

JASCHA KESSLER

Afrodite

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To a Reader

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Afrodite

Because it was high summer in the Mohawk Valley, and the tumult of July's thunderbolt-riddled days had passed, I meditated in peace in my study on the second floor of the Greek Revival house we lived in, built long ago in the early 19th century, and rebuilt again in the 1950s into two apartments. The downstairs place was inhabited meagerly by Gertrude and David and their boys, all off camping in some gulch at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, he tapping at two-billion-year-old strata for specimens of proof for his geology classes, she wrinkling deeper into what she'd become, angular, hollow chested, confused, the boys wallowing in the Red Colorado River clay, hardening into spasmodic sticks. It was peaceful now without their tromping and bellowing below. The paperweight on my desk was a big fossil scallop shell he'd brought back three years ago as a souvenir of the times when Arizona had lain beneath the foaming waves of archaic seas.

Now the ghosts of the two old spinsters, last of their line, to whom this house had once belonged, could ascend from the earthen-floored cellar and stump through their apartment, as they never cared to do when the Crawleys were home during the academic year, perhaps preferring to wander about fretting, or to squat beside the washers and dryers on the south side where gelid sunlight lit the muddy panes cut in

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the foundation wall, offering them a little cold comfort. We preferred it like that too: our little boy had seen the sisters in his room one evening and screamed from his crib, pointing over my shoulder as I soothed him, telling them to go away, go away.

. . . More than once I'd been aroused from sleep as they paced down the long hallway of our apartment, making faint shoecreaking sounds, not on the floorboards, and raising the hairs of my body like the spicules of a sea urchin. My wife never woke, though. Her name is the same as the younger of the sisters. When they passed through the rooms they'd occupied for nearly ninety years, even the squirrels in the vast attic above us ceased their midnight gambols and stopped trickling their acorns down inside the thick walls. In summer, though, they took some light and air in the Crawleys' place, and never disturbed us at all. It was a compromise: I had asked them, out loud, to stay out of the children's rooms, since it was no good for little ones to be scared by old ladies who aren't there. Keep to the Crawleys', I implored the empty air, you can share the space with their bodies, they won't even notice you, and stop troubling our wits! That was a reasonable request, I thought, since we paid rent to the College, not to them. And that was that.

All morning I'd been meditating in my study under the front gable, shaded by the canopy of great, ancient elms surrounding the house. It was quiet across the road: the fraternity houses were shut down for the summer. So was the home of Ulysses S. Grant's daughter, she having died last winter at eighty-eight. Robins hopping on the lawns, heads cocked for grubs, the jays fighting around as usual, the wren tending her tiny nest, flitting in and out of the eave like a blur in one's vision, cardinals, orioles, and doves visiting through

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the morning hours. My wife was out back under the apple tree in the garden with the children. Occasionally a pickup rattling by on the cobbled road, and a cow lowing far down in the valley. The cicadas of August tuning up for the afternoon's tedious static.

Meditating, if it can be termed that, sitting two hours looking out at lawns, the road, the old white houses behind their hedges on the other side. I'd come to realize that somehow, somewhere, I had lost my self. I had no idea where to look now. Yet it waited for me. Nearby, perhaps. Or far off. But not here. We'd parted one day without even a farewell, like former friends at a crossing, and gone our separate ways. And here I am, thirty. The road I'd taken had come abruptly to an end. No track led on from it now. Must I go back all that way to the fork? Then what? I might go on, always hoping to catch up, and knowing time lost is lost forever, like myself. So I sit here at this roadside in the Mohawk Valley. And wait, wondering how to proceed. It has been three years now. No one, it seems, can tell you. You are alone. Absolutely. My meditation this morning says simply: It's useless for an object to seek the subject which it is. Only the subject could seek, and the subject cannot find itself by seeking. Because what's sought is necessarily elsewhere than that which seeks it. The sought for is in a different moment of time, and in a different region of space, from those moments of time and space occupied by that which is seeking. If you could have it, you wouldn't be seeking it. Seeking it, yourself, is vain. It can be presented to you, though. How? and by whom? It depends.

I got up feeling the book-lined walls of my little study closing on me as if to blot me out, in the way I had just obliterated a gnat by closing my fist. Queenie, our golden retriever, got up with me. I went down the

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stairs and stepped out on the verandah. It was nearly noon. Beyond the shade of the elms, the sun floated swelling up to its height. I crossed the lawn and walked up College Road to the Grant house, slipped through the garden and went out back into a copse that shielded it from the winter gales, walked down the path that dipped through among those trees, and climbed again to the pastures running beside an old apple orchard that spread out along the crown of the long hill heading away from the College. This hill was a ridge stretching ten miles north and south, paralleled by similar rolling hills to the east and the west. I was walking southward through the old pastures. Here and there the mounded green grass was mined by groundhogs and rabbits and cropped by horses some faculty kept. In the springtime, cows from the adjacent dairy farms were let out here to forage after the long months of silage. There were always crops of common field mushrooms battenning on the manure, and giant puffballs white as bleached skulls. Last week's rain had brought them out, and I could see many "Yoricks," as we called them, lying here and there where they'd popped from the ground. I regretted having left the basket on the porch.

No shade out here, and no breeze now. To my right, the apple trees, full of small green fruit. On my left, a pair of horses standing side by side at the barbed wire, head to rump, switching the flies from one another's eyes. About a half-mile ahead, the trees I was making for: a tall, second-growth forest in which you could escape the sun to rest beneath the shadowing alders and beeches, breathing in the tang of rotted log and leaf-mold and ferns, where trillium sprouted in lavender and white choruses. In this wood, there were no directions: the sun scatters into a diffuse greeny light

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filtering through the thick layer of branches, and only the faintly traced track winds through to come out nowhere. . . down a narrow ravine where a brook flows clotted with green slime. Wild grape covers that deep ditch and its slopes, and not much else but sumac and poison oak. Swarms of midges and mosquitoes hang over it. In this wood it is always silent, except for the rasping of a crow floating between the tall, thin tree boles. Sometimes a pair of phoebes calls sweetly in the depths, echoing. But not disturbing the heavy stillness. In there, misery is assuaged for an hour. And, emerging afterward by the same path you have taken in, you are even glad to be back in the empty light once more on the meadows and pasture land, and heading somewhere again, home perhaps, with a few huckleberries and blackberries garnered along the way and staining your hands blue. A palliative, if no remedy.

As I looked along the track and the wall of that wood ahead, I felt the midday light glancing about at violent angles, and not just pouring down over the fields. I blinked at the strange, invisible shafts flickering around me. The ground seemed suddenly to be thrumming, a sound louder than the usual buzz and hum of the bees hovering over the clover and the daisies, milkweed and Queen Anne's Lace. A low susurration, and behind it a muffled low roaring that seemed to rise out of the grass on which I walked. The ground of the faint track seemed springy, elastic, a thick carpet spread upon a lake. As though there were no flinty granite beneath but a dark, and a warm, sea, and I was treading on matted weed. Dizzied, I kept on going. There is solid world here, I said to myself, plain, simple, poor, meagerly alive, but solid.

The yelping of the bitch stopped me. She was poised up ahead, alert, her tail stiff and high. She

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scented something. Then she began coursing back and forth, her nose to the track. I saw what her nose was thrilled by: just before the gate into the forest, right in the middle of the way, a great, ten-point buck faced us, his antlers lifted high. The bitch hadn't seen him. She kept her nose to the ground she was eagerly traversing. The buck watched her coming. He also gazed at me where I stood, his ears flicking. No one had ever brought down such grand game in these parts, where there's not enough forage or cover for the likes of that stranger. I watched Queenie as she began running towards him; he stood his ground watching me. Then she lifted her muzzle and saw him too. With a crazy, strangled bark, she rushed him. Casually, the stag turned, his head twisted back to keep me in his view, and snapped his white rump, bounding away into the dark wood, the retriever in wild pursuit. I called out to her; it was useless. I could hear her baying fade into the echoing forest, fainting away as the buck led her off in chase. That fool might never find her way back. Nothing to be done now.

I kept on anyway. As I neared the spot, I saw that the dried grasses were crushed near the track. The stag had bedded down here. I stopped to pick up a clump of coarse red hairs snagged on a twist of briar beside his couch. The sunlight flooded down terribly then, as if a boiling cauldron had been tipped out overhead from the zenith. The roaring low rolling hum out of the earth grew until it sounded like surf thundering in. What was this? I swayed. I felt myself being forced down, the ground coming up for me. I yielded: I dropped to my knees for the first time in my life. Something was sweeping at me. The air split apart before its progress. What I felt was the pressure of its coming. I couldn't look up from the earth. I stared at the stag's lair, the

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tangled grasses and the tiny purple clover and daisies enmeshed among the broken stalks. The space about me was thickening with light and heat. It drummed. Far off, I heard the last belling of that maddened bitch, down and over the little valley to the west it seemed, miles off now.

And I knew what it was.

Afrodite! I shouted that name. At the same instant I was flung on my face. I did not dare to look up. Calmly I lay there, thinking. This is extraordinary: you have not sought this: neither have you deserved this: yet it has come: there is no remorse, no panic: she is here: there is only joy: brilliant joy: it will not stay: be thankful. Laughing and mumbling tears, full of a gratitude I had not known was in me to offer, I gave thanks. I called out to this bombarding passage of light and immense heat—this noise and power erupting from the earth and pouring like a wind over me, and passing steadily by like a great vessel—Afrodite! Io, Afrodite!

When I returned some hours later, my wife sat on the verandah, rocking the child in her lap. A glass of sherry was in her hand, the bottle at her feet. She smiled at me, reaching up to tug a straw from my hair.

Queenie came home the next day, matted with mud, her tawny coat a mass of burrs, her pads swollen and bleeding, her chest caved in, broken-winded. She drank her fill and stretched out to sleep for a whole day and night.

To a Reader

—*Words, words, words.*

HAMLET

Some time in 1938 when I was nine years old I took an illustrated edition of Joseph Conrad's short fiction from my parents' bookshelf. I recall reading with fascinated interest a preface to one of the novellas in it. In it Conrad wrote that his aim was to render the world of his characters such that a reader might imagine the physical reality evoked by printed words.

In my own lifetime, I have seen most of the intellectual and moral vestiges of Western society and civilization confounded. During the decades since 1918, the Technology that produces and supports today's material life in what we call the First, Second, and even Third Worlds has transformed the ways in which we live. Almost everywhere our waking consciousness is perfused by The Media. And The Media offers to our sight and hearing virtual experience. Most might recognize our confused and confusing experience whether waking or sleeping as one "distracted from distraction by distraction" [T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," 1936]. In his scabrous paranoiac satire, *Naked Lunch* (1959), William S. Burroughs called The Media "Senders." The Media sent; we received, unable to reciprocate.

At this hour when my publisher asks me to preface a new edition of *Siren Songs & Classical Illusions*, we are subject to a "virtual reality," instant communi-

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cation by and from both senders and receivers via the Internet. One phenomenon is the reduction of words to formulaic expression, sentence into phrase, phrase often abbreviated. One might expect The Seven Last words of Jesus rendered today not as *Eli, Eli* but OMG! OMG! Minimal hiccups, a caption purporting to represent the day and night of the Crucifixion. It might even be supposed that's manageable for conscious thought leveled to the lowest common denomination.

Our Senders urge universal "sharing." The question is, *Who shares what with whom?* Present snapshots, present sounds, present sights moment by moment, news intrinsically ephemeral presented as captions personal or public; in short what Socrates deplored—mere opinion captured instantly as recorded instants instantly transmitted and/or deleted" (its o's and i's sequestered in a virtual "Cloud," to be preserved in arrays of huge servers in cooled warehouses). To post an answer to that question on a billboard would be to paint a blank gray on a muddled canvas.

Notwithstanding, our species has from the onset of language itself saved and transmitted its neurally-encoded memories as narrations of past happening. Events originally handed down by oral recital as legend returning remembered passages as chronicle. Chronicles retell history and history is narration often assumed non-fictive. In any case, History is redacted passing through generations, reduced often to the mythical. Myth is problematical, its matter commonly set into tale and fable. These are by their nature transmogrified, complex metaphors subsuming event and action. Metaphors permeate our common speech, usually unrecognized although they contain the kernel of situations, persons, events, or actions, much as our cells contain at their core helixes of billions of mole-

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cules, like ribbons of relatively stable proteins, interpreted by means of today's astounding technology as information.

Mythologem, a more or less modern term for myth, was coined in the latter 19th century. Defined as mythical history, it contains and communicates a fundamental theme or motif. I came upon the word in Nietzsche, whose early studies were in Classics. It remained latent in my vague imaginings until I began in the 1970s to write short pieces my wife called "one-minute stories." She was thinking of people today as too busy, too preoccupied, nervous, and impatient to "curl up," as used to be said, with a novel. In composing them I was concerned with what could be the contemporary content and form of the mythologem scholars once indexed as Classical shorthand narration. That needs some elaboration.

The ancients wrote and children still read fables. Customarily the fable is an anecdote told to point a moral. The moral is usually set at its end: an apothegm, a saying, adage, witticism, a pithy or sententious maxim like *Look before you leap*, or *Don't count your chickens before they hatch*, or *A bird in hand's worth two in the bush*. Maxims are universal. In the West, motifs and themes derive from the Classic world and the Bible, one assortment usually credited to Æsop, another to Proverbs. Most of the pieces in this book carry titles that signal and/or suggest familiar names, personages, or events alluding to them. To aid a reader I offer a list of "Attributions," whimsical or sardonic comments about names resident in an-

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cient pantheons of gods or persons. Attributions, not explanations, since the stories are neither retellings nor fantasies in the vein of inventions like Tolkien's allegory of a primitive ring of universal power lost in a time that never was, or Rowling's adventures concerning a prep school lad named Potter and his friends.

A reader of *Siren Songs & Classical Illusions* might ask why the tales are told in the first person. My answer is, the "I" we think of as the Self is an elusive, perhaps altogether illusive, creature emanating from what's called Mind. We hear it said, One speaks his or her "mind." Each "I" speaks in these, relating a situation or event, pathetic or tragic or comic. It is suggested by some mythologem the title announces. I have not relied on a reader's knowledge of motifs and legends to discover, support, or explain the "meaning" of what is told. However, the underlying subtext or motif offers this clue: that what happens to a person seems to have happened before; that a person may be characterized by what was done long before, and not only once but at other times and places. A title, motif or theme is a template or paradigm for this or that situation and action. Is there anything new beneath the sun? Not that we see ourselves as instances of a theme, as acting out a tale comic, pathetic, or tragic. Consequently we live in and breathe an atmosphere of the Absurd because although our unique existence in the history of the Universe is novel it can appear somehow familiar. Who wouldn't resent being seen merely as a shadow of some ancient moment; as incarnate; worse,

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as its caricature. I think we're mistaken in our stubborn belief that one's "identity" is the same as one's Self—that may be the most common fatality, the flaw in Humanity's makeup.

Furthermore, I think what a "Self" may seem to be is unknown, even if it is recognized as an "I, myself" belonging uniquely to one from birth. Therein lies my conundrum—or perhaps not. That most do not know themselves is a commonplace Socrates took for granted. In pursuit of the Apollonian dictum, "Know Thyself," he spent his life inquiring into his experience and his world to learn who and what he was; it is the foundation of his ethics and philosophical adventure. If ever we could know the Self we suppose we are, priests and doctors, lawgivers and philosophers would be out of business. Most need to be told from the first year who and what we are. Most never are told, and if told question, reject, or deny whatever others may see, think or say. With good reason, since others cannot enter into our conscious, waking experience of our own self as Self. Most moreover haven't the power to recognize themselves in the mirror, let alone see there what life had made of them, or they of life. As for the mirror itself, there is the mythologem of Narcissus who naively finding his reflection in a forest pool was so entranced that he plunged in to seize that person, himself—and perished. It cost him his life. No trivial myth that!

A storyteller telling stories is able to inform a listener of the character of selves as epitomized by persons imagined once upon a time in a place that or may not have been. That is one quality of the

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mythologem. Mine are set in our world, or at least the world I lived in for most of the 20th century; and in most of them the narrator lived or might have lived when and where I found them in a newspaper perhaps, or perhaps heard about, sometimes from a friend, sometimes from a stranger. I wrote them because they were examples of recurrent or eternal motifs, as Nietzsche put it. In "Kassandra," it is for a reader to recall that episode from The Iliad, that fate and doom of which my narrator has not the least inkling (though what finally occurs in this telling happened). There's irony and humor in that. In another, I was taken aback when a well-known poet, after dinner and whiskey pointed at my book where it lay on a lamp table and remarked sadly that what took place in one of its stories had actually happened concerning his wife. And a grim experience it proved.

More generally, regarding life's vicissitudes in hope to convey a sense of how it is with us, a story from the past goes unrecognized. Leslie Farber, a psychoanalyst practicing in Washington, D.C. decades ago, once wrote that patients fell ill, lost for having never found, constructed, or imagined a narrative threading their lives through a past, present, let alone possible future. They had no story to "objectify," as it were, themselves to themselves. It cost them dearly.. They had it seems no Self...whatever the Self may be. In any case, the history of civilization, perhaps from Neanderthal times, is the search for it, in dreams, magic, ritual, or resort to those who profess to know what it is and where to look for it. Freud's final estimate was

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that Homo sapiens was born deficient and/or defective; in another word, neurotic, in need of some "prosthesis." Speech is one such, Technology, the Art of Fire, another. Both have from the first ameliorated our native, natural condition.

Regarding the word, Self, it is interesting to turn to the inventor of the essay as we know it, Michel de Montaigne. He retired from an active life during a busy world of wars in 16th century Europe, and took to writing about subjects that interested him, the how and why of us, we actors on the stage of life as Shakespeare later put it. He iterates that his purpose was solely to examine his own character, which he finds nowhere, not in this, that or any one trait, mind and emotions being perpetually in flux, labile, unpredictable. He holds definite views of society, its institutions, its failures and triumphs, and the personages and events from ancient times to his own day he cites on every page. He holds to a single position that is a triad: he takes the world as it is, the world as it can be known, and nothing else more, not even the Supernatural that has forever haunted our thought—the world is what is, the material, natural and living world in a universe in which the Earth circles the sun. He speaks of what I name the Self, but uses the word "Soul." Not any supposed ghostly survivor of our corporeal being, but simply as what we breathing are. It is a "she," this soul. It is what essentially we are, mind, dreams, thoughts, habits, all of which we may not know fully, let alone understand or control. Those two, world and Soul, are Lucretius' Nature; here in

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each one of us has our being from birth to death. Moreover, whatever we think, plan, intend, do, or hope for is under the aegis and sway of a third, "Fortune." Fortune was an ancient, unknowable, unmanageable and indifferent goddess who rules our vicissitudes, happenstances, coincidences, our states of mind and being. We might call her Chance. Fortune is not to be importuned, not to be worshiped, cannot be influenced by any person or any and whatever gods may be. How we fare under Fortune's command can hint at some story that sheds for a brief moment some insubstantial and flickering light on our individual lives. Hamlet could well have read Montaigne; his soliloquies are forthright demonstrations of a similar attempt to know himself, to consider whatever he supposes guides and directs his action in his times, which are "out of joint." *Lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be. Or, There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will.* Montaigne's Fortune is that divinity.

Nonetheless, I trust a reader may find the title of this collection describes the serious, skeptical, perhaps mocking tales of what the "I," in the first person, undergoes, lives, and tells us. Surmising the impossibility of "knowing" another who is always and only what the Existentialists called The Other, let alone of knowing oneself truly, led me to "embody" mythic motifs. I thought their stories worth recalling because it may be most of us follow a track on a path others before us left across the desert sands of Time.

—Jascha Kessler, May 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JASCHA KESSLER is an Emeritus Professor of English at UCLA, where he taught from 1961 until his retirement. A former arts commissioner for Santa Monica, a radio book critic, and an anthologist, Professor Kessler is particularly well-known for short satirical fictions, as well as his many translations of poetry and prose from Eastern European languages. In addition, several volumes of short fictions, four volumes of poetry have been published. He is the recipient of two Senior Fulbright fellowships, a fellowship from the California Arts Council, and various awards for his translations.

Fiction

Siren Songs & Classical Illusions: 50 Modern Fables, <https://tinyurl.com/suom5e5>

Classical Illusions: Twenty-eight Stories, <https://tinyurl.com/wbuy5ql>

An Egyptian Bondage and Other Stories

Death Comes for the Behaviorist: Four Long Stoires

Transmigrations: Eighteen Stoires

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Whatever Love Declares

After the Armies Have Passed

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Anthology

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Translations

The Magician's Garden, 24 Stories by Geza Csath (from Hungarian; also published as *Opium: 24 Stoires* by Geza Csath)

Bride of Acacias: The Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad (from Persian)

Under Gemini: Selected Poems of Miklos Radnoti (from Hungarian)

Medusa: Selected Poetry of Nikolai Kantchev (from Bulgarian)

The Face of Creation: Contemporary Hungarian Poetry: 23 Poets Catullan Games by Sandor Rakos (from Hungarian), awarded the Translation Award from the National Translation Center
King Oedipus (in Sophocles 2. U. of PA Press)

Traveling Light: Selected Poems of Kirsti Simonsuuri (from Finnish)

Tataga's Children: Fairytales by Grozdana Olujic (from Serbian)

Our Bearings at Sea by Otto Orban (from Hungarian)

Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry, Selected Poems of Qurratu 'Ayn (from Persian)

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