LEONORA’S JOURNEY   
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CHAPTER 1:  
LEONORA THROUGH EUROPE TO INSANITY

2.

What is wrong with the young Leonora? Her eyes are so dark, and her hair is sticking up everywhere after riding her pony, Winkie, across the sprawling estate following yet another family confrontation. She is growing up in Lancashire, North-West England, at Crookhey Hall, a sizeable property, with her nouveau riche, social-climbing parents Harold and Maurie, British and Irish repectively, and her three brothers. It is 1935, she is 17 years old, and ready to make her debut in the highest of social circles, but something has struck her. Throughout her childhood, Maurie and the house nanny Mary Cavanaugh, also Irish, have told Leonora stories about *The Sidhe*, the little people inspired by Celtic folklore and mythology, and now she is seeing them everywhere. She has grown up reading Lewis Carrol and William Blake, and the art familiar to her is no wilder than the so-called Pre-Raphaelites, who mainly painted beautiful, anaemic upper-class women (“goddesses”) floating around in solemn natural landscapes.

What is non-Leonora, what stands out from the family and their conventions, is Winkie and the spirit world. It is very difficult to fit Leonora into a hierarchically divided social order. Leonora is in the rain, she becomes the rain, she becomes the soil, the blackberry vines scratch her legs like a cat’s claws. There is something in the bushes. She is not separate from this unruly chaos, she has no overview, no control over it. Harold is a hunter, but Leonora observes these pompous hunting rituals and finds it revolting. These adults chasing the fox until it’s little heart bursts with anxiety. Sitting at the table eating grotesque dishes made of dead animals while engaging in enlightened conversation.

In Leonora's world, man and beast form an unbreakable alliance. Life is not separate from death or from the spirit world, these worlds exist simultaneously. She writes and draws with both hands, something the Catholic girls' school is strongly against. So petulant she is, so petulant her brain. The family's social hierarchies don’t resonate with her. That her brothers have other rights than she does, that her parents flatter and crawl for acceptance from society’s higher spheres – and that cruelty to animals is an integrated, normalised concept – are things she has made herself deaf and blind to. She refuses to accept it.

Her identification with horses is absolute. Try being a horse yourself for a moment. What do you do with your body? Do you raise your chest and stretch your neck? The horse within forms an extension of my chest and moves up through the my neck. The horse is proud, it holds it’s head high. “I am a horse! I am a mare!" Leonora says. "Yes, you're a nightmare,” Harold grumbles. The horse is Leonora's overshadowing totem. Like Lewis Caroll, it is an animal that leads the way to the underworld in Leonora's first texts, written in French after her escape to Paris. In Leonora's short stories, the protagonist often freezes, as if traveling to a spirit world inhabited by the dead. In "House of Fear," a talking horse leads her to a sinister party: “It seemed like every horse in the world was there, all with protruding eyes, staring dead ahead, with crusted foam around their lips. I didn't dare talk, I was terrified.” At the centre of the party was its hostess, Fear. “Before us, reclining like a Roman on a huge bed, was the lady of the house – Fear. She looked a bit like a horse, only much uglier. Her coat was made of live bats sewn together by their wings. The way they fluttered, one would have thought they didn’t much like it.” The story ends abruptly, and is no more than a short excursion towards a horrifying vision, frozen like a painting.

Her next horse story ventures deeper into an entirely real and traumatic conflict with her father. Of the four children it is Leonora who resembles their father the most, both of whom have strong personalities and strong wills. But Harold is adamant that boys and girls should be raised differently. Leonora is to be brought up to please, and the family's great hope is for her to be well-married, to validate their creaky status as members of the British upper class. There is only one problem with this: Leonora is a horse. “I don't belong to any class. I am a horse!” she exclaims. This conflict is evident in the story “The Oval Lady,” in which her father wants to take her beloved rocking horse “Tartar” and burn it. He wants to castrate and curtail her imaginative powers; her ability to change shape, to go off on flights of fantasy, and inhabit monstrous animal bodies. In “The Oval Lady*,”* Lucrecia, a little girl in the body of a giant, goes on strike, anorexically:

“Señora do you like poetry?”  
 “No, I detest poetry,” she replied with an excessively critical voice, without turning towards me.

“You should drink a cup of tea; it will calm you.”

“I don’t drink, I don’t eat. It’s a protest against my father, the devil.”

But Lucrecia has a voracious appetite: “When she reached her twentieth tart, she said: ‘Even if I die of hunger, he’ll never waver.’” Lucrecia and the more passive narrator Matilda give up and play horses: “‘Tartar is my favourite,’ she said while stroking the horse’s neck. ‘He detests my father.’” But who actually is Tartar? The name evokes the subterranean world of *Tartarus* from Greek mythology, but in the blink of an eye it says Artart. Leonora draws horses, which is all she wants to do, until finally being allowed to move to London to attend the Chelsea School of Art, and later to the French Cubist Amédée Ozenfant's small Academy of Fine Arts. Leonora has used her totem, the horse, to break free of a deadlocked situation. This magic shapeshifting via her horse-identity affords her a different lifestyle, essentially a perpetual escape through transformation, a constant movement across several continents.

In photographs, Leonora's face often seems curiously blank or empty. Perhaps something else is going on beneath the surface; a barely detectable smile in the corners of her mouth; a poker face with an undercurrent of sensuality and humour almost cracking the surface. But one might wonder if this emptiness indicates an absence of masks, or if it *is* the mask; a distinct form of animalistic watchfulness. Her face is like an animal mask stripped of any ingratiating recognition. Her thoughts far from any notion of ​​presenting herself. These kinships with animals have removed any human ability to be calculating; to determine something based on an idea of ​​one’s own success.

3.

Before Leonora is finally released to embark upon her art studies, her parents want to present her as a debutante at Buckingham Palace. The whole thing is staged, Maurie being particularly eager for acceptance from more refined circles. “Could you do that for me, Leonora? Beautiful Leonora, for the good of the family?” So at the age of seventeen, she is to be prepared and served at Buckingham Palace to fulfil her parents' aspirations: “The tiara is biting into my skull.” The white satin dress clings to her body, but her face shows that she is elsewhere; the conditions and their absurd demand for her to behave in a cultivated manner are met with blank looks. Her symbiosis with magical Winkie cannot help her now, so a far crueller beast will make it’s debut among the British upper-classes: The hyena. Despicable. Not even from our continent. Found only in zoos. The cackling scavenger. The hyena, unlike the horse, is a beast disapproved of in genteel circles. It is anti-establishment, it’s gender identity is unclear, it eats rubbish. It yearns for something beyond normality, it yearns for garbage, all that is revolting.

Her short story "The Debutante" is a subversive rewrite of her debut at the traditional debutantes’ ball at Buckingham Palace, where only daughters from the richest families were permitted to appear. Carrington's stories are mostly allegorical, she writes about her life, nothing is made up. She reports from a world that is real, yet radically different from the one she grew up in. The crime and rebellion in "The Debutante" is caused by her friend, the hyena, who takes her place at the ball. Leonora teaches the scavenger to wear high-heeled shoes. But the face? What about the face? She suggests that they kill the maid and bite her face off. Soon the maid is dead on the floor with the hyena carefully chewing round the edge of her face, to make a nice little mask. But the face is less of a problem than the body, and the smell, which they fail to conceal; and the story ends with the hyena's scandalous, and very public, unmasking. The tight rituals around the dinner table and the food are the battlefield: "So I smell a little strong, eh? Well, I don't eat cakes!” says the hyena before tearing off her human mask and eating it. She then jumps out of the window.

Leonora sees a piece by the German surrealist Max Ernst (1891–1976) entitled *Two Children Are Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924). It is a combination of painting and collage which makes the image multi-dimensional. Two figures seem to break out of the wooden frame, and it’s in this way that she encounters with Max Ernst for the first time; by stepping into his work with the two frightened children running from a nightingale. In 1936 she meets Ernst in London, at the opening of the surrealists’ first international exhibition, organised by the author of the surrealist manifestos, André Breton, and the art collector Roland Penrose. Works by Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró and Ernst are shown there for the first time. Similarly to Leonora, Ernst has used an animal figure or mask to escape an unbearable situation. He declares “Max Ernst died on August 1, 1914, and came back to life on the eleventh of November 1918,” as a direct result of his traumatic experiences as a soldier during the First World War. In his case, the white bird “Loplop” comes forward to help, becoming his alter ego, and his salvation from a frozen and death-like trauma.

Max, with his white hair and his curved, beak-like nose and 26 years older than Leonora, is the perfect white bird or horse, leaping directly out of Leonora's idiosyncratic mythology. He is the white rabbit showing her the way to Paris's surreal underworld. In one of Leonora's first real masterpieces, all these symbols collide. Her self-portrait *The* *Inn of the Dawn Horse* (1936) shows her wearing tight-fitting riding clothes, and wild, windblown hair like a horse mane. She stares right at us with a faraway look, while sat in a chair with her legs spread comfortably – a proper manspread – her body is streamlined, androgynous, flat-chested. A hyena with dark fur and milk-laden breasts stands beside her, staring at the viewer with equal indifference. Leonora and the hyena do not look at each other, but Leonora's hand floats nearby, sensually, joining them in an intimate alliance.

Her wild mane – her whole head in fact – is seemingly pierced by the curved runners of a chalk-white rocking horse, which hangs on the wall behind her suggesting a step-by-step transformation. Through the window, a white horse can be seen running away. The viewer's gaze is forced to do a circle; the white horse running from the dark hyena that is almost being touched by Leonora's hand and her head and her wild hair linked to the rocking horse that once again becomes the horse charging away outside the window. The viewer’s gaze follows this, round and round, in a circle of animal association and magic transformation.

4.

Leonora stands in the snow, back on her feet after Kylo Ren has thrown her, using his telekinetic powers, at one of the blackened tree trunks. Finn has fought Ren, and he has masses of raw strength, but Leonora has something more. Something that has been sleeping within her has been may now be awakening. Ren's face is pale, like a melancholy, Gothic figure. The son who went to the dark side, who wore the black mask of authority to take command of his emotions. Leonora sees Ren trying to summon the blue lightsaber that Finn has lost in the snow. He calls to it with his mind, but Leonora's powers are stronger than his. The blue lightsaber glides through the air and into Leonora's hand where it activates and smashes against Ren's red lightsaber, again and again.

The battle is fierce. Tree trunks snap now and then like flaming matches. Ren is wounded, weakened, but Leonora is strong, surprisingly strong. Lightsabers are swung, crackling and buzzing as they collide. The two fighters come face-to-face. Ren looks at Leonora and gasps: “You need a teacher. I could show you the ways of the force.” Leonora breathes: “The force?” It's as though she has fallen asleep for a moment, her face illuminated by the clashing lightsabers. Something within her awakens, and as the fight continues, it’s as though Leonora's powers have doubled in strength. As if the surroundings, the blackened forest and trees, are fighting on her side. The ground trembles, a crevasse opens up beneath them, and Ren is swallowed by the earth. Leonora remains standing there as the world collapses around her.

Not only is the mask a magic escape route, it can also represent something painful, a painful dualism between an inner and an outer reality. In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), the mask, for the first time, becomes explicitly problematic. In the earlier *Star Wars* films, Darth Vader and his stormtroopers marched robot-like, their strength derived entirely from their identity with machines; the mechanical behaviour and masks giving them a callous appearance. Kylo Ren has used his mask to symbolise the distance between him and his father, Han Solo. The final battle between them is characterised by intimacy and emotional betrayal. "Take off that mask, you don’t need it,” the father says, wanting to see his son's face. Ren, whose ambivalence seems quite genuine, obeys his father. "Will you help me?" he says. The black helmet strikes the metal construction they’re stood on with a fateful clang. The mask has fallen, but Ren runs his lightsaber through his father anyway. The killing creates no external drama, just two men standing there, inches from each other, one of them mortally wounded.

Earlier in the film we meet Finn, a stormtrooper in Kylo Ren's dictatorship The First Order. Something is about to awaken in Finn. In the midst of a chaotic battle, he sees one of his fellow soldiers dying. There is nothing he can do. The soldier reaches out his blood-soaked hand, and in desperation wipes it across Finn’s white helmet leaving a bloody smear. The soft interior of the stormtrooper has forced it’s way out, and become a mark on Finn's forehead. In a panic Finn wrenches his helmet from his head; his dark skin contrasting sharply with its glossy white enamel. Something has awoken in him. He can no-longer be a stormtrooper, he can no-longer keep wearing the white mask of cruel authority.

5.

Finn and Leonora are similar in many ways; both are rebels, fighting machine-like levels of conformity that are fostering cruel and violent behaviour. Leonora’s rebellion takes place internally at first, within her biological family (and later in a Europe on fire and a France being invaded by Hitler). Leonora has run her lightsaber through Harold's body. And after leaving England to live with Max in Paris, she never sees her father again. Max's and Leonora's magic animal-masks have numerous functions, both seek to create distance to the past and release them into an amazingly dream-like, desire-driven, imaginary world. Reactions to upper-class conformity and memories of the First World War’s barbarity contribute to the birth of a utopian idea called surrealism. Harold's analysis differs very little from Hitler's: Ernst is perverse, his art is pornographic, furthermore he has stolen Leonora and taken her away. But Leonora doesn't look back. The adoptive family of surrealists that she finds in Paris, is also the wildest family in the history of art.

Leonora's dark stare. Her time in Paris is undoubtedly eventful. A 20-year-old woman who has burned all her bridges and then makes a perfectly timed arrival in Paris, art-historically. It is in Paris that she makes her second debut, this time as a painter and writer. In 1938 she takes part in the scandalous exhibition *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* along with the inner circle of artists we now associate with Paris surrealism; as does the Danish artist Rita Kernn-Larsen (1904–1998) something which today’s art historians are only now discovering. Privately, things are a little turbulent; being with Max is not without it’s problems. His wife Marie-Berthe Aurenche is not too thrilled about being pushed aside in favour of a young British woman rapidly being hailed and accepted as Max's new muse. Marie-Berthe is a caring figure actively supporting the artists, an enabler, but is worth nothing to the surrealists as a destructive housewife trying to invoke her marital rights.

Max is a sexual force, having affairs with several female artists associated with surrealism, including Meret Oppenheim and Leonor Fini. He feels no loyalty to Marie-Berthe, he is free and has chosen Leonora as his queen. Theirs was not the only painful love triangle in this story; Max’s intimate relationships included Paul and Gala Éluard, and later another complicated love triangle between him, Leonora, and the art collector Peggy Guggenheim. The surrealists’ experimental relationships favoured a more complex three-person arrangement to the two-person one, at least when charming Max was in the vicinity. Loplop, *le supérieur des oiseaux*, was an easy lover.

The female artists of the surrealist milieu are more connected on a social level than formally. They are presented at the surrealist exhibitions, yet are reluctant to brand themselves surrealists. The manifestos of André Breton, the surrealist movement’s central force, have gathered a group of male artists under its banner. They systematically attribute more value to any notion deemed irrational or different from the burdensome norms of the bourgeois – such as the woman, especially the younger woman, *la femme-enfant,* and the insane; preferably the insane woman, as in Breton's novel about *Nadja* (1928). Primitive peoples were also fetishised, as Breton enthusiastically stated a few years later: "Mexico is the most surreal country in the world."

The woman who owns herself, or is lost in her own mind, has tapped into a well-spring of emotions. She can disrupt hierarchies, she can be idolised and adapted like an inner concept, like a dream. The ideal woman is preoccupied, in an enchanting way. Female artists such as Leonora, Leonor Fini, Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo paint portraits of themselves with serious, introverted faces in phantasmagoric landscapes. Their stares are turned inwards, their faces are blank, they are somewhere other than in communication with the viewer. It is striking how differently we present ourselves today; with exaggerated grimaces and posed gestures. There is no other, inner world, there is no alternative to actively posing for the viewer.

In 1930s Paris, the surrealists view “the woman” as something exalted, as a muse and a revolutionary heroine. But also as an object, like a mannequin, which their desire for embodiment can dissect and assemble in new, grotesque forms. Breton is excited about Leonora, but she owns herself. She feels titanic. Her rebellion is no wet dream. She has completely abandoned the phoney values of the upper class in favour of her inner dreamscapes, which have been given a natural extension through her life with Max. Unlike the surrealists, she is less interested in Sigmund Freud's dream interpretation, her allegories are made up of a conglomerate of different mythologies. She is unwilling to serve anyone. Joan Miró can buy his cigarettes himself, and Man Ray can find himself another model, she is not interested in posing for him.

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CHAPTER 4:   
LEONORA IN MEXICO

1.

My thoughts return to Leonora's white face. The handheld camera hums, and the person holding it takes a breath. Leonora is in her kitchen in Mexico City. Her face is white, very wrinkled and almost rectangular. Her hair is put up, her voice is deep, and her accent is distinctly British. There’s an absent look on her face, it is blank – but there’s a hint of irony and humour simmering beneath the perfectly timed, rhythmic and pointed comments that seem to almost tumble from her mouth. Leonora quips. Her eyes are black and vibrant. She is over 90 years old in the recordings, which have been cut into the middle of Anne Kjersti Bjørn's little film about the female surrealists. In a piece of YouTube footage of a Leonora conference, her son Gabriel "Gaby" speaks with a British intonation and mannerisms that are disturbingly similar to Leonora's. It’s as though Leonora is inside him talking to us – and in a way, she is.

I have a feeling that Leo has snuck in on me. The creature that snuck in on me as I wrote the project description for this book was identical to the grey-green face Max Ernst painted, almost stone-like yet smiling joyfully, in the upper right corner of *The Antipope* (1941). It’s one of the more adversarial paintings from the time they were fleeing Europe, when Ernst was torn between two continents and the influences of two women, Leonora and Guggenheim. Leonora's face is mirrored in the face of a horse. Both she and the horse are painted in the same grey-green tones. They are one. The horse has a seductive feminine body, dressed in black. Leonora and the horse seem to be only partly of this world. They are both statuesque and seductive, and they embrace a female figure stood with her back to them who is painted in warmer colours. There is blood in that body. But Leonora is not a muse, nor is she *my* muse. She would not be amused.

Leonora follows Renato Leduc to Mexico City. She picks up animals from the street; a small menagerie. A dog, a cat, a bird. Renato lives an outgoing life as a journalist, sauntering between the city's cantinas with his friends, while Leonora wanders the streets collecting homeless animals. Amazingly, Renato gets her to attend a bullfight, but she can barely watch the suffering of the bull and the horse; two animals put there to mistreat and kill each other. The bull's horns pierce the horse’s flank, the horse screams, Leonora screams. Renato turns out to be just as insensitive as Harold: Fox hunting, bullfighting – two idiotic human inventions. How satisfying, we know what a human is when we witness this grotesque performance; a human is something that reigns over the animals. A human is something that orchestrates elaborate animal killings, followed by extravagant dinners where dead animals are prepared and served for our enjoyment. Such unbelievable arrogance.

Despite it being her 100th birthday in 2017 – which was celebrated with book releases and exhibitions – Leonora research seems to be in its infancy. Leonora researchers are but a handful; a small, dynamic, international network whose goal is to investigate and analyse Leonora, using archeological methods, and perhaps bring her back to life. We want to bring Leonora back to life, we sing, but we are still underground. Until now Leonora has been far too much of a footnote to the story of Max Ernst, the great artist, or limited to a couple of sentences in the story of the Paris surrealists. Her stormy escapes from England to Paris, then to Spain and Portugal and across the sea to New York, have been scrutinised thoroughly for their drama. In a broader sense, they also help understand the dynamics between the historical avant-garde and the abstract expressionists who made use of Peggy Guggenheim's hot tips in New York, *took it and ran with it. Fuck and run,* Jackson Pollock. But when Leonora finally becomes herself in Mexico City, when she becomes her own artist, at that point the researchers fall asleep, they are looking in a different direction. No more. We want to bring Leonora back to life, we whisper. There are writers within this writer, and many of us who are writing. A collective of researchers writes within me. The Leonora bookshelf is quite full, there is a popular biography written by a British family member and a novel written by a Polish friend who belonged to the community of exiled European artists in Mexico City. Biographies and novels may be marketable genres, but researchers are able to do something else; they can be precise, they can go in-depth, and they can reflect.

It may sound a little poeticised, but I imagine Renato and Leonora separated after the trip to the bullfight. True, their relationship hinged primarily on getting Leonora out of war-ravaged Europe, and it was, after all, a successful endeavour. Leonora lives, she survives, but is deeply traumatised by the horrors of war and by her hospitalisation in Santander. She went through something, but what was it that she went through? What has happened cannot be undone. She looks at Max, who also survived, and is now living a completely different life than her – as Peggy’s golden bird in New York. Max is alive, but he is now underwater, his image is unclear, and she cannot or doesn’t want to reach him. Insanity as a portal to another world was a fetishised concept, but the surrealists preferred seeing their cute-looking female friends go to the most extreme states of mind. Leonora experienced madness in the most brutal manner, and was subjected to dehumanising treatment which, at its worst, was not so different to the treatment meted out in the other European institutions of that period: The death camps. Leonora's death camp was the psychiatric hospital in Santander. She would never be the same – no, never the same. Perhaps Breton would have been delighted? Had it been a kind of art for him? Leonora's convulsive beauty lying contorted and tied down in her own excrement.

There’s the smell of burning hellfire. Leonora has gone through something irreversible, on the other hand she can become her own artist, she can create her own surrealism, and she has found a new bird. It is not a superior bird, it is not Ernst, it is an owl, the nicest owl in the world; the Spanish artist Remedios Varo. This is an entirely new power constellation, it is girl-on-girl surrealism. Varo’s totem is the owl, but it is also the cat; and it’s not clear which of these Varo identifies with the most, which is perhaps a little disturbing since the owl and cat are not exactly best friends, on a natural, street level.

Her creative and intellectual friendship with Remedios is reminiscent of something else. It reminds Leonora of the relationships she had actually grown out of; with her Irish mother, her grandmother and her nanny, whom she met in the kitchen, the magic kitchen, where strange herbs were thrown in the pot and the conversations followed entirely different paths to those in the elegant sitting rooms. Admittedly, I can’t be sure how often Maurie did the cooking, the family was affluent enough to have servants at Crookhey Hall and Hazelwood, but the Celtic fairytales this staunchly matriarchal trinity entertained her with, shaped Leonora's identity. They told her she was a descendant of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the people of the goddess Danu. John Duncan’s painting *Riders of the Sidhe* (1911), depicts women with glowing halos riding on horseback. Was this how Leonora began to see herself? As a light-emblazoned knight of the goddess Danu? They said she was a descendant of Danu, but that she was also a gypsy; Leonora’s dark wild hair made her look like a daughter of the Roma people. It’s not surprising that several Catholic schools gave up on this girl who had such a powerful understanding of herself.

In Mexico, she comes to realise that folktales about magical pasts have a great deal in common across different cultures. In Central American mythology it is said that some people are *nagual* or *nahual*, meaning they have the power to transform into an animal. Maybe that's what I see when I look at Leonora? The ironic or humorous lack of presence in her behaviour is about her not actually believing that she’s in charge. Humanity is not a central factor in the cosmos. Humans can choose to submit to relationships between species, perhaps even communities between life and death. Eventually, her paintings are filled with hybrid animals, since she is a hybrid animal herself. Chains of animals and diaphanous spirits, dancing and dancing. There is no-one in the middle. No-one controlling, no-one ruling, conquering, orchestrating or consuming it.

It is the doctor, writer and surrealist Pierre Mabille who brings Leonora in for conversation therapy; and it is here she finally opens up about the painful memories from her time at the psychiatric institution in Santander. Mabille is in Mexico City, and his book *Mirror of the Marvelous: The Surrealist Reimagining of Myth –* first published under the title *Miroir du merveilleux* in 1940 – provides her with a starting point for talking about what happened to her. She had many highly creative and active years in Mexico, but the Leonora researchers are agreed that she occasionally went through difficult periods where she would sit like a statue in bed smoking. Leonora dressed in grey. Sometime she would actually become a marble pillar. Sometimes she would become a horse, a chalk-white Dawn Horse, playing with wild abandon.

Stone-faced Leonora, she's not going to make it easy for us. I don't think she believes in the artist identity, the art institution, or any form of dissemination or criticism of art. Critics should obviously walk on four legs too: “Once a dog barked at a mask I made; that was the most honourable comment I ever received.” Leonora is closed, but she is also open. As soon as I call her closed, I realise that she is open. On the other hand, if I call her open, she closes. Leonora is open as a pop song, you can walk right in. In 1995, Björk wrote the song "Bedtime Story" for Madonna, and in the video, directed by Mark Romanek, Madonna floats around in a surreal landscape. Both Björk and Madonna had shown their enthusiasm for the works of the female surrealists and, as with Leonora, Madonna was at this stage interested in various esoteric traditions, Kabbalah and so on. The video is full of art history references, and, among other things, has a scene where two versions of Madonna mirror each other. Both faces peer out from hand mirrors poking up from two blue jackets, which we recognise as Remedios Varo's painting *Los Amantes* (1963). A white bird peeps out of a cloak. Madonna opens the cloak and dozens of birds fly out, and we recognise this as Leonora Carrington's *The Giantess (The Guardian of the Egg)* from 1947.

*Today is the last day that I’m using words*   
 *They’ve gone out, lost their meaning*   
 *Don’t function anymore*  
 *Let’s get unconscious, honey*

[…]

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4.

The question of what I am looking for becomes more and more urgent. I stomp on the ground, maybe I'm trying to stomp Leonora up from the earth. Didn't she hear me calling her name? It’s one of my last days in town and I have an appointment with a young girl named Carmen. She studies English literature, works for a publishing company and also helped translate poems into Spanish for a poetry festival which included Scandinavian poets. Just then Fermin gets back to me on email. “Can you visit tomorrow?” he asks. He lives several hours away in one of the city's suburbs. I run off to meet Carmen. We take it easy and chat for a while, but part of me is ready to pounce, like a stalking tiger. I want to know if she is busy tomorrow, if she can come with me to visit Fermin. When I finally ask her, she looks at me strangely. “Well, I'm actually going out there tomorrow. My parents live there,” she says. Fermin is one of the sons of Plutarco Gastélum, and grew up in Edward James's surreal jungle palace in Xilitla, as part of his adopted rainbow family. There is something he wants to show me, a few of Leonora's sculptures no doubt, and it will be interesting to meet him anyway. The following day Carmen and I are on the bus, and are picked up by her mother at the bus-stop. “What is the address,” they ask, as we drive away in Carmen's mother’s car. Once I’ve finally made myself understood, Carmen laughs and says, “Oh! That's the street I grew up in!"

Fermin opens the door and welcomes Carmen, her mother and myself inside. He takes the white flower I bought for him, and shows us the house, which is full of life and sound. Cat-shadows creep about inside (we’ve already met the dog outside) and a parrot sits in a large cage commenting on it’s surroundings like another outdated cultural critic. We pass through an open kitchen and into an equally large room where one wall is covered with empty aquariums. But this is no store room, it’s where the family lives, and it is also home to Leonora's art, which seems to be everywhere. The first figures I see don’t stand apart or tower over the life going on in the house, they seem to be engaged with the whole menagerie. On the kitchen table there is a silvery figure, a gondola-like boat that reminds me of *How Doth the Little Crocodile* on Paseo de la Reforma: The boat is the mother heron’s winged body, with bird’s feet and a tail holding a lantern. Inside the boat-body sit the heron’s three chicks in a row. The assisting parent is stood upright holding an oar in the water. They are travelling on a mothership, being evacuated from a catastrophe perhaps.

On the floor by the window there is a large bronze statue. Fermin says that this was Leonora's last piece, which came back from the foundry after she died: These strange triangular faces dispel any notion of the face and the mask being two different entities. The figures are reminiscent of prototypical aliens (greys) with large, broad faces and long, slender bodies. The boundaries separating bodies and objects are blurred, which is typical of Leonora. Here, two creatures and a harp are merged into one. One of them plays the harp, which consists of both the creature's own leg and the harp's leg, both with clearly defined human feet. Both faces seem peaceful and attentive. An elongated cat creature sits on a table. It’s a while before I realise why things aren’t quite as they should be. The cat is resting it’s long, elegant, human hands on the table top.

Fermin starts unwrapping the tissue paper from the small figures, explaining in both Spanish and English while Carmen translates; and her mother – who is a doctor – stands there with knitted eyebrows, looking both interested and confused. Several creatures of varying size and material are brought out. Many of them began life as part of a painting, then later became three-dimensional. There are statues as well as smaller pieces of jewellery, brooch-sized animal hybrids that the artist herself once wore. Again, I am thrown by a statue! Just as I recognise it as a griffin, with a lion's body and wings, I realise that the forelegs are horse legs. It's face is a kind of oriental mask with green pearl eyes. Another slender, mask-wearing cat creature appears. “She has seen a lot of parties!” says Fermin. A small, terrified silver ghost stands on the table. The same silver thread creates the ghost's face ("outer") and its labyrinthine intestinal system (“inner”).

Leonora wrote theatre pieces with Octavio Paz, Remedios Varo and Alejandro Jodorowsky, and there are masks and remnants of the scenography lying in the empty aquariums. Much of it looks quite neglected and has been in the house in the Xilitla jungle for over sixty years. The pieces have been collected at Fermin’s house so they can be categorised and restored for future exhibitions, a process he is paying for himself. The masks were to be cast in bronze, but remain in their brown clay moulds. “The state won’t contribute financially, but they’ll spend huge sums on floral decorations in Mexico City,” Fermin says. Leonora crossed borders and made art that crossed academic trends. Her art was often dismissed in the 80s and 90s as hermetic (understood as "apolitical") and essentialist (far too spiritual and occult to fit with the French and American feminist theories of that time), nevertheless she was brought back into the fold during the rediscovery of the female surrealists. These American researchers were in fact pioneers! Gloria, who met her and wrote about her in the 70s, and later Susan and Whitney Chadwick, among others, have done a solid amount of work.

Fermin tells me that Leonora’s artistic production was unsteady, she suffered long bouts of depression and non-productiveness where she just sat paralysed in bed. She presumably swung back and forth between this immobilised state – perhaps deep in thought about the war in Europe and her hospitalisation in Santander – and a more devilish and humorous state of mind. They had searched for her personal papers in Xilitla and found a locked box. But when they finally opened the box, it was empty except for a photograph of a Tibetan monk. Leonora was certainly laughing that day. Fermin takes out one box after the other from a shelf, and leafs through old, water-damaged negatives. They are Chiki's photographs. “There are many photos here of André Breton’s visit to Mexico!”

Fermin puts Leonora's worn notebooks on the table. There is also a package wrapped in brown paper with the words "St. Martin d 'Ardèche 1940” written on it in scrawled handwriting. Some of this material will slowly reach interested researchers. Perhaps a new picture of Leonora will emerge, and new ways of understanding her. Her dark eyes stare melancholically from an old passport photo from 1932. I keep returning to a strange lithograph of a moonlit hunting scene (*Figuras fantásticas a caballo*) from 2011, the year of Leonora’s death: Five figures are on a hunt in the forest. It is unclear whether they are fish or birds. They look like birds wearing flamboyant masks inspired by tropical fish. Three of them are on horseback, two of them are on foot. One holds the horses while the other watches over five wolf-like dogs. One of the dogs races off in pursuit of a white stag. But it's the figure in the far left of the picture who seems to want to tell me something. I am drawn by the contrast between the red mask, the proud posture of the golden-brown horse’s back, the wing-like cape, and the midnight blue forest behind the creature.

We say goodbye to Fermin and climb into Carmen's mother’s car, smiling happily as if we have been allowed to see a magic treasure trove. Then we drive off and eat *tacos al pastor* in a little roadside place on the way to Mexico City. Later we walk round looking at the local *Día de Muertos* market. What I don't realise at this point, is that I have company. A mysterious creature has attached itself to me, following me like a shadow, everywhere I go.