

**THE ESSENTIAL DOUG HOLDER New & Selected Works \$15 Big Table Publishing <http://bigtablepublishing.com>**

*Review by Ravi Teja Yelamanchili*

Doug Holder's poetry is an examination of people and things, but more importantly their patinas. In many of the poems there is a gentle awareness conveyed to the reader—an acknowledgement that everything will eventually deteriorate. Holder's poetry is subtle, deeply empathetic, and captures moments of vulnerability with unmatched elegance and fragility. In the poem "On the Ward: Stuffed Animals", Holder writes

*"At night  
as you  
check the rooms  
the flashlight discovers  
these animals  
attached to grown  
women—  
like suckling babes  
held tightly  
against the darkness—  
memories of morning  
abandonment—  
the deep chasms  
that were never  
bridged.  
On these lonely  
nights  
any union  
will do" (Holder 48)*



On the cover of THE ESSENTIAL DOUG HOLDER New & Selected Works, Doug Holder, the poet of the collection, stands modestly in the bottom right hand corner of his own book, his hands are placed defensively in his pockets, and under his arms he carries a newspaper. It is hard to tell if his weary eyes are gazing at you, at the ground, or if he lost in his own thoughts. Bold white text is superpositioned on the page, pushing the poet to the back of his own cover. The cover seems off balanced, as though the subject (Doug Holder) is about to leave the reader any minute. The background is composed mostly of silhouettes of trees and buildings, while the foreground is composed of shadows. The sun is either rising or setting, and a ray of sunlight falls on Holder. On the bottom of the page, a quote from Boston's first Poet Laureate Sam Cornish reads "Holder is a poet of the street... an observer of the everyday... he sees the world not for what it is, but on his own terms". At first, I thought that the picture was

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a strange choice for the cover of a book—surely, Holder had a centered picture of himself he could have used instead. But, after reading Holder’s collection this cover art was in fact the perfect choice.

In the poem “Life of the Party” Holder writes:

*“After all,  
you were  
the center [...]*

*the approving smiles  
from the women  
the perfect opiate  
delightful  
but never enough*

*And for this moment  
you were a man  
among men  
above—  
[...]*

*And then  
in the bathroom mirror  
who was this imposter  
short and bald  
struggling with  
his fly [...]*” (Holder 76)

(Insert drumroll here) While you’re not supposed to judge a book by its cover, or so we are told, in the case of this book, the cover art perfectly captures the essence of Holder’s style. Similar, to how Holder doesn’t stand in the center of his cover, his poetry employs innovative stylistic techniques that invite the reader into the poem without ever directly breaking the fourth wall. This is achieved by both the tone of the poems, and how vulnerable and honest the speaker of the poems makes himself. There is a “Confessional” quality to the poetry, yet unlike Confessional poetry the poetry is not as emotionally forceful. This often catches the reader off-guard, but the poems themselves are so well balanced—either thematically, or in their emotional content that the reader can easily regain their footing.

Holder uses ellipses, like no one else. Ellipses are normally used to exclude less relevant text from passages. You will often find Holder using ellipses to cut his own conclusions short, as though to indicate to the reader that his conclusions are not that important, or perhaps that he has not formed any. These unresolved conclusions become almost a rhetorical question that can significantly alter the meaning and tone of the poem. Take for instance the poem “A Dream of Minnie Baum”:

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*"She exchanges Yiddish for English with mother  
tit for tat.*

*I am trapped...  
my stomach leaden with chicken fat.  
Bronx cheers from the pavement below" (Holder 80)*

In the poem above, the word 'trapped' is followed by an ellipsis. This leads the reader to wonder if the speaker is trying to escape. Depending on the answer, yes or no, the meaning of the poem can greatly change. The charm of Holder's poetry is that it does not impose its views on the reader. It does not try to force a way of thinking on the reader. It draws a clear distinction between the 'real world', and the poet's interpretation of the world. There are fantastical moments in Holder's poetry, but the reader is rarely left wondering where the line between reality, and Holder's interpretations of reality falls. At times they don't align, and this is often where we see ellipses—omissions of conclusions, or pseudo-questions, where Holder seems to be asking himself and the reader how to negotiate "everyday observations with his own terms".

Confessional poetry is often extremely assertive. The emotions are so raw, that the reader is often overwhelmed and consumed by them—they impose their will on the reader. This can be a very powerful artistic choice, but ultimately limits the reader's interpretive freedom. Holder's poetry often includes very intimate details, but the raw emotions are toned down. Holder's emotions do not convolute reality, and not force the reader to interpret events one way or another. Even though the poems are written from Holder's point of view, the poems are not just about him. This allows the reader to explore Holder's world with him—not just be passive listeners. For example on page 146, "I don't know why", Holder writes:

*"i don't know why  
i have visions of elevated tracks  
subways defiantly roaring  
at the dark  
damaged men pawing costume  
jewelry[...]" (Holder 146)*

The first two lines of the poem start with "i", yet they are both lowercase, which draws less attention to the repetition. This is followed by the powerful image of a "subway defiantly roaring at the dark", followed by another powerful image. When Holder uses the word "i" in this poetry it is simply to provide the reader with context.

The entire collection opens with the poem "Daddy, Is He a Monster?"

*"A child caught sight of me on a bus  
propped up on his seat  
safe within his father's fold  
he said  
"Is he a monster?"*

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*My head  
poking out of a protective shell of newspaper  
a suspicious crab  
peering at a threatening predator" (Holder 23)*

Holder's poetry shares very intimate details. Initially, this can throw the reader off a bit, because we just aren't used to people sharing such personal thoughts. Thoughts that are so personal, we may even feel uncomfortable hearing them if some of our closest family or friends shared this information with us. But, Holder does not withhold much from his reader, but quickly the reader realizes that this honesty is what makes his work so captivating. At certain points you almost wonder if you are even supposed to be reading these extremely personal reflections. The poem "Unknown in a Crowd", to some degree expresses this sentiment:

*"And that's when  
you felt most at peace—  
lost in the cornucopia.  
Feeling  
like the multi-eyed  
fly on the wall  
away from the claustrophobic intimacy.  
Observing  
not observed  
owner of you own dialogue..." (Holder 37)*

But, the reader despite being thrown off by the unguarded nature of the poems, can easily regain their footing, because of how Holder brilliantly balances everything. Opposing themes, and tones act as counterbalances to each other. The poem "At the Reading: Young Poet", is a brilliant example of how Holder uses a poetry reading to explore the question of what is and isn't worthy of art, and more importantly gives us insight into his own aesthetic philosophy.

*"She talked of making love  
as if a new discovery[...]  
of old Cambridge Victorians  
cigarette smoke  
lipstick traces  
romantic places  
half-empty glasses  
the lingering scent  
remembered words...  
phrases [...]*

*From the corner  
an old woman  
lifted her head  
from the rim of her shot glass  
and cackled  
breaking the spell:  
"What's the big deal, kid, and two dogs could do that." (Holder 31)*

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This poem is particularly interesting because of its many layers. The young woman, and the old woman represent two opposite sides of the same coin. Both are in ways equally cliché. Yet, Holder finds them both to be equally important subjects, and he is simultaneously interested and critical of both. Using themes to counterbalance each other, is one-way Holder's work keeps the reader constantly engaged. In another poem Holder writes, "The bridge/to the Bronx/a spurt of connective tissue./ Bridging a new limb to an old" (Holder 51).

In addition to using themes as counterbalances, Holder also uses dramatic and comedic elements to create balance in his poems. In the poem "First Night on the Job on the Psychiatric Ward", Holder starts the poem off by painting a very dramatic scene. But the mythical elements are quickly pushed aside and replaced with humor. These sharp turns in poems, are particularly interesting because of how they change the pace of the poems without using any grammar or white space.

*"The night seemed perfectly cast...  
stormy, thunder and rain  
the patient was biblical  
long hair and a beard  
with his staff at his command.*

*He put a paternal hand on me  
and called me his finest creation  
what could I do but thank him?  
He smiled with divine patronization" (Holder 33)*