



**Best? — Holderest Book Yet:
Poems from the Left Bank: Somerville, Mass.
by Doug Holder
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review by Michael T. Steffen

None of us quite rise to the poetry we would ideally write. Some of our best stabs at the art in fact spring ironically from that very fountain of failure, as W.H. Auden remembered the salt and wit of Yeats:

Sing of human unsuccess

In a rapture of distress.

If Doug Holder shies from the empathy of rapture and distress, the subject of the poetry in his new chapbook *Poems from the Left Bank: Somerville, Mass.*, remains “human unsuccess,” shortcoming, such as the “Fellow Cherub Outside a Liquor Store”:

He turned his face toward me—
A smiling mouth
That had turned cruel
Still with the fleshy
Flushed cheeks
Of a choirboy.

Typically the poem’s subject gets caught in the mirror of a choice adjective as from the lit glass window of that store, perhaps with an insular examination that is glaring enough for us his familiar readers to slap a knee at, this humor, which is always at the observer’s and observed’s exchange of expenses. Nothing, the mendicant in front of the store would agree, is free. Above all, Holder’s heart is not going to do the man the disservice of bleeding for him, and the poet is being a little kind to be cruel himself, a little like Hamlet whose street, in another poem in the collection, Holder, with a sketch of drama, ponders, vacillates at and turns from.

The twenty poems from *Left Bank* (a shifty witticism for these hard times) if less generous in the poet’s consideration and feeling, give us friendlier versions of Holder impersonating the expected Holder that previous books have acquainted us with. It is more Holderesque than poetic, more characteristic than adventurous or traditional. A skirt of heresy for the religious.

A sign of the times. An authentic keepsake for readers. A value for the read.