

Richard Meyer

La Gioconda

*apostrophe to the **Mona Lisa***

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 stutter 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.
Named Lisa. Christened after morning 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,
 a pious cleric 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 Buonarroti'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.

Napoleon fell a victim to your spell
 and kept you in his bedroom for himself.
 He spoke to you. You smiled and listened well.
 You leaned against a neoclassic shelf
 and watched him study maps by candlelight

while yellow shadows flickered on your face.
 You watched him write. You watched him brood and pace
 and plan maneuvers late into the night.
 With bold resolve he turned a stalled campaign
 by daring use of infantry and horse,
 then took advantage of adverse terrain
 to flank and split a far superior force.
 He sent reserves to back the lead brigade
 and claimed the field and won a war that day.
 He labored long to master arms and men,
 but you could often coax his mind away
 from routing paper armies with a pen
 or struggling with a troublesome blockade.
 He'd turn to you and for a while forget
 the lure of battlefield and bayonet,
 the thrill of saber flash and cannonade.
 He spoke aloud of skill and risk and fate.
 He'd look at you and say *Je t'aime*, then hum
 a tune he heard a street musician play
 in Tuscany. Sometimes he'd masturbate.
 You watched him stroke his cock, you saw him cum.
 He spoke of Joséphine de Beauharnais
 and how she kissed, and how he liked to lick
 between her legs where hair grew black and thick.
 You smiled, but did not blush or look away.

Leonardo would not let you go.

He took you with him everywhere he went
 until he died in France with you in tow.
 He left you incomplete. Never content,
 he fiddled with your image off and on
 but failed to match the vision in his mind.

For you the passing years have been unkind.
 You have become an icon much abused,
 a curiosity, a joke, a pawn,
 an image over-hyped and overused,
 a varnished ghost of what you used to be
 reflecting only what we wish to see.

Museum number seven-seven-nine,
 arranged and housed with other artifacts,
 you sat sedately proper and relaxed,

content for years to hold your place in line
 with not much known of you and not much said,
 but when a crazed Italian kidnapped you
 and kept you in a box beneath his bed
 your quiet life was shattered through and through.
 The daring heist immortalized your name
 and catapulted you to worldwide fame.
 (Picasso was a suspect in the crime
 but cleared of all complicity or blame.)
 Your rescue brought a torrent of acclaim.
 For art you're now the foremost paradigm.

Pronouncing you alluring and aloof
 with their rhapsodic academic breath,
 the pundits praise your countenance and style
 while memes online purloin you for a spoof.
 You've been lampooned and parodied to death —
 a stock contrivance in the hackneyed pile,
 a ready-made for mustache and goatee
 and lettering that says your ass is hot.
 The advertisers will not let you be.
 You're reproduced and strewn *ad nauseam*,
 compelled to sell perfume, a kitchen pot,
 a credit card, a dress, or chewing gum.
 Ubiquitous and stale, a cheap cliché,
 you haunt our lives and never go away.

We leave you on that loggia where you sit
 inscrutable, alone, and dimly lit,
 forever changing and forever fixed,
 an archetype that cannot be eclipsed.
 Contesting what we think and how we view,
 you question us more than we question you,
 and seem to conjure from your eyes and lips
 a silent musing meant for everyone —
Tell me if anything ever was done.
Tell me if anything ever was done.



Notes

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. The French title has a similar meaning.

Toward the end of his life, despairing of so many projects that were never completed, Leonardo wrote variations of a phrase over and over again in his notebooks: *Tell me, tell me if I ever did a thing* or *Tell me if anything got done*.