

Judges' Commentary on "Viva la Vida"

by

Ariana Wallace

**"Viva la Vida" won third prize in the University of Pittsburgh's
2007/08 Composition Program Writing Contest**

In "Viva la Vida," Ariana Wallace addresses a complex assignment calling for a self-portrait created while depicting a friendship with "someone (or something) [she] has never actually met." To render her relationship over time with the life and art of the famous Mexican painter Frida Kahlo, Wallace provides a sequence of striking descriptions that reflect her increasingly mature awareness of the artist's inspiring yet unsettling personality. Early in the essay, for example, readers learn that a children's book illustrating "a young, uni-browed girl holding an easel while riding a red bird, her free hand defiantly waving a paint brush around in the sky" stirred the author's "small girl" fairytale dreams of becoming "that master artist with the same dark braided hair." But those dreams are soon complicated by extended description of an encounter with Kahlo's disturbing painting *The Broken Column*. Rather than turning away from its "embarrassing and shocking" depiction of Frida's distorted body, Wallace finds in that image a compelling beauty: a face "both stern and hopeful, pained and determined," a figure reminiscent of "the statue of Liberty and the Venus de Milo (only with more life than the pale green and stark marble skin of either)."

Here and elsewhere, "Viva la Vida" seamlessly shifts from dramatic depictions of Kahlo to sharply contrasting glimpses of the author's own narrative persona as "a girl worn thin by the everyday, streetlamp after streetlamp outside her window." Yet with Frida as her guide, Wallace ever more deeply recognizes art's power to quicken familiar surroundings and transmute life's hardships. By imaginatively leaving her "black-and-white world" to tour one radiating with "bright red and yellow starbursts and flowers, and a red clay ocarina, domed like the shell of a wide desert tortoise," she expands her artistic sensibilities. Her description of "the sound of traffic in late December sleet" morphing into "the soft chirp of crickets and . . . clapping from a cantina" transforms the everyday into an exotic Kahloesque landscape. Using words rather than paint, then, Ariana Wallace

creates her own vibrant, life-affirming art. Just as Frida pulled her “through the brushstrokes” into the painting, so does she become a “personal portal” enticing her readers into “a strange and exciting world, [one of] raw emotions and amplified colors of existence.”

To read the full text of Ariana Wallace’s essay, [click here](#)