

## **KAREN HOLDEN'S *THIS MUSIC***

**By Michael Ventura**

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A century ago, when Egypt was completely different (like everywhere else), there lived in Alexandria a certain clerk named Constantine P. Cavafy. He worked his modest job for thirty-odd years (the second half of his life) while living alone in the same modest apartment. Cavafy was a poet. That is, he was an indefinable being, even more indefinable than the rest of us. Writing a unique meld of purist and demotic Greek, obsessed by ancient history, and unabashedly sensual, Cavafy produced just a few poems a year and kept his poetry largely to himself, sharing his work only with friends and, now and then, a Greek magazine. He published just two small volumes in his lifetime: The first contained 14 poems; the second added 12 more. Flash forward to now: Cavafy has long been recognized as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest poets.

George Seferis was a superb Greek poet who won the Nobel Prize and, rightly, never believed he was as good as Cavafy. Perhaps contemplating this, Seferis wrote: "What we look for is not who is a great and who is a minor artist, but who keeps art alive."

Who keeps art alive – could also be a question: Who keeps art alive?

It is my fortune to have known many who've worked hard at keeping art alive. Most of their names are as unknown as was Cavafy's: Steve Teeters, Andy Wilkinson, Deborah Milosevich, Spider Johnson, Lora Hunt, Joel Schulman, Larry Simmons, Bill Bentley, Dana Williams, Mona Lewis, Irene Gilbert – are the first who come to mind. I don't mean to insinuate that they are as great as Cavafy; I mean that the very great are too rare to sustain a medium, and that art is a force everywhere around us that many attend to diligently, and this must be or the arts would die like soil unwatered.

Karen Holden is one who keeps art alive. I write of Cavafy and Seferis to honor Holden's Greek-Jewish heritage and to give Holden a context. In fact, she just quit Cavafyish office work to face an uncertain future while making art and writing poetry with every sinew of herself. (She also leads excellent creative writing workshops.) Holden's first collection, *Book of Changes*, sold out and required a second edition – very rare for an unknown poet. Then obscurity found her again, and the world let her alone.

And there's this: Like Cavafy and Seferis, most great modern European poets (Wisława Szymborska and Tadeusz Rozewicz come to mind) write primarily to express their world and their vision. This entails expressing oneself, but personal self-expression is secondary to their larger sense of what a poet does.

For several decades now in the United States (with notable exceptions, like Carolyn Forché), poetry has been primarily self-expressive. Whether confessional or imagistic, the world outside the poet's presence is too often secondary. Somewhere the individual got away from the rest of us.

(The idea *we are larger than the immediate present* is not a functioning notion in America today.)

Don't mistake me to mean that poetry should be issue-oriented or anything like that; I mean that I champion poetry in which history, both past and immediate, is felt as personally as inner life – and is experienced as inner life. (Performance poetry is another area. Poetry jams are celebrations of survival – personal survival and the survival of language itself.)

But we've drifted from Karen Holden. What Holden expresses in *This Music*, her new poetry collection, is precisely the connection between the self and the world – the world as immediacy, the world as ancestry, the world as music. Music as behavior, behavior as music. All with Holden's exquisite tension of syntax, as in the necessary tension of a violin's strings.

The poems of *This Music* contemplate 22 musical pieces. Holden conceives of music as "language just before it leaves the mouth" ("String Quintet in C, Op. 163: Franz Schubert, 1") – she hints that, as a species, we sang before we spoke.

Holden is always aware of music as connection and connector, revealing the connection of one to another and of present to past, as in "Aegean Sea: Vasilis Dimitriou": "I, who could not swim, suddenly/ and without warning, jumped, fully/ clothed into the Aegean/ I was unprepared for this act/ as if it was not my own volition/ as if some/ ancestor had grabbed me by the shirt/ flung me/ from the boat shouting/ *jump!// this is life!// this is all there is!*"

At the center of this work, and placed at the center of the text, are two outstanding poems that plumb the depths of Karen Holden's range: "Requiem, Op.48: Gabriel Fauré," based on the Roman Catholic Mass for the Dead, and "Kol Nidrei, Op. 47, Adagio on Hebrew Melodies: Max Bruch," based on the Yom Kippur prayer.

"Requiem, III – Sanctus" portrays a sacred encounter too vivid and complete to risk quoting except in its entirety. Then "Requiem IV – Pie Jesu" returns us to where we live – that is, where we're afraid to die:

"We console ourselves with standard lines/ the driver was thinking about his wedding, probably/ on drugs, she refused to take her meds/ he should have/ she should have, they should have/ Jesus, *grant them rest* from all the attempts to comprehend/ to muffle that high-pitched sound rising on the edge of/ consciousness, not gall, not grief, but naked truth, it could/ have been me, it could have been me, it could have."

After "Requiem's" seven parts, you turn the page to "Kol Nidrei's" 10 parts.

From "Day Two": "A silvered skein weaving generations now unstrung/ on all but this one night when even those of us who/ wander find our way back home, pale and tender/ we return to what we've always been..."

From "Day Four": "what/ arises in this prayer where we ask nothing, are/ assured even less. It is acceptance we lean into, our/ *Adonai* afloat, midair..."

From "Day Six": "there is no explanation for a covenant/ like ours/ ... and God sings out our/ names, each tone at will, and those who/ hear become a wick of flame."

From "Day Seven": "a chorus of us/ bowed, but on our feet."

The effect of "Requiem" and "Kol Nidrei" together is a sense of intimate vastness – call it death, call it God, call it that which is always present, no matter what we want or believe. It is Karen Holden's gift, in these poems, to bring that sense of intimate vastness right into your hands.

Karen Holden is one of the artists Jazmin Aminian and I were thinking of when we founded LettersAt3amPress, and it is an honor that she allowed us to publish *This Music*. (A reminder: We pay ourselves no wages and 100% of a book's earnings go to its author.) Our mission is to get the rare stuff out there, stuff by people who keep art alive – and who remind us vividly of what we've forgotten, if we ever knew it in the first place.

For instance, she reminds us that Beethoven hated the tacked-on title "Moonlight Sonata." She speaks for the composer: "... they call it moonlight, damn/ them, damn

their idylls, scattered leaves/ damn eternal love and birds ... they say/ moonlight/ idiots,  
how can they know/ a constant storm grows inside my head/ whirls daily toward its silent  
eye faster, faster/ into bitter moonless night and still they call/ it moonlight, *moonlight*,  
this force impossibly/ contained in pale reflected light glinting off/ that distant lake in  
which the music dies.”

*Order print and e-book editions of This Music at [www.lettersat3ampress.org](http://www.lettersat3ampress.org). The e-book is also available from Kobo, Kindle, and Nook.*

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