

# Frida Kahlo Do You Think of Me Some Time?

In 1944, Frida Kahlo was at a crossroads, both in terms of her health and her career. In April of that year, with World War II dragging on, she writes to her gallerist—and former lover—Julien Levy. In this tender and personal letter, she moves from the logistical challenges of sending art across national borders during wartime, to describing her painful new steel corsets, to asking after her many friends in New York, where Levy lives. Unpacking this letter and exploring Kahlo’s words written in her own hand provides a new understanding of an artist who has become larger than life in the years since her death at age 47.

In this episode of *Recording Artists: Intimate Addresses*, host Tess Taylor highlights Kahlo’s vibrant personality, tracing how her artistic career developed alongside her long-running health struggles and her now-iconic style and persona. Anna Deavere Smith voices the letter. Photographer and poet Rachel Eliza Griffiths, whose work often addresses pain and the body, provides her artist’s insight while historian Circe Henestrosa, who co-curated the Kahlo exhibition *Making Herself Up* at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2018, shares charming anecdotes and important details of Kahlo’s life.

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## Transcript

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**Anna Deavere Smith:** I haven’t paint much because my spine bothers me a lot and I have to wear a damn corset (iron) and it has been hell for me, it is so hard to work with such a contraption on your body!

**Tess Taylor:** How do you say no to requests for new work? How do you say no to your friend, lover, and gallerist? And if global war and chronic pain upend your daily life, how do you continue to make art?

Welcome to Season 2 of Recording Artists, a Getty podcast dedicated to exploring art

and artists through its archives. I'm your host, poet Tess Taylor. In this season, called *Intimate Addresses*, each episode examines one letter by one artist, looking deeply at what it means to make a life in art. Anna Deavere Smith performs the letters as we travel the globe and the twentieth century. You listen as makers collaborate, fight for justice, ask for money, work through pain, and affirm their resilience. What emerges is a sweeping panorama of artists in dialog with one another, and six distinct portraits in creativity.

Today's letter is from Frida Kahlo, an artist whose presence, importance, and fame can feel unquestionable today. It's hard to escape Kahlo's image—braids, colorful skirts, boxy blouses, and the striking unibrow. It's on pencil cases and signs for female empowerment and Halloween costumes. But today we meet Kahlo at a moment when she was not well known, when she was at a crossroads in her life, reaching out to a friend she hasn't seen in a long time.

It's April 1944, a few months before D-Day, though nobody could have known that. World War II has been dragging on. Frida Kahlo is 36 years old. She's sending a letter to Julien Levy in New York from the outskirts of Mexico City, presumably from her home at the Casa Azul. Levy is her gallerist, but he's also her friend and former lover. The letter Kahlo sends is written in black fountain pen on straw colored-paper. The rich marigold seal of the "Seminario de Cultura, Mexicana" affirms Kahlo's place in the newly established Seminar of Mexican Culture, a group of artists and intellectuals of which Kahlo is a founder. Like Kahlo herself, the letter is composed with flair. It's playful and elegant. Now it is freckled and stained with age. In places, ink stains bleed through.

Here's Anna Deavere Smith:

**Deavere Smith:**

*Coyoacán, April 20<sup>th</sup> 1944.*

*Julien darling,*

*Here are the papers you wanted for the painting. I have tried to send you more pictures, but it is quite difficult now to send anything unless somebody takes them to U.S.A., personally. As soon as someone goes I will send four things I have now ready. I haven't paint much because my spine bothers me a lot and I have to wear a damn corset (iron) and it has been hell for me, it is so hard to work with such a contraption on your body! But I must wear it, otherwise I would need an operation and I am scared to do it. So baby, don't scold me for not sending you things, and don't tell me you are disappointed with me. Jacqueline Breton is coming next June to stay with us. I am so happy because it will be good for her, and marvelous for me to have her near. I wish you could come too. When can you give yourself some vacations? What are you doing now? What will you do this summer? And your book - what happened? Please, darling, write to me all about yourself. And about Muriel- and every thing you do and plan to do. I love you so much*

*and will always love you.*

*Tell me how is New York now? It's sad? What people do you see? Have you seen Nick, Mary Sklar - Ella Paresce? How is Joella, and the kids?*

*Do you think of me some time?*

*With the three moons or without the moons?*

*Yours Frida*

**Circe Henestrosa:** It's incredibly intimate. As every single thing she wrote. You can perceive this intimate relationship between them; but also describing how she's feeling, how she's dealing with her illness. And in such an open way.

**Taylor:** For historian Circe Henestrosa—professor of fashion history at LaSalle University in Singapore—this letter showcases Kahlo's lively and tender personality.

Poet and photographer Rachel Eliza Griffiths, whose work explores the body, intimacy, and pain, also heard the playful register of Kahlo's letter:

**Rachel Eliza Griffiths:** The chattiness that comes through. I feel you really hear Frida's voice and her warmth for her friendships, and that they matter to her. And that, you know, she can talk about business in one breath, and at the same time, really care and remember and— "What's happening? What's going on in your world?"

**Taylor:** When I read Kahlo's letter, it strikes me as performing a complex tightrope walk. It's at once renewing a friendship and passing along disappointing news that paintings aren't ready and work can't be sent. It's a note recalling a wonderful circle of friends, but also one written in the dark shade of a shattered world and a deteriorating body. Kahlo shares flirtation and love and an intimate description of physical pain all at once. It's a letter as complex as Kahlo herself.

But let's rewind a little. Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón—the woman we've come to know simply as Frida Kahlo—was born in 1907 in Coyoacan, a village on the outskirts of Mexico City. She grew up in the shadow of the Mexican revolution, in a period marked by political unrest and radical class struggle between elites and the working class. Kahlo's father, a photographer for the overthrown president Porfirio Diaz, was an artist who taught her to paint and to see. But he was also often out of work and out of political favor. The young Kahlo, who'd suffered from polio at age 6, was vigorous and rebellious. She posed in men's clothes for her father's photographs. At Mexico City's renowned high school, *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*, or just *Preparatoria*, she moved in a circle of young artists, radicals, and poets.

But at age 18, Kahlo was in a life-changing collision between a bus and a trolley. It impaled her pelvis and broke her spine. It took her over a year to walk again. During that time, she wrote a friend: "The only good thing is that I am starting to get used to suffering." This violent accident was inextricably entwined with the beginning of Kahlo's career. Here's historian Circe Henestrosa:

**Henestrosa:** Kahlo always had this very dark sense of humor, and she said that with the accident she also lost her virginity. This accident is the beginning of the amazing artist we know today; but it was also the beginning of the deterioration of her body.

She was bedridden at home at the Blue House. And her mother installed a mirror in the canopy of her four-poster bed. And it is then where she started painting. And of course, because she spent so much time alone, she painted herself. It's really interesting, this idea of the mirrors, because it's something that is present in her work, mirrors and duality.

**Taylor:** Today Kahlo is known for "self-portraits," but these paintings actually depict many different "Fridas." Even while painting her so-called self, she constructs and disguises, reveals and escapes all at once. Her portraits provoke tender, upending puzzles in their viewers. Here's artist Rachel Eliza Griffiths:

**Griffiths:** This vining and tendrils and capillaries that run through her work. She really brings the body alive in a way that becomes visual to us and goes beyond the two-dimensional surface of just a canvas. I think there's an invitation that she offers, in a way that painters sometimes do not do. She invites you into her vulnerability, and she does not compromise craft in that invitation.

**Taylor:** The vulnerability that draws Eliza to the paintings mirrors the vulnerability Kahlo showed in letters to her beloved friends, scattered across the world. Kahlo met many of these friends through her husband Diego Rivera. Rivera and Kahlo first met in the late 1920s, when she was about 21 years old. He was twenty years older and had already gained international acclaim for his sprawling murals of public life and idealized portraits of flower vendors, fishermen, and other working-class heroes.

The two soon married, but it was tangled from the start. Rivera paid Kahlo's medical bills and helped support her whole family, but he was also a constant philanderer. He even had an affair with Kahlo's sister. In time, Kahlo had many affairs of her own.

Even so, she began to travel the world with Rivera in the 1930s, and to craft herself as an artist in her own right. During this period, carving out time to paint was central, but so was deliberately stylizing her outward dress. Circe explained Kahlo's evolving fashion sense:

**Henestrosa:** Kahlo starts being very conscious about the relationship between her body and her dress from a very early age, since she had polio and started using these long skirts to negotiate her body differences.

**Taylor:** Kahlo's style also crystalized against the backdrop of the Mexican Revolution of the 1920s.

**Henestrosa:** At the time she chooses to adopt this Tehuana dress, all the big muralists, like Diego Rivera and Siqueiros and Orozco, get all these public commissions to depict this sense of Mexican culture and Mexicanidad. And Kahlo aligns herself to these ideals and she wants to portray herself as la Mexicana.

She adopts a dress that comes from a matriarchal society, from the Tehuantepec Isthmus, where the society is managed by women. I think it's a dress she chooses to define herself and distinguish herself as a female artist in a highly male dominated environment, at the end of the twenties, all the way to the forties.

**Taylor:** In part, Kahlo seems to have increasingly signaled her Mexican heritage in response to her time in the US in the 1930s. Following the trail of Rivera's commissions and exhibitions—from San Francisco to New York to Detroit—Kahlo signaled herself as a revolutionary, a feminist, a Mexicana, someone who crossed many kinds of borders, just like her artwork.

As she traveled, the self-styled, striking Kahlo was a hit. In San Francisco she met artists like Dorothea Lange, Edward Weston, and Maynard Dixon. In New York, she met painter Georgia O'Keefe, MoMA curator Alfred J. Barr, and other important collectors. In Detroit, Kahlo and Rivera dined with Henry Ford. Throughout her travels, she also witnessed the stark economic inequalities of the Great Depression that would influence her politics and appear in her art.

Meanwhile, she painted deeply personal pictures that broke boundaries. After she suffered a miscarriage or abortion in Detroit, she painted a visceral representation of the experience. Titled *Henry Ford Hospital*, she shows herself naked on a hospital bed lying in a pool of blood, tethered as if by umbilical cords to mechanical and medical

objects, a snail, a wilted flower, and a fetus. The painting is small—about the size of two sheets of paper. It was the first painting in modern art history ever to depict this difficult subject matter.

Despite these radical innovations, Frida Kahlo was still inventing in Diego Rivera's shadow.

**Henestrosa:** She's married to one of the most important male artists at the time. I mean, for you to have an idea, Diego Rivera was the second retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in 1931.

**Taylor:** While Rivera's murals are jumbled, synchronous readings of public history, Kahlo's paintings—however political—are personal, often physically small. They are also deeply mysterious, frequently setting up unresolvable enigmas for their viewer. And while Rivera's works were visible across Detroit and San Francisco, Kahlo's paintings had not yet found their audiences.

Even so, her work continued to grow, disrupting boundaries. With extraordinary freedom, Kahlo explored her body, her childhood, Mexican identity, sexual relationships with women, and the pain in her marriage with Rivera. She is often entangled in vines, companioned by animals, and set against cracked lunar landscapes. Her paintings read like riddles or fables. They mix colonized and colonizer, wild and tamed, pleasure and pain, body and plant, loving and hurt, modern and ancient. No one painting has an easy moral.

For Eliza, Kahlo's willingness to disrupt binaries activates the work:

**Griffiths:** I think there's something in her gaze where you don't look at her, you look with her, you know? And she seems very adept at being able to collapse boundaries, even as she may recognize the physicality or spirituality of boundaries, knowing when to cross them, which it felt she had to do all of the time, to create the body of work that we have.

**Taylor:** As well as breaking boundaries in her work, Kahlo built an increasingly international circle around her at home. In Mexico, Kahlo's home in Coyoacan became a hub for global travelers. During the 1930s a stream of important visitors passed through, including Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, female photographers Lola Alvarez Bravo and Tina Modotti, and surrealist ringleader André Breton. As they came and went, Kahlo's reputation as a painter began to spread.

After Kahlo participated in a small group show in Mexico City, word reached Julien Levy, the important New York gallerist, who Kahlo is writing to in this episode. Levy, who had a prestigious space on 57<sup>th</sup> street in New York City, had already made his career displaying Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, and other members of André Breton's surrealist circle. The roster of artists he showed was nearly entirely male. But in 1938 he sought Kahlo out, and she came. It was her first solo show, one of only two in her lifetime.

This show was a high point for Kahlo. She traveled to New York as an artist in her own right. She rekindled friendships from her travels earlier in the thirties and attracted new patrons, some of whom became lifelong friends. Indeed, her 1938 opening was an evening full of many of the people Kahlo mentions in her later 1944 letter.

**Deavere Smith:** Jacqueline Breton is coming next June to stay with us.

**Taylor:** Jaqueline Lamba Breton, André Breton's wife, also a painter whom Kahlo

became intimate with following the couple's visits to her home in Mexico in the 1930s.

**Deavere Smith:** Please, darling, write to me all about yourself. And about Muriel...

**Taylor:** Muriel is Muriel Streeter, Levy's second wife.

**Deavere Smith:** What people do you see? Have you seen Nick, Mary Sklar – Ella Paresce? How is Joella, and the kids?

**Taylor:** Nick, Nickolas Murray, the Hungarian photographer and Kahlo's on again, off again lover over the course of a decade. Mary Sklar, friend and patron to whom Kahlo had given a famous painting. Ella Paresce, a pianist, the wife of a painter, and a dear friend, who'd help her out when she was in pain. And Joella, Levy's first wife, the daughter of avant-garde poet Mina Loy.

Meanwhile, André Breton wrote the catalog essay for the exhibition. Kahlo didn't love the way that Breton coopted some of her ideas for surrealism. And she didn't love the way he wrote in French, a fact she found unbearably pretentious. Even so, his essay was insightful.

**Henestrosa:** On the back of the catalogue he compared Kahlo's painting to a ribbon around a bomb.

**Taylor:** "A ribbon around a bomb" captures the potentially explosive power in Kahlo's paintings. But Eliza and I discussed this power using a different term, *duende*, coined by the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. *Duende* happens when the pendulum swing between pain and ecstasy, suffering and release, becomes a source of power:

**Griffiths:** You know, she could have this kind of really bleak, wonderful kind of humor about life and mortality— A kind of *duende* and a *muertos* sensibility. And at the same time, the poet's sting of death. And it's hard-earned. in Kahlo's work and in her life, to have the joy she had, and the laughter and the vibrancy and the power. I mean, sheer power, in spite of her injuries and her chronic pain. She knew how to suffer, but she knew how to laugh. And I think that appeals to people.

**Taylor:** Levy must have felt the *duende* in Kahlo's work, even if he'd never heard the word. He seems to capture this quality of hers in intimate photographs he took of her around the time of the exhibition, likely during the course of a brief affair. In these pictures, we see Kahlo's naked torso as she is doing and undoing her hair. She is entangled in her own self-construction, playing with what it means to make and unmake herself. We have a sense of the artist as performer. Here, as in many of her paintings, we get a sense of two "Fridas"—vulnerable but also staging the shot, somehow, with a theatricality around her own making. There is also a playfulness in these images, and a powerful magnetic presence at the center.

Critics of Kahlo's 1938 show didn't see this power, at least not yet. While half of Kahlo's twenty-five paintings sold, and more were commissioned, reviews at the time were tellingly mixed. *The New York Times* was prim, writing "Mrs. Rivera.... has also painted, in a rather stiff and semi-'primitive' manner, some subjects more obstetrical than esthetic."

Kahlo's *Vogue* review was warmer. Even while hailing Kahlo as the "wife of the weighty and mighty Diego," it noted Kahlo's art as "spontaneous and personal" and said "even when she does not herself appear in a canvas she somehow pervades the

picture.” The *Vogue* reviewer also noted the way that the elaborate constructions inside Kahlo’s paintings share a certain reciprocity with her outward persona. The author writes: “Madame Rivera seems herself a product of her art, and, like all her work, one that is instinctively and calculatedly well composed.”

The 1938 exhibition at Levy’s gallery was Kahlo’s passport to the rest of the world as an artist in her own right. Around this time, Breton invited Kahlo to exhibit in Paris. But in short order, the trip descended into disaster.

**Henestrosa:** She had really terrible experiences in Paris and she hated Breton—because all her letters are like, oh, my God, like he— she really couldn’t stand him.

**Taylor:** “That cockroach.”

**Henestrosa:** “That cockroach.” All her letters are incredibly revealing, of the way she felt. She didn’t have any reservations to express herself.

**Taylor:** “That cockroach,” she calls him. Breton had invited Kahlo halfway around the world to show her work. But arriving in the cold January of 1939, Kahlo discovered Breton had lined up neither funds nor venue. In the nick of time, Marcel Duchamp came to the rescue, getting Kahlo’s paintings out of customs, and helping to arrange a show. Duchamp and his partner Mary Reynolds even housed Kahlo when, under the stress of waiting, she collapsed with exhaustion and illness.

Eventually, in March 1939, there was an exhibition. The opening reception was full of luminaries. Kahlo embraced painter Wassily Kandinsky, and Pablo Picasso gave her earrings in the shape of tiny hands.

Yet even these successes emerged under shadow. Europe was on the brink of war. Just over a year later, Paris would fall to the Germans, scattering many of Europe’s artists and intellectuals for good.

Returning from Paris, Kahlo faced new instability on the home front. In late 1939, she divorced Rivera—only to reunite in 1940. In 1940 she also flew to New York to plan one more exhibition with Levy, but it was not to be. Instead, war took over the world. The global art trade ground to a halt. It became impossible to move paintings and people across borders.

**Deavere Smith:** I have tried to send you more pictures, but it is quite difficult now to send anything unless somebody takes them to U.S.A., personally.

**Taylor:** During the war years Kahlo taught painting at La Esmeralda, an art school in Mexico City, until her own pain while standing grew too great for the long commute. She had to invite her students to come to her, instead.

This time was difficult for Kahlo, and we hear the poignancy in this letter to Levy:

**Deavere Smith:** Tell me how is New York now. It’s sad?

**Taylor:** In the handwritten letter I noticed a sharp dark dash, next to the word sad—as if accenting it deeply. I spoke to Eliza about writing a letter like this in the midst of an ongoing global war.

We’re at such an interesting moment because she’s trying to send paintings, but both internal bodily pain forces, but also external, like global war, are making it impossible for her to get to him. So there’s this element of leaning across distance to these people that she isn’t gonna get back to.

**Griffiths:** Yeah. And I mean, to add to that, too, it's not casual, the way she talks about, you know, she's in an iron cast. Her spine, she would need another operation and she doesn't wanna do it. The distance that she can move is very limited, compared to someone else, perhaps. This feeling of being isolated, and yet she's asking about news from the world and what's going on at that time.

**Taylor:** I imagine that for Kahlo, it must have felt like a clock was ticking. The world was in tatters, year after year. And at home, her health was deteriorating.

In 1944, the year of Kahlo's letter, she underwent multiple surgeries. Her doctors prescribed months of bed rest and steel and plaster corsets, which didn't let her easily sit or stand. She had to tie herself to her own chair to support the work of painting. There was a succession of strange cures, which were supposed to stretch her spinal column, like spending three months in a vertical position with sandbags attached to her feet. Other cures had terrible side effects: Ella Paresce—the pianist Kahlo mentions in her letter to Levy—was visiting one night after doctors applied a plaster cast around Kahlo's ribs. It hardened so tightly that she could no longer breathe. Paresce entered Kahlo's bedroom and found her terrified, weeping, gasping for breath.

1944 was dramatic, personally and globally. There were many reasons it must have been excruciating to paint. But that year, on beautiful stationery which reasserts that Kahlo is an intellectual in a circle of intellectuals, Frida writes to her gallerist to reveal her illness and to promise new work. She also hopes, somehow, that she hasn't *disappointed* him. The letter performs a delicate emotional labor. Here's Circe:

**Henestrosa:** I think she is, I haven't sent you the papers, but I'm gonna send them to you. But then also, slowly revealing aspects of how she's feeling in a very poetic manner and unveiling almost slowly. Like, no? How she transitions from "Julien, darling, I'm sending you the papers. Don't give me, you know, like a hard time."

**Tess:** Eliza—a practicing artist—told me about the poignancy of not being able to say yes to a request for work.

**Griffiths:** I feel like with her, if she could've gotten him what he wanted, she would have. And at the same time, I try to imagine her, in this very vibrant handwriting, also sitting there, perhaps smoking a cigarette, with a metal corset around her body. To imagine that one of your daily instruments or daily objects is a iron cast corset that you wear is extraordinary.

You know, to bridge to our contemporary time, so often we are strongly, almost violently, encouraged to produce, produce, produce, and make things and get it out there. There's a time stamp and everything is time-sensitive. You feel this pulling back from her, that she's going to take her time, because what is literally going through her body and how to visualize that is not a act of convenience or impulse or quickness. And so I think being patient with herself as an artist is revelatory.

**Taylor:** I thought about the patience that artists need to negotiate their work, and also the fear saying no that grows out of our precarity. Like Circe, I could see the elements of performance in this work. Like Eliza, I noticed the delicate task of saying "No, I can't. My work isn't ready." But as I read this letter, with its flirtation and genuine affection and pain and intimacy, I see something more. The letter serves as a rough draft, a preparation for a major piece to come.

In May, only a month after writing this letter to Levy, Kahlo produced *The Broken*



*Column*. The canvas looks a bit as if Kahlo has taken the imagery that's woven into her letter and painted it as a wild dreamscape. In the painting, Frida stands against a turbulent and fractured earth, her eyes greeting all viewers with a curious challenge. Her painted torso, caged by a corset but savagely ripped open, is also the same frame that Kahlo would have shared with Levy in the 1938 intimate nude photographs. But this time, the process of self-construction is terrifying and painful. Kahlo faces us, hair down, white tears lining her eyes. Her face and arms are pocked with pins. Her body is held up by a skeletal, external corset-cage. She reminds me of a bride or mannequin being tortured at her own fitting. And as if some piece of the fractured, war-torn world is lodged inside her, we see the column of a crumbling building where her spine should be.

In this painting, I see many intersecting kinds of pain—the pain of gender, the pain of the corset, the pain of costume, the pain of performance, and the pain of a fracturing world. Eliza—who also makes self-portraits—understands that a self-portrait like this can have many meanings at once:

**Griffiths:** You can make self-portraits and never show your face. Or show your body. It can be cities or architecture or plants or food or, you know, a sense of humor about it. Sometimes there are portraits where it's the textures, the wrinkles, the tears, the crooked teeth that someone has. All of those different themes can kind of come together or be fragmented and manipulated and distorted in the self-portraiture.

**Taylor:** *The Broken Column* is a haunting masterpiece. It also marks a turning point, after which Kahlo's life would be increasingly medicalized. In 1946, two years after her letter to Levy, Kahlo traveled to New York City, but not to have another exhibition or mingle joyfully with her art world friends. On that trip, Kahlo underwent a complicated surgery, likely the procedure she had told Levy frightened her.

It involved fusing four vertebrae and adding a metal rod. She was confined to a metal corset for 8 months and developed anemia. She became addicted to morphine. In 1950 she came down with gangrene and spent nearly a year in the hospital, undergoing 7 operations. In 1951 she was confined to a wheelchair, and in 1953 her right leg was amputated below the knee.

At this point, Kahlo's paintings became increasingly medicalized as well. The 1945 painting *Without Hope* evokes a failed rest cure. In it, Frida is confined to a bed, tears running down her face. In *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Doctor Farrill*, from 1951, Kahlo is wheel-chair-bound. She holds a palate with an anatomical heart on it in one hand and paint brushes in the other.

Even in these moments, Kahlo insisted on beauty, art, and joy. Here's Circe on how Kahlo reacted to her 1953 amputation:

**Henestrosa:** When she got the leg cut, she describes how she would dance with joy with the leg, and she decorates the leg with an amazing red boot. So she wanted to make a point of her being able to walk with that prosthetic leg. She decorated it with these Chinese embroideries, puts a bell on it, and eventually manages to walk and dance with it.

**Taylor:** As we read Kahlo's April 1944 letter to Julien Levy, we meet her at a turning point—at the end of the war, at the beginning of her final decade. She wants to paint. She wants to exhibit. She wants to gather her dear friends again. On some level she must be aware that the pain she's experiencing and the long sad tide of global war may prevent these dreams from coming true.

There's a tenderness at these crossroads. Any of us who have had our lives upended by an illness or obstacle, any of us who have longed to get back to art or career or friends might relate. Despite it all, we feel Frida's great vitality, her flirtatious, unquenchable joy. Eliza says in this letter—as in all of Kahlo's gestures—she finds an artist's, or a human's, conscious decision to persist:

**Griffiths:** It isn't just once in your life; it's pretty much every day that you have to kind of go through a birth and a death. She decided early on that in spite of the accident and what happened to her spine and what that might mean, her dependence on her family for her care— How is she going to make money? How is she going to remain in a kind of bohemian circle of thinkers and painters and makers and dreamers and also, of activists and things? She was going to pick her own path and pick her own roads, body be damned, in a way.

And I can see it so clearly, that bed in Coyoacán with the mirror in the top of it and how provocative. The power it would've took to look up into that mirror and not give up, not surrender. And at the same time, to surrender and say, "I can be more than this. I'm beyond this; and yet this is going to be part of my story."

**Taylor:** On July 13, 1954, Frida Kahlo was found dead. She was 47 years old and suffering from pneumonia. During her life she had only had two solo exhibitions—one at the Levy gallery in 1938, and one in 1953, in Mexico. Nevertheless, until the end, even when she was too weak to stand for more than ten minutes, she sat daily at her easel. She said "I am happy to be alive, as long as I can paint."

Kahlo, who had spent so many years processing her understanding of self and body through art unsurprisingly had given some thought to her death as well. She imagined death as a doorway. Near the end of her life, in her journal, she wrote "I hope the exit is joyful, and I hope never to return."

Nevertheless, Kahlo returns to us, again and again, in her paintings, and in her writing, too. Again and again in that writing she comes back to her 1938 exhibition with Levy. She often seems not to understand how much her work and her life would come to mean to the world.

I leave with these words from her 1953 autobiography, published the year before her death:

*My paintings are well painted, not nimbly, but patiently. My painting contains a message of pain. I think that at least a few people are interested in it. It's not revolutionary.*

*Painting completed my life. I lost three children and a series of other things that would have fulfilled my horrible life. My painting took the place of all of this. I think work is best.*

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