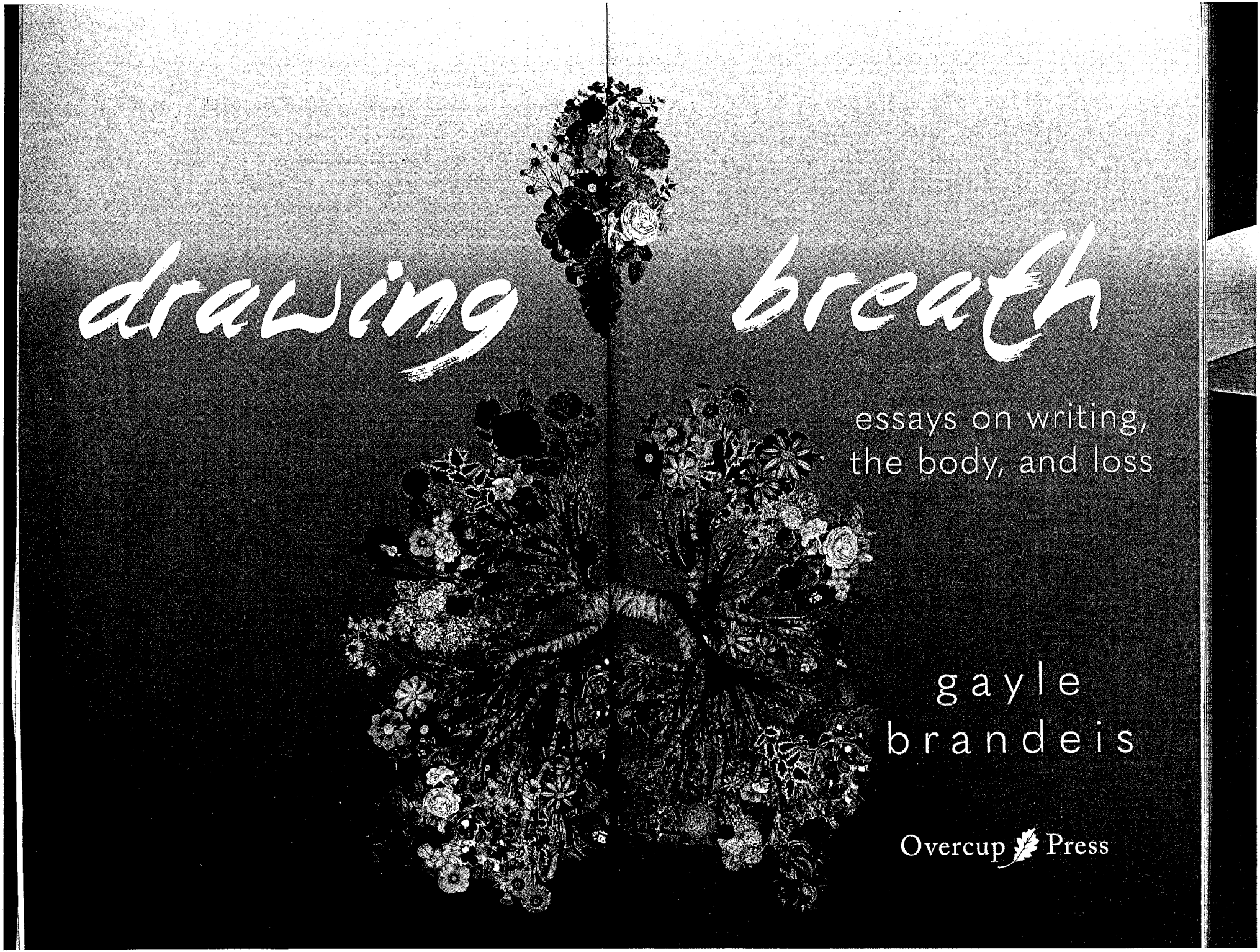
drawing breath
essays on writing, the body, and loss
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Overcup Press

thunder, thighs

I WAS BORN WITH TWISTED LEGS.

My feet were turned in, "pigeon-toed"; for the first six months of my life, I wore casts halfway up my shins, little stone booties to correct the tibial torsion. My legs still have a tendency to turn inward, especially when I'm feeling shy. My mind still has a tendency to turn toward my legs and cringe.

More than a decade ago, I decided to write a cultural history of the thigh, a book that would explore changing societal ideals, a book I hoped could help me make peace with my own thighs. As excited as I was by this project, it didn't coalesce for me, and I set it aside to focus on other writing projects. During our latest move, I came upon two thick binders: one full of thigh research, the other full of surveys I had circulated, asking women about their relationships with their legs.

I had forgotten how many women had responded.

I had forgotten how much thigh anxiety is out there in the world.

I used to have a happy relationship with my legs. I was a dancer and competitive figure skater as a girl, and the second-fastest runner

in my class; my legs were sources of power and speed and grace. I could kick higher with my left leg, but I could lift my right leg higher in back (my signature move on the ice was to grasp my right leg behind me at the ankle and raise it up over my head). My legs shinnied me up trees, propelled me forward on bikes and in swimming pools, did the crab walk and the Hustle and carried me regularly up five flights of stairs to my apartment. My legs were my friends, my freedom. I didn't inspect them, couldn't imagine dividing my body into parts like a butcher cutting and grading meat.

The word "thigh" finds its root in the Indo-European teu, meaning "to swell." The very ampleness some of us worry about is written right into the etymology. Maybe if we remembered the word holds space for abundance, we'd be able to embrace it more fully in our own bodies.

The thighbone, or femur, is the longest bone in the human body. It finds its root in Latin—the outer thigh was known as the femar, the inner thigh the femen. The Latin word femina springs from the same root. The Romans considered thighs inherently female. Femina is also intimately connected with the Greek word phemi, meaning a woman's ability to speak with grace.

I never had a negative thought about my legs until I was thirteen. We had just moved, and I was feeling uncomfortable in my new house, uncomfortable with the way puberty was breathing down my neck. I wanted to outrun it, wanted to stay in a child's body forever.

"You have a long torso and short legs, huh?" a new friend said offhandedly one day as we stood outside our homeroom, taking off our winter boots.

"I guess so," I said, even though I had never noticed this before. I suddenly felt hideous, my upper body stretched to ghoulish lengths, my legs compressed into stubby nubs. I wanted to put my boots back on, put my jacket back on, put my scarf and my hat and my gloves back on so no one would be able to see my freakishness. My friend closed her locker and walked into the classroom humming, unaware.

Thigh anxiety appears to be a fairly recent phenomenon. The first evidence I've found of the thigh-hatred industry was a self-published diet booklet from 1953, "Special Diet for Fat Hips and Thighs." It was written by Ruth Pfahler, who owned a "reducing shop" in Decatur, Illinois. Her theory: "People with excess weight on hips and thighs consume too many sweets." This booklet aside, it appears widespread thigh anxiety didn't sweep the nation until the 1960s, with the advent of the miniskirt. It billowed into epidemic proportions in the 1970s, when French doctors coined the term "cellulite" in *Vogue* magazine, naming it a "disfiguring" disorder. Until then, cellulite had been considered a natural part of the female body, something 90 percent of us share. Liposuction was introduced in France in 1977 and came to the States in 1981. The 1980s also ushered in the fitness craze (not to mention bathing suits and leotards cut high on the hip), which added a whole new dimension to thigh anxiety. Wendy Stehling's book *Thin Thighs in 30 Days* was released in 1982; it sold more than 425,000 copies in less than two months.

I was in and out of the hospital with Crohn's disease much of my freshman year of high school. My mom brought a photo from one of my skating shows to my room so I could remember being out

in the world, remember being well, and so my doctors could see me as a whole person, not just a patient. In it, I'm wearing a little white Spandex dress with strips of red sequins stitched into the shape of a bow tie and tuxedo lapels, a matching bowler on my head—the costume for my solo to "I Got Rhythm."

My gastroenterologist couldn't stop staring at my thighs in the photo, one stretched before me in a shallow lunge, my toe pick rooting me to the ice.

"They're like tree trunks," he marveled, spreading his white-coated arms. "They're each as big around as your waist."

I was mortified. I knew I had developed muscular thighs from skating, but I had never thought of them as weird before—just strong. After his comments, my thighs felt obscene to me, in the photo and in my body, even though much of that muscle had atrophied beneath my hospital gown. My mom tried to convince me the doctor had been showing admiration, but I didn't believe her. I was convinced my legs had been officially diagnosed as abnormal, wrong.

I recently came upon this photo; my quads are well developed in it but not dramatically so (and even if they had been, that shouldn't have been a problem). My doctor's words had managed to influence my long-term memory of the photograph, not to mention my long-term relationship with my legs. Words like his—whether careless or intentionally hurtful—can hover over our bodies like a distorted lens; they can make it hard for us to see, to appreciate what is truly there.

Survey Question #3: *Has anyone ever made a comment about your thighs? Your mother, a lover, a friend? What did they say? What was your response?*

"In high school, my mom would get mad at me for buying miniskirts because, 'Your legs are so ugly, you should try to hide them.' She was raised in Taiwan and thinks Asian women are supposed to be thin and petite."

"My husband once mentioned that they look like bad Jell-O that contained some sort of bumpy fruit. I cried, he said, 'What did I say?,' and I had to leave the room and cover up."

"My paternal grandmother would poke at my thighs with her unlit cigarette, a chopstick, whatever was handy when I was a girl. She would tell me they were 'fat and lumpy, like an old woman.' I was VERY self-conscious in school because I was and am large and she always made me cry."

"I had a lover once who told me I had fat legs, so I told him he had a small prick, and we parted company."

My own boyfriend in high school once grabbed my legs and growled "meaty thighs" like a hungry beast; he meant it affectionately, but I couldn't help but shrink away from his hand. My boyfriend in college, who became my first husband, told me my legs were works of art, but I figured he just wasn't looking at them closely enough.

More than one-third of the women in my survey had been called "Thunder Thighs" at some point in their lives. Many were still haunted by this. None of us had reinterpreted "thunder" to mean "power."

After I went into remission and my body started to accept nutrition again, I shot up several inches, leaving long, red stretch marks on my upper thighs. They looked like talon marks, as if growth had to claw its way into my flesh. Of course, this made me all the more self-conscious about my legs.

"What happened to you?" a friend asked, aghast, that summer

when we changed into our bathing suits. The red streaks coursed down my thighs like runnels of lava. I couldn't answer her; all I could do was cry. She stared at me in disbelief. "Forget about it," she finally told me. "Jeez."

I couldn't forget about it. For several years, I couldn't talk about my body, any part of it, without crying. Every doctor's visit unleashed a torrent. Every conversation about periods made me dissolve. I reached a turning point my freshman year of college when I announced, heart pounding, "I haven't shaved my legs in ten days" to everyone in my dorm lobby. I was part of an alternative program within the university, so this was not a shocking confession—most women there were hairy legged, hairy pitted. It was a huge step for me, though; I was amazed that I could speak about my body—especially my legs—out loud, and the world didn't fall apart.

During the Victorian Era, it was considered improper, if not downright scandalous, to utter "thigh" out loud in mixed company. When chicken thighs were served, they were referred to as "dark meat" (a term that survives to this day.) And, of course, it was considered even more improper to show one's thighs during a time when even a peek of ankle could cause a scandal.

In college, I started to feel more at home in my body than I had in years—I was in the dance studio just about every day, was finding ways to weave my body into my writing, was having lots of sex—but two different bodyworkers told me my energy only radiated from my hips up; it was as if my brain was pretending my legs didn't exist, they said. One bodyworker spun her pendulum

over my body and told me this was because of family pain from two generations back. This made some sense; my diabetic grandfather's legs had been amputated when my mom was a young woman. Perhaps I was experiencing the opposite of phantom limb, reliving my grandfather's experience in reverse—his brain could feel legs that weren't there; my brain wouldn't acknowledge legs that were.

Survey Question #8: *Do you think about your thighs during sex? If so, how does this affect your experience?*

"I do notice that if I'm feeling receptive, my thighs just naturally fall open…uh, like the petals of a beautiful flower unfolding. Yeah."

" Yes, I do. Because I have arthritis of the hips, I have a hard time opening my thighs, which means I can't have 'normal' sex, which means my love and I must get creative and work around the thighs."

"Occasionally, I'd be self-conscious when I got up to go to the bathroom but only with new partners."

"I so prefer my thighs by candlelight."

"A cartoon ran in *MAD Magazine* in the late eighties (possibly *National Lampoon*). It was about how naked you could expect 'chicks' to get based on their religion—the Reform Jewish girl would get as naked as her cellulite would allow and was depicted in a bra and half-slip."

"If I'm on top, I try to pull at the blankets on the bed, as if in some sort of fit of ecstasy, when I'm actually trying to cover some of my thighs and hips."

"Sometimes, in both good and bad ways. I think that I'm glad they're strong, that they feel good. That's a good thing. If I'm

thinking they're fat, unattractive, dimpled...I'm probably not having good sex. Not a bad indicator."

During my first pregnancy at twenty-two, I scrutinized my body's changes from month to month and noticed a little patch of cellulite on the back of one of my thighs, a little starburst of spider veins on the side of the other. I assumed they were temporary, that once I had the baby, things would smooth out, disappear, that my body would bounce back to its prepregnancy state as if nothing had happened, like memory foam. I didn't anticipate the way the cellulite would start to drift lightly down my thighs, didn't anticipate the way other little veins would burst forth, one in the shape of a mouth, a tiny kiss left on my skin, one I couldn't wipe away, no matter how hard I tried.

In labor, each contraction steered clear of my belly and back and seized the fronts of my thighs, my legs clenching so hard, aching so profoundly, they felt they might shatter. Leg labor, my midwife called it, as if my baby was going to be born through my quadriceps like Dionysus, sewn into Zeus's thigh after his pregnant mother's death; or like Aurva, who, according to the *Griffith Ramayana*, "issued from his mother's thigh with such lustre that he blinded his persecutors." Given my history with my legs, the fact that I ended up with leg labor—a pretty uncommon presentation—made a strange sort of sense.

My family took a vacation to Jamaica when I was a baby; I consider two framed black-and-white photos from the trip amongst my most prized possessions—in one, my dad is doing the limbo; in the other, my mom is about to go under the stick, hips thrust

forward in a mod, skirted bathing suit. When she saw the pictures on my bookshelf, she shook her head and said, "That's before I lost my legs." It seemed a strange thing to say for a woman whose dad's legs had been amputated. I felt an uncommon rush of protectiveness toward my own legs—I realized I didn't ever want to lose them; I told myself I would never take them for granted again. My mom must have noticed the horrified expression on my face at her comment, because she said, "It was before I lost the baby weight." The tenderness I had been feeling toward my thighs dissolved; I started to think about the weight I was still hoping to lose.

In what appears to be a highly unscientific—not to mention insulting—study done by L'eggs, 47 percent of women said they'd give up chocolate to have smoother legs; 25 percent would give up talking on the phone, and 18 percent would stop shopping. Thirty-one percent found cellulite more troublesome than their partner's bad behavior; 17 percent found it worse than dealing with their in-laws, and 23 percent feared cellulite more than turning into their own mother. Of course, this study was released at the same time as their L'eggs Care Anti-Cellulite Legwear. So many other companies have capitalized on the same consumer thigh angst—today, you can pay to have your thigh fat frozen, melted, wrapped, kneaded or vacuumed away (results not guaranteed); you can buy creams with caffeine and retinol and seaweed and quinoa and a host of other natural and chemical ingredients to smooth on your thighs in an attempt to smooth them out (results also not guaranteed).

My first husband's best friend visited shortly after my second baby was born, when I was twenty-five. He told me I was looking good, his eyes sweeping up and down; I just needed to work on my thighs, he said. He didn't know thighs were the Achilles' heel of my body image, didn't know how deeply his words would cut; even so, that gave him no right to say it. My body didn't owe him anything, not that I thought to tell him this. I didn't think to speak up for my thighs, which were providing a soft nest for my sleeping baby. I felt a hot rush of shame instead, as if I had committed some grave, moral offense by not living up to his idea of what a woman's thighs should look like. And, of course, that wasn't just his idea—he had seen that idea, that ideal on every billboard and magazine and sitcom and porn video and commercial and cardboard cutout of women advertising beer. So had I. I thought my thighs needed work, too.

A curse from the Bible: "May the Lord cause your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag." (Num. 5:21)

Could this have been the beginning of men judging women's bodies? Could this be where women's thigh anxiety really began—fear of a vengeful God?

I started wearing board shorts over my bathing suits, not wanting to inflict my thighs on the world, not wanting to hear anyone else talk about them. It didn't matter that my cellulite was only visible in certain light; it grew in my mind more than it did on my legs—over the years, the board shorts got longer and longer. Anytime I saw

a woman with cellulite walk down the beach uncovered, I would admire her and her bravery. I thought about all the tabloid covers shaming stars who dared to show cellulite on the beach. I thought about hazing rituals I had heard of, in which fraternity boys draw "fat circles" around bulges on sorority pledges' thighs, marking their skin as a plastic surgeon would. I thought about an essay by a rock star in which he says something disparaging about a woman's cellulite, implying that the woman's partner must be disgusted by her; I thought about a review I had read of a photography exhibit, where the male critic had called photos of a woman with cellulite "grotesque." I thought about how my mom covered up all the parts of her body she didn't like, especially her neck, never going out in public without a scarf. *Cover up your imperfections,* I learned from her. *Obsess about your imperfections. Don't let anyone know you aren't smooth and sleek as a seal.*

In ancient Egypt, the Goddess Hathor—also known as the Celestial Cow—had legs that held up the sky. Women would pray to have big, powerful thighs like Hathor's, in both this life and beyond. One papyrus is translated as "(Hathor) shall make thy thighs large among the goddesses, she shall open thine eye so that thou shalt see each day."

I wrote my first book, *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write,* to try to help myself and other women reclaim our bodies, tap into our bodies as sources of deep creativity and power. I wish I could say that after writing this book, I never felt bad about my body again, that writing this book helped me forever embrace every inch of myself unceasingly, unfailingly.

We often teach what we need to learn; sometimes we need to learn the same thing over and over again. I do have long, sweet stretches when I feel at home in my skin, when I don't care what other people think about how I look, when I'm able to view my body with compassion and kindness and gratitude. But two decades after writing the book, there are still times when I backslide, times when I look at the mirror and cringe, times when I reach for the board shorts, times when I freeze if my husband, Michael, touches my thigh, sure his hand is measuring it, judging it.

And he's not. He's not measuring; he's not judging. He loves every part of me; he doesn't understand why I sometimes flinch if he takes a playful peek up the back of my skirt, why I feel convinced he's trying to block my thighs from his sight if he holds on to them in bed.

I would never judge another woman's thighs the way I judge my own. I am fascinated by bodies, in awe of their diversity, their integrity, their power. I know all our bodies are beautiful, that all our bodies deserve love, no matter what size or shape or state of health or ability. I know I'm being ridiculous with my thigh preoccupation—intellectually, I know there's nothing wrong with my body—but some reptilian part of my brain is still convinced that my legs, and my legs alone, are monstrous.

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America describes body dysmorphic disorder as "a body-image disorder characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or slight defect in one's appearance.

"People with BDD can dislike any part of their body, although they often find fault with their hair, skin, nose, chest, or stomach. In reality, a perceived defect may be only a slight imperfection or nonexistent. But for someone with BDD, the flaw is significant and prominent, often causing severe emotional distress and difficulties in daily functioning."

Supposedly only 1 percent of the population suffers from BDD, but I'm guessing a larger percentage has a mild case. We're practically bred to have BDD in our culture. It's never been diagnosed, but I wouldn't be surprised if I have a touch of BDD; it doesn't affect me on a daily basis, and the distress it causes is not particularly severe, but it is definitely a "persistent and intrusive preoccupation," and I know I see my thighs as if I'm looking at them in a fun house mirror, each flaw, each billow magnified. If you met me, you probably wouldn't notice my thighs; you probably wouldn't understand why I'd feel compelled to write an essay—to have considered writing a whole book—on the subject. I barely understand it myself; I only know I need to face my own, unreasonable fixations, find a way to bring them to light.

Thigh anxiety is definitely a first-world problem, and largely a white problem. Black and Latinx cultures still tend to see big, powerful legs as sexy. Missy Elliott celebrates her thick thighs in several of her songs, and Pitbull's praise of Ciara's generous thighs in "That's How I'm Feeling' " is worlds away from Robert Plant wailing that a woman with big legs has no soul. Even so, BIPOC women are developing eating disorders and body-image crises at an alarming rate.

In *Wanting to Be Her: Body Image Secrets Victoria Won't Tell You,* Michelle Graham interviews Sandra, a woman from San Juan, Puerto Rico. "I remember my pride at being complimented for

my piernas gordas like my mother," Sandra says. When she went off to college, Sandra was faced with a different beauty standard; she internalized this and "started a war against my 'big' butt and thighs...too flaca in the barrio, too gorda downtown."

The Thigh Gap Hack: The Shortcut to Slimmer, Feminine Thighs Every Woman Secretly Desires was written by a Black woman, a fact that distresses Veronica Wells, who wrote the essay "Do Black Girls Want a Thigh Gap?" at *MadameNoire*. She ends with, "For those of you still lamenting the fact that there's not a gap between your thighs, let me leave you with this. According to my grandmother, the most important function of thick thighs is to keep your 'fishy' warm. And that's important."

In 2014, I needed to have several inches of obstructed intestine, a complication from Crohn's disease, removed. I had been unwell for months, unable to eat more than a couple of bites of food at a time without writhing in pain, and my weight had dropped to the point where people were expressing alarm. In the hospital, I fell beneath one-hundred pounds, becoming so weak, I could barely stand. My ass was gone, my legs spindles, but I somehow found myself scared to put on weight as I recovered; I found myself wearing my flimsiest shoes to doctor appointments to keep the numbers on the scale low, my thinking around my weight having grown distorted, disordered.

As I regained strength and health, my senses about this thankfully also returned. I started eating with gusto again, with pleasure. I gained back all the weight I'd lost during the hospitalization, and then some. Some of the clothes that fell off of me when I was at my tiniest turned snug; I tried not to care about this. I tried to focus less on my physical appearance, more on my physical experience, grateful for the thighs that let me groove across the dance studio

and walk the trail behind our house and squat down to play with my son and pull my husband in closer. The thighs that keep my fishy warm.

Studies have shown we spend an average of six and a half years of our life worrying. It's embarrassing to think about how much time I've wasted worrying about my thighs. Time I could have spent writing, or agitating for change, or using my legs to do something fun. And that's been the aim of beauty standards all along, right? To get women to spend money on unnecessary products and procedures, to get us to spend time worrying about our thighs or our bellies or our wrinkles or our breasts when we could be speaking up for our rights or making art or otherwise kicking ass. That's not a system I want to perpetuate. As comedian Sarah Silverman says, "Mother Teresa didn't walk around complaining about her thighs. She had shit to do." I have shit to do, too. When I start to worry about my thighs now, I try (not always successfully) to redirect that energy in a more positive direction—channel it into a poem or a petition or a dance, or even just renewed appreciation for all my thighs can do. It appears that's what therapy for body dysmorphic disorder often entails, using "cognitive restructuring" to help patients recognize and shift irrational thinking patterns. If I'm unable to do this sustainably on my own, I'll find someone who can help.

I see how women are helping one another online now, much in the way I had hoped to with my thigh-book project. A hashtag on Twitter, #thighreading, started when @princess_labia posted a photo of her thighs after she realized "they could tell a story, the way my palms could tell a story." In an interview with *The Today Show*, she says, "My thighs are something I've been insecure about my entire life. We don't ever really see thighs that aren't retouched

and that are of average size." Since then, women have been posting photos of their own thighs, using her hashtag, sharing their stretch marks and cellulite and scars from surgery and self-harm, with tweets like @mxurakate's "#thighreading helps so much. I didn't realize that so many other people have stretch marks wow now I feel like a normal human being" and @LyssaLatte's "#thighreading I've always said my thighs look like raw hamburger meat cuz of cellulite. I should be easier on myself." If #thighreading, or tv shows like *Orange Is the New Black*, which show women of all sizes, or *So You Think You Can Dance*, where so many of the dancers have big, strong thighs like mine, or even the phrase "thick thighs save lives," popularized in 2016 by model Ashley Graham, had existed when I was thirteen, or even twenty-five, I doubt my thigh loathing would have become as deeply entrenched in my psyche.

Survey Question #9: *If your thighs could talk, what would they tell you?*

- "You're kind of hard on us, don't you think? So we don't look like supermodel thighs, so what? Hey, look at Diana Ross. Cut us some slack, sister. We never hear you complaining when you're biking up those long hills."
- "For crying out loud, get off your lazy ass and take us for a walk already!"
- "Don't worry too much about us; we're cool. We aren't going anywhere, and we will never look the way you wished we did—so give it up."
- "Quit wearing those tight, tummy-trimmer underwear from Sears. We can't breathe!
- "Rub me."
- "Keep on truckin'."

- "Spread us more frequently. Do it for the team."
- "Lighten the fuck up."
- "LOVE US!"

My dear friend and mentor, poet and novelist Alma Luz Villanueva, had responded to my original survey with great verve (in answer to my question "What do your thighs like to wear?" she had responded "THE OCEAN"), and years later sent a follow-up: "I've always loved my thighs because they're strong and guide me through the world," she told me. "I trust my loyal, *amiga* thighs, their tender strength...*QUE VIVA LAS THIGHS*!!"

QUE VIVA LAS THIGHS, indeed.

I have an image in my head of all the people who've ever had negative thoughts about our thighs coming together; I imagine us shedding our board shorts, shedding our shame, and creating a giant kick line. Not like the Rockettes, who all have similarly-shaped thighs—this would be a diverse kick line, with thighs of every size and age and color and ability and gender identity; dimpled thighs, smooth thighs, muscled thighs, partial thighs, thighs with stretch marks and scars and veins and track marks and bruises and wrinkles and tattoos and other histories, hard and sweet, written on our skin. Some of us can kick way up over our heads; some of us can kick knee-high, some join the line sitting or lying down, but all of us are dancing in our own way; all of us are celebrating our bodies just as they are.

You can see it, can't you, this glorious line of dancers?

All our arms linked together?

All our thighs, thundering?