



*What I Saw in the Water or What the Water Gave Me, 1938.*  
Oil on canvas, 91 x 70.5 cm. Private collection.

*Kahlo's World*  
*Split Open*

*Evelyn Torton Beck*

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?  
The world would split open.

—Muriel Rukeyser, "Käthe Kollwitz"

Mine was a strange world  
Of criminal silences  
Of strangers' watchful eyes  
Misreading the evil.

—Frida Kahlo, *Diary*

Visual artists' . . . most truthful biographical statements  
are their images.

—Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*

THE MEXICAN ARTIST FRIDA KAHLO (1907-1954), of European and Mexican indigenous heritage, turned to painting after a life-threatening accident at age eighteen made attending medical school impossible. At twenty-two, she married the well-established painter/muralist Diego Rivera who remained supportive of her work despite their stormy marriage. In her lifetime she became internationally known as an artist in her own right, but after she died, her work (like that of so many other women

artists) disappeared from public view. She was rediscovered by feminist scholars in the Second Wave of the women's movement and has since become an "icon" with a wide, international audience.

This essay offers an alternative reading of a cluster of violent images of "bloody wounds" that pervade her self-portrayals and which, I suggest, originate in her experiences of growing up female in a highly patriarchal culture in which girls and women have historically not "owned" their bodies and as a result were frequent objects of sexual abuse not only in the public sphere, but also within the confines of the family.<sup>1</sup> Although Kahlo's images of woundings to the female body have been widely understood to represent traumatic physical and psychic pain (childhood illness, the life-threatening accident in which a bus rail pierced her body and the dozens of operations that followed, her elective abortions and bloody miscarriages, Rivera's frequent sexual betrayals), I believe they also suggest traumatic experiences of sexual abuse that were "unsayable" in any other form and were perhaps not even available to conscious thought. Kahlo herself said of her painting, "I didn't expect anything more from my work than the satisfaction it could give me from the very fact of painting and *saying what I was unable to say in any other form*" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Because my "engagement with the unsayable" is at once systematic and deeply intuitive and is rooted in historical as well as psychological contexts, it seems appropriate not only to offer my readings, but also to document the process by which I came to these troubling conclusions which have wide interpretive ramifications.<sup>3</sup> Trying to understand Kahlo's paintings in the context of her life history, I began to wonder about the shame that I sensed was simultaneously revealed and hidden in her work. While some sources of shame were clear (an early illness followed by teasing for her withered "peg leg," being the child of a German-Jewish immigrant father with a foreign accent, abandonment by family and a young lover after the horrific accident, having a mutilated body, repeated betrayals by a womanizing husband, remaining childless in a culture that defined women by their capacity to reproduce), my antennae went up when I read her biographer's description of the dramatic changes evidenced in photographs of the child Kahlo taken *before* and *after* an injured leg confined her to bed for many months. From being a "chubby imp, with a dimple in

her chin and a mischievous glint in her eye," she became "thin and gangling, her . . . face somber, her expression withdrawn. She stands alone behind a bush *as if she wished to hide*" (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Hayden Herrera cites Kahlo's illness as the cause of this profound change. However, in light of the knowledge that it was her father who nursed her through this confinement and spent a good deal of time with her in the privacy of her bedroom, I was led to think about the intimacy of such a "special" relationship and its possible incestual aspects. The patriarchal structure of the Kahlo household, with its facade of respectability and its traditional, gendered division of labor (as well as a mother described by the daughter as "cold and cruel," paired with a nurturing, adored father, tender in the daughter's early years and distant in adolescence), fit the literature describing the families of many other girls who have been abused. Reflecting on this patterning led me to a dialectical process in which I moved from the study of the life to the art and then back again. Each new reading of one led to new interpretations of the other. In this process I came to believe that Kahlo's masked, impassive self-portrayals (so at odds with her wounded body), also hid an additional source of shame. My intuition was strongly reinforced by recent, harsher descriptions of Kahlo's family dynamics than had previously been offered.<sup>5</sup>

Kahlo is quoted as stating unequivocally that her parents' marriage was cold and loveless.<sup>6</sup> Like many wives of abusing men, Kahlo's mother had numerous unwanted pregnancies, suffered from mysterious ailments, and was often depressed and emotionally unavailable. She was judgmental and prudish about sex, and given the coldness in the marriage it is likely (as has been hinted at between the lines in accounts of the marriage) that she was sexually unavailable as well. Kahlo's father, who is universally said to have been a remote and depressed man, made an exception for the young Frida, his undisputed "favorite." From her earliest years she took on (or was assigned) the task of keeping him happy, cajoling him out of depressions, and accompanying him in his work to protect him should he have an epileptic episode.<sup>7</sup> A year before her death, in 1953, Kahlo reflected, "My childhood was wonderful even though my father was a sick man. . . . He was the best example for me of *tenderness*" (emphasis added), a word that she had consistently associated with him.<sup>8</sup> Kahlo's insistence on her

father's "tenderness" (otherwise so out of character with her father's personality) made it possible to imagine that the lonely man in a loveless marriage was giving "comfort" to (and perhaps getting comfort from) his special little girl who he felt was the most intelligent of his children, and the one he said was "the most like him."<sup>9</sup> Although there is no doubt that the senior Kahlo's marriage was unloving, it is also possible that some of the coldness in Kahlo's parents' marriage was not the cause, but rather the result of her father's early pull toward his child, which can separate mother and daughter. Yet mothers have often been complicit, sometimes offering the daughter to the father in her own stead. Tellingly, Kahlo identified with the Mexican figure of La Malinche, the Aztec Indian whose mother betrayed her when she was a young girl by giving her away to men who ultimately raped and exploited her.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE PAINTINGS

My sense that there were inappropriate sexualized dynamics in the Kahlo household was reinforced by an oddity that struck me forcibly in one of Kahlo's best known paintings—her decision in *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* (1936; fig. 1) to paint the child Frida in the nude and to place her directly beneath the portrait of her father, locating her in the center of their U-shaped family home (a shape that contains and holds, but also possibly engulfs). This placement has often been read as Kahlo's signal that she had, since early childhood, felt closer to her father than her mother, but the fact that the child (who is not a baby) is depicted in the nude has not been interrogated.<sup>11</sup> According to Herrera, Kahlo said that the Frida in the painting was about two-years old, but the face of the child looks several years older, closer to the age Kahlo was when she became bed-ridden.<sup>12</sup> This time reference is reinforced by the illusion created by Kahlo's (perhaps unconsciously) covering one of the child's legs with a small tree so that the leg resembles the withered leg Kahlo herself developed as a result of her illness.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, nudity for a child of that age seems particularly strange, especially as her labial cleft is carefully made visible. (This kind of detail is a signal to which psychologists who work with children who may have been abused pay close attention.)

An even more explicit delineation of the vaginal cleft occurs in an

unsettling drawing of Ady Weber, a close school friend whom she called "cousin" (1930; fig. 2), whose pubescent nude body, with tiny breasts and long arms hanging down passively, is child-like, with no pubic hair covering her vaginal cleft. Ady's legs have no feet, perhaps because Kahlo misjudged and was not able to fit the feet onto the page. But Kahlo chose to place the feet next to the figure at mid-arm level, exaggerating the slender girl's immobility. When looked at in the light of the nude self-portrait as a child in *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I*, it seems possible that Kahlo was projecting onto her friend some of her own vulnerability as a young girl.

To the left of the child Kahlo in *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* a "big sperm, followed by a school of smaller competitors, [penetrating] an egg" (interpreted by Herrera as Kahlo's way of signifying the moment of her conception), is mirrored by the fetus in her mother's belly (although she is dressed in her wedding gown). Further to the left, Kahlo has painted another scene of "fecundation: a crimson, U-shaped cactus flower (visually echoing the U-shaped Kahlo home), opening to receive pollen carried by wind."<sup>14</sup> Kahlo's frequent depiction of sperm/egg imagery has been remarked upon and usually attributed to her interest in biology and study of medical texts, but the frequency of the swarms of sperm is so striking as to seem overdetermined and raises the possibility that something else, something "unspeakable," is being signified, possibly early and unwanted acquaintance with sperm.

Similar images of magnified cells or eggs surrounded by "swarms of dark marks that suggest sperm" provide the background for the *Portrait of My Father* (1951; fig. 3), a picture painted on the tenth anniversary of his death. Gannit Ankori, who has compared this painting with the original photograph of the much younger Herr Kahlo on which this painting was based, observes astutely that the original was a full body portrait, but "[Kahlo] cropped the bottom portion of the photo, thus focusing attention on Wilhelm's body from the waist up," and replaced the bourgeois setting with his camera and the cells.<sup>15</sup> Ankori makes nothing more of this detail than that Kahlo was identifying Herr Kahlo as her father and as an artist. However, the choice to edit out the lower half of his body potentially takes on new meaning when placed in the context of Herrera's observation of the "wild, haunted look" of Kahlo's father's "shiny overly large eyes" that

have a distinctly vaginal shape and resemble the “eye” of his camera beside him. The swarms of sperm (and eggs) that give the portrait’s background a “Van Gogh-like agitation” support the sexual undertones of these associations. Herrera wonders if the sperm/egg imagery is meant to signal Kahlo’s father as her biological progenitor or if Kahlo was suggesting a connection between her father and “primal energy,” possibly making “an analogy between sexual and artistic fecundity,” because he too was a painter.<sup>16</sup> These interpretations clearly have much validity, yet the possibility that sperm is associated with her father in a more concrete and unspeakable way may also be signified here, especially given the agitation in this painting, her father’s open collar, and the phallic red tie.

Such a possibility becomes more viable when these details are coupled with the odd distancing effect created by the encomium to her father that she painted beneath his portrait in blood-red ink, which begins in the first person with a more neutral tone and ends with her adoration, in the third person:

I painted my father, Wilhelm Kahlo of Hungarian-German origin, an artist-photographer by profession, in character generous, intelligent and fine, valiant because he suffered for sixty years with epilepsy, but never stopped working and fought against Hitler, with adoration. His daughter, Frida Kahlo. (Fig. 3)

Her attachment to her father even during her adult years was pronounced. In a 1930 letter to her father, when she was living in the United States, a year after her marriage, she addresses him as “Darling daddy”:

If you knew how pleased I was to receive your letter, you would write me every day. For you can’t have any idea how glad I was. . . . I miss [you] terribly for you know *how much I love you*. . . . Accept all my affection and a thousand kisses from your daughter who adores you,  
Frieducha [here is a kiss]<sup>17</sup>

Her mother gets a bare mention in the letter. Especially telling is the fact that Kahlo kept a photograph of her father (but not of her mother) on the headboard of her bed until the day she died. Kahlo’s idealization of her father, combined with a strong attachment, in no way precludes the possibility that there was some kind of incestuous bond between them or that some form of abuse had occurred. In fact, identification with the abuser is

common, especially if the abuse is mixed with tenderness and affection. According to Judith Herman's research, the daughters of seductive fathers often leave their families at an early age (as Kahlo did when she married Rivera, twenty-one years her senior) and even after they have married maintain close ties with their father: "some never [succeed] in putting an end to the original seductive relationship."<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the attachment to her father, Kahlo's relationship with her mother was strained. Kahlo never painted a parallel individual portrait of her mother. In Kahlo's entire oeuvre, her mother is imaged only in copies of her parents' wedding portraits that she incorporated into larger paintings—*My Grandparents, My Parents, and I* and *What I Saw in the Water* or *What the Water Gave Me* (1938; cover art) and in *My Birth* (1932; fig. 5) where, according to Kahlo, the dead woman (whose head is covered with a sheet) represents both herself and her mother (who had died while the painting was in progress).<sup>19</sup> However, it seems equally possible that this startling image carries another meaning: Kahlo's mother had not only "died" to her when she was born (by her depression) but had also made herself "dead" to Kahlo by closing her eyes to what was going on in the family. ("Mine was a strange world of criminal silences.")<sup>20</sup>

The idea that something about unwanted sexual experience is being hidden in Kahlo's paintings is supported by Ankori's and Helga Prignitz-Poda's observations about *What I Saw in the Water* or *What the Water Gave Me* (1938; fig. 4). Ankori places this painting in a series of Kahlo's representations of her "body self," which she interprets as possibly representing Kahlo's traumatic defloration which, according to Salomon Grimberg's unpublished work, was a "wounding" experience. According to an interview with Julian Levy, Kahlo said that this painting dealt with "unpleasant memories of her childhood." Citing Grimberg and Levy, Ankori assumes that Kahlo's sexual initiation was the "traumatic homoerotic affair" for which Kahlo was severely punished when she was in high school, and she takes this painting as evidence of this. She interprets the positioning of Kahlo's parents above the portrait of two nude women embracing as symbolic of their disapproval.<sup>21</sup>

However, although Kahlo was traumatized by her parents' crude inter-



vention, there is no evidence in this painting of guilt or shame surrounding homoerotic desire. On the contrary, the embrace of the two women (in this painting and later enlarged in *Two Nudes in a Forest* or *The Earth Itself*, 1939) represents the only peaceful coupling symbolized in Kahlo's entire oeuvre, and it is the woman tied to the masked male in underwear who looks tortured and is, indeed, bleeding from her mouth. Clearly, it is heterosexual sex that is associated with male violence, as evidenced in one of Kahlo's most bloody paintings, *A Few Small Nips* (1935), which depicts a woman brutally murdered by her male lover, one of her starkest depictions of blood and wounds.

Ankori's suggestion that defloration is symbolized in *What I Saw in the Water*, supports my contention that this painting points to sexual violation by the male figure. To understand what this, Kahlo's most "surreal" painting, may be trying to say, it is helpful to look at its components in greater detail. In this painting, Kahlo depicts herself sitting in a tub, looking at her legs from the waist down as they would appear from the subjective perspective of a bather who is looking into the water, perhaps dipping into the unconscious at a moment of greater openness evoked by the warm bath. Kahlo's feet (one of them scarred and somewhat deformed) stick out of the water and reflect back into it, creating the image of doubled toes, while blood drips lightly from the bathtub stopper into water, which was a symbol of female sexuality for Kahlo.

The water is filled with sexual symbolism: water pours from the holes of a conch shell (which is the Mexican vulgar name for female genitalia); a phallic Empire State Building is stuck into the crater of an erupting volcano that is also streaming blood; a voluptuous naked woman with long black hair, with full belly, breasts, and pubic hair exposed, is being strangled as she is submerged in the water by a rope twisted around her neck. At one end, this rope is tied to the hand of a prone, masked, male figure, nude except for his underwear, one of whose feet is dangling into the water. The noose around the woman's neck forms one side of a web, as the connecting rope is stretched tight from the undressed man's hand, around her neck, to two widely separated phallic-shaped rocks that clearly jut out from the water; on the ropes crawl repellent insects that come to feed on dead bodies: worms, larvae, a huge spider, and a tiny balancing ballerina

(the balancing act Kahlo had to perform in her family?).

Ankori observed that "a white rope, similar to the one that strangles the drowning nude woman," encircles Guillermo Kahlo's body, in front of which Kahlo has placed vaginal shaped pods that are being penetrated. The rope around Herr Kahlo threatens to strangle him like a noose or literally to "tie him to his wife like a dog on a leash," suggesting rage at family dynamics.<sup>22</sup> That the rope tying her father to her mother resembles the rope that ties the masked man in underwear to the floating roped woman (an alter ego or split-off self whose Mexican dress is floating away) strengthens the idea that the two male figures (who are positioned one directly above the other) are one and the same—the first, a mimetic portrait of her father, the other, his masked, undressed self.

A haunting entry in the diary comes to mind here, as Kahlo associates Germany (her father's place of birth) with madness and mystery, followed by "all ghosts wear clothes of this color [yellow, which she associated with madness], or at least their underclothes." The last lines of the entry lead us back to her association of her father with "tenderness," "Tenderness can also be this blue blood?"<sup>23</sup> (But the word "blood" is written in red.) What follows is a long passage, Brecht's "Ballad of Mack the Knife" (copied out here and elsewhere in German, her father's native language) which features a criminal who seduces and violates/rapes women. Kahlo's association here of "tenderness" with "violence" suggests that she is trying to speak something that cannot be seen or known, yet wants to be heard.

The masked man in the painting also calls to mind that other masked figure, the nurse suckling a tiny adult Kahlo in *My Nurse and I* (1937), a parallel which suggests nurturing may once have been associated with this male figure and that his identity is deliberately being hidden. In a self-portrait tellingly entitled *The Mask* (1945), she both reveals and hides her feelings of pain, as the mask sheds the tears that she herself cannot reveal in public.

In *What I Saw in the Water*, placed directly above the faces of the two male figures, is a dead bird on its back, looking as if it were impaled upon a tree. This strange image is in a direct visual line leading from the floating nude to the man in underwear to whom she is tied, to the dead bird who mirrors the helpless position of the woman in the water. A few sharp phallic-shaped leaves point directly to the portrait of her father, while two others

flank either side of the naked woman at the level of her genitals, possibly suggesting violation, as does the highly phallic skyscraper stuck in the erupting volcano on the opposite side of the painting. Given the historical ubiquity of sexual abuse of girls, it is not unlikely that Kahlo had been violated in some way at some time in her childhood or adolescence and that this experience is either deliberately or unconsciously encoded in this, her most dream-like painting.

Once one allows for the possibility that sexual violation is being "spoken" in some of the more disturbing paintings, new readings of other paintings also emerge. For example, *Without Hope* (1945; fig. 6) depicts a Kahlo in bed, looking young, almost childlike, her body small and vulnerable, tightly immobilized by a sheet covered with strange looking microscopic organisms (eggs and sperm) while a huge funnel with a long stem filled with entrails and other repulsive food that has a visceral quality is being forced into her mouth. The huge scaffold on which the funnel sits resembles the wooden contraption her father had built for her so she could paint in bed when she was immobilized. On the back of the painting she wrote, "Not the least hope remains to me. . . . Everything moves in time with what the belly contains." This painting is interpreted by Herrera as possibly symbolizing "a hemorrhage, a miscarried child, a scream, or a force-fed meal."<sup>24</sup> According to Ankori, the painting references a 1944 book on the persecution of "hidden Jews" in Mexico during the Inquisition that she found in Kahlo's personal library. Illustrations in this book show Jewish women were forced to "lie upon torture beds, their hands covered, so that, like Kahlo, they are rendered helpless, while something is forced into their mouths."<sup>25</sup> Ankori is referring here to the infamous water torture which caused death by drowning. But if one allows for the "unspeakable" to emerge in this painting, it is also possible to imagine that Kahlo may be evoking the choking feeling of unwanted fellatio, the microscopic organisms on the bed signifying sperm. Difficult though it may be to accept or "take in" such a harsh reading, I believe it would be irresponsible not to name it as a possibility. Such a reading that is both literal and symbolic in no way obviates any of the previous ones.

Equally difficult to contemplate is a possible reference to rape in the imagery of *My Birth*, in which the long neck of a head (the adult Kahlo's)

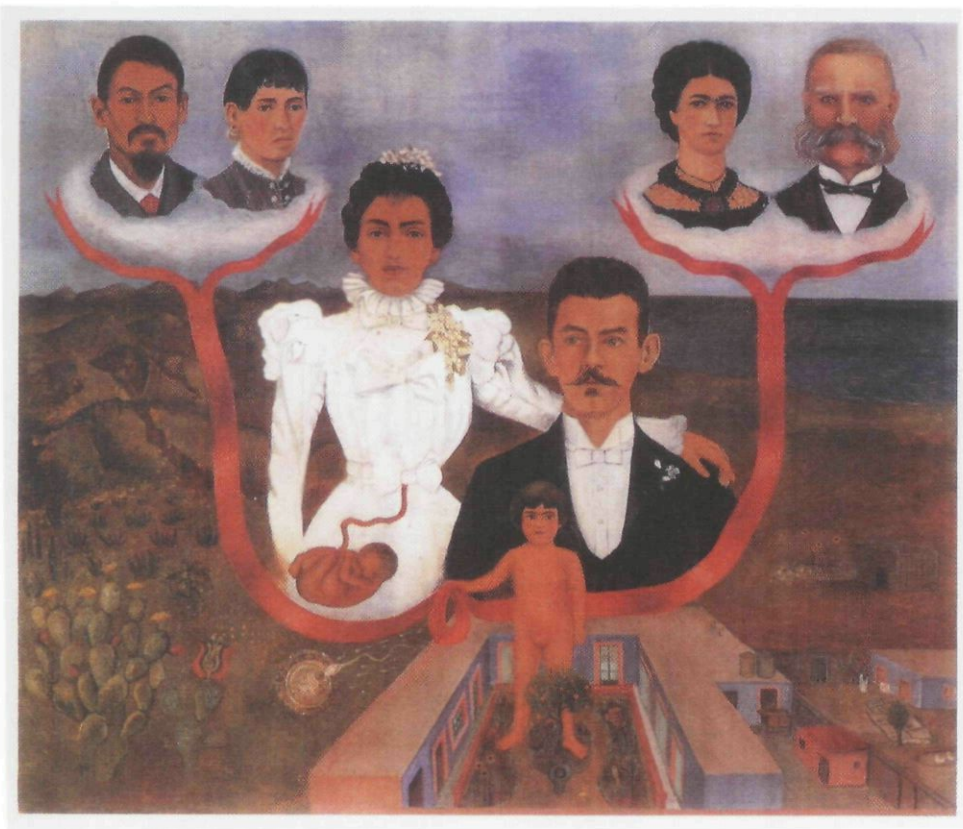


Figure 1.

**MY GRANDPARENTS, MY PARENTS, AND I, 1936.**

Oil and tempera on metal panel, 30.7 x 34.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

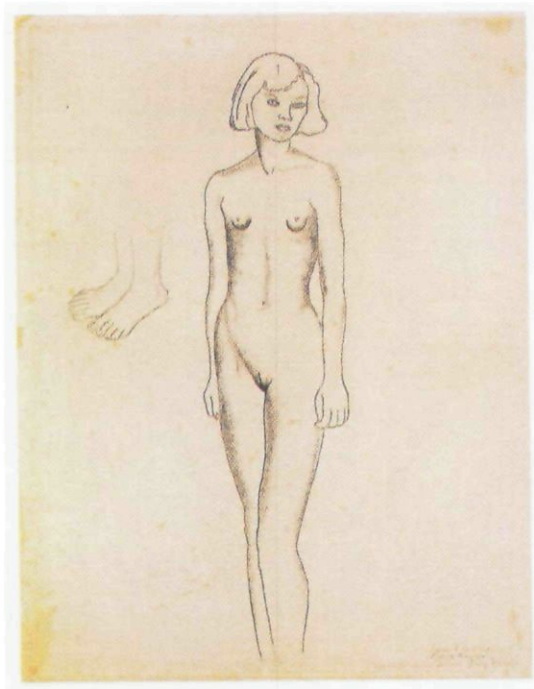


Figure 2.

**NUDE OF MY COUSIN ADY WEBER, 1930.**

Pencil on paper, 60 x 47 cm. Museo Dolores Olmeda PatiZo, Xochimilco, México.

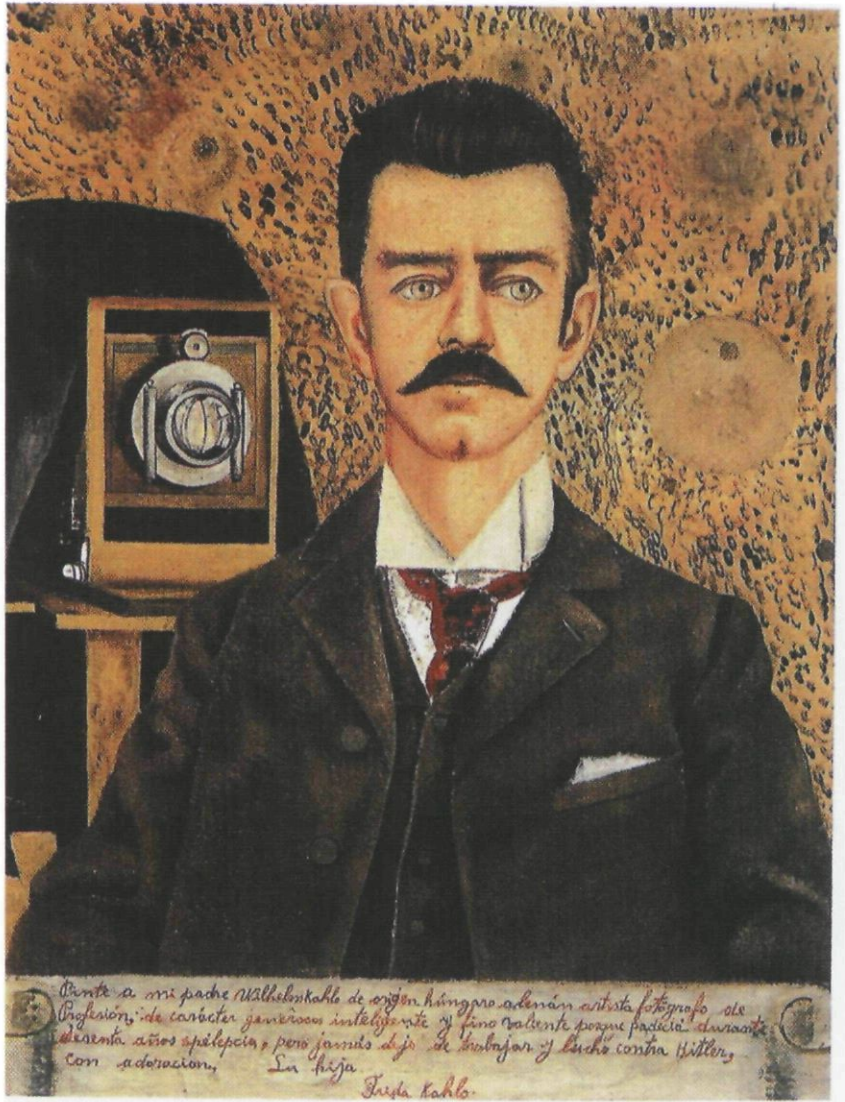


Figure 3.

**PORTRAIT OF MY FATHER, 1951.**

Oil on masonite, 60.5 x 46.5 cm. Frida Kahlo  
Museum, Coyoacán, México.

Figure 4.

**DETAIL OF WHAT I SAW IN THE  
WATER or WHAT THE WATER GAVE  
ME, 1938.**

Oil on canvas, 91 x 70.5 cm. Private collection.



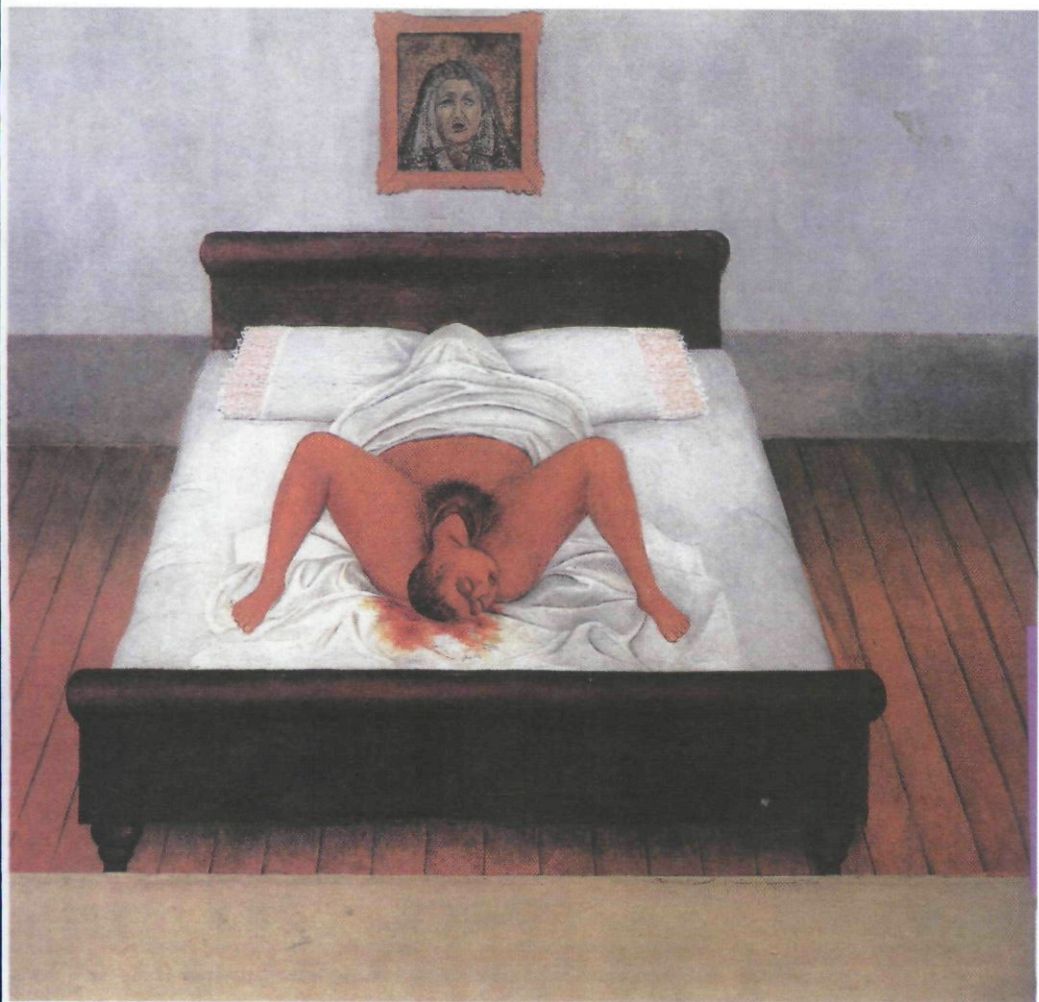


Figure 5.

**MY BIRTH**, 1932.

Oil on metal, 30.5 x 35 cm. Collection of Madonna, New York.



Figure 6.

**WITHOUT HOPE**, 1945.

Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 cm. Museo Dolores Olmeda Patizo,  
Xochimilco, México.

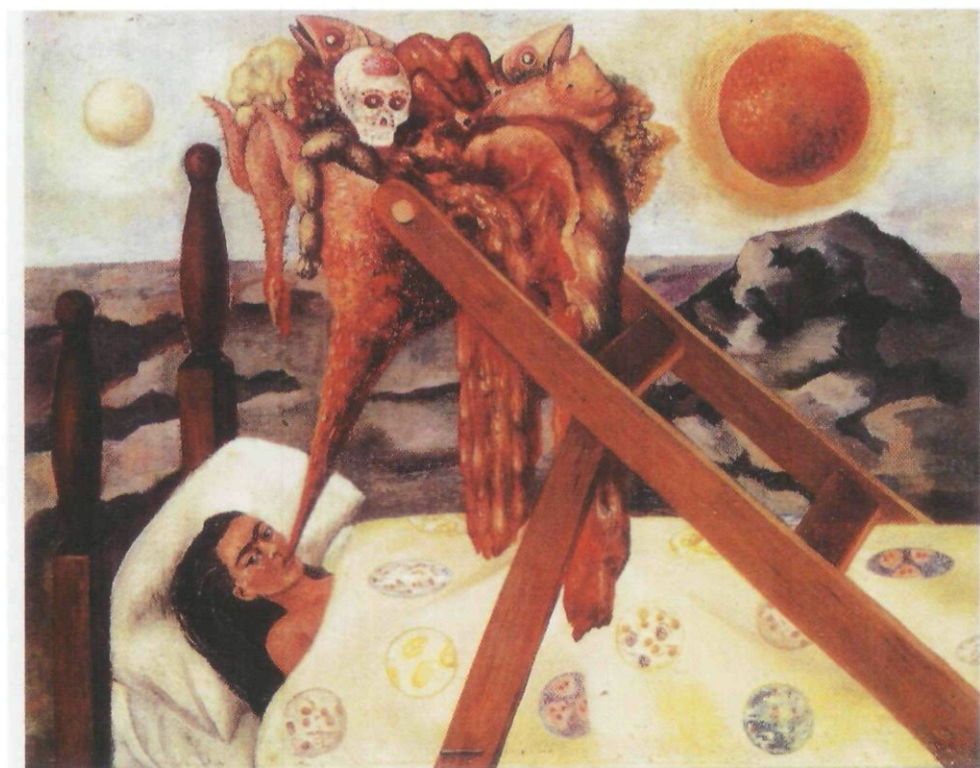




Figure 7.

**MEMORY or THE HEART, 1937.**

Oil on metal, 40 x 28 cm. Private collection.

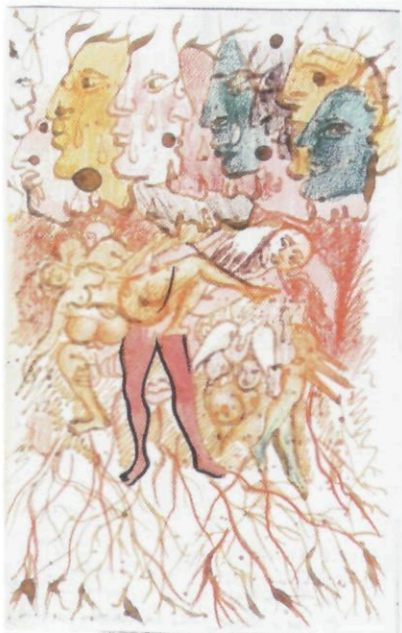


Figure 8.

**THE PHENOMENON, UNFORESEEN**, ca.1945-47.

Diary drawing, pen and ink on paper.

Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacán, México.

Figure 9.

**DIARY DRAWING**, ca.1945-47.

Pen and ink on paper.

Frida Kahlo Museum, Coyoacán, México.

being born remains stuck in the female figure's vaginal passage while blood drips onto the sheet. Although the head is being born and therefore coming *out* of the passage, the elongation of the neck, as well as its texture and shape, create an image that can be seen as a huge penis penetrating the passage, especially if one blanks out Kahlo's head. It is as if the dissociated penis had become a part of her. In an unpublished interview with art critic and curator, Parker Lesley, Kahlo explained that the dead woman references her own mother's death (the bed in the painting resembles the marital bed in which Kahlo and her sister were born), as well as the death of her own lost fetus, while the *Mater Dolorosa* (an image that would have been in her mother's bedroom) weeps in the background for this loss.<sup>26</sup> However, it is also possible to see in *My Birth* and *Without Hope* a representation of the death of Kahlo's spirit, perhaps her youthful innocence. If one depersonalizes the rape image of *My Birth*, then the tears being shed by the picture of the *Mater Dolorosa* on the wall behind the bed have greater symbolic meaning. Mother and daughter represent the vulnerable female flesh that can be (and historically has been) violated. Neither can speak; they must call upon the "mother of sorrows" to weep for them.

In her journey toward wholeness in a seven-year successful psychoanalysis that brought her out of madness, French novelist Marie Cardinal claims that the two pivotal moments in her own life-saving analysis were finding the violence of her long-buried rage about sexual abuse and her recognition that "to be a woman, was to have a vagina, to be physically always vulnerable. I belonged to that gigantic horde of penetrable beings, delivered to the invaders."<sup>27</sup> I suggest that Kahlo is speaking to this same kind of recognition, especially as violation is also the theme of one of Kahlo's most clearly personally symbolic representations, *Memory or The Heart* (1937; fig. 7), in which a rod literally penetrates Kahlo's body where her heart should be, leaving instead only an empty hole (which can be read as a symbolic displacement of penetration) through which the sky is visible. On this phallic rod sit two little cupids, suggesting an ironic association of "love" with this piercing. Frozen tears stream from Kahlo's eyes and she is clearly helpless in all the incarnations symbolized by her clothing: as schoolgirl, as Rivera's bride in Mexican dress, and in ordinary clothes.

Virtually all commentators associate this painting with the pain Kahlo

experienced when she learned of Rivera's affair with her sister Cristina, but Ankori suggests that this painting also refers to "much earlier memories" (of illness and the accident), which I do not contest, although I do not believe that Ankori goes far enough in her reading. My interpretation builds on Ankori's identification of Kahlo in this painting not only with La Malinche (the young girl who was betrayed by her mother and was in turn forced to betray her own people), but also with the related figure of La Chingada ("the screwed one," she who has been sexually violated), who has no control over her life and is passive, violated, broken open, or ripped apart. Ankori quotes Octavio Paz, who stated that the verb *chingar* is "masculine, active, cruel; it stings, wounds, gashes, stains. . . . The person who suffers this action is passive, inert, and open, in contrast to the active, aggressive, and closed person who inflicts it. The *chingon* is the *macho*, the male, he rips open the *chingada*, the female who is pure passivity, defenseless against the exterior world."<sup>28</sup>

These words, supported by the images in the painting, clearly suggest forms of sexual violation, possibly by someone who was associated with family and love. Kahlo represents her adult self without hands, and her schoolgirl uniform, hanging nearby, is bodiless and has no right arm, while the left futilely reaches out toward the adult self. On Kahlo's other side, her Mexican costume is also bodiless and is missing one arm. A huge heart bleeding into the ground lies at her feet. Ankori connects the references to family in this painting to the earlier *My Grandparents*, *My Parents*, and *I*, not only because of the schoolgirl dress, but also through "the repetition of the red veinlike strings" that course through the cavity in Kahlo's chest, and which suggest that the figure is a puppet pulled by strings whose origins remain hidden.<sup>29</sup> I find it impossible to overlook the connotations of this painting, which suggest sexual violation within the family. If others suspected it but did nothing, then Kahlo was betrayed, but to the extent that she herself kept silent, she herself was a betrayer, colluding in "criminal silences."<sup>30</sup>

A paper-and-pencil image Kahlo created in the very last year of her life, when she was mostly bedridden, also seems to lead back to childhood memories. The drawing, suggestively and plaintively entitled, *Look at Me, but Do Not Touch Me* (1954), is a sketch of what looks like a child's bed, not at all

resembling the large canopied bed in which she slept as an adult. There is no human figure on the bed, but only a quilt, covered with lips (Kahlo's signature for herself) and eyes. The drawing is dedicated to Machila Armida, a close friend who sat and kept watch at Kahlo's bedside in her last days, whom she thanks in writing on the drawing itself, for her "love and *tenderness*" (emphasis added).<sup>31</sup> These details recall the "tenderness" that Kahlo associated with her father, further suggesting that Kahlo was recalling her childhood illness when her father tended to her, possibly inappropriately. That Kahlo chose to sign herself with a lip print of a closed mouth, suggests a silencing; the eyes see what the lips may not speak.

However, it is also possible that Kahlo may not have been speaking only from the specificity of her own experiences, but also reflecting the collective experience of women living in patriarchal societies who have lost control of their own bodies. For example, a state of dissociation that often follows trauma (also noted by Ankori with respect to the sequelae of Kahlo's accident, but not connected by her to sexual abuse) is suggested by two strange self-portrayals as headless (*Showing the Scar*, 1938, and *The Circle*, ca. 1950), the latter portraying a naked female whose body is disintegrating, positioned on the earth as if she had been ravaged.<sup>32</sup> Among other disturbing images found in the diary, where the unconscious speaks most freely in an associative stream of pen-and-ink drawings and writing, is one that Sarah M. Lowe calls a "monstrous hybrid," a woman (or several women joined together) with many legs and many heads.<sup>33</sup> Near the center we see a limp woman whose head is thrown back as if she were dead or ravished, her hair falling down. Hanging between the many legs of this creature is a huge breast and a large penis with scrotum. In the female figure's greenish legs, just level with the penis, is a set of eyes, suggesting that something with the power to disorganize has been seen, but perhaps not heard. The shape of the huge ears set just behind and above the center of the figure suggests Kahlo's father's familiar "protruding ears" (which have the same pointed shape and are prominent in every photograph and in Kahlo's portraits of him).<sup>34</sup> Most telling, she calls this *The Phenomenon, Unforeseen* (ca. 1945-47; fig. 8), which raises the question, what is it that happens to women that is unforeseen and creates the inner chaos that this drawing suggests?

Another equally disturbing image occurs just a few diary pages later (ca. 1945-47; fig. 9). Filling the top of the page is a frieze of androgynous, weeping faces in profile, looking like a lamenting Greek chorus (although a few heads on the page are placed sideways, one with bared teeth, in line with and staring straight down at the naked woman's genitals). Their tears seem to provide a commentary on the confusion below, which Lowe interprets as "one of Kahlo's more frankly amorous vignettes, perhaps an erotic fantasy." I interpret this image quite differently. What I see is a confusion of bodies, a woman swept up or being carried away by a powerful male figure, a feeling Lowe also seems to intuit, when she calls attention to the center of the painting where "Most disturbing are a pair of red legs, severed from their body. . . . The red lines suggest veins, carriers of blood, while the others look like nerves, transmitters of sensation, both pleasurable and painful."<sup>35</sup> The chaotic eros of this charged image, the red legs (color of blood) severed from a body, the dissociated penis hanging from what may be thick legs or an enlarged scrotum is placed on a level next to where the genitalia of the red legs would be, and directly below the penis, a small face that is clearly Kahlo's.

To the side of this face are three phallic shapes that stick out menacingly. A pair of lips, Kahlo's signature, is prominently placed directly between the disembodied legs of the woman at knee level. On top of the red legs lies the helpless female; next to the legs a large male hand is groping a woman's leg. Other body parts, faces, and an eye floating in the chaos suggest that Kahlo may have been working through difficult material, perhaps unwanted sexual encounters, while the red roots that fill the bottom quadrant of the painting take us back to the red ribbons in *My Grandparents*, *My Parents*, and *I and Memory*, tying this detail directly to her own family as well as to the historical, collective experiences of women.

#### CONSEQUENCES

In her pioneering study of father-daughter incest, Herman located sexual abuse on a continuum from overt sexual acting out to covert seductiveness and incestuous family dynamics. Although Herman recognized that there is a difference between overt and covert abuse (especially if violence is involved), she argued that the long-term effects of any kind of sexual abuse

are always destructive and worse if a trusted family member is involved.<sup>36</sup>

Such a reading of Kahlo's life and works challenges the common assumption that her multiple sexual relationships (with men and women) signal a "strong sexual appetite" or, more negatively, "promiscuity." If her experience of getting warmth and nurturance was associated with an abusing, trusted male early in her life, it seems more plausible to suggest that Kahlo was replicating this pattern by using sex in her adult life to meet relational needs. The psychological literature reports that some abused daughters often end up being "the other woman" to a married man. It is possible that Kahlo played out some version of this pattern by finally "accepting" Rivera's philandering and taking up the position of the abandoned and rejected mother, perhaps doing penance for displacing her mother as a child. To her close friends, Bertram and Ella Wolfe, she confided her unhappiness, saying that in all the years of her marriage, there had always been a "third" ("*at least one* female companion") between herself and Rivera, living at their home.<sup>37</sup>

Although Kahlo's suicidal thoughts (and gestures) and her later addiction to alcohol and drugs have been understood to be her way of coping with physical pain as well as depression and loneliness, especially in response to Rivera's betrayals, there is also the possibility that these traumas built upon or triggered previous ones. It is likely that only someone who was expecting to be abused would be so drawn to such a psychologically abusive relationship and remain in it with such tenacity. By Rivera's own admission, he was often cruel and violently explosive, perhaps recalling Kahlo's father's sudden eruptions of rage as well as his "explosive" epileptic episodes. Although there is no doubt that Kahlo suffered pain, it may also be that the drinking and drugs were a way of keeping memories of shameful sexual secrets out of awareness. A long poem she wrote in her diary in her last year provides what may be a haunting commentary on the spoken and unspeakable aspects of her life. It reads, in part:

Quietly, the grief  
loudly the pain,  
the accumulated *poison*  
love faded away.



Mine was a strange world  
of criminal silences  
of strangers' watchful eyes  
misreading the evil.  
darkness in the daytime. . . .  
Was it my fault?  
I admit, my great guilt  
as great as pain  
it was an enormous exit  
which my love went through.<sup>38</sup>

While Kahlo seems in this passage to be addressing Rivera in the here and now of her adult life, it is difficult not to wonder to what extent she is also addressing figures from her childhood, old griefs, loves lost, unnamed pain, and unnamed guilt for we know not what. The difficulty in pinning down the unsayable is, as psychologist Annie G. Rogers has noted, that "what is signified is always slipping beneath the signifier."<sup>39</sup> The only thing one can say with any degree of certainty is that something powerful has been signified that we would do well not to ignore, no matter how uncomfortable our "educated intuitions" may make us.

In my readings of Kahlo's life and work, it seems critical to appreciate that Kahlo buried these private, inchoate, most likely shameful thoughts and feelings in her diary, her private place of refuge. Recognizing this, Lowe begins her introductory essay to the diary with the apt warning:

Reading through Frida Kahlo's diary is unquestionably an act of transgression, an undertaking inevitably charged with an element of voyeurism. Her journal is a deeply private expression of her feelings, and was never intended to be viewed publicly. As such, Kahlo's diary belongs to the genre of the *journal intime*, a private record written by a woman for herself.<sup>40</sup>

I am only in partial agreement with Lowe. Feminist scholarship of the past thirty years has uncovered much that we did not know about the history of women's private writings, and it seems that Lowe may not be correct in assuming Kahlo was writing only for herself. Because she did record her thoughts and feelings, she may have been hoping that someone, at some time, would understand her "language of the unsayable" and

connect her public painting with her private reflections. For centuries, women buried their experiences in private writings because there was no cultural frame that would permit women to speak in any other way (at times it was not even safe to speak to other women). In lines that have become a kind of clarion call in the struggle for women's liberation, Muriel Rukeyser wrote in the early years of the Second Wave: "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open."<sup>41</sup> It may be that it is the element of "truth broken open" in Kahlo's paintings that makes her work so "disturbing," a word that is used by virtually every person who experiences it.

#### NOTES

1. This essay is based on chapter 5 of my recent (and second) Ph.D. dissertation. See "Speaking in Pictures," in Evelyn Torton Beck, *Physical Illness, Psychological Woundedness, and the Healing Power of Art in the Life and Work of Franz Kafka and Frida Kahlo* (Ph.D. diss., The Fielding Graduate Institute, 2004) where these ideas are developed in greater detail. The epigraphs are from Muriel Rukeyser, "Käthe Kollwitz," in *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, ed. Jan Heller Levi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), 217; Frida Kahlo, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, trans. Barbara Crow de Toledo and Ricardo Pohlenz (New York: Harry N. Abrams and Mexico City: La Vaca Independiente, 1995), 273; Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 259. As this goes to press, I found that Helga Prognitz-Poda also makes this argument; she does not, however, provide supporting evidence based in the literature of psychological theory and research. See Helga Prognitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo: The Painter and Her Work*, trans. Bram Opstelten (New York: Schirmer/Mosel and Distributed Art Publishers, 2004).
2. Frida Kahlo, letter to the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez, October 1939, asking him to translate into English her artist's statement for a Guggenheim Fellowship (which she did not get), in Raquel Tibol, ed., *Frida by Frida: Selection of Letters and Texts, Foreword and Notes*, trans. Gregory Dechant (México City: Editorial RM, 2003), 184.
3. Strategies for identifying the "unsayable" are more fully developed by Annie G. Rogers, Mary E. Casey, Jennifer Ekert, James Holland, Victoria Nakkula, and Nurit Sheinberg, "An Interpretive Poetics of Languages of the Unsayable," in *The Narrative Study of Lives*, vol. 6 of *Making Meaning of Narratives*, ed. Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1999), 77-106.
4. Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 14. The exact nature of the illness that caused her leg to wither has never been definitively established; polio has been most often cited, but more recently also contested. See for example, the report of Dr. Begun, cited by Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: An Open*

- Life*, trans. Elinor Randall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1993), 12-13, and accepted as valid by Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo*, 13.
5. Gannit Ankori sums up Kahlo's dichotomous views of her parents (gleaned from remarks scattered in Kahlo's letters, diary writings, and interviews) that contrast her father's goodness and kindness "with what she perceived as her mother's cruelty." See Gannit Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves: Frida Kahlo's Poetics of Identity and Fragmentation*, no. 7 of *Contributions to the Study of Art and Architecture* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 39. For a more detailed discussion of family patterns in which incest has occurred, see Diana E.H. Russell, *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); and Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
  6. See, for example, Tibol, *Frida Kahlo*, 39.
  7. Therapists who work with incest survivors note that the "favorite" daughter often becomes the caretaker for the abuser and as a result develops strong feelings of loyalty. See Ramon C. Ganzarain and Bonnie J. Buchele, *Fugitives of Incest: A Perspective from Psychoanalysis and Groups* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 1989), 3-4.
  8. Kahlo, *Diary*, 282.
  9. Herrera, *Frida*, 18.
  10. Kahlo made this identification explicit when she signed a letter to her friend, Dr. Leo Eloesser, "La Malinche, Frida" (15 Mar. 1941), in Tibol, *Frida by Frida*, 228.
  11. See, for example, Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 45.
  12. Herrera, *Frida*, 8.
  13. I thank my friend Sue Lanser for calling this detail to my attention.
  14. Herrera, *Frida*, 8.
  15. Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 38.
  16. Herrera, *Frida*, 21-22.
  17. Tibol, *Frida by Frida*, 76-77. Translations of this letter vary. Tibol does not include the "here is a kiss" which appears after the signature in Martha Zamora's compilation, *The Letters of Frida Kahlo: Cartas Apasionadas* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995), 38-39. I have reinstated this omission. "Darling Daddy" is translated by Zamora as "Lovely Daddy."
  18. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 120.
  19. Herrera, *Frida*, 159.
  20. Kahlo, *Diary*, 211. Because Kahlo scholarship is still very much in process (with new materials and facts coming to light each year), many references, especially the titles of paintings, have not been standardized, and many paintings such as, *What I Saw in the Water* or *What the Water Gave Me*, bear two titles connected with "or"; in some texts, only one of the titles is used, but there is no consistency in whether it is the first or the second half of the title. My title notations are in line with the most recent scholarly consensus.
  21. Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 127; Prignitz-Poda, *Frida Kahlo*, 174; Salomon Grimberg, "Frida Kahlos Einsamkeit" (Frida Kahlo's Loneliness), in *Frida Kahlo: Das Gesamtwerk* (The Collected Works), ed. Helga Prignitz-Poda, Salomon Grimberg, and Andrea

- Kettenmann (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1988), 11-21; and Salomon Grimberg, "Frida Kahlo's Memory: The Piercing of the Heart by the Arrows of Divine Love," in *Woman's Art Journal*, 11, no. 2 (1990/1991): 3-7.
22. Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 31.
  23. Kahlo, *Diary*, 211.
  24. Herrera, *Frida*, 348.
  25. Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 196. Kahlo's father was a German-Hungarian Jew who had emigrated to Mexico in his youth. Although Kahlo was raised Catholic, she was well aware of and interested in her Jewish roots.
  26. Cited by Herrera, *Frida*, 157.
  27. Marie Cardinal, *The Words to Say It*, trans. Pat Goodheart (Cambridge: Van Vactor & Goodheart, 1975), 261.
  28. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961), quoted in Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 86. The 1950 Spanish language version of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* was found in Kahlo's library.
  29. Ankori, *Frida*, 86.
  30. Kahlo, *Diary*, 273.
  31. Prignitz-Poda, Grimberg, and Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo*, 281.
  32. Ankori, *Imagining Her Selves*, 118. The likelihood that Kahlo had been sexually violated in childhood or early adolescence is reinforced by a prose poem she published at age 15 (years before the bus accident), hauntingly named *Memory*, the title she gave to the 1937 painting (fig. 7) in which she depicted herself as most helpless—a one-armed schoolgirl without hands reaching out to the adult Kahlo whose body was pierced by an iron rod. The poem reads, in part, "He was following me. Like my shadow. . . . He was following me. I ended up weeping. Curled up in a corner of the parish churchyard, cloaked in my *rebozo de bolita* which was drenched in tears" (November 30, 1922, *El Universal Ilustrado*; quoted by Raquel Tibol in "Pain—Love—Liberation: Frida Kahlo's Words," *Frida Kahlo*, ed. Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson [London: Tate Enterprises, 2005], 184). Tibol does not discuss the content of this poem but uses it as an example of Kahlo's youthful interest in modernist art movements.
  33. Sarah M. Lowe, in Kahlo, *Diary*, 225. The *Diary* drawings are extremely difficult to date as most entires are undated. Kahlo kept this diary between 1944 and 1954, the year she died. Internal evidence suggests figs. 8 and 9 were drawn between 1945 and 1947.
  34. Her father's ears have frequently been commented upon. For example, Herrera describes Guillermo Kahlo as "intelligent, hard-working, and rather handsome, in spite of his protruding ears" (emphasis mine), *Frida*, 6.
  35. Lowe, in Kahlo, *Diary*, 231.
  36. Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 4.
  37. Kahlo, writing from Mexico in 1944, in Tibol, *Frida by Frida*, 249.
  38. Kahlo, *Diary*, 273.
  39. Annie G. Rogers, private communication with the author, 6 Sept. 2003.
  40. Lowe, in Kahlo, *Diary*, 25.
  41. Rukeyser, "Käthe Kollwitz," 217.

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