

Richard Meyer

from *La Gioconda*

We know you well. We call you by your name.
We know the stamp of your iconic face—
that enigmatic smile and cryptic gaze.
We see your body shift in subtle ways
and quaver gently like an umber flame.
Apart from ordinary time and place,
you sit, emerging in a smoky haze.

Drawn by the power of a famous name,
the chatty crowds keep coming in a queue
like pilgrims tramping to a mythic shrine
to stare and point and puzzle over you.
Only the tired guard shows no surprise.
With folded arms he leans against a wall
and notes one woman moving through the line,
a blonde with ample breasts and slender thighs.
The best today, he thinks. *Well built and tall*.
He stutters taps a foot against the floor,
and checks the time, and yawns a little sigh.
To him you're like some criminal of war
condemned and placed on permanent display,
encased in sturdy glass for all to view.
You'll never be released and cannot die.
He stands at ease. He rarely looks your way,
accustomed to the smirk behind his back
and numb to eyes that slice across his neck.

Tradition tells us little of your life:
Florentine. Late quattrocento middle class.

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Named Lisa. Christened after Sunday Mass.
Believed to be a wealthy merchant's wife.
His third. You married well. Arranged, no doubt.
Appearance plain. Not very well equipped.
Quite commonplace. Most likely nondescript.
And through arrangements no one seems to know,
a contract for a portrait came about
which brought you to the maestro's studio
where he possessed you as no husband could
and recreated you in oil on wood.

We come upon you seated in a chair.
You turn our way and meet us face to face.
Your flesh is palpable. You breathe our air.
You pose before a strangely lunar place
and look at us with secrets in your eyes.
We see your cunning smile. You always wear
that smile, that furtive curve of lip on lip
we cannot read but always recognize.

Precisely keeping their excursion pace,
two teachers midway through a summer trip
politely pause, consult a list, and stand
just long enough to say they've seen your face
and taken in your legendary charms,
then scurry off, museum maps in hand,
to find the Venus missing both her arms
and headless Nike with the spreading wings.

You see them all. You watch them come and pass:
a whining child, three nuns, an art school class,
a scholar searching for some hidden clue,
and even Lester Pratt from Cedar Springs
who with his wife arrived by tour bus
and joined the line that winds its way to you.

So, here she is! he broadcasts with a shout
and tilts a thumb your way to point you out.
He grins and shakes his head at all the fuss.
You don't rate well against the glossy prints
found in the Norman Rockwell picture book
he has at home beside a jar of mints.

It's kinda plain, says Claire. *And dark and small.*

She leans and squints a last bewildered look.
She's disappointed. Not impressed at all.

She looks like cousin Martha, Lester laughs,
after the doctor put her on those pills.

Before they leave they pose for photographs,
but you're obscured in flash and glare on glass.

What can you do, so windowed and confined,
the chief attraction in an artwork zoo,
when you grow weary of our eyes on you?
Perhaps your mind retreats into those hills
and ghostly rocks receding deep behind
to find new mysteries to make your own
and etch in delphic riddles on your face.
Perhaps you dream of solitude and peace,
a quiet corner in a minor room
where you can live unnoticed and unknown
and few inquisitors, if any, come
to gawk and gabble, stare and scrutinize.

When looking on your image fresh and new,
Vasari stood astonished and enthralled.
He swore he saw a pulse beat at your throat
and moisture glisten in your sentient eyes.
He saw an eyelid twitch. Your flesh he called
a miracle of art made living skin.
Close-by a window where the sun streamed in,
His servant Nicco shivered in his coat

and risked his soul to look askance at you.
Such alchemy, he knew, must be a sin.
He quickly crossed himself, removed his cap,
and murmured *Deus!* with a lowered head.
Deus meus libera nos, he said.
He did not mean to, but he looked again,
and saw before him in that painted space
those perfect hands that gently overlap
like lovers resting in a mild embrace,
calm hands that may at any moment move
to smooth a sleeve or brush a strand of hair.

While pigeons circled Brunelleschi's dome,
their outward flight unfolding like a wave,
a marble giant standing in the square
cast Buonarroto's shadow long and deep.
Young Raphael, the vaunted prodigy
whose reputation reached as far as Rome,
walked home in haunted silence after he
was introduced to you. He could not sleep.
That night his mistress lay alone in bed
and watched him draw until his fingers bled.

Note: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* is generally believed to be a portrait of Lisa Gherardini Gioconda, the wife of a wealthy Florentine merchant named Francesco del Giocondo. In Italy the *Mona Lisa* is known as *La Gioconda*, and in France it's called *La Joconde*. In Italian *giocondo* also means "light-hearted" or "jovial"—thus the title is a pun on the sitter's married name.