

EARLY IN THE WOODLANDS:
STORIES AND POEMS

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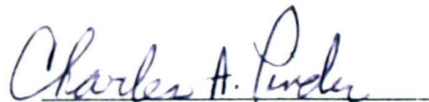


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Early in the Woodlands:

Stories and Poems

A Thesis Presented for the

Master of Arts Degree

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Helen O'Connell Hobson

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DEDICATION

To my children, Sharon, Daniel, and Paul, and to my sister, Pearl,
whose unwavering encouragement has been an immeasurable
source of inspiration.

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Early in the Woodlands

False Pretenses

Amy had no idea how little she knew about Steven Sjersja when they eloped one late summer night. Oh, he was the most handsome, the most romantic young man she had ever known. He was tall with dark hair and deep black eyes that completely mesmerized her.

And – he loved the moving pictures the way she did. The musicals, the comedies, and especially the dramatic Greta Garbo films. They quoted lines from films, remembering them as easily as the words of popular songs.

That first summer after graduation, he came to town to visit his cousins, the Thompsons. Karen Thompson introduced him at a church supper, and Amy was excited and thrilled when he sat beside her and later asked her out. They went often that summer to the movie theatre with friends, to concerts in the town square, or for walks along the river where their conversation flowed with recited lines from films.

When *Camille* came to the theatre, with the great Swedish star Greta Garbo and Robert Taylor as her leading man, they sat through it twice and even then were reluctant to leave the theatre. Whispering lines from love scenes to each other, they carried the drama out into the night where, under the street lamps, Steven looked so much like Robert Taylor and Amy's resemblance to Greta Garbo was intensified by her silky blonde hair and mannerisms taken straight from the screen.

Adopting her best imitation of the famous accent, Amy recalled a line from the film: "Oh, Armand! How *can* one change one's entire life and build a new one on one

moment of love? ” – a breathless pause, “And yet, that’s what you make me want to close my eyes and do.”

She shivered in the cool evening air as Steven responded dramatically, imitating Armand,

“Then close your eyes, my darling, and say yes.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Amy pretended to faint, laughing as he caught her and draped his jacket over her shoulders.

Knowing that Steven’s company was making her the envy of her friends helped to overcome her disappointment at not going on to the university with Karen. They’d both won scholarships that would cover half their expenses and for months, they’d dreamed of being roommates at college, but now Amy’s father balked. She was needed at home. What would her mother do without her? Mother wasn’t well. There was the baby to care for and her little brothers. Grandmother couldn’t do it all. Besides, he thought Amy would benefit from another year at home. “You take on a different personality with every book you read and it’s even worse with the picture shows.” Her father struck a match and held it in front of his cigar but did not light the cigar. “You’ve got to know who you are, be sure of your own mind.”

“Daddy, you’re going to burn your fingers.”

“Amy, life is full of choices. You’ve got to be sure you’re the one who is making those choices.” He blew out the match and struck another.

“Daddy, I’m afraid if I don’t go now, I never will. I *am* making the choice to go.”

“You’ve got to learn to be yourself,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard her.

“But I *am* myself. And I did win the scholarship, I did that myself.”

“Yes, and we’re proud of you. But we just don’t have enough money to send you this year. Business will be better next year.” He insisted she wait for a year. Wait at home in this awful little town while Karen went out into the world. The anguish of being left behind was only partially compensated by Steven’s attentions.

He brought poetry, candy, and flowers picked from Karen’s garden, took her for drives in his shiny green roadster, told her how beautiful she was and said he would adore her forever. Surely they were in love. Everyone said so. People had only to look at them to see they were in love.

In late August, Karen invited all her best and dearest friends to a party before she left for school. Steven and Amy helped decorate the garden, stringing Japanese lanterns from the fence to the trellis. The evening of the party was blessed with good weather. Joe Franklin brought his ukulele and everyone was singing college songs when Steven pulled her out into the garden and there, among the golden chrysanthemums, asked her to marry him. His dark eyes reflected the colors of the Japanese lanterns. His tone changed to Armand’s. “Would you build with me a new life on one moment of love? Would you marry me tonight?” When Amy said “Yes, yes, yes, I will,” he shouted out the news, “We’re getting married!” The whole group piled into their cars to drive across the state line to the Justice of the Peace. Karen even loaned Amy three dresses packed in a pretty little suitcase and promised to visit her parents that night so they would not be worried. Not be worried! Steven should have asked her father’s permission, shouldn’t he? But that was so old-fashioned. It seemed like a dream, but Amy felt quite sure and certain. This was what she wanted, yet she hadn’t realized that they would be married right then, that night. It was exciting and romantic. Amy loved being swept away by

excitement and romance.

The honeymoon lasted three days. Their small hotel room in the city was cheerful and quaint with chintz curtains and flowered bedspread. Bell boys in dark red uniforms carried luggage down the halls. Amy noticed that most people seemed to have piles of luggage, but she and Steven didn't need that much. Before their money ran out, they sent telegrams to their families announcing their marriage and then went to every picture show in the city, sitting through double features twice.

"Steve, let's go back to that little café by the river. Can we afford to go there once more?"

"We can afford anything . . . whatever we want," he said, grinning, "as long as we don't order very much."

Le Café Rouge lived up to its name with flickering candles and tiny tables. They held hands across the red tablecloth. *Where will we go now? Where will we live?* Amy had just tonight let these questions cross her mind. It occurred to her that she certainly didn't want to go back home, but she was pretty sure they didn't have enough money for an apartment. Steven was smiling. He really did look like Robert Taylor as Armand and for a moment, Amy saw herself sitting across from him on the screen. She tried to project her feelings into her eyes, just like Greta Garbo.

Steve was searching his jacket pocket for a handkerchief when a folded paper fell out. "What's this?" said Amy, picking it up. Unfolded, there was a diagram, a carefully penciled floor plan of a small house. Three rooms and a porch. A small entry room. Behind that, a bedroom and a bath. Behind that, a larger room that had to be the kitchen, and a back porch. Shrubs, trees and flowers were indicated around the house

and even what could only be a clothes line.

“What’s this?” he said. “It’s Amy’s house.” He seemed quite serious.

“My house? Where?”

“On the farm, down by the creek and the woods. I always wanted to build a house there.”

“You didn’t tell me! When will you build it?”

“I’ve been working on it all summer. It’s a surprise – a present – a house for you in a place I love. It’s small but there’s a fireplace, a big kitchen with a sink and a cook stove.” On a paper napkin, he quickly sketched a little house amid flowers and trees at the end of a long driveway.

“How did you know I’d say yes? How could you be so sure?”

“I was sure from the moment I saw you. Some things are just meant to be.”

“What would you have done if I’d said no?”

“Lived there by myself until you changed your mind.” Steven’s quick, sure answer stunned her, made her own uncertainty seem childish and too playful. She hadn’t known she would say “yes” until it happened. The word was out of her mouth because it seemed so right but after that, it had all happened too fast.

Amy studied the floor plan. The house seemed very small but she said, “It’s beautiful. It’s perfect. But where will we stay tonight?”

“There. We’ll go there . . . to your little house in the country. There’s not much furniture yet but . . . oh, it’s just a little house, Amy, but we can make it bigger later on.”

She hadn’t thought about *later on* with Steven. Suddenly the boy across the table seemed much older, a stranger with a strange name. Her name now. Amy Jones,

now Amy *Sjersja*? She still had trouble remembering how to spell it.

She knew so little about him, had never met his family, had no idea where this farm was that he talked about. Getting married secretly had seemed such fun, such an adventure, like something thrilling happening in her life at last. She'd dreamed of becoming a *woman of the world*, going to the university, writing for a newspaper, like Katherine Hepburn, or becoming a glamorous actress like Carole Lombard. But she could hardly imagine living in a house with this stranger, an actual house with furniture and a kitchen and fireplaces that needed wood brought in on rainy days from a woodpile full of spiders like the one back home.

No, it *won't* be like that. She smoothed away the thought, erasing the screen in her mind that had suddenly reminded her of reasons she'd wanted to leave home and go away to school. Her father's face appeared on the screen, telling her kindly that she'd have to wait a year. There was not enough money for college and besides, her mother needed her. Her mother and grandmother were there, too, surrounded by her little brothers. Mother, pale but smiling. Grandmother scowling, her lips forming familiar words – "Come down out of the clouds, young lady," – as Amy realized that there would never be enough money. Never. It was all just a dream.

Then Steven had appeared with his flowers, his roses, his dozens of roses. Actually they had been zinnias and chrysanthemums, but she remembered them as roses. She'd imagined life with him as a road strewn with rose petals and violets, leading to a place where she would be not only his wife, but a woman of the world, glamorous and free. Scenes of the future were enclosed in ornate gold frames. She'd not imagined a daily life full of chores like the ones back home – cleaning, cooking and doing laundry.

Grandmother fussing whenever Amy forgot and burned the chicken or let a pie bake too long. "Come down out of the clouds. Put those stories out of your head and just be yourself."

Amy knew Steven had no money, but after all, nobody had any money except in the movies. Her father was always saying that business was bad. At least Steven had a nice car. And he had built a house for her. And she adored him. What more could anyone want? Amy gathered herself to make the best of things. If there was one thing she was good at, it was making the best of things. Everyone said so.

Amy had no idea what direction they took when leaving the city in the roadster. With Steve's arm around her, she felt safe and warm, looking up at the stars as they raced into the darkness. It was late when they turned into a driveway and came to a stop. A row of nasturtiums lined the stone walk and the house glowed in the moonlight. Inside it was dark, small, and smelled of new wood, but the bed, made up with fresh linen, was wonderfully soft and they were very young and they were very much in love. There would be time enough tomorrow to think of ordinary things.

Before dawn, Amy woke with a start to see Steven sitting on the edge of the bed, putting on his clothes.

"What's wrong? Where are you going?"

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just going to help Dad with the milking. I'll make a fire before I go. Go back to sleep."

"What time is it?"

"About four. I'll be back around eleven and we'll go up to the house for dinner."

Amy sat up. "To meet your family? Today? Steven, I don't have anything to

wear. What will they think of me? What will I do? Oh, what if they don't like me?"

"They will love you. Don't worry about anything. Just be yourself."

She heard him moving around in the kitchen, starting a fire in the stove. Then the back door closed and he was gone. She was alone. The early light and the increasing sound of birdsong in the trees outside the window took away all chance of going back to sleep, as did Steven's words. *Just be yourself*. Was everyone going to tell her to "be herself" all her life? Such noisy birds, thousands of them. She'd never heard them like this in town. They were certainly being themselves. But how could she meet his family – this morning? She wasn't ready for that.

In a panic, she quickly made the bed and unpacked her small suitcase. Three of Karen's dresses and one of her own, a hopelessly wrinkled pink linen, were all she had, along with a sweater, nightgown, robe and stockings. She hung them next to Steven's clothes in the closet. Steven's shoes were placed neatly beneath the clothes, three pair. Amy wondered how long he had been living here. Her only clean dress was Karen's blue dotted-swiss. She tried it on, only to find it didn't fit and hung like a sack from her shoulders. This must have belonged to Karen's sister. The thought of meeting Steven's mother and father, dressed like this, filled her with dismay. *This isn't me. I can't be myself in this awful dress*. She would need to get her own clothes and return these things to Karen. The idea of facing her own father and mother made her wish for a telephone. If she could only talk to them first – but her father had never seen any reason to install a telephone. It would mean calling Mrs. Atkins up the street and asking her to call them to the phone. Mrs. Atkins would be listening to every word.

There was only a small mirror in the little bathroom. Amy brushed her hair hard,

encouraging it to fall in blonde waves around her face. She brushed her teeth, found a washcloth and turned the hot water tap. She let it run, but only cold water came out. Well, cold water was invigorating. Her face was pink and shining as she came out of the bathroom and peeked into the entry room.

It was completely empty and unfinished but its two arched windows looked out on a lovely view of hills and trees. The kitchen was the largest room. Square with a higher ceiling. The walls rough and unpainted. A wood-burning cook stove stood on one wall, its shiny black top proclaiming how new and proud it was. Its fire was welcome in the chill morning air. A long sink under the window was flanked by two cupboards and a wooden ice-box by the back door. A basket of brown eggs sat on a large square table in the middle of the room. The table's smooth, mellow finish was the one lovely thing that stood in contrast against the rough, raw floor and walls. There were no counters. And no curtains at the window. The room felt strange and raw, its ugly walls and cupboards grating on her.

It wouldn't be so hard to make curtains if she could find some sheer blue cloth. Definitely blue, and light enough to catch the smallest breeze. That would cheer up the room. If the walls were painted, it wouldn't be so different from the kitchen back home, not as odd as the rest of the house. "*Well, Maida, you certainly are brave,*" she said to herself, remembering a story from childhood.

Exploring the ice-box and cupboards, she found flour, sugar, salt, a pitcher of milk, a bin full of apples and a tin of lard. Everything she needed to make an apple pie except for cinnamon and nutmeg. No spices and no rolling pin, but she could use a glass turned on its side. Amy knew how to make do, thanks to Little Maida.

The role of Little Maida was one she often used at home. Not from a film, but from a series of books she read as a child. Amy loved Little Maida's courage and ability to make the best of whatever situation she found herself in. She could even make sweeping and laundry and baking into a cheerful, wonderful game. Back home, there was plenty of that to do. Thinking of herself as Maida, Amy smiled as she peeled the apples and rolled out pie-crust, cutting it into strips for a latticed top. *If it's worth doing at all, it's worth doing right. There – it's beautiful!*

The oven was hot enough, judging by the thermometer hanging from the shelf inside. What if she burned it – Grandmother wasn't here to rescue the pie. But she couldn't just sit there watching it. It would take at least an hour to bake. She looked for a clock but there was no clock in the kitchen. With pies, timing was everything. Grandmother kept saying "Pay attention, Come down out of the clouds and pay attention." If you mixed the crust too long, it became tough. If you didn't bake it long enough, the apples would be half raw but if you baked it too long, the pie would be dry instead of juicy. Timing was everything.

She found a little alarm clock in the bedroom, set it for an hour and put it in her pocket. Noticing a stack of books on the floor, she bent down and glanced through them. There were books on architecture, bridges, engineering, Shakespeare and Browning, and several notebooks. She had just opened a notebook when she heard a thumping noise, and then a scrape from the other side of the wall. She froze. Someone was out there. All her Little Maida courage fled and Amy stood as her bare self, alone and afraid. *Go see who it is, silly.* Her own plain, practical voice goaded her, sounding a lot like grandmother, but she knew it was her own.

She crept through the kitchen, left the clock on the table, and went on tiptoe out onto the back porch. Straight ahead, not twenty yards away, was a large wall of trees, so dense and dark beneath their leaves. To her right, a sunny green meadow rose toward another cluster of trees. She could just make out the white wall of a house under their shadows. That was probably *the* house, but she could not be sure. A bell tinkled softly as a line of cows made their way, single file, down the hill, followed by a man and a dog. Too far away to see his face, she could tell he was old by the way he walked. It was definitely not Steven.

Tentatively stepping out into the yard, she had the feeling of someone watching her. The hair on the back of her neck felt electric as goosebumps covered her arms in the warm morning sun. She turned and stood face to face with an enormous deer, a buck. Its feet were still planted in the soft dirt around the nasturtiums as he raised his graceful neck, his head perfectly balanced under his antlers. For a moment, he stood there, his great black eyes watching her, seeing through her, knowing everything there was to know about her. Then he bolted past, leaping into the woods, his white tail disappearing into the dark trees. He passed so close she could have touched his trembling flanks, golden in the morning sun. The liquid amber of his arched neck. His black eyes darting past, consuming her with one more swift backward glance that spoke to her as he dissolved, invisible, into the trees. She'd never in her life been so close to such a beautiful and huge wild creature.

Amy peered after him and found herself trembling. She hadn't imagined it. The deer was real. That instant when he stared at her, it was as if he had recognized her and had something he might have told her. *He is himself. He is who he is, completely. He*

exists *fully in this bright and pulsing light.*

Still, the strangeness of this place caused a constriction in her chest. She wanted to talk to her mother, beg her father's forgiveness, listen to grandmother's grumbling and her little brothers' clamor. She wanted people around her, the noise of life as she had known it to make sense of this new silence.

At the side of the house, she saw the deer's tracks, perfectly formed in the soft dirt, proof that he had indeed been there. The morning sun was bright now but did not penetrate the dense, mysterious wall of trees. Taking a few steps toward it, she was seized by a sudden fear. Other wild animals hid in places like that and some of them were wolves. Something moved in the shadows, sending Amy racing for the safety of the porch.

From there, the trees seemed even closer as she watched for another movement in the shadows until her eyes hurt. She listened, her ears straining at the silence. Nothing. But the silence grew.

The birds that had been so clamorous at dawn had fallen silent, as if afraid of something. Amy felt they were waiting, listening, just as she was, because they knew some danger moved below them. The tension in her body grew. All the voices in her head were quiet, listening. She searched for some familiar voice to help her.

Her breast heaved as the sobs came, remembering mornings back home, the warm noisy kitchen, her brothers' teasing pranks, her mother's laughter, grandmother pulling fresh biscuits out of the oven and Father's comfortable brisk way, or his angry irritation, "*Stop all this commotion now, and eat your breakfast!*" – the baby gleefully slapping his spoon on the high chair tray. She could remember but could hear nothing.

She saw them as if in a silent movie with no music. The musicians had drifted away. The piano keys locked. Every morning of her life before, had been so full of other people's words. She'd often left early for school in order to have a little time to think her own thoughts. Life was conversation, laughter, argument, talking and listening, always with other people around her. Never before this morning had she experienced such silence, such stillness, such loneliness. It was like drowning. She was unable to breathe.

The tears were hot on her face as she realized this would be her life. She'd married a farmer who'd built her a tiny house where she would be alone, living in silence, living for him to return from milking cows or whatever farmers did. And there was no one here to talk to. Even the voices in her mind were silent. Both Maida and Garbo had disappeared. And what did a farmer's wife do?

Cut off the tails of mice? No, don't be silly, this is real, what do they do? Even if I could think of what they do, I don't want to do it. I don't want to be here. I can't do this. The timing is wrong. I never meant to end up so far away from everything. I never meant to end up as a farmer's wife

She loved being with Steven, but if he was going to leave her alone like this – she shuddered, looking out the window. The dark woods filled her heart with dread. Desperately she longed to be back in all the commotion, all the chaos of her family, its noisy warmth, where she knew who she was and what she wanted. Going back home would not be easy, but they'd have to take her back. Grandmother would be harsh. Amy would just have to swallow her pride and admit she'd made a terrible mistake and then let them say whatever they would say.

She pulled the dresses off their hangers and re-packed them in the suitcase. *How will I tell him? I don't want to hurt his feelings, but I have to go home.* She put her purse into the suitcase, snapped it shut and placed it beside the front door. She felt as though a movie had ended and it was time to leave. The lights had come on, harsh and bright, and things were not as they'd seemed in the dark. *What time is it? Why didn't he come? What if he didn't come back at all? Well, she'd walk. She'd find a telephone and call her father.*

A strong burning odor stung her nostrils. The pie – she'd forgotten the pie. She hadn't heard the clock. She rushed to the kitchen and made a frantic search for hot pads, but found none. Smoke poured out of the oven. The pie was black. Balancing the tin precariously on two wooden spoons, she backed carefully out the door onto the porch and out into the yard. There was no sign of Steven and she was glad he was not there to see this utter, dismal failure. It had been a beautiful pie but now there was nothing to do but get rid of it. She walked carefully to the very edge of the woods and tipped it over into a thicket, tin, burnt apples and all.

Walking down the main road, the suitcase was heavier than she'd thought. Her heels kept sinking into the gravel, making it hard to take the next step. She'd walked about a mile when a car slowed down and stopped just ahead of her. A man leaned over and called out "Need a ride, honey?"

Amy was uncertain. The car was dirty, its wheels caked with mud. She couldn't see the man's eyes behind his dark glasses, but his face reminded her of Clark Gable.

"No, thank you," she said. And just to let him know that she did not need

anything from him, she added, "I'm just looking for a telephone. My father will come for me."

"I'm looking for a telephone, too. I'd be honored if you'd help me find one." He pushed the door open.

Acutely aware of how she must look in her baggy blue dress, Amy shifted the suitcase to her other hand and back again. Her right heel caught in the gravel. For just a moment more, she hesitated – then climbed into the passenger seat.

The Blessing

My Grandfather only came to the kitchen when it was time to eat breakfast or dinner or supper. He'd sit down and immediately begin to say the blessing. "Father, we thank thee for these and all blessings, pardon us for our sins..." If Grandmother or Aunt Carrie or anyone else was talking or moving around, they froze like statues, words half finished, hands in mid-air, until the blessing was over. Then all the voices came alive again, bubbling words spilling out to finish a sentence as hands moved again to reach for salt or pass a plate. It was like magic, that frozen moment, but it only worked when my grandfather said the blessing. Sometimes my Grandfather looked straight at me and asked me what I was thankful for. I'd say "Biscuits and Strawberry Jam!" which made him laugh, but it was an approving sort of laugh and made me laugh, too.

Sometimes when everyone was talking after dinner, I'd slide out of my chair to the floor under the table. Under the table was like a little room inside the big room. From there, I could see legs and feet and hear the words and the laughing. I could see the lower part of the kitchen stove where the words "Warm Morning" were written in blue letters on the white enamel oven door. Under the table, I learned to read by sounding out those letters.

The kitchen was a big room, warm, and busy. It smelled of strawberries and bacon and fresh green peas. Pots and pans steamed and bubbled on the wood-burning stove. There was a refrigerator in one corner and a metal cabinet beside it. The counters and sink were just

below three sunny windows overlooking a plum tree and the strawberry patch. There was a big table with six chairs in the kitchen.

There was always somebody in the kitchen, Grandmother or Aunt Carrie or one of their helpers. Sometimes Lucy. They'd be shelling peas or baking cakes or making strawberry jam. Some mornings I'd bring my crayons to the table. If I didn't get in her way, Grandmother would stop and show me how to write letters and sound them out. "J - A - M, Jam!"

Grandmother's oldest daughter was Lucy, and when she was home, she liked to stay in the kitchen, talking to Grandmother and showing her photographs. Lucy was a model and her pictures were printed in magazines. Aunt Carrie called her Lucy, so I did too, but when Grandmother talked to me about her, she called her "your mother."

"Sit up straight now. Your mother always had perfect posture."

When letters came from Lucy, Grandmother would pat her apron pocket and tell me, "There's a letter from your mother." She read them out loud at the dinner table to my grandfather, me and Aunt Carrie. The letters often had special words for me. Nobody had to tell me to sit up straight and listen to that part. One letter said that Lucy would be home soon for my birthday. It said she would make a birthday cake for me when she got here.

"That'll be the day," Grandmother laughed, "when Lucy bakes a cake!"

"Jam cake," I said, "I want Jam cake." Grandmother frowned, "No, Jam cake is for winter. You want Angel cake." I didn't think so until she said, "with strawberries."

Aunt Carrie was ten years older than me and not quite grown up. She wore pleated skirts and sang in a choir and rode the school bus. On Saturdays, I followed her around while she washed her long silky hair, and painted her fingernails. We'd sit cross-legged on

the floor, listening to music on the radio, and she would paint my fingernails, too. We'd practice walking around with a book on our heads, walking very straight so the book would not fall off. Carrie wanted to be a model like Lucy and said it was really important to have good posture. I liked to ask Carrie about my father, even though I knew what she would say. "He's in Heaven, Honey, you know that. Way up in the clouds."

On weekdays, I wandered around the house and farm alone. Outside, I was followed most of the time by our big yellow dog named Prince. Grandmother worked very hard, was always busy with laundry or cooking or sweeping, and would tell me to get out of the way. If she wasn't watching, that's when I would sometimes get under the table. Other times, I'd just go find Prince.

In winter, the house was cold and the kitchen was the best place to be, but on winter evenings, after supper, we'd get close to the fireplace in my grandparents' room. I'd sit on the floor or hide behind my grandfather's chair. It was cozy and warm there by the fire. Grandmother would forget to put me to bed, and I'd fall asleep on the floor listening to their voices. Summer or winter, I was always surprised to wake up in bed the next morning, not remembering how I got there.

On hot summer days, having been shooed out of the kitchen, I'd find a place on the porch and lie down, pressing my face, arms and legs to the cool concrete. Prince would lie down beside me, waiting until I got up again. Prince didn't know words like "Sit" or "Stay." He just did whatever I did. He'd lie down beside me, and we'd look up at the clouds and watch the leaves moving in the trees, listening to their rustling sounds.

My birthday came, and when I woke that hot summer day, a little breeze was coming through the screens of the long floor to ceiling windows. Prince was on the porch outside

the window, hoping I'd come out. My mother was coming today. I expected the day to feel different, and as I got out of bed and stretched, it did seem different because it was so quiet. I couldn't hear any voices. It was very still, and I froze like a statue, listening. Maybe they were already at breakfast in the kitchen and had left me asleep.

I pulled off my nightgown and looked around for something to put on. I thought of the warm, cozy winter evenings, and how I never woke up alone in the winter. I opened Grandmother's cedar chest and pulled out winter clothes, dressing myself for winter. My pink sweater, Aunt Carrie's green wool skirt and a large purple and green knitted cap. Delighted, I turned in front of the mirror, then raced barefoot for the kitchen to find the family and breakfast. I felt like a story book girl, the snow girl. I'd created a winter... maybe there'd be snow and warm fires and birthday cake and candles. My fifth birthday was already magic!

I stopped short at the kitchen door. Grandmother and Lucy were alone at the table. I was surprised to see Lucy and then stunned by her outcry, "What on earth! Look at her, Mother, Look at her. Who put sweaters on her on a day like this!"

Grandma eyed me, head to toe. "Well, I declare." She clucked her tongue. "She's just playing dress-up." My mother was away from the table, jerking the sweaters off me, throwing my hat, her fingers in my hair. "Look at this mess of tangles. Don't you ever bathe her or comb her hair? Don't you take care of her?"

Grandma calmly stirred her tea. "Lucy, it is time you came home. I just can't take this responsibility anymore."

"Now Mama, I didn't mean that."

Tears filled my grandmother's eyes. "Maybe you didn't, but it's the truth. I can't do things the way you want. You'll have to take her or come home."

"Mama, you know I can't do that now..."

Their words scraped and clanged. Even though it surely was because of me that they were talking this way, they didn't notice when I took a biscuit and left the house, still wearing Aunt Carrie's green wool skirt.

Prince was waiting outside the door and he ran beside me toward the old lilac bush. We crawled under the branches, which draped to the ground, making a hidden room inside. Prince curled up beside me. I broke the biscuit in half. "Look Prince, this is a magic birthday biscuit." He smiled and wagged his tail. He swallowed his half of the biscuit in one gulp and licked my fingers.

We could see the house through the leaves of our secret room. We saw them come out the back porch, waving their arms around but could not hear their words. We watched them glide down the porch stairs and float, with perfect posture, to the shade of the plum tree where they stood with arms around each other for so long, it was as if Grandfather might have been saying the blessing.

The Christmas Stranger

Some memories rise sharp and clear like bright objects on the surface of a river, swirl around and then disappear with no explanation, drawn down, invisibly progressing with the currents to the sea. These bright surprises can cause my heart to skip, and like a traveler in time, I feel the day as it was then, icy cold but with a heavenly brightness. I was but twelve years old that Christmas Eve day, seventy years ago, but I smell again the wood burning in the stove and the odor of sickness in the house.

Lucy, my baby sister, was burning up with fever and Mama's eyes were red and tired. All night she dipped cloths in water, wringing them out and bathing Lucy gently, but the cloths seemed to burn dry when they touched her skin. Mama worried what we would do for Christmas, with the war still going on and Papa gone, but that day she thought only of Lucy. She hardly noticed what I was doing. I found a little sugar and was mixing up cookie dough. There were walnuts but no raisins. They'd just have to be Christmas cookies without the raisins.

Mama took me by the shoulders. Brushing a wisp of hair off my face, she told me that the angels might be coming soon for Lucy, though she prayed they would not, but right now she needed more water, and I would have to go to the spring to fill the buckets. "I don't know what I would do without you." She kissed my forehead. "At least the sun is out today. Bundle up warm."

The cold air pinched my nose and turned my breath to little clouds. I pulled my cap down tighter and pulled on the sled. The meadow grass was crunchy and white with

icy frost. The leafless trees of the woods at the edge of the meadow were coated with ice, each tiny twig encased in shining ice, brilliant in the winter sun. It was so beautiful, I stood still for a moment, enchanted and awestruck, but the cold air soon pushed me on toward the spring. I could hear branches cracking and falling in the woods from the weight of the ice, echoing and sounding like a cannon in the distance. I was pulling the buckets on a small sled that had sides like a wagon. Mama had made it after the soldiers had taken our last horse. They took all the horses and all but one cow. We never knew when soldiers would come. There wasn't much more for them to take, except the cow. It didn't matter which side they were fighting on, they just took things.

When I got to the spring, I found it was iced over. I hadn't thought about bringing anything to break the ice. I tried to break it by stepping on it, carefully at first. The spring was not deep, but I didn't want to get wet. Then I jumped on it, hard, but couldn't break through. I pulled a broken branch over and tried to chip at it with a sharp end, thinking all the while how long it would take to go back to the house for a hatchet and how much Mama needed the water now, how it might keep the angels from taking Lucy, and I was afraid they would be there to get her before I brought the water. It was all up to me and I was failing, letting Mama down, failing to save Lucy. I felt hot tears in my eyes, freezing on my eyelashes, blinding me. I pulled my right mitten off with my teeth, using my right hand to rub my eyes clear, and that's when I saw the great, huge soldier, sliding off his horse, and I choked in fear.

I don't know if I heard the horse or saw the soldier first, but there he was, sliding

off that horse. His uniform was so dirty, torn and bloody, I couldn't tell what color it was or whether it had ever been blue or gray. It was the strangest thing how he seemed to flow, as if he were lit all around and from the inside, both him and his horse, little sparks flying off them in every direction. When he spoke to me, his voice was deep like a dark, hollow bell ringing up the valley. I can remember the way it sounded but not the words he said. Just that quite suddenly all fear left me, and I was as glad to see him as if he had been Papa himself. He looked a little bit like Papa, but much bigger, and he glowed in that strange way. Everything turned dark around him, and he stood out from the darkness.

He broke the ice, and I found a trickle of water, enough to fill the buckets. He put me on his horse and led it across the meadow back to the house. I ran in to tell Mama that a stranger had come but he was right behind me.

I will never forget the look on her face. It was like she was asleep and awake at the same time. As if she saw something so amazing she could not grasp it all at once. She did the strangest thing then. Moving ever so slowly, she picked up baby Lucy and held her out to the stranger.

He took Lucy in his arms and that warm sparkly light ran all over Lucy until she was glowing too. She raised her head then and looked around, and smiled. Not a sick smile, either, but a happy one.

What happened then was like a landslide in my memory, everything tumbling together so fast, the words and feelings jumbled and swirling. I heard Mama laugh and the shock and surprise of that laughter lifted my heart to the heavens. Somehow the house

warmed up and Mama was cooking breakfast, and I finished rolling out the cookie dough, finding in the back of the cupboard, where I had searched ten times before, a sack of raisins. That was a kind of miracle, too, because I knew there hadn't been any raisins.

The strange soldier stayed with us all day, but the next morning, Christmas morning, he was gone. Mama and me both wondered at first if we had dreamed him, but Lucy was well again, happy and smiling, and there were two sacks of raisins and real candy on the table, a big stack of chopped wood, and he had left his horse. When I heard the horse whinny outside the door, I knew it hadn't been a dream, but just as surely, I knew the stranger would not be back.

"Mama, where did... how did he..." But she put her finger on my lips. "Shhhhhh, Lindy. Don't ask questions of the angels, Lindy, especially one who gives so much more than he takes."

Three Long Boys

Against the sun, their bodies dark and slim
they dance along the railroad track, their
long necks, long legs, push and slap,
long feet in sockless Rebocks,
jump, hop, scramble, moon walk
long steps from tie to tie with
long arms draped on knobby shoulders,
flying fingers talk and toss
cracker-jacks to open mouths,
flash white teeth, red tongues,
laugh, howl and snort. Like three
young colts they clamber,
heads high and bodies limber with
their easy energy
in love with wind and danger.
And as a whistle blows, they leap
and disappear around the bend.

Toad

April now (it seems like spring)

I drag the rake to clear away those leaves
packed underneath the faucet since last fall,
all soaked from snow and winter rain.

I bend to scoop them with my hands
and grasp a strangely fat brown bud like thing,
smooth surface traced with curious designs –
too soft for wood, it almost seems alive.

I hold my breath and watch as it unfolds
and comes apart and hops –
then sits – all sullen, still eyes closed.

Oh soft brown toad awake too soon,
I rush to push the leaves back to your bed,
turn back for you – but you are gone.

Awash in something like remorse or grief,
I stare at the place where you were.

August Morning

21

Rivers of sunlight

wash the summer leaves and spill

like water falling.

Eve

I was conscious
halfway through my birth,
awakened in a heap of
snipped bone
beside a wounded man
who slept as
I became aware of voices
over me. *You're a helpmate*
they said, *a helper for*
the man.

When he woke I understood
he'd been in the habit of naming
things for some time. Right away
he named me "woman" – not
a proper name – but it was all
he could think of. –

I could see I'd have to help him.

Choices

*In our family, nothing is ever settled. We just
go on as if nothing had happened.*

O, Alice, No

It's not as if nothing ever happened.

I have stood in morning light

determined to go on

anyway.

Insistent efforts never praised

nor even understood, refuse to die.

Still I have made the choice

to move ahead,

to pull out of the pool

of tears.

In the Car,

they always fought, all three of them,
when riding in the back seat, on the floor
they kicked and pinched each other, deaf
to all instruction or suggestion to sit still and
keep their clothes clean 'til we got there.

Riding in the car was dull for one thing,
being forced to sit so close together, touching,
and impossible to keep peace among all
those knees and elbows tangled
and objecting to confinement,
impossible

unless by some clear miracle, one
began to sing, and then
the other two joined in
and two could even harmonize,
their angel voices rising over
swinging feet with rhythm as they
belted out the laughing lyrics,
singing "Jeremiah was a Bullfrog,
Oh Oh Oh -- was a good friend of mine"
and at the wheel, eyes on the road,
Life was full then, in the car.

The Gunshot

A wall of small paned windows and French doors closed
the room where my grandfather slept, his bed
beside the windows, black at night, his gun
in the rack above his head, a pistol
on the table by his side, and with the
big black Labrador asleep outside, we all
felt safe. We never locked the doors
and kept the windows open to the breeze.

One night he woke and shot the pistol in the air.
We roused and crept behind him by the door.
Grandmother said "It's just to scare them so
no one will want to bother us at night."
Her fingers held my shoulders tightly when
I heard the running in the woods and shrieks,
"It's Anna May," I cried, "Don't shoot, don't shoot."
He didn't answer, just looked hard at me.

I had betrayed what they had chosen not to say.
The gun went off again, aimed at the sky
through tender maple leaves that broke in pieces
all the safety of the silence in the dark.

Separation

I was fourteen when I chose to be
stronger than my mother, though she carried me
in silence still and heavy like a stone.

Such a burden, I decided she should
not bear more. I rose to carry my own.
The sudden weight beyond what I had known –

I pushed away the bonds that held
me to her, ripped the fabric that had grown
between us, tore myself apart to save her.

Struggling to stand, And out of breath,
I couldn't answer her demand, "What's wrong?
What's wrong with you?"

If I spoke of this, she'd take it from me – all –
If I broke the silence then, I'd fall.

The Road

The road remains but doesn't seem the same.

We traveled that same road to town and back

so many times that it did not occur

to us that it could not go on and on,

that there would come a day when we could not

go home again, when this same road would not

result in what we always took for granted,

that we would find you waiting there as always.

Oh, the road is much the same but smoother now,

that red dust that we raised behind the car

is covered now with flat black tarry pavement and

the driveway, long and looping near the house,

once was lined with yellow daffodils

and young pear trees all white with blossoming.

Some trees remain while many have decayed.

Though split in ragged spires, they still might bloom.

The road remains but many things have changed.

The porch is there and still surrounds the house.

Whoever lives here now must suffocate

with windows all closed tight. The house is blind,

gone deaf, unable now to see or hear

your quick light step that echoes everywhere.

The house is hollow now and cannot fill

the heart as once it did when you were here.

Now you become a whisper in my mind.

The road remains but everything has changed.

Third Birthday

I came down the stairs
that morning and
saw myself reaching
into the china cupboard
for plates to match
my pink dress
and white shoes.
From the cupboard door,
all glass,
I caught a glimpse
of myself on the stairs
looking down.

New Year's Eve

Reflections fell like silver rain
when music and the dancing stopped –
her husband gone to find champagne
before the new year struck. She stood
alone and smoothed her dark green dress
that fitted like a velvet skin
and glittered in the drifting lights
of the dance floor.

From the corner of her eye,
she sensed the swift approach from far
across the room, straight toward her, striding,
came a man she'd never seen
before and didn't know, his tall
form inappropriately dressed
in white.

She stepped aside, for him to pass
and find whoever he was looking for,
but straight he came, and suddenly
his arms like wings enfolded her,
so close, so hard, she could not see his face –

his lips consuming all the words
she meant to speak, his hand now firm
against the small green velvet of her back
and moving close against her,
left her breathless.

Then he was gone into the crowd
and she would never know his name
or why he plowed straight into her that night
or why he left behind
that sliver of a memory,
a feather that would drift on any breath,
or why it was she'd never speak of it but
hold it in the corner of her smile.

Intake

Late that night in bed, her husband sleeping,

she woke at the sound of a door

and footsteps moving firm and certain

across the living room and through

the house to stop there at the bedroom door.

Whoever it was knew the house, had been there before.

Terror froze, she could not make a sound,

afraid to breathe, ears full of hammering,

She felt him standing there.

Then again the sound of

heavy boots retreating,

sound of the back door closing.

How strange her husband hadn't stirred.

How strange she went back to sleep

so easily against his back.

By morning, no longer sure

of how to talk about it, bring it up,

of what to say – “I heard

footsteps in the house last night?”

“Why didn't you wake me then?” he'd ask,

But he would be quite sure

no one had been there,

so sure he was of himself, so sure

that he would have known

if it had really happened.

Collision

Through Here-and-Now, the Cyclist passes fast,
Here, now here, now here, the rapid change of place
a blur of bright blue Lycra, spokes and gears.
Metallic muscle skeens on whirling wheels
that barely skim the ground, that slice past avenues,
that weave and lean around the clumsy bulk
of vehicles, long limousines and trucks,
shoot past the sounding point of violence;

Chance thrill of risk and narrow margins,
the screams of twisted metal, shattered bone.
One instant shreds the present space,
rips into splinters all the grace and balance lost
like broken glass, a *now* that cannot be retraced,
gone by, a *here* that cannot be replaced.

Snow

Like snow, love falls and covers all
the jagged edges breaking us
apart. It falls while we lie sleeping
in the dark and secretly it fills
and frosts our layers into one.

We sleep and dream of stark horizons
with no fear, all doors to difference sealed.

Waking then to one white morning,
hall clock ticking, unaware that time
had stopped its muffled tracking, growing
louder now as bright rays burn across the floor,
dividing, peeling, paring, cracking
crystal pendulums away
to blame dark loam revealed below
like separate death beneath the fields
of endless snow.

The Break

Her silhouette against the cloudy sky
struggled with groceries and the old screen door
slammed hard against her as the storm began
with lettuce, celery and apples spilling 'cross the floor,
to fill the damp suspension of the urgent day.

Her right foot slipped its shoe and helped the left
go bare and out onto the grass. She turned
arms out, palms up, open to the rain,
with huge slow drops that splashed the sharp
remembered sting of ozone through the screen.

The Gulls

Watch the gulls
they glide,
bank, dive,
and soar
aloft
on sea-wing
salty,
cold and brisk.

Thin rays pierce
and energize
their flight.

Reaching apogee
they spin,
cruciform shadows
in the sky,
all motion coiled,
they wait as

Quiet grows explosive
and they dive
pure speed
they fall

to break the water
with sheer purpose.

The Gulls - II

Now drift

upon the wind of time,

glide for a while

through spray,

great swelling breakers

bringing in the tides.

How far upon the beach

can you reach?

Is this the measure

of your life?

To steal the sand?

To store the wisdom

in your depths

Or

Send yourself breaking

with the white mist

Toward the sun?

The Gulls – III

(How you know when it's over.)

It wasn't hard to get

a table by the window

at the Santa Cruz Café.

The morning fog

not yet burned off,

the clink of silver forks

on china,

the soft rustle of the

waitress' skirts, hushed –

a waiting silence.

Fog does that.

He ordered toast,

she asked for tea.

Not hungry, they observed

the white fog carefully

as if it required attention

as if it were a close up of their hearts.

The wide dark ledge outside,

a diving board where

careful preparation

made all the difference.

After you left it was as if I'd died.

My wooden body roamed well trodden ways.

By rote I passed through dull and heavy days.

After you left, I saw you on the sand,

walking away from me, that raincoat flying

in the wind, and overhead, the seagulls crying.

I knew that stride and hurried after you

until you vanished in the fog that took my breath

and left me standing underneath the open sky

where all those crazy birds kept calling, calling.

They cast a net of sound, a summons not to grieve

without recalling that you had not meant to leave.

Villanelle for the Forrest

Some say if no one hears, there is no sound
of falling trees in forests by the sea
of throbbing air, or trembling underground.

The silent ferns beneath the firs are found
as crushed and broken by the fallen tree,
as if someone had heard and there was sound.

If you have stopped your ears, don't turn around
to look or hear that odd reality
in throbbing air, in trembling of the ground.

No – don't look back, and don't look down.
What you don't hear, you wouldn't want to see.
Some say if no one hears, there is no sound.

If no one hears the cries from underground,
unheard despair cannot disturb our sleep,
like throbbing air. That trembling of the ground

makes us uneasy and confounded by
God's silent voice, the fallen redwood tree.
Some say if no one hears, there is no sound,
no throbbing air, no trembling of the ground.

Villanelle at Five a.m.

At five a.m. the roofs began to shake
Beneath the heavy military drone –
a long low sound of something hard at stake.

The talk of war had long been in the making.
Our leader said that we would go alone
At five a.m. when roofs began to shake.

Cries of “Peace not War” no longer making
sense in this the present conflict zone,
just long low sounds of some real thing at stake.

Deployment is a term we learned to take
without emotion, flattening the tone
At five a.m., as roofs began to shake.

The troops go, feeling every human ache
but without hesitation, ride at dawn
that long low sound of some great loss at stake.

Not knowing when that desert sun will bake
them, for the sake of home they steel their bones.

At five a.m. the roofs began to shake.
with long low sounds of life itself at stake.

The Arribada

As if by invitation now sea turtles gather
off the coast of Ostional in Costa Rica
for a gala mating party. They come
In the months of April to November,
by the hundreds of thousands,
speeding underwater, groups of
males and females swiftly cruising,
chasing through the deep green water.

Then as if at some clear signal, phase of moon
or biological decree, the females
turn to shore, and homing in
on that black sandy beach at Ostional,
drag themselves ashore in massive numbers,
massive bodies climbing one atop the other
to reach a place above the tide line,
digging pits with strong back flippers,
to deposit each a hundred eggs,
a hundred soft shelled gleaming eggs.

This is the *arribada*, the arrival.

One more thing to do now –
cover them and thump the sand down tight,
a thrumming for the ear of some composer.
Just suppose John Cage was strolling by to
catch the incidental rhythms of
A hundred thousand turtles rumbling,
drumming sand at this one moonlit “arribada”
on the beach in Costa Rica.

Turtle Child

The great sea turtle
slick and green
belly crawls
to lay her eggs on land,
digs down in sand,
deposits, covers them
and leaves them on their own

to hatch,
then speed on tiny legs
to water.

Crowds of predatory birds
appear to think of other things
one cocked eye
upon
those scrambling legs.

Born to race,
not many will survive.
The pelicans are too attentive.
The local dogs, raccoons and even crabs
will come to feast. But any

turtle child who makes it through alive
can claim to be a winner,
and has earned the prize
with its own legs.

The Wind

After Donald Justice's "The Wall"

They had been warned of what was bound to happen.
They had been told a hurricane was near,
but nothing dark was seen, the sky was clear.
The day lay calm, the water smooth and restful.

The danger was too far away to threaten
(glistening sand was hot and white as salt),
hard wind is only swiftly moving air.
So thought the woman running with the ball.

Her red dog leaped for it with sharp precision.
Nothing was about to change. First, the sky –
so clear above the robin's-egg-blue sea –
lucent – smooth – unusually shallow –

How could that be an omen of disaster
for paradise so beautiful, so blessed?
That night in dreams she saw the red dog
whipped through the air while birds exploded,

dropping ink-black blood upon her slippers.
Awake, she felt the lash of savage thighs,
the charging of a thousand thunderous hooves.
She heard them lift the roof and shred the timbers

of disbelief as Furies carved the twisting,
coiling earth and cast it to the sky.

Demeter Betrayed

It was as if the child had disappeared today or yesterday: the goddess tore her hair and beat her breasts—nor did she know where the child was, but cursed all earthly places for lack of pity and ingratitude, saying they had disowned the gift of grain . . .

Ovid, Metamorphoses, Book V

First he sent golden-winged Iris to call rich-haired Demeter . . . in her temple, spake to her and uttered winged words: "Demeter, father Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting, calls you to come join the tribes of the eternal gods: come therefore, and let not the message I bring from Zeus pass unbeyed." Thus said Iris imploring her. But Demeter's heart was not moved.

Homer, "Hymn to Demeter"

How dare he send you, Iris, this is not your fault
you had nothing to do with it, I know
he's the one who betrayed me and my daughter
and now he sends *you* to summon me?
I have no words to send him and no, I will not go.
He sends your charming face to taunt my mourning?
Here, take my rings, and take this scarlet scarf.
I will wear only black and ashes, only ashes.

My daughter is gone, Iris,
can you understand?

I have nothing to say to him. Nothing.
The wind blows cold and nothing grows
as long as she is gone. My misery is endless and I
wander sleepless, wordless in the night since she was taken.
I am deformed, demented and betrayed.
I heard her cries – they echo in my ears – I paused
too long to listen, paused too long to wonder at the cause.
And though I ran then, flew to find her, it was too late.

My daughter's gone.
I have no words for him.

He's worried you say about the condition of the fields?
worried about starvation of the mortals? His fan club?
Oh, please! – He has destroyed my life, conspired to take my daughter.
And she's his daughter too.

When Hecate told me what had happened,
something died in me. Let him hide in his disguises, his brutish bull,

his big white bird, his cloud – who knows what shape he'll think of next –
to trick some innocent girl.

Persephone's held captive in the dark
and I can't save her.
Can't you understand?

My tender seeds remain in darkness too, and cold.
How could I think of fields and flowers now? Besides
of all the cheap tricks, he used a flower from my own bright fields
to capture her. No, there'll be no more flowers, no new corn
until I find her. Tell him I've no heart to call forth fruit.
Does he think I can ignore his lies, his cheap and sneaky ways?
Even a beast would not betray his own daughter like this.
Let him rot.

I'll not go near him
while she's lost.
Can you understand?

Angry? No, that's much too mild a word for what I feel and
No, I'm not afraid of him. He can't hurt me more than this.
You have pled his case, dear Iris, sweet obedient child, you've
done as asked and need not fear his wrath though
he abuses power to maim and rape, to cause despicable harm.
Be watchful – wary. Look how
he tricked our daughter. Let him use his power to bring her back.
Oh, I have no words for him.

My fair-haired child is gone,
And not one leaf will grow 'til she returns.
You tell him that.

Night Visions – Terzanelle

Five gentle horses penned among the beams,
rearing, white-eyed in defenseless panic where
strange lions stalk the regions of my dreams.

While I am cringing, helplessly in fear
the foolish little dog barks, horses scream
and rear and toss, white-eyed, defenseless there.

The lions close their boundaries as a team,
as steaming breath of terror fills the dark.
The foolish dog runs forth as horses scream.

Smooth lions slowly walk a stately arc,
(the only door to safety is to wake)
while steaming breath of terror fills the dark.

Keep watch throughout the night for horses' sake
and for all helpless prey, refuse to sleep.
(The only way to save them is to wake.)

The visions of the night returning keep
five gentle horses penned amid the beams
as helpless prey, until I break from sleep
though lions stalk the regions of my dreams.

Eliot's Retreat

Let us fly then, you and I,
where the morning is emblazoned on the sky
like a theatre marquee in New York City.
Let us wander through bicycle paths
and darkened alleyways
of shabby seaside villages
and Dairy Queens with soft ice cream,
on paths that wind and twist like scattered
goals that never even mattered,
to leave you with an obvious elation.
So don't ask for explanation,
take a chance on elevation,
risk a bit of optimism,
let it lift us like the light
of some bright prism.

Vita

Helen O'Connell Hobson was born in Nashville, Tennessee. She graduated from Clarksville High School in 1952, where she wrote poetry for the school magazine, *The Purple and Gold*, and wrote the Class Poem. These poems are now lost and that may be a good thing. She attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York from 1952 to 1954 as an Art History major. While home on vacation, she took a summer class at Austin Peay, where she met her future husband.

After marriage and three children, her husband was transferred to a number of cities in Oregon and California. Helen worked at the John Steinbeck Library in Salinas, California, the Merced County Library in Merced, California, the Patent Library in Sunnyvale, California and at the Newport City Library in Newport, Oregon. In each town, she took classes at the local college. Most of these were community colleges and did not offer upper division work.

Years later, when Helen entered Austin Peay State University, she had more than 120 lower division credits. She graduated in 2002 with a major in Art, received the Dogwood Award for Creative Writing in 2003, and has earned a Master's degree in English in 2005.

Helen is a founding member of the Downtown Artist's Co-op Gallery and of the ARTZ group of Clarksville.