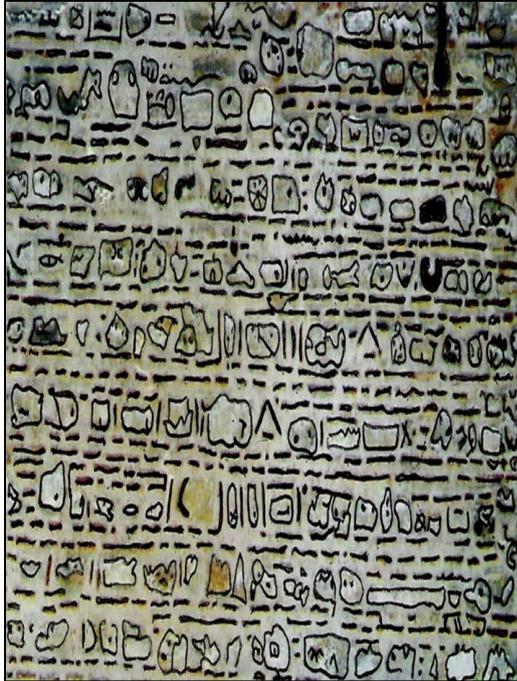


Alan Halsey & Kelvin Corcoran

The Choir Included Some Familiar Faces



The choir were not as one about the history
of the singing alphabet wherever it arose
and shared no consensus descant or no
on disputes across the Pontic steppes:
forgive me horseman of the endless sky
I haven't a clue what you're saying.

This face hammered into a clay tablet
sparked a different branch entirely,
a divergence in phonics turned fatal
and made for repeated border raids
for women, cattle, any useful shit to hand;
the little triangle said it all – you don't mean?

Fishman, Stoneman, Shieldman dance
beat out your song on the wires of the world
beat out your semantic pulses unreformed
like birds in the wilderness down in Demerara;
survey the sea of grass, the predawn cities;
the rippling light, message after message arrives.

So, through time in the yoyo sport of civilisation
the choir came to include unfamiliar faces too;

and you horseman riding straight as an arrow
full tilt before the breaking wave of polyphony,
black feathers in your hair, stand in a circle and sing:
everything is there, for you the stones arrayed speak.

*

In those spaces
between words
sung and heard

Wire knot a swan
where rivers rose
sense scant as air

Liar liar
growl the basses
lower and lower

Let least
lack less
castrati trill

Every one
of those flinty
shrill sopranos

is an auntie of
one or more of
the Sultan's wives

*

The Sultan's mind grasped
the law of succession, the neat garrotte
a case of blades, the sherbet airs of Spring.

The singing was peripheral but welcome
as accompaniment to the sex riot,
those voices rising to the casement a river.

A river running back to Anatolia
the Ottoman hegemony mint-fresh
to make the whole world his private garden.

The Sultan's mind grasped many things
all thought is thought about something
there were no abstractions.

Quarter tones left open tiny doors

through which the mind could slip
to think the unthinkable unknown blank

Such that when sense escapes ellipses
the empire is in decline, the choral voices
unfamiliar were not as one about history.

Oh horseman return like flame
a wave across the singing steppe
free of lies the old song of blood.

*

As it happened the strangers from the steppe –
five men and two women – arrived on foot.
‘But your horses’ we protested: ‘hour after hour
we’ve listened to your horses approaching.’

The strangers smiled and began their audition.
Then those distant horses rose from their throats,
came galloping out between closed teeth,
drumming down to the river, whinnying skyward.

Your Highness: This is the reason
you will see some unfamiliar faces,
and hear the music they call ‘clear sound’,
on our return to Court.

*

So the ghost riders of the East
set about the party with horsehead fiddle
and Tuuvan throat ballads
a season-long performance.

The absent horses were there
a thunderous seismic signature
wave after wave of votive horses
shaking the court to dust, they sang

We don’t fall into your story telling
nor end in a ditch or skirmish
for a lost literary convention
sealing the mouth of a lost people etc.

The strangers knew about history
came ready for it, armed to the teeth
with an oral tradition sharp as a knife
they were of one mind and they triumphed.

*

One sang five thousand verses
every night for seven nights.
We heard his hero descend
into the world of the changelings –

in our minds' eyes we saw him
fight to the death Earth Belly,
Three Shadows and the Yelping Maiden.
We trembled at the terrible cunning

of Famous Snake and Sir Bloodclot –
how fortunate his horse had warned him
with such wise words! And then his sister
disguised as a bird with a golden tail

divided in eight branches. They tell this
of Nyurgan Bootur the Quick Slinger.
We will say more of the Three Worlds
in a further despatch to Your Highness.

*

‘ . . . the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe. Perhaps it would be more entertaining to add a few surprising customs of my own invention; but nothing seems to me so agreeable as truth.’

There's the three world escalator hop-stop;
Well, it's hardly unique phenomenology said Tammuz,
try these little axes planted in my chest for Spring
and think of Orpheus, his double-take, fatal,
then, after all that, it's goodbye singing head Beach Boy.

But well, ok, in the end – the three worlds waiting,
Mary Wortley Montagu's telegram explained it all;
why the singers did not return to court,
why a mythology can wear out its welcome,
how a moment of direct observation refutes the lot.

Your Highness, forgive my digressions, my unnamings,
fish shield big fish manface perhaps a boat.
If we return by descent to that first picture
dot dot dash your swift reply is awaited
by zoomorphic grapheme with holes drilled in pebbles.

Fish shield big fish manface river boat
ready to be slung like stars around Quick Slinger's neck,
that would be his real neck in a fable – that sort of anatomy,
and the picture remains unread though familiar

returned by descent, the song lasts only one season.