

– Prologue –

What you say, you say in a body; you can say
nothing outside of this body.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein

*D*esnudo de Frida Kahlo, a lithograph by Diego Rivera, hangs in a light-filled gallery in a small museum in Guanajuato, Mexico. In this portrait, Frida's torso is taut and slim; the sides of her waist curve inward, creating perfect hollows for each of your hands. Her breasts are soft and firm – slightly lifted, because her arms are clasped behind her head; her elbows are the pointed tips of wings. The likeness is that observant, that meticulous and loving in its detail. This body is deeply known, fully seen and so *elevated* that you can imagine it moving into positions outside the frame, in real time and in other places. Two looped strands of large dark beads hang just below her collarbone. Her shoulders look solid, strong, able. This is a body that is loved, admired, desired. Frida's eyes are cast downward, half-shuttered as if she's in mid-thought. Perhaps she is enjoying her body and the adoration it evokes from her love. This extraordinary body, this remarkable image: beautiful, when she had already weathered so much.

This lithograph was made in 1930, after polio dis-

figured her right foot in 1913 when she was six years old; after the 1925 streetcar accident that broke her spinal column, her collarbone, her ribs, her pelvis, created eleven fractures in her already weakened leg, crushed her foot and left her shoulder permanently out of joint. During the twenty-nine years between her accident and her death in 1954, Frida had thirty-two operations; was required to wear a corset every day from 1944 onward; and had her leg amputated as a result of gangrene in 1953. It was this final operation that likely led to the complications that eventually killed her. Speculation of suicide remains.

As an artist, Frida is famous for translating her pain into art, but people rarely know the full details of what she endured, and what such an enterprise of translation might require. Many of her millions of admirers across the globe do not realize that she was an amputee during that last part of her life, and that *all* her life her body was a canvas constantly shifting: at one point she was hung upside down to strengthen her spinal column; her body was wired and rewired, bracketed and captured and restrained and corseted in an attempt to be hemmed in, to stop her muscles and bones and joints from collapsing into chaos. She was as familiar with the edge of a scalpel as she was with the tip of a paintbrush.

Here, in Diego's 1930 likeness, her legs are thickly muscled, almost masculine. Sheer stockings hug her legs from the calves all the way to her upper thighs,

stopping just short of the shaded tangle of hair between her legs. She appears soft but also invincible, a lovely live wire in careful repose. There is no invitation in her posture, only choice – a reflection of the serenity and eroticism and intimate power of absolute trust; a woman who is willing to be seen by this artist, this man, fully and completely. Frida met Diego, twenty years her senior, in 1922 when she was fifteen years old. He had been commissioned to paint a mural at the National Preparatory School in Mexico City, where her program of study was meant to lead to medical school. This, one of Diego's first murals, was called *Creation*, and Frida walked past his larger-than-life interpretation of the beginning of the world day after day for years.

As an amputee since the age of four, I have always wondered what it would be like to have memories of two flesh and blood legs. I have always wanted someone to see me the way that Frida is seen in this lithograph. I long for a concrete, active memory of walking and running on two legs, looking at them, crossing them, spreading them, although I know this remembering would be painful. I long for the extraordinary confidence that allows Frida to be seen by the viewer without looking back to see if the body is okay, if it is offensive, if it is grotesque. But the memory of life lived on two legs is unavailable to me within the conscious process of remembering. The desired body that I long for is a fiction, and its aspiration is pointless.