The Suicide of Dorothy Hale

Frida Kahlo Calderón (1907-1954) was born in Coyoacán, a suburb of Mexico City, Mexico, to a Hungarian-German father and Spanish–Mexican Indian mother. As a child, she had polio involving her right leg but recovered sufficiently to engage actively in sports. Her imagination was vivid; when alone in her room, she would cloud a glass windowpane with her breath and then trace a doorway with her finger. In her imagination she would pass through it and travel to the middle of the earth to join an imaginary, joyful companion, share secrets with her, and watch her dance, then happily return through the same door, watching her companion disappear as she erased it. Frida attended the prestigious National Preparation School in Mexico City, hoping to become a physician. All her potential seemed lost when on September 17, 1925, at age 18 years, a streetcar hit the bus she was riding. She was impaled by an iron handrail that entered her left hip, creating a penetrating abdominal wound, and exited through her vagina with fractures of her third and fourth lumbar vertebrae, 3 fractures of the pelvis, fractures of the right foot, and dislocation of the left elbow. \(^{2(p13)}\) The spinal fractures initially were not recognized but eventually led to immobilization with a plaster body cast for 9 months. For the rest of her life she endured the consequences of the accident, having more than 30 surgical procedures culminating in spinal fusion in 1946 and the amputation of her right lower leg in 1953, the year before she died.

Frida's art began in response to her pain. She said, “As soon as I saw my mother [after the accident] I said to her: I'm still alive and besides, I have something to live for,” \(^{1(p229)}\) Although she was in a plaster body cast from clavicle to pelvis, an easel that held paper was ingeniously created, and a canopy with a mirror was placed over her bed, allowing her to use her own face as a model. While bedridden she began to paint in a primitive but meticulous manner, depicting both transient and personal thoughts. She completed more than 70 self-portraits among 200 works of art. These are “analytic and symbolic, lyrical or burlesque.” \(^{2(p80)}\) She looks out at the viewer with an intense expression never shown in the same aspect. In admiration, Picasso wrote that he could not “paint a head like those of Frida Kahlo.” \(^{2(p130)}\)

At age 22 years, she became the third wife of the 42-year-old muralist Diego Rivera (1886-1957). He encouraged her painting as did the leading surrealist, André Breton, who wrote the introductory essay for the catalog at her first independent exhibit in New York, NY, at the Julien Levy Gallery in November 1938. The brochure read, “Her paintings combine a native Mexican quality which is naive, an unusual, female frankness and intimacy, and a sophistication which is the surrealistic element.” \(^{1(p230)}\) Frida denied being a surrealist, stating that she painted her own reality.

During this visit to New York, she met Clare Booth Luce, playwright, managing editor of Vanity Fair, and later a congresswoman and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. About 10 days before the exhibit opened, their mutual friend, Dorothy Hale, committed suicide. Dorothy Hale was the widow of Gardiner Hale, a New York portrait painter. She was considered one of the most beautiful women of that era but was demoralized when she failed a movie screen test and after Harry Hopkins, advisor to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, jilted her. Booth Luce deeply regretted her behavior and emotional coldness that preceded her friend's suicide. Booth Luce had declined an invitation to a farewell party Dorothy was giving for herself and advised Dorothy that she looked best in her Madame X femme fatale dress, the dress she wore when she jumped to her death. Booth Luce had been lending Dorothy money for the rent for her expensive top-floor suite at Hampshire House and mistakenly thought that Dorothy had used this money to buy another expensive new dress at Bergdorf Goodman. \(^{1}\) She felt betrayed but discovered after Dorothy’s death that she was mistaken when she learned that the money for the new dress had come from Bernard Baruch, whom Dorothy had gone to for help in seeking a job. He told her that it was too late in life to find a job that would support her current lifestyle and proposed that instead she needed to find a new husband. This would mean going to parties and looking as attractive as possible. He offered her $1000 on the condition that she buy the most beautiful dress she could find for this purpose.

Shortly after the suicide, Booth Luce attended the gallery exhibit of Frida's paintings. Frida spoke to her about the suicide and proposed a recuerdo (memorial) of Dorothy. Dorothy’s suicide note had been addressed to Booth Luce, \(^{1(p392)}\) thanking her for her friendship and asking that her mother be notified of her death. Expecting a painting similar to one of Frida’s self-portraits, she agreed, planning to give it to Dorothy's mother.
The painting that Frida completed was a retablo, an ex-voto painting prepared for Mexican peasants when a tragedy is averted, showing both the event and the holy agent—usually the Virgin Mary or a saint—responsible. Retablos thank God or the saints for the continuation of life despite the most horrendous misfortunes. Rivera wrote that for Frida, Christ, the Virgin, and the saints disappear from the retablo and in place of any old miracle we find the permanent miracle that makes up the theme of painting. . . . A life contains the elements of all lives, and if one penetrates to the bottom of it, one comes across abyssal depths, dizzying heights, and infinite ramifications that spread into the centuries of light and shadow of life.5(p233)

Like her earlier painting of a woman's murder, A Few Small Nips, this painting depicts a frightening image of a woman's violent death. Frida shows us the universal tragedy of suicide, graphically illustrating the event and describing it in blood-red script with a red blur under the word suicide in the bottom panel. We follow Dorothy's fall in 3 progressive moments: first as a shadowy figure in the background, then falling, and finally lying in the foreground. She falls from an illusory space and enters the visual plane of the viewer, lying on the dark-brown ground outside the perspective of the portrait. Her shoeless, stockinged foot points to her name in the inscription, giving a sense of immediacy as it protrudes into our visual space. She stares out at us as blood trickles out of her nose, ear, and mouth and onto the frame of the picture. Her beauty, her yellow-rose corsage, and the line of her black-velvet Madame X dress remain intact. The inscription at the bottom reads as follows:

In the city of New York on the 21st of the month of October 1938 at six in the morning, Mrs Dorothy Hale committed suicide by throwing herself out of a very high window of the Hampshire House building. In her memory, [section deleted] . . . this retablo, having executed it—Frida Kahlo.

The dreamlike quality of the fall contrasts with the written inscription. The reality of Dorothy’s gaze leads the viewer to reflect on her despair and perhaps also on Frida’s, whose life was changed by her traumatic accident and whose marriage was in turmoil at that time.

At the top of the original painting, a banner held by an angel declared, "The Suicide of Dorothy Hale, painted at the request of Clare Booth Luce, for the mother of Dorothy."1(p292) When she unveiled the painting and saw the banner and the graphic depiction of her friend’s suicide, Booth Luce felt physically sick. What should she do with this painting of her friend’s corpse? She was furious and called 2 of Frida’s friends to her home to witness its destruction with library scissors. One of them, the sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), had given Dorothy the corsage she wore in the painting. Although the painting was not destroyed, Frida’s friends removed the banner and the inscription listing Booth Luce’s name. Booth Luce gave the painting to a friend, Frank Crowninshield, with the instructions to donate it anonymously to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Instead he kept it, and 20 years later the painting was returned to her after Crowninshield’s death. Living in Arizona at the time, she donated it anonymously to the Phoenix Art Museum. A new curator at the museum traced its origins, thus ending her anonymity. When it was publicly revealed that she had commissioned the painting, Booth Luce famously penned a widely quoted phrase: No good deed goes unpunished.1(p59)

The painting was not on public view during Frida’s lifetime, and she provided no information about it. Frida’s retablos were autobiographical, archetypal images, so it may reflect her own suffering the year before her divorce from Rivera. Brown1 suggests that the ambiguous image shows a figure dead yet alive—the living death experienced by those in constant pain. Some see the painting as expressing a bizarre sense of mischief and black humor, others as a cynical commentary on the lifestyle of the rich and famous by a left-wing Mexican radical, a poignant metaphor for the oppressive nature of the social values of New York society.5(p19) If Dorothy could not live in the style to which she was accustomed, she would be memorialized clinging to external appearances and the appraisal of others. In placing an angel in the painting, unlike Blake’s illustration of Dante,6 perhaps Frida intended an element of compassion and forgiveness, which Booth Luce may have erased when the banner was removed.

The painting remains as a memorial to Dorothy Hale’s suicide. She chose a dramatic exit, and Frida painted it with monumental realism. Perhaps the angel who held the banner should be restored to give a fuller view of Frida’s intent and to replace a critical element of a retablo.

Frida had many friends and was fully engaged in the actions and passions of her time. Her last painting, completed 8 days before her death of a pulmonary embolism, is a whimsical still life of luscious red watermelons, the favorite Mexican fruit. She titled it Viva la Vida—Celebrate Life!