

# Excerpt from the introduction to

## A HELEN ADAM READER:

*Edited with an introduction by Kristin Prevallet*

(National Poetry Foundation, 2007)

### Pixie Poole: The Early Years

When asked to write a biographical statement for Donald Allen's seminal anthology

*The New American Poetry* (1960), Helen Adam described a few key points in her life:

I was born in Glasgow, Scotland, December 2nd, 1909, but only lived in Glasgow for the first year of my life, educated in Nairnshire and Edinburgh University. Worked as a journalist in Edinburgh and London. Came to America with my mother and sister in 1939. Worked summers in the land army during the war, and various business jobs in New York. We moved west in 1949, living in Reno and Oakland, and to San Francisco in 1953.

But this is only a fraction of a story that begins in a minister's thatched cottage in Dundee, Scotland and ends in a cramped, roach infested apartment in New York City. Helen Adam's journey across the ocean traverses a world split in half by World War II—a world that begins with the Victorian sensibilities, manners, and domestic ambitions of her childhood and ends in a modern world where to hold on to such sensibilities is to become a relic of the past, a personification of attitudes and mannerisms that no longer exist.

The story of Helen is also the story of Pat, her life-long companion and sister. Although Helen was the famous one—the confident child prodigy who became a spellbinding chanter of ballads—she and Pat, alongside a series of cherished cats, were inseparable. The two sisters were mutually dependent on each other and remained unmarried for the entirety of their lives. The opposing worlds of manners and madness were the cultivated domain of these two women who, along with their mother Isabella, formed a matriarchal unit that friends called “the real Adams family.”

In Scotland, Helen and Pat came from a family that upheld stern Presbyterian values in churchgoing and erudite education. Their grandfather, the Reverend William Douglas Dunn, was an eccentric traveling evangelist with the United Free Church of Scotland—a rebel church that broke from the Church of Scotland in 1843.

Their father, the Reverend William Adam, was a “professional” preacher who kept his loyalties with the traditional Church of Scotland. Reverend Adam was a stern disciplinarian and a conservatively religious man. In contrast to the hardworking farmers whom he served, Reverend Adam chose to spend most of his time (including when he was supposed to be writing sermons) on the golf course. Unfortunately, when Helen was a child, a stray ball knocked him unconscious while he was putting on the course. Two days later, he died from the blow. Helen, not overly fond of her father, later described the calamity as “karmic retribution” inflicted upon him for not being a committed enough priest.

After his death, the girls lived a productive and picturesque childhood with their mother in the Scottish countryside, immersed in the books of eccentric Victorian writers like George MacDonald, Marjorie Bowen, and Andrew Lang, and consumed with the legends and magical stories told by their neighbors. They spent long summer afternoons making copybooks of their favorite poems, and tracing Rakahm's drawings of elves on mushrooms and pixies flying over pools which they would color and use as frontispieces for their own hand-made books. Pat soon developed a detailed eye for drawing, and Helen began writing verses that eventually became plays.

What is most remarkable is that what can only be referred to as Helen Adam's "early years" all happened before she was finished with secondary school—published her collected poems, *The Elfin Pedlar and Tales Told by Pixy Pool*, was published when she was 14 years old. It includes 120 poems, arranged chronologically starting at age two, when Helen composed rhymes to sing her dolls to sleep. The introduction to the book, written by the Reverend John Hutton states that "sometimes her mother, hearing this casual flow of dainty rhymes would say, 'Helen can you repeat that?' To which the child would answer, 'Oh no mummy; but I shall say some more.'" This little anecdote was picked up and repeated by many of the over 35 newspaper columns throughout Scotland and England that reviewed the book. The family received laudatory letters from all over the continent, impressed by the little Helen's flawless use of meter and rhyme.

Helen became the pride of Scotland. She was hailed as being able to out-write

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for inheriting the talents of Robert Louis Stevenson (but at a younger age), and for having the potential to be the next Tennyson. The critics applauded her first book for having “an extraordinary sense and handling of rhythm and rhyme” and a “perfect ear and a delicate imagination” with “a mind elect” which was “entirely free from self-consciousness or any thought of posing.” She received a note of praise forwarded by an aristocratic acquaintance who received a letter one morning from the Queen, “thanking me for the book which ‘Her Majesty has enjoyed very much.’” But perhaps the most prestigious compliment was that the eminent Irish composer Sir Charles Villiers Stanford—who aside from writing numerous operas had also worked with Tennyson in 1875 putting “Queen Mary” to music—wrote songs for *The Elfin Pedlar* poems. These were performed with orchestras throughout the continent.

A year later, the New York publisher Putnam and Sons published an American edition of the book, which William Rose Benet found and cited in his introduction to *The Janitor’s Boy* by Nathalia Crane, the young American prodigy poet. He compared Helen Douglas’s poems to Crane’s saying “the best poems of hers I have read do not seem to me to possess such individuality or such maturity of melody and diction as Miss Crane’s best poems.”

The individuality lacking in Helen’s poems is noteworthy not in that it distinguishes her from Nathalia Crane, but that her poems are so reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century Victorian tradition in Scottish poetry. The Scottish ballad tradition has its roots

in the “mouth to mouth” folk songs that collectors like Sir Walter Scott, Peter Buchan and Francis James Child traveled through the Highlands to record and subsequently publish. Often however, they would translate the Scots or Lallan dialect into English verse, thereby separating the ballads from their folk roots.

By the end of the nineteenth century, according to the critic Douglas Young, industrialization, modernization, and golf had infiltrated Scottish culture, and ballads, now thoroughly anglicized, became the leisure-class’s choice drawing-room entertainment. Helen’s light verses are suggestive of this anglicized *vers d’occasion*. She later dismissed her childhood writings as “dreadful” and wrote marginal notations like “Mush” and “Horrid” on some of the newspaper clippings about her that her mother dutifully kept.

Indeed, it was the style of the times to write in highly inflated light verse and by the time that she was 20, Helen had published two more books of poetry with Hodder and Stoughton: *Charms and Dreams from the Elfin Pedlar’s Pack* (1924), and *Shadow of the Moon* (1929). As would be expected, the three books are all written in the shadow of Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott, and all tell in rhymed verse tales of pixies and spider-witches, of corrupt wizards and kidnapped changelings. Certainly a reflection of Helen’s in-depth reading of George MacDonald and Andrew Lang, the poems speak of magical worlds visible only through a child’s eye. This is not to say that the verses are simple. “The Witches Daughter,” Helen’s first actual ballad written when she was ten,

goes on for 39 pages with remarkable twists and turns of intricate narrative development, aided by a pair of singing blue shoes that carry the heroine Marjori dancing through different layers of fairyland. "The Elfin Pedlar" is itself a play written when Helen was twelve, about a wizard-carved peddler who was sadly conceived without a heart. A fan letter from a school teacher indicates that the play was taught and performed in drama classes throughout Scotland.

By the time *Shadow of the Moon* was published in 1929 Helen, at the wise age of 20, had become more reflective. The poems in that book deal less with action-packed plots and magical shoes and more with metaphysical musings on death and the pains of love. Child prodigies are hard pressed to produce a sequel of books more impressive than the first in order to prove that their talent is expandable. Critics writing proclamations such as "she possesses the imagination of the true mystic" and "we have in this Scottish girl, dreaming in a Scottish Manse, one of the poets of the future who shall touch the lasting remembrance of mankind" could have bestowed doom on the young Helen with their unattainable expectations and exaggerated praise.

Helen went on to study Fine Art at Edinburgh University, and in 1933, after the death of their maid Nana, who had been with the family for 25 years, Isabella and her two daughters moved to London. Helen, "horrified by the rubbish I had written as a child" decided to be a journalist, and initiated the move by taking the train to London by herself to research possible apartments.

So began a very active and formative ten year stay in London for the three women. From 1934-1939, the two sisters made their living writing a society column called "Jottings from London" for *The Weekly Scotsman* which sent them all over the city, to boat races, fashion shows, Royal processions, and theaters. But in 1939, the two sisters, their mother, and their cat Bidy left Europe and travelled to America to take part in a cousin's wedding in Hartford, Connecticut. While they were there, Europe was under attack and family members back in Scotland began writing to them about rations and black-outs, urging them not to return. They realized that they were too poor to return to Scotland, and so found work around New York City as fill-in secretaries, office messengers, and migrant laborers during the summer.

In spite of having very little money, Helen was very prolific in the ten years from 1939-49, and during this time composed many of the ballads which won her notoriety later in her life. She was able to cast aside her early "dreadful doggerel" and find a voice that was all her own.

Pat, on the other hand, did not fare so well. Although she wanted to marry, it became clear that Helen could not function without her sister and was wholly dependent on Pat for her survival in the world where material concerns were necessary. Helen's dramatic flair, and her eccentric style; the imaginative energy she spent on writing, making scrapbooks, and reading—all of this was inversely projected onto Pat, who rarely came out in public, held steady secretarial jobs, and, by the time they moved

to San Francisco, had stopped writing and drawing all together. Helen was free within her imagination to create magical universes that she could inhabit day to day, but it was Pat who had to ensure that the real day-to-day functioned properly.

Pat began suffering from depression, and then other medical problems, and with Isabella getting older, the three decided to move West where the climate was warmer. They took the train to Reno in the Summer of 1948, and whimsically bought a trailer, where they lived a caravan life for one year, settling in various sites from Reno to Oakland, and spending time hiking, canoeing, and exploring the desert hills. Helen began sending her ballads out to contests, and 20 years after the success of Pixy Pool, she won first place and \$15 for her entry in the "Don B. Skinner Ballad Contest."

But all this was only the beginning of her literary achievements.

## **Godmother of the Beat Generation: The San Francisco Years**

San Francisco is a strange city  
Built too close to the sea  
Those who sleep in San Francisco  
Dream too vividly.  
-from *San Francisco's Burning*

A year later in 1949, the three women yearned to settled down; they set their sights on San Francisco. The three Scottish women, displaced from their native country because of the war, ended up in the city where already a group of politically minded

artists, writers, and intellectuals were working through their own psychological, social, and cultural shocks. As Michael Davidson wrote in *The San Francisco Renaissance, Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, "like an earlier generation of postwar writers—that of Auden, Spender, and Day-Lewis—the poets who found themselves in the Bay Area after World War II were faced with creating an art within the context of massive human and psychological devastation." What ensued was what Kenneth Rexroth saw as an "elegiac tone directed not only at what had been lost within the human community but what would never be recovered now that the bomb, as William Carlos Williams put it, 'entered our lives.'" This combined with a reaction against the dominant, academic literary styles of the New Critics solidified a radical group, not unified in their purpose, but directed in their energy and creative passion. Rexroth's anarchistic literary salons, Madeline Gleason's Festivals of Modern Poetry, the KPFA radio station's open forums, and the California School of Fine Arts where Clyford Still, Hassel Smith and Ed Corbett were teaching the first wave of abstract expressionism—all of these laid the foundation for an enraged and active community, diverse in their aesthetics but joined by their indefatigable will to fight the status quo.

In 1954, Adam signed up for Robert Duncan's poetry workshop at San Francisco State, along with Michael McClure, Jack Gilbert, Lawrence Fixell, Paul Dreckus, Norman McCay, Paul Cox, and Ida Hodes. Michael McClure described the workshop participants as "a nest of rebels" who were devoted to learning, and were encouraged by Duncan to

find their own poetic direction. “Duncan’s idea of a workshop was anarchist and liberational,” said McClure. “He pushed people in their own direction and taught them to open their own doors.”

The doors may have been open, but when Helen Adam—a elegant, proper, Scottish ballad-chanting woman who was almost twice their age—walked in, Duncan and his class were slightly at a loss. Once escorted from a modern art museum for kicking a sculpture that was too abstract and lacked spiritual significance, Adam was a bewildering presence among the restless and rebellious group of young poets. She was much older than the rest of the “kids” and brought her macabre, supernatural ballads to the workshop, which created a knee-jerk response among the young bards who, given the times in which they were living, viewed traditional forms with suspicion.

But after she read her first ballad to the class, with its dark humor and masterful execution, the class perceived that she represented the authentic ballad tradition. The filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who was sitting in on the class at the time Adam read her first ballad, remembers a dramatic lightning storm that added to the electricity she had sparked. “Duncan was swept off his feet, as was everyone,” he remembers. “With the storm in the background, it was magical.”

Duncan found in her a reinforcement of his own poetic direction. What seemed before to be the work of a flighty, eccentric old woman without a clue about what was happening in the world became for Duncan a crystalline jewel, and his poetic

development was enriched by their friendship.

In his biographical statement for Don Allen's anthology, *New American Poetry*,

Duncan generously wrote:

[It was] Helen Adam, who opened the door to the full heritage of the forbidden Romantics. Her ballads were the missing link to the tradition. How troublesome at first they were! They fascinated; they seemed entirely anachronistic. There was the mere lapse of time through which they traveled. They were powerful; they should have been *wrong*. ... In grasping the inspiration of Helen Adam, in admitting her genius, I was able to shake off at last the modern proprieties—originality, style, currency of language, sensibility and integrity. I have a great appetite for approval from whatever source, and only the example of this poet who cares nothing for opinions but all for the life of the imagination, for the marvelous that is the grain of living poetry, saves me at times. And Helen Adam was right, passions may have voice in ballads and orders appear in fairy tales that were otherwise mute or garbled.

Given the wave of conservative scholarly approaches to the nineteenth century Romantics, it was significant to Duncan that Adam was entirely unaffected by academic agendas, and proudly sang her ballads with no sense that they might be out of fashion. Not only did she, at first anyway, refuse to write anything but ballads, but she recited Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in its entirety at a poetry reading. This was enough to convince Duncan that if his poetic field was as open as he espoused, then Helen Adam with her genuine link to old Scottish ballad traditions, could not be denied entrance. He began experimenting with traditional poetic forms not to fit conservative preconceptions, but rather as a field in which the poet, open to all possibilities of content and form, can discover the multi-faceted and complex world.

Duncan's workshop was scheduled to continue in 1956, but Charles Olson had invited Duncan to teach at Black Mountain, and he and Jess took the Fall off and accepted the invitation. Allen Ginsberg stepped in to take over the class. Like Duncan, he too was at first resistant to what he perceived as Adam's outdated poetics. However, she proved herself to be more progressive in her thinking than some of the other workshop participants.

Soon, Ginsberg also fell under Adam's spell, and in his introduction to her poetry reading at the Naropa Institute in 1979, said:

Helen Adam's work was always a puzzle to me when I was in San Francisco because she was writing straight, classical rhymed ballads. I had come off my own father's rhymed lyric verse and found it antithetical. And so, taking Robert Duncan's course, I beat Helen Adam over the head with my idea of what modern poetry should be after William Carlos Williams's forms. But fortunately, she resisted my malevolent influence and continued writing the ballads and songs which she does so exquisitely, so that finally, many years later, I find myself writing rhymed ballads and songs and look to Helen Adam for encouragement and advice and find her one of the most sympathetic ears and one of the most outrageously self-right writers among my contemporaries and elders.

Adam also took Jack Spicer's "Magic Workshop" at San Francisco Public Library in Spring of 1957, and that April she and Spicer gave a reading together at the Poetry Center. Spicer gave very few readings, and had an innate distaste for theatrics, but he and Adam had established an important poetic connection rooted in their mutual interest in ballad and folk songs. Introducing them, Duncan established a connection between the "Romantic worlds" that they each differently occupied. Kevin Killian wrote

more specifically that “Spicer’s excitement over Helen Adam was due to the way she rejected the modernist re-invention or co-optation of the ballad, rejecting its folksiness, returning it to its original purchase—a form in which horror, violence, sex and abjection held sway.” Partly due to Adam’s influence, Spicer went on to try his own hand at the ballad form, in his mock translation of *After Lorca*, in which he dedicates the poem “The Moon and Lady Death” to her.

Helen took some notes during the Magic Workshop, and in one notebook wrote: “People have reactions to them [poems] in the real world. They cause events to happen outside as well as inside the world of poetry...Speech and magic have always been connected.” This connection between speech and magic--the way words can effect listeners and put them under a spell--is what Adam materialized in her readings where she would chant and gesticulate her ballads and songs.

On the surface, many of her ballads, particularly those in which women are empowered by their latent supernatural powers, seem dated, essentialist, and lost in an imaginary world. And yet, she was disgusted by the fate of the earth and human behavior, and would speak about how beneficial it would be if the Adam Bomb fell and wiped out civilization.

“I feel myself that it is much too late, and that the human race is indeed doomed. It serve[s] it right on the whole, considering its long history of fiendish cruelties, greed & hate. I think this is a build up of Karma, and only wish the glorious planet might escape unhurt and not be burned to a cinder.”

Although it is true that Adam was more interested in the astral than she was in the

actual world, she was not entirely oblivious to the world around her. Although many of her ballads deal with supernatural and magical themes, others deal with psychedelic drugs, junkies, and the “big dirty bomb.” Adam believed that the poet had special visionary powers that came from elsewhere. An interviewer for *New York Quarterly* asked Adam about this poetic vision, and about her allegiance to Blake. She replied:

Oh, Blake of course simply lived in the real world. I think it’s such arrogance, all the pithy little people who say that Blake was mad—he wasn’t mad, he simply was living in the real world in which he saw the astral world.

Adam too lived in the two worlds simultaneously, and as a result of this her poetic aim was convulsive—to write ballads that, through the persistence of an ancient rhythm, evoke the fright of the *grue* and that cast an otherworldly spell on the audience, giving them the delight of a spine tingling shudder. The implication of the *grue* was seen by many poets of the day as central to poetry’s power to affect the spirit and consciousness of the reader or listener. The transformative power of Adam’s ballads, with their repetitions of rhythm and refrain, and the sheer strength of their unique stories as she proudly sang them, was important to the powerful oral impulse that possessed many of San Francisco’s poets.

## **Ballads and Bicycles**

Of course, living between the actual and the astral worlds is no easy feat, but Adam was consistent in her belief that it was possible. Adam's expressive gestures, eccentric clothes, and emphatic mannerisms were her genuine personae. Her costumes, bright nail polish, and thick make-up revealed not just her desire to remain young at heart, but her Gnostic perception of her body as an outer shell, there to reveal the passions of her soul. Passions which were often contrary to the demands of the "real" world.

She did not let working menial jobs stop her from composing her ballads, and she talks about hearing rhythms and composing ballads when riding her bicycle (she worked as a messenger). "I used to see her riding her bicycle on the Golden Gate bridge," James Broughton said. "All the traffic was going both ways around her, but she just would ride across because she was always in another world. She never saw the traffic." After shocking an interviewer by telling him that she usually writes while on a bicycle, Helen retorted: "There is a sort of rhythm to bicycling, you know. You're gliding along, which goes with the ballad rhythms." Hers was a magical inversion where the imagination exists not as dream-like and interior, but as a vibrant and generous livable space. Here, madness is the symptom when that other reality—the mundane, work-a-day world of traffic and 9-5—imposes upon the imagination.

This process of negotiating with the real world even as she desired to transform it is also present in her idolization of the female form. She surrounded herself with beauty,

both in the art she created and the objects she collected. From her substantial scrapbooks filled with autographed photographs of famous ballerinas, to her collages which reveal those same elegant beauties transforming into terrifying demons, Adam saw the female body (or that of effeminate men like Bonnie Prince Charlie of Rudolf Valentino) as a point in which the physical converges with the astral. The true *grue* happens when this connection of opposites manifests itself, and an erotic, humorous, or macabre apparition startles the reader, (or Adam) with delight.

Adam's vision of women undergoing states of frightening, demonic metamorphosis is, according to Nina Auerbach, a myth that is prevalent in Victorian literature.

"The imaginative association of women with monstrosity," she wrote, "or with that which is conscious but not human, is both a stigma ... and a celebration of female powers of metamorphosis: Victorian fantasy art finds constant wonder in the juxtaposition of women with outlandish sorts of creatures."

Heavily inspired by fantasy literature, many of Adam's ballads are the conjuring of a monstrous merging of erotic and supernatural powers. The poem *Mune Rune*—which came out of her exploration of the moon goddess's domain in her film "Daydream of Darkness"—is a calling forth of earthy women's voices to "sing down the mune." Only when this essentialized female moon-power is drowned in the sea, taking with her all tendencies towards polarity, will genuine love, long forgotten, be restored to the inhabitants of the earth:

Frae every breaking wave  
Her wierd we'll dree.

Droon, droon the goddess  
In her ain siller sea...

And there shall be  
No more moonlight.

And there shall be  
No more opposites  
Over a' the Earth.

Still, the more powerful figures in her work are always women, and they are usually demons. As many women scholars have remarked, the inhabitation of the body by evil, otherworldy creatures is not only a supernatural takeover, but an erotic empowerment that quells up when women characters finally relinquish control of their bodies to an outside force, be it monster, devil, or desire. Adam never talked about this erotic tension in her work, saying "I really don't know why almost all the women in my ballads are demons. I guess because it's dramatic."

Certainly, drama is crucial to the success of a ballad, as Murray Skinner (of the Skinner Ballad Contest she won in 1948) instructed her in a letter. "Ballads must be dramatic...Flowery writing is *out*, Hard, straight wording most acceptable—blood *is* 'blood,' murder, death, ghosts, rape, hangings ...must be told as *is*." Adam heeded his advice well, and her ballads always have a good dose of drama and passion, blood and wicked revenge. She was not a master of subtlety or innuendo, and had no interest in delicate descriptions, as a stanza from her most celebrated ballad, "I Love My Love" makes clear:

The hair rushed in. He struggled and tore, but whenever he tore a tress.  
'I love my love with a capital Z,' sang the hair of the sorceress.  
It swarmed upon him, it swaddled him fast, it muffled his every groan.  
Like a golden monster it seized his flesh, and then it sought the bone,  
Ha! Ha!  
And then it sought the bone.

Love in Adam's ballads is not real until the flesh that contains it is devoured, melted, or absorbed into the ground. In a personal notebook, perhaps referring to a current love affair, Adam wrote:

Him would I meet among these glades  
And deeply  
Of him would I drink.  
His flesh should be my food  
Fresher tasting than smooth apples  
In the shade of the laurel wood.

Perhaps composing while riding a bicycle is what kept Adam's creative genius flexible and infinitely malleable—soon she began composing an opera written entirely in verse. This ambitious ballad melodrama called *San Francisco's Burning* was composed entirely in rhymed couplets. There were initially 26 characters and each was to have a special song that would introduce them and define their character.

On Halloween of 1960 at Ebbe Borregaard's "Museum," (a series of lectures, readings, parties and art shows held at his house) Helen and Pat performed the entirety of the play (about 2 hours) by themselves. Helen chanted her own songs for each character and jumped back and forth across the stage. Most of the San Francisco poets were there that night, including both Spicer and Duncan, who later described it:

“She performed the whole herself, with her sister taking parts here and there, evoking by candlelight, by the manipulation of a fan, and by her marvelous voice, a theater immediate to the imagination, true to the inner vision of the Underworld. Where the old gods preside.”

*San Francisco's Burning* soon became an obsession. With the help of James Broughton and his friends—composer Warner Jepson and director Kermit Sheets—the opera was successfully staged at The Playhouse, a small but vibrant theater which produced many avant-garde productions. The play was an enormous success, helped by favorable reviews in the San Francisco papers, and sold out for every show. But the production was fraught with controversy and drama (see my introduction to *A Helen Adam Reader* for the whole story), including a severe mental breakdown that had Helen hospitalized for the last week of the show. Ultimately she hated Carmine's music, and felt that she had lost control of the production.

In the end, the sisters wanted more.

### Off-Broadway: New York, 1963-1992

I, in whose heart the North sea echoes,  
And the Pacific roars,  
Why should I crave the sad Atlantic  
Splashing on Brooklyn's shores?  
-from *Deep in the Sub-Way*

In October of 1963, Isabella Adam had peacefully died. Although the financial realities of their ambition were an obstacle, they were enchanted by the possibility that

San Francisco's *Burning* could be a Broadway success. To Helen it was a divine intervention when James Merrill, her "guardian angel" recommended that she apply for a Merrill Foundation Grant to continue work on the play. Pat typed the application, and Duncan, Levertov, and James Scheville all wrote letters on her behalf. She was awarded a much needed \$4000 from the foundation in July of 1964.

"After this miraculous rescue," Helen wrote in a letter to Triem, "I am now convinced that *San Francisco's Burning* has a fate, and that all I have to do is throw all my energies into it, and I can't fail to find the right composer who will take the folk tunes I have found and weave them into a whole."

In 1965, the sisters packed their possessions into Duncan's basement and boarded the train with only a few suitcases. Like their initial arrival in the U.S., the sisters had no intention of permanently moving to New York. They were planning on staying in New York for only a couple of years, long enough, in their minds, to see a Broadway production of their play.

This was not as easy as they might have hoped, and soon all the grant money was gone. Pat was terrified of New York; she refused to live anywhere but on the upper East side. The only apartment they could afford was very small, ("a cupboard" as Helen called it) and not well kept. Soon the space was so filled with books and flea-market treasures that they couldn't find room for bedframes, and had to sleep on mattresses propped up by books. Although not happy, they had no money to return to San Francisco, either to

collect their possessions or to move back.

After a long series of setbacks and disappointments, the sisters finally found Reverend Al Carmine and the Judson Poet's Theater willing to produce the play and re-write the music. Carmine wrote the songs spontaneously during rehearsals, and although the sisters were nervous about his technique, he actually managed to compose music that was closer to their expectations.

"There are dirty, low-down honky-tonk numbers," the critic John Gruen wrote in the New York's *World Journal Tribune*, "shamelessly sentimental Rudolf Frimil-type love duets, mock-serious patter songs a-la Gilbert and Sullivan, and simple, quiet lovely sea chanties and Schubertian pastorales. Each of these celebrates the essence of triteness at its most winning."

The Village Voice critic, Michael Smith, was not as tolerant, calling the play "witless, styleless, formless, self-important." Denise Levertov and William Packard both wrote letters to the editor in the play's defense. Helen did not let Smith off the hook— his review had dissuaded an off-Broadway backer who was considering investing \$15,000 into a larger production. After the play completed its run, Helen sought revenge and sent Smith a curse from the Worm Queen, the play's main character.

She wrote to Duncan:

I was standing in a green light through the Voodoo scene, busily cursing Michael Smith behind my veils as usual, while the savage young "hanged Man's Beauty" cursed Spangler Jack, and suddenly Anubis glanced at me along the beam of green light, and this austere simple idea shot into my head, as though the god himself had suggested it. The next day I just sent

him the big Ace of Spades I had used in the show, with a line “from the Worm Queen to Michael Smith, January 1967” and that was all. But already I hear from several sources that he is badly frightened, and serves him right. Let him take that as “a personal affront and a moral outrage” and let him watch out, for I have never before been in such a splendid position to curse.

In a future column, Smith retracted his position, questioning whether his whimsy should hold such critical power. “Last week, for instance, I felt “San Francisco’s Burning” as a personal affront, almost a moral outrage. I was furious and attacked it with something resembling a sense of holy mission. But it can’t be that bad. And even if it is, so what?”

It might have been enough that a hot New York theater critic retracted his review after receiving a curse from the Worm Queen. But Helen continued to thrive in New York. She gradually built up a circle of friends as stimulating as the ones in San Francisco whom she had left behind. Poets, filmmakers, artists, and actors were frequent guests for dinner. In spite of the cramped apartment and low income, Helen frequently invited people over for dinner, a realization of her belief that imaginative creation and hospitality were interchangeable.

Since the work-a-day world was an imposition on imaginative freedom, Helen forged a domestic space where tiffany lamps, art-nouveau statues, Christmas lights, and stones illuminated a magical séance-atmosphere where friends could meet for ample, traditional dinners, served with plenty of wine. Visitors recall that the only spaces in the apartment were carved out by books, and that every available inch of wall-space was covered with postcards, cut-outs from magazines, and artwork given to her by friends.

Pat prepared multi-coursed dinners and served it on a card table with no legs that the diners had to balance on their knees. "I remember a wonderful pumpkin soup," recalls Samuel Delany. "I remember a veal with rosemary...and liqueur glasses of Cointreau. Because it was so small, it verged on the uncomfortable, though the conversation—and the food— invariably turned it into a wonderful night." After dinner, the poet Maureen Owen wrote,

"Helen offered to read your Tarot cards, if you so desired. When she shuffled the deck and began, a spell was cast over all. She was the real thing. No turning back. No kidding. It was genuinely scary and fraught with danger to her hear Tarot insights and predictions. Although she set about it with utter cheerfulness, one was chilled to the bone by the possibilities of what the cards might turn up. She was definitely magic. Truly a real power. Even as she made light of the reading to calm the recipient, it was too late. One knew everything she had foretold would happen and there would be no getting around it."

Pat was miserable. Although she tried to keep the space clean, soot would not stop accumulating on the floor, cockroaches roamed freely, and their pipes burst several times. Pat did not fare well in these conditions, and became increasingly depressed and ill. "New York continues to go on being unrelentingly savage" she wrote in a letter to Jess. Helen's rheumatism began flaring again with the colder weather, and Pat became severely ill with a rare bone marrow disease which she thought she had contracted from their living in Reno in the 1940's. "I feel sure it must come from a brush with radiation I had in San Francisco years ago when they were making atom bomb tests in Nevada because it is very difficult to harm one's bone marrow," she wrote in a letter to Hodes.

Although Helen remained forever young at heart, her eccentricity began to work against her and she had trouble finding work. Her friend Wesley Day recalls that he had arranged an interview for her as a file clerk at a friend's photo agency. She arrived, Day said, "wearing her most outrageous clothes--gold strapped ankle shoes, and sequins--doing everything she could not to get hired." She ended up doing temporary work, and in one job at a "jewelry setting dump," she had to sort through the floor-sweepings on her hands and knees, searching for the gold flecks among dust and cockroach shells. "I feel as if I were acting out something from Grim's Fairy Tales as I do it" she wrote to Duncan and Jess. Eventually, she found work as a bike messenger for Wall Street.

But the details of making a living were never Helen's main concern, and although she was poor financially, she remained active and creatively prolific. Small theaters staged versions of her ballads, and she continued singing her ballads at poetry readings. She published several books, including a 1974, Helikon Press very elegant, hard-back edition of her selected poems and ballads. Lita Hornic published another book, with which Adam wasn't as happy because it was badly typeset, called *Stone Cold Gothic*, and the Toothpaste Press published *The Bells of Dis* with engravings by Ann Mikolowski. Bob Hershon's Hanging Loose Press published her book of chilling ghost stories, *Ghosts and Grinning Shadows*, and also put out the New York version of *San Francisco's Burning*, with Al Carmine's musical score.

She began traveling, gave a reading at the Naropa Institute in a "Buddhist roller-

skating rink" with Anne Waldman and Eileen Myles, and again in 1973 with Robert Duncan. She did a Buddhist benefit in New York where she was featured with Pattie Smith, John Weiners, and Allen Ginsberg. She continued making her collages, scrapbooks and also wrote a screenplay for another movie, a "visual fantasy" called *The Slow Blue Labyrinth, A Celebration of Agates*, in which a player spreads the stones around her on the floor, and then prays to Anubis who opens their mysteries to her. The stones are "alive in the world of dreams" and reveal throughout the course of the play their mysterious true selves.

Many artists were inspired by Helen's presence in New York. The avant-garde German filmmaker Rosa Von Praunheim included Helen in several of his films, including one where he "brought his photographers along to our awful little hovel and photographed all the pictures and agates, and the patched up ceiling, & myself in various costumes, and then took me wandering around Coney Island on a ninety in the shade day." In the summer of 1981, the filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim took Helen and Pat to Europe for the first time since they had moved to America, to feature Helen in his film "Our Corpses are Still Alive." They stayed at a chateau in Germany and Helen did a reading tour through Cologne, Amsterdam and Frankfurt. The following year, von Praunheim arranged for Helen to perform at the prestigious Edinburgh Festival, but Pat's bone marrow disease made her dangerously anemic and the plans had to be canceled. Regardless, Helen was able to return to Europe through her roll as the evil

hostess in a "mad vampire movie" made by Marjame Enzensberger that was sold to German TV. "It was shot in Central Park," Helen wrote to Hodes, "and in a wonderful spooky old shut-up house in Greenwich village."

This creative activity ceased in 1988, when Pat died. With her anchor to the world gone, Helen did not function well, and locked herself in her apartment, refusing to answer the door or pick up her mail. "In her last years," wrote the poet and publisher of Hanging Loose Press, Bob Hershon, "there was no more cheer for Helen. After Pat's death, Helen's world turned dark and fearful. She was sure she was going to prison, sure all her books and papers had been destroyed. She became silent and solitary, and turned from her friends. I believe she was ready to move on, to rejoin Pat and Duncan and others she loved." Robert Bertholf and Rich Blevins were at her apartment visiting when a yellow bird, which Helen thought was a "fetch" coming to take her soul, flew in through the window. She died a ward of the state in the Carlton Nursing Home, Brooklyn NY on September 19, 1993. "I don't think she went mad. I think she went quiet, soundless," reflected Hodes.

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