

JONATHAN HOLDEN (1941 -)



Jonathan Holden, first Kansas poet laureate, has lived in Manhattan, Kansas, since 1978. He is distinguished professor at Kansas State University. I first met Holden when I taught at K-State briefly in the 1970s, and he was generous to many poets and students. He has influenced the direction of American poetry—through essays and example—by insisting that informal, domestic moments are high art.

Holden is passionate about poetry, both as critic and poem-maker. His brilliance manifests in his performances as well as writings. He can quote entire poems by major American and British poets for hours. He masters fields of knowledge—mathematics, tennis, U.S. politics, Bach—and finds ways to use them in everyday situations.

This poem, about apparently ordinary sights, comments upon instinctive knowledge. It mimics the perfect balance that baseball players and sparrows both must practice in order to survive. The lines shift in rhythm, to imitate birds totter and regain balance. Holden uses a passel of rich descriptive verbs, like “pirouette” and “stab,” to describe reflexive movements of the birds and players. These contrast to hesitations—reflection and philosophy—in the poem. Instinct keeps us alive, even when in the dark of night.

NIGHT GAME

***These infielders are definite
as sparrows at work.
Split that seed with one peck
or starve.
There is no minor league
for birds. There is
exactly one way
to pirouette into a double play
perfectly. The birds
don't dare reflect on what
they do, each hop, each stab and
scramble through the air into the
catch of the sycamore's
top twigs
is a necessity,
absolute. To stay alive
out in the field, you must be
an authority on parabolas
and fear philosophy.***

Education: Holden grew up in rural Morristown, New Jersey, described in his memoirs *Guns & Boyhood in America* and *Mama's Boys*. His college degrees, all in English, are from Oberlin (BA 1963), San Francisco State College (MA 1970), and University of Colorado (PhD 1974).

Career: This poet has published twenty books of poetry, essays, memoirs, and a novel. *Knowing* is his most current book of poetry (University of Arkansas Press 2000). He is poet-in-residence and University Distinguished Professor at Kansas State University. He has won awards from the National Arts Endowment, University of Missouri Press, the Associated Writing Programs, and others. *Midwest Quarterly* devoted the summer 2007 issue to him. His website is www.jonathanholden.com.