

SURF MUSIC



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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