

ROBERT
DESSAIX



CORFU

ROBERT
DESSAIX

CORFU

A NOVEL

b brio
BOOKS

ALTHOUGH THIS NOVEL WAS INSPIRED BY THE LIFE
OF THE AUSTRALIAN WRITER AND ACTOR KESTER
BERWICK, THE NARRATOR IS AS FICTIONAL AS THE
CHARACTERS HE ENCOUNTERS.

— KESTER BERWICK —

Born Frank Perkins in Adelaide, South Australia, 1903
Founded the Ab-Intra Theatre Company,
Adelaide, 1930
Studied at Dartington Hall, Devon, England, with
Michael Chekhov, 1936–7
War years spent teaching in Australia
Teaching in London, 1955–60
Settled in Methymna (Molyvos), Lesbos, 1960
Moved to Gastouri, Corfu, 1969
Published the novel *Head of Orpheus Singing* (Angus &
Robertson, London), 1973
Died Corfu, 1992

1.

It was just on two. The train had arrived, thank God. I'd had no warning dream about this moment, that was the extraordinary thing. There'd been none of those ragged, foggy patches lying low in the mind. On the contrary, I'd pictured it a thousand times in brightly coloured detail, each time with a small bolt of pure excitement. Even now there was no sign that anything had changed, none at all.

But no sooner had the train shuddered to a halt at Roma Termini, and his chunky black boot touched the platform, than I knew I'd made an appalling mistake. Some distance away behind a clutch of Polish nuns, I reeled. The second black boot touched the platform and a kind of anguish engulfed me, shot through with screeching wheels and muffled cries of joy.

There was William, entirely William, casually dapper in that unfussy way of his, demurely cocky as he always was, peering about in the yellow light, his suitcase at his feet, waiting to be rescued.

I caught his eye, smiled, and walked quickly across the platform—to hug him and to tell him the first lies.

2.

If Kester had a favourite time of the year on Corfu, it was the week before Easter. It didn't seem to matter when Easter fell, early or late, or whether it was damp and chilly or shockingly sunny all of a sudden, something inside Kester always woke up that week, exactly like the tortoises struggling up from under the ground all over the hillside behind his house. A bit gnarled, a bit stiff in the joints and liable to lurch off in odd directions, but at the same time, in a sedate sort of way, delirious.

This Easter awakening was one of the first things I ever learnt about Kester Berwick. Inconsequential, you might say, but at that moment, when I was as fragile as a moth's wing, picturing the lurching tortoises buoyed me up.

The voice over the telephone that first morning in Corfu was not exactly faint, yet by no means robust. Certainly not youthful, but hardly quavering, either. It was sprightly.

'Easter's one thing I can't abide,' it said firmly. 'The crowds, the priests, all that jiggery-pokery—not to mention the pot-throwing—I try not to leave the house.' No accent you could put a name to, just a carefulness with the vowels.

‘But the week before Easter is always a miracle—I have to *wade* through the wildflowers, you know, when I walk down the hill, I almost float up into the air on the scent.’

It was an odd thing for a man to say to a complete stranger, but I was actually looking at a vase of asphodels as I listened, so felt instantly drawn in. And then he mentioned the tortoises, ‘doddering about’ in the sunshine behind his house.

It was Palm Sunday, I remember, and I’d rung him from the Hotel Cavalieri in town where I’d come to rest after fleeing Rome (and William) several days before. I felt more like someone’s shadow than a man. It actually startled me whenever someone spoke to me—a waitress, a child on the staircase, anyone—had they really noticed I was there? A few days earlier on the deck of the ferry, squinting into the sheets of spring rain and seeing Corfu Town, glowing like a painting, all umbers and pinks in a patch of sun to the south, I’d thought instantly: I’ll stay here, I’ll cast anchor here and ride out whatever comes until I’m myself again. (An inane thought, really—who did I imagine I was, if not myself?)

A day or two later, while I was leafing through the gossipy local newspaper with its advertisements for bouzouki lessons and coffee mornings at the Anglican church (‘all denominations welcome’), Kester’s tiny notice had caught my eye. *House in Gastouri for rent for 2 mths*, it said. *Occupant travelling. Reasonable rent*. Not, on the face of it, very revealing. Not even a telephone number to call. But I liked *Occupant travelling*, and I liked the idea of *Gastouri*, too, wherever it was. It rang a little bell. So I left a message at the newspaper for the travelling occupant to ring me at the hotel. Which he did, on Palm Sunday, just as the bells of St Spiridon died away,

leaving everyone slightly stunned, as if abruptly purged of something.

It was a strange, disembodied sort of conversation we had that morning. Who Kester Berwick might be, what sort of house it was, where he was going—I learnt nothing about any of that. He just asked if I was newly arrived, made a few remarks about Easter and then said: ‘Actually, I’m just about to set off—I’ve left it all rather late, I suppose—but you could come up and look over the place this afternoon, if you’d like to. I’ll have gone, but Agape will show you around.’

And so after lunch I took a taxi up to Gastouri in the sweet-smelling hills behind the town with the curious feeling that I was the last piece this Mr Berwick had needed for some jigsaw puzzle he’d been working on. Missing until the last moment under a chair, perhaps, but I’d turned up eventually and been slotted into place. I’m not sure why I felt that—it was nothing he actually said.

3.

Stuck awkwardly amongst straggly olive-trees on the high side of the road winding up from the village to the crest above the sea, the house had not a skerrick of charm. To tell the truth, it almost looked like a child's drawing of a house: a square, white block, with two shuttered windows upstairs and a door and one window downstairs. Some scruffy greenery drooped from the window-boxes. No sign of life. It was not at all what I'd had in mind. I stood and stared up at it glumly.

The silence at that time of the afternoon was so deep it was almost like a dinning in the ears. The odd whine of a motor-scooter somewhere down in the village only made the quiet more intense.

Spiralling down inside, I nevertheless climbed up the damp stone steps to the narrow terrace outside the front door and stood for a while taking in the afternoon. Purple honesty sprinkled the cobbles. Of course, at that time everything still reached my eyes through a William-coloured haze. A thousand times a day I saw those chunky black boots of his touch the platform at Roma Termini and felt my soul turn to lead.

Over and over again I heard myself say 'I'm so happy to see you' as my lips brushed the cheekbones I'd once—indeed, just minutes before—thought more beautiful than beaten gold. Well, certainly striking.

Even now the gaudy mauve judas-trees across the road amongst the cypresses swam towards me through memories of what had happened when we left the station—in the taxi, in the cramped, yellow hotel room with its unforgiveably purple bedspread filling half the room.

But all of a sudden around the corner came Agape. Who else could it have been? No ancient Greek crone, Agape. Grey-haired, a trifle hunched, a little pear-shaped, but nimble and sharply alive, possibly to things I couldn't see.

'*Hérete,*' she said with a smile, inspecting me in careful detail and drawing a large key dramatically out of her cardigan pocket. Chatting amiably to me in Greek, she rattled the key in the lock, pushed open the weathered wooden door and stood aside to let me go in, nodding encouragingly.

At first it gave me a prickly, uncomfortable feeling, to be honest, prowling through someone else's house like that. But Agape seemed perfectly at home, opening doors, peering into cupboards and flinging the shutters wide. She was wearing a deep-blue dress, so can't have been a widow. Who was she exactly? A neighbour? Surely not Kester Berwick's mother-in-law? She made the odd comment in Greek, laughing softly once or twice and not minding at all, it seemed, that none of her comments would be understood.

Although sparsely furnished, the house felt curiously far from empty. The downstairs kitchen felt talked in, the wobbly table sat around, and the cool silence in the two upstairs rooms strangely inhabited. It was a comfortable, inti-

mate sort of silence, the sort of silence you can sit back and let creep over you at the end of a long evening with a friend. Was it the books crammed into the home-made bookshelves that gave me that feeling? E.M. Forster, *Peer Gynt*, Annie Besant, Clive James, *The Odyssey* and several old *Time* magazines—rather a queer assortment, actually. Was it the framed photographs dotted about the house? The amateur canvases high on the walls? The faint smell of dog? Whether the life lived in these rooms was small or big, though, was hard to tell—there just weren't enough clues.

From the upstairs window the view was actually more Italian than Greek: cypresses spearing the sky as far as the eye could see, pink and cream houses curving away to the left down the slope towards the jumbled village, while up on the brow of the hill that hid us from the sea, partly concealed by the huge holm-oaks in the gully between us, I could just make out a large, white palace of some kind.

Still, turning back from the window to meet Agape's eye, I wasn't sure I wanted to live in a stranger's house, eating off his plates, squeezing my clothes into his wardrobe, sleeping between his sheets.

But I took it, of course. It was less a decision than a matter of hearing myself saying, 'Ne, yes, I'll take it.' Agape nodded peaceably and smiled. She'd never doubted it, apparently. She led me outside and banged the door shut.

'Thank you,' I said. '*Efharistó.*'

'*Bitte schön,*' she said, rather unaccountably at the time.

Walking up to the bus-stop outside the white palace, I had the strong, sudden feeling that the silence of Gastouri was almost certainly deceptive.

4.

I should never have been in Greece at all, that's the point. I was actually on my way home. Greece, as we know, is full of foreigners who were once on their way home from somewhere and got stranded there. They wash up on the beach while floating idly past, disappointed by something or other—the lack of a new beginning, perhaps, wherever they've just been. They get snared amongst the driftwood and then can't move on. Swapping coffee-stained novels from home and complaining about the sloppiness of everything, they stay on, growing sourer, even about home. I wondered as I looked about me on my first morning in Mr Berwick's house if he was one of those castaways.

As I saw it at the time, *I* hadn't washed up anywhere. I wasn't entangled in any driftwood. I was just sorting myself out in picturesque surroundings. I'd hardly got in the door before I was unpacking briskly and wiping down benches.

So this was it. With the last shirt hung in the cupboard and my toothbrush stuck in a jar, the longed-for moment had now arrived: I'd finally cast anchor. Life was a smooth, wax tablet again, waiting to be written on. It was deeply

unsettling.

I stared at the greasy sink for a moment and went upstairs.

—

Dear William, I wrote (first things first), seated at Kester's rickety table, gazing out of the window towards the palace (if that's what it was). On the bookcase to my right stood a framed photograph, unmistakably of Krishnamurti, youthful, lost-looking, achingly handsome, I'd never had much time for Krishnamurti and so laid the photograph face-down on its shelf. I considered the *Dear* for a moment, but, really, in English one has so few options.

This is a terribly difficult letter to write, but write it I must. At the very least I owe you an explanation.

When you suggested we meet up in Italy and then set out for home together, I agreed without a moment's hesitation. And I meant it. I didn't say 'yes' lightly.

No, I didn't. I'd first seen William some eighteen months before the Roman fiasco, on a nose-pinchingly cold November evening in an Indian take-away in North London. A few of us had popped up to the Shalimar on the Holloway Road to pick up some curries and chapatis—it was our first read-through of *The Cherry Orchard*, and all of a sudden between Acts II and III we'd felt tired and overexcited, needing the distraction of food. William, who was designing, hadn't been there earlier. He must have arrived at Clive's house just after we'd set off and been sent on to join us at the Shalimar. In he came, breezy but with a hint of shyness, in a floppy knitted top and black jeans, to join the gang. How flattering

floppiness is to the slim. Late twenties, cropped black hair, a sculpted look—but by a rough hand. I didn't realize I'd particularly noticed him—after all, everyone that first evening was new and intriguing (except Leila, whom I'd known for years—she was playing Ranyevskaya, a part she scarcely had to act)—until I saw Leila huddled with him by the door, warmly cocooned with him, ignoring the rest of us.

Astonishingly, a tingle of *jealousy* started up at the back of my throat. I watched Leila's slender fingers straying across this young man's shoulder-blades, her fingernails flashing mauve in the neon light. Taken by surprise, I put the whole thing down at first to the overpowering smell of curry and Leila's cigarillo.

As we walked back to Clive's terrace, William stayed glued to Leila, I remember, with Gareth, who was Welsh and eager to be noticed, nudging at them like a silly puppy despite his years. At this early stage, of course, we were all still sniffing each other out, so it wasn't quite clear who Gareth hoped to be noticed by. Anyone, probably. He was playing Leila's nincompoop of a brother, Gayev.

That first night we couldn't get the *comedy* of *The Cherry Orchard* to shine through at all. Cooped up in Clive's living-room, with its distressing wallpaper and too few chairs, we found the play unsettling, tragic, heart-breaking, pathetic, trivial, even silly, but not comic. Yet Chekhov had called his play 'funny, very funny', and at the top of page one in black and white it said quite unambiguously:

THE CHERRY ORCHARD

A comedy in four acts

This would eat away at us for days. To start with Leila tried camping it up, which was disastrous, while Gareth simply opted for playing the ninny, which was embarrassing. We couldn't strike the right note. Clive, who'd had a smash hit with *The Seagull* the previous summer, just kept saying: 'Look, it's all *there*, the comedy is all *there* in the lines, there's no need to work at it. This is a *soufflé*, not a suet pudding. Just find the *truth* of it.' I hate it when directors mention truth.

But I ask you: a blowsy, hare-brained aristocrat, Ranyevskaya, comes home to her estate in some God-forsaken corner of Russia from Paris, penniless, ruined, emotionally ragged; she cries a lot, remembers things, blubs some more, throws a party and loses her estate, along with her precious cherry orchard, to a hard-headed businessman who starts chopping the trees down before she even has time to catch the train back to Paris. Is this funny? While she mooches about sniffing into sodden handkerchiefs, her children and various other hangers-on walk in and out droning on about money, love, radiant futures, pickled cucumbers and all sorts of other Russian nonsense. Is this comic? Ludicrous, perhaps, or even pathetic, but hardly comic.

Yet Clive did have a point. It's maddening to have to admit it, but there *was* something in Chekhov's straggly, often preposterous lines which was disarmingly 'true'—and not only about turn-of-the-century Russia, either, but of everyone in that North London flat. And when we hit on it, it made us want to laugh.

—

For the rest of that evening William, as designer, just sat on

the floor by the window in the shadows, half-lit by the tasseled standard lamp, listening. I knew he was there, I was aware of the rough-cut hair and watching eyes, but didn't know if *I* was being watched, as it were, or if his eyes were on Chekhov.

When we started to break up, something quite unexpected happened. Only two of us were left to walk up the road to the Underground—William and me. The others had all quickly melted into the fog or jumped into their cars and driven off. Even Leila, who just called out 'Bye, darlings!' as she jumped into her car and chugged off. Offering a lift on the first night could lead to awkwardnesses later on. I admit I felt a little prickle of pleasure.

'Feel like a coffee?' he said suddenly, as we ambled up the hill.

'Why not?' I said, although I didn't want a coffee at all. The tingle at the back of my throat again. It was disconcerting, completely unforeseen. Well, almost completely. Certainly, from time to time since my divorce I'd caught myself *looking*—I may have been invisible, but I could still see. On trains, say, or on escalators or in cafés, I admit I'd sometimes found my eyes flicking across calves and t-shirted chests, or resting briefly on the backs of necks and strong, bluish jawlines—but my throat had never once gone dry. And I'd hardly been aware of any impulse to reach out and touch.

'It's so scungy around here this time of night—let's go back to my place.' *Scungy*. No Englishman would say that. Unexpectedly, I thought of Adelaide.

'OK. Let's grab a taxi.'



Nothing *happened* in William's flat that night, needless to say: we just drank coffee and skipped across the surface of things—Chekhov, William's guitar lessons, and Adelaide, as a matter of fact, which was where his parents turned out to be living and where he'd first started dabbling in the theatre ('ages ago'—four years before). He hated Adelaide, he said, although I sensed he missed it. We weren't really talking about Chekhov, guitars or Adelaide, obviously, or only in order to mark out a space for something else to happen in. But nothing did. Except the toppling.

By midnight the slow toppling had begun and it was already too late to regain my balance. The mauve fingernails on the shoulder-blades, the whiff of coriander, the expectant glances, the glow of the tasselled lamp, *scungy*—trifles, pinpricks—had already clustered into an instant *after which it was already too late*. It's only in retrospect, of course, that I can say that.

'When you were reading,' he said, after a longish pause well past midnight, 'you were kind of transparent. It was great!'

I was shocked. What had he seen through *to*, exactly? Gathering up my script and coat, I leapt to my feet and made to go. He didn't move. So, not knowing what to do next, I bent over him and kissed his forehead. It may have been a mistake, but, after all, I *am* an actor.

'See you Tuesday,' he said. 'It's been fun.' And sat cross-legged on the couch while I let myself out.

Not a taxi in sight. I set off home on foot.

Transparent. It wasn't a word I'd thought much about,

to be honest. Sometimes when you meet somebody—over dinner, in a foyer, even at a bus-stop—you have the immediate feeling that you are seeing *straight through* something to a life being lived right at that very instant—the real one. Straight through what, I'm not sure—speech, gestures, clothes, looks ... although those words don't quite cover it. And at such moments you're apt suddenly to feel translucent yourself—uncovered, not quite there, while at the same time more solidly alive and yourself than you usually are.

What I can't work out is whether this feeling of transparency strikes you *because* of all the things in the way—the timbre of the voice, the cocking of the head, the lamplight on the hair, the angle of the knees—or *despite* them. Or is it the same thing?

When I eventually got back to the Holloway Road and was passing the Shalimar, now closed, the blue neon sign hit me with an almost blinding brilliance, and I realized, as the lingering smell of curried lamb pinched my nostrils, that I was experiencing a blue transparent moment right then and there in the empty street. It passed, of course.

See you Tuesday. Sitting at Kester's desk in Gastouri this afternoon a year and a half later I could still hear those four syllables as clearly as if William had just spoken them, standing behind my chair. So banal and said with such nonchalance, almost jauntily, yet brimming over with every meaning ever dreamt of. Or else no meaning at all.

—

On the Tuesday we read through Act III. Such a painful act—the stupid party Ranyevskaya throws while her estate

is being auctioned off, while she's losing everything she loves and ruining everybody. It's painful for everyone, it's an orgy of humiliation and despair. And terribly funny, according to Clive, an expert in all things Russian.

'Remember, it's vaudeville with feeling,' he said to us as we were about to begin. Then, quite pleased with his little *bon mot*, he said it again.

Act III was particularly crushing for me. I was playing Peter Trofimov, the risible, moth-eaten, bespectacled, eternal student and former tutor of Ranyevskaya's drowned son. It hardly mattered that I was rather older than Trofimov, who seems to have been just under thirty—after all, everyone keeps telling me how old and ugly I've become since Ranyevskaya went away to Paris. 'Why have you lost all your looks, Peter? Why have you got so old? You were just a boy when I went away ...' Leila loved saying that to me, I'm convinced, although she had a stab at fond pity.

It's in Act III that I mock Ranyevskaya's dreary foster-daughter Varya, the would-be nun. 'If only we had some money,' she bleats, 'even just a little, I'd give everything up and go away. I'd go into a monastery.' Piffle! She's avid for money and all it can buy—and for sex, needless to say, although 'love' or 'marriage to a good man' would be how she'd put it. And so I mock her. Just one or two barbed words. Like all righteous people, I am merciless. Her mother—almost *spongy* from all her illicit loves—tries to protect her from me.

RANYEVSKAYA: Don't tease her, Peter, you can see how distressed she is already.

TROFIMOV: She's got a one-track mind, she's too pushy by half, always poking her nose in where it's not wanted. We've had no

peace from her all summer, Anya and I. She's afraid we might start an affair. What business is it of hers? Anyway, I haven't given her the slightest cause to think such a thing. That kind of vulgarity is foreign to me. Anya and I are above love.

RANYEVSKAYA: Yes, well, I must be below it.

Absolutely. She's drowning in love, raddled with it, mostly for men who mistreat her. And for her daughters and servants and old furniture and the cherry orchard and Russia, of course ... all the things she's throwing away as the orchestra plays on.

RANYEVSKAYA: The reason you can resolve all life's important questions, Peter, dear, is that you haven't yet had to *suffer through* a single one of them ... I was born here, after all, my mother and father lived here, and my grandfather ... I love this house, I can't even imagine life without my cherry orchard, and if it has to be sold, then I might as well be sold along with it. (*She embraces Trofimov and kisses him on the forehead.*) And my son drowned here ... (*Cries.*) Have some pity on me, Peter, my good, kind Peter.

TROFIMOV: You have my wholehearted sympathy, Lyubov Andreyevna, you know that.

However, when I call her Parisian lover a no-good nothing of a man, no better than a petty thief (she's squandered everything on him), something inside her hardens and she hits me right between the eyes:

RANYEVSKAYA: It's time you became a man, Peter, at your age it's time you understood people who love people. And it's time you loved someone yourself ... time you fell in love. (*Angrily.*) Yes, it is! You're not *pure*, you're just a prude, just a ridiculous crank, you're unnatural ... 'I'm above love!' You're not above love,

you're just a nitwit. Fancy not having a lover at your age!

TROFIMOV: (*In horror.*) This is horrible! What is she saying?
(*Leaves the room, clutching his head.*) This is horrible! I can't take this, I'm leaving ... (*Leaves, but immediately comes back in.*) It's all over between us! (*Goes out.*)

RANYEVSKAYA: (*Calling after him.*) Peter, wait! What a funny man you are, Peter, I was joking! Peter!

Someone can be heard rapidly going down a staircase and then noisily falling down the stairs. Anya and Varya scream, but then straight away start laughing.

I was sweating profusely by the time we finished *that* little scene, I might say. Over by the window on his beanbag in the corner, those knees tucked up under his bluish, unshaven chin, William was laughing along with the two hysterical sisters. Then one or two of the others seemed to catch the mood and joined in. Alex, the snub-nosed young woman with the red hair playing Anya, had a coughing fit and had to be given a drink of water.

'Very good!' said Clive, in his usual businesslike way. 'Very good! Almost believable.'

But it was unfair, that laughter. If Trofimov was a high-minded prig, clothing his shyness and lack of experience in grand phrases about being above sordid, everyday feelings, then Ranyevskaya and her daughters were just as uncomprehending, just as pitiless towards my failure to be a man.

Soon afterwards we called it a night. This time, when William turned to me, whipping his scarf across one shoulder, to see if I was ready to set off for the station, I said I

thought I'd walk home. 'I need to clear my head,' I said.

'See you Thursday, then,' he said with a friendly grin, unfazed. But on the Thursday the beanbag by the window stayed empty.

5.

On the subject of Greek driftwood, by the way, and getting entangled in it, Sisi was a classic case. Having a terrible weakness for palaces, by which I really mean *palazzi*, not castles, *châteaux* or anything English, I strolled up the hill the next morning to cast an eye over the strange white building, so out of place in this higgledy-piggledy village, which, from my window, I could see on the crest above the sea. I was hoping for a tonic.

It was built, as it turns out, by that stupendously miserable creature Elisabeth, Empress of Austria—Sisi, as everyone called her with a mixture of affection, pity and disdain. Hopelessly adrift on dreams of Homer, Sisi called her palace the Achilleon.

Sisi was in love with loveliness—her own mostly, to be frank, which was the talk of Europe, but also Corfu's orange-scented beauty, aglow with drifts of golden broom when she first saw it as a young woman. But she had little eye for beauty of more cultivated kinds. In 1887, at the age of fifty, she took a perfectly nice old Venetian villa, perched idyllically on the edge of an escarpment with views across

the town and the glittering straits to Albania, and turned it into this lumpish little *Schloss* with classical pretensions. 'At last I've come home,' she said, and in a sense she had.

It was the perfect place for an unhappy empress to wait for death, gracefully, amidst olives and myrtles, and that's why she had it built—God knows, she didn't want to die in Vienna surrounded by all those lunatics her family swarmed with, her nagging mother-in-law and her sour Hungarian ladies-in-waiting. In the event, however, even dying proved boring and she moved disconsolately on. Out strolling on the quay in Geneva one afternoon some years later, she was knifed to death by an Italian anarchist. Just a tiny puncture with a stiletto—she hardly bled a drop.

As you wander through the Achilleon's coldly vulgar rooms, you can picture the amber-eyed empress mooching about absently, vaporously, a volume of Heine in one hand (Heine's ghost came to her in the night), a fine lace shawl across her shoulders, one of her emerald-studded belts around her tiny waist, wondering if she'd really come to rest at last after a lifetime of wandering, looking for ... what, exactly? Tranquillity? Solitude? Certainly not love—Sisi craved adoration, not love. I'm tempted to suggest insignificance.

In this white palace it was, a hundred years ago, as age crept up on her, that she bathed in warm seawater poured from gilded taps, here she lay in wet sheets impregnated with seaweed to slim her waist, here she spent hours of a morning dressing her famous auburn hair, here she lay on her leopard-skin couch to be oiled and pummelled by her masseuse ... all in vain. 'As fresh and unspoilt as a green, half-opened almond', she had been when she'd first met Franz Joseph in the Austrian mountains. Or so her smitten husband-to-

be wrote of her. Well, in Vienna's desiccating air she'd dried and cracked in no time at all, and by the time she took up residence here in the Achilleon it was too late for unguents and deep massages. She'd become that worst, that most unqueenly of things—spry for her age. And her only companion was an over-scented local hunchback, her tutor in Greek, Christomanos. Together this unregal pair would tramp at a furious pace up and down the hills through the olive-groves, discussing Homer and the futility of everything. The peasants round about called her 'the locomotive'.

But I must say, after staring at her palace from my window for several weeks, that I've grown rather fond of Sisi. This was her fairy palace, this was how she madly imagined that Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, had lived here on this island three thousand years before. I like the craziness of those dreams. Yet what does Homer actually say about Alcinous' 'resplendent halls', his 'famous house' which once (if ever it existed) soared, high-roofed, amongst orchards of pears and pomegranates, teeming vineyards, rippling springs and groves of figs and olives, somewhere down near the present Hilton? As Odysseus crossed the palace's bronze threshold, Homer says, he saw:

Walls plated in bronze, crowned with a circling frieze glazed as blue as lapis, ran to left and right from outer gates to the deepest court recess and solid golden doors enclosed the palace. Up from the bronze threshold silver doorposts rose with silver lintel above, and golden handle hooks.

And dogs of gold and silver were stationed either side, forged by the god of fire with all his cunning craft to keep watch on generous King Alcinous' palace, his immortal guard-dogs, ageless, all their days.

Inside to left and right, in a long unbroken row from farthest

outer gate to the inmost chamber, thrones stood backed against the wall, each draped with a finely spun brocade, women's handsome work.

Here the Phaeacian lords would sit enthroned, dining, drinking—the feast flowed on forever.

Yet what did I see? A few bronze nymphs with electric torches, illuminated bowls of glass fruit and dozens of bad paintings scattered about a suburban mansion with fake pillars tacked onto it. The casino on the second floor was a stroke of genius.

Yet ... what can I say? The woman who dreamt all this up, the woman who fled Vienna's brilliant court and her extraordinary family of emperors, dukes, archduchesses and queens spread across the world from Mexico to Budapest, in order to be nobody, to come to rest and just be herself, this woman set off sparks inside me. Her moonstruck life was a stupendous failure, and failure on that scale is fascinating.

How often, I wonder, did she think back to her childhood, before her fateful meeting with Franz Joseph, to the silly snowball fights in the streets of Munich, the sleigh-rides through the Bavarian forests with her brothers and sisters, the times she and her father, Duke Maximilian, would dress up as strolling players to strum the zither and sing bawdy songs at village weddings? Nobodies—fabulously wealthy *royal* nobodies, certainly, but for an hour or two, for an afternoon, of absolutely no significance.

Marrying His Imperial Majesty, Emperor of Austria and King of Jerusalem, Margrave of Moravia and King of Bohemia, had been an appalling mistake.

Just before she built her fairy palace in Gastouri, her son Rudolf killed himself together with his mistress in his hunt-

ing lodge at Mayerling. Or someone poisoned them both. Or one of them. No one knows. Sisi lost her faith in everything apart from her slimming cures after that, and her melancholy shrouds that house as if it were a mortuary temple. That's why, I think as I write this, only one thing in the whole palace has any life in it: the sculpture of the dying Achilles, out in the garden amongst the palms and cypresses. Vitality in every stretched muscle, every contorted limb and vein and fold of marble flesh.

Why Achilles? Because he was the dead son she'd have liked to be the mother of? A demigod with utter contempt for both gods and men? For his stone beauty?

I made a mental note to browse through *The Iliad* again one day to look for other clues. It was sure to be somewhere on Kester's shelves. Such a tedious book, unfortunately, the sort I can't help dozing off over. Perhaps it needs to be read aloud by someone manly from the BBC. *The Odyssey*, on the other hand, is as engrossing, as exciting, as voluptuously pleasurable a book as any I've read. I wonder which of them Sisi loved most?

—

After my encounter with Sisi I couldn't go back to my letter. I couldn't find the voice. I just sat at the desk by the window for a while and gazed back up the hill at the white palace. Eventually, to distract myself, I eased the desk drawer out an inch or two and peered inside. I wondered briefly, I remember, whether it was immoral to rifle through someone's drawers uninvited, but decided it was neither moral nor immoral *of itself* and pulled it all the way out. It smelt de-

licious—papery, powdery, ancient glue and lavender. I was going to enjoy this drawer.

Poking around amongst letters in English and German and old envelopes with exotic stamps, I unearthed yellowing notebooks, small diaries, several manuscripts, newspaper clippings (some fifty years old) and, scattered amongst them, photographs—uninteresting at first: a dark-haired young man on the doorstep of a weatherboard house somewhere far away and long ago, a different young man on a motor-bike (perhaps even before the war), another young man seated on a low wall with his arm around a young woman, a gentle-faced elderly woman at a piano ... There were several more recent colour shots, too, of a smooth-faced, serenely smiling older man, white-haired, in the company of some frisky-looking foreign sailors (here in a crowded taverna, there shirtless in the Greek sun). And here he was again, leaning back against a whitewashed wall, here dining with friends *al fresco* ... and here overcoated, rather more austere, caught standing awkwardly in an archway.

And then, just when I was on the point of taking out one of the letters and perusing it (just for fun), I came upon another snap, hidden inside an envelope with an English stamp. It showed two men sitting naked on a rock in shallow water, with a panoramic view behind them stretching over the sea to snowcapped mountains (possibly Albania), yachts in the distance, brilliant sunshine. One was my older man (coily posed), his nose and thin smile unmistakable. The other (less coy, but hardly brazen), relaxed but alert, without a shadow of doubt and to my great astonishment, was William.

First published by Scribner in 2001
Published by Brio Books in 2017

Copyright © 2022 Robert Dessaix

All rights reserved. The author asserts their moral rights in this work throughout the world without waiver. No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher. For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to editions@booktopia.com.au.

ISBN 9781925143966 (print)
ISBN 9781925143973 (ebook)

Published in Australia and New Zealand by:

Brio Books, an imprint of Booktopia Group Ltd
Unit E1, 3-29 Birnie Avenue, Lidcombe, NSW 2141, Australia
briobooks.com.au



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Printed and bound in Australia by SOS Print + Media Group



booktopia.com.au

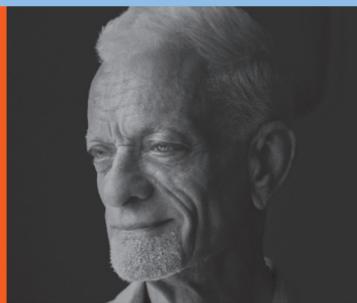
**'House in Gastouri for rent for 2 mths.
Occupant travelling. Reasonable rent.'**

In a village on the island of Corfu, alone in the cottage of a man he's never met, a young Australian actor pieces together the strange life story of the Australian writer whose house he's living in. As he explores his surroundings and makes new friends in Corfu, his own life begins to appear to him like an illuminating shadow-play of his absent host's.

Set in the physical landscapes of the Greek islands, Adelaide and the suburbs of London, Robert Dessaix's second novel is about the nature of friendship, love, the ordinary and extraordinary. Yet at its core is a perfectly placed meditation on literary landscapes – Homer, Sappho, Cavafy and Chekhov – and the part art can play in making our lives beautiful.

'Robert Dessaix is one of Australia's finest writers, as this sad, funny and moving novel proves.' — John Banville

'Robert Dessaix is some kind of national treasure because he represents with a kind of Helpmann-like elegance and virtuosity the side of our sensibilities we publicly repress.'
— *Australian Book Review*



Fiction

b **brio**
BOOKS



briobooks.com.au