

During their twenty-five-year marriage, Kahlo and Rivera separated formally twice but divorced only to remarry one year later. During their first separation (1934–35), Kahlo attempted to establish herself as separate and autonomous. She had just discovered his affair with her younger sister Cristina. She shed the Mexican costumes and jewelry, cut off her braids, and permed her short hair. She had affairs with two artists, Ignacio Aguirre and Isamu Noguchi.¹¹

Nevertheless, for her external appearance to work, it had to be the product of an internal conviction. Kahlo's new appearance was not as successful as she would have liked. She "lost" the attractiveness she felt she had with Rivera. She became profoundly depressed and attempted suicide by ingesting barbiturates. If she painted anything in 1934, the works have never come to light. In 1935 she painted a small *Self-Portrait with Curly Hair*, wearing regular clothes and jewelry, and *A Few Small Nips*, her apperception of what Rivera did to her. The latter depicts a nude young woman, stabbed from head to foot, butchered by her lover who stands beside her smirking. "I only gave her a few small nips," he says. Rivera's cynicism was comparable to the murderer's. "I never loved you, I loved your sister, you were just the doormat of my love,"¹² he sang to Kahlo.

Kahlo had borrowed the subject of *A Few Small Nips* from a sensational news broadside. The brutal scene takes place beneath a ribbon, held in the beaks of a white bird at one end and a black bird at the other on which she has written the title of the work. Kahlo exhibited *A Few Small Nips* three years later, but she worked on the painting for at least fourteen years. Photographs of the work taken from time to time show how she kept altering the painting. In one from 1948, Kahlo sits in her studio next to the painting; the work sports a new rough pine frame with a knife stuck in it. By the time *A Few Small Nips* was finally acquired by its first collector (c. 1949), Kahlo had stabbed the frame multiple times and splattered blood-red paint all over it, telling of her more than usual attachment to this work. The fact that she also worked on the painting for so long suggests that she remained troubled by the experience to such a degree that she could scarcely distance herself from it. Also, her portrayal of the brutality, as if it happened to another person rather than to her, suggests that despite her identification with the subject, painting it as if it

had happened to her was intolerable. This is unusual for Kahlo, who was not usually squeamish about bearing and baring all.

At some level—at the core of her self—Kahlo recognized that the price of playing Galatea to Pygmalion would be too steep. But she went ahead anyway. She deluded herself into believing that whatever gratification came from being Rivera's wife was well worth the consequences. She found it intolerable that he preferred his work over anyone and anything and sometimes spent days away working; he was also a shameless philanderer who relished telling Kahlo about his conquests.

The separation from Rivera did not produce the desired results. Kahlo's sense of self was fuzzy and gave itself away in the smallest of ways. Ignacio Aguirre had rented a room in a private home where Kahlo met him to be alone. Rather than using her name with the owners, she used the pseudonym Cristina(!)¹³ By taking her sister's name, she created for herself a deserving self, one who was more lovable. As Frida, she only deserved a few small nips, she believed. When Rivera agreed to a reconciliation, Kahlo readily shifted back into the persona he coveted, the invented self and world in which she believed she thrived.

Much information about Kahlo's chronic feelings of fragmentation and their source can be found in her self-portrait *My Birth* (1932). The painting was produced shortly after the death of her mother in Mexico. Kahlo had traveled from Detroit with Lucienne Bloch to see Matilde Kahlo in the hospital. Though they arrived with enough time to do so, Frida did not visit her before her death; she would not even see the body.¹⁴ And she couldn't stop crying. Frida's father Guillermo Kahlo, a professional photographer, took two photographs of his daughter following Matilde's death. On one print Frida Kahlo drew tears spilling from her eyes, signed it "from your friend who is very sad,"¹⁵ and sent it to her childhood friend Isabel Campos.

Why would Kahlo avoid seeing her mother, even though seeing her was the purpose of the trip? Why would she not even see the body? What conflict was she trying to avoid? Knowing Kahlo's lifelong separation anxiety, one may guess that she was frightened to confront what she considered the ultimate separation, which may explain the energy that gives *My Birth* its power.

Frida painted *My Birth* as an ex-voto, on tin and with an empty, unfurled scroll beneath the image, where a narrative of the tragedy and the miracle requested from a favorite deity would normally be written. On the bed, shrouded from the waist up, lies the body of Matilde Kahlo. Her knees are bent and spread in the position of giving birth. Frida's head is barely out of the vaginal canal; blood stains the sheet beneath Kahlo's head, and one does not know whether she is alive or dead. Above the bed, as if watching over the tragedy, hangs a portrait of the Virgin of Sorrows, bleeding and weeping, stabbed by two daggers. There is no sign of life in the barren room. "This is how I imagined I was born,"¹⁶ said Kahlo later, of what she could not explain as a newborn but only experience. The image of *My Birth* has its iconographic root in the Aztec goddess Tlazoltéotl, often depicted giving birth. Her sacred Cihuateteo were the ghosts of women who died in childbirth.¹⁷

Preverbal experiences often leave memories that may be impossible to articulate but are nevertheless retrieved whenever we confront external events that echo them, and they can rule our lives without our ever knowing.¹⁸ Frida could not tolerate seeing Matilde Kahlo dying or dead because confronting this fact tapped into a horror of being alone that had begun in her infancy and in the face of which she felt as helpless as a victim.

In *My Birth* Kahlo displays the foundation of her personality. The image condenses a fear and a wish, an understanding Kahlo had about the relationship between herself and her mother: that her coming into the world had been a kind of death to her mother; that Kahlo could have been born only after her mother died; that the experience of bonding between them never took place; that she never fully separated from her mother.

There was a significant element of truth to Kahlo's intuition about her psychological origins. She was the fourth of five siblings, the third of four girls. Matilde Kahlo became pregnant with Frida following the loss of her third child, her only boy, who died days after he was born. How the pregnancy with Frida went while she grieved for a lost child is difficult to say, but it makes sense to assume that it was complicated. When Frida was born, Matilde was too ill to nurture the baby and turned Frida's care and breastfeeding over to a hired nursemaid. When Matilde discovered the nursemaid was ingesting alcohol and breastfeeding Frida at the same time, she fired her,

Frida Kahlo
My Nurse and I, 1937
 Oil on tin
 11 ³/₄ x 13 ³/₄ in.
 Collection of Dolores Olmedo Foundation,
 Mexico City



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replacing her with new nursemaid. Within two months of Frida's birth, Matilde was pregnant again with what would be her fourth daughter and last child. Kahlo's first two years of life, therefore, were shaped by her mother's illness and bereavement, faulty bonding, two nannies, and the self-absorption of Matilde's new pregnancy.

In her diary Frida wrote an entry without explanation or elaboration: "The one who gives birth to herself."¹⁹ This statement has been attributed to Kahlo though it comes from her extensive readings on ancient Egypt. It deals with the creation myth of Nu, the first Egyptian God. What is important about this statement is why Kahlo would be drawn to it—as she was to many other apparently disconnected phrases she entered in her diary. As she came upon it, it must have felt affectively right. It rang true. In a sense she had given psychological birth to herself without a consistent primary caregiver who, attuned to her, would provide the mirroring she needed to thrive and develop adequately.

The painting *My Nurse and I* (1937; fig. 27) shows Kahlo still working on the issue of a faulty attachment and its consequences. Kahlo considered this work a companion to *My Birth* and one of her two best paintings.²⁰ In this painting, produced



Frida Kahlo

The Two Fridas, 1939

Oil on canvas

67 x 67 in.

Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno,
Mexico City

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five years after its companion, she returns to depicting dualities, portraying herself half-infant, half-woman. She appears in the arms of her Indian nanny, whose transparent left breast reveals swollen milk ducts as minute trees. Her nipple spills drops of milk into Kahlo's unresponsive mouth. As in *My Birth*, one cannot tell whether Kahlo is living or dead; at best she looks self-absorbed. The nanny's face is covered with a Teotihuacán mask, and she carries Kahlo in her arms as if offering her away. The painting looms brutally direct. There is no mutuality between nanny and Kahlo, no affectionate cuddling, no holding, no touching. With the body of an infant, Kahlo dramatizes herself as someone who developed unevenly and cannot thrive. The image was most likely inspired by a funerary clay figure from Jalisco of a nursing mother in Rivera's collection. This pre-Hispanic object also holds in her arms a child with the head of an adult who appears dead. The minute "tree" gland ducts refer to the Mayan myth of *Ceiba Yaxche*, the first tree that existed in the world.²¹ With fruit that looked like breasts, it was the first nourisher of humanity. It

Théodore Chassériau
The Two Sisters, 1843
 Oil on canvas
 70 ⁵/₁₆ x 53 ¹/₁₆ in.
 Musée du Louvre



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was believed that infants who died before weaning were placed in heaven to be fed under one of these trees. Nanny's pose, as if giving away the infant Frida, may be explained by the Teotihuacán mask she wears. Teotihuacán was the Aztec site where human sacrifices were held.

Kahlo's developmental history and her depiction of her infancy in these two self-portraits speak of the roots of her loneliness, her feelings of incompleteness, fragmentation, and lack of integration; Kahlo lacked an empathic attachment to someone who could walk her through the milestones of infancy until she arrived at a place where she felt comfortable with her self, not separate and apart. Images of herself as an adult continue to reflect this concern.

Frida Kahlo painted *The Two Fridas* (1939; fig. 28) following Rivera's request for a divorce. Here she again uses dual images to portray two opposing forces: living and dying. In this double self-portrait two Frida Kahlos sit side by side on a bench holding hands. Each one has her heart exposed, and both hearts are linked by one artery. The Kahlo on the right,

dressed as a Tehuana, holds in her left hand a miniature portrait of Rivera as a child. Emerging from the portrait, an artery travels to nurture her heart. Kahlo told a friend that this Frida was kept alive by the love she received from Rivera; that the second Frida, the one on the left in a lace white dress, is dying since she is not loved by Rivera.²² With her right hand she tries unsuccessfully to stop the slow bleeding from the artery despite the efforts of a Kelly clamp.

Kahlo could not have been much more specific in her description of how Rivera's mirroring kept her alive and how his withdrawal felt like a slow death. She does not consider that within her is the ability to survive, all she has to do is access it; like an infant, Kahlo expects to receive her sense of self from the outside. That is why when Rivera was absent she looked to external sources to provide, even momentarily, enough positive regard to hold her through difficult times. She received this from the intensity of love affairs or even circumstantial friendships.

The iconography that sparked *The Two Fridas* came to Kahlo months earlier while in Paris, at the Louvre.²³ There she saw Théodore Chassériau's *The Two Sisters* (1843; fig. 29) and the anonymous *Gabrièle d'Estrées*. The vision of two identical women side by side, as mirror images of each other, must have struck a familiar chord. On her return to Mexico she created her double portrait.

Kahlo had resisted going to Paris; she acquiesced to Rivera's suggestion because the marriage was shaky. She had just paid him back for his affair with Cristina by having hers with Trotsky, their house guest. Rivera wanted space and said it would be good for her and her art to exhibit in New York and Paris. Kahlo feared the marriage would fall apart. Both proved right; when she returned, triumphant, he asked for a divorce.

Feeling split would naturally make Frida Kahlo identify situations where halves could fuse into one. Studying Chinese philosophy, she came upon the *Tao te ching*. In the 1947–48 mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda*, Rivera paints himself as a child next to an adult Kahlo; in her hand she holds the symbolic figure of the yang-yin disk, the primordial beginning, which stands for being within each other. Half of the circle represents the positive, male, light principle, and the other half the negative, female, dark principle. It is a sym-



Frida Kahlo
Xóchitl, 1938
Oil on metal
7 x 3 ³/₄ in.
Private collection, Mexico City

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bol for the great secret of the unity of existence and nonexistence. The precursor of this figure is a circle that stands for chaos, before differences have been separated and differentiated—not unlike the infantile mind.²⁴ Kahlo entered the symbol in her diary many times.

Finding and sustaining a balance was, for Kahlo, a way of life. Her ongoing conflict reflected a fluctuating experience that brought her harmony at times but mostly disharmony. Her talent, not being subject to the ebbs and flows of such conflict, allowed her to produce an art that portrays the experience in her choice of subject. One example of a harmonious extreme is her painting *Xóchitl* (1938; fig. 30), which denotes an integrated balance of opposites; an example of the other

disharmonious extreme is *The Little Deer* (1946), showing Kahlo's unsuccessful attempt at bringing cohesion to her life. As works of art both paintings are equally extraordinary, but only one represents a desired state of mind.

Xócbitl is one of Kahlo's smallest works. At first glance it depicts a simple flower made up of two opposite but perfectly integrated parts: a red, bell-like vagina and a penis received from above. *Xócbitl* is Náhuatl for "flower," but it also means "delicate thing," which may be why the painting is also known as *The Flower of Life*. The visual idea for the painting came to Kahlo from a glyph in the *Codex Mendoza*. *Acaxochitla* (*aca*, reed; *xócbitl*, flower; and *tla*, abundance), means "place abundant with flowers and reeds." In the *Codex*, glyph is a single red flower penetrated from above by a reed,²⁵ but the narrative behind the work comes from the Aztec myth about the origin of flowers. The story tells how a bat emerged from the semen of the god Quetzalcóatl or Plumed Serpent, who took a piece from the genitals of Xóchitl, Goddess of Love, and out of this flowers were born.²⁶

Xócbitl is significant in Kahlo's oeuvre as the only example of a moment in which she has resolved her ongoing conflict harmoniously. During the height of her affair with photographer Nickolas Muray, Frida Kahlo signed her letters to him "Xóchitl." Initially the painting hung in her studio, but when it did not sell right away, she moved it to her bedroom and hung it by her bed until she gave it to its first collector, Rivera's major patron.

In *The Little Deer* (see fig. 34) Kahlo paints herself in a wooded area, surrounded by trees except in the vanishing point, where one sees a waterscape and lightning coming down from the sky. In this self-portrait, Kahlo paints herself as a wounded stag. She fuses her head with the body of a deer and portrays herself as half-male and half-female, half-human, half-beast. She has human ears—and earrings and deer ears too. Nine antlers grow from her coiffed hair. She is crying, her body pierced by nine arrows. A dry branch lies at her feet. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who chronicled the daily life of pre-Hispanic Mexico, documented that since the sixth century A.D., a dry branch was placed in the graves of those who died by drowning or struck by lightning. Upon arrival in Tlalocan, the place of delights, the branch would come back to life.²⁷ According to Chevalier: "In women's dreams, the deer evokes

generally her own femininity, though ill differentiated (sometimes badly accepted), in a state still primitive and instinctual, not fully revealed due either to moral censorship, to fear of circumstances, to psychic immaturity, even due to a sense of inferiority." Due to its antlers, which are periodically renewed, the deer symbolizes rebirth. The archaic image of the deer as psychic renewal is found equally among Mayans, Muslims, and Christians. The deer represents the soul searching for divine water in order to satiate its thirst. The deer's tendency to isolation links it to the melancholic temperament.²⁸ In Christian symbolism the branch would serve as Kahlo's passport for her entry to heaven from earth, but Kahlo will not be able to enter heaven. Because she has no arms, she has no way to pick up the branch and therefore is doomed to reincarnate once again. We know to this because of the explanatory word she has written in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas: "CARMA." Kahlo saw her situation as caused by cosmic forces, not by her current attitudes or behavior. She saw herself as a blameless victim of cosmic justice.

Kahlo delivered the painting to its owner accompanied by a poem:

There I leave you [with] my portrait
So you will keep me in mind
every day and night
I am away from you
Sadness is portrayed
in all my painting
but that is my condition
I cannot be fixed

However, I carry
joy in my heart
knowing that Arcady and Lina
love me as I am.

Accept this little painting
painted with my tenderness
in exchange for your affection
and immense sweetness.²⁹

The painting's original title was not *The Little Deer* but *I Am Just a Poor Deer*, a line that Kahlo borrowed from a popular Mexican song. "I cannot be fixed," she says and thanks them for loving her as she is.

In a diary entry, Kahlo sits on a potter's wheel, her limbs crumbling away. "I am disintegration," she writes above her head.³⁰ To her left is the Egyptian deity Khnum. Sometimes depicted as a person of either gender wearing a ram's head with wavy horns, Khnum created all living creatures on a potter's wheel prior to placing them in their mothers' wombs.³¹

Jacqueline Lamba and Leonora Carrington, two Surrealist artists who befriended Frida Kahlo and greatly admired her art, were aware how self-absorption gave power to her painting but also kept her stuck. "It lacks contact with the cosmos," observed Lamba; "it's a dead end," said Carrington.³²

After Frida Kahlo

Hayden Herrera's publication of *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (1983) sparked an interest in Kahlo's life and work that has spread like wildfire, and there is no sign of it stopping anytime soon. The Mexican Kahlo has become the most popular woman artist in history. Her work addresses universal conflicts with which everyone struggles from birth: the need to integrate one's primitive and rational natures; the need to establish a cohesive sense of self and identity; the need to feel comfortable as an individual, separate and apart; and the acceptance of one's aloneness.

Kahlo's life and art has also influenced the work of many artists. More often this work lacks the experiential power that Kahlo's art readily conveys; rather, it tends intellectually to interpret her predicament or pay homage to her.

In Mexico, Paula Santiago and Graciela Iturbide's art stands apart from other work inspired or affected by Kahlo. Their work emerges directly from the core of the self. Santiago, out of a harrowing sense of personal damage, creates infant clothes out of rice paper, stitched together and stained with her own hair and blood (pl. 23). Iturbide photographs women from Oaxaca or Tehuantepec, reversals of Kahlo's self-portraits. In one, a woman wearing a crown of iguanas looks back at the viewer: solid, proud, and dignified. Self-aware, not self-absorbed.

Notes

1. Interview with the author in Salomon Grimberg, *Lola Alvarez Bravo: The Frida Kahlo Photographs* (Dallas: Society of Friends of the Mexican Culture, 1991), n.p.
2. For documentation of all Frida Kahlo works cited see Helga Prignitz-Poda, Salomon Grimberg, and Andrea Kettenmann, *Frida Kahlo: Das Gesamtwerk* (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1988). All translations of this text are the author's.
3. Frida Kahlo's diary has been published recently as *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, introd. Carlos Fuentes, essay and commentaries by Sarah M. Lowe (New York: Harry N. Abrams, and Mexico City: La Vaca Independiente, 1995), 115.
4. This drawing was destroyed. Its remnants remain at the Frida Kahlo Museum stuck with thumb tacks on a piece of plywood bathed in sunlight each day. We are fortunate to have a photographic record of the work thanks to Karen and David Crommie, who photographed it for their film *The Life and Death of Frida Kahlo* (San Francisco, 1996). I thank them for providing me with a copy of the photo and allowing me to work from their files in my research on Kahlo.
5. Developmental disorders of the self are thoroughly described by Freudian psychoanalysts Otto Kernberg and Heinz Kohut, M.D. In this essay I refer specifically to a work by Kohut, "The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorder," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, monograph no. 4 (New York: International University Press, 1971).
6. Kahlo, *Diary*, 60.
7. Diego Rivera discovered the golden mean while traveling in Italy in 1921. The work of Paolo Uccello left an indelible impression on him, and this became the point of departure for his mural painting. See Alfredo Cardona Peña, *El Monstruo en su laberinto: Conversaciones con Diego Rivera* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1980), 173-74. Frida Kahlo kept in her collection several sketches Rivera did of Uccello's *Il combattimento*. Frida Kahlo herself used the golden mean to create perspective in her art. See page 121 of her *Diary*, where she sketches *Naturaleza viva* with references to the golden mean. On page 135 she produces a finished drawing of the same still life. On page 121 she also refers to the golden mean when addressing the anniversary of the sudden death of her friend the engraver Isabel Villaseñor.
8. See Robert Lawlor's *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 23.
9. Josep Bartoli became Frida Kahlo's lover in the early months of 1946. He was a Spanish artist who had emigrated to Mexico during the war. I thank him for his generosity during my research on Kahlo.
10. For the most complete study on the life of Frida Kahlo see Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983). I am grateful to Herrera for her invaluable help while I worked on *Das Gesamtwerk*.
11. See Herrera, *Frida*, 200, 201, 228, 230, 290, 292, 351, for Kahlo's relationship with Noguchi. See also *Frida Kahlo—Ignacio Aguirre: Cartas de una pasión. Recopiladas y comentadas por Luis Mario Schneider* (Mexico City: Ediciones Trabuco y Clavel, n.d.) (letters and notes Kahlo wrote to Aguirre).
12. Emmy Lou Packard interviewed by Katie Davis for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," n.d.
13. Aguirre letters.
14. Interview with Olga Campos in my forthcoming *Frida Kahlo: Song of Herself*.

15. This photo is in the collection of Throckmorton Fine Art, Inc., New York.
16. Frida Kahlo to Parker Lesley. Herrera, *Frida*, 464, note 157.
17. Carolyn Larrington, ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora Press, 1992), 378–79.
18. Two texts that facilitate understanding reconstruction of preverbal experiences and the psychological development of the infant are Margaret S. Mahler et al., *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), and Gertrude Blanck and Rubin Blanck, *Ego Psychology: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
19. Frida Kahlo studied Egyptian history and mythology while doing research for her painting *Moses* (1945). For Kahlo's reference see the *Diary*, 49. For the historical source see E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Magic* (New York: Bell Publishing, 1991), 162. The quote reads, "I am the great god Nu, who gave birth unto himself, and who made his name to become the company of the Gods."
20. Frida Kahlo in a letter to Emmy Lou Packard dated December 15, 1941. I thank Ms. Packard for providing me with copies of her correspondence with Frida Kahlo.
21. For an illustration and description of this tree see Carmen Aguilar, *Flora y fauna Mexicana, mitología y tradición* (Mexico City: Editorial Everest Mexicana, n.d.), 120–22.
22. See MacKinley Helm, *Modern Mexican Painters* (New York: Dover, 1941), 167–68.
23. I thank Fernando Gamboa, friend of Kahlo's, for sharing this information with me in 1989.
24. Lao Tzu, *Tao te ching, the Book of Meaning and Life* (London: Arkana/Penguin Books, 1985), translated and with commentaries by Richard Wilhelm; translated into English by H. G. Ostwald.
25. Frances B. Berdau and Patricia Rieff Anawalt, *The Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), vol. 1, 168, appendix E.
26. See Larrington, *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, 376–78.
27. See Alfonso Caso, *El pueblo de Sol* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983), 80.
28. Chevalier/Gheerbrant, *Diccionario de los símbolos* (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1991), 285–90.
29. Raquel Tibol, *Frida Kahlo: Una vida abierta* (Mexico City: Editorial Oasis, 1983), 111.
30. Kahlo, *Diary*, 41.
31. The God Khnum or Khnemu was one of the old cosmic gods, which "according to legend fashioned man upon a potter's wheel." In the judgment of the dead one on the prayers went like this: "And the god Khnemu bestowed health upon his limbs." See E. A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Religion: Ideas of the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1959), 125 and 168, respectively.
32. Personal interview with Jacqueline Lamba, 1987; with Leonora Carrington, 1995.