

# SURF MUSIC



R. S. DEESE

*Surf Music* by R.S. Deese

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## THE SCHOLAR OF ALEXANDRIA

He lived in a time when the lights  
Were going dim, and every trick of memory  
Drew closer to impossible. His nights  
Passed in the high hall with the broken  
Gates, honoring the sleep of dogs,  
And tracing every scratch on stolen  
Scrolls of fish paper. By day his back  
Was straight again. He was a sure  
Magician, his hat soaked in deep black  
Ink and crusted with a spew of stars  
That split the sun and startled listeners.  
He spoke a perfect alchemy of silent  
Truths and sonorous inventions. In a day,  
He'd pull more coins than he could count;  
Spills nine tithes on wine and treats  
Then sleep his drunk off like a cat,  
To climb back through those sooted gates  
And sift more secrets from the trash.

CHRIST, WHAT DO YOU WANT  
FROM ME?

He stands at my doorstep  
Holding a magazine  
With no advertisements  
And, of course, it's free.  
I can't help but be suspicious.

## MAGELLAN

What do I know about stars?  
Compared to something  
I know less about, Eternity,  
These are mere fleeting

Sparks cast from a mindless wheel.  
I thank God, whom I know  
Close to nothing of, that Ferdinand  
Magellan was no student of this

Mindless wheel, Eternity, but set his eyes  
Upon the fleeting sparks, and whistled  
Hymns across a dark Pacific  
In his sleeping faith

About their permanence.  
They led him in a shimmering  
Circle.  
A blind embrace.

NINE SONGS FOR THE  
MIRROR & THE MONKEY

## I. THE LION'S TOOTH

A subtle foot of curling root  
A stalk sewn equal to the breeze  
A wreath of Lion's Tooth to cut

The lucky thread of sight that sees  
A mirror of the Sun and Moon  
Among the grass as tall as trees

This humble flower is the one  
The blind of heart still call a weed  
One empire cracked and scores begun

By the flight of a single seed

## II. THE QUEEN

The dreamer she weaves in her womb  
Weaves her into the same dream  
Neither knowing who nor whom

Knowing neither be nor seem  
Only an illicit thought  
That lights creation with its gleam:

One white seed floating from without  
Three walls the king built high and strong  
To settle in a sweet dark spot

Where it does not belong



### III. THE KING

Not quite asleep, the old man muses:  
If only I were one with my horse  
—A centaur beats a king for most uses—

I'd leave my kingdom (with a force  
Of guards to guard it) and taste the air  
Outside these walls, then fill my purse

With fat red berries from up there  
Where steam breaks from the mountainside  
You cannot get such berries here

No thought would break my stride

## IV. THE DRAGON

A dragon sleeping in her nest  
Draws new iron from old rust  
Here she stays to drink her rest

Another eon if she must  
Do not wake her to enquire  
If her dreams are wise or just

One day, a king drunk with desire  
And torn from peace by anger's claw  
Will summon her into his fire

As she wraps him in her law

## V. THE MONKEY

A man who dreams he is a monkey  
Who dreams he is a fish, and a fish  
Who dreams she is a dreaming monkey

Who dreams a man but wakes a fish  
Are all the same while the fish is awake  
And the man still slumbers in his wish

What difference, really, does it make  
Who is a fish, a monkey, or a man?  
None but this: The world will break

To wake the sleeping man

## VI. THE ASSASSIN & THE SECRETARY

Every kingdom since the first  
That brought the wild to order  
From the finest to the worst

Folds lies into its charter  
And spills the blood of innocents  
As lime into its mortar

To bind great stones into a fence  
A king must guard the art of killing  
And gather jewels of high expense

As honors for the willing

## VII. TAHUALAMNE

You will never remember how to spell  
Her name, or the way her face  
Shines in the dusk, or even tell

If what lingers in your eye's a trace  
Of something real, or just a thing  
You hoped and hope for. The place

And time are sunk in the flood. Nothing  
Happened you can be sure. The one  
Who taught your bow at once to sing

That one is gone

## VIII. THE PRIEST

Important lies ought never go  
Out poor & naked. They must glisten  
In the half light with the glow

Of miracles. Every ear will listen  
To the music of a lie well told  
As every eye will fasten

On the bird whose wings are trimmed with gold.  
And simple folk must never sing (except to sing *along*)  
Their minds should never be as bold

As their bones are strong

## IX. THE GRATEFUL BABOONS

We wandered over scorching flats  
Through mazes thickly twined  
We fled from ravenous snakes and cats

But no shelter could we find  
Until an arrow from above  
Saved the smallest of our kind

It echoed in the shady grove  
Where on that day we came to roam  
Whistling a song of love

We prayed would lead us home  
Whistling a song of love  
We prayed would lead us home

## TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

It is that safe, familiar brand of speech  
That bores us right away, but fills the hollow  
Intervals through which it tends to blow  
Occasioning a “Yes, I know!” from persons each  
A stranger or acquaintance to the other  
As they wait in line, or anyplace  
Where we must navigate a funnel, face  
To face. Another space where talk of weather  
Whistles welcomingly to ward off silence  
Is through that steep and staggering crevasse  
That suddenly or glacially may pass  
Between the touch and tongues of ones once  
Intimate, who now share only civil chatter  
On the life of air, and fire, and water.



## KITE SEASON

Line as bright  
as powdered bleach

and nearly thin  
enough to cut

your fingers,  
taut between

the anchor  
of your body

and the currents  
in the sky.

The kites themselves  
like all the toys

the supermarket sells:  
eagerly disposable,

except the fragile  
skin of these

was not part  
of some luring lie,

but parcel  
of their buoyancy.

# THE BEACH, CA. 1969

*for Helen Deese*

The world was never safe.  
Each wave ahead was always  
Green and menacing  
And full of life.  
Unlike a person or an angry dog,

A wave won't speak its threats  
Beforehand. It just throws you down,  
Roars  
Its bright, diminished triumph  
And falls back into the sea.

As old as all the fingers  
On my hand, I could dig for sand crabs  
With a blue translucent plastic  
Cup. Or just look.  
The world was, and is, fantastic.

You knew that, and you know it.  
You held all my years that day  
And taught me  
How to leap above some broken waves  
And dive beneath the rise of others.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



R.S. Deese grew up in Claremont, California. He currently teaches History at Boston University and is the author of *We Are Amphibians: Julian and Aldous Huxley on the Future of Our Species* (University of California Press, 2014). His poetry has been published in *AGNI*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *MungBeing*, *The New Formalist*, *Poetry Motel*, and *The Quarterly*.

“Deese’s well-titled book is the work of an athletic, adaptable mind and an enterprising, distinctive listener.”

Robert Pinsky

“*Surf Music* is a cascade of observation and pleasure in the witnessing, offering us pleasure in these adept short-line free verse poems.”

David Ferry

“Wade into *Surf Music*. You’ll relish every incoming wave—from choppy epigrams that bite and tickle to dazzling breakers that slap and console. Like the surf, Deese’s poems roil with life and speak in a mesmerizing voice.”

Robert Wexelblatt, author of *Zublinka Among Women* and *Heiberg’s Twitch*



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