



Ahadada Books

Chapbook

I Know the Songs of all the Birds

Kelvin Corcoran

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Kelvin Corcoran was born in 1956. He came to prominence with his first book, *Robin Hood in the Dark Ages* in 1985. Eight subsequent collections have been enthusiastically received, and his work has been anthologized on both sides of the Atlantic. His *New and Selected Poems* is available from Shearsman Books. The sequence "Helen Mania" was made a Poetry Book Society choice in 2005. He's also the publisher of *Gratton Street Irregulars*, a very occasional pamphlet series.



Part I



Helen Mania



Helen Mania

Yannis told us of the alternative escape route,
Helen and Paris making chariot wheel tracks in Thalami
down to the harbour at Pephnos.

Spartans left waiting at Kranai,
mouths open, bored before the myth
—look at those sparks, like stars eh?

They spent their first night here,
fell upon one another, spent
until the sun came over Taygetos.

Helen set foot on board, trumpets sound
over water, sewing in the grain
the ships of all the world in her wake.

†

Helen didn't want the trouble
safe behind those walls
the army of the fertile plain said so.

I looked at Marathonisi, plotted
the chariot tracks crashing down
from Thalami to Pephnos and the sea.

Helen didn't want it to happen,
then love like Paris arrived.

I looked at the serene harbour
isle of fennel, empty blue mirror,
Helen was not there nor in Egypt.

Honey melting the other side of Taygetos that night.

†

We need a name for this war,
economics won't move our heroes;
plunder is nearer to it but
join our trade war won't swing it.
We need to make it personal.
Control of grain ships through the straights
and increased tax revenue? I think not;
if we had a woman abducted for instance.

In the future they'll see through us,
as if we would turn the world upside down
for a Spartan girl who warmed up the house guest?
Menelaus' hot wife gone wrong.

†

I set my foot in the track
greased slot to smashed Ilium,
one way ride to bliss or exile.

Night of stars, night of revelation



silver jackal sniffing around the door,
storm came smoking off Taygetos.

The house became a boat and
the great green flooded her mind
the island, her dream, floated out to Paris.

Snakes and figs littered the yard.

That morning Helen threw aside the carpet of stars,
that morning Helen stepped aboard.

†

I kept my Spartan girl wrapped up,
hidden under a pile of cloaks
for this languid, sexual periplus.

We drew bright lines across the water
phosphor alphabet dissolving clues,
we lipsticked the mouth of hell below Tanaeron.

Even so she could not be dimmed,
she shone so fair like a bowl of light
desire lifted us like the tide.

Up from the inky black a message,
where fish pick the bones clean and
fields of seaweed denote a continent.

We turned the world upside down:
Menelaus—Where are your divisions now? Stop.
—Your squad cars and riches? Stop.

I left of my own freewill and cannot stop. Stop.

She lay in the boat burning, my beacon,
shaped by heaven,
they built temples in her wake.

†

Who would believe it over a girl?
despite our endless back and forth,
Io, Europa, Medea and the sassy east?
Moon-struck lovers is all we need.

We could get the Egyptian priests on our side,
build a temple to the goddess stranger;
variation as a post-something aesthetic,
she was a ghost above the Skaian gates etc.

I have it now: our brother's loss is our cause.
Make sure you don't catch them,
clear all the harbours down to Matepan;
it's Priam's turn for regime change.

†

We fled in the hour of the furnace

Helen a black outline in the blast
dark one, I see only your face.

Swing the pendulum myth
another woman, another man sail eastward
pass Cythera, ploughing the grain.

Aphrodite came swanning out
attendant gods swim in her wake,
their mouths shaping O O in the eddies.

Oh Helen I loved every woman
to have you, Mr Meat Me, the fool
to find you deep in darkness.

†

My lord they have flown;
I have posted guards to the passes
but who can outrun love?
I'll stick the barb into Menalaus.

I think I hear armour clashing by night,
see smart bomb snapshots of Trojan bunkers;
saturation red hits the air in waves,
reconstructed it's just as real.

Draw up the list of ships
and tilt our western powers into the east;
we can lead our little princes
into the divided meadows of Aphrodite.

†

Helen you are not to blame,
your smoky heart faced the east
the colour rising inside you.

She ascends the steps above the gate,
Helen, the cicadas whisper unearthly,
the sky fuses around the shape of a girl.

Politicians made silent as stone,
remember hope, scratch at lust,
the word wanton dry in their mouths.

She steps forward parting the air
into the live broadcast
wrapped around the world.

She steps forward, pictures the boat
parting the waves, the field of men below,
what? the dream of? the plains of Argos?

She wanted to see her brothers
on the island of Pephnos, they stand in the waves,
guarding the safe passage of her escape.

She steps forward, it is Helen
ascending, her shape makes a window



in the air for the breathless sky.

†

We saw the sun burn the high meadows
the rain drench the white roots
the wind fuck the come hither waves.

We ran up the goat tracks, breathless
between spurge and aconite and mallow.

Helen you have undone the world
I taste your looks, touch your colour
you were always there, my radiant lexicon.

See how our boat dips and rises
to our shared step aboard
noses out of Pephnos over the endless sea.

We lie together in the seabed
just rippling the light with our breath.



Part II



The Subsequent World View

Aphrodite's Bay

I walked in the favour of the gods
the children calling from the water
once out of the bay of the Libyan Sea.

You Egyptians from over there
who can work the gold like us?
make trade in gifts, copper and staples?

We are dripping with this blue
we will prosper for ever
the children call in their drowned language.

There's no dignity wading ashore
the stones roll under foot
and you stagger through endless need.

At that moment, face to face,
sea around your feet, sky falling away,
you must choose, abacus or knife.

†

I was in the market of market town on Saturday
when I found her in daylight —from where?
Across the Caspian, Anatolia, Sumerian dark wave
against the backdrop of Birmingham bargain stall,
over my head in the tide of singing birds.

Looky, look at this, where'd they get that?
How did that get here and what is your name?
I am not from here, my name trans-Pontine,
I step over the silver thread between two worlds,
I walk to you across water and open the door.

Red dust of Asia perfumed my feet,
the golden hordes at my back look around
their horses snickering for fresh water;
I come from the founders of towns and trade,
I rise up from boom and bust harvests.

I led the way from rickety kids to shining surplus,
I focused the mirage of the blueprint town
across the high table-land, made specialists spring,
dreaming a design to catch the whole world;
our turbine ploughing to the western shore.

†

Today the lesson is English grammar.
It is dangerous to swim in Aphrodite's bay.
Repeat.

Why since then everybody wants to die?
It is the third world war already I think,
bit by bit, what is happening, this music.

Everybody so running to die -why?



You see this aria of Tosca, if they did,
maybe it would make them ok.

And it is dangerous to swim in Aphrodite's bay;
the razor shells will cut your feet,
the currents around the rocks are unpredictable.

Though the water is milky and clings to the skin
like a second body that slides and fits around your own,
long after you have returned to shore.

Today English grammar is heroic film;
the black and white harbour before money arrived,
western coiffure on Levantine heads.

At night I watched the ships unload:
the dovecotes, trinkets and sex toys,
the belief in mythology as fact.

And finally, more than we bargained for,
objectivity in Babylon
brought to book on the banks of the Euphrates.



Part III



Roger Hilton's Sugar



Setting Out

I slip down the road under sea light falling
slam into the giant red women,
ripping green split on both sides
through electric spring wet with flame
to St Ives, the secret island, to find the Hilton.

I sailed a painted boat fit for a boy
against the whole white and crashing world
—darling Bo, thank God you were born,
when I was boy there were horses in the field
and I rode in a cart to cart me off in.

My parents alive, I'm holding on, no hands
as I drift off into the anaesthetised sky.
What's the river doing around the boundary?
I can see you both outside our house,
your faces looking up like white words.

On the secret island, in the middle sea,
two figures dance on the Cape of No Hope,
Hilton sets out, feet first, on the bed of last days,
—the fun is over, what else have I got?
Miraculous pictures leap from his hands.



The Language of Art Critics

My discontinuous line is sexual, intimate, savage,
your fantastic anatomy my vehicle;
this is what they say —beast, charming I'm sure,
show the whole world, why don't you?

As is your life, so is your line,
a fragment made abstract and broadcast;
the human sensation we die for;
my nudes and other animals dancing.

My horses, carts, boats and flowers
such earthly bodies in motion overlap,
run into one another the quick sensation
behind the big secret behind all thought.

Bow down you Greeks, you ghosts;
I am on the last run, with no feeling in my feet.



Seeing Hilton

1

Nothing can replace the long, steady gaze,
face to face with the picture.

Swindon Art Gallery and Museum.
Well we'll be closed until 6 March,
for reorganisation, and then yes, I think,
our picture by Roger Hilton will be on show.

The Tate.
I went to the wrong branch,
freezing wind off the river.
No picture, just a postcard of Oi Yoi Yoi.

Bath Victoria Gallery.
Answer machine.
One picture. One question.
No answer.

Nothing can replace the long, steady gaze.

2

Through warm rain and dense traffic
down the southern slope, petrol war stalemate
thickens the Friday night call to air,
to arrive at the moment of seeing —mappa mundi.

1953, oil, neo-plastic work
flat colour from Mondrian daddy,
piling up the words my mind in stripes
of blue of white red white.

Tilting off the edge of England
I'm standing here in the gallery,
all proportion thrown overboard
I see you wave the flag of a new country.

It's 1953, one light floods the dark room
and outside the Atlantic dynamo firing.

The Hilton Biography—a Selection

I am lying under a bus in St. Just
 —who wants this fucking medal?
 It's a curse on me for staleness,
 I could use this gravel, textured to my face,
 fairer far than palace walls.

I am drinking 300 bottles of life p.a.
 and to hell with my perambulation to the pub,
 where my nerve endings end I don't go,
 in the dim light creeping under the beast's gate
 these painted glyphs are mocking me.

I am writing a list of things for you to get,
 so get them—the good paint (will gouache fade?)
 that Italian bread from Soho, the garlic and good broccoli,
 and a decent pen, one that fucking writes.
 Forgive me, I am a shit. It is all my fault.

I am making these quick pictures
 to keep my family when I am not,
 a water soluble inheritance,
 to clap their little hands in the breeze
 when I am launched into nothing.

I am freezing in this sodding plane,
 seven hours to Antibes, freezing for some sunshine,
 for the little circus and the afternoon sea;
 at last at last, they'll wheel me up and down
 and I'll see the god come raging from the water.



The Unpainted Hiltons

You see I am surrounded by these things
a medium like breathing under water,
the Royal Bokhara, the pictures on the wall
I wave as I float by with transparent hands.

My wife's sexy dress hanging there
taken off like a season transformed,
and the organic food jumps into my mouth
as your warm arm falls across me.

The light from the floor landscapes your sleep
and those would be cabbage roses descending,
like red kisses on your perfect cunt
around the dim margin he is on his knees.

Then the great secret settles on everything,
you're sleeping and I launch out into darkness;
ivy pours into the courtyard, I'm half drowned,
face emerging in Spring —Dionysus.

†

Even the island I speak from is painted by Hilton,
to the rhythm of dropped seeds into instant oleander
and open mouthed cats into swaying boughs;
the riot of ants know the plan
and blue drips from the mighty swimmer.

Interior darkness dissolves in the air
and perfect weather wraps us bodies;
hand in hand like nerve ending sex
my eyes have seen the glory
riding in on a big clam shell.

Let the breeze stir and sing,
lift the shirt off the girl with ample breasts
and cool the hairy god slumped in the breakers;
the two master is trim, we're ready to leave,
the white circuit snaps and ignites.

The all-sea shines lit from below,
childrens' voices scud across the bay
quick ripples enskied in acrylic;
—will you wait for me there?
on the shore of the morning world.

†

I think of the fields at night,
the compact Celtic geometry
laid over with darkness
and the black sea rising.

The Gulf of Sleep invades my room,



waves rise with each breath
drowning thought under the door,
go down you beasts, you bastards.

In the compass of the sea
I am abandoned, absolute,
but let me keep the way
of talking to my children.

The lights on the other side
shine out clear and bright,
my boat is one word sent
in the language of my painted hands.

The shape of morning rises,
white ribbons of light
unravel across the sliding waves,
momentary chart of all the sea lanes of the world.

†

If this window opens on the world of free running senses;
your filthy mind in the cart pulled by my bonny horse
—see she carrapaces, treading the liquified air
falling like amber on us sorry bodies,
so that our limbs are restored, magically proportioned,
and we lie and roll and walk in one another,
the anthropometric secret in our hands at last
as easy as talk floats out of the bedroom door
across the evening laid out in this land of good weather;
the game is up —and if the window doesn't etc the game is up:
we must settle for the living creatures we have about us,
and that would be the Hilton in this earthly paradise
awake in a sea of trees breathing underground,
ambidextrous, prolific and grinning.

The Passion of Phineas Gage & Selected Poems (Jesse Glass)

0-9732233-8-3

*The Passion of Phineas Gage & Selected Poems presents the best of Glass' experimental writing in a single volume. Glass' ground-breaking work has been hailed by poets as diverse as Jerome Rothenberg, William Bronk and Jim Daniels for its insight into human nature and its exploration of forms. Glass uses the tools of post-modernism: collaging, fragmentation, and Oulipo-like processes along with a keen understanding of poetic forms and traditions that stretches back to Beowulf and beyond. Moreover, Glass finds his subject matter in larger than life figures like Phineas Gage—the man whose life was changed in an instant when an iron bar was sent rocketing through his brain in a freak accident—as well as in ants processing up a wall in time to harpsichord music in order to steal salt crystals from the inner lip of a cowrie shell. The range and ambition of his work sets it apart. The product of over 30 years of engagement with the avant-garde, *Passion of Phineas Gage & Selected Poems* is the work of a mature poet who continues to reinvent himself with every text he produces.*

Secret, but Kept it Room (Mike Gubser)

0-9732233-7-5

Secret, but Kept it Room explores the development and stasis over time of self as image—at once real and artificial, subjective and perspectival, engaged in the physical world and torn from it, a self often disappearing into non-self. Mike Gubser treats the art of poetry as, in some sense, the art of experiment and problem-solving by placing the notion of self in various contexts—romance, depression, friendship, travel, memory, isolation—and poetic forms—visual, musical, lyrical modernist, numeric—to see how it reacts.

At That (Skip Fox)

0-9732233-6-7

*Skip Fox, with the concern of an entomologist, presents passages sprawling and pinned in a shadow box of observations and odd lots. Framed under double glass, the mounting board of *At That* writhes with a cast of freaks: Ezekiel in the streets, a kitty bomb squad, sadists on steroids, the shadow of Cadmus, kingfishers, omen clad apertures of evening with cicada wings, heart attacks of clouds rolling in off the Gulf, a city mouse, spastic proctologists, and so forth, all projecting their "goods" in spate: smatterings, obsolete creeds, mordacious stumps, "furious opinions, exaggerations, fabrications," neo-prophetic stylings, verbal molestations, elegiac mumblings, the silence above a shallow grave, etc.*

Ahadada Reader I (A. Halsey, J. Byrum, G. Monk)

0-9732233-3-2

Combines the lively, challenging work of three experimental poets: Alan Halsey, John Byrum, and Geraldine Monk. Halsey's group of poems resurrects past versions of English, turning with peculiar spellings and striking frictions of their grammar. Byrum's work, entitled 'Approximations,' is a shifting visual text work mainly utilizing the text block, pointing to the form of a word as art itself. The final selection of Monk's work rounds out the book with her varying forms and sharply constructed lines.

the time at the end of this writing (Paolo Javier)

0-9732233-2-4

In his first poetry collection, Paolo Javier overlaps life in New York with his childhood spent in Manila and Cairo and imagined senior years referred to as "The Lid To The Great Jar." Javier's poems sail over the handlebars of a Huffy bicycle; saunter through the city onto balconies with lovers; respond to the visual art of Manuel Ocampo; and curse a botched reading of Tagalog. Of this book, Anselm Berrigan says, "Perceptive poems; that there is pleasure despite it all in never knowing what might happen next is no small part of what they know."

Ahadada Books is a small press first begun in 1999, publishing titles both online and in print. The aim of the press is to present new writers and literature that, to paraphrase Francis Picabia, speak with you, envelope everything, and belong to every religion. We present broadsides, limited-run chapbooks, and perfect bound books of diverse literary forms.

Online publishing is an integral component of the Ahadada Books project: to get important voices heard. The World Wide Web facilitates this endeavour, allowing a potential audience of millions to access our site and read authors that they might never find in their local bookstores.

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