



The Language of Magic

Queer Occult Poetics

September 2024 - June 2025

The Poetry Collection



The Language of Magic

Queer Occult Poetics

Forming on the San Francisco Renaissance, a radical poetry and arts community that flourished in the 1950s and 60s, and its legacy, *The Language of Magic: Queer Occult Poetics* explores how poets engaged with occult influences to create queer identity. The San Francisco Renaissance was comprised of poets working in the Bay Area and the Greater Midwest who were influenced by early twentieth-century modernism and in conversation with contemporary artists like the Generation and at Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina led by poet Charles Olson. Many, but not all, artists were queer, and many shared an interest in the occult, a world that not only promises rewards their talent in magic and the supernatural, but also reveals what is concealed, whether by the closet or by queer coding, in the meaning of casting off these veils.

What emerges is an alignment of magic and queer identity, where queer coding operates as a form of magic, represented in the symbolism and their operations and rituals of poetic access to unseen worlds. The poets used this occult to re-orienting in different ways and through different strategies, in creating and highlighting marginalized practices and histories. They worked together on what was a radical history of resistance and belief and practice, that allows them to reimagine gender and sexuality, queer and language.

The Language of Magic: Queer Occult Poetics

Focusing on the San Francisco Renaissance, a radical poetry and arts community that flourished in the 1950s and 60s, and its legacy, *The Language of Magic: Queer Occult Poetics* explores how poets engaged with occult influences to create queer identity. The San Francisco Renaissance was comprised of poets working in the Bay Area after the Second World War who were influenced by early-twentieth-century Modernism and in conversation with contemporaries in the Beat Generation and at Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina led by poet Charles Olson. Many, but not all, members were queer, and many shared an interest in the occult, a word that not only gestures towards their interest in magic and the supernatural, but also towards what is concealed,

whether by the closet or by queer-coding, in its meaning of cutting off from view.

What emerges is an alignment of magic and queer identity, where queer coding operates as a form of magic imperceptible to the uninitiated, and where queerness and witchcraft provide access to a universe parallel to but unacknowledged by mainstream society. The poets featured in this exhibit were committed, in different ways and through different strategies, to creating and legitimizing marginalized identities and histories. Their writing occupies an occulted space, a liminal territory of unauthorized belief and practice, that allows them to reimagine gender and sexuality, poetry and language.



Alison Fraser

Alison Fraser, Associate Curator of the Poetry Collection

CASE 01

Manifesting the San Francisco Renaissance: Beginnings

1. *On a Grey Thread* by Elsa Gidlow. Chicago: Will Ransom, 1923.
2. Elsa Gidlow to Kenneth Rexroth, Dec. 29, 1983. Kenneth Rexroth Collection.
3. *The Metaphysical Needle* by Madeline Gleason. Decorations by Hal Goldman. San Francisco: The Centaur Press, 1949.
4. Madeline Gleason and Moonhead, ca. 1957. Photograph by Helen Adam. Helen Adam Collection.
5. Madeline Gleason to Robert Duncan, Mar. 11 and Mar. 19, 1947. Robert Duncan Collection.
6. *One: The Homosexual Viewpoint* 4.4 (Apr.-May 1956).

When British-born Elsa Gidlow settled in the Bay Area in 1926, she followed in the footsteps of the many young people who had moved to San Francisco in the early twentieth century seeking opportunity and social freedom. Gidlow had just published the first openly lesbian book of love poetry in the U.S., *On a Grey Thread* (1923), and had become friends with poet Kenneth Rexroth, one of the founders of the San Francisco Renaissance. “Something of a witch,” in the words of James Broughton, in 1954 Gidlow moved above the city to a property on Mount Tamalpais she called Druid Heights, where she became a central, but now underacknowledged, figure of intellectual life

and cultural change in the Bay Area.¹ The community Gidlow built at Druid Heights influenced the direction of gay liberation, radical feminism, neopagan witchcraft, and other countercultural movements into the 1980s.

While Gidlow remained perched above the city, Madeline Gleason, the other founder of the San Francisco Renaissance, was actively engaged in organizing the poetry community in the city. In April 1947, Gleason put on two nights of poetry readings at the First Festival of Modern Poetry at the Lucien Labaudt Gallery on Gough Street. Widely considered to be the first U.S. poetry festival, the event established the Bay Area as a key location for innovative poetry. Among the twelve readers were Rexroth as well as the young poets Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, and its resounding success prompted a series of festivals over the following years, eventually giving shape to the West Coast school of poetry now known as the San Francisco Renaissance.

While San Francisco was one of the most welcoming cities in the U.S. for members of the LGBTQ+ community, homosexuality was still criminalized and witch-hunts were commonplace, as a 1956 report from *One: The Homosexual Viewpoint* details: during a two-week period of raids at gay bars, 100 men and ten women were arrested.

1. James Broughton. *Coming Unbuttoned*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993. 127.



CASE 01

From the Top of the World

Come to me at the top of the world,
O Mine, before the years spill
Our rare love into Time's cup
And give our will to Time's will.

My wide basin is full of starlight,
My moon is lighted with new fire,
I have lit every sun in the firmament
With the hurting flame of my desire.

The worms there in the valley
Die—to forget death!
But here at the top of the world
I laugh under my breath.

There is pain here, and tears,
Bitter, terrible tears;
But the joys have warm mouths, and madness
Dances downwards with the years.

Come to me at the top of the world,
O Mine. The valley is deep,
The valley is full of the dying,
And with those that sleep.

But here wonderful winds blow
And the pines sing *one song*.
Come to me at the top of the world,
Come soon. I have waited too long.

42

Episode

I have robbed the garrulous streets,
Thieved a fair girl from their blight,
I have stolen her for a sacrifice
That I shall make to this mysteried night.

I have brought her, laughing,
To my quietly sinister garden.
For what will be done there
I ask no man's pardon.

I brush the rouge from her cheeks,
Clean the black kohl from the rims
Of her eyes; loose her hair;
Uncover the glimmering, shy limbs.

I break wild roses, scatter them over her.
The thorns between us sting like love's pain.
Her flesh, bitter and salt to my tongue,
I taste with endless kisses and taste again.

At dawn I leave her
Asleep in my wakening garden.
(For what was done there
I ask no man's pardon.)

43

Dear Robert,

The 19th 2
March, Wednesday, would be
a good time for the poets
to meet at my house (as many
as there as can), for a little
rehearsal.

Thank you for
letting me know about Emerson.
The programs as you being
pointed, and some slight changes
were made but these poets
who should not appear on
the same night have been
& kept separate.

Good luck with
the writing, and my best
to you.

Madeline Gleason

Dear Robert,

The Festivals
dates have had to be
changed. Now the affair
is planned and will be
advertized for April
22nd and 24th. These
dates are final. Can't
find Chris MacLennan's address.
Will you tell him (if it is not
too late) to correct this
for contact?

We will not meet
then on March 26th, but
later. I'll write you.
Thanks for every thing.
affectionately
Madeline.

Madeline Gleason to Robert Duncan,
Mar. 11 and Mar. 19, 1947. Robert
Duncan Collection



Madeline Gleason and Moonhead, ca. 1957.
Photograph by Helen Adam. Helen Adam Collection.

Initiation to the Coven: The Maidens

1. “Ballad of the Forfar Witches’ Sing” by Robert Duncan, ca. 1961.*
2. Tarot cards from Robert Duncan’s deck.*
3. Moonhead icon.*
4. “The Homosexual in Society” by Robert Duncan, 1959 revised and expanded typescript.*
5. Helen Adam’s camera and double-exposure photo of Jess, ca. 1957. Helen Adam Collection.
6. Occult books from the personal libraries of Helen Adam and Robert Duncan.

* From the Robert Duncan Collection.

Within the San Francisco Renaissance formed a small coterie consisting of Gleason and Duncan, as well as Duncan’s partner the artist Jess, and poets Helen Adam, James Broughton, and Eve Triem. Calling themselves the Maidens, the group gathered in each other’s homes, and often in Duncan and Jess’s Stinson Beach pad (which they called “Elfmere”). The group celebrated poetry, theater, camp, and magic through performances and gatherings, exploring the boundaries of poetry, spirituality, sexuality, and gender expression. The Maidens took the Moonhead icon, salvaged from a demolished soda fountain and standing in for the moon goddess, as their spiritual emblem. Frequent collaborators, the Maidens often created works inspired by other members of the

group, like Duncan’s “Ballad for the Forfar Witches’ Sing,” which he wrote for his “witch-lore-loving” friend Helen Adam.² Inspired by a famous seventeenth-century Scottish witch hunt, the poem casts Duncan and Adam as members of the accused and condemned coven. Meanwhile, Adam took double-exposure photographs of her friends to reveal their astral twins.

Duncan was among the first American men to come out in print, with the 1944 publication of his pioneering essay “The Homosexual in Society.” A complex work, it was highly influential in homophile groups and gay rights organizations throughout the twentieth century. In it, Duncan links the persecution of witches to modern-day anti-gay prejudice, although he condemns both marginalized communities by arguing that “like early witches, the homosexuals, far from seeking to undermine popular superstition, have accepted and even anticipated the charge of demonism.” Duncan’s perspective could be attributed to internalized homophobia as well as his apprehension about publishing this essay. By coming out and therefore uncovering a previously hidden truth about himself, Duncan allowed straight readers to reread his poetry for queer-coded language, revealing new meanings in the work. One of these readers was John Ransom, the editor of the *Kenyon Review*, who realized Duncan’s poem “An African Elegy,” which he had accepted for publication, was queer and consequently rescinded his acceptance.

2. Robert Duncan to Helen Adam, Aug. 22, 1961. Helen Adam Collection.



CASE 02

The ballad of the Forfar Witches' Sing
sent of the Scots into our American tongue

'Andrew Watson had his usual staff
in his hand, altho he be a blind man yet
he danced also nimble as any of the companye,
and made also great merriment by
singing his old ballads, and that lovel Shyrie
did sing her song called Twinkletum, Tankletum;
and that the devil kept every one of the women'

Sing your song Shyrie and you'll get a cold kiss
for Twinkletum, Tankletum goes a twirl to the moon.
~~The~~ When I hear your old voice fly up to its tune
that music raises dancers out of the mist

for my blind eyes lie in my head
like stones that would stave lassie or lad down from their
stride
and my heart's a familiar nest
where all the world's dancers gone out of my old legs
to hide, to hide - and Twinkletum, Tankletum

as the song goes, lovel Shyrie
I feel such a merriment raised to your beat
the toes of my old feet go on to your number
and I'll soon be capering in what I can't see.
:and that lovel Shyrie did sing her song
:and that the devil kept all and ore

"Do you know the Wren,
the cow's own Mother?
I'm an old girl
but I'll be your brother.
Twinkletum, Tankletum,
sops-in-wine
if you don't kiss me
and treat me fine
I'll raise the old bones
to make you a better"

"Do you know the Robin,
the leech's own killer.
I've grown so old
that I'll be your childer.
Twinkletum, Tankletum
oil-of-thyme
sing me your mad -
and make me your nurse
or I'll stuff my scrap bag
with your shade for a filler."



The Maidens: Jess, James Broughton, Robert Duncan [standing]; Madeline Gleason, Helen Adam, and Eve Triem [sitting], 1957. Photograph by Harry Redl. Helen Adam Collection.



Helen Adam's camera and double-exposure photo of Jess, ca. 1957. Helen Adam Collection.

Poetry as Magic Workshop

1. Jack Spicer, ca. 1957. Photograph by Helen Adam.*
2. Questionnaire for applicants to the Poetry as Magic Workshop, 1957.*
3. San Francisco State Poetry Center Spring 1957 program brochure.*
4. Poetry as Magic workshop, 1957. Photographs by Helen Adam.*
5. Flyer for a poetry reading by the workshop participants, June 9, 1957.*
6. Tarot card given to Helen Adam by Jack Spicer.*
7. Russell Fitzgerald Jack Spicer tarot deck, 1969.
8. "Initiation to the Magic Workshop" by Helen Adam, 1957.

* From the Helen Adam Collection.

Madeline Gleason's Festival of Modern Poetry led in part to the establishment of the Poetry Center at San Francisco State College in the mid-1950s, where Robert Duncan became assistant director, charged with organizing programming. Perhaps the most famous event run out of the Poetry Center was Jack Spicer's Poetry as Magic workshop, which came to be after Duncan secured a donation from a lesbian gym teacher who was in love with his friend (and fellow Maiden) Eve Triem. Desperate to reach Triem, the gym teacher "turned to the Poetry Center in despair," as Duncan remembered it.³ He convinced her that the best way to impress Triem would be to make an anonymous donation in support of a workshop, and she gladly agreed.

Applicants to the workshop filled out a five-page questionnaire designed by Spicer, with questions

like "What star do you most resemble?" and fill-in-the-blank poems. Meeting weekly, participants wrote poems based on prompts such as "Write a poem that should create a universe" or "Evoke magic spirits." One poet was particularly up for the challenge: Scottish-born Helen Adam, whose reading during a violent thunderstorm became part of poetic myth. For the workshop, Adam wrote an initiation ritual, which Kevin Killian and Lewis Ellingham describe as her "queerest work by far, one in which poetry is an unruly and amoral site of sexual and gender transgression."⁴ The initiate to the workshop promises they're "not afraid of Jack Spicer's spell," while Spicer, Duncan, Adam, and the other workshop members weave an intimidating tapestry of "a world enchanted, sublime, and absurd."

At the end of the workshop, Spicer gave to each participant the tarot card he felt best embodied them, from the classic Rider-Waite deck illustrated by Theosophist artist Pamela Colman Smith. Spicer later worked on another tarot project, this time a collaboration with his lover, the artist and writer Russell Fitzgerald. While Spicer never completed his book about poetry and tarot, the homophilic deck that Fitzgerald designed as a companion piece was printed in an edition of 100 and distributed to friends. "Tarot," Fitzgerald explains in the accompanying booklet, "is really a book of meditation & fortune-telling is only its cover. Those who have ears & eyes will see & hear many true stories in this book." Unmoored from the limitations of the codex (or bound book), Fitzgerald's deck can be read countless ways depending on its reader. Wordless and unbound, it occults hegemonic reading practices, offering new ones tailored to its reader's imagination.

3. Qtd. in *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*. Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998. 79.

4. *Ibid.* 91.





POETRY CENTER

San Francisco State College

presents

Sunday, June 9--8:30 P. M.

"Poetry as Magic"

Conducted by

Jack Spicer

A Reading by Workshop Poets

Helen Adam

Elyce Edelman

E. Borregaard

Jack Gilbert

Robert Connor

J. Kostolefsky

Joseph Dunn

Sue Rosen

George Stanley

Public Invited

Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Assn.

555 Chestnut Street

1957



Jack Spicer, ca. 1957. Photograph by Helen Adam. Helen Adam Collection.



[The Jack Spicer Tarot Deck],
Russell Fitzgerald, 1969.

CASE 03

"POETRY AS MAGIC" WORKSHOP

This questionnaire is in no sense designed to indicate whether you can write poetry. Since the workshop is limited to 15 people, I must have some guide as to which of you would most benefit from a workshop of this particular content. Some of the questions will seem bizarre or pointless, but it would be useful if you would answer all of them as precisely as possible.

A list of those selected will be posted on Thursday, February 21, on the main bulletin board of the Library and at the Poetry Center, S. F. State College, Juniper 4-2300, Ext. 251.

I. POLITICS

1. What is your favorite political song?

2. If you had a chance to eliminate three political figures in the world, which would you choose?
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
3. What political group, slogan, or idea in the world today has the most to do with Magic? _____
_____ With Poetry? _____

4. Who were the Lovestonites?

- 1 -

II. RELIGION

1. Which one of these figures had or represented religious views nearest to your own religious views? Which furthest? Jesus, Emperor Julian, Diogenes, Buddha, Confucius, Marcus Aurelius, Lao Tse, Socrates, Democritus, Apollo, Hermes Trismegistus, Li Po, Heraclitus, Epicurus, Apollonius of Tyana, Simon Magus, Zoroaster, Mohammed, the White Goddess, Cleveo.
Nearest _____ Furthest _____
2. Classify this set of figures in the same way. Calvin, Kierkegaard, Suzuki, Schweitzer, Marx, Russell, St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, St. Augustine, Sartre, the Mad Bomber, Marquis de Sade, Yeats, Gandhi, William James, Hitler, G. S. Lewis, Freud.
Nearest _____ Furthest _____
3. What is your favorite book of the Bible? _____

III. HISTORY

1. Give the approximate date of the following people or events:
Plato _____ Buddha _____ The Battle of Waterloo _____ Dante _____
The invention of printing _____ Nero _____ Chaucer _____
The unification of Italy _____ Joan of Arc _____
2. Write a paragraph about how the fall of Rome affected modern poetry.

- 2 -

IV. POETRY

1. If you were editing a magazine and had an unlimited budget, which poets would you first ask for contributions?

V. PERSONAL

1. Name: _____ Address: _____
Age: _____ Sex: _____ City: _____ Phone: _____
Height: _____ Weight: _____ Married or unmarried: _____
2. What animal do you most resemble? _____
3. What insect do you most resemble? _____
4. What star do you most resemble? _____
5. What card of the ordinary playing-card deck (or Tarot deck) represents the absolute of your desires? _____
The absolute of your fears? _____
6. Write the funniest joke that you know.

- 3 -

Questionnaire prepared by Jack Spicer for applicants to the Poetry as Magic Workshop, 1957. Helen Adam Collection.

CASE 03

INITIATION TO THE MAGIC WORKSHOP.

ALL (Singing) We sit in a circle at the table round,
Our feet are steady on the solid ground,
But our heads are spinning in the starry sky,
And we all shout Hozanna when the witches fly.

INITIATE May I come in
Under Hecate's wing?

SPICER Can you call up a spirit, and kill a child,
Create a universe tame or wild,
Blaspheme, and flourish through a ritual feast,
Or change your shape to a flesh eating beast?

INITIATE Let me come in. Let me come in.
There's somebody coming who wears no skin.
The velvet ones are close at my back,
And a wolf just crawled through the keyhole crack.

ALICE No new poet may enter here
Until he has wept a lemon tear.

INITIATE Please let me in, it's cold out here,
Away high up on the dark third floor
With the ghost of Ginsberg howling low at the door.
Let me come in
Under Hecate's wing.

IDA I am the one who keeps the gates,
The hidden poet who listens and waits.
Listens to poems both short and long
Hushing the wings of my own wild song.
A cat so black that her coat shines bright,
And a golden kitten hear me sing by night.
They think they listen to the birds of spring
So sweet are the songs I secretly sing.

If you can't keep quiet you may not come in.

DUNCAN Rings on your fingers and bells on your toes,
If you follow the road Jack Spicer goes.
Does it lead up, or does it lead down,
To Jerusalem, or to Hecate's town?
Though the torch of Heaven he can brandish well,

JAMES There's a glint at his heels of the fires of Hell.

ALL He hisses with sparks from the fires of Hell.

2

INITIATE I've peeped through the keyhole of the gate of Hell.
And I'm not afraid of Jack Spicer's spell.

SPICER Then stand in the center of the table round,
It's not too far from the solid ground.
The words are powerful, be prepared for shock.
When Duncan roars the table will rock.
When Joseph stammers the table will spin.

ALL Keep your balance. Begin. Begin.

JOHN I know the names and I speak the names.
They scorch the table like prancing flames.
Snatch the fox from under my coat.
Knot it three times around my throat.
Empty my pockets like a box of tricks
Till the damned boy drops me in the river Styx.

JOE Write to Lilith, and learn to your cost,
How and where a letter gets lost.

SPICER Listen, Joe's voice rings proud and strong.

JOE "Oh! everything into a song.

ALL (Singing) Everything into a song.

JOE Before the circle can spin complete
My burning babe you must cook and eat.

INITIATE Will it taste nicer
Than toasted Spicer?

SUE Out of the table there grows a tree
Too big for words. Have you eyes to see.
It's terrible branches bend to me.

ALL Bite a leaf from Sue Rosen's tree.

GILBERT Lightly over the table vault
Six brown dragons who are all named "Salt."

BOB Stain your mouth with forbidden juice
And chase Jack's dragons round my black berry bush.

ALLEN Forget gay dragons and magic trees,
And learn rough love in Los Angeles .

EMMEY "Low, low, a phospherent glow.
The wapatee frolicking light as snow.

JOSEPH Worse than the wapatee, friend beware
The embrace of my ravenous Teddy Bear.
Pluck, and put in my bear's hot hand

EMMEY A hyacinth from wapatee land.

"Initiation to the Magic Workshop" by Helen Adam, 1957.
Helen Adam Collection.

3

ALL (Singing) Snips and snails, and puppy dog's tails.
Love is left if poetry fails.
Sugar and spice and everything nice.
If your poem is good you may read it twice.

DUNCAN Little Boy Blue come blow your horn.
The dark prince riding the unicorn
Conjures phantoms from profoundest night.

SPICER But the wand of his magic flashes crystal white
O'er a world enchanted, sublime, and absurd.

JAMES " In the beginning was the bird."
In the beginning there was only me.
And all the little fish of my seraphic sea.
With a star for a bait you must catch a fish.
And serve it to Spicer on a quick silver dish.

GILBERT The turnings are tricky as a nest of snakes
On the dangerous track Jack Spicer takes.
It leads very high, or it leads very low.

JOE But along it the winds of Boston blow.

HELEN It's hard to follow when you scarce can see.

GILBERT I suspect he'll lead us to the bottom of the sea.

IDA The graceful unicorn prances high.
And Duncan beckons to the starry sky.

HELEN But I have a feeling, strong as can be,
That we'll all end up at the bottom of the sea.

ALL (Singing) Lets all end up at the bottom of the sea.

JAMES Silver bells and cockle shells.
Eve at her window weaving thistledown spells.

EVE Can a princess of elfland live with a man?
I invoked fierce angels, then the fun began.
My husband threatened. He bolted the door.
To the wicked workshop I may come no more.
Filch a feather from my angel's wing,
And trace on the table top a fairy ring.

SPICER Over the hills and far away
Where the moon doth shine as bright as day,
The world of magic is Duncan's stage.
He rules all magic like a radiant Mage.

DUNCAN I play a harp that is holy and great.
When I strike it all hearts vibrate.
Under the shade of Hecate's wing
Challenge my harp and strike it's string.

ALL (Singing) One, two, buckle your shoe.
Dreams to beware of are dreams that come true.
Ride a cock horse past Christopher's eye.
Kiss the girls and make them cry.

4

DUNCAN Now quaff fresh blood from a paper cup.
Does Spicer's pathway lead down or up?

SUE If you cannot answer this riddle ma ree
You'll be hung by the neck from the top of my tree.

GILBERT My scampering dragons will run you down.
East side, west side, all round the town.

JAMES Though they gleam as bright as a granted wish
Expect no mercy from my marvelous fish.
No man has ever caught my fish on a hook.
They'll nibble you naked, and make you a spook.

JOHN I will stun you with names of power.

EMMEY In the universe of my ear you'll cower.

JOE My burning babe will light you to bed.

BOB You'll find on your pillow the High Priest's head.

EVE My tarnished angel your soul won't save.

ALICE I'll plant stinkweed over your grave.

ALLEN You will not die, but you'll wish you could
In the blue-moon bed rooms of Hollywood.

IDA You'll be mouse for my cats, and their claws are sharp.

DUNCAN You'll wall on the strings of my mighty harp.

JOSEPH You'll fall from my ladder that leads sky high.

ALL (Singing) And where we bury you, why there you'll lie.
And not get up however hard you try.

SPICER Think fast. Think fast. You'd better think fast.
All the King's horses go galloping past.

INITIATE I can't guess the answer though I drop down dead.

SPICER Here comes a chopper to chop off your head.

JOE Now his goose is cooked.

Bob Now his tale is told.

HELEN He meddled with magic and it knocked him cold.

ALL His only chance, before all hope is gone,
Is for Ida to sing her most secret song.

HELEN One silver lyric. One secret song.

SPICER Another moment and the fires begin,

ALL Save him. Save him. Sing Ida sing.

ALICE Alas I she covers her lips with her hand.
His time runs out like sinking sand.

GILBERT Something is knocking at the window pane.

DUNCAN It seeks for blood.

JAMES It must not seek in vain.

SPICER Satan's envoy at the window waits
Till I wave the flag of these United States.
I will not falter in this fatal hour,
Nor name the abysses where I learned my power.
Enough to mention, and I do not brag,
That the window will open when I wave the flag.

JOHN What would happen both to us and you,
If instead of one flag you brandished two?
Two flags flourished o'er the table brown,
One striving up, and one besting down?

IDA Some things magic does not dare to mock.
It's time for Duncan to stop the clock.
And call up Kore with his earth-quake shock.

PAUSE for Duncan to read the DANCE OF THE HALLOWS.

SPICER Duncan thunders and the powers wide loose.
Now his earth quake shakes them free.

ALL (Singing) Three times round Conner's black berry bush
And we sink to the bottom of the sea.

HELEN ADAM

CASE 04

Continuations: Beyond San Francisco

1. John Wieners to Helen Adam, Aug. 20, 1957. Helen Adam Collection.
2. *Measure* 3 (1962).
3. *City* 1 (1967).
4. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* by Starhawk. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979.*
5. *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* by Arthur Evans. Boston: Fag Rag Books, 1978.*

* From the personal library of Robert Duncan.

News of the Poetry as Magic workshop spread to Boston, where John Wieners was editing the third (and last) issue of his little magazine *Measure*. While the second issue had taken magic as its theme, Wieners reprised the theme again under the guise of “The City,” printing poets from the San Francisco Renaissance, many of whom, as he wrote to Helen Adam, were sent to him by Duncan “from Jack Spicer’s Magic class.” “The City” featured Adam—“priestess of the city”—Duncan, Gleason, and Spicer, among others, and helped bring the San Francisco Renaissance to the East Coast, as did moves by several of its members, like Adam, who decamped to New York City in 1964.

The following year, Jack Spicer died, although Adam believed that he had died two years too early and his spirit would linger a while longer, as she explains in an interview in Marilyn Hacker’s *City* 3. This short-lived little magazine included editorial and

production contributions from Russell Fitzgerald, William McNeill, and Samuel Delany. In New York, Adam created a new community, for instance connecting poet and Helikon Press editor William Leo Coakley with “many queer writers and film-makers of interest,” as Coakley remembers, “notably the poet Marilyn Hacker and the novelist and hotly gay memoirist Samuel ‘Chip’ Delany.”⁵ As *Measure* and *City* make clear, the idea of the “city” was becoming porous as poets bounced between San Francisco and New York and points in between. What had once been a concrete location was becoming a liminal space simultaneously inhabited by those on both coasts.

Liminality is the domain of the occult, as bisexual witch Starhawk explains in *The Spiral Dance*. A chapter on magic begins with wordplay—“i/mage mag/ic magician imagination mage”—and quotes lines from a Duncan poem that is later revisited in an explanation of how to perform magic: “The language of the old belief, the language of magic, is expressed in symbols and images... Poetry, itself a form of magic, is imagic speech.” Even as practitioners of witchcraft embraced its liminality, the connection between the occult, poetics, and queer identity grew more visible thanks to neopagan publications like *The Spiral Dance* and radical revisionist histories like *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (1978), which argues that Christianity and compulsory heterosexuality are linked.

5. William Leo Coakley. “What to Do Until the Poet Comes, Part One.” Dec. 20, 2011. <http://keepthelightsonfilm.com/archives/gay-new-york/what-to-do-until-the-poet-comes-part-one#more-1517>. Accessed July 31, 2024.



CASE 04



City 3. New York, 1968.

August 20, 1957

Dear Miss Adam:

I would like to print in MEASURE your poem Anaid Si Taerg, but first I should tell you some embarrassing facts, for which I have no excuse, tho I give some.

The poem was sent by Robert Duncan with a great many others from Jack Spicer's Magic class. Three of yours I liked and one by Joseph Kostelevsky. Especially Anaid Si Taerg which I felt was perfect for the Magic issue, nevertheless I gave them to Robin Blaser, as I usually do with poems I feel use either material or come from grounds that I am not used to, or have even found/explored. I forgot them. Robin, in stress of moving, forgot. Our jobs, Measure #1 coming, Measure #2 going etc. Duncan's package was examined again, I hadnt changed my mind. #2 went.

Now Robin returns talking of the wonderful magic poems ^{by} you, James Broughton, Michael McClure, and he quotes one: Moondoom, Moondoom, Moondoom. I came home and rummaged everywhere, for I remembered. Robin couldn't remember, but he would look among his books which still weren't on the shelves. That night, when I visited him, he had found them.

So Measure has a magic poem and no issue for it to go into. And the irritation is that there is so little of traditional magic in Magick, let alone contemporary magic: while your poem contains both. So little of incantation, or a poem seized with the slightest mystery, that I beat my head. Yours overflows, I see now.

So if it has not been accepted elsewhere, I will print it in #3. There should be a priestess of the city. I consider it as the voice they might hear over their radios some night.

I will not be able to pay you & if someone else does, please go there. But I want you to know that I would be most pleased if you would be a regular contributor of the magazine, as you do them. That you find a ground here, and use it, widening each issue, or whenever, by a use of your own necessary form. That you keep it/ making measure for MEASURE thru this use of yrself, as we all must do.

I will return the others thru Robert, and hope you excuse my carelessness. Which cd only be halted by this kind of mistake. Altho it still seems quite in evidence thru the typing of this letter. Thank you for letting Robert send them.

Sincerely

John Wieners

John Wieners

New Generations

1. Typescript of “a little dream of me,” from *A Lesbian Estate* by Lynn Lonidier, ca. 1977.*
2. *A Lesbian Estate* by Lynn Lonidier. Cover illustration by Jess. San Francisco: Manroot, 1977. From the personal library of Helen Adam.
3. Woodblock from Manroot Press.*
4. Lynn Lonidier to Paul Mariah, Nov. 27, 1971.*
5. Gay Poetry Reading fundraiser for the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, 1978.*
6. Harvey Milk to Bruce Boone, Mar. 31, 1978. Bruce Boone Collection.
7. “Ritual for Winter Soulstice” by Aaron Shurin, 1975. Aaron Shurin Collection.

* Manroot/Paul Mariah Collection.

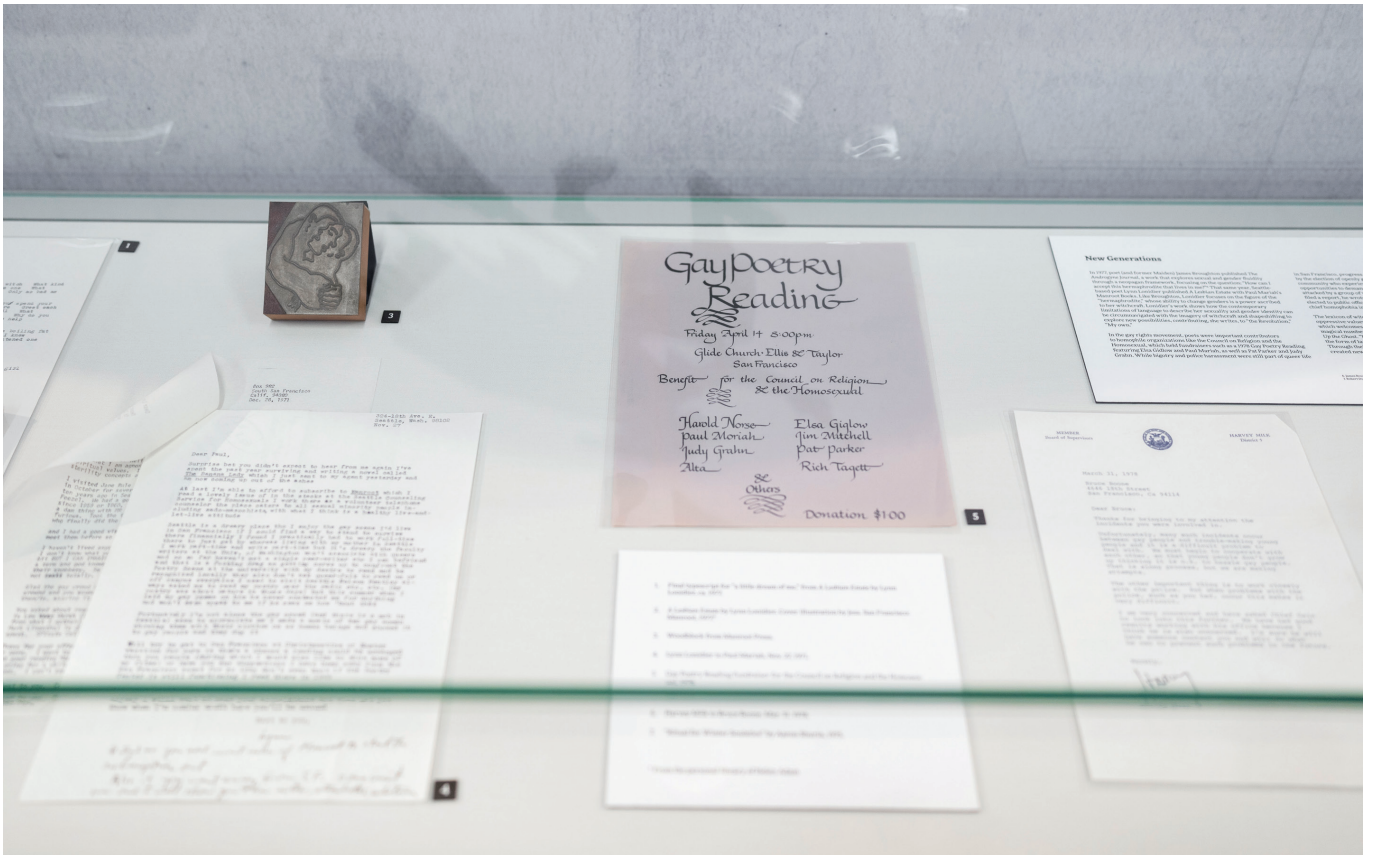
In 1977, poet (and former Maiden) James Broughton published *The Androgyne Journal*, a work that explores sexual and gender fluidity through a neopagan framework, focusing on the question: “How can I accept this hermaphrodite that lives in me?”⁶ That same year, Seattle-based poet Lynn Lonidier published *A Lesbian Estate* with Paul Mariah’s Manroot Books. Like Broughton, Lonidier focused on the figure of the “hermaphrodite,” whose ability to change genders is a power ascribed to her witchcraft. Lonidier’s work shows how the contemporary limitations of language to describe her sexuality and gender identity can be circumnavigated with the imagery of witchcraft and shapeshifting to explore new possibilities, contributing, she writes, to “the Revolution”: “My own.”

In the gay rights movement, poets were important contributors to homophile organizations like the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, which held fundraisers such as a 1978 Gay Poetry Reading featuring Elsa Gidlow and Paul Mariah, as well as Pat Parker and Judy Grahn. While bigotry and police harassment were still part of queer life in San Francisco, progress forged by homophile organizations as well as by the election of openly gay officials meant that members of the LGBTQ+ community who experienced discrimination or worse had increasing opportunities to demand basic civil rights. When poet Bruce Boone was attacked by a group of young men and then dismissed by police when he filed a report, he wrote to Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, who promised to address with the chief homophobia in the police department.

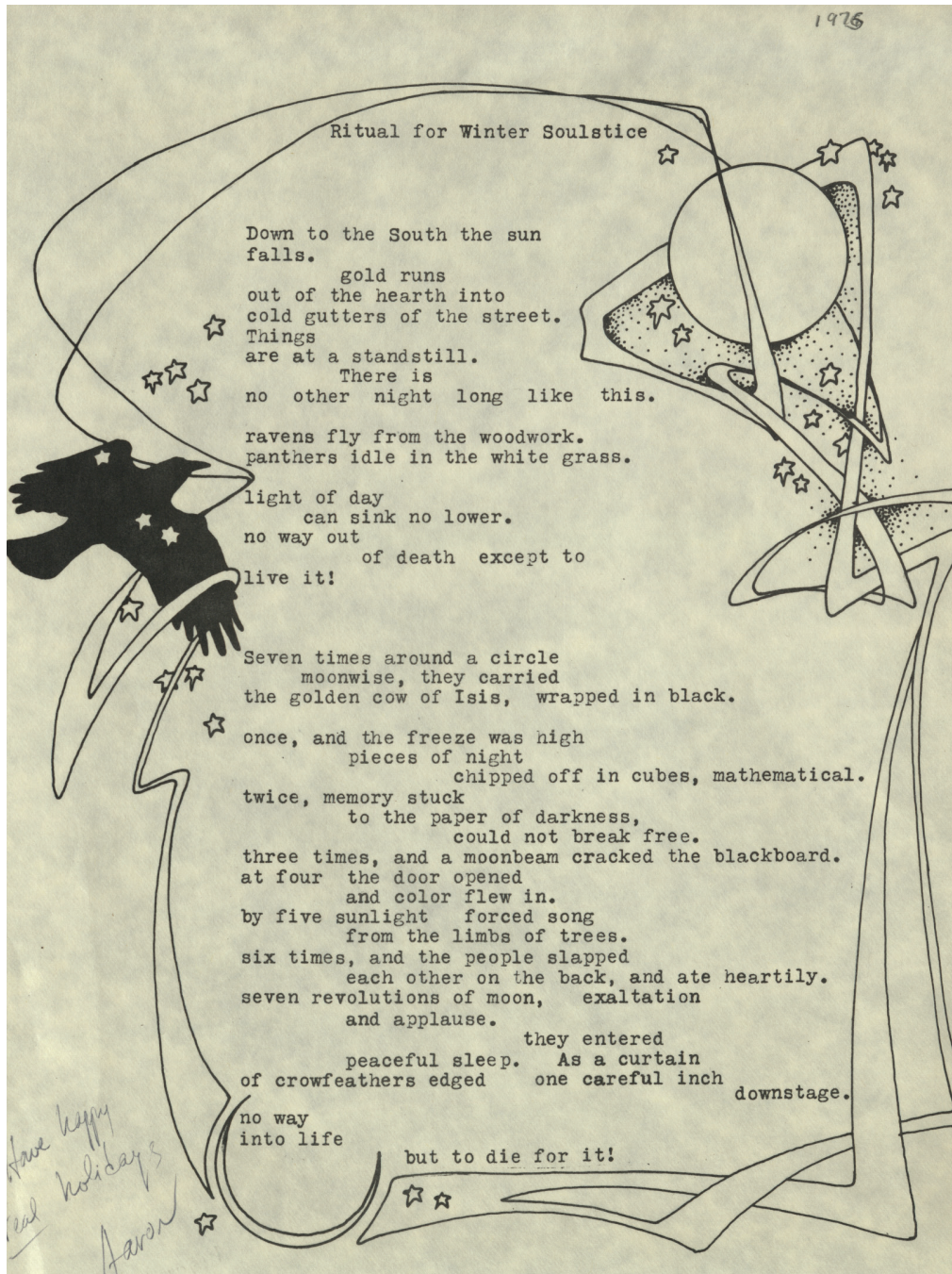
The lexicon of witchcraft continued to be a useful tool to counter oppressive values, as in Aaron Shurin’s “Ritual for Winter Soulstice,” which welcomes the new season through an invocation based on the magical number 7. The poem was republished in Shurin’s 1980 book *Giving Up the Ghost*. “Poetry,” Duncan writes in his preface to the book, “is surely the form of language re-arranged to accommodate new knowledge.”⁷ Through their poetics of the occult, the poets featured in this exhibit created new possibilities for gender and sexuality.

6. James Broughton. *The Androgyne Journal*. Oakland, CA: The Scrimshaw Press, 1977. 7.

7. Robert Duncan, “Preface.” *Giving Up the Ghost* by Aaron Shurin. San Francisco: Rose Deeppress Press, 1980. 7.



CASE 05



"Ritual for Winter Soulstice" by Aaron Shurin, 1975.

354-18th Ave. E.
Seattle, Wash. 98102
Nov. 27

Dear Paul,

Surprise bet you didn't expect to hear from me again I've spent the past year surviving and writing a novel called The Banana Lady which I just sent to my agent yesterday and am now coming up out of the ashes

At last I'm able to afford to subscribe to Manroot which I read a lovely issue of in the stacks at the Seattle Counseling Service for Homosexuals I work there as a volunteer telephone counselor the place caters to all sexual minority people including sado-masochists, with what I think is a healthy live-and-let-live attitude

Seattle is a dreary place tho I enjoy the gay scene I'd live in San Francisco if I could find a way to stand to survive there financially I found I practically had to work full-time there to just get by whereas living with my mother in Seattle I work part-time and write part-time but it's dreary the faculty writers at the Univ. of Washington won't associate with queers and so so far haven't met a single peer-writer who I can befriend and that is a fucking drag an getting nerve up to confront the Poetry Scene at the university with my desire to read and be recognized locally they also don't ask queer-folk to read on or off campus everytime I used to visit Seattle Nelson Bentley always asked me to read my poetry over the radio etc. etc. (my poetry was about nature in those days) but this summer when I laid my gay poems on him he never contacted me for anything and won't even speak to me if he sees me how 'bout that

Fortunately I'm not alone the gay crowd (and there is a mob in Seattle) seem to appreciate me I made a movie of two gay women showing them with their clothes on as human beings and showed it to gay people and they dug it

Will try to get to San Francisco at Christmastime or Easter vacation for sure is there a chance a reading could be arranged thru you people (during which I would also like to show some of my films) or have you any suggestions I have been away from the San Francisco scene for so long don't even know if the Poetry Center is still functioning I read there in 1965

Anyway I still want to make your acquaintance and will let you know when I'm coming south hope you'll be around

Best to you,

hymn
I send me your most recent issue of Manroot to start the subscription out
Also if you want away from S.F. come visit me and I will show you the sites, stands, whatnot

Lynn Lonidier to Paul Mariah, Nov. 27, 1971.
Manroot/Paul Mariah Collection

Box 982
South San Francisco
Calif. 94080
Dec. 28, 1971

Dear Lynn Lonidier,

Meant to write earlier but December got too hectic for me. Enclosed is \$5.00 for publication of four poems in Manroot # 5. Rich and I wanted to have something of yours in the mag before we featured you in 7. Exposure. Or whatever you want to call it. Also plugged your little book and gave credit. I think I have sent three copies on its way to you. One a subscriber's copy. The other two author comp.

Glad to hear about your work at the Seattle Counseling Service. I do work here with a couple of groups but at an organizational level. Like Council of Religion and Homophile, every now and then I remind them that I am agnostic or atheist but that I am concerned over spiritual values. It makes them do some doubttakes to break their sterility concepts anyway.

I visited Jane Rule when I stayed with George Bowering in Vancouver in October for several hours. Also visited a fraternity brother from ten years ago in Seattle, who is now in speech dept. at UW. Jerry Fezell. He had a good visit considering we hadn't seen each other since 1959 or 1960. Then back here to find my printer hadn't done a damn thing with NR # 5 in 120 days, hadn't burned one plate. I was furious. Took the issue away from him and gave it to someone else who finally did the issue within about four weeks. Anyway Jane, Helen and I had a good visit considering. I hadn't been lucky enuf to meet them before so it was worth it.

I haven't lived anyplace but SF since I have hit the scene here. So I don't know what you are going through with the professional faculty bit BUT I CAN IMAGINE because I was on staff at state (SF STATE) for a term and god knows that just about blew some people out there with their snobbery. So I have an inkling of what it is really like but not really totally.

Glad the gay crowd appreciate you. Seattle needs that kind of sanity around and you sound like you are really into doing your thing with them/ie. sharing it. That's great.

You asked about readings. The one who handles INTERSECTION readings is Lew Marsh (NY crowd, ancel hair, some wildman ~~SEXUAL~~'s friend from what I gather). His address is Box 521, Sinton Beach Calif. 94970. Mark Linenthal is director of SFSate Poetry Center. Like we barely speak. SFSate College 19th & Holloway SF. He tolerates me poorly.

Thank for your offer. I doubt if I get that way again for another year. Or more. I want to thank you again for your poems, your subscription, and your reading Manroot. Hope others turn on to it and we can keep it going for a while. I don't think I want to do more than 16 or 20 issues. I can't see ~~xxxxx~~ixing myself to it say in 1982 or some...

All best to you. Call 621-9917 if you get to the city. Pax for now. And blessings,

Paul Mariah to Lynn Lonidier, Dec. 28, 1971.
Manroot/Paul Mariah Collection.

Gay Poetry
Reading

Friday April 14 8:00pm.
Glide Church, Ellis & Taylor
San Francisco

Benefit for the Council on Religion
& the Homosexual

<p>Harold Norse Paul Moriah Judy Grahn Alta</p>	<p>Elsa Giglow Jim Mitchell Pat Parker Rich Tagett</p>
---	--

&
Others

Donation \$100

Gay Poetry Reading fundraiser for the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, 1978. Manroot/Paul Mariah Collection.

CASE 05

4646 18th St.
San Francisco, CA 94114
March 29, 1978

Harvey Milk's Office
City Hall, Attn. Dick Pabich

Dear Mr. Pabich,

Here is the short summary of what happened to me last night, which you suggested it would be good to send to your office.

A little after midnight while I was hitchhiking up 18th St. about a block above Castro St, a late model pick-up truck with two white youths in their early to middle twenties pulled up suddenly to the curb, the door of the cab opened and before I realized what the situation was, one of the two had run over to my side. Then he began hitting me hard in the left temple and I began screaming as loud as possible. He then stopped, laughed, and retreated to the truck where the other was waiting and yelled out, "We just wanted to trash you!" Then they drove off, heading up 18th St., west. I was able to clearly see their license plate, though. It was license number 1 F01 1131.

I called the police and a squad car arrived a few minutes later. They asked me if I would get into the back seat of the squad car, but I declined, saying I wasn't feeling very trustful of anybody after what had just happened and preferred to stand outside. One of the officers then took the report. The other officer kept asking me why I didn't trust the police. He seemed put out that I wouldn't get in the police car. Finally another police car pulled up and the officer in that car asked the two policemen who were talking to me what the problem was. One of them answered that it was just another "fruit beating." At this point I got very angry and asked him what he had just said. He repeated the words and added that it was "just what we call it in this area." This made me angry enough

to want to just leave without saying anything else to them. I told them I was in a situation that I could no longer deal with and then told them just to forget everything, because I was leaving. Then I left, and returned home, which is very near to the area.

I am really upset that the police would use abusive language about gay people to me, particularly because I had just reported a crime against gay people to them. After I left them I felt that this aspect of what happened to me was just as important as the fact that I been violently attacked and beaten. It seems particularly important to me because on two occasions before, both of them in the last six weeks, I was harrassed and threatened and asked for money by male teenagers who live in the area, once on 18th St. just below Castro St. and the other time on 18th just above Castro. These incidents didn't seem as serious to me then as they do now.

Yours sincerely,

William Bruce Boone

William Bruce Boone

cc: Human Rights Commission; Chief Gain, Police Dept.;
Sentinal Newspaper.

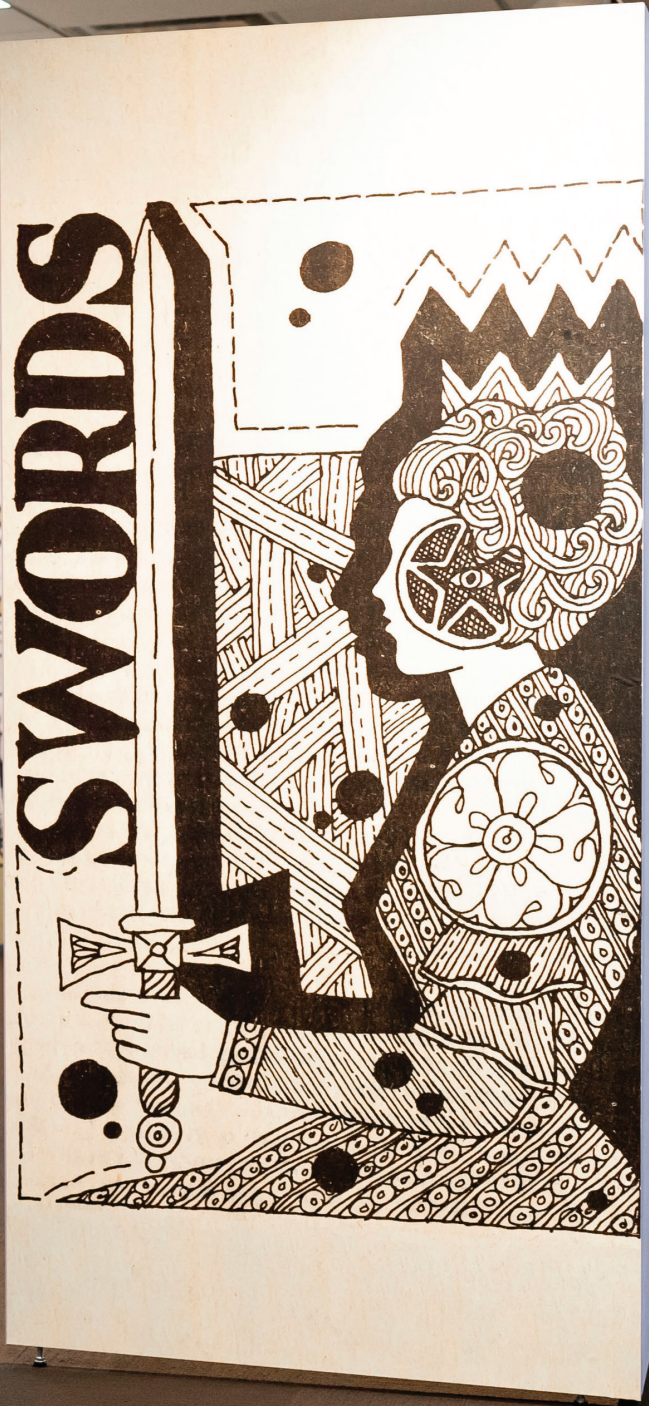
Acknowledgements & Permissions

Grateful acknowledgement to my colleagues Rhys Elia, Lynn Lasota, James Maynard, Edric Mesmer, Nicholas Michalski, Kristopher Miller, William Offhaus, Lillian Reynolds, and Denise Wolfe for their support of this exhibit. Exhibit photos by Julie Pavlock.

The following individuals and estates generously granted permission to publish archival materials in this catalog: Bruce Boone; the Jess Collins Trust (for work by Jess and Robert Duncan); the estate of Paul Mariah; Aaron Shurin; the estate of Jack Spicer; and the literary estate of John Wieners. Materials by Helen Adam are copyright the Poetry Collection.

All materials are from the Poetry Collection.

Cover: from *The Queen o' Crow Castle* by Helen Adam. Illustrated and lettered by Jess.



II



Copyright © 2025 The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries,
University at Buffalo, The State University of New York