Preface

Jonathan P. Eburne

I first met Gabriel Weisz at a scholarly conference in 2009. Then, as now, I was struck by his majestic eyebrows, which rise up like bats' wings from their perch above his eyes. I also found it impossible to ignore his singular manner of punctuating phrases: in place of the overused affirmative, he parses each phrase with a negative question. It makes for a strong impression, no?

I was also, and remain, transfixed by his kindness and intellectual hunger.

Gabriel Weisz, like his late mother, Leonora Carrington, is a scholar of fantastic literature and its animating tendencies: philosophy, magic, shamanism, becoming-animal. In addition to his published writings on the arts, sciences, and cultures of transformation, he has also published poetry and drama and, in recent years, has become a writer of memoirs as well. I can hear his voice in my head as I read the pages of *The invisible painting*; I hope you can hear it too. It is a memorable voice.

Gabriel Weisz, also like his late mother, is something of a shamanic figure himself – a statement which, as I write it, rings false. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that for someone who lives at the very borders of myth, who straddles the realms of quotidian existence and magic, Gabriel is startlingly, almost shockingly, *normal*. He and his partner, Paty Argomedo, go to the shops; they wash the dishes; they run the vacuum cleaner. When they travel abroad they carry their passports and papers in theft-proof

document purses slung beneath their clothes. Paty and Gabriel are generous hosts, correspondents, interlocutors; they are doting parents.

Again I stop myself, for in portraying Gabriel this way I am still missing something, once again lapsing into falsification. It occurs to me that for such an allegedly normal person – ‘normal’ being a term that Gabriel, a child of Surrealism, would hold in absolute contempt – Gabriel Weisz is also deeply, deliciously weird. How grateful I am for this.

‘To those who live in emotional poverty’, Gabriel writes in the pages that follow, ‘other people’s happiness can be perceived as a threat.’ The wisdom in this observation lies at the heart of *The invisible painting*. Gabriel is referring here to his mother’s wartime mistreatment by neighbours in the south of France after her lover, the German Surrealist Max Ernst, was incarcerated as an enemy alien. Yet it is a statement that applies to the forces and institutions of normalisation more broadly. Normality, that is, describes a condition of emotional and spiritual impoverishment that fuels and reproduces cruelty, social division, militarism, racism. ‘How easy it is to reimagine other people’s difference as an offence against the law.’ Later in the memoir, Gabriel writes this line in reference to the deadly violence used to crush the student protest movement in Mexico City in the autumn of 1968, when the army opened fire on a student demonstration in Tlatelolco and, later, when police burst into a café and arrested Gabriel and his friends. The truth of Gabriel’s observation resonates no less powerfully today, over half a century later. Even as I write this preface in the final days of May 2020, the United States is (once again) simmering with rage and unrest as protests against the police murder of (yet another) unarmed Black man, George Floyd, have faced repression by militarised police forces and white supremacist government rhetoric. How easy it is to reimagine other people’s difference as an offence against the law.

The invisible painting tells the story of an artist – and a family – dedicated to resisting emotional impoverishment and the

catastrophe it reproduces in the world. Arriving in Mexico City in 1942 as a war refugee, the British-born writer and artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) married the Hungarian photographer Emérico ‘Chiki’ Weisz (1911–2007), a refugee and Holocaust survivor. Gabriel’s childhood unfolded during a period of mourning and reconstruction, when Leonora and her circle of friends – including Surrealist poets and artists such as Remedios Varo, Benjamin Péret, Katy Horna, Octavio Paz, Alice Rahon, and Juan Soriano – forged a new, surrogate family. And no less importantly: Gabriel came of age during a period in which they persisted in their artistic and intellectual experimentation. To resist emotional impoverishment requires a fundamental shift in the way people use their imaginations. This means cultivating an openness and willingness to listen, as Gabriel puts it, as well as a commitment to question one’s own intellectual preferences. This, he notes, was one of Leonora Carrington’s most admirable traits.

The invisible painting is a memoir of Leonora Carrington written by her son. It offers a testament to her imagination and openness as much as an intimate portrait of her creative life. Carrington appears here not only as a major international artist and author with a career spanning two continents and eight decades, but also as a mother, a friend, a teacher, and a storyteller. Born in Lancashire, England, in 1917, Leonora Carrington studied art with Amédée Ozenfant in London before joining the Surrealists in Paris at the age of 19. With Max Ernst she moved to the village of St Martin d’Ardèche, north of Avignon, where she developed as a writer and painter before the Nazi occupation of France separated the couple. After she crossed the Pyrenees into Spain, the father of the grieving artist had her committed to a Spanish asylum in Santander. Carrington recounts this terrifying experience in her wartime memoir *Down Below*. Gabriel retells the story of his mother’s subsequent escape and voyage to New York, where she collaborated with André Breton and other Surrealist refugees before arriving in Mexico City. Carrington’s literary and artistic career in Mexico has been

increasingly well documented, as have her collaborations with other Mexican and Mexico-based artists, writers, and intellectuals from 1942 until her death in 2011. In Gabriel's memoir we read, too, about her travels abroad: her return visit to her childhood home in Lancashire, her reunions with Surrealist comrades in Paris, her impassioned visits to art museums and her several returns to New York. Though such visitations may too often play a minor part in an artist's biography, they loom large in the imagination of a child, and thus it is through Gabriel's eyes that we can witness the affective as well as intellectual life of Leonora Carrington as it played out in her family life.

The invisible painting is a memoir, but it is also a gift. Like the painting to which its title refers, the memoir traces out an impermanent image: it is an act of remembrance, an elegiac portrait that presents us with a vivid likeness of the author's mother. Yet unlike its invisible namesake, Gabriel's memoir is both visible and tangible. You hold it now in your hands. This is important. For whereas Leonora Carrington is no longer alive to speak to us, her writings and artworks remain to call our imaginations into action and to spur us to challenge our presumptions. Here, though, we have a portrait of the artist herself as she lived, spoke, took notes, smoked cigarettes, raised her family, responded to emergencies, and revisited the places where she had once lived.

At times, Gabriel slips into the second person, addressing his mother directly. *The invisible painting* aches towards her continued presence in the world. 'If only I could talk to Leonora now as I once could', he laments. At other times, his prose gestures inclusively to us as readers of the memoir, speaking to us as viewers of Leonora's paintings and readers of her stories. We, too, can become part of Leonora's surrogate family: this is the gift that *The invisible painting* presents to us. It is a gift that demands a certain responsibility from its recipients: a responsibility to participate in its challenges, to question our own criteria and habits of understanding, to live *with* and *for* the worlds it opens up within our own imaginations.

To this end I think it is important to clarify a position that Gabriel – and Leonora – have expressed with regard to the ‘interpretation’ of Carrington’s artwork. ‘It is fruitless’, Gabriel writes, ‘to search for meaning in these compositions: they are what they are, and that is enough.’ This position echoes the artist’s own refusal to capitulate to biographical or psychoanalytic justifications for her working practices or the ‘deep meaning’ of her symbolically charged work. This position is anything but anti-intellectual. Carrington’s artworks demand participation; they ‘beckon us to take part in their saga’, as Gabriel puts it. This does not mean that the spectator – or the student, the scholar, the researcher, the devotee – is somehow barred from investigation. Quite the opposite: what Leonora Carrington resists are the kinds of extractive interpretations that *replace* the experience of delving with some kind of self-contained elucidation.

Carrington stands firmly against the commodification of knowledge. She did not live long enough to become familiar with the term ‘mansplaining’, but her writings are deeply attentive to the kind of toxic, masculine self-assurance that this neologism describes. One thinks of the scene in *The Hearing Trumpet* when Marian Leatherby conjures a white-flannel-clad, racquet-bearing dandy from her youth: ‘Darling’, the young man says, ‘stop being philosophical, it doesn’t suit you, it makes your nose red.’¹ The young man keeps talking but begins to fade, disappearing from view even as he continues to prescribe the reading habits suitable for young women. As a figure conjured through the memory of Carrington’s nonagenarian protagonist, this tiresome mansplainer is ultimately subject to the conditions of the medium that have resurrected him: memory, fiction. For Carrington, to be philosophical is to take active part in the life of ideas; it demands a living commitment rather than a recourse to explanation. Knowledge, meaning, philosophy, art:

¹ Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1996), p. 21.

these words refer to a state of being and thus are irreducible to mere explanation – except through the repressive imposition of power. The extraction of meaning is, like theft or appropriation, an authoritarian act. Carrington's art instead encourages us 'to live simultaneously in two dimensions: to live not just our ordinary existence, but also in a visual marsh that pulls us in as we engage in creative imaging'. This marsh, like all marshes, is a place of decomposition and new life, a liminal site between worlds. At once estuary and breeding ground, it marks the meeting point of land and sea, of death, rot, fecundity, and rebirth. Let us not forget that Mexico City is built on the ancient lake Texcoco. A fundamentally unstable ground, trembling with earthquakes, it is bound up in historical as well as geological cycles of death and new life. This is the terrain of Leonora Carrington's imagination.

Leonora Carrington (with foxy cat), Mexico City, 1947.