Viva la Vida

I have an unlikely friend. A passionate German-Mexican communist, she was born during the height of the Mexican revolution in Coyoacan, Mexico, and died at the age of forty-seven (around the time that my grandparents were married). She survived polio and a gruesome bus accident, dealt with a fickle husband, and dreamt in vain of a peaceful marriage with children. She was amorous, rash, hot-tempered, determined, daring, and unconventional. Her name was Frida Kahlo, a painter whose life is immortalized through her vibrant self-portraits and surreal portrayals of a turbulent existence. To a teenaged girl from Pennsylannia, she exists as an opposite, the other side of a color wheel— a fiery orange hue to the gray-blue shadows of a snowy night in November.

Although we are not alike, though, Frida seems closer to me than family. She has always held a steady presence in my life, (though distant, sometimes, like a mysterious older cousin at a family reunion who tells stories about holding you as a baby). Our relationship is not entirely accidental, however. Mexico is the adopted home country of my mother. She spent several years playing French horn in an orchestra in Guanajuato, leaving behind a comparatively quiet life in the North-Eastern US to live at the base of an active volcano and immerse herself in local culture. Small reminders of my mother’s years in Mexico were hidden in every corner of our house. Most of her collection is now resigned to the attic, but during my childhood, the artifacts were as common and scattered as my little brother’s Legos.

Miniature paintings of mariachi bands, macabre wooden skulls blooming with bright red and yellow starbursts and flowers, and a red clay *ocarina*, domed like the shell
of a wide desert tortoise (a favorite of mine to improvise songs with) were some of the familiar characters of my environment. Frida, hand-in-hand with Mexico, was just another peculiar resident of our house. I even had a children’s book outlining Frida’s life—albeit more innocent than a full biography. The cover was illustrated with 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. Like any small girl might wish to be the princess in their favorite fairy tale, I wished I could be that master artist with the same dark, braided hair. The first image that had me hooked on the strange life of Frida, however, was one of her own: “The Broken Column.”

In my lower-school art class, the teacher started to hand out photocopies of “The Broken Column” to the students. The girls around me began to buzz with confusion and curiosity—glimpsing at their peers’ papers to see if they all held the same unusual picture. I could see how perplexed my classmates were. I knew that they were searching for the portrait’s meaning, unable to dismiss the creeping uneasiness. “The Broken Column” portrays a calm-faced Frida before a strange, sandy landscape, naked but for her back-brace and numerous nails and pins protruding from her body. Her torso is split to reveal what at first seems to be her spine, but is actually a cracked column— its broken sections crooked. White tears, reminiscent of those you might see in a painting of Christ’s crucifixion, adorn her dignified cheekbones.

In a classroom full of young girls too ashamed to sketch anything but a modest, flat-chested, and pleasantly smiling portrait, this picture was both embarrassing and shocking to see in the classroom. I imagine that for some of my peers, the painting must have even seemed ugly; certainly a painting of a nude is meant to show beauty and allure,
not suffering and anguish. The portrait’s eyes speak of tragedy; the body is square on and overt. This painting was no coy lady of Degas. My classmates began to spin on their art stools in anxiousness, but the sound of chatter and ruffling papers was lost to me: I was enchanted.

The Frida of “The Broken Column” was the most beautiful person I had ever seen. Her face was both stern and hopeful, pained and determined– to me she was the Statue of Liberty and the Venus de Milo (only with more life than the pale green and stark marble skin of either). I suddenly envied Frida and her unashamed character. Although she was bed-cast and frail, her olive skin was vibrant with blood in contrast to her white brace. The crack in her torso not only showed the broken column, but also the home to her soul– and, I imagined, some mournful guitar and *ocarina* duet. I considered myself: pale arms and legs not so different than the stick figures of my art class peers, thin straw-blonde hair, a blessedly average face. To my grief, I was unfit for Frida’s world. I could put my eye to the kaleidoscope of leafy palms and birds of paradise, but I am whisked away from the vision as quickly as a house sparrow flits away in my backyard. I wasn’t the type to wear an exotic thorn necklace, droplets of blood like rubies at the points, or surround myself with small dogs, monkeys, and green parrots, or stand like a Greek goddess in the desert.

I felt like a tourist to the lively scenes I found in Frida’s paintings, an estranged foreigner from a black-and-white world. Always close at hand to my inner thoughts, though, Frida offered the next best alternative to my limited outsider’s regard of her paintings. When she was bedridden with polio, Frida wrote in her diary that she had an imaginary friend of her same age that would guide her to adventures outside her bedroom
(if only in dreams). Like her childhood imaginary twin, portrayed in the painting “The Two Fridas,” Frida leads me to envision the world more creatively. Like the goddess Athena approaches war-weary Odysseus in the endless waves of a dark sea, Frida reaches to me sympathetically. Her passionate, colorful creations carry her words of hard-earned wisdom. Though I couldn’t stay forever, I was a willing traveler in her lush environment.

I could pretend that a sullen fall day was actually *la dia de los muertos*, a loud festivity with candy skulls and paper-mache demons bouncing down the sidewalk, carried by masked children. The small oaks of familiar city streets became fruit-bearing, fan-leafed, tropical trees. I imagined my dog as a small black mutt lying on the hot, sandy stones of the road (although in actuality, Stella would probably rather be in a queen’s lap). The sound of traffic in late December sleet would become the soft chirp of crickets and the sound of singing and clapping from a cantina, too distant to discern any lyrics. I would gaze past my glassy reflection in the window into the cool night, imagining myself as the unhappy mirror image in “The Two Fridas,” until my laughing twin would pull me through the brushstrokes to the sweet-smelling, warm evening air of Coyoacan.

Through all my dedication to Frida, I had never yet seen one of her paintings in person. I made a quiet promise to myself (and to Frida) that I would someday make a pilgrimage to see a painting of hers, one colored by the actual paints squeezed onto her easel years ago instead of a flat picture of a picture. The chance presented itself in 2001, in the form of an academic program in California. I signed up exclusively for the field trip: the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. I knew that this included the painting “Frida and Diego Rivera,” a depiction of Frida and her husband Diego Rivera on their wedding day. Although it isn’t as intensely emotional as “The Broken Column,” and
some of her other works, this portrait still held the same enigma of Frida, her passion and vivacity. Finally standing in front of the painting, I tuned out the tour guide’s monotonous “fun facts” and focused on the face of my friend.

There stood the actual Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in a quaint retrato, Diego still holding his easel and brushes and Frida smiling coyly to his side. It seemed like Frida’s wedding dress still swung slightly around her waist from recent dancing— I almost dared to anticipate the guitar and maracas to start up inside the museum! My mirrored-twin, the dark-haired, uni-browed girl, ally of the small black dog and green parrot, tugged me into the scene of the wedding reception. I could hear the band begin a new tune and the footsteps of guests on the wooden floor, laughing and conversing around the bride and groom. The room was saturated with red, gold, and the deep green of Frida’s dress. In contrast, on the outside of the painting, I was silent and detached, unsure of how to contain my enthusiastic twin. The walls of the museum were high and white, as sterile and unfeeling as those in a hospital, sure to reveal my blush of emotions. Frida was my personal portal into that wild dimension, and she was meant to stay secret.

I read a full, in-depth biography of Frida at the awkward age of thirteen. Written down in plain terms, Frida’s adventures seemed more distant from me than ever. Rage, lust, alcohol, depression, pain, and fruitless ambition were the motivations behind her creations. The dream world of my dark-haired friend became less inviting. Grotesque, foreboding figures appeared between the palm fronds and flowers— skeletons and straw men, victims of murder, the ill and broken Frida. Her arched brow and lips like petals were quick to shift into visions of death and pain: Frida weeping with the image of her cheating husband ingrained on her forehead, Frida vomiting blood like a fountain, Frida
as a corpse entombed in roots. Now old enough to understand the serious tragedies in Frida’s life, I felt betrayed by my childhood companion.

Not even the most horrifying of scenes could keep the dark-haired girl from her colors, though. She continues to wear yellow flowers behind her ears, her own face blooming with passion for the world. Whether she is safe with her pets or wandering through a surreal, terrifying landscape, she shines with persistent bravery and enthusiasm; life radiates from Frida. The same brow that was pinned with anguish also wears a crown of lush leaves and buds. She holds my hand on her left side and on her right, the bleached-white, twig-like fingers of a skeleton. I realize that I am not meant to fear and avoid my twin’s ominous surroundings. Frida’s spirit turns anger and sadness into art; her passion turns pain and death into beauty.

I still imagine mango and guava trees lining my street and I still wish to wake in a blue house in Coyoacan. The resilience and life of pink blossoms, green palm leaves, the trill of a guitar behind the low whistle of an ocarina, and Frida’s blood-red shawl coexist with broken columns, tears of betrayal, death and pain. For a girl worn thin by the everyday, streetlamp after streetlamp outside her window, Frida embodies the ideal love of life—regardless of whether life is frightening or beautiful. My dark-haired twin enables a deviation into a strange and exciting world, the raw emotions and amplified colors of existence. The proudly colored birds and blooms of Frida’s artwork creep into my every day experiences, along with a few strangely smiling skeletons. Through the frame of a painting, dull blues catch fire, vibrancy swirls from the quietest corner of the canvas, lights and darks become the dynamics of an artwork.

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Judges' Commentary on "Viva la Vida"