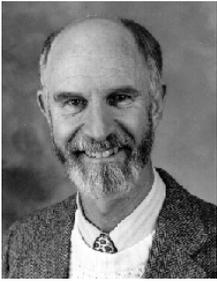


Jonathan Holden

Distinguished Kansas Poet



Jonathan Holden has been recognized as one of America's foremost poets. He is a University Distinguished Professor of English and Poet-in-Residence at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. And, in July 2005, was appointed the First Poet Laureate of Kansas.

As poet-in-residence, Holden was available as a resource to students and members of the community. To be a poet-in-residence at a university, the author has to have published a great deal of work and won various awards. Jon Holden has won numerous awards, with prizes ranging up to \$20,000. Twice he has received a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. In 1995, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa chose Holden's poetry collection, *"The Sublime,"* for the Vassar Miller Prize.

Jon Holden has published 17 books, all monographs, in addition to more than 190 poems published in professional journals. In 1986, he received the Kansas State University Distinguished Faculty Award. In 2000, he was a member of the committee that selects the Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry.

Holden earned his bachelor's degree in 1963 in English from Oberlin College, his master's degree in 1970 in English with creative writing from San Francisco State College, and his doctorate in 1974 in English from the University of Colorado. He has been at K-State since 1978.

Tornado Symptoms

As you step outdoors you'll enter a hot barn
with a moist haystack inside.
The cardinals will dart like embers, *pierce*
pierce your nerves with their bent sabres.
You'll be intimate with traffic for miles around.
But if you look up where the twigs
all stiffly point, you'll see silent
pandemonium, ugly rumors,
vagrant clouds loitering at loose ends.
It's a schizophrenic air.

By supper the sky will be uprooted,
a garden hopelessly gone to seed.
Gray broccoli will float by disconnected
from the ground, fat sooty toadstools,
a species you've never seen before,
will sprout beside swollen fungi
and other gray growths, strange weeds trailing
their severed roots, flowers the color
of bad bruises just opening into blossom,
slowly moving areas of combustion.
Even cauliflower as it rolls past
will be misshapen
before the forest comes

The Names of the Rapids

Snaggle-Tooth, Maytag, Taylor Falls—
long before we measured with our eyes
the true size of each monstrosity,
its name, downriver, was famous to us.
It lay in wait, something to be slain
while our raft, errant, eddied
among glancing pinpricks of sun
and every bend giving way to bend
seemed a last reprieve.
But common terror has a raw taste.
It's all banality, as when
you stare straight into a bad cut—
this sense of being slightly more
awake than you might like.
When the raft pitches sideways off
a ledge, what you land on is less
than its name. It's a mechanism. None
of the demented expressions
that the fleshly water forms
over that stone profile
is more than another collision,
a fleeting logic lost and
forming, now lost in the melee.
When the world is most serious,
we approach it with wholly open eyes
even as we start the plunge
and the stone explanation.



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Kansas Fair

There can be no such thing as a "normal life" until
every oppressor swine has ransomed with his
blood the blood of this brave lad.

FROM AN I. R. A. FUNERAL EULOGY

Sorefooted, sunburnt, I escape
the hot pelt of the crowd for a little
shade, to watch from the sidelines
people trading places A baby,
eyes bugging, bobs by in its knapsack.
An old couple, in pursuit
of something severe and private,
hesitate, then find their narrow
seam through the traffic.
And as I sit there, pulled
by the argument of every smell—
cigar smoke, french fries, suntan oil—
by the whole, complex, bittersweet
scent of the gathered human—I wonder
what it would take to convert
these farm hands with mustard streaks
on their beards, so they might believe
in history. A scuffle? An explosion?
The helicopter, a dark locust swarm
spinning down over the trees?
I do not believe in one history,
but that among us the believers
are the dangerous ones.
Their minds are elsewhere.
When they eye a crowd from the side
they are counting the bodies.
And that it's lucky to be in the shade,
to be so prodigally bored,
resting one's feet, certain that
all this afternoon and the next, nothing
important will happen.

Shoptalk

I like this low, comfortable kind
of conversation which the rain's
been having with itself all day
as it goes about its business,
deftly assembling its tiny parts,
confident, in no great hurry,
discussing, perhaps, the different
gutters it has seen, the taste of rust
in New York, the rust in Chicago.
Or perhaps comparing notes
about the finer points of roofs,
where best to creep to find
flaws in asphalt shingles,
or maybe it's murmuring in rain-jargon
over different grades of redwood,
the rate they rot. No end of stories
that it could be telling—
the drudgery of cycling in a monsoon,
monotony of equatorial assignments,
the same steamy party each afternoon.
Or maybe the gossip's of some great
typhoon, the melee of another
grand convention. Or is it muttering
about the way some thunderstorms
rig their elections, the social
life of rain in some bayou,
as the rain keeps up its quiet
shoptalk—the level, reassuring
talk of people who are comfortable
again, sure what they're doing,
graceful in their work, and accurate,
serious in the way that rain
is serious,
given over to their task
of touching the world.



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Western Meadowlark

Through the open car window
seven needles in a haystack
BoPEEP-doodle-our-PEOple!
snatched by ear out of the moving
prairie, like you
already fading, passed, gone.
BoPEEP-doodle-our-PEOple!
If I could find it, it would be
points of sunlight glancing
off a brooch so near shades
of gold in these moving
grasses I could scarcely distinguish
it from the grasses. Like you
it is always gone.

BoPEEP-doodle-our-PEOple!
The bird pulled it off like a string
of catches on this flying
trapeze which keeps swinging
back. If birds' songs simply mean
I'm here! I'm here!
then why a song so baroque?
How many notes did it have?
Which notes were extra?

In the Beatles' "Blackbird"
you again hear a meadowlark, its song
canned as the slow-motion replay
of a pass-reception on TV:
Love studied into pornography,
Bo-PEEP-diddk-diddk-her-PEEP-hole!
The bird falls off a see-saw,

hesitates, picks itself
back up on the rising board,
completes its song.
It does it again.

I prefer the song that eludes me,
this one which we are passing,
banjo music picked out
through wind and distance
already falling behind

gone and not gone.

—for Ana

Some Basic Aesthetics

Out past the motels where town ends
and all the weather starts and the windy
grasses rattle their dried bracelets
Greg swung his pickup off the dusty road
and we wobbled westward over ruts, looking
for some place safe to shoot.
What does being "American" feel like ?
Steering the sights of his .357 magnum
from lucky rock to rock, I could feel
the solid handshake of its grip adjusting
me again in the comfortable old stance
that cap pistols set us in as boys.
Our trigger fingers light, whimsical,
we'd point, peremptory, directing
that hypothesis from tree to rock to darting
Indian to Kraut. This stance redoubled us
as in the batter's box, bats cocked.
Drop your guns. Keep your hands up. I expected
someday to own guns, to wear a tie.
Steering the magnum's trustworthy weight, sparing
a bush, sparing a dry patch, sparing a tree,
I parked my sights in front of a rock
where, on flatter ground, third base might be.
If it's possible to "feel" American
it was the first Bam boxing both my ears, numbing
half my face as, Bam, the limestone flared
a whiff of smoke, went out. Bam.
The valley harvested another crop of echoes
broadening into luxurious redundancy
upon redundancy. It was the thrill
of having your hands on so many cylinders
at once, all of them extra,
more capability than I would ever need.