

THE

BREAK FREE FROM BEAUTY

INVISIBLE

CULTURE AND EMBRACE

CORSET

YOUR RADIANT SELF

LAUREN GEERTSEN

CONTENTS

<i>Prologue</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
 PART ONE: THE UNSEEN STRINGS	
<i>Chapter One: Beyond Body Positive</i>	11
<i>Chapter Two: Fear</i>	29
<i>Chapter Three: Domination</i>	49
<i>Chapter Four: Disconnection</i>	69
<i>Chapter Five: Machine</i>	87
<i>Chapter Six: Coercion</i>	105
 PART TWO: CUTTING THE STRINGS	
<i>Chapter Seven: Listening</i>	123
<i>Chapter Eight: Discovering Your True Self</i>	141
<i>Chapter Nine: Self-Expression</i>	163
<i>Chapter Ten: Love</i>	183
 <i>Epilogue</i>	 201
<i>A Love Letter from Your Body</i>	203
 <i>Acknowledgments</i>	 205
<i>Appendix: Floral Song Flower Essence Therapy</i>	207
<i>Bibliography</i>	211
<i>Further Resources</i>	227
<i>About the Author</i>	229

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND BODY POSITIVE

Warning! Reflections in this mirror may be distorted by socially constructed ideas of beauty.

—CAPTION FOUND ON A MIRROR DECAL

As women, we consciously and unconsciously measure our bodies against a culturally imposed beauty standard. We internalize this definition of beauty due to the unrelenting barrage of images in media and advertising that perpetuate this standard. Our families and communities, influenced the same way, further ingrain in us appearance-based values. We know this beauty standard is impossible and unrealistic because it's only made possible with Photoshop, professional hair and makeup artists, and cosmetic surgery. We might understand fashion models weigh, on average, 21 percent less than the average woman and that the media's portrayal of the "perfect body" is often a product of severely disordered eating. We may be aware that the beauty industry heavily favors white, Eurocentric faces and severely underrepresents the natural hair, skin tones, and features of women of color. On one level, we realize this beauty standard is toxic and unrealistic. At the same time, we battle our bodies for not conforming to this illusory ideal.

We're all doing our best to navigate this impossible beauty standard. We question aspects of it, yet remain controlled by it. How many of us invest in anti-aging eye creams without asking, "Wait a minute. Why should I spend my money trying to prevent signs of my age?" How many of us automatically reach for the Instagram filters and photo editing apps to smooth our skin without asking, "Why am I photoshopping myself when photoshopped ads have warped my own self-image?" How many of us have studied YouTube tutorials to learn how to fake bigger eyes or deeper cheekbones without wondering, "Why am I trying to make myself look like a different person?"

I used to feel trapped by an illusion of what I believed my body should look like, and that illusion controlled my thoughts and behavior. It was as if I were stuck in a funhouse room of mirrors. I looked at my reflection and saw myself as distorted, instead of realizing the mirrors themselves were warped and misshapen. Instead of leaving the room, I tried to manipulate my body to appear beautiful in those distorted mirrors.

The body positivity movement arose in response to the impossible cultural beauty standard. Through books, documentaries, and social media platforms, this movement seeks to help women love and accept our bodies in a society where billions of advertising dollars are spent to make women hate our appearance. You may have seen before-and-after Photoshop transformation videos on Facebook, showing how digital alterations make the initial model unrecognizable. You may follow Instagram accounts where women post pictures of their cellulite or share a meme stating, "How to have a bikini body: 1. Have a body. 2. Wear a bikini." Perhaps you've noticed corporations riding the wave of body positivity, vowing to avoid retouching models' photos.

Undoubtedly, body positivity has served an immensely positive role, bringing to our awareness the degree of technological, surgical, and cosmetic manipulation behind our cultural beauty standard. But in my

experience, body positivity wasn't enough. If it were effective, then I would be able to scroll through my social media feed or flip through a woman's magazine and celebrate my own body, even while confronted with that parade of willowy, poreless, hairless people.

Previously, when I saw body positivity photos or memes in my social media, they only fed into my existing mindset of body comparison and inadequacy. I'd see a celebrity's makeup-free selfie with some wincingly trite caption about embracing one's natural beauty. I'd think, "That's easy for her to say, because she has clear skin instead of the constellation of acne scars I have across my cheeks." Or I'd see an advertisement featuring a curvy model (as in a size 4 rather than a size 0), and I'd think, "She can embrace curvy because her curves are in all the right places, but I gain weight in all the wrong spots."

In my experience, body positivity messages fueled, rather than extinguished, my scathing self-criticism. These messages told me I *should* love my body, but I couldn't. That led me down a mental spiral of guilt and self-blame: I felt searingly insecure about my body, then berated myself for this insecurity. Given the thorough cultural brainwashing we've received, we *should* hate our bodies. It's the only normal—in fact, the only possible—response for women indoctrinated by beauty culture.

Body positivity encourages women to stop comparing our bodies to a beauty standard that is detached from reality because our bodies are beautiful in all shapes, sizes, colors, and conditions. Even if body positivity suggests that different variations of women's bodies are beautiful, it still panders to beauty culture—the *idea that a woman's value is dependent upon whether others perceive her as beautiful*. Expanding the definition of beauty isn't enough; we need to eliminate beauty as a determinant of a woman's worth and societal contribution. Can we still enjoy makeup, skincare, fashion, hairstyling, and other forms of self-adornment and self-expression? Yes! And in fact, we can enjoy beauty accoutrements more when they're not upholding systemic inequality and self-oppression.

WHEN BEAUTY BECOMES BIAS

*Makeup isn't a power. Getting dolled up isn't a power.
The lack of need to get dolled up is a power.*

—A CAMPUS POSTER created by the
Sookmyung Women's University feminist association

I posted a photo on Instagram, comparing a headshot of myself with makeup and styled hair next to a barefaced photo of myself. In response, one friend told me, “I went to work without makeup one time, and someone asked if I was sick.” One of my colleagues replied as well, saying she doesn't normally wear makeup, but “there's this lingering doubt about ‘professionalism.’ You know, because I get taken more seriously when I wear it.” Another friend recounted to me about the time when her manager told her to wear makeup and style her hair, because she would be taken more seriously. All these stories hit home, since my own inner dialogue went along the lines of, “I'll look too young without makeup, and people won't trust my advice.” Or, “I won't look professional without makeup.” And, “Most people will think I look less attractive without makeup. That surely won't help my career.”

This experience is so common, most women don't need proof about it, but research does offer confirmation. One 2011 study suggests that women are seen as more competent, likable, and trustworthy when they wear makeup. Nancy Etcoff, the study's lead author and author of *Survival of the Prettiest*, suggests that women can use this to our advantage. She says, “Twenty or thirty years ago, if you got dressed up, it was simply to please men, or it was something you were doing because society demands it. Women and feminists today see this is their own choice, and it may be an effective tool.”

But is it truly a choice if our professional reputation is on the line? Is it fair that going without makeup may harm a woman's career but not a man's? And is it truly an effective tool for professional advancement when it upholds an unfair system, rather than dismantles it?

As of 2019, black men earned an average of eighty-seven cents for every dollar earned by similarly qualified white men in similar jobs. Does this prove that the white men are better at their jobs? Does this mean that if black men wanted to earn more, they should become more white? Of course not! Rather, it suggests a cultural bias that negatively impacts black people. Yet those absurd arguments are employed when it comes to beauty, when people suggest that beauty advantages are biological, and it's "only natural" for women to spend so much time and money on our appearance as a way to increase our success and desirability. A few aspects of what humans consider beautiful do seem to be biological, but by and large, beauty is a social construct determined by cultural, financial, and racist forces (as I'll discuss further in chapter 3). Scholar Tressie McMillan Cottom sums it up when she says, "Beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order."

In *Survival of the Prettiest*, Etcoff writes:

Women are heavily rewarded for their looks in a way that they are not always rewarded for their other assets, and it is only natural that they put some of their resources into its cultivation. The idea that women would achieve more if they only didn't have to waste time on beauty is nonsense. Women will achieve more when they garner equal legal and social rights and privileges, not when they give up beauty.

But how can we achieve equal rights when we're exhausting our resources on our appearance? Yoon-Kim Ji-Young is a professor at the Institute of Body and Culture at Konkuk University in Seoul. She commented on a feminist movement in South Korea called Escape the Corset. (My jaw dropped to the floor when I learned about this movement after titling this book.) Ji-Young said, "The constant feeling of obsession, self-hatred and fatigue in this competitive society robs us of the energy to address its fundamental, structural inequality."

Various polls reveal that women spend, on average, \$225,000 to \$300,000 on beauty expenses in their lifetime. Most women aren't

spending this money because we enjoy salon visits, hair products, Botox, and makeup *that* much; rather we see them as a means to the ends of success, approval, and romance. Education, mentorship, spiritual development, and relationship coaching might all prove more effective avenues to achieve the business success, self-confidence, and love life we want. Yet we haven't given ourselves the opportunity to realize that because we believe that beauty is our best investment. Since we hold this belief, we've made beauty a profitable self-investment. This is an oppressive social system we unconsciously uphold, *not* our biological fate.

In discussing beauty bias with my friends and colleagues, I've heard variations of the response, "If I didn't capitalize on my appearance, I wouldn't have the success I do," or "I would have better success dating if I was more conventionally beautiful." These statements may indeed be true, but they can also be forms of confirmation bias. This psychological phenomenon occurs when we interpret reality as evidence for our existing beliefs. If our existing beliefs limit us, as in the case of beauty culture, then confirmation bias isn't on our side. Many powerful women chose to believe that it's possible to find legacy, success, and joy while diverging from the beauty standard—and they confirmed that belief! Frieda Kahlo told herself, "I can be an enduring artist without plucking my eyebrows and waxing my upper lip." Lizzo told herself, "I can be an international icon at my current weight." Betty White told herself, "I'll continue my career long after youth fades from my face."

Imagine how different beauty would feel if you *truly* had a choice. You'd be equally confident with and without mascara. You might invite spontaneous and adventurous changes in your appearance, like that haircut you've been secretly considering or a bold fashion choice. Like your male colleagues, you'd feel no need to apologize for not wearing makeup today or for "looking tired." You'd feel no pressure from your job, partner, or social circle to hide your "visible signs of aging." You might feel more confident and uninhibited in your sex life, workplace, and social environment. We can only experience the freedom of beauty

when we address the subjugation to it. Then it becomes what we always wanted it to be: fun, celebratory, sensual, and self-expressive.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR BODY IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO LIFE

Einstein purportedly said:

The most important question you can ever ask is if the world is a friendly place. For if we decide that the universe is an unfriendly place, then we will use our technology, our scientific discoveries and our natural resources to achieve safety and power by creating bigger walls to keep out the unfriendliness and bigger weapons to destroy all that which is unfriendly. . . . We may either completely isolate or destroy ourselves as well in this process.

We're presently witnessing the manifestation of the concerns in that statement. Humans are on the fast track to cause our own extinction by killing our life-giving planet. We've learned to see the world as a dreadful, threatening place.

The body's intelligence is, of course, an inseparable part of universal intelligence, one of its countless manifestations.

—ECKHART TOLLE

We must also ask ourselves the question, “Is my body a friendly place?” Imagine you're considering the purchase of a new home. One house sits nestled in your ideal environment with blue skies overhead and sweet sunshine filling the air. You open the door, and the space greets you with delight. Even time takes on a different quality here—softer and slower. In this home, colors appear brighter, food tastes

better, and your mind feels immediately clearer and expansive. The other home stands in stark contrast, situated in an area with brutally violent weather, like a perpetual Little-House-on-the-Prairie winter. The air in the home feels heavy, as if resentments and bitterness saturate the very walls of the place. In here, your heart races, and you can't catch your breath. Which home would you buy?

The perceptions, beliefs, and expectations we hold of our bodies determine whether we live in that friendly home or the oppressive one. We've tried fruitlessly to change our exterior without addressing the root of the issue, which is how we perceive our bodies. It's like wallpapering the walls of that second house—the energy and the experience remain the same. Fortunately, the biggest and most important relocation of our lives can occur without heavy lifting in the physical world, but simply by a radical shift in our perceptions. This perceptual shift is the most effective, enduring way to transform our physical surroundings.

Botox is the most common form of cosmetic surgery, but it comes with potential side effects ranging from blindness to death. Breast implants place second in the most popular cosmetic surgeries, and these operations frequently come at the price of diminishing or destroying breast and/or nipple sensation. Every day, we reach for makeup and personal care products laden with chemicals, which, when absorbed through the skin after application, are implicated in cancer and autoimmune diseases. Products like skin-bleaching creams and hair relaxers, and procedures such as double-eyelid surgery intended to create a more Eurocentric eye shape, inherently promote a white-supremacist beauty standard. Anorexia, often associated with sociocultural causes, has the highest death rate of any psychiatric illness, including depression. On a less lethal but still disturbing note, the compression garments maker Spanx was valued at a billion dollars in 2012—that's a billion-dollar industry based on restricting women's comfort for the sake of an arbitrary beauty ideal. We are sacrificing our health, our heritage, our sanity, and our *lives* on the altar of our culture's beauty standard not because we choose to, but because we can't see any other choice.

Fear of our own bodies is not a natural state, for it is unnatural to destroy that which gives us joy and pleasure and life. We must ask the question, “Is it a coincidence that women fear their bodies, and as a result we self-destruct? Or is this fear culturally indoctrinated, systematically implemented, and consciously manipulated?” When we examine history and facts, we find this fear is an intentional method of social control to make women fear our bodies. After all, when women are busy destroying ourselves, we’re not challenging and fighting the cultural system that oppresses us. Women unlock a triumphant force of creative potential energy when we escape the tunnel vision of body worries.

My body used to be the loneliest, most hostile place I knew. Since it went with me wherever I went, I was perpetually lonely and anxious. Because I was ashamed to be seen with my body, I attracted toxic relationships with people who didn’t want to be seen with me. Because I saw my body as unsexy, I gravitated toward experiences that were not sexually fulfilling. Because I thought my health problems meant my body was broken, I didn’t create necessary boundaries around other broken, unhealed people. Because I saw my body as never enough, I was magnetized to situations where I was never enough.

I had to learn the truth of women’s bodies before I could see myself for who I truly am. This search for truth took me on a journey through history, philosophy, science, medicine, and politics. I discovered that women’s self-perception of our bodies has been corrupted by the erasure of history, our lineage of exploitation, and the psychological abuse inherent in beauty culture. I also realized that the truth of women’s bodies has been buried, ignored, and decried as blasphemous not by accident, but intentionally. Why? Because this truth is so magnificent and so powerful that it threatens the foundation of hierarchy, violence, and domination upon which our present culture stands.

In order to stop hating our bodies, we need more than a non-photoshopped bikini ad. We need to see the invisible belief systems and power structures that trap women in a hate affair with our bodies.

Only when I saw these invisible restraints, which had been hidden in plain sight, did I recognize the value, worth, and power of my body. I know who my body is, and I am proud to be seen with her. I know her radiance and joy. I know her tremendous capacity to heal. I know her glorious sexuality. I know she offers vast and unique contributions to the world. As a result, my life is now filled with relationships and situations that reflect this awareness.

Are you ready to let the truth of your body set you free?

THE BODY'S WISDOM

If a woman were to trust her body to guide her life, body anxiety would be replaced with awe. But instead of working *with* the force of nature within her body, our culture exerts power *over* her body. We'll never achieve sustainability or relaxation by striving for power *over* nature, only by seeking power *with* nature.

What is the wisdom written in our bodies? It's the intelligence that guides a fertilized egg to transform into a complex fetus within the womb. It's the internal knowledge directing a child's growth and development. It's the healing power that seals a paper cut and knits back together broken bones in a cast. It's the intuitive compass in your gut.

Our bodies hold the source of our power: our intuition, our creativity, our sexuality. When fully expressed, all these aspects allow a woman to live a life in alignment with her soul, unshackled by societal standards and expectations. She is a seething force of self-confidence requiring permission and acceptance from no one, and her mere presence commands respect from everyone. Women in touch with the wisdom of our bodies are the single greatest threat to societal systems of domination, oppression, and control. We are also the greatest possibility to bring healing, peace, and restoration to our world.

When we control our bodies to fit a beauty standard, we resist the wisdom of nature within us. On a larger scale, that means we resist