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Gioconda And Si-ya-u

Nazim Hikmet

*to the memory of my friend SI-YA-U, whose head was cut off in
Shanghai*

A CLAIM

**Renowned Leonardo's
world-famous
"La Gioconda"
has disappeared.
And in the space
vacated by the fugitive
a copy has been placed.**

**The poet inscribing
the present treatise
knows more than a little
about the fate
of the real Gioconda.
She fell in love
with a seductive
graceful youth:
a honey-tongued
almond-eyed Chinese
named SI-YA-U.
Gioconda ran off
after her lover;
Gioconda was burned
in a Chinese city.**

I, Nazim Hikmet,

authority
on this matter,
thumbing my nose at friend and foe
five times a day,
undaunted,
claim
I can prove it;
if I can't,
I'll be ruined and banished
forever from the realm of poesy.
1928

Part One Excerpts from Gioconda's Diary

15 March 1924: Paris, Louvre Museum

At last I am bored with the Louvre Museum.
You can get fed up with boredom very fast.
I am fed up with my boredom.
And from the devastation inside me
I drew this lesson;
to visit
a museum is fine,
to be a museum piece is terrible!
In this palace that imprisons the past
I am placed under such a heavy sentence
that as the paint on my face cracks out of boredom
I'm forced to keep grinning without letting up.
Because
I am the Gioconda from Florence
whose smile is more famous than Florence.
I am bored with the Louvre Museum.
And since you get sick soon enough
of conversing with the past,

I decided
from now on
to keep a diary.
Writing of today may be of some help
in forgetting yesterday...

**However, the Louvre is a strange place.
Here you might find
Alexander the Great's
Longines watch complete with chronometer,
but
not a single sheet of clean notebook paper
or a pencil worth a piaster.
Damn your Louvre, your Paris.
I'll write these entries
on the back of my canvas.**

**And so
when I picked a pen from the pocket
of a nearsighted American
sticking his red nose into my skirts
--his hair stinking of wine--**

I started my memoirs.

**I'm writing on my back
the sorrow of having a famous smile...**

18 March: Night

**The Louvre has fallen asleep.
In the dark, the armless Venus
looks like a veteran of the Great War.
The gold helmet of a knight gleams
as the light from the night watchman's lantern
strikes a dark picture.**

**Here
in the Louvre
my days are all the same
like the six sides of a wood cube.
My head is full of sharp smells
like the shelf of a medicine cabinet.**

20 March

**I admire those Flemish painters:
is it easy to give the air of a naked goddess
to the plump ladies
of milk and sausage merchants?**

**But
even if you wear silk panties,
cow + silk panties = cow.**

**Last night
a window
was left open.
The naked Flemish goddesses caught cold.
All day
today,
turning their bare
mountain-like pink behinds to the public,
they coughed and sneezed...
I caught cold, too.
So as not to look silly smiling with a cold,
I tried to hide my sniffles
from the visitors.**

1 April

**Today I saw a Chinese:
he was nothing like those Chinese with their topknots.
How long
he gazed at me!
I'm well aware
the favor of Chinese
who work ivory like silk
is not to be taken lightly...**

11 April

**I caught the name of the Chinese who comes every day:
SI-YA-U.**

16 April

**Today we spoke
in the language of eyes.
He works as a weaver days
and studies nights.
Now it's a long time since the night
came on like a pack of black-shirted Fascists.
The cry of a man out of work
who jumped into the Seine
rose from the dark water.
And ah! you on whose fist-size head
mountain-like winds descend,
at this very minute you're probably busy
building towers of thick, leather-bound books
to get answers to the questions you asked of the stars.**

READ

SI-YA-U

READ...

**And when your eyes find in the lines what they desire,
when your eyes tire,
rest your tired head
like a black-and-yellow Japanese chrysanthemum
on the books..**

SLEEP

SI-YA-U

SLEEP...

18 April

**I've begun to forget
the names of those Renaissance masters.**

**I want to see
the black bird-and-flower**

**watercolors
that slant-eyed Chinese painters**

drip

from their long thin bamboo brushes.

NEWS FROM THE PARIS WIRELESS

**HALLO
HALLO
HALLO
PARIS
PARIS
PARIS...**

**Voices race through the air
like the fiery greyhounds.
The wireless in the Eiffel Tower calls out:**

**HALLO
HALLO
HALLO
PARIS
PARIS
PARIS...**

**"I, TOO, am Oriental -- this voice is for me.
My ears are receivers, too.
I, too, must listen to Eiffel."**

**News from China
News from China
News from China:**

**The dragon that came down from the Kaf mountains
has spread his wings
across the golden skies of the Chinese homeland.**

**But
in this business it's not only the British lord's
gullet shaved
like the thick neck
of a plucked hen
that will be cut
but also
the long
thin**

beard of Confucius!

FROM GIOCONDA'S DIARY

21 April

**Today my Chinese
looked my straight
in the eye
and asked:**

**"Those who crush our rice fields
with the caterpillar treads of their tanks
and who swagger through our cities
like emperors of hell,
are they of YOUR race,
the race of him who CREATED you?"
I almost raised my hand
and cried "No!"**

27 April

**Tonight at the blare of an American trumpet
--the horn of a 12-horsepower Ford--
I awoke from a dream,
and what I glimpsed for an instant
instantly vanished.
What I'd seen was a still blue lake.
In this lake the slant-eyed light of my life
had wrapped his fingers around the neck of a gilded fish.
I tried to reach him,
my boat a Chinese teacup
and my sail
the embroidered silk
of a Japanese
bamboo umbrella...**

NEWS FROM THE PARIS WIRELESS

HALLO

HALLO

**HALLO
PARIS
PARIS
PARIS**

**The radio station signs off.
Once more
blue-shirted Parisians
fill Paris with red voices
and red colors...**

FROM GIOCONDA'S DIARY

2 May

Today my Chinese failed to show up.

5 May

Still no sign of him...

8 May

**My days
are like the waiting room
of a station:
eyes glued
to the tracks...**

10 May

**Sculptors of Greece,
painters of Seljuk china,
weavers of fiery rugs in Persia,
chanters of hymns to dromedaries in deserts,
dancer whose body undulates like a breeze,
craftsman who cuts thirty-six facets from a one-carat stone,
and YOU
who have five talents on your five fingers,
master MICHELANGELO!**

**Call out and announce to both friends and foe:
because he made too much noise in Paris,
because he smashed in the window
of the Mandarin ambassador,
Gioconda's lover
has been thrown out
of France...**

**My lover from China has gone back to China...
And now I'd like to know
who's Romeo and Juliet!
If he isn't Juliet in pants
and I'm not Romeo in skirts...
Ah, if I could cry--
if only I could cry...**

12 May

Today

**when I caught a glimpse of myself
in the mirror of some mother's daughter
touching up the paint
on her bloody mouth
in front of me,
the tin crown of my fame shattered on my head.
While the desire to cry writhes inside me
I smile demurely;
like a stuffed pig's head
my ugly face grins on...
Leonardo da Vinci,
may your bones
become the brush of a Cubist painter
for grabbing me by the throat -- your hands dripping with paint --
and sticking in my mouth like a gold-plated tooth
this cursed smile...**

**Part Two The Flight
FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK**

**Ah, friends, Gioconda is in a bad way...
Take it from me,
if she didn't have hopes
of getting word from afar,
she'd steal a guard's pistol,
and aiming to give the color of death
to her lips' cursed smile,
she'd empty it into her canvas breast...**

FROM GIOCONDA'S DIARY

**O that Leonardo da Vinci's brush
had conceived me
under the gilded sun of China!
That the painted mountain behind me
had been a sugar-loaf Chinese mountain,
that the pink-white color of my long face
could fade,
that my eyes were almond-shaped!
And if only my smile
could show what I feel in my heart!
Then in the arms of him who is far away
I could have roamed through China...**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

**I had a heart-to-heart talk with Gioconda today.
The hours flew by
one after another
like the pages of a spell-binding book.
And the decision we reached
will cut like a knife
Gioconda's life
in two.
Tomorrow night you'll see us carry it out...**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

The clock of Notre Dame

strikes midnight.

**Midnight
midnight.**

**Who knows at this very moment
which drunk is killing his wife?
Who know at this very moment
which ghost
is haunting the halls
of a castle?**

**Who knows at this very moment
which thief
is surmounting
the most unsurmountable wall?**

**Midnight... Midnight...
Who knows at this very moment...
I know very well that in every novel
this is the darkest hour.**

**Midnight
strikes fear into the heart of every reader...
But what could I do?
When my monoplane landed
on the roof of the Louvre,
the clock of Notre Dame
struck midnight.**

**And, strangely enough, I wasn't afraid
as I patted the aluminum rump of my plane
and stepped down on the roof...
Uncoiling the fifty-fathom-long rope wound around my waist,
I lowered it outside Gioconda's window
like a vertical bridge between heaven and hell.
I blew my shrill whistle three times.
And I got an immediate response
to those three shrill whistles.
Gioconda threw open her window.
This poor farmer's daughter**

**done up as the Virgin Mary
chucked her gilded frame
and, grabbing hold of the rope, pulled herself up...**

**SI-YA-U, my friend,
you were truly lucky to fall
to a lion-hearted woman like her...**

FROM GIOCONDA'S DIARY

**This thing called an airplane
is a winged iron horse.
Below us is Paris
with its Eiffel Tower--
a sharp-nosed, pock-marked, moon-like face.
We're climbing,
climbing higher.
Like an arrow of fire
we pierce
the darkness.
The heavens rise overhead,
looming closer;
the sky is like a meadow full of flowers.
We're climbing,
climbing higher.**

.....

**I must have dozed off --
I opened my eyes.
Dawn's moment of glory.
The sky a calm ocean,
our plane a ship.
I call this smooth sailing, smooth as butter.
Behind us a wake of smoke floats.
Our eyes survey blue vacancies
full of glittering discs...
Below us the earth looks**

like a Jaffa orange
turning gold in the sun...
By what magic have I
climbed off the ground
hundreds of minarets high,
and yet to gaze down at the earth
my mouth still waters...

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

Now our plane swims
within the hot winds
swarming over Africa.
Seen from above,
Africa looks like a huge violin.
I swear
they're playing Tchaikovsky on a cello
on the angry dark island
of Africa.
And waiving his long hairy arms,
a gorilla is sobbing...

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

We're crossing the Indian Ocean.
We're drinking in the air
like a heavy, faint-smelling syrup.
An keeping our eyes on the yellow beacon of Singapore
-- leaving Australia on the right,
Madagascar on the left --
and putting our faith in the fuel in the tank,
we're heading for the China Sea...

*From the journal of a deckhand named John aboard a
British vessel in the China Sea*

One night

**a typhoon blows up out of the blue.
Man,
what a hurricane!
Mounted on the back of yellow devil, the Mother of God
whirls around and around, churning up the air.
And as luck would have it,
I've got the watch on the foretop.
The huge ship under me
looks about this big!
The wind is roaring
blast
after blast,
blast
after blast...
The mast quivers like a strung bow.(*)
*[What business do you have being way up there?
Christ, man, what do you think you are-a stork?
N.H.]**

**Oops, now we're shooting sky-high --
my head splits the clouds.
Oops, now we're sinking to the bottom --
my fingers comb the ocean floor.
We're learning to the left, we're leaning to the right --
that is, we're leaning larboard and starboard.
My God, we just sank!
Oh no! This time we're sure to go under!
The waves
leap over my head
like Bengal tigers.
Fear
leads me on
like a coffee-colored Javanese whore.
This is no joke -- this is the China Sea... (*)
*[The deckhand has every right to be afraid.
The rage of the China Sea is not to be taken lightly.
N.H.]**

Okay, let's keep it short.

PLOP...

What's that?

**A rectangular piece of canvas dropped from the air
into the crows nest.**

The canvas

was some kind of woman!

**It struck me this madame who came from the sky
would never understand**

our seamen's talk and ways.

**I got right down and kissed her hand,
and making like a poet, I cried:**

"O you canvas woman who fell from the sky!

Tell me, which goddess should I compare you to?

Why did you descend here? What is your large purpose?"

She replied:

"I fell

from a 550-horsepower plane.

My name is Gioconda,

I come from Florence.

I must get to Shanghai

as soon as possible."

FROM GIOCONDA'S DIARY

The wind died down,

the sea calmed down.

The ship makes strides toward Shanghai.

The sailors dream,

rocking in their sailcloth hammocks.

A song of the Indian Ocean plays

on their thick fleshy lips:

"The fire of the Indochina sun

warms the blood

like Malacca wine.

They lure sailors to gilded stars,

those Indochina nights,

those Indochina nights.

**Slant-eyed yellow Bornese cabin boys
knifed in Sigapore bars
paint the iron-belted barrels blood-red.
Those Indochina nights, those Indochina nights.**

**A ship plunges on
to Canton,
55,000 tons.
Those Indochina nights...
As the moon swims in the heavens
like the corpse of a blue-eyed sailor
tossed overboard,
Bombay watches, leaning on its elbow...
Bombay moon,
Arabian Sea.
The fire of the Indochina sun
warms the blood
lie Malacca wine.
They lure sailors to gilded stars,
those Indochina nights,
those Indochina nights..."**

**Part Three Gioconda's End
THE CITY OF SHANGHAI**

**Shanghai is a big port,
an excellent port,
It's ships are taller than
horned mandarin mansions.
My, my!
What a strange place, this Shanghai...**

**In the blue river boats
with straw sails float.
In the straw-sailed boats
naked coolies sort rice,
raving of rice...
My, my!
What a strange place, this Shanghai...**

**Shanghai is a big port,
The whites' ships are tall,
the yellows' boats are small.
Shanghai is pregnant with a red-headed child.
My, my!**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

**Last night
when the ship entered the harbor
Gioconda's foot kissed the land.
Shanghai the soup, she the ladle,
she searched high and low for her SI-YA-U.**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

**"Chinese work! Japanese work!
Only two people make this --
a man and a woman.**

**Chinese work! Japanese work!
Just look at the art
in this latest work of LI-LI-FU."**

**Screaming at the tip of his voice,
the Chinese magician**

LI.

**His shriveled yellow spider of a hand
tossed long thin knives into the air:**

one

one more

one

one more

five

one more.

**Tracing lightning-like circles in the air,
his knives flew up in a steady stream.**

Gioconda looked,

**she kept looking,
she'd still be looking
but, like a large-colored Chinese lantern,
the crowd swayed and became confused:
"Stand back! Gang way!
Chiang Kai-shek's executioner
is hunting down a new head.
Stand back! Make way!"**

**One in front and one close behind,
two Chinese shot around the corner.
The one in front ran toward Gioconda.
The one racing toward her, it was him, it was him -- yes, him!**

**Her SI-YA-U,
her dove,
SI-YA-U...**

**A dull hollow stadium sound surrounded them.
And in the cruel English language
stained red with the blood
of yellow Asia
the crown yelled:
"He's catching up,
he's catching up,
he caught-
catch him!"**

**Just three steps away from Gioconda's arms
Chiang Kai-shek's executioner caught up.
His sword
flashed...
Thud of cut flesh and bone.
Like a yellow sun drenched in blood
SI-YA-U's head
rolled at her feet...
And this on a death day
Gioconda of Florence lost in Shanghai
her smile more famous than Florence.**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

**A Chinese bamboo frame.
In the frame is a painting.
Under the painting, a name:
"La Gioconda"...**

**In the frame is a painting:
the eyes of the painting are burning, burning.
In the frame is painting:
the painting in the frame comes alive, alive.
And suddenly
the painting jumped out of the frame
as if from a window;
her feet hit the ground.
And just as I shouted her name
she stood up straight before me:
the giant woman of a colossal struggle.**

**She walked ahead.
I trailed behind.
From the blazing red Tibetan sun
to the China Sea
we went and came,
we came and went.
I saw
Gioconda
sneak out under the cover of darkness
through the gates of a city in enemy hands;
I saw her
in a skirmish of drawn bayonets
strangle a British officer;
I saw her
at the head of a blue stream swimming with stars
wash the lice from her dirty shirt...**

**Huffling and puffing, a wood-burning engine
dragged behind it
forty red cars seating forty people each.
The cars passed one by one.
In the last car I saw her**

**standing watch:
a frayed lambskin hat on her head,
boots on her feet,
a leather jacket on her back...**

FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTEBOOK

**Ah, my patient reader!
Now we find ourselves in the French
military court in Shanghai.**

**The bench:
four generals, fourteen colonels,
and an armed black Congolese regiment.**

**The accused:
Gioconda.
The attorney for the defense:**

**an overly razed
--that is, overly artistic--
French painter.**

**The scene is set.
We're starting.**

The defense attorney presents his case:

**"Gentlemen,
this masterpiece
that stands in your presence as the accused
is the most accomplished daughter of a great artist.**

**Gentlemen,
this masterpiece...**

**Gentlemen...
my mind is on fire...**

**Gentlemen...
Renaissance...**

**Gentlemen,
this masterpiece--
twice this masterpiece...**

Gentlemen, uniformed gentlemen..."

"C-U-U-U-T!

Enough.

stop sputtering like a jammed machine gun!

Bailiff,

read the verdict."

The bailiff reads the verdict:

"The laws of France

have been violated in China

by the above-named Gioconda, daughter of one Leonardo.

Accordingly,

we sentence the accused

to death

by burning.

And tomorrow night at moonrise,

a Senegalese regiment

will execute said decision

of this military court..."

THE BURNING

Shanghai is a big port.

**The whites have tall ships,
the yellows' boats are small.**

A thick whistle.

A thin Chinese scream.

**A ship steaming into the harbor
capsized a straw-sailed boat...**

Moonlight.

Night.

Handcuffed,

Gioconda waits.

Blow, wind, blow...

A voice:

**"All right, the lighter.
Burn, Gioconda, burn..."
A silhouette advances,
a flash...
They lit the lighter
and set Gioconda on fire.
The flames painted Gioconda red.
She laughed with a smile that came from her heart.
Gioconda burned laughing...**

**Art, Shmart, Masterpiece, Shmasterpiece, And So On,
And So Forth,
Immortality, Eternity-
H-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-E-Y...**

**"HERE ENDS MY TALE'S CONTENDING,
THE REST IS LIES UNENDING..."
THE END**

Nazim Hikmet - 1929

FOOTNOTE:

GIOCONDA AND SI-YA-U: Si-Ya-U, Hsiao San (b. 1896), Chinese revolutionary and man of letters. Hikmet met him in Moscow in 1922 and believed he had been executed in the bloody 1927 crackdown on Shanghai radicals after returning to China via Paris in 1924, when the Mona Lisa did in fact disappear from the Louvre. The two friends were reunited in Vienna in 1951 and traveled to Peking together in 1952. Translated into Chinese, this poem was later burned-along with Hsiao's works- in the Cultural Revolution.

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