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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “but she did create a world.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

### THE NURSE OF ENCHANTMENT

Even the avant-garde couldn't resist Helen Adam's ballads.

By Ange Mlinko

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**A Helen Adam Reader**, ed. by Kristen Prevallet. National Poetry Foundation. \$29.95.

The publication of *A Helen Adam Reader* is of historical interest, feminist interest--and poetic interest. Born in Peeblesshire, Scotland, in 1909, Adam was a teenage poet whose Victorian fairy ballads captivated the British public and earned the praise of the Queen of England. Reviewers lauded her “perfect ear” and “delicate imagination.” But this fame vanished into the past in 1939 when Adam, who lived with her mother and sister until their deaths, immigrated to the United States virtually by accident. The three women had traveled from London to Hartford, Connecticut, for a wedding; two months later World War II broke out, and relatives warned them against returning to a city of blackouts and rations.

The watershed moment of Adam's creative life came in the late 1940s, when her mother's health problems prompted a move west, first to Reno and then to San Francisco. In the Bay Area, Adam quickly found herself a member—some said godmother, witch or Nurse of Enchantment—of the interlocking Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer poetry circles, which, with the Beats, formed the avant-garde San Francisco Renaissance.

Adam wrote to raise gooseflesh. Her brand of ballad derived from the northern regions of Scotland, where minstrels evoked the grue (whence our “gruesome”). The grue manifests itself physiologically in the audience's shiver: the authenticity of a bodily response is the outward sign of the performer's otherworldly power. Helen Adam had, as they say, “it,” as in these lines from “Kiltory”:

“Come hither, my lady, lie doun wi’ your dear.  
A rival sae braw I ha’ reason tae fear.  
Come lie wi’ your true love for ten starry nights.  
I’ll grudge ye nae hour o’ your stolen delights.”

Tae the dead man he flung her. He nailed up the door.  
“Kiltory, I wish ye the joy o’ your whore!”  
Awa in the woodlands the wild throstles cried,  
And the waters ran red on the brant mountain-side.

Adam combined the narrative economy of ballads—where each line is a discrete unit of information—with the lush sonic tapestry we associate with older Anglo-Saxon and Celtic strains of British verse. It’s not just in the way she wields the Lallans dialect (those wi’s and ha’s, sae’s and braw’s), trimming consonants to highlight the more musical vowels. To see her sing her ballads—she chants “Kiltory” on the *Reader*’s accompanying DVD—is to appreciate how the language, trilling and seething by turns, possessed its acolyte. Adam gets so lost in it, she dances a jig to her own bloodthirsty tale.

When Helen Adam landed in Robert Duncan’s class at the Poetry Center in 1954, the effect was literally electrifying—classmates recalled a thunderstorm erupting at the moment Adam chanted William Blake’s “Introduction to the Songs of Experience” from memory for him. Adam also cast a spell over austere, uncompromising Jack Spicer. This conjunction was even stranger, on the surface: Spicer worshiped virile boys, Billy the Kid, Federico García Lorca. Spicer was struck by Adam’s rejection of the folky and fey, her chthonic appeal to the grue. No hippie she, in these lines from “I Love My Love”:

There was a man who married a maid. She laughed as he led her home.  
The living fleece of her long bright hair she combed with a golden comb.  
He led her home through his barley fields where the saffron poppies grew.  
She combed, and whispered, “I love my love.” Her voice like a plaintive coo.  
Ha! Ha!  
Her voice like a plaintive coo.

How different the ballad’s “Ha! Ha!” from the Romantic odist’s “O!” (Think of Shelley: “O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being.”) The note of mockery imbedded in the nuptial scene is but a foreshadowing of horror: in the climactic stanza “The hair rushed in.... 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.

What Duncan’s and Spicer’s enthusiasm had in common was the belief that Helen Adam was the real thing—a link to an authentic past and authentic power. In an interview, Adam admitted, “One critic called me a pre-Christian poet, which I think is nice...most of my poems are about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

The avant-garde needed Adam not only because she was Romantic, authentic and transgressive. They needed her example to unite their own fractured poetics, their own wounded demos. Despite herself, Helen Adam showed them how to be one again; she exerted authority, and they recognized it. From “Counting Out Rhyme”:

Then cam’ the unicorn, brichter than the mune,  
Prancing frae the wave wi’ his braw crystal croon.

Up the crisp and shelly strand he trotted unafraid.  
Agin’ the lanesome lassie’s knee his comely head he laid.

Upon the youngest sister’s lap he leaned his royal head.  
She stabbed him tae the hert, and Oh! how eagerly he bled!

Now we can read Adam’s poems for ourselves and judge whether Duncan was right that “what was important was not the accomplishment of the poem but the wonder of the world of the poem itself.” She may not have invented a new form, but she did create a world.

Ange Mlinko’s poems and articles have appeared in the *Village Voice*, *The Nation* and *Poetry*. Her latest book of poems is *Starred Wire*. This article first appeared in *The Nation*. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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