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The Editor
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3 June 1987

Dear Elaine

Please find enclosed four photographs of the house that Helen Martins lived in in Nieu Bethesda, Cape Province South Africa.

The house was the one she was brought up in and she lived in it for most of her life. The youngest of six children it was left to her to look after the aging parents and as a result her formal education and any prospects of a career were abandoned. After the parents died in the late forties Helen lived alone in the house till her death in August 1976. (She committed suicide by taking drain cleaning fluid).

Nieu Bethesda is a small town firmly set in the "platteland*" of South Africa. The nearest town of import is fifty miles away and Nieu Bethesda is approached by a rigorous winding dust road. The town itself is beautiful, characterised by clumps of pear trees and freshwater which flows in channels through the street.

The community is mainly Afrikaans speaking and the town's centre consists of the Dutch Reformed church, the police station and a shop. On the one side of the town is the cemetery where Helen is buried and on the other is the "coloured" location which resounds with the sounds and activity the "white" town no longer has.

Helen's home, which she called the Owl House, faces towards the very wide and often very dry river bed.

It has a larch porch which welcomes the late afternoon sun and since her death one no longer enters the house by the front door but by a side door which opens into her beloved yard. I say 'beloved' because in this small yard she created a fantastical world out of cement sculptures and mythical buildings. Enclosed with netting like a huge bird cage, birds in fact flew in this 25 year accretion of glass, cement and poetic words in wire. In a way it is a picture postcard world of Christmas carols and Omar Khyam, coruscating with the shards of thousands of crushed bottles. She also built with bottles and every square foot found itself utilised with creative precision.

She said "There was very little brightness in my youth and as soon as I was able I began to express the brightness all around me". The garden flows into the interior of the home whose walls, ceilings and furniture are covered with

* Flatlands - Hinterland.

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crushed glass.

In the late evening she would light about fifty table lamps and place them throughout the house to pick up and highlight each shard of glass - mirrors of specific shapes and sizes abound in the interior.

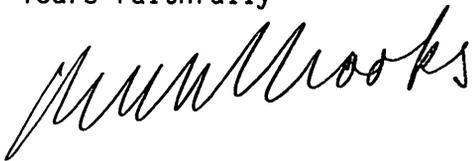
She was helped by a coloured labourer called Malgas. Towards the end of her life she was rather afraid of him. The ideas were hers - the sculpture in its naive configurations was his.

She obviously worked towards a concentrated totality to give substance and sustenance to her lonely sensibility. She took refuge in the crowds she made and the brightness she created. She made a kind of chaos to counter her singularity. By being alone and lonely she of course attracted people. She gave total expression to our urge to surround ourselves with things that we like.

Everyone I have met who has gone to the Owl House comes away questioning themselves and Helen Martins as well. One re-evaluates and is in a way resprung. Her owls, snakes, camels and people group together with a remarkable unity and cohesion.

Helen Martins though married twice, spent most of her life alone. She had a strange magnetism for what I would call outsider people (poets, philosophers, young girls with half-formed sensibilities) and her creation is now a place of pilgrimage and continues to show us how art can enhance and strengthen our lives.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "R B Brooks". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with the first letters of the first and last names being prominent.

R B BROOKS (PROFESSOR)
HEAD OF DEPARTMENT