

Kahlo the Wild: Frida Kahlo, left, dressed in her traditional Mexican costume, photographed by Nicholas Muray in New York, 1938. Right: Kahlo's brutal self-portrait *The Broken Column*, 1944 (oil on canvas mounted on Masonite, 15 3/4 in. by 12 1/4 in.), represents the artist pricked by nails and wearing a polio corset, her spine a ruined Ionic column.

As frenzied mourners watched the earthly remains of Frida Kahlo roll away into the crematory, the artist, known in her day for her macabre sense of mischief, played one last ghoulish trick on her audience. The sudden blast of heat from the open incinerator doors blew the bejeweled, elaborately coiffed body bolt upright. Her ignited hair blazed around her head like an infernal halo. One observer recalled that, deformed by the phantasmagoric, flickering shadows, her lips appeared to break into a grin just as the doors closed shut. Frida's postmortem chuckle—a last laugh if there ever was one—is echoing still. Half a century after her death, Kahlo, around whom a whole industry has sprung up like a garden on a gravesite, grows more alive with each passing decade.

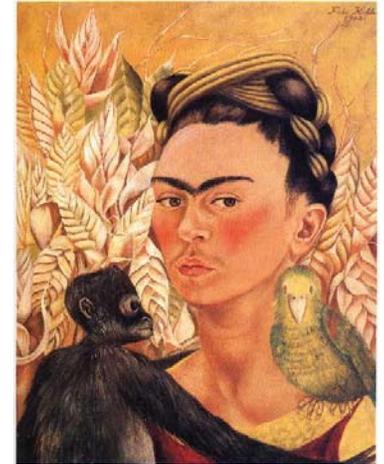
What Elvis Presley is to good old boys, Judy Garland to a generation of homosexuals, and Maria Callas to opera fanatics, Frida is to masses of late-20th-century idol seekers. Every day at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the 1931 double portrait of newlyweds Frida and Diego Rivera (right) draws a worshipful horde, as reverent as the devotees gathered daily before the Louvre's *Mona Lisa*. Says Hayden Herrera, author of the groundbreaking 1983 biography *Frida*, "Her paintings demand—fiercely—that you look at her." Kirk Varnedoe, a chief curator of the Museum of Modern Art (which is exhibiting two of its three Kahlos in a summer show of women's art), reflects on the Frida Phenomenon: "She clicks with today's sensibilities—her psycho-obsessive concern with herself, her creation of a personal alternative world carry a voltage. Her constant remaking of her identity, her construction of a theater of the self are exactly what preoccupy such contemporary artists as Cindy Sherman or Kiki Smith and, on a more popular level, Madonna—who, of course, collects her work. Kahlo, incidentally,



is more a figure for the age of Madonna than the era of Marilyn Monroe. She fits well with the odd, androgynous hormonal chemistry of our particular epoch."

In fact, a whole cross section of marginalized groups—lesbians, gays, feminists, the handicapped, Chicanos, Communists (she professed Trotskyism and, later, Stalinism), hypochondriacs, substance abusers, and even Jews (despite her indigenous Mexican identity, she was in fact half Jewish and only one-quarter Indian)—have discovered in her a politically correct heroine. The most concrete measure of Frida's nail-digging grip on the popular imagination is the number of publications on her: 87 and counting. (Though she has also been the subject of at least three documentaries and one Mexican art film, the world still awaits the movies promised by Madonna and Luis "La Bamba" Valdez.) Says art dealer Mary-Anne Martin, who as founder of Sotheby's Latin-American department presided over the first auction of a Kahlo painting, in 1977 (it went for \$19,000—\$1,000 below the low estimate), "Frida has been carved up into little pieces. Everyone pulls out that one piece that means something special to them."

Just when Frida fever seemed on the verge of cooling down, the public's attention has once again been riveted by her—1995 is turning out to be yet another annus mirabilis in the Frida chronicles. This May her 1942 *Self-Portrait with Monkey and Parrot* (right, acquired in 1947, reports Kahlo expert Dr. Salomon Grimberg, by IBM from the Galeria de Arte Mexicano for around \$400) sold at Sotheby's for \$3.2 million. This is the highest price ever paid for a Latin-American work of art, and the second-highest amount for a woman artist (Mary Cassatt holds the record). About the auction record he set, Argentinean collector and venture capitalist Eduardo Costantini states firmly, "There is a correlation between the painting's price and its quality."



On one page of Kahlo's diary, a naughty French postcard partially obscures the words on the right—"mara villa," a private pun on Frida's Spanish lover's pet name for her. The words *sonrisa* ("smile") and *ternura* ("tenderness") reflect her happiness with their relationship.

And riding the wave of what Sotheby's director of Latin-American painting, August Uribe, calls "a thrilling, historical sale," next month Abrams is releasing with great fanfare what may be the publishing coup of the season: a facsimile edition of Frida Kahlo's diary, an intimate, enigmatic written and pictorial record of the last and most lurid decade of the artist's tortured life. Though this document has been on display at the Frida Kahlo Museum in Coyoacan, Mexico (formerly her house), since it opened in 1958, only a handful of researchers, such as Hayden Herrera, have been permitted to page through it. And even then it has resisted coherent interpretation. The situation has been further complicated by the fact that an executor of Kahlo's estate, wealthy Rivera patron Dolores Olmedo, has jealously guarded the diary. It took the savvy young Mexican art promoter Claudia Madrazo two years to persuade Olmedo to allow publication, in order at last to make the strange workings of Frida Kahlo's mind, quite literally, an open book.

Once she had Olmedo's blessing, Madrazo showed up at the office of New York literary agent Gloria Loomis with a fuzzy color photocopy of the diary. "I flipped," says Loomis. "It was original, moving. And I told her, yes, American publishers will be crazy about it." The *New York Times* broke the story of the diary, announcing on its publishing page that an auction would be held that week. "The next morning the phones went mad," Loomis recounts.

The Mexican press had picked up the *Times* story, and a furor erupted. In Mexico, where Kahlo is known as *la heroína del dolor*, "the heroine of pain," the artist is—like the Virgin of Guadalupe—a national idol. "They were demanding to know who is this gringa who has the right to do this to our national treasure," Loomis says. "I had to reassure the Mexicans that I was auctioning the right to reproduce the diary in facsimile, not the diary itself." Loomis invited a series of

publishing houses to view the color photocopy in the Banco de Mexico's New York offices and place their bids. "I was immediately intrigued," says Abrams editor in chief Paul Gottlieb. "I dug in my heels and went for the moon—and we won!" Though Gottlieb won't divulge the amount of his successful bid, he allows that it is more than the

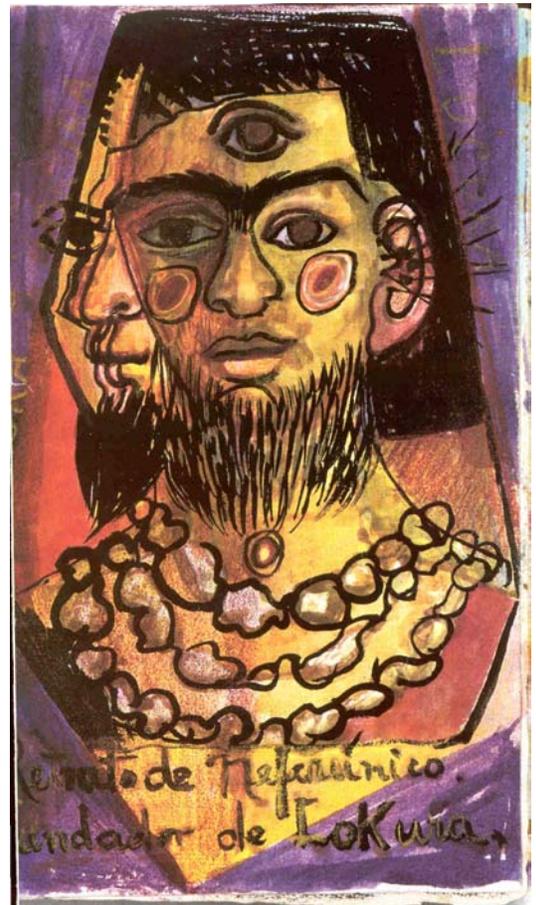
\$100,000 estimated by an insider in the *Times* article but "less than \$500,000." Even before the first book is sold (the initial print run is more than 150,000) Abrams undoubtedly will have made good on its investment, for Frida-mania has a global reach. Abrams has already sold the foreign rights in nine different countries, and these editions will all be published simultaneously with the American one. "A miracle," Gottlieb declares breathlessly. Madrazo will publish the diary in Mexico under her own imprint—and her plans for Frida *objets* based on the diary are currently under way.



Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in New York City, 1933

What is so compelling about Frida's esoteric scribbles and doodles, which are unintelligible to the casual reader (especially one with no Spanish) and, at best, puzzling to most Kahlo experts? "They're hypnotic," says art historian Sarah M. Lowe—who, in her succinct notes to the text, has valiantly endeavored to make sense of Kahlo's wild, sometimes polymorphously erotic pictographs and stream-of-consciousness ravings. (Carlos Fuentes is the author of the belletristic introduction.) "The diary is the most important work Kahlo ever did," Claudia Madrazo asserts. "It contains energy, poetry, magic. They reveal a more universal Frida." Continues Sarah Lowe, who cautions that her comments on the diary are not definitive, "In Kahlo's paintings you see only the mask. In the diary you see her unmasked. She pulls you into her world. And it's a mad universe."

Most pertinent to the diaries is an understanding of how the daughter of a lower-middle-class German-Jewish photographer and a hysterically Catholic Spanish-Indian mother became a celebrated painter, Communist, promiscuous temptress, and, later (during the diary years), a narcotic-addicted, suicidal amputee afflicted with a bizarre pathology known as Munchausen syndrome—the compulsion to be hospitalized and, in extreme cases, mutilated unnecessarily by surgery.



DEAR DIARY A Spread from Kahlo's enigmatic diary. Above, a portrait of "Neferisis," who is pregnant, and her consort is, says Dr. Grimberg, the artist's interpretation of the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris. The first line of the text, "Strange couple from the land of the dot and line," probably refers to her and Diego. Right, the portrait of "Neferunico" (Neferisis's son), with his unibrow and facial hair, resembles Kahlo's self-portraits.



Photographer Nickolas Muray, Rivera, Vanity Fair caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias, and Kahlo at Rivera's San Angel home in 1938.

Thanks to an astonishing, largely unpublished body of research as complete as Hayden Herrera's exhaustive biography and complementary to it, compiled by an unlikely scholar—Dr. Salomon Grimberg, a 47-year-old Dallas child psychiatrist—it is possible to amplify these facts of Kahlo's life and even, Grimberg says, decode 90 percent of the diary." Like Kahlo, Grimberg grew up in Mexico City, where he commenced, while still an adolescent, his rigorous investigations on the artist. A somewhat casual interest became an earnest fixation during his pre-med studies, when he started working at Kahlo's former gallery, the Galeria de Arte Mexicano. There he started amassing records about every work of art she ever created, tracking down lost paintings, collecting pictures by her and other artists, and befriending anyone whose life had intersected Kahlo's. Though Grimberg is something of a pariah in the art world, where his unapologetic zeal and his affiliation with another profession are eyed with suspicion—"I am a bastard of art history," he admits—his knowledge of his subject is unrivaled and incontrovertible. He is routinely consulted by auction houses and dealers, often without

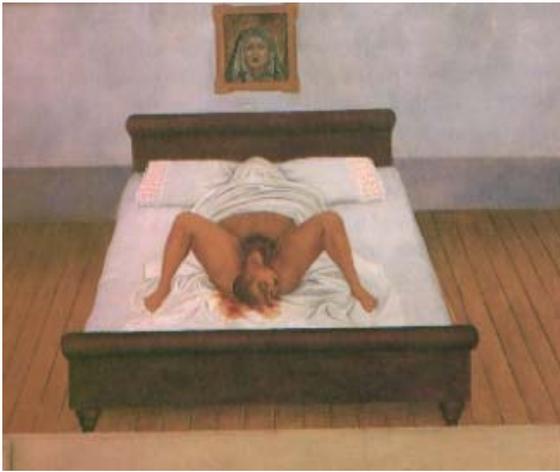
compensation, who rely on him to locate, document, and authenticate art by Kahlo and others. And he has been given (again, without remuneration) the texts of other, better-known scholars' books for fact checking. He is, however, a paid consultant to Christie's, a curator of museum exhibitions, the author of numerous pioneering scholarly articles, as well as a co-author of the catalogue raisonne of Kahlo's work.

Because he has earned the complete confidence of several key players in the Frida story, Grimberg has been entrusted with some startling Kahlo documents—in particular a soul-baring clinical interview conducted over many sessions between 1949 and 1950 by a Mexican psychology student named Olga Campos (a classmate of Diego Rivera's daughter by Lupe Marin). Additionally, Grimberg has the transcripts of a full battery of psychological tests Kahlo underwent, in preparation for a book Campos planned to publish on the theory of creativity. Kahlo was, Campos writes, "cooperative" with her, not only because of their friendship but also because the young psychologist had begun her research at a devastating juncture in Frida's life. In response to a sudden announcement by Diego Rivera that he wanted a divorce to marry the Mexican film siren Maria Felix, Kahlo, Campos reports, overdosed.

The text of Campos's interview—in which Frida candidly discusses her life and her paintings—forms the core of Grimberg's unpublished book manuscript. Kahlo's intimate revelations are then fleshed out by Grimberg's psychobiographical account of Kahlo's life, Campos's personal reminiscences about the artist, the results of the artist's Rorschach, Bleuler-Jung, Szondi, and TAT psychological tests, Kahlo's medical records, and Grimberg's line-by-line analysis of the 170-page diary. For many years and from several sources he has been accumulating photographs of the journal pages (some barely the size of a playing card), assembling them in sequence, and studying the results nightly for hours at home after work. His reading of the diary, as outlined in his unpublished book, is a much closer, more thorough, and more accurate interpretation than the one offered by the Abrams volume. More astonishing still, his compilation of the diary pages is probably more complete than the Abrams facsimile. Grimberg has discovered three missing pages that Frida had torn from the diary and given to friends—lost leaves represented in the Abrams book only as jagged, ripped edges.

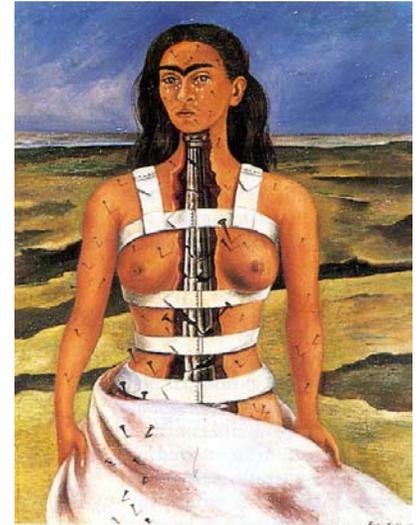
Though she gave her birth date as July 7, 1910, Frida Kahlo was actually born on July 6, 1907, in Coyoacan, Mexico, now a suburb of Mexico City. This most basic lie alone qualifies her for a name she goes by in the diary: "the Ancient Concealer." Her epileptic father, Guillermo Kahlo, and her mother, Matilde, had another daughter, Cristina, 11 months later. Before Frida arrived, Matilde had had a son who died a few days after birth. Unable, or too ambivalent, to breast-feed her, Matilde passed Frida on to two Indian wet nurses (the first, Frida told Campos, was fired for drinking). Probably because of the confusion of having three erratic caregivers, and her mother's general depression over the loss of a son (Frida called her family's household "sad"), Kahlo had from earliest infancy a very damaged sense of self.

In the absence of a Kahlo boy, Frida assumed something of a son's role in the family—certainly she was her father's favorite, and the one who identified most with him. Frida told Campos in her clinical interview, "I am in agreement



with everything my father taught me and nothing my mother taught me." Lucienne Bloch, a close friend of Kahlo's and disciple of Diego Rivera's, recalls that "she loved her father very much, but Frida did not have these same feelings for her mother." In fact, in 1932, when Kahlo returned to Mexico from Detroit upon hearing that her mother was dying (Bloch accompanied her on the journey), she failed to visit Matilde or even view her body. The painfully obstetric work *My Birth* (left, now owned by Madonna), in which Frida's head emerges from the vagina of a mother whose face is covered by a shroud, was most likely her painted response to Matilde Kahlo's death.

At age six or seven, Frida contracted polio, an illness not detected immediately by her parents. When her right leg began thinning, the Kahlos attributed the withering to "a wooden log that a little boy threw at my foot," Kahlo told Campos. She tried to hide the deformity by wrapping her atrophied leg in bandages, which she then concealed with thick woolen socks. The young Frida, however, never wore a leg brace or orthopedic shoe. Her unbuttressed limp led her pelvis and spinal column to twist and deform as she grew, according to Grimberg, who does not agree with another doctor's recent diagnosis that she suffered from spina bifida, a congenital condition. The etiology of her later problems with childbearing and spinal malformation, he feels, can therefore be traced all the way back to her polio. She herself presents this idea in her painting *The Broken Column* (right), in which a crevice opens in her body to reveal a backbone in the form of a ruined Ionic column. Says Grimberg, "The steel corset she wears in this painting is a polio corset," not the kind she later used when recuperating from back operations.



Though her peers maliciously nicknamed her "peg leg," Frida nevertheless found some solace in her disease. "My papa and mama began to spoil me a lot and love me more," Kahlo told Campos. This statement, extraordinary in its pathos, provides one sorrowful key to the artist's psyche. For the rest of her life, Kahlo would associate pain with love (she read one Rorschach as "male genitals with fire and thorns"), and use illness to extract from others the attention she so desperately craved. Family photographs from her adolescence show she found another unusual technique to gain attention and at the same time disguise her gimpy leg. Surrounded by primly dressed relatives, she appears nattily turned out in the full masculine attire of a three-piece suit and tie (left). Kahlo's early cross-dressing, of course, also reflects her ambiguous gender identity. In a poignant section of Campos's interview entitled "My Body," Frida responded, "The most important part of the body is the brain. Of my face I like the eyebrows and eyes. Aside from that I like nothing. My head is too small. My breasts and genitals are average. Of the opposite sex, I have the moustache and in general the face." (Lucienne Bloch says Frida always carefully groomed her mustache and unibrow with a little comb.) Kahlo also intimated to Campos that her first sexual experience occurred at age 13 with her gym and anatomy teacher, a woman named Sara Zenil. Noticing Frida's stricken leg,

Zenil declared the girl "too frail," pulled her out of sports, and initiated "a physical relationship" with her. When Kahlo's mother discovered some compromising letters, she removed Frida from the school and enrolled her instead in the National Preparatory School, where she was one of 35 girls in a student body of 2,000. Tellingly, when she had her first period it was a male friend who took her to the school nurse. And, she recounted to Campos, when she got home it was to her father, not her mother, that she reported the news. While Frida was attending the National Preparatory School, the government engaged the celebrated muralist Diego Rivera to paint the walls of its auditorium. Frida, about 15, developed an obsessive crush on the 36-year-old, internationally famous, and prodigiously fat Michelangelo of Mexico. She declared to her school friends that her ambition was to have his child.

Frida's affair with Diego would begin later, however, for the course of her life was diverted by a cruel twist of fate. In 1925, Frida, now apprenticing (and sleeping) with an artist friend of her father's, was riding in a wooden bus with her steady boyfriend, Alejandro Gomez Arias, when an electric trolley car crashed into it. Frida's boyfriend told Hayden Herrera, "The bus...burst into a thousand pieces." Trapped under the trolley, Gomez Arias sustained comparatively few injuries. But Frida, probably destabilized by her bad leg, was pierced by the trolley's metal handrail, which entered her lower body on the left side and exited through her vagina, tearing its left lip. Her spinal column and pelvis were each broken in three places; her collarbone and two ribs broke as well. Her right leg, the one deformed by polio, was shattered, fractured in 11 places, and her right foot was dislocated and crushed. Somehow, in the impact, Frida's clothes had also been yanked off, and she was left completely nude. Even more freakish, Gomez Arias recalled, "someone in the bus, probably a housepainter, had been carrying a packet of powdered gold. This package broke, and the gold fell all over the bleeding body of Frida." Kahlo was hospitalized for a month (her mother visited only twice), and then sent home to recuperate. During her convalescence she bombarded Gomez Arias with lovelorn letters, and took up painting. Her letters show how intertwined her anguish over Gomez Arias's waning attentions was with her physical suffering. She created her first self-portrait, a gift for her lukewarm beau, as a way to force him to think of her and look at her. "If, after her polio, Frida ever had the chance to separate the idea of love from the experience of pain, the accident destroyed that chance," says Grimberg. Beginning a pattern that would recur with the 30-odd operations performed on her in the course of her beleaguered life, Frida ended her bed rest prematurely and healed poorly.



Frida's sketch, done in a hospital bed, of the accident and herself in a body cast. It is now she begins to paint.

Around 1927, through mutual Communist acquaintances, she met Diego Rivera. Their affair began after she showed up one day while he was frescoing Mexico City's Ministry of Education building. With paintings tucked under her arm, she demanded that he critique her work. In 1929 they married, launching an obsessive, earthy, and doomed union that turned them into the Liz and Dick of the international art world. Twenty-one years older, 200 pounds heavier, and, at more than six feet, nearly 12 inches taller than she, Rivera was gargantuan in both scale and appetites. As irresistible as he was ugly, Rivera was described by Frida as "a boy frog standing on his hind legs"—women flung themselves at him. (Paulette Goddard was perhaps his most famous conquest.) Casual as well as compulsive in his philandering, he compared making love to urinating and declared he could well be a lesbian because he loved women so much. Frida was hopelessly attracted to him (she returns to the theme constantly in her diaries), and developed a special fondness for his huge stomach, "drawn tight and smooth as a sphere," she wrote, and for "the sensitivity" of his pendulous, porcine breasts. Frida altered her persona to please Diego, painting works influenced by indigenous Mexican art, dressing in the colorful, feminine costumes of the Tehuantepec peninsula, and arranging her long, black tresses in Indian-inspired styles. Frida became pregnant just before she married Diego, but she aborted at three months, supposedly because of her twisted pelvis. Her second pregnancy ended in a miscarriage—though she had in fact tried to induce an abortion by ingesting quinine. The third pregnancy was also terminated, quite possibly because it was a lover's child. It is part of the Frida myth that she could not bring a child to term, a situation which caused her much grief and which became the subject of at least two important artworks by her. Yet, in spite of her congenitally underdeveloped ovaries, she was still able to



Henry Ford Hospital. 1932

conceive. And though her pelvis had been damaged by both polio and the accident, there still remains the question of why she never considered a cesarean delivery. Diego supposedly worried that childbearing would ruin her delicate health, but, as Grimberg says, "even if she were physically capable of having a child, she was psychologically unable. It would have stood in the way of her bond with Diego," whom she babied to the point of filling his tub with toys while she bathed him.

Throughout the early 30s, Kahlo traveled with Diego to San Francisco, Detroit, and New York while he worked for American capitalists on large commissions with leftist themes. Kahlo, meanwhile, with Rivera's proud encouragement, developed her craft, honed her engagingly sassy persona, and made important contacts in the social and art worlds—from the Rockefellers and Louise Nevelson (with whom Diego probably had an affair) to that other amazon of art history, Georgia O'Keeffe. Frida's friend Lucienne Bloch remembers that Frida was "very irritated by the famous O'Keeffe" when she met her in 1933—a reaction probably provoked by competitive feelings. But Frida habitually neutralized rivals (usually Diego's mistresses) with a disarming camaraderie, which in this instance may have flowered into a physical relationship. Art dealer Mary-Anne Martin has in her possession an unpublished letter Kahlo sent to a friend in Detroit, dated "New York: April 11, 1933," which contains a revealing passage, sandwiched between jaunty gossip about mutual acquaintances: "O'Keeffe was in the hospital for three months, she went to Bermuda for a rest. She didn't made [sic] love to me that time, I think on account of her weakness. Too bad. Well that's all I can tell you until now."

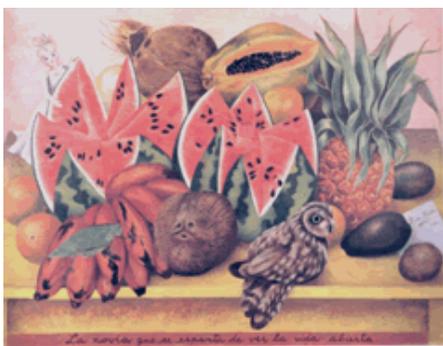
Homesick in the United States, Frida persuaded the reluctant Rivera to return to Mexico. Once there, he retaliated by having an affair with her sister Cristina. (Rivera eventually paid a creepy price for his priapism; in his 60s he was diagnosed with cancer of the penis.) Devastated, Frida began painting herself wounded and bleeding. According to most Frida literature, the artist's series of vengeful extramarital affairs also date from the Cristina crisis. But Grimberg has discovered that Kahlo very quietly had been keeping up with her husband all along. Grimberg has found a letter among the papers of the handsome, womanizing photographer Nickolas Muray (whom Kahlo probably met through the Mexican-born *Vanity Fair* contributor Miguel Covarrubias) which proves that Frida and he had begun their passionate affair as early as May of 1931.

Kahlo tried to conceal her heterosexual liaisons from Rivera—not so difficult after they moved into his-and-hers houses, adjacent residences connected by a bridge. Once detected, these dalliances, such as her mid-1930s fling with the dapper Japanese-American sculptor Isamu Noguchi, usually ended. (In contrast, Rivera boasted to anyone who would listen of her flings with women.) Her brief liaison with Leon Trotsky—whom Rivera, with his potent political pull, had helped bring to Mexico in 1937—infuriated him most. (Kahlo also did not miss the opportunity to seduce Trotsky's secretary, Jean van Heijenoort.) Friends recall that long after Trotsky's assassination Kahlo delighted in driving Rivera into a rage by humiliating him with the memory of her affair with the great Communist. The Kahlo-Rivera duet was, a friend says, "heightened torture and heroism."



As they disembark in Tampico, Mexico, Leon and Natalia Trotsky are met by Kahlo and Communist activist Max Shachtman (right), January, 1937

After Kahlo's successful New York exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1938, Rivera—eager for some distance from his overbearing wife—urged her to travel to Paris, where the Surrealist poet Andre Breton had promised to organize a show. Though Frida professed to feel alone and miserable in France, this "beautiful human magnet" (as a friend called her), decked in ethnic fiestawear, mesmerized Picasso,



Duchamp, Kandinsky, and Schiaparelli (who paid homage by designing a "robe Mme. Rivera"). Frida found Breton insufferable, but she had discovered a soul mate in his wife, painter Jacqueline Lamba. Half a decade later Frida even copied into her diary a letter she had written to Lamba after departing France. It is possible to read through the letter's doubly crossed-out line "We were together ..." When Grimberg asked Lamba if she and Frida had been close, she replied, "Very close, intimate." Grimberg feels that Kahlo's painting *The Bride Frightened at Seeing Life Opened* (left) is a tribute to Lamba, who had confided in Kahlo the trauma of her wedding night. The little blonde doll peering over this still life, and alluded to in the

letter, resembles the elegant Lamba.

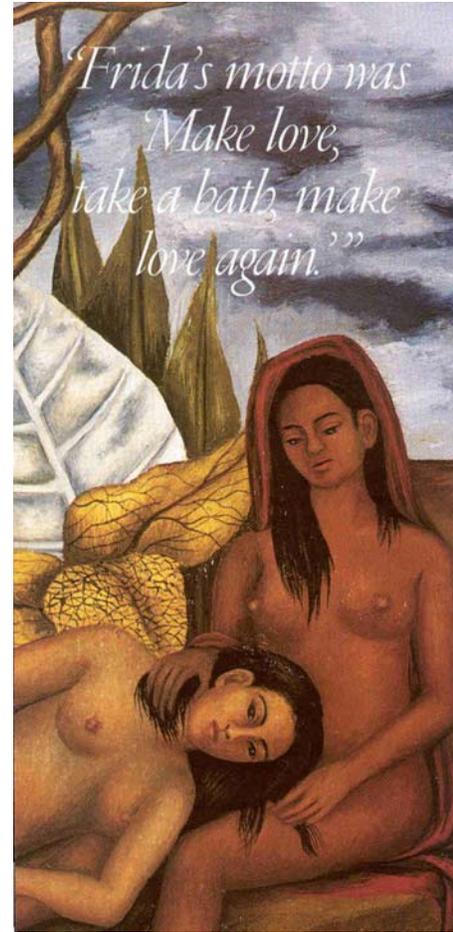


After her 1939 return from Paris, Rivera demanded a divorce from Kahlo. (Paulette Goddard had by then moved across the street from Diego's studio.) Kahlo mourned the separation by cutting her hair as she had during the Cristina affair. She painted herself (left) shorn and desexed (she described herself to Nickolas Muray as looking like a "fairy"), wearing a man's baggy suit capacious enough to be Diego's—a curious case of identification with the aggressor. In the 1940s, she also embarked on the series of arresting self-portraits that have seared her features so indelibly into the public's imagination. As Grimberg astutely points out, Kahlo clearly had difficulty being alone. "Even in her self-portraits she is usually accompanied by her parrots, monkeys, dogs, or a doll," he says. "She kept mirrors in every room of her house, her patio included, as if she needed constant reassurance of her very existence."

A painting known today by the descriptive title *Two Nudes in the Jungle* (right, 1939; originally titled *The Earth Herself*) is usually interpreted, like the contemporaneous *Two Fridas*, as a double self-portrait. Painted for Dolores Del Rio around the time of Frida's divorce, it may in fact be a slightly veiled sapphic image of Kahlo with the screen goddess. In the Campos interview Frida states that she painted a portrait of Del Rio, yet in the actress's estate only two Kahlo pictures turned up: *Girl with Death Mask* (1938) and *Two Nudes*. The fairer, recumbent nude, with her sloe-eyed, oval face, bears an undeniable, if somewhat stylized, resemblance to photos of Del Rio from the period. The painting brings to mind a salacious confession Kahlo made to Campos—that she was "attracted to dark nipples but repelled by pink nipples in a woman."



BOSOM BUDDIES *Two Nudes in the Jungle*, 1939, painted for the actress Dolores del Rio around the time of Frida's divorce, may in fact be a slightly veiled sapphic image of Kahlo with the screen goddess. Above, Frida at home with Del Rio, circa 1940.



Never good, Frida's health—physical and otherwise—worsened after the divorce. Her endemic infirmity was exacerbated by her bottle-a-day brandy habit, chain-smoking, and steady diet of sweets. (When her teeth rotted she had two sets of dentures made, one in gold and a more festive pair studded with diamonds.) By 1940 not only was she racked with agonizing pain in her spine, she was also suffering from infected kidneys, a trophic ulcer on her right foot, where some gangrenous toes had already been amputated in 1934, and recurrent fungus infections on her right hand.

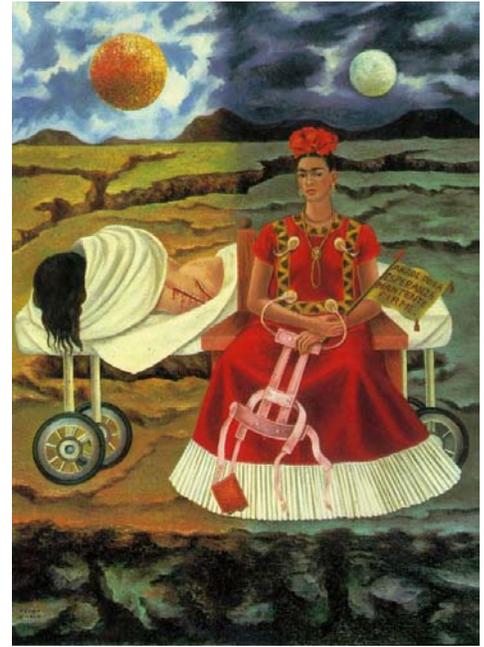
Rivera, who had fled to San Francisco to avoid embroilment in the Trotsky-assassination-attempt fiasco (he was briefly under suspicion), was disturbed to learn of Kahlo's debilitated condition and her two-day imprisonment for questioning after the Communist leader's eventual murder. Rivera sent for Frida, had her hospitalized in California, and, as Frida wrote to a friend, "I saw Diego, and that helped more than anything else. ...I will marry Diego again. ...I am very happy." These tender sentiments, however, did not prevent Frida from carrying on—from her hospital bed—an affair with the noted art collector and dealer Heinz Berggruen, then a boyish refugee from Nazi Germany. Says Herrera, "Remember, Frida's motto was 'Make love, take a bath, make love again.'" Nonetheless, the couple re-wed in San Francisco on Diego's 54th birthday, returned to Mexico, and set up housekeeping in Kahlo's childhood Coyoacan home.

In 1946, having consulted numerous Mexican doctors, she elected to undergo major surgical intervention on her spinal column in New York. There an orthopedic specialist named Dr. Philip Wilson performed a spinal fusion

using a metal plate and a bone graft sliced from her pelvis. The operation filled her with an eerie euphoria. "He is so marvelous this doctor, and my body is so full of vitality," she wrote to her childhood sweetheart Alejandro Gómez Arias, in a letter illustrated with diagrams of the cuts Dr. Wilson had made into her back and pelvis. In her painting *Tree of Hope* (right, 1946) these gaping wounds reappear, bleeding exhibitionistically on her almost Christlike body, wrapped as if in winding-sheets and resting on a hospital gurney.

There were several causes for the almost morbidly elated tone of Kahlo's note to Gómez Arias. Surgery always gave her a strange high—she gleefully soaked up the ministrations of doctors, nurses, and visitors (in bed she entertained guests like a hostess at a party). She also was receiving huge doses of morphine, which left her addicted to painkillers for the rest of her life. But, most pertinent to the genesis of her diary, she had embarked on what would be her last and most satisfying romance with a man.

In 1946, just before she left Mexico to see Dr. Wilson, Frida fell in love with a beautiful Spanish refugee, a gentleman of great discretion and a painter like herself. Still alive today, he is, as when Frida knew him, a peripatetic soul—and he remains infatuated with Frida. In an old cigar box he preserves a relic of their love, a *huipil*, the loose Mexican blouse Frida often wore. When they were both in Mexico, the couple trysted at the house of Kahlo's sister Cristina, and corresponded by means of a post-office box in Coyoacan. She confided to one of her friends, "He's the only reason why I'm alive." This confidante says that the Spaniard was the love of Frida's life. By contrast, the relationship with Diego was, she insists, an "obsession"—a kind of complicity of needy souls. An unpublished incantatory poem Frida addressed to Diego, which her reputed late-in-life lesbian lover Teresa Proenza gave him a few months before he died, bears witness to the kind of raw, perverse emotional ties that bound her to her husband: "Diego in my urine—/ Diego in my mouth /—in my heart, in my madness, in my sleep..." she wrote.



The diary is conventionally understood to have originated in 1944—that date, it is true, appears on one page. But Frida often referred to past events in the diary, and sometimes copied old material—such as the missive to Jacqueline Lamba—into the book. And her letters and diary entries show how frequently the imprecise Frida made chronological, and other, slips when she wrote. One date in the diary, for example, first written as "1933" is then corrected to 1953. On the opening page of the diary, Frida scrawled, "Painted from 1916," an inscription that has mystified scholars, but that Grimberg feels is merely a slip for 1946. The recollection of her Spanish lover, who met Frida that year, is, however, certain proof of the 1946 dating. He recalls that Cristina Kahlo was in the habit of buying little notebooks—for addresses, accounts, etc.—for her sister from a stationery store in Coyoacan. One day when he visited Frida at Cristitla's house, he found her pasting a collage of flowers onto the first page of a dark-red leather book, larger than the others, with her initials stamped in gold on the cover. The collage in question is the frontispiece of Kahlo's diary. The memory of the initials is also accurate—and shows up the persistent blindness of most readers of the diary, who have, despite its crossbar, routinely mistaken the monogrammed *F* on the cover for a *J*. In fact, a preposterous story has even sprung up around this misreading and clung to it tenaciously—that the book had once belonged to John Keats. From cover to cover, the signals given off by the diary have been misunderstood, misinterpreted, or disregarded—as if "the Ancient Concealer" has posthumously been covering people's eyes with her heavily beringed fingers.

Frida's Spanish flame remembers next seeing Kahlo with the diary in New York, at the hospital. A comparison of the drawings and handwriting in the book with sketches and letters she gave him at the time bears this out. What is more, several of the diary's more mysterious entries, once deciphered, clearly refer to the Spaniard, whom she saw until 1952 (the affair ended because he needed to travel and she was incapacitated). But by no means is this to say that he was the only lover referred to in the book or its sole subject. (Diego, naturally, is mentioned far more frequently; she, as always, is her own main subject.) Of particular interest, as far as the Spanish lover goes, is a page (*see above*), partially obscured by a naughty French postcard, where fragmentary words are still legible on the right. The first of these " ...ra villa, " Grimberg explains, in its entirety reads, "mara villa," a private pun. The Spaniard's nickname for Frida was "Mara"—in Hindu mysticism, the temptress who entices the soul through the

senses. (Many of the strange words in the diary are in arcane languages—not only Sanskrit, but also Nahuatl, an Aztec tongue—and even Russian. Far from being a naïf, Kahlo was extremely sophisticated about language, art history, and culture.) She added the Spanish suffix *villa*, Grimberg says, because when people heard her secret lover call Kahlo by her nickname, Frida and he would pretend it was short for *maravilla*, the Spanish word for "marvel." Similarly, the word *arbol*, or "tree," clearly discernible beneath "mara villa," is a reference to the Mexican song "Tree of Hope Stand Firm" (also the title of one of her paintings), which the Spaniard had taught Frida to help her overcome her despair. "Voyage" refers to a trip her errant lover took, the one that occasioned the postcard. "There's always an underlying theme in the diary," Grimberg says. "You just need to find it."

Another coded reference to her clandestine lover appears on a page which begins with "September at night. Water from heaven. the dampness of you. waves in your hands. matter in my eyes..." Farther down Kahlo writes the words "Delaware and Manhattan North," an allusion, Grimberg says, to the northbound trip the Spaniard took from his home in that state to visit his paramour. Perversely, sometimes Kahlo's obscure scribbles weave several lovers together, in rebus-like fashion. A few pages after the one on which she pasted the French postcard, she writes, "Anniversary of the [Russian] Revolution / 7th of November 1947 / Tree of Hope / stand firm! I'll wait for you -b. / ...your words which / will make me grow and / will enrich me / DIEGO I'm alone." The song and painting title "Tree of Hope," of course, evokes the Spanish lover—but so does the lower-case *b*, the first initial of one of his names. (The faintly marked *b* is left out of the Abrams transcription of that page.) Frida's plaintive invocation of her husband is obvious. Less so is the reference to Trotsky, whose birthday fell on the same autumnal day as the revolution. There is something undeniably disturbed about the way she conflated these men in the space of a few sparse lines—as if on an unconscious level they were all interchangeable.

Kaleidoscopic, dissociative, and fractured, the writing and drawings—floating a networks of penises, faces, ears, mystical a symbols, and anthropomorphic beasts—may be "automatic" in the Surrealist sense, and sometimes even funny, but they are hardly intellectually calculated avant-garde exercises. They demonstrate, Grimberg feels, the kind of chaos unleashed in a Kahlo's psyche when she was left in the one state she could not bear—solitude. The word ICELTI, Nahuatl for "alone"—untranslated in the Abrams notations—blazes in large red letters amid the disembodied heads and eyes of one page. Left to her own devices, she often summoned up the name or image of Diego to allay her interior sense of disorder. "Diego was her organizing principle, the axis around which she spun," Grimberg says, pointing out another mantra-like diary entry: "Diego = my husband / Diego = my friend / Diego = my mother / Diego = my father / Diego = my son / Diego = me / Diego = Universe."

The psychiatrist continues: "Anything, no matter how banal, that emanated from the great Rivera was sacred to her. She picked his crumpled drawings out of the trash, and asked him to inscribe in her diary his recipe for tempera," an ancient egg-based artist's medium. (The Abrams book mistakenly assumes this uncharacteristically orderly entry was written by Frida.) Similarly, a feverishly carnal message ("I pressed you against my breast and the prodigy of your form penetrated all my blood..."), addressed to "Mi Diego" and assumed in the Abrams volume to have issued directly from Frida, is in fact a medley like pastiche of erotic poems by her intimate friend Elias Nandino (she even scrawled the poet's name up the right margin of the page). Some of these verses he later published in the collection *Poems in Loneliness*, dedicated to Kahlo.

Inevitably, Frida's profound ambivalence about her inordinate emotional dependence on Diego bubbles to the surface, along with all the other flotsam and jetsam streaming from her unconscious. "Nobody will ever know how much I love Diego. I don't want anything to hurt him. nothing to bother him or to sap the energy that he needs to live," she writes on another leaf. This is a classic case of what psychoanalysts call "negation" and what Shakespeare called "protesting too much." Why bring up "hurting," "bothering," and "sapping" at all, unless it is in fact a secret wish?

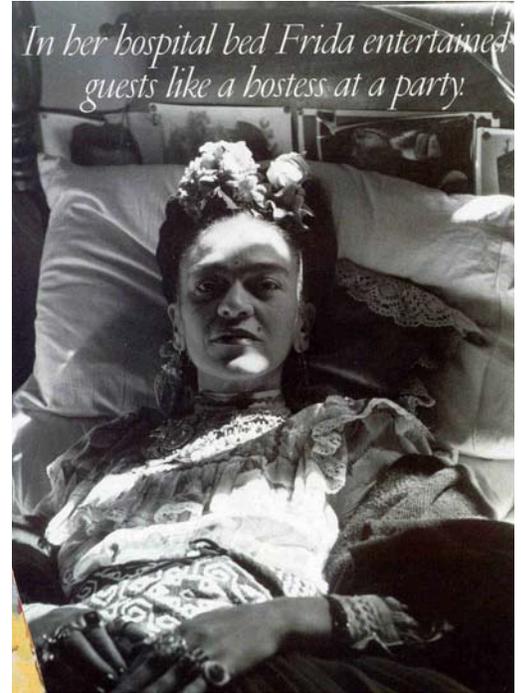
The only one whom she ever effectively "hurt" or "bothered," of course, was herself; the only vital energy Frida succeeded in sapping was her own. In the diary she obliquely compared her personal auto-da-fe to that of the Jews of the Spanish Inquisition. The Israeli art historian Gannit Ankori has detected that a cryptic drawing labeled "ghosts" has its source in an illustration of Jews (a few are weeping females with long black hair) being humiliated by Spanish soldiers that Kahlo lifted from a book about the Inquisition in her Coyoacan library. (This revelation,



Diego kisses Frida at the English Hospital in Mexico City during her 1950-51 stay.

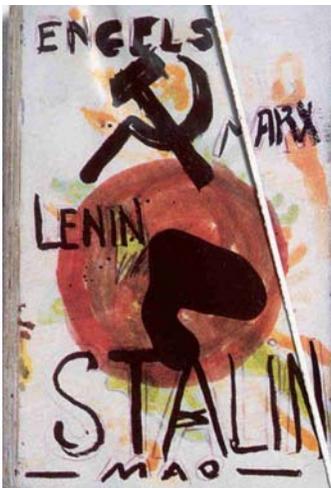
published in the 1993-94 issue of *Jewish Art*, is not mentioned in the Abrams book.) Kahlo had good reason to identify with these wretched victims, for her final years added up to a Passion of her own.

A 1950 examination suggested that in the 1946 New York operation the wrong vertebrae may have been fused. Kahlo's back was thus reopened and another fusion was performed, this time with a donor graft. When the incisions became abscessed, the surgeons had to operate again. She lay in the Mexican hospital for a year, her wounds once more healing badly because of a fungus infection, and her right leg exhibiting early signs of gangrene. But in her own baroque variation of the Munchausen disorder, Frida turned her hospital stay into a festival. Diego took a room next to hers, and doctors noted that on those rare occasions when he was attentive her pains disappeared. Like Christ with Saint Thomas, Frida exhorted her guests to look at her oozing sore, and when doctors drained it, Hayden Herrera wrote, she would "exclaim over the beautiful shade of green." After her release, the exhibitionism of Kahlo's illness reached a bizarre apogee when, warned against attending the opening of her first Mexican one-person show, at the Galeria Arte Contemporaneo, she was ceremoniously brought in on a stretcher and installed in the room on her four-poster bed as a live display.



Frida Kahlo in her four-poster bed at her Coyoacan home in 1952. During her lifetime, Kahlo had more than 30 operations.

Whatever warped satisfaction Kahlo had habitually derived from illness and operations was unavailable to her when she underwent the most drastic of her 30-odd procedures (Kahlo had at least as many doctors as lovers) in August 1953—the amputation of her right leg. Kahlo's injured spinal column was already metaphoric proof that she was indeed "rotten at the core." But, unlike her backbone, the stump was an outwardly visible sign of her defectiveness. The incorrigible egomaniac Rivera wrote in his



On this diary page, Kahlo inscribed the names of her Communist heroes around an image of the earth topped by a hammer and sickle.

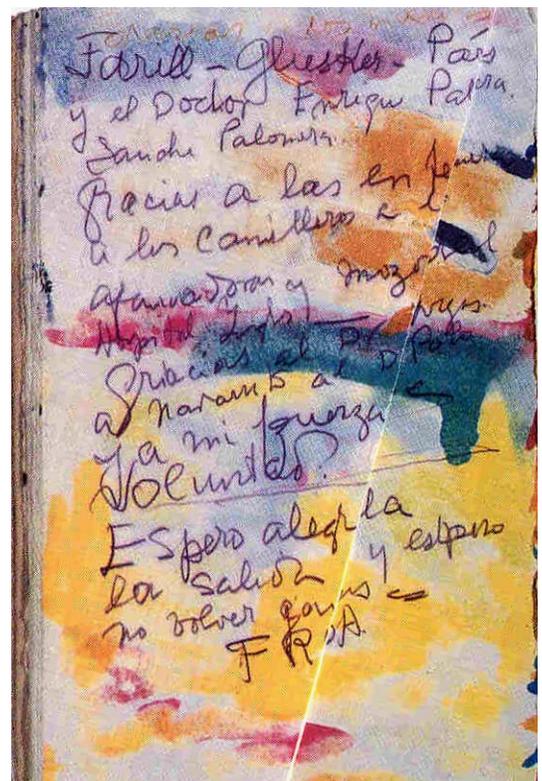
autobiography, "Following the loss of her leg, Frida became deeply depressed. She no longer even wanted to hear me tell her of my love affairs....She had lost her will to live." Though she painted, mostly still lifes, whenever she had the strength, and, if the occasion warranted, could summon up her diabolical humor (in a quarrel with Dolores Del Rio, she announced, "I will send her my leg on a silver tray as an act of vengeance"), she tried several times to kill herself by hanging or overdose. But even in her livelier moments, she was doped up on Demerol; between the scabs from previous injections and her surgeries, it was impossible to find a virgin spot of skin in which to insert a needle. Vain to the finish, she continued her daily makeup ritual—Coty rouge and powder on the face, Talika eye pencil on the unibrow, and magenta lipstick—but her expert touch failed her, and, like the surfaces of her last canvases, the cosmetics were grotesquely caked and smeared. Her features coarsened and thickened, giving her countenance, in the past compared to an effeminate boy's, a distinctly masculine cast.

In her delirious despair, Frida became an ardent Stalinist. The Soviet tyrant, who died not long before Kahlo, was somehow merged in her agitated mind with Rivera—and with her father. "VIVA STALIN / VIVA DIEGO," she wrote on one diary page. Her last known painting is an unfinished likeness of the Russian leader. With his brushy hair and drooping mustache, he resembles, Grimberg observes in his unpublished manuscript, the posthumous image she had made in 1951 of her father.

All signs point to the fact that Kahlo's death on July 13, 1954, was a suicide by overdose. As art historian Sarah Lowe says, "Enough was enough." Many factors, the diary not least among them, support this theory. Her last written words include a long list of doctors and companions whom she thanks, and then the lines "I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return—FRIDA." The diary's last self-portrait shows a green face, which looks like an amalgam of her features with those of Diego, under which Kahlo inscribed "ENVIIOUS ONE." And the book's last image is a bleak and transcendental study of a dark winged being—the Angel of Death.

Through a doctor friend, Rivera obtained a death certificate that listed the cause as "pulmonary embolism," but Kahlo's body was cremated before an autopsy could be performed. In Grimberg's text Olga Campos recalls that when she leaned over to kiss the corpse's cheek Frida's mustache hairs bristled—for a moment the psychologist thought her friend was still alive. After the cremation, when Frida's ashes slid back out on a cart from the oven doors, Rivera, some witnesses claim, scooped up a handful and ate them.

With her diaries now bared to the world, what, finally, can we make of Frida, the Ancient Concealer? Was she victim, martyr, manipulator—or even a great artist? Certainly her pain, her tears, her misery, her talent were authentic—but so was her need to exploit them. Which is not to deny Frida the essential tragedy and heroism of her life. Says the psychologist Dr. James Bridger Harris, who interpreted the Rorschach tests administered by Olga Campos, "It is Kahlo's heroic battle in the face of feeling defective, deformed, and unloved that everyone taps into." Frida projected onto one of these Rorschach cards a poignant, metaphoric description of herself. Its ambiguous shape suggested to her "a strange butterfly. Full of hair, flying downward very fast." Her remarkable response to an even murkier gray inkblot eloquently reveals Kahlo's longing to transcend her afflictions with dignity and grace: "Very pretty. Here are two ballerinas without a head and they're missing a leg [this was several years before the amputation]. ...They're dancing."



The final page of Frida's diary, which thanks all her doctors and nurses, and ends, "I hope the leaving is joyful—and I hope never to return—FRIDA."