

KNOWING AND JUMPING

I was watching the cliff divers and thinking how crazy they were to do it, while feeling, at the same time, jealous of them for having the guts to do it. Several of Hawaii's more vocal volcanoes were burping pink ash into the sky. I kept wondering how the divers could crawl up the face of the cliff without cutting their bare feet. They obviously had to start with smaller, softer cliffs. And they obviously needed a flawless knowledge of the ocean's movements, which waves would come all the way in and which were only faking it. Then it occurred to me that knowing is one thing and jumping is another.

MONA AND THE MASSES

She was protected by so many layers of lacquer and glass that she didn't seem quite real when I finally reached the front of the line.

I'd been waiting all morning with a crowd that stretched halfway through the gallery. Guards everywhere. Real guards, rent-a-guards, avant guards.

And a cumbersome early version of the metal detector.

The Dutch couple in front of me kept talking babytalk to their baby. Babytalk sounds the same in any language, and it bothered me just as much coming from a Dutch couple. They were sharing an orange despite thousands of dollars in camera equipment.

I'd worked myself up to a state of impossible expectation, and that was my mistake. The colors were a dull dove-gray, and the famous enigmatic smile was neither tragic nor comic, more like someone who's just had a successful dental exam after expecting an ordeal.

I couldn't study her face as long as I wanted because the throng behind me kept pressing. One quick eyeballing, in that situation, was all that propriety allowed. But I'd seen it. I'd seen the Mona Lisa.

At least I'd never have to go through that again.