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Introducing the *SRPR* Illinois Poet:
Helen Degen Cohen

Helen Degen Cohen (Halina Degenfisz) is a graduate of the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She travelled to schools throughout the state as part of the Artist in Education program and then returned to teaching and then to co-editing *Rhino* magazine. She is a featured poet in the October 2001 issue of *TheScreamOnline*, and her work has appeared widely in literary journals. She has been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry. Other honors include first prize in the British *Stand Magazine's* International Fiction Competition, two Illinois Arts Council Awards (fiction and poetry), an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, and fellowships to several art colonies in the United States. An essay, "This Dark Poland, Ethnicity in the Work of Helen Degen Cohen" appeared in *Something of My Very Own to Say: American Women Writers of Polish Descent* (Columbia UP). She was a 1990 *SRPR* Illinois Featured Poet.

Singing about Nothing—
A Discussion with Helen Degen Cohen

SRPR: Helen, in 1990, *SRPR* featured your work, and now we are doing it again. Suddenly your huge envelope of poems arrives in our office, some of the most interesting work I have read in years and so different from your earlier work—when did you write these?

Helen: In the last three years. I write every day when it comes to poetry. The notebooks are under the bed. I have no schedule, but when it wakes me, when I can't sleep and the writing starts, then I'll write two or three poems.

SRPR: As poems? Or as journal entries?

Helen: Some people use journals as journals, but mine seem not to work that way. Everything wants to go in there in some kind of poetic form. And the journals just get filled. I don't remember half the stuff that goes into them. I go into them looking for gold, but there is so much it is hard to know which is gold and which is tin.

SRPR: Tin's good though—you can't have a mine with nothing but gold in it. In my 1990 interview with you, I remember you said you liked amplitude—large clots of words around you to work with.

Helen: Not a question of *like*. It just falls out that way. I've been influenced by a few poets within the last few years. In some strange way they've freed me up—Larissa Szporluk's *Dark Sky Question*. Also, Brenda Hillman and Fanny Howe have shown me that you don't have to be writing about anything heavy, a kind of singing about nothing. Singing about nothing gets you deeper into your soul somehow. I thought I had it before, that freedom, but with "To Poem #---5" I noticed something different. When those mushrooms started *mringing*, I thought, I'm in a different place!

SRPR: Yeah, when I read these new poems, I wondered if you'd been doing more with the mushrooms than *mringing* them! I remember that Rilke is a lifelong passion for you—you have taken seriously his poetic injunction to sing about nothing. These poems are different, less self-conscious, more jubilant, riding the very edge of control and unafraid to slip over. They seem written in a kind of abandon. You've never been a narrative poet, but in these poems the narrative doesn't simply fragment and hint that it is lurking somewhere, it is absent. And the lyric's in a different register. Almost depersonalized.

Helen: I don't really know how that happened. Maybe I had just not read enough. I've been reading more. I *think* about writing more, and write about writing and film more. The arts have always inspired each other. There is a kind of democracy about it. We are more unified as artists than any nation or culture or religion or race. Maybe I find more excitement in the art I'm exposed to than in the life I experience.

SRPR: But your early life was more interesting than most people would wish.

Helen: Overstimulating, it was.

SRPR: Intensified, in the way art is, coherent and confined the way art is. Your film poems aren't really *about* the films. Rather, they become part of the film. Not a dialogue—more like film captions.

Helen: But not reviews!

SRPR: I taught film for a number of years and got proficient at taking notes in the theatre's darkness, frame by frame response, the notes taken from an assumption that the film's artistically, aesthetically, stylistically arranged by a director. These notes took the material of the film at the level of the frame and translated it into a re-presentation of the cinematic, leaving out the narrative. They were taken to help me get at *how* the film built its narrative, suggested its narrative, at a non-verbal level, how it arranged our reading of the frame. Your poems seem to be a similar representation of *mise-en-scene* that you as poet have both observed and entered into, a new space that bits of scenes from your life, pieces of story, can weave through, as in "First Leaf." You make an art from what you call in that poem *glazing*: "in the old/ painting days, it meant/ one fine, almost spiritual, layer/ superimposed on another,/ on a child's eyes, for instance,/ bleeding through the/surface of a town..." The poems suggest more than they say, and suggestion is filled with desire, longing.

Helen: There is a holiness to it: I mean about transforming (not ruing) loneliness into singing. Anyway, when something comes like Rilke's "gust inside the god. A wind," it does feel good, surprising, world-forgetting and world-containing. I consider the other arts to function in the same way. Film is a composition of many arts, a grand opera of arts, and when it works, I'm intrigued, thrilled, invigorated, I feel happier and healthier. There's longing for the most mysterious kind of connection. The arts are viscerally, spiritually interrelated.

SRPR: There is a Sufi saying that goes something like: "This longing never satisfied within you—it is the answer."