Classic Poetry Series

Nazim Hikmet

- poems -

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A Sad State Of Freedom

You waste the attention of your eyes,
the glittering labour of your hands,
and knead the dough enough for dozens of loaves
of which you'll taste not a morsel;
you are free to slave for others--
you are free to make the rich richer.

The moment you're born
they plant around you
mills that grind lies
lies to last you a lifetime.
You keep thinking in your great freedom
a finger on your temple
free to have a free conscience.

Your head bent as if half-cut from the nape,
your arms long, hanging,
your saunter about in your great freedom:
you're free
with the freedom of being unemployed.

You love your country
as the nearest, most precious thing to you.
But one day, for example,
they may endorse it over to America,
and you, too, with your great freedom--
you have the freedom to become an air-base.

You may proclaim that one must live
not as a tool, a number or a link
but as a human being--
then at once they handcuff your wrists.
You are free to be arrested, imprisoned
and even hanged.

There's neither an iron, wooden
nor a tulle curtain
in your life;
there's no need to choose freedom:
you are free.
But this kind of freedom
is a sad affair under the stars.

Translated by Taner Baybars

Nazim Hikmet

A Spring Piece Left In The Middle

Taut, thick fingers punch
the teeth of my typewriter.
Three words are down on paper
in capitals:
SPRING
SPRING
SPRING...
And me -- poet, proofreader,
the man who's forced to read
two thousand bad lines
every day
for two liras--
why,
since spring
has come, am I
still sitting here
like a ragged
black chair?
My head puts on its cap by itself,
I fly out of the printer's,
I'm on the street.
The lead dirt of the composing room
on my face,
seventy-five cents in my pocket.
SPRING IN THE AIR...

In the barbershops
they're powdering
the sallow cheeks
of the pariah of Publishers Row.
And in the store windows
three-color bookcovers
flash like sunstruck mirrors.
But me,
I don't have even a book of ABC's
that lives on this street
and carries my name on its door!
But what the hell...
I don't look back,
the lead dirt of the composing room
on my face,
seventy-five cents in my pocket,
SPRING IN THE AIR...

*

The piece got left in the middle.
It rained and swamped the lines.
But oh! what I would have written...
The starving writer sitting on his three-thousand-page
three-volume manuscript
wouldn't stare at the window of the kebab joint

but with his shining eyes would take
the Armenian bookseller's dark plump daughter by storm...
The sea would start smelling sweet.
Spring would rear up
like a sweating red mare
and, leaping onto its bare back,
I'd ride it
into the water.
Then
my typewriter would follow me
every step of the way.
I'd say:
"Oh, don't do it!
Leave me alone for an hour..."
then
my head-my hair failing out--
would shout into the distance:
"I AM IN LOVE..."

*

I'm twenty-seven,
she's seventeen.
"Blind Cupid,
lame Cupid,
both blind and lame Cupid
said, Love this girl,"
I was going to write;
I couldn't say it
but still can!
But if
it rained,
if the lines I wrote got swamped,
if I have twenty-five cents left in my pocket,
what the hell...
Hey, spring is here spring is here spring
spring is here!
My blood is budding inside me!

20 and 21 April 1929

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

About My Poetry

I have no silver-saddled horse to ride,
no inheritance to live on,
neither riches no real-estate --
a pot of honey is all I own.
A pot of honey
red as fire!

My honey is my everything.
I guard
my riches and my real-estate
-- my honey pot, I mean --
from pests of every species,
Brother, just wait...
As long as I've got
honey in my pot,
bees will come to it
from Timbuktu...

Trans. by Mutlu Konuk and Randy Blasing (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Angina Pectoris

If half my heart is here, doctor,
the other half is in China
with the army flowing
toward the Yellow River.
And, every morning, doctor,
every morning at sunrise my heart
is shot in Greece.
And every night,c doctor,
when the prisoners are asleep and the infirmary is deserted,
my heart stops at a run-down old house
in Istanbul.
And then after ten years
all i have to offer my poor people
is this apple in my hand, doctor,
one read apple:
my heart.
And that, doctor, that is the reason
for this angina pectoris--
not nicotine, prison, or arteriosclerosis.
I look at the night through the bars,
and despite the weight on my chest
my heart still beats with the most distant stars.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Autobiography

I was born in 1902
I never once went back to my birthplace
I don't like to turn back
at three I served as a pasha's grandson in Aleppo
at nineteen as a student at Moscow Communist University
at forty-nine I was back in Moscow as the Tcheka Party's guest
and I've been a poet since I was fourteen
some people know all about plants some about fish
I know separation
some people know the names of the stars by heart
I recite absences
I've slept in prisons and in grand hotels
I've known hunger even a hunger strike and there's almost no food
I haven't tasted
at thirty they wanted to hang me
at forty-eight to give me the Peace Prize
which they did
at thirty-six I covered four square meters of concrete in half a year
at fifty-nine I flew from Prague to Havana in eighteen hours
I never saw Lenin I stood watch at his coffin in '24
in '61 the tomb I visit is his books
they tried to tear me away from my party
it didn't work
nor was I crushed under the falling idols
in '51 I sailed with a young friend into the teeth of death
in '52 I spent four months flat on my back with a broken heart
waiting to die
I was jealous of the women I loved
I didn't envy Charlie Chaplin one bit
I deceived my women
I never talked my friends' backs
I drank but not every day
I earned my bread money honestly what happiness
out of embarrassment for others I lied
I lied so as not to hurt someone else
but I also lied for no reason at all
I've ridden in trains planes and cars
most people don't get the chance
I went to opera
most people haven't even heard of the opera
and since '21 I haven't gone to the places most people visit
mosques churches temples synagogues sorcerers
but I've had my coffee grounds read
my writings are published in thirty or forty languages
in my Turkey in my Turkish they're banned
cancer hasn't caught up with me yet
and nothing says it will
I'll never be a prime minister or anything like that
and I wouldn't want such a life
nor did I go to war
or burrow in bomb shelters in the bottom of the night
and I never had to take to the road under diving planes

but I fell in love at almost sixty
in short comrades
even if today in Berlin I'm croaking of grief
I can say I've lived like a human being
and who knows
how much longer I'll live
what else will happen to me

This autobiography was written
in east Berlin on 11 September 1961

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Don Quixote

The knight of immortal youth
at the age of fifty found his mind in his heart
and on July morning went out to capture
the right, the beautiful, the just.

Facing him a world of silly and arrogant giants,
he on his sad but brave Rocinante.
I know what it means to be longing for something,
but if your heart weighs only a pound and sixteen ounces,
there's no sense, my Don, in fighting these senseless windmills.

But you are right, of course, Dulcinea is your woman,
the most beautiful in the world;
I'm sure you'll shout this fact
at the face of street-traders;
but they'll pull you down from your horse
and beat you up.
But you, the unbeatable knight of our curse,
will continue to glow behind the heavy iron visor
and Dulcinea will become even more beautiful.

Translated by Taner Baybars

Nazim Hikmet

Gioconda And Si-Ya-U

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 puffling, 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-Y...

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

Nazim Hikmet - 1929

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk 1993

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.

Nazim Hikmet

Hymn To Life

The hair falling on your forehead
suddenly lifted.
Suddenly something stirred on the ground.
The trees are whispering
in the dark.
Your bare arms will be cold.

Far off
where we can't see,
the moon must be rising.
It hasn't reached us yet,
slipping through the leaves
to light up your shoulder.
But I know
a wind comes up with the moon.
The trees are whispering.
Your bare arms will be cold.

From above,
from the branches lost in the dark,
something dropped at your feet.
You moved closer to me.
Under my hand your bare flesh is like the fuzzy skin of a fruit.
Neither a song of the heart nor "common sense"--
before the trees, birds, and insects,
my hand on my wife's flesh
is thinking.
Tonight my hand
can't read or write.
Neither loving nor unloving...
It's the tongue of a leopard at a spring,
a grape leaf,
a wolf's paw.
To move, breathe, eat, drink.
My hand is like a seed
splitting open underground.
Neither a song of the heart nor "common sense,"
neither loving nor unloving.
My hand thinking on my wife's flesh
is the hand of the first man.
Like a root that finds water underground,
it says to me:
"To eat, drink, cold, hot, struggle, smell, color--
not to live in order to die
but to die to live..."

And now
as red female hair blows across my face,
as something stirs on the ground,
as the trees whisper in the dark,
and as the moon rises far off
where we can't see,

my hand on my wife's flesh
before the trees, birds, and insects,
I want the right of life,
of the leopard at the spring, of the seed splitting open--
I want the right of the first man.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

It's This Way

I stand in the advancing light,
my hands hungry, the world beautiful.

My eyes can't get enough of the trees--
they're so hopeful, so green.

A sunny road runs through the mulberries,
I'm at the window of the prison infirmary.

I can't smell the medicines--
carnations must be blooming nearby.

It's this way:
being captured is beside the point,
the point is not to surrender.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Last Will And Testament

Comrades, if I don't live to see the day
-- I mean,if I die before freedom comes --
take me away
and bury me in a village cemetery in Anatolia.

The worker Osman whom Hassan Bey ordered shot
can lie on one side of me, and on the other side
the martyr Aysha, who gave birth in the rye
and died inside of forty days.

Tractors and songs can pass below the cemetery --
in the dawn light, new people, the smell of burnt gasoline,
fields held in common, water in canals,
no drought or fear of the police.

Of course, we won't hear those songs:
the dead lie stretched out underground
and rot like black branches,
deaf, dumb, and blind under the earth.

But, I sang those songs
before they were written,
I smelled the burnt gasoline
before the blueprints for the tractors were drawn.

As for my neighbors,
the worker Osman and the martyr Aysha,
they felt the great longing while alive,
maybe without even knowing it.

Comrades, if I die before that day, I mean
-- and it's looking more and more likely --
bury me in a village cemetery in Anatolia,
and if there's one handy,
a plane tree could stand at my head,
I wouldn't need a stone or anything.

Moscow, Barviha Hospital

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Letter To My Wife

11-11-1933
Bursa Prison
My one and only!
Your last letter says:
"My head is throbbing,
my heart is stunned!"
You say:
"If they hang you,
if I lose you,
I'll die!"
You'll live, my dear--
my memory will vanish like black smoke in the wind.
Of course you'll live, red-haired lady of my heart:
in the twentieth century
grief lasts
at most a year.

Death--
a body swinging from a rope.
My heart
can't accept such a death.
But
you can bet
if some poor gypsy's hairy black
spidery hand
slips a noose
around my neck,
they'll look in vain for fear
in Nazim's
blue eyes!
In the twilight of my last morning
I
will see my friends and you,
and I'll go
to my grave
regretting nothing but an unfinished song...
My wife!
Good-hearted,
golden,
eyes sweeter than honey--my bee!
Why did I write you
they want to hang me?
The trial has hardly begun,
and they don't just pluck a man's head
like a turnip.
Look, forget all this.
If you have any money,
buy me some flannel underwear:
my sciatica is acting up again.
And don't forget,
a prisoner's wife
must always think good thoughts.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Letters From A Man In Solitary

1
I carved your name on my watchband
with my fingernail.
Where I am, you know,
I don't have a pearl-handled jackknife
(they won't give me anything sharp)
or a plane tree with its head in the clouds.
Trees may grow in the yard,
but I'm not allowed
to see the sky overhead...
How many others are in this place?
I don't know.
I'm alone far from them,
they're all together far from me.
To talk anyone besides myself
is forbidden.
So I talk to myself.
But I find my conversation so boring,
my dear wife, that I sing songs.
And what do you know,
that awful, always off-key voice of mine
touches me so
that my heart breaks.
And just like the barefoot orphan
lost in the snow
in those old sad stories, my heart
-- with moist blue eyes
and a little red runny rose --
wants to snuggle up in your arms.
It doesn't make me blush
that right now
I'm this weak,
this selfish,
this human simply.
No doubt my state can be explained
physiologically, psychologically, etc.
Or maybe it's
this barred window,
this earthen jug,
these four walls,
which for months have kept me from hearing
another human voice.

It's five o'clock, my dear.
Outside,
with its dryness,
eerie whispers,
mud roof,
and lame, skinny horse
standing motionless in infinity
-- I mean, it's enough to drive the man inside crazy with grief --
outside, with all its machinery and all its art,

a plains night comes down red on treeless space.

Again today, night will fall in no time.
A light will circle the lame, skinny horse.
And the treeless space, in this hopeless landscape
stretched out before me like the body of a hard man,
will suddenly be filled with stars.
We'll reach the inevitable end once more,
which is to say the stage is set
again today for an elaborate nostalgia.
Me,
the man inside,
once more I'll exhibit my customary talent,
and singing an old-fashioned lament
in the reedy voice of my childhood,
once more, by God, it will crush my unhappy heart
to hear you inside my head,
so far
away, as if I were watching you
                in a smoky, broken mirror...

2
It's spring outside, my dear wife, spring.
Outside on the plain, suddenly the smell
of fresh earth, birds singing, etc.
It's spring, my dear wife,
the plain outside sparkles...
And inside the bed comes alive with bugs,
                the water jug no longer freezes,
and in the morning sun floods the concrete...
The sun--
every day till noon now
it comes and goes
from me, flashing off
                and on...
And as the day turns to afternoon, shadows climb the walls,
the glass of the barred window catches fire,
                and it's night outside,
                a cloudless spring night...
And inside this is spring's darkest hour.
In short, the demon called freedom,
with its glittering scales and fiery eyes,
possesses the man inside
                especially in spring...
I know this from experience, my dear wife,
                from experience...

3
Sunday today.
Today they took me out in the sun for the first time.
And I just stood there, struck for the first time in my life
                by how far away the sky is,

how blue
and how wide.
Then I respectfully sat down on the earth.
I leaned back against the wall.
For a moment no trap to fall into,
no struggle, no freedom, no wife.
Only earth, sun, and me...
I am happy.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Lion In An Iron Cage

Look at the lion in the iron cage,
look deep into his eyes:
like two naked steel daggers
they sparkle with anger.
But he never loses his dignity
although his anger
comes and goes
goes and comes.

You couldn't find a place for a collar
round his thick, furry mane.
Although the scars of a whip
still burn on his yellow back
his long legs
stretch and end
in the shape of two copper claws.
The hairs on his mane rise one by one
around his proud head.
His hatred
comes and goes
goes and comes ...

The shadow of my brother on the wall of the dungeon
moves
up and down
up and down.

Nazim Hikmet

On Living

I

Living is no laughing matter:
you must live with great seriousness
like a squirrel, for example--
I mean without looking for something beyond and above living,
I mean living must be your whole occupation.
Living is no laughing matter:
you must take it seriously,
so much so and to such a degree
that, for example, your hands tied behind your back,
your back to the wall,
or else in a laboratory
in your white coat and safety glasses,
you can die for people--
even for people whose faces you've never seen,
even though you know living
is the most real, the most beautiful thing.
I mean, you must take living so seriously
that even at seventy, for example, you'll plant olive trees--
and not for your children, either,
but because although you fear death you don't believe it,
because living, I mean, weighs heavier.

II

Let's say you're seriously ill, need surgery--
which is to say we might not get
from the white table.
Even though it's impossible not to feel sad
about going a little too soon,
we'll still laugh at the jokes being told,
we'll look out the window to see it's raining,
or still wait anxiously
for the latest newscast ...
Let's say we're at the front--
for something worth fighting for, say.
There, in the first offensive, on that very day,
we might fall on our face, dead.
We'll know this with a curious anger,
but we'll still worry ourselves to death
about the outcome of the war, which could last years.
Let's say we're in prison
and close to fifty,
and we have eighteen more years, say,
before the iron doors will open.
We'll still live with the outside,
with its people and animals, struggle and wind--
I mean with the outside beyond the walls.
I mean, however and wherever we are,
we must live as if we will never die.

III

This earth will grow cold,
a star among stars
and one of the smallest,
a gilded mote on blue velvet--
I mean this, our great earth.
This earth will grow cold one day,
not like a block of ice
or a dead cloud even
but like an empty walnut it will roll along
in pitch-black space ...
You must grieve for this right now
--you have to feel this sorrow now--
for the world must be loved this much
if you're going to say "I lived" ...

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Optimistic Man

as a child he never plucked the wings off flies
he didn't tie tin cans to cats' tails
or lock beetles in matchboxes
or stomp anthills
he grew up
and all those things were done to him
I was at his bedside when he died
he said read me a poem
about the sun and the sea
about nuclear reactors and satellites
about the greatness of humanity

Nazim Hikmet

Our Eyes

Our eyes
are limpid
drops of water.
In each drop exists
a tiny sign
of our genius
which has given life to cold iron.
Our eyes
are limpid
drops of water
merged absolutely in the Ocean
that you could hardly recognize
the drop in a block of ice
in a boiling pan.
The masterpiece of these eyes
the fulfillment of their genius
the living iron.
In these eyes
filled with limpid
pure tears
had failed to emerge
from the infinite Ocean
if the strength
had dispersed,
we could never have mated
the dynamo with the turbine,
never have moved
those steel mountains in water
easily
as if made of hollow wood.
The masterpiece of these eyes
the fulfillment of their genius
of our unified labour
the living iron.

Translated by Taner Baybars

Nazim Hikmet

Regarding Art

Sometimes, I, too, tell the ah's
of my heart one by one
like the blood-red beads
of a ruby rosary strung
on strands of golden hair!

But my
poetry's muse
takes to the air
on wings made of steel
like the I-beams
of my suspension bridges!

I don't pretend
the nightingale's lament
to the rose isn't easy on the ears...
But the language
that really speaks to me
are Beethoven sonatas played
on copper, iron, wood, bone, and catgut...

You can "have"
galloping off
in a cloud of dust!
Me, I wouldn't trade
for the purest-bred
Arabian steed
the sixth mph
of my iron horse
running on iron tracks!

Sometimes my eye is caught like a big dumb fly
by the masterly spider webs in the corners of my room.
But I really look up
to the seventy-seven-story, reinforced-concrete mountains
my blue-shirted builders create!

Were I to meet
the male beauty
"young Adonis, god of Byblos,"
on a bridge, I'd probably never notice;
but I can't help staring into my philosopher's glassy eyes
or my fireman's square face
red as a sweating sun!

Though I can smoke
third-class cigarettes filled
on my electric workbenches,
I can't roll tobacco - even the finest-
in paper by hand and smoke it!
I didn't --
"wouldn't" -- trade

my wife dressed in her leather cap and jacket
for Eve's nakedness!
Maybe I don't have a "poetic soul"?
What can I do
when I love my own children
more
than mother Nature's!

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Some Advice To Those Who Will Serve Time In Prison

If instead of being hanged by the neck
you're thrown inside
for not giving up hope
in the world, your country, your people,
if you do ten or fifteen years
apart from the time you have left,
you won't say,
"Better I had swung from the end of a rope
like a flag" --
You'll put your foot down and live.
It may not be a pleasure exactly,
but it's your solemn duty
to live one more day
to spite the enemy.
Part of you may live alone inside,
like a tone at the bottom of a well.
But the other part
must be so caught up
in the flurry of the world
that you shiver there inside
when outside, at forty days' distance, a leaf moves.
To wait for letters inside,
to sing sad songs,
or to lie awake all night staring at the ceiling
is sweet but dangerous.
Look at your face from shave to shave,
forget your age,
watch out for lice
and for spring nights,
and always remember
to eat every last piece of bread--
also, don't forget to laugh heartily.
And who knows,
the woman you love may stop loving you.
Don't say it's no big thing:
it's like the snapping of a green branch
to the man inside.
To think of roses and gardens inside is bad,
to think of seas and mountains is good.
Read and write without rest,
and I also advise weaving
and making mirrors.
I mean, it's not that you can't pass
ten or fifteen years inside
and more --
you can,
as long as the jewel
on the left side of your chest doesn't lose it's luster!

May 1949

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

The Strangest Creature On Earth

You're like a scorpion, my brother,
you live in cowardly darkness
like a scorpion.
You're like a sparrow, my brother,
always in a sparrow's flutter.
You're like a clam, my brother,
closed like a clam, content,
And you're frightening, my brother,
like the mouth of an extinct volcano.

Not one,
not five--
unfortunately, you number millions.
You're like a sheep, my brother:
when the cloaked drover raises his stick,
you quickly join the flock
and run, almost proudly, to the slaughterhouse.
I mean you're strangest creature on earth--
even stranger than the fish
that couldn't see the ocean for the water.
And the oppression in this world
is thanks to you.
And if we're hungry, tired, covered with blood,
and still being crushed like grapes for our wine,
the fault is yours--
I can hardly bring myself to say it,
but most of the fault, my dear brother, is yours.

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Things I Didn't Know I Loved

it's 1962 March 28th
I'm sitting by the window on the Prague-Berlin train
night is falling
I never knew I liked
night descending like a tired bird on a smoky wet plain
I don't like
comparing nightfall to a tired bird

I didn't know I loved the earth
can someone who hasn't worked the earth love it
I've never worked the earth
it must be my only Platonic love

and here I've loved rivers all this time
whether motionless like this they curl skirting the hills
European hills crowned with chateaus
or whether stretched out flat as far as the eye can see
I know you can't wash in the same river even once
I know the river will bring new lights you'll never see
I know we live slightly longer than a horse but not nearly as long as a crow
I know this has troubled people before
                and will trouble those after me
I know all this has been said a thousand times before
                and will be said after me

I didn't know I loved the sky
cloudy or clear
the blue vault Andrei studied on his back at Borodino
in prison I translated both volumes of War and Peace into Turkish
I hear voices
not from the blue vault but from the yard
the guards are beating someone again
I didn't know I loved trees
bare beeches near Moscow in Peredelkino
they come upon me in winter noble and modest
beeches are Russian the way poplars are Turkish
"the poplars of Izmir
losing their leaves. . .
they call me The Knife. . .
                lover like a young tree. . .
I blow stately mansions sky-high"
in the Ilgaz woods in 1920 I tied an embroidered linen handkerchief
                to a pine bough for luck

I never knew I loved roads
even the asphalt kind
Vera's behind the wheel we're driving from Moscow to the Crimea
                Koktebele
                formerly "Goktepé ili" in Turkish
the two of us inside a closed box
the world flows past on both sides distant and mute
I was never so close to anyone in my life

bandits stopped me on the red road between Bolu and Geredé
when I was eighteen
apart from my life I didn't have anything in the wagon they could take
and at eighteen our lives are what we value least
I've written this somewhere before
wading through a dark muddy street I'm going to the shadow play
Ramazan night
a paper lantern leading the way
maybe nothing like this ever happened
maybe I read it somewhere an eight-year-old boy
going to the shadow play
Ramazan night in Istanbul holding his grandfather's hand
his grandfather has on a fez and is wearing the fur coat
with a sable collar over his robe
and there's a lantern in the servant's hand
and I can't contain myself for joy
flowers come to mind for some reason
poppies cactuses jonquils
in the jonquil garden in Kadikoy Istanbul I kissed Marika
fresh almonds on her breath
I was seventeen
my heart on a swing touched the sky
I didn't know I loved flowers
friends sent me three red carnations in prison

I just remembered the stars
I love them too
whether I'm floored watching them from below
or whether I'm flying at their side

I have some questions for the cosmonauts
were the stars much bigger
did they look like huge jewels on black velvet
or apricots on orange
did you feel proud to get closer to the stars
I saw color photos of the cosmos in Ogonek magazine now don't
be upset comrades but nonfigurative shall we say or abstract
well some of them looked just like such paintings which is to
say they were terribly figurative and concrete
my heart was in my mouth looking at them
they are our endless desire to grasp things
seeing them I could even think of death and not feel at all sad
I never knew I loved the cosmos

snow flashes in front of my eyes
both heavy wet steady snow and the dry whirling kind
I didn't know I liked snow

I never knew I loved the sun
even when setting cherry-red as now
in Istanbul too it sometimes sets in postcard colors
but you aren't about to paint it that way

I didn't know I loved the sea
                except the Sea of Azov
or how much

I didn't know I loved clouds
whether I'm under or up above them
whether they look like giants or shaggy white beasts

moonlight the falsest the most languid the most petit-bourgeois
strikes me
I like it

I didn't know I liked rain
whether it falls like a fine net or splatters against the glass my
   heart leaves me tangled up in a net or trapped inside a drop
   and takes off for uncharted countries I didn't know I loved
   rain but why did I suddenly discover all these passions sitting
   by the window on the Prague-Berlin train
is it because I lit my sixth cigarette
one alone could kill me
is it because I'm half dead from thinking about someone back in Moscow
her hair straw-blond eyelashes blue

the train plunges on through the pitch-black night
I never knew I liked the night pitch-black
sparks fly from the engine
I didn't know I loved sparks
I didn't know I loved so many things and I had to wait until sixty
   to find it out sitting by the window on the Prague-Berlin train
   watching the world disappear as if on a journey of no return

19 April 1962
Moscow

Trans. by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk (1993)

Nazim Hikmet

Today Is Sunday

Today is Sunday.
For the first time they took me out into the sun today.
And for the first time in my life I was aghast
that the sky is so far away
and so blue
and so vast
I stood there without a motion.
Then I sat on the ground with respectful devotion
leaning against the white wall.
Who cares about the waves with which I yearn to roll
Or about strife or freedom or my wife right now.
The soil, the sun and me...
I feel joyful and how.

Translated by Talat Sait Halman

Nazim Hikmet