

WHEN THE HEART BEGINS

By Michael Ventura

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"It doesn't matter what we know, the body
requires a kind of pain, a longing that
becomes its compass..."

-- Karen Holden, *The Book of Changes*

The artist is always a stranger. Even when we know her. Even (perhaps especially) when the artist is oneself. There is the "I" you sign your checks with, the "I" that says "I love you," the "I" that says "I will," "I won't," "I might" -- and for the artist there is another "I," less predictable than any, the "I" that conducts some charge of spiritual electricity intent on making itself present in the world. That artist-I is a stranger who makes irresistible and often inexplicable demands upon the one who carries its name -- demands that may drive you to the edge, or over the edge, yet will surely tear you apart if denied. Don't confuse this description with the adolescent image of "the suffering artist"; everyone suffers, after all, but not everyone (hardly anyone!) knows the joy of an artist in the sway of her demon creating something that has not yet been and that no one else could have created. And yet this being, this artist-I, is a stranger to the artist herself -- a difficult companion, part lover, part monster, part friend, part deer- or wolf-like beast, with whom one never achieves complete accommodation.

And when one's friend or lover, or someone of one's blood, is an artist, the confusion accelerates. Love them though you do, touch them as intimately as you can, yet the artist-I of that person is always just out of reach, watching from a few paces away, joining in sometimes but doing so out of a different sense of purpose than the one whose name is so familiar in your heart. The art of a friend, a lover, a sibling, always surprises -- and the better the art, the more it surprises. Suddenly we are faced with the part of that person that we sensed but could never define -- a part that perhaps we loved the most but had never fully seen.

The book I read today isn't Karen's book -- Karen, my friend and, for a (lovely) time, my lover; no, it's *The Book of Changes*, by Karen Holden, artist and poet. Had I never met Karen I know I would still be taken by these poems; but would I have created in my mind the person whom I knew and know? The photograph on the back is, shall we say, noncommittal: an expression that is between expressions -- and, not knowing her, I would have no idea what they might be. Petite, fierce, funny, with a pixie-ish kind of energy at play, yet tough the way small swift hunting animals are tough -- no, you see from the photograph that she's small and smart and strong, but you wouldn't know the rest. The poems, the strength of their delicacy, and their demanding precision -- that's Karen, so playfully unforgiving of sloppy thought, simplistic solutions, and messy language. But the ethnicity of her, half Russian Jew and half Greek, both always claimed and present in her talk -- that's not evident in the poems. (Another book, perhaps?) The longing was always there, in the room, with Karen, but even so the poems are a surprise -

- they long the way small plants long, with a longing for the sun that is so strong and constant it can crack rock. "Praise these stubborn lives," she writes of plants, "however they may grow."

"I am thinking of longing, the deep green feel of a man so high inside me I can't tell where our edges end, or meet for that matter. And I wonder if that will ever be mine again, and if not, what kind of container will I become?"

The absolute honesty -- that's there. But in a room the honesty is usually turned outward, in the poems it peers inward, as she writes: "not a pretty power, but formidable/ and your own."

Here is a prose-poem called "Return":

I could look at that face, the same face, endlessly. Almost cube-like auburn wings follow the line of eyebrow, and the deep mouth, ripe like a fig. Her hands, small animals themselves, rest on a counterpane, laced and checked in odd design. A fetus engraved on a tear shaped coin hangs over her shoulder and the gold foil wall, its trees espaliered, flattens into a sheet of paper fine enough to wrap a gift; or oneself, if it finally comes to that. She looks beyond me, clear as a moon -- those eyes, not green not blue, and I fall into her water, hand, foot and knee, knowing when I emerge it will start all over, will begin again. So I look at that face, the same face, and wonder about capture and longing and lust; the place the eye leaves off and the heart begins.

She writes in "Darkening of the Light": "Her hair smells like cigarette smoke and she's tired and it's sweet dark and thank god no one can save her at last." And there on the page I recognize something I didn't understand enough about Karen: our silent, almost bodily agreement that the place to be reached is where thank God no one can save us -- where we are really and finally on our own path, doomed and blessed to be ourselves at last.

She's so funny in a room that you don't assume the determined vision of "Splitting Wood" -- and she's so slight, you don't image her with an ax:

Curly grained and auburn,
each wedge falls from the maul
a testament to winter
and the endlessness of life.

That is why I love splitting wood;
you can't see the heart of things
until you cut them.

In the poems she looks at moments of loss as one's best chance to see into the heart of things:

and seeing her ex-husband through the window, folding shirts in the low lights of the closed shop, she felt happy. he looked good. better than he ever had when they were together. his face didn't seem to hang at the corners so much. he had even grown a beard like she'd always

wanted. she tapped on the window and waved. he smiled and made a silly gesture, trying to sell her the shirt he had in his hands. then she laughed and walked on. that's all it took she thought, a few years, some window. she couldn't remember, didn't even recognize the easy smile he gave. it was a part of him hidden to her all the years they ate and slept together. a small gift on a summer evening, a split second when the glass between them could dissolve.

Artists are strangers, always. Dangerous strangers, not in the sense that we are harmful (though we are often harmful), but in the sense that a ruthless attention (ruthless even when kindly) is always being paid, always focusing upon one, always waiting for the moment when you will reveal either yourself or whatever the artist has sought in you. And then one never knows what the artist will do with that moment. "Preponderance of the Small":

the way men empty their pockets at night.
throw the change on a dresser, hang the keys
unfold bits of paper, scraps with numbers,
lunch receipts. each day same thing pockets
empty pockets full. pockets empty. the way
solar dust is sucked into black holes. the way
women empty their hearts into waiting pockets
wind up on a dresser with some change.

She writes, "I hold you, lightly, with gratitude for all/you are not and are." We are most truly ourselves, when with another, in that space between what the other person is not and is. Karen Holden's poems flower in that space -- and so a simple line like "It is lovely in this garden" has great resonance. It gives her the strength to ask: "Why fear Satan?/He learned his fury from God."

Book of Changes, by Karen Holden (North Atlantic Books, PO Box 12327, Berkeley, CA, 94712; 510/559-8277).

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