

Bill Holm

2008 DISTINGUISHED ARTIST

THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

A close-up, low-angle shot of a weathered wooden sign. The sign is made of several horizontal planks of wood, showing natural grain and some knots. The text "Welcome to MINNESOTA" is painted in a white, cursive script across the middle plank. The word "Welcome" is in a larger, more flowing font, while "to" is smaller and "MINNESOTA" is in all caps. The sign is set against a bright, clear sky. A large, bright sun flare is visible in the upper right, partially obscuring the sky. A wooden pole or handle extends from the right side of the frame towards the sign. In the top left corner, some bare tree branches are visible against the sky.



Call me island. Or call me Holm.  
Same thing. It's one way to start,  
though like so many other human  
starts—or human books—it's not  
original. We stand on the shoulders  
of our ancestors no matter how many  
machines we invent. Only our memory  
and our metaphors carry us forward,  
not our money, not our gadgets, not  
our opinions. —from *Eccentric Islands*, 2000



MINNEOTA, MINNESOTA

Bill Holm

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2008 DISTINGUISHED ARTIST

THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION | *Minneapolis, Minnesota*

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## Introduction

Erika L. Binger, *Chair*, The McKnight Foundation

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In *The Windows of Brimnes*, Bill Holm writes that Minneota, Minnesota, is “the first town south of my father’s farm and the town I still make my home when I am not elsewhere.”

Although forever tied to Minnesota, Holm is indeed no stranger to “elsewhere.” His first real venture from home took him about 100 miles east, to Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter. But his traveling poet’s journey, just beginning, would next take him to Kansas and then Virginia—and would eventually lead him to China, Madagascar, and Iceland.

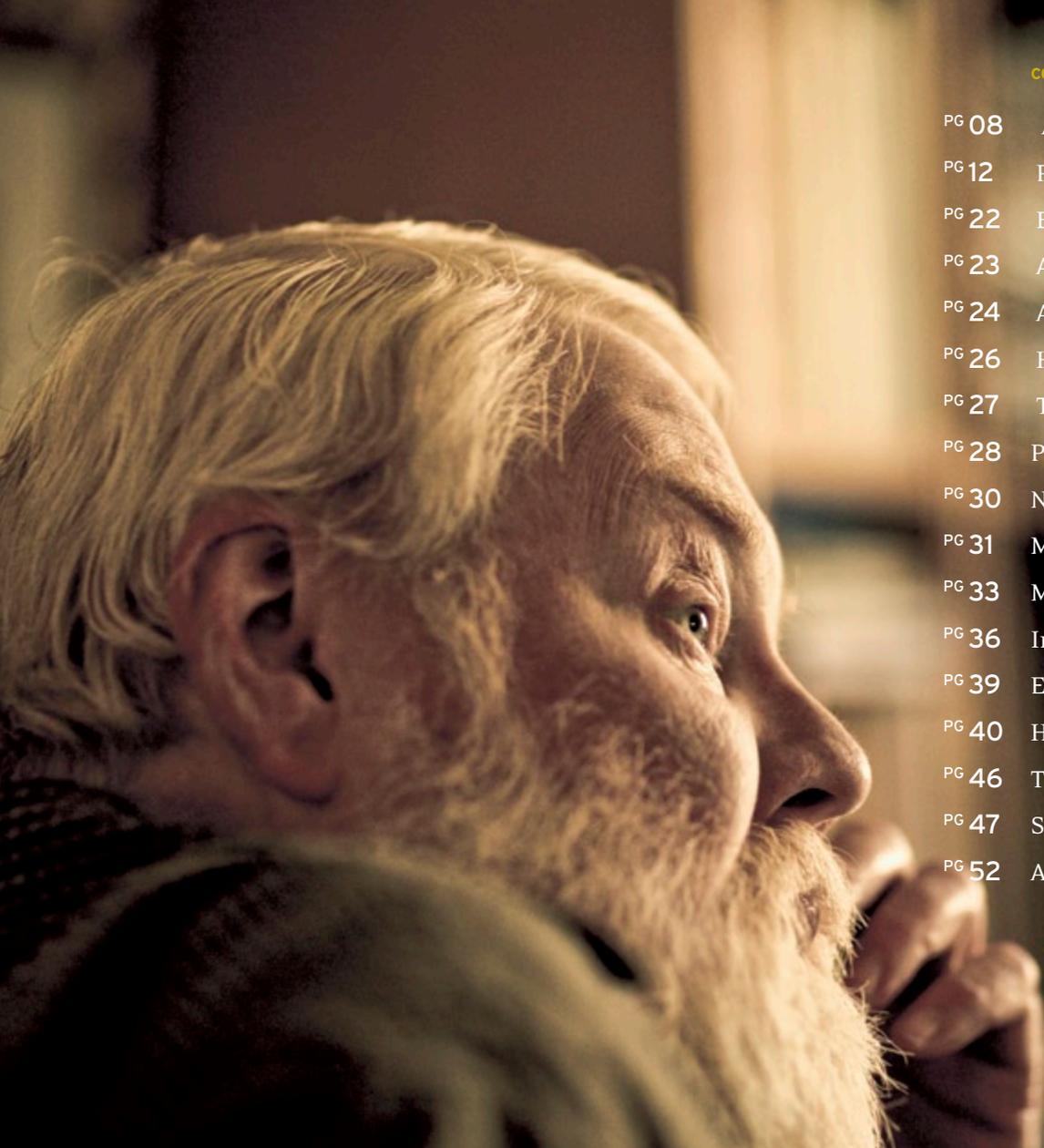
These days, Holm spends summers on the northeast coast of Iceland, the birthplace of his grandparents. In addition to teaching, writing, and playing his beloved piano, he spends hours looking toward the sea through the “magical windows” of an old fishing cottage he bought a decade ago. From that singular vantage point, he says, he can clearly see his life and his country.

Where Holm goes, he takes along the landscapes and the characters of Minnesota. “All of my books are really about Minneota,” he has said. **“We travel not to see something exotic, but to see something inside of us.”**

As told in nearly a dozen books of poetry and essays, Holm has seen a lot—from the bliss of cooking and eating, to the rage engendered by political corruption, to the despair of watching a dear friend die slowly. Given the complexity of his stories, Holm’s artistry lies in the straightforwardness of their telling, which has resonated deeply with readers, listeners, and thousands of students during his 30 years as a writer, performer, and teacher.

Although Holm has made a habit of being “elsewhere” in the past 45 years or so, we needn’t be jealous of his time away from us. Minnesotans are fortunate that Bill Holm is a wanderer whose compass always points him home in the end. Though we are privileged to share with the world this exceptional poet, essayist, musician, and teacher, we rest assured that he really belongs to us—and just as he travels with Minnesota in his mind’s eye, he also carries a piece of the world back to us when he inevitably returns.

“For better or worse,” he writes in *The Music of Failure*, “you belong in a place, and grow out of its black soil like a cornstalk.” How lucky for us that McKnight Distinguished Artist Bill Holm is firmly planted, and still growing, in the “black soil” of Minnesota.



## CONTENTS

- PG 08 Artist's Statement by **Bill Holm**
- PG 12 Playing His Own Song by **David Pichaske**
- PG 22 Bill Holm by **Robert Bly**
- PG 23 Advice
- PG 24 A Well Tempered Island by **Emilie Buchwald**
- PG 26 Holm Grown by **John Calvin Rezmerski**
- PG 27 The Sea Eats What It Pleases
- PG 28 Paying Attention by **Lawrence Owen**
- PG 30 Not Sleeping at Bill Holm's House by **Barton Sutter**
- PG 31 Messenger of Failure by **Vidar Hreinsson**
- PG 33 Music for an old pump organ
- PG 36 Independent People by **Einar Már Gudmundsson**
- PG 39 Excerpt from *The Windows of Brimnes*
- PG 40 Ho(l)mage: Notes from friends and colleagues
- PG 46 The Ghost of Wang Wei Looks at Skagafjörð
- PG 47 Selected Bibliography/Discography
- PG 52 About the Award

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## Artist's Statement



This morning, July 12, I am sitting at a table in a farmhouse just outside Vopnafjörður, at almost the northeast corner of Iceland, facing what is here the Arctic Ocean. Long fields of local hay lie in damp windrows, perfuming the morning air. It has drizzled for a few hours. Too wet to turn the hay. Meanwhile I am writing—these words, drinking a little now-chilly coffee. I've played a few Bach fugues (*Well-Tempered Clavier II*, my summer project) on a creaky old piano (London, circa 1850), missing a G#. No G# minor fugue for me—or for you today. Only C, F, D. Gunnar, the neighbor, has come to the door looking for escaped sheep. I'm no help, so I wish him well, and keep scribbling. A pair of noisy whimbrels trill at each other in the hayfield, with their long, displeased beaks.

What am I doing here—and why am I still scribbling—poems, essays, letters, musical notes? I am 65 now, officially retired from office work, a little creaky in the back, a little gloomy at the human assault on libraries, books, newspapers, pianos, history—even language itself. I'm not a plug-in tech-man at all, not precisely through Luddite contempt, but from a complete lack of interest in the machines. They bore me, so I avoid them. It seems the right human solution to technology.

Why scribble this here—so far from Minneota, my real home? Partly by sheer chance. I have a quiet day to do it, but partly, I think,

by unconscious design. Two of my great-grandfathers farmed in this fjord, close to this house; three of my four grandparents were born here, and the fourth only a few hours away by horse—no cars then. I write not just to amuse and divert (though I hope that happens, too), but to make connection to all of human history on the planet, to the fine threads that connect us into a tribe, quarrelsome and idiotic though we sometimes are. I have a history, you have a history. At our best, they touch and bind us together, like it or not.

I scribble for the pleasure and benefit of the dead. I am an afterlife skeptic; if we wish to keep hold of our dead, we must put them on paper—in bound books. Though books are certainly only a little more eternal than we ourselves, those scribblings have kept Gilgamesh, Antigone, Achilles, Aeneas, Jesus, Buddha, Njáll, Don Quixote, Hamlet, and Faust (to list only a few) alive in us. At birth, we begin to keep the register of our personal dead: parents, mentors, lovers, friends. As we age, the size of this register swells until—if we live past, say, 100—it includes everyone we have ever truly known, with only us left alive to join someone else's register. I have tried to make that register part of my books so that my parents, both dead too young, unlucky friends who disappeared early, and now in the last years, my literary mentors, have been given a little more life in print for those who now can never know them alive.



For it is life we want. We want the world, the whole beautiful world, alive—and we live in it. That is the actual god we long for and seek, yet we have already found it, if we open our senses, our whole bodies, thus our souls.

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For it is life we want. We want the world, the whole beautiful world, alive—and we alive in it. That is the actual god we long for and seek, yet we have already found it, if we open our senses, our whole bodies, thus our souls.

My mentor among poets—as among Americans—is, of course, Walt Whitman. I first read “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as a young boy, without fully understanding what it says. We age into that poem. It is a love song for us—all of us who entered the planet after 1856 (it goes backward, too):

And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence, are more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might suppose. . . . A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence, others will see them . . . (the islands—the world).

. . . It avails not, neither time nor place—distance avails not; I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence;

. . . Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt.

Walt asks: “What is it then between us?” “I too lived,” he answers,

*“Brooklyn of ample hills was mine.”*

So now the Minneota of my childhood, my roll call of honored dead, the splendor of this morning in faraway Vopnafjörður, are yours, dear readers, dear humans. Bill Holm—and Walt—“consider’d long and seriously of you before you were born. . . . Who knows, for all the distance, but [Bill and Walt among a multitude are] as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see [us].” That is why I have written, and intend to continue, until someone among you takes up the happy work of keeping the chain letter of the soul moving along into whatever future will come.





*The "Walt Whitman Wall" in the English department at Southwest Minnesota State University*

That is why I have written, and intend to continue, until someone among you takes up the happy work of keeping the chain letter of the soul moving along into whatever future will come.

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## Playing His Own Song

by David Pichaske



“Resist much, obey little.”—Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman’s advice to Americans has been one of Bill Holm’s favorite aphorisms for as long as I have known him. It reflects a cantankerous independence that we recognize as characteristically Minnesotan, typically high ’60s . . . and traditionally American. For all his oft-voiced reservations about his native country (more properly, because of those reservations), no truer American has existed than Bill Holm.

Holm’s career has been a lifelong struggle to find a place far from the center of corruption and to define himself on terms other than those imposed by mainstream, middlebrow America. He wrote in *Eccentric Islands* (2000) about how, as a boy in Swede Prairie Township, Yellow Medicine County, Bill Holm, Jr. (“Little Billy”) gazed out from his farmhouse bedroom across “a sea of bright blue [flax] blossoms,” and saw an America “too strange, too hostile, too unsuited to my nature” for comfort. Fifty years later, in *The Windows of Brimnes* (2007), Professor William Holm gazed out of the window of his home in Hofsós, Iceland, across the blue Atlantic, at an America overripe with “too much religion and not enough gods, too much news and not enough wisdom, . . . too many humans but not enough eagles.” Things change over half a century, but not much.

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In his life and writing, Bill Holm has spent a lot of time going out and coming back, measuring the home place by some newly explored geography, defining his own Self in terms of some psychological Other. “You have to know the world so well before you know the parish,” Sarah Orne Jewett told a young Willa Cather, and it does not much matter whether the parish is Swede Prairie Township, Minnesota, or Bronx, New York: eyes and ears that never escape remain permanently blindered, deaf. Holm’s early excursions were into classical music, Literature with a capital “L” (canonical American authors, D.H. Lawrence, the Bible, Icelandic sagas), and his own imagination. Later came geographical explorations: undergraduate studies in St. Peter, Minnesota; graduate school at the University of Kansas; a teaching position at Hampton Institute; a Fulbright to Iceland; a year in China. And from 1980 until his retirement in 2007, always a return to teaching at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Minnesota, not 15 miles down Route 68 from his home in Minneota. “In my end is my beginning,” wrote T.S. Eliot, who offers as good a key to Holm’s work as Bill’s own favorite authors, Whitman and Thoreau.



*“Billy” Holm’s first self-published book, Hats Around the World, circa 1950*



*Bill Holm, 1970*

At the age of 10, Holm was busy assembling “The Collected Poems of Wm. J. Holm, 1953,” printing the poems on unlined paper and sewing them together with thread, but for all his youthful aspirations, he would not publish his first book until the age of 41. Holm is a Robert Frost, not a John Keats: his work is the product of long incubation. During his adolescence, while others were playing football, drinking Grain Belt, and picking rock in their fathers’ fields, Holm was singing in the Icelandic Lutheran Church choir, playing the piano, and refining his philosophy of life. **“I have my own philosophy of life,”** read the words below his senior photo in the 1961 Minneota High School yearbook. **“I made it; I live it; and I change it when I please.”** In most things, Holm

set himself squarely against the established power structures and received wisdom of his hometown—and America—during the 1950s, embodying the ’60s version of Whitman’s admonition: “Whatever the power structure wants you to do is probably not in your best interest, so do the opposite.” In an early essay titled “The Grand Tour,” Holm wrote, “One of power’s unconscious functions is to rob you of your own experience by saying: we know better, whatever you may have seen or heard, whatever cockeyed story you come up with; we are principle, and if experience contradicts us, why then you must be guilty of something.” Shaped from experience or story or imagination, your world is truer than their world, and don’t you forget it.



Perhaps it is well that American high schools are so repressive and depressive: they motivate students to get out. “At 18,” Holm recalled in the essay “Icelanders, Boxelders, Soybeans and Poets,” “what I wanted most to see in the world was the Minneota city limits receding, for the last time, in the rear view mirror of an automobile driving east, to New York, Boston, Washington.” Even when Bill Holm, Sr., suffered a debilitating stroke the spring of his son’s graduation, Bill Holm, Jr., did not look back: he enrolled at Gustavus Adolphus College that fall. By 1965 he was editing the college literary magazine, *Prospects* (its lead poem, “Beyond the dark jaws of the hornet,” was authored by one Bill Holm, with other Holm poems scattered throughout). For the next 12 years Holm avoided Minneota,

where, he says, “the fifties lasted a long time.” “I traveled, got educated, married, divorced, and worldly,” he wrote succinctly in the essay “The Music of Failure: Variations on an Idea,” and while he expanded slightly on these years in subsequent work—particularly in “Iceland 1979” in *Eccentric Islands* and “Minneota—the Early Years” in *The Windows of Brimnes*—on his marriage and early career, he is largely silent. (We may learn more when Holm completes his current project, a history of his 60 years in the American educational system.)

Robert Bly once told an audience at Knox College, “We expect great creativity out of poets in their 20s, and that’s a disaster. You can’t write great poetry in your 20s; you’re too neurotic. Poetry comes later, in your 30s, 40s. Your job in your 20s is to go out and make contact with the world.” For Holm, on whom Robert and Carol Bly were major influences, making contact with the world amounted to both getting out of Minnesota and encountering his Other. In a prose preface to the poem titled “Advice”—which, as a letterpress broadside, hangs framed beside his piano in Minneota—he wrote, “Either we make friends with this opposite, though it makes us no money, or it turns vicious and poisons our conscious lives. This is not practical; it is necessary.” (Holm would return to the Jungian idea of a shadow self in an essay in *The Windows of Brimnes*.) Eventually those encounters with the world proved almost as disillusioning as the high-school experience—empty-hearted rootlessness, books used as blunt instruments, sneering disbelief—and in 1977 he purchased a \$5,000 house in Minneota and returned to the parish. “The paradox,” he wrote, “was that the farther away I

traveled, to places utterly unlike Swede Prairie and my father's farm, the more clearly I saw and understood the farm, the more the wisdom it had to offer revealed itself to me."

Holm took work where he could find it—including a week of "Poetry Out Loud" readings with Frederick Manfred and Phebe Hanson—and ink where he could make it: in little magazines (*Minnesota Monthly*, *Crazy Horse*, *Spoon River Quarterly*), in a chapbook titled *Happy Birthday Minneota!* (1981; edited by Tom Guttormsson, Bill Holm, and John Rezmerski), and in another tiny chapbook titled *Minnesota Lutheran Handbook* (1982). The *Happy Birthday* anthology contains work by Robert and Carol Bly, Alec Bond, Florence and Philip Dacey, Leo Dangel, Phebe Hanson, Tom Hennen, William Kloefkorn, Frederick and Freya Manfred, Howard and Jody Mohr, Joe and Nancy Paddock, and John Rezmerski. This is an impressive list and a clear indication that Holm was discovering the literature of his own place. In this respect, his experience replicated that of Robert Bly and of Paul Gruchow, who grew up on a farm not 30 miles north of Swede Prairie Township: "I had not imagined, or been encouraged to imagine, that it was possible to live in the country and write books, too. Nor did I suspect that it was possible to write books about our countryside. . . . I was left to unearth by my own devices, years [after high school and college] the whole fine literature of my place," wrote Gruchow in *Grass Roots*, his 1995 book of essays. In an article on Frederick Manfred, Holm also admitted, "I had not imagined as a teenager that a writer could live in such a place [as Minneota]."

In fact, the late 1970s and the early '80s were for Americans of Holm's generation a time of retreat from urban chaos, a time of discovering Woodstock and other country retreats (the 1980 census is the only census in American history to show more people moving to "rural" areas than to "urban" areas) and a good time for writers of the small town, countryside, and wilderness. Robert Bly was in all the poetry textbook anthologies, radios across America tuned each weekend to Garrison Keillor for the news from Lake Wobegon, and even the *New Yorker* was filled with writers like Annie Dillard and Wendell Berry writing about pastoral locales far from the Big Apple. Beginning a teaching career at Southwest Minnesota State University, Holm got the best of both the '80s and the '60s: the baby of the state university system, Southwest runs about 15 years behind the current national trend, and was thus in 1980 a remote outpost of the high '60s. An entry in my own journal for January 13, 1982, reads, "Lunch with crowd of students, faculty: Kari on my right casually smoking a joint in the middle of the cafeteria, Holm on my left calling for the undermining of the middle class and return of Marx and Lenin to the classroom." This was also the time of the so-called Cornstock readings at the





Billy Holm, age 11, gets the autograph of Minneota native Valdimar Bjornson during Bjornson's 1954 Senate campaign against Hubert Humphrey

American Legion in Ghent, Minnesota (between Minneota and Marshall), a kind of early poetry slam, where poets and musicians gathered to dine on one another's hot dish and salad, drink beer, strut their stuff, and develop an audience. Cornstock gave birth to Philip Dacey's weeklong Marshall Festivals, which further showcased local and rural writers. Holm polished tales he had spun out East about "the rich variety of characters in small towns, whom one could know, tolerate, and forgive in ways not available to the guarded privacy of the big city," as he recalled them in *The Music of Failure* (1985). And he built an audience.

In 1985 two different small presses published "real" books by Bill Holm: books bearing the author's name and the book's title on the spine. One—Plains Press, publisher of *The Music of Failure*—would remain small and virtually invisible, but the other—Milkweed Editions, publisher of *Boxelder Bug Variations*—would become one of the nation's premier literary publishing operations. Both these books—and the later collections of poems *The Dead Get By with Everything* (1990) and *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth* (1996)—are firmly rooted in Holm's place in western Minnesota. *The Music of Failure* is a gathering of Minneota character profiles, Poetry Out Loud adventures, and prose meditations like "Horizontal Grandeur" and "The Music of Failure: Variations on an Idea." The book was typeset at the *Minneota Mascot* newspaper office, and Holm's friend Tom Guttormsson contributed photos. Its initial printing sold out before the publisher could circulate review copies. *Boxelder Bug Variations* was an elegantly designed and illustrated

gathering of witty poems, prose pieces, and even musical compositions celebrating the insect that is the bane of rural Minnesota in the fall. The book's genesis, according to its author, was an assignment for one of the creative-writing classes Holm taught: "You don't have to go to exotic places to find material. You can write a poem about anything. That boxelder bug there—for next class, write a poem about it." Never one to ask more of his students than he gave himself, Holm wrote a poem about the bug . . . and then another, and then another, and then another. In 1988 *Boxelder Bug Variations* became a musical production at the Lyric Theatre in Minneapolis, with Holm himself playing piano and harpsichord.

These books, the work of a writer of considerable experience, power, and vision, celebrate not some Other of distant place or abstract idea, but features of the social and geographical landscape Holm so disdained as a high-school senior. "The further away from Minneota that I got, the more I realized that my material as a writer—not just the material, but the way that I saw the world, and the lens through which I observed America, the world, and my life—had something to do with this funny little town where I was born," Holm told MPR's Euan Kerr on May 12, 2008. Holm does not romanticize the past, but he sees in the rapidly disappearing "pickled-in-amber culture" of the Icelandic Americans of his parents' generation an attractive alternative to the glitz and glam and consumerism of what the writer Jean Shepherd called "the creeping meatball." (Holm titled his contribution to Mark Vinz and

Thom Tammaro's *Imagining Home* "Is Minneota in America Yet?") The penny auctions of the Farm Holiday Association, DFL politicians like Floyd Olson and Hubert Humphrey, Republicans like Valdimar Bjornson, and the prairie populism of Holm's father provided a tradition with which he could identify:

"Come into an old café / in Ghent, or Fertile, or Halloway / . . . These are the men wrecking the ship of state— / the carriers of darkness." In "The Music of Failure: Variations on an Idea," Holm proudly described his own "prairie eye" and concluded, "Nothing can be done about living here. Nor should it be. The heart can be filled up anywhere on earth."

In his book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*, Greil Marcus talks about an "old, weird America" embodied in the folk-music tradition recovered by Dylan, into which Dylan himself became increasingly absorbed. Reading Holm's portraits of Ronald the Road Runner, Rose Bardal preaching sermons in Icelandic to the cornstalks, Minneota bag lady Sara Kline, and his own father, who "god-damned this, and god-damned that, and god-damned a politician as 'an asshole too dumb to piss with his pants full,'" one





realizes that Holm, too, celebrates an old, weathered, curmudgeonly America . . . which he, too, moves to join. For his 1993 essays for *Landscape of Ghosts*, Holm selected subjects old and weathered—barns, outhouses, junked cars and tractors, rocks, windmills, graveyards, silos. “Here is a book full of pictures of stuff nobody wants to look at and of essays on subjects no one wants to read about,” he wrote by way of introduction. In an essay for Mike Melman’s 2003 book of urban photographs, *The Quiet Hours*, Holm writes, “Here are pictures of old places that remind us of our own age, but they are sad too in that what was beautiful and majestic in these buildings has been replaced by a species of soulless utilitarianism.”

Holm remains to this day a Luddite who disdains television, computer, and even typewriter, preferring to write his manuscripts longhand on a pad of yellow legal paper.

In turning to a discarded Old as an antidote to the disconcerting present, Holm works within a tradition that includes writers like Jeffers, Frost, Anderson, Faulkner, Etter, Keillor, Abbey, Dylan; most members of the ’60s generation (so very different from, opposed to, the ’70s yuppies, the ’80s ideologues, the ’90s businessmen); his older colleagues at Southwest Minnesota State (Alec Bond, Adrian Louis, Joseph Amato); and the writers Holm selected as “mentors” of the regional tradition he defined in his 2007 anthology of Southwest Minnesota State writers, *Farming Words*: Meridel Le Sueur, Thomas McGrath, William Stafford, Robert and Carol Bly, Eugene McCarthy, and Frederick Manfred.

But ’60s people are a restless lot, and Holm was not about to sit in Minnesota forever. In 1985, Southwest Minnesota State agreed to a teacher exchange with Xi’an Jiaotong University in China. This exchange lasted only two years, in part because what Minnesota got from China was a party apparatchik who spoke little English and knew less about education. But quid pro quo, Xi’an got Bill Holm—American Jeremiah, cranky missionary for subversive ideas, proponent of individual experience over party doctrine. He was certainly not what card-carrying administrators there expected, nor was China the blessed alternative to American vulgarity that Holm anticipated. Shortly after his arrival there we received a telegram: “Help! Luggage lost. Send Chore Boy scrubbers. Send

Clorox bleach. Send Comet cleanser and SOS pads.” We packed a box, sent it airmail at 40 or 50 dollars, and listened, bemused, for the explosion. What we got was a series of updates recording a gradual unraveling . . . and then a refocusing, and then a quirky affection.

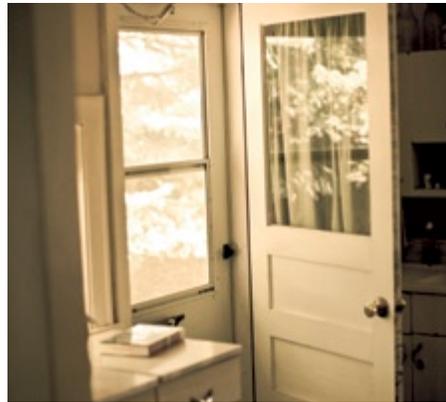
China was a timely subject in 1990, and *Coming Home Crazy: An Alphabet of China Essays* got Holm a review in the *New York Times*. Like anyone else who spent time in a “developing nation” in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Holm encountered enough deprivation, idiocy, and bureaucratic intransigence to make America look almost attractive; the book is in part a rant against Chinese banking, bound feet, bad food, and flies. However, also like others who went abroad during this time, Holm met many bright and energetic students, had some unforgettable experiences exploring an Other even more exotic than Iceland, and came home, if not crazy, certainly altered.

In China, Holm was seen as an American, and some aspects of America began to look pretty darned attractive. “I found myself . . . simultaneously feared and heroized for being a symbol of something I wasn’t even sure I could stomach any longer,” he wrote in amazement. “I even forgot my old anger at American politics of the eighties.” But Holm is one of those old, weird Americans, and the yardstick of China helped

him measure developments in late ’80s America, especially the expanding web of rules, regulations, slogans, and plans imposed by power structures here and there. “Henry [Thoreau] found his angle of vision at his cabin on Walden Pond,” Holm wrote in *The Windows of Brimnes*. “I had to go outside the United States to find mine.” The business model increasingly used by American colleges is not much different from the old Soviet system of committees, studies, strategic goals, five-year plans, personal development plans, annual progress reports on Great Leap Forward plans. One of the more entertaining stories in *Coming Home Crazy* is the tale—familiar to everyone at Southwest—of Holm’s confrontation with the personnel department employee who demanded to see Holm’s Social Security card before re-enrolling him on the state payroll. “An original, not a copy,” she told Holm, pointing to page 8795 of the Federal Register, Form 1-9

903/06/870. “She was, like every Chinese bureaucrat I met, ‘only doing my job,’” Holm wrote, just before quoting Whitman: “Resist much, obey little.”

Holm returned to China in 1988, and again in 1992 for another teaching assignment; he also traveled to Panama, Tasmania, Japan, and Madagascar. In 1999 he returned to Reykjavík, a city dramatically transformed from what he had seen 20 years before. His travel essays showed up in magazines, and he made guest appearances on PBS’s *The Savvy Traveler*. In





*Eccentric Islands*, Holm converted these geographical Others—and a few mental islands—into enclaves of alternative life, Holm far away from home. Iceland was far enough from the thickening center that Holm bought a small home on the island’s north shore—a place akin to Thoreau’s cabin at Walden, or Ernest Oberholtzer’s cabin at Rainy Lake, both described in *Cabins of Minnesota* (2007)—some distant outpost at the world’s end where he could spend each summer teaching writing workshops and writing his own books. Not unexpectedly, then, experience away from southwestern Minnesota provides most of the content for the essays in *Eccentric Islands*, *The Windows of Brimnes* and to a large degree for the poems of *Playing the Black Piano* (2004). Amid description of places abroad, however,

Holm continued his critique of power structures at home and abroad. The latest “American News” in an ironic poem of that title is the hope that “an attack on Iraq could trigger a market rally.” The poem “To Kristján Árnason” satirizes the postmodern relativism fashionable today: “If you say in poem or song to your fellow man: / ‘This is a beautiful bowl,’ they laugh, / saying: ‘That is only your view, your denial / that trees have suffered, that one bowl / is necessarily more beautiful than / another bowl.’” “Official Talk in Wuhan–1992” sounds like official talk at the university, all over America: “When nothing has happened there is no need / to mention it, it would only prove / embarrassing if certain policies / were brought up, though of course / everything, as you see, is fully / ordinary, moving forward, though without / any backward to move forward / from and everyone smiles and is / happy; doing their part, though of what / they are not too sure.” Here is a world too strange, too hostile, too unsuited to Holm’s nature.

The Icelandic community described in *The Windows of Brimnes* is similar to the Minneota Holm knew as a boy in that it is a place filled with people who share each other’s history and trust. It is unlike modern America, where “thumbprints, hidden cameras, scanners, national ID’s, armed national guards, wiretaps, X-rayed shoes,” and other powers of the secret police make us neither free nor safe. Where the function of television is not to inform or entertain, but to distract and deafen. Holm’s careful attention to names and histories and the minutest details of small places reminds us of all that has been lost in our chaotic, materialistic,

sound-bite world. Essays on departed aunts and uncles and on the year and circumstances of his birth echo some of the material in *The Heart Can Be Filled*, and join Icelanders in America with Icelanders in Iceland. But the parallels suggest that the Brimnes alternative, like the Minneota alternative, is endangered, going if not gone. Corruption, if not compulsory, is omnipresent, spreading inexorably from New York to Baghdad, Ulaanbaatar, and even Brimnes. *The Windows of Brimnes* ends with a chapter titled “Fog,” which describes the recent industrialization of the island, and the decline of fishing. Holm concluded darkly, “The Icelanders are giving up their only real patrimony—the emptiness and wisdom of nature—for money.”

A note of acquiescence, of loss beyond repair, of the futility of resistance creeps into late Holm. “Oh what a time it was, I have a photograph,” Paul Simon once sang about old folks looking back at the only memory they had; Holm, too, used old photos to suggest things irrevocably lost to an indifferent world: “Now all flesh is gone, names too. / Nothing left but brown images, / lit by silent flashes, / the squeezed bulb in the photographer’s hand.” Some of Holm’s best poems are elegies on deceased friends like Mike Doman and Alec Bond, public figures like Frederick Manfred and Paul Wellstone. The final poem in *Playing the Black Piano*—which Holm called “the theme of the book”—is titled “Letting Go of What Cannot Be Held Back.” It begins, “Let go of the dead now” and concludes, “Practice / your own song. Now.”

The focus of Bill Holm’s own song has swung from the home place to the larger world, back to the home place, out to an even larger world, and thence to the physical and mental retreat of cabins in Minnesota and Iceland. It moves from Self to Other to Self in Other(s). This ambivalence is not unusual in the experience of ’60s people, or Midwesterners, or Americans, as we seek simultaneously to transcend our place and to celebrate what makes us what we are. Beyond spinning entertaining stories of Minneota and China and Iceland, Holm helps us examine the process we all go through, and points out opportunities and dangers. He himself says it best toward the beginning of *The Windows of Brimnes*: “We do not see reality—or nature—directly, but always through a window of some sort. These windows are often physical, the window of our ‘place,’ our experience, our particular angle onto nature. But they can be mental, . . . the boundaries we erect around the imagination.” The important thing, Holm tells us again and yet again, is never to forget . . . and never to settle.



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*David Pichaske is a professor of English at Southwest Minnesota State University. His books include Rooted: Seven Midwest Writers of Place; UBO3: A Season in Outer Mongolia; A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Society in the Sixties; Movement in the Canterbury Tales: Chaucer's Literary Pilgrimage; and Beowulf to Beatles: Approaches to Poetry. He has published Bill Holm, Leo Dangel, and other poets through his Spoon River Poetry Press.*

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## Bill Holm

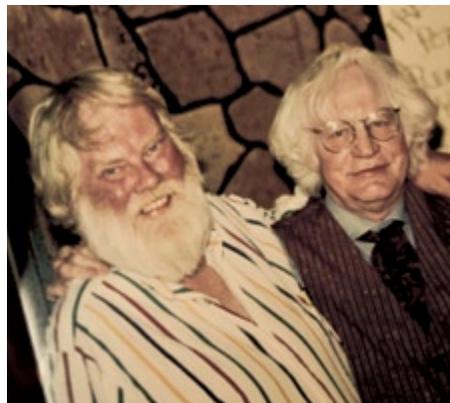
by Robert Bly

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One has to go to a lot of places to find Bill Holm. For one thing, he has a home in music, and he has lived there for years, paying his taxes and voting for the county commissioner. As he says, somewhat inaccurately, “The heart can be filled anywhere on earth.” Of course, you have to keep your eyes open. If Bill is driving along a jagged Icelandic road and sees a house he likes, he may well buy it. Years ago he was shocked out of the idea that America is the best place on earth. When he worked two years as a teacher in China, he wrote *Coming Home Crazy*. That also means Coming Home Sane, or maybe Coming to a Saner Holm.

For Bill it’s clear that to be sane in his world means that you pay attention to what you love. It has to do with Eros. There has to be some Eros in music, and in a sofa, even in food. Maybe there is an Eros especially for opinion. If you can’t hug or marry an opinion, what’s the sense of it? He’s been known to talk for three hours to a book salesman who happened to knock on his door. In one case, at least, that man went back to college the next day.

Bill Holm says that a book is not a place where you sleep through the night. It’s more like a Pony Express rider. A book carries you from one night to the next, one country to the next. I think we all feel an immense gratitude for Bill’s tenacity in defending literary culture in the face of forces that actively encourage mediocrity, thoughtlessness, and television. We have a right to feel genuinely proud of him.




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Robert Bly, named Minnesota’s first poet laureate in 2008, is a poet, editor, translator, storyteller, and father of what he has called “the expressive men’s movement.” A recipient of Guggenheim, Rockefeller, and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, he was also the 2000 McKnight Distinguished Artist.

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## Advice

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Someone dancing inside us  
has learned only a few steps:  
the “Do-Your-Work” in 4/4 time,  
and the “What-Do-You-Expect” waltz.  
He hasn’t noticed yet the woman  
standing away from the lamp,  
the one with black eyes  
who knows the rumba,  
and strange steps in jumpy  
rhythms from the mountains of Bulgaria.  
If they dance together,  
something unexpected will happen.  
If they don’t, the next world  
will be a lot like this one.

—from *The Dead Get By with Everything*, 1991

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## A Well Tempered Island

by Emilie Buchwald



A man with music in his soul, he celebrates its glory in each of his books. Music brings joy, mitigates sorrow, enhances humanity—even, he contends, staves off the Angel of Death (see *Playing the Black Piano*). In one of my favorite poems, Bill contends that if you practice a piece of music often enough over many years you may finally penetrate the wisdom at its core. If you are lucky enough to count Bach and select others, like Haydn, Mozart, and Brahms, as intimates, you, like Bill Holm, will never be poor or alone.

A man whose generative frontal lobe brims with ideas and words, Bill pens poems and essays that gather into books as individual as their creator. There are 11 Holm titles in print, with at least one or perhaps two in utero; not bad for a man whose first book was published when he was 41.

For Bill, books are sustenance. I knew this from our earliest meetings but understood how much this was so on a winter day in 1985. Because I was chicken to drive to Minneota in a blizzard, I climbed aboard a bus from Minneapolis for a publication reading to honor Bill's *Boxelder Bug Variations*, Phebe Hanson's *Sacred Hearts*, and Joe Paddock's *Earth Tongues*. Safe and warm in Bill's home, I walked through room after room as filled with books as a hive is with

honeycomb. The walls of that house exist to support bookshelves. I realized that Bill felt no obligation to keep books in their place, since their place is anywhere convenient. In that house, there is no need to live without a book near to hand at any time.

On that fierce, cold evening, we drove to the event at the Ghent town hall. There, in defiance of the weather, more than a hundred people came in out of the dark, snow glinting on scarves, hats, and jackets, to eat heartily of roast pig and to feast on poetry. It was an elegant event; Bill wore his tuxedo.

Bill's books start life scribbled on a yellow legal pad he hauls around in his book bag, though the 1984 manuscript of *Boxelder Bug Variations* arrived on my desk as a typed, three-inch-high bundle.

"What do you think?" he wrote. "Is there anything in it?"

Yes, indeed there was. Since those boxelder bugs flew out into the world, Bill and I have chewed over *Coming Home Crazy: An Alphabet of China Essays*; *The Dead Get By with Everything*; *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*; *Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary*; and *Playing the Black Piano*. "Chewed over" is not an idle metaphor; these manuscripts were discussed over good food at a variety of eateries or over takeout at the Milkweed office.

Bill's desire to share—hospitality, books, and music—has fueled his peregrinations not only to every part of Greater Minnesota but, among other destinations, to Australia, China, Iceland, Madagascar, and Mexico. At the events I have attended, Bill begins by reading poems written by other poets, enthusiastically pointing out how marvelous they are. He often ends the evening at the piano, if there is one, playing Joplin rags, or Bach, or music suggested by the audience. On these occasions, he is gregarious and convivial, except for an occasional jeremiad to the assembled multitude, as if his give-them-hell doppelganger had suddenly seized the microphone to lambaste the evils of corporate greed and national stupidity, bearing witness to mankind's unregenerate nature.

Bill loves his land—everybody else's land as well—too much to suffer fools and scoundrels in silence, and he writes about what sticks in his craw. In fact, when you scrutinize his oeuvre, the recurring themes are not confined to the beauty of the arts or the delights of the table, or even the pleasure of playing music for one's self. Far more frequently Bill's meditations approach the age-old questions: What is the good life? How do you live it? He offers some answers, and on his journeys, he practices what he preaches: living with integrity, decency, and honor; bullying no one; valuing every individual; connecting with others in this fractured world over food or drink or talk, for the fun of it. Though his name means "island" in Old Norse, Bill is well and truly connected to the main.

A toast to Bill Holm: Your friends, who number many, rejoice in you. Play on! Write on! Keep the Angel of Death so busy dancing, reading, and drowsing that he forgets all about you. Skál! I predict that your books will have staying power; they have the tensile strength of ideas keenly felt and stories delightfully told, with a zesty appreciation for the fact that in spite of every sorrow and trial, life is worth living to the fullest.



*Emilie Buchwald is publisher emeritus of Milkweed Editions and publisher of The Gryphon Press. She was the 2002 McKnight Distinguished Artist.*

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## Holm Grown

by John Calvin Rezmerski



When somebody asks me “Where did Bill Holm grow up?” I know he hasn’t read much of Holm’s writing, full as it is of Minneota, Minnesota, where he resides in a slowly collapsing house full of books, a piano, pictures of ancestors and the children of friends, stones, driftwood, animal teeth, artwork by friends, a threadbare stuffed bear (Snoozlebeaker), a full shelf of spices, piles of mail, books, magazines, kitchen drawers containing anything from a Sabatier knife to an old broken .32-caliber pistol, ashtrays, a persistent telephone, books, newspapers, amazingly assorted cassette tapes and vinyl records, a TV attached only to a videotape player, books, heaps of mail, mountains of musical scores, a freezer where dead pheasants sometimes reside, cookbooks, a cabinet full of wonderful spirits, and a stairway lined with old posters and occasionally piled with books.

His family used to farm in Swede Prairie Township—a burly father, an energetic mother, animals from dogs and pigs to bees that dwelt in the walls, honey oozing through cracks in the plaster. He played with visiting children, the disabled .32 standing in for a cap gun, Snoozlebeaker lying low in the bedroom, a wounded tractor in the shed, a car in the yard. He wore big glasses, collected stamps, played in the band, suffered the taunts that studious kids have to

endure, and dreamed of seeing the town growing smaller in the rearview mirror of his own car as he left in pursuit of excitement.

His world included a piano teacher, a family friend whose house was full of books, small-town people treating one another courteously or badly, good teachers and bad. His father knew he would never make a farmer; his mother thought he’d be a good lawyer. He sang in church, rebelled in school. In college, he became a popular nerd who wrote for the student newspaper. He played piano in bars, went to graduate school, taught college, wrote poems and essays, became acquainted with other writers and musicians, found influential friends, traveled abroad. For a while, his life was a sort of cliché. Eventually he came home.

I’ve been told that Holm didn’t really grow up until he visited China, and that he re-created himself through travel. I have a different opinion. Hearing him talk of his early reading, having read his juvenile pastiches of Poe, having witnessed his binges—Swift, Ibsen, Jon Hassler, Spinoza, Liszt, Joplin, Twain, Kafka (Franz and Barbara)—it seems clear to me that the place where Holm grew up is on the page, that his own pages are adjacencies to everything he has read. Dr. Johnson’s famous kicking proclamation “I refute it thus” has informed Holm’s piano-whacking tone cluster: “I affirm

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## The Sea Eats What It Pleases

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it thus!” Kitchen, piano, fjords, and whiskey are statements as vital to the conversation as classicism, pentameter, and the Pisan Cantos. So on to the next phase of growth.

His agenda is to meld high-culture intellectualism with the fundamental skills of being a good neighbor. With all the surfaces deeply covered, he had to push hard. The task demanded that he sharpen his ironic skills, but I’m tired of hearing him described as a humorist primarily. He is like the drummer in the stern of the ancient boat, earnestly trying to turn work into play.

“Who touches this [book] touches a man,” Walt Whitman said. The same is true of Holm’s books. Who grows in reading them wears the author’s boots on the perpetual tramp toward real maturity.

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*John Calvin Rezmerski’s poems have appeared in publications as varied as the Wall Street Journal, Mennonite Life, New Letters, Chelsea, Nursing Outlook, Poems of Exotic Places, The Party Train, the Sumac Reader, and Tales of the Unanticipated. He taught creative writing and journalism at Gustavus Adolphus College for 35 years.*

If you turn your back to the ocean  
Do you think the tide will not find you  
If it decides to rise a little higher  
Than usual, to swallow an extra helping  
Of gravel, to suck on your bones to clean  
Its palate? The sea eats what it pleases  
Whether you face it or give it your back.  
No use having opinions about this.  
But the sea does not hate you, or imagine  
That you have wounded it with your avarice.  
You cannot blaspheme the honor of water  
Or insult the tide for tasting of salt.  
Only humans, so newly risen from fish,  
Imagine drowning each other for reasons.

—from *Playing the Black Piano*, 2004

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*The writer Carol Bly, who died in 2007, once said: “What I admire so much about Bill Holm is that he knows inside the ordinary person is a need and joyous desire—even if it doesn’t show at first—for deeply felt literature. . . . One of his great gifts to Minnesota is his constant reminder that inside each of us is a longing for strong feeling and the ability to enjoy a strong artistic expression.” “The Sea Eats What It Pleases” was Carol Bly’s favorite Holm poem.*

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## Paying Attention

by Lawrence Owen

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At an August faculty get-together, a colleague said, “You may have trouble getting these Minnesotans to talk in class.” He was telling a new Gustavus faculty member what to expect. Then on my first day among taciturn Minnesotans, I walked a big pink student under a bushel basket of blond hair. He was talking.

A couple of months ago, this big pink man phoned and said, “I’m going to a Unitarian service in Underwood. I’ll pick you up in about an hour.” As he drove his Buick across the prairie, he talked. About Spinoza, Iceland, Whitman, Obama’s books, Icelanders in Manitoba, heart medicine, Bly’s translation of *Peer Gynt*, Bush’s failings, and a dozen other matters. His hair has turned white, but he keeps talking, wonderful talk from a full life of reading, traveling, thinking, and writing.

Dr. Johnson was ill, feeling weak. Boswell said Edmund Burke might visit. Johnson said no to the visit. He knew he had to be strong, alert, to talk to Burke. When Bill Holm comes visiting, you better be strong and alert if you want to get in on the talk.

■

Bill’s like Lance Armstrong and Tiger Woods. He trains really hard and then he gives it all he’s got. When he was doing boxelder bugs, he did them morning, noon, and night. We would see his Chevy Caprice (he likes big cars) park in front of our house. He would charge across the yard with his canvas bags full of books, magazines, and manuscripts. No knock. In he would come, straight to the piano. He would cross one leg over the other, light a Camel or a Kool, then start playing the boxelder variations he had composed while driving from Minnesota to St. Peter. Out would come the music notebook and he would write down his new boxelder variations, little songs sounding like Chopin, or Bach, or Joplin.

Then he would say, “Hello,” dig around in a canvas bag and say, “I don’t think you’ve seen these.”

These would be poems and love stories about boxelder bugs. And then a bit later, Milkweed Editions published *Boxelder Bug Variations*, that glorious view of the world as seen while dancing and philosophizing with a little striped bug.

We visited a medieval church in a village near the Dorset coast. In the churchyard he said some verses from Gray’s “Elegy” and then we came upon a stone lid to a coffin. The lid lay there upside down, looking like a shallow bathtub. Bill got down on his knees, got into that coffin lid, stretched out on his back.

“This is what it will be like,” he said. “But mine will have to be longer than this one.” Bill had been studying mortality for a good long while before he noticed death out there at the lilac bush in his Minneota backyard. And it’s our good fortune that Bill figured out that he can keep death out there by playing Haydn. I can’t play Haydn, but Bill convinced me that death is in my backyard and that I better do something to keep him out there.

■ ■

“When’s the last time you read Conrad?” Or Emerson, or Yeats, or Spinoza. “When was the last time you played Chopin?” Schubert, or Joplin, or Liszt. Bill is always turned on to a writer and a composer. He named some travel writer I had never heard of, and then held forth at length on travel writing. Back in the early years of his immersion in Whitman, Bill told about a visitor calling on Whitman in Camden, about Whitman in a rocking chair in a room filled with books and manuscripts, about Whitman poking around among the papers with his walking stick. Listen to Bill and he will let you into his mind. It’s filled to bursting, yet he keeps stuffing more in. It’s been Spinoza lately, but one of these days it will be another writer, another composer.

■ ■

You can’t think about Bill Holm without thinking about Iceland. He goes over there to a house called Brimnes and after a nine months that has lasted for years, Milkweed Editions publishes a set of superb essays called *The Windows of Brimnes*. Music, birds, religion, ancestors, language, politics, modernity, geography—the boxelder bug has become a house in Iceland. I’ve been listening to Bill talk Iceland for over 40 years. He showed me a new poem about eider ducks in Iceland and I am happy to tell his readers that it’s a really good poem. Bill’s not through. He’s still playing Haydn and Iceland keeps showing him new things.

Keep paying attention, Bill. And showing us how to pay attention.

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*Lawrence Owen is professor emeritus at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, where he taught English from 1963 to 1996.*

Bill Holm's house in Minneota is a kind of ark for the arts—for music and literature especially, but also for the arts of cooking and conversation—out on the Minnesota prairie. For decades now, Bill has offered his place as a rent-free hostel to passing writers, musicians, and iconoclasts. His long-term hospitality is just one more manifestation of the big-hearted generosity Bill has shown toward fellow artists throughout the state, the nation, and, in truth, the world. I've benefited from Bill's brotherly encouragement many times. You could call this poem a thank-you card.

## Not Sleeping at Bill Holm's House

by Barton Sutter

In the corner of my narrow room,  
 There's a double-barreled shotgun,  
 Which will not go off in this poem.  
 Reclining on the bedclothes:  
 A small stuffed bear and pink flamingo,  
 Which I set aside. Turning back the spread,  
 I am greeted by red flannel sheets  
 Bearing a Frosty the Snowman motif.  
 This bed is too loud to sleep on, and I am  
 Too wired with coffee and wild ideas to dream  
 But settle in, anyhow, with a volume by Sandburg,  
 A poet far better than I had remembered,  
 Who talks of the tombs and the grass  
 And passengers rocketing into the dark  
 Toward strange destinations, like Omaha.  
 What could be stranger than Omaha?  
 I'm a passenger, myself, in this crooked old house  
 Full of books and the ghosts of hot arguments.  
 Where are we going? The clock says two,  
 And, out in the yard, a barred owl asks, Who?  
 Who are you? I answer that I am  
 A passenger on the Minnesota Express,  
 Bound for points west—Canby and Mars.

I can hear, in the next compartment, my comrade,  
 My host, the polar bear of American literature,  
 Cough and hack and growl in his sleep,  
 Which I envy. I can't count sheep  
 Or the number of books in this house.  
 In the outer room, a harpsichord waits  
 As patiently as a horse-drawn cab  
 In a story of Sherlock Holmes.  
 Who done it? Who knocked me out?  
 And how did it get to be daylight  
 And Bill banging out hymns  
 On the downstairs piano, just now  
 That sweet Shaker tune  
 "Tis a Gift to be Simple?" Tis! Tis!  
 Tis also a gift to be complex and ornery,  
 With a house full of music,  
 Cigar smoke and whiskey,  
 And Icelandic sagas  
 Preserved by farmers  
 For nearly a thousand years.

*Barton Sutter, a writer of poems, essays, and stories, lives in Duluth, Minnesota, and teaches English and creative writing at the University of Wisconsin, Superior.*

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## Messenger of Failure

by Vidar Hreinsson

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In the summer of 1850, my great-great-grandfather Jón Ingjaldsson of Eyjardalsá in Bárðardalur Valley in northern Iceland got his wife Gudny Stefánsdóttir pregnant for the second time. In the fall, they hired her young half-sister Helga as their housemaid. Jón impregnated her, too, just before his annual midwinter depression set in, with worries that he would run out of hay and his sheep would starve to death. My great-grandfather Gudni was born in April of 1851, and his half-sister Sigríður in the fall. Her mother Helga left the farm and became a housemaid elsewhere until she married, but little Sigríður remained in Eyjardalsá. Her aunt Gudny made no distinction between her and her half-siblings.

Sigríður was possibly the first love of the great poet Stephan G. Stephansson, but he emigrated from Iceland to America in 1873. She married Fridgeir Jóakimsson in 1877, much against her aunt Gudny's will. Gudny didn't attend the wedding in the church, and that day she handled the churn more harshly than usual. The newlyweds farmed in Hlídarendi, next to Eyjardalsá, until 1880, when they set off for America. Sigríður was pregnant, but died on the ship, giving birth to twins who also died. Fridgeir continued his journey alone, carrying their humble belongings with him, toward the promises of the new world, which turned out to be a failure. He took up the surname Bardal, married again, and was the father of Gunnar who gave Bill Holm books, Pauline who gave him music, and Rose who gave him "her crazed longing for God."



In Sigríður's luggage, there was at least one book. When I visited Bill Holm in Minnesota in 2002, he took me to his cousin Daren Gislason, a lover of human talent, plants, and books. There I found this old and worn book, which is in fact a few books and pamphlets about drinking herbs, morals for youth, bringing up children, and the history of Christ's childhood, all bound into one. It was marked with the names of Fridgeir Bardal, Gudny Stefánsdóttir, and her sons Gudni and Stefán, but only the initials of Sigríður.

Everything connects. We need awareness of the insignificant details of past and present lives, and the ability to reveal their significance. "Seabirds arrange themselves into a sentence on the water," Bill observed out of his Brimnes-window, himself a migratory bird revealing the significance of bugs, low life, failures, Iceland, wooden bowls, music—in a constant effort to "reach full consciousness as a human."

In his service to human reason, Bill Holm has created an imaginary, selective image of Iceland, a subversive, critical contrast to America of today. We Icelanders tend to believe that the image Bill presents in his works is true. If there is some truth we are losing it, as Bill has already observed through his Brimnes-window. We no longer embrace the "wholesome failure" Bill wrote about in *The Music of Failure*, but our tendency toward self-destruction is increasing. May Bill Holm continue to tell us about the significance of the small details—the only way to keep the world from falling apart.



Vidar Hreinsson, a literary scholar, critic, and editor, is the executive director of the Reykjavík Academy, a multidisciplinary community of independent scholars.

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## Music for an old pump organ

from *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*, 1996

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Pauline was buried among the Bardals in the graveyard next to the Icelandic country church in Lincoln County. In 1922, Pauline picked out the congregation's new reed organ, and played it for services there for almost forty years, until the church, a victim of rural urbanization and of Icelanders who refused to reproduce or stay on the farm, closed its door for lack of business. While a few miles to the west, the Poles sensibly planted their Catholic Church in a hollow protected from the wind, the Icelanders defied Minnesota by building on a rise in the only ridge of hills on that flat prairie. On even a calm day at that wind-swept knoll, the church windows rattled, shingles flapped, and the black granite gravestones seemed to wobble.

Pauline and I drove out to that church a few years before her death. She carried a shopping bag full of flowers and rat poison. She had a key for the back door of the church and we went up through the minister's dressing room into the sanctuary. The room, carpentered in good oak, was furnished only with chairs, pews, organ, pulpit, and the simple altar crowned by a wood cross; no statues, paintings, bric-a-brac—nothing but that wood, goldened by afternoon light from the pale yellow windows. Wind seemed to come up from inside the church, whooshing over the fine dust that covered everything. "Nobody's cleaned it since last year. It's a shame." Pauline muttered,

then went to work. First, she arranged her long legs on the organ bench, carefully folding them between two wooden knee guards below the keyboard. Thus constricted, she pumped, and while checking the stops with one hand, slid over the keys with the other, playing the chords from Handel's "Largo." "The mice have not eaten the bellows," she announced with satisfaction, then launched into an old hymn with both hands. We played for each other for a while, Pauline marveling at my clean fingering. She knew, I think, that she had some responsibility for my love of playing, and was proud of herself, and of me, but this was not the sort of thing Icelanders discussed openly with each other. Skill could be remarked on, but the heart was private and disliked language.

When we finished, she swept up the old poison in a newspaper, opened her yellow skull-and-crossboned boxes, and laid down a fresh lunch for any rodents who might presume to make a meal of God's own organ bellows. Even though the church would never likely be opened, nor the organ publicly played there again, such things ought to be attended to for their own sake. Who knew? Perhaps the dead a few feet away liked an occasional sad tune and didn't fancy the idea of rats interfering with their music.



Pauline locked the church carefully, looking back at it with a sort of melancholy nostalgia. She proceeded to the graveyard with the rest of the contents of her shopping bag, and there performed her next errand. She swept off the graves, then put a flower or two on all of them. The row read:

PALL 7/25 – 8/2 1889	FRIDGEIR 1843 – 1899	GUDLAUG 1851 – 1943
—	—	—
ROSE 1890 – 1956		GUNNAR 1887 – 1961

“And I will be between Rose and Gunnar,” she said, “in not too long.”

Indeed, within a few years the row was full; six dead in the graveyard of a dead church, no progeny, no empire following them, only the dry wind of a new world that promised them and all of us so much.

by Einar Már Gudmundsson

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“Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

“Neither—I am an Icelander.”

“Democrat or Republican?”

“Icelander.”

“Black or white?”

“Icelander.”

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This conversation can be found in Bill Holm’s book *Coming Home Crazy*, based on his year living in China. I think that Bill is more Icelandic than most Icelanders. He knows his origins and ancestry, as well as the places—many places.

Bill is so emphatically proud of us that it is tempting to deceive him. He is not allowed to know the truth about all the chaos, all the greed and graft and bullshit, because we are the epitome of a civilized culture in his eyes, cosmopolitans in touch with their past, crackerjack storytellers, pure geniuses.

In his thinking, to be an Icelander is an entire school of philosophy. He reminds me sometimes of the Native boy fostered by an Icelandic family in Canada because he was an orphan.



When Icelandic travelers came along later and met this young man, fluent in Icelandic, they asked, “Are you an Icelander?”

“No,” he replied, “I am a Skagafjörður native.”

Bill’s forefathers are of course from East Iceland—Vopnafjörður and nearby areas—but these last summers he has lived in Skagafjörður, at Hofsóss, so the people there and natural wonders like the mountain Tindastóll and the sea have been a fountain of inspiration for his poetry and stories.

We would not be worse as a people if we would always ask: “What would Bill Holm think about that?”

*Translated from the Icelandic by Cathy Josephson*

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## Independent People

by Einar Már Gudmundsson

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In October of 1995 I received an invitation to come to the U.S., to the Midwest, to Minnesota. I went there in February of 1996, shortly after the great cold spell, when temperatures had reached -50°C. Our readings were in and around Minneapolis and I visited a number of other places.

When my hosts asked me what I would most like to see I mentioned a distant small town, Minneota. My hosts' eyebrows shot up and they said, "What do you want to go there for? There's nothing to see there."

"That's exactly what I want to see," I said. "Nothing." Because if anyone can ever show me nothing, I'll have seen everything.

The truth was that I had read Bill Holm's books and was curious to see the town he was so fond of, Minneota, where the Icelandic pioneers had settled.

I had met Bill in Minneapolis, but he was on his way to California, so his cousin Daren Gislason, teacher and gardener, received me and my companion, Árni Sigurjónsson, who lived in Minneapolis at the time and was one of the people who were making sure my trip went well. We drove for five hours over endless plains through numberless small towns where deserted streets announced their names and most coffee shops were shut.

When we reached Minneota we phoned Daren, since we didn't have his street address.

"You'll find the house right away," said Daren. "It's the only house with furniture on the porch roof."

These could hardly be called clear instructions, especially in view of how similar houses are to each other out there in the Midwest. Yet we hadn't been driving for long when the car did indeed stop right in front of a white wooden house with chairs on the porch roof, whatever they might have been doing there in the biting frost.

Daren was standing in the entrance, a slim man wearing a red sweater, with gray hair and a cat on his shoulder.

"You'll have to pardon me," said Daren, "this is a bachelor apartment. If you're allergic to cats I advise you not to come in."

This made sense: some 30 cats lived there and there's no denying that they were accompanied by the smell that accompanies cats. I realized immediately that I had entered another world. Here, time merged the generations and told its own story. Gramophones

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*Einar Már Gudmundsson is one of Iceland's best-loved and most-translated living writers. He has written poems, essays, short stories, and novels, including Englar Alheimsins (Angels of the Universe), which won the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 1993 and is now required reading for every Icelandic high-school student.*



*Daren Gislason with Bill Holm*

met the eye from the very beginning, wind-up gramophones and gramophones with trumpets, old 78 r.p.m. records, cupboards and lockers and above them pictures of the Icelandic forebears who left the Vopnafjörð area in the wake of volcanic eruptions and the death of sheep. These people's expressions contain something you might call historical determination. There are congressmen and lawyers, thrice-married dignitaries who fathered more than 20 children, whose descendants were now dispersed throughout the United States and would phone one another if they ran across their bizarre last names in phone books.

Upstairs there is a grand library with old books and new, and conspicuous in one corner 80 first-edition copies of *Independent People* by Halldór Laxness.

"I always buy it if I run across it," said Daren, and then pointed to a little wooden chest.

"You can see where this one comes from," he said.

The workmanship, the carvings, were unmistakable, and my anticipation grew as he opened the chest with a big key to show books and letters, original editions of Jónas Hallgrímsson\*: textbooks on mathematics, algebra, and astronomy translated by Jónas, and handwritten letters that could doubtless form the basis for a pioneer saga if somebody could read the writing and the language of their forebears.

"You should maybe send these documents to the University of Iceland," I said.

*\* Icelandic poet and natural scientist, 1807–1845.*

“No, I wouldn’t dream of it,” said Daren. “They can come here if they want to.”

I nodded. This man’s passion for *Independent People* was slowly becoming clear to me.

Now the cats came along and peered into the chest as if one of their nine lives were kept there among the yellowing pages, in hardcover original editions.

“Look, the thing is,” said Daren. “The Icelanders didn’t like the look of the plains. They wanted mountains around them and they didn’t like the look of the black soil, either, which is of course the richest soil for wheat and soybeans, so they kept going farther and farther until they ended up here in Minneota and Lincoln County. There are a few hills here, but obviously no mountains. On the other hand, the soil here is not as good as it is elsewhere. Even so, this is the center of the universe. The Belgians came along the next year and took the best farms, but they didn’t read and the Icelanders maintained that they were imbeciles, one and all. The Icelanders were the only pioneers who brought books and set up a library, which was very unusual, but it wasn’t a library of the kind we run today, where books are lent out. It was a traveling library that was moved from farm to farm by five horses and left there.”

Here I end my account of the town where there was nothing to see and of Daren Gislason, teacher and gardener, who is no less memorable to me than the town.

*Translated from the Icelandic by Wincie Jóhannsdóttir*



So I come here to this spare place in the summer, and sometimes in the winter when its spareness is magnified by snow and darkness. After a while, the United States is simply too much: too much religion and not enough gods, too much news and not enough wisdom, too many weapons of mass destruction—or, for that matter, of private destruction (why search so far away when they live right under our noses?), too much entertainment and not enough beauty, too much electricity and not enough light, too much lumber and not enough forests, too much real estate and not enough earth, too many books and not enough readers, too many runners and not enough strollers, too many freeways, too many cars, too many malls, too many prisons, too much security but not enough civility, too many humans but not enough eagles. And the worst excess of all: too many wars, too much misery and brutality—reflected as much in our own eyes as in those of our enemies. So I come here to this spare place. A little thinning and pruning is a good anodyne for the soul. We see more clearly when the noise is less, the objects fewer.

When Americans ask me to describe my little house in Iceland, I tell them, not entirely disingenuously, that it is a series of magical windows with a few simple boards to hold them up, to protect your head from rain while you stare out to sea.

—from *The Windows of Brimnes*, 2007

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## Ho(I)mage: Notes from friends and colleagues

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It's been my honor and privilege to be among Bill Holm's friends for at least 30 years, and I was delighted to learn that he had received this high distinction. Bill is one of our country's few essential contemporary writers. What he has had to say to American readers has, it seems to me, a quality of insight and intelligence right up there with, say, Thomas Paine or Henry David Thoreau. If he has ever written something that doesn't matter, I haven't come upon it. I remember Bill's dear friend Carol Bly once saying with typical wryness that most contemporary American fiction is about shopping and its consequences. And though Bill doesn't write fiction, that kind of pervasive and almost universal slightness is just what I'm talking about. And not only has he contributed a body of marvelous writing, but he has been a model of humanity, helpful to his friends, and generous with his praise for their work, whether it be in writing poetry or playing the piano in the parlor of an isolated farmhouse. When I think back to Fred Manfred's memorial service in Luverne, now many years ago, it is Bill's moving remarks that I remember more than anything else. If I could choose the person I'd like to have stand at my grave and tell people who I was and what I did with my life, Bill would be my choice.

Ted Kooser

*United States Poet Laureate, 2004–2006 | Garland, Nebraska*

Bill embodies much of what I hold most dear in the tradition not just of American literature, but of American society more broadly. He is eternally suspicious of power, particularly when it becomes excessively concentrated. He is fiercely independent, often downright polemical, and yet he is essentially a generous, tender man, with a fierce love of music and literature. Think Thomas Paine crossed with Walt Whitman, leavened by what seems to me to be a uniquely Minnesotan dose of self-effacing humor and fundamental decency. What a pleasure it has been for me to come to know him, and to work with him.

Daniel Slager

*Publisher and CEO | Milkweed Editions, Minneapolis*

Bill Holm was known to his students in China as “Professor Bill.” We were thrilled to learn from this large, red-headed, and outspoken Icelandic American random subjects ranging from Whitman poems to the principles of linguistics (the latter of which, according to some of my classmates, “Professor Bill didn't seem to be very passionate about”).

He was not just a great teacher of prose and poems. To us, he was a walking exemplification of the essence of the American spirit in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. He mistrusted the

authorities (of both the Communist and Republican regimes). He was never afraid to speak his mind. Getting to know this erudite poet, musician, adventurer, and “bourgeois liberalist” outside the classroom was a life-changing experience for many of his students in Xi’an, and they have remained close friends for the past 20 years. His contempt for institutionalized bureaucracy was legendary on campus, and yet he maintained genuine and profound respect for the general down-to-earth folks, people like hotel maids, chefs, farmers, drivers, school secretaries, postmen, street peddlers, and of course his students. He was resented by the university administration for not observing some of the most bizarre official rules (like getting back to the guesthouse no later than midnight), but he was adored by everyone else who got to know him as a mentor, as a friend, as a man of integrity, and as a man of independence. His love for authentic Chinese cuisine lured him to many a restaurant, urban and rural, big and small, where he entertained his friends with his newly composed poems or prose after the last course was served.

Back in the late 1980s, Bill’s writings (many of which were translated into Chinese) made many of my compatriots realize that the American culture was much more than what Rambo and Baywatch had to offer. He is the ultimate roaming poet in the tradition of ancient Chinese poet Su Dongpo, leaving behind his trail of poetic lines that inspire the readers to rediscover the significance of life, to enjoy things of beauty, and to seek spontaneity in this increasingly commercialized world.

Dingman Yu

*Teacher of Chinese | South High School, Minneapolis*

When I met Bill Holm many years ago I had been reading David Quammen on the subject of island biodiversity. Due to the peculiarity and whirl of the billions of neurons in my head, I’ve always since this first meeting thought of Bill in terms of a floating island he anchors here and there including a few weeks every winter near our cold-weather home, a casita on a creek near the Mexican border. During this time we are unfashionably preoccupied with eating, drinking, smoking, and talking. We’ve even come to the point in friendship where we exchange our freshest poems, a signal moment of trust between poets. He was amused when we first met that I had even been through his little town of Minneota way back when I was researching my novel *Dalva* and had visited Pipestone on my way to the Sandhills of Nebraska.

Bill is not larger than life, he’s as big as life, which is as large as anyone gets. He’s a singular man, not in the least to be confused with any other citizen or writer. I was there the day he played the piano to a group of local Arizona retirees at the community center in Patagonia, and he managed to enlarge the modest room into a cathedral. He is one of the few living writers I revere rather than merely read, and I often think of him in terms of Sir Thomas Browne’s directive, “Swim smoothly in the stream of thy nature and act but one man.”

Of course Bill is also a crank in the manner of the village atheist, utterly embattled, Menckenesque, and quick to lather over anything that irritates him. He’s untranslatable except in his own words. We cook rather elaborately and the only time he’s totally calm is when eating. Oddly our favorite annual meal is when Bill



arrives with a big package of fish a friend catches through the Minnesota ice—bluegills, perch, rock bass, and walleye. This meal is a form of prayer and I wouldn't trade it for the 37-course lunch with 19 different wines I had in France a few years ago.

A couple of times Garrison Keillor and I have spoken on the subject of how we could help Bill make some money since he is an anti-magnet for dollars. It's so pleasant that The McKnight Foundation stepped in and that this summer in Iceland at least he can afford that 90-buck-a-quart low-rent scotch he favors.

Jim Harrison  
*Writer | Suttons Bay, Michigan*

My first meeting with Bill was at a poetry reading in St. Peter, Minnesota, where he recited my poem, “Sacred Heart, Minnesota,” from memory. Of course, I fell in love immediately, and that evening began a long and valued friendship. For five summers in the 1970s, we traveled around southwestern Minnesota with a motley crew of poets and musicians and storytellers in a program called Poetry Out Loud, financed by the Minnesota State Arts Board. We read to corn detasslers, children and their parents in city parks, residents of nursing homes, patrons of supper clubs, and farmers and housewives at various small-town Crazy Daze. What a piece of work this Renaissance man is! Not only does he possess a glorious tenor voice, but he plays both piano and harpsichord. One of my happiest memories of Poetry Out Loud days is listening to Bill play Bach on his harpsichord, which he kept in his Minneota kitchen.

But above all, he is a gifted and brilliant writer whose work has roamed among many forms—poetry, memoir, travel, personal essay. To borrow from Emily Dickinson, his “brain is wider than the sky.” Bill is truly a man of distinction as well as a generous and loyal friend. I have even forgiven him for inveighing against e-mail and Google and voicing vociferously his preference for a cabin in treeless Iceland over one on Lake Superior's North Shore!

Phebe Hanson  
*Poet | St. Paul*

As a teacher at Southwest Minnesota State University from 1970 to 2004, I consider myself privileged to have been able to call Bill Holm my colleague for most of that time. Characteristic of him are intelligence, passion, creativity, energy, knowledge, and honesty. No ivory tower professor, he made the classroom an arena for intellectual adventure and discovery. Students shook their heads in wonder at the natural phenomenon that stood before them, a whirlwind of curiosity and excitement. He cared, and they knew it. Bill always remained shockable at a student's limited interest in books or ideas and was on a perpetual mission to convert young minds to the beauty and power of the printed word. As a colleague and friend, he was unwavering in his support and generosity. I look forward to the next time I can exchange bear hugs with him. A brainy bear. That's Bill. Did I forget to say that as a writer he's a genius? To translate a compelling human voice onto the page the way he can is a rare achievement. And, finally, I love his unrelenting intolerance of politicians who are a discredit to the Republic.

Philip Dacey  
Poet | New York City

I can't count the number of times people have asked me if I know Bill Holm, and when I tell them that I consider him one of my best friends, they will say, "Oh, he's one of my best friends too." Though Bill often needs to escape all of us to get his writing work

done, he is one of the most generous people I have ever known. He may condemn the arrogant and greedy, but he has unlimited praise and support for humble or unrecognized talent wherever and whenever he sees it.

Trying to imagine two Bill Holms would be like trying to imagine two Walt Whitmans or two Ella Fitzgeralds or two Winston Churchills or two Emily Dickinsons. His whole persona comes with a clear mandate: DO NOT DUPLICATE—as if anyone could if they tried.

Jim Heynen  
*Writer | St. Paul*

Bill Holm enters your life and takes up permanent residence in your psyche. He's a big man, with a big talent and a big soul. No one who's read Bill's work, heard him regale an audience, listened to him play Haydn and Schubert on a grand piano, or thrilled to his vocal rendition of "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" is ever the same again. He is a force of nature and he will be heard. Is he intimidating? Absolutely. But like his longtime friend and fellow writer, the late Carol Bly, he is respectful of the views of others. All of us in Minnesota, Iceland, and elsewhere who know and love him have gained immeasurably by his presence in our lives.

Louise Klas  
*Attorney and teacher | St. Paul*

I have known and admired Bill Holm as a writer and teaching colleague for more than 30 years. His writing, both prose and poetry, is brilliantly clear, honest, perceptive, and provocative. When I first read his poems and essays about rural and small-town Minnesota, I knew I was reading something locally authentic and universally true. Bill is at home when writing about the inhabitants of Minnesota, and when writing about life in America, China, Iceland, Madagascar, and other distant places. His knowledge of literature is broad and deep. Bill is one of the most generous people I have ever known—generous in sharing his knowledge and writing, and in promoting the work of other writers. He should be named poet laureate at large for what he already does to spread the happiness around.

Leo Dangel | *Poet and professor of English (retired)*  
*Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall*

Bill Holm’s sense of beauty and place reverberates across everything he does and sees: his poetry, prose, music, and conversation, even an old roadside motel with signs warning of dire punishment for charging boat batteries or cleaning fish in the rooms.

Bill’s readers cover the whole spectrum: he once packed a Wisconsin lakeside ballroom with the local sheriff, a city council member, several grandmas, two bikers, the librarian, and a masseuse (and that was just one table!), all of whom knowledgeably discussed Bill’s work. The pink-haired punk rockers who organized the event asked Bill to sit in with them on stage, which he did, adding

a counterpoint to the two chords being played and punctuating the songs with honest poems and affectionate humor.

Although our efforts to become captains of the audiobook industry have so far fallen short, he still holds out hope that one day our ship will come in and poetry will become a valued American commodity. Come to think of it, this award proves that poetry does pay. I feel fortunate to call this fellow western Minnesotan my friend and business co-conspirator.

Scott Beyers

*Publisher, EssayAudio.com | New Brighton*

In a review of *The Windows of Brimnes* Bill was dubbed “the great fulminator,” a reference presumably to his unhesitatingly sharp criticism of that which he sees going wrong in our world. The past 30 years have indeed provided me with lots of Bill-as-fulminator during many a shared preprandial “bump,” prompting lively discussions (read: “arguments”), so the phrase at first received my delighted approval. But read his work—whether prose or poetry—and you also find a profound love of what life, art, and human beings have to offer. I for one can never get through more than a few pages without getting choked up on the warmth and affection they contain. Bill’s view is basically positive, the anger directed at the waste of potential. But I will continue, over whiskey, to accuse the man of negativity because I can’t of course let him know I’ve caught on to him.

Wincie Jóhannsdóttir

*Teacher of English | Hamrablid College, Reykjavik, Iceland*

Of all the pianists I have heard in 46 years, no one can will music into being as persuasively as Bill Holm. His outsized frame and those wonderfully rough, large hands are able to produce plangent melodies and thunderous sonorities whenever he has a new obsession in mind—the late music of Schumann, the ecstatic musings of Rautavaara, the cool surfaces of Fauré, anything of Big Daddy Bach . . . indeed, his musical obsessions (and they are nothing short of this) fill his life; he is “lost” when he has discovered a new composer, spending hours poring over scores from his capacious music library, or gotten through his shadowy network of music-nerd informers. And he rarely contents himself only with the piano music; operas, symphonies, chamber music, songs—all are played in hurried transcriptions or simply sight-read from full score. This is the mark of a true musician—someone whose curiosity and thirst for knowledge are not bound by his technique on one instrument.

Bill, never one to hide his agenda, is still moved by the old Romantic notion that if people would just play music instead of buying contraptions to play it for them, we would come to our senses, stop killing the Earth, start listening to each other, and discharge the motley crew that currently and arrogantly assures us of “God’s will.” His ethos, both artistic and political, can be summed up in a line from one of his essays, “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bach,” where he discusses the salubrious effects of Bach’s music on the thinking capabilities of some of the more interesting specimens of the human race, including Halldór Laxness, Albert Einstein, and Pablo Casals: “Maybe Americans should make it our national habit

to begin every day with a half-hour of Bach. It couldn’t hurt us in either our private or public lives.”

Personally, I am very grateful to Bill for a thousand pleasures, but none more profound than the love of piano duet playing, usually with at least one adult beverage under our commodious belts. I have whiled away countless hours in this pastime, one that paints the rather alarming picture of two overly large men on one piano bench in uncomfortable proximity to each other. Our piano team, “Big Guys with Grand Pianos,” enjoys a modest success in western Minnesota, where we are a hit on the hot-dish circuit, as well as the occasional “real” concert series.

But it is in Schubert’s duet music, and especially his Grand Duo, that Bill’s true generosity has been exposed, allowing me into a world of which I had only half-consciously been aware and one that I should have visited much earlier. It was on a still, crushingly cold November night that I think I had my most profound musical experience, in a house in Minneota, the home of a prairie bard and the possessor of a spirit larger than his frame could contain. And for this I am ever grateful to Bill Holm.

Dr. Daniel Rieppel

*Professor of Music | Southwest Minnesota State University, Marshall*

## The Ghost of Wang Wei Looks at Skagafjörð

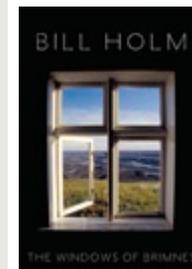
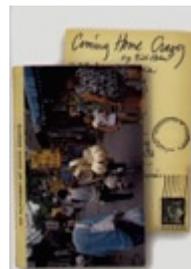
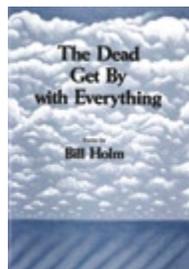
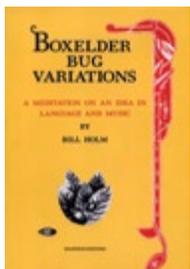
How the old Chinese poets would have admired Iceland!  
 Everything appears one at a time, at great distance:  
 one yellow wildflower, one brown bird, one white horse,  
 one old ramshackle farm, looking small and far away  
 with its polka-dot sheep and that ten-mile-long  
 black mountain lowering behind it. One farmer  
 the size of a matchstick walks out of his thimble barn  
 to his postage-stamp hay field while  
 over his head a river falls half a mile  
 off a cliff, a silver knitting needle  
 that disappears for the length of a finger.  
 Still you can see the farmer, even from this distance,  
 his tiny black boots, his brown coat, his blue hat,  
 his moustache, his slightly bloodshot eye  
 in which you can just make out the reflection  
 of the Atlantic Ocean and the whole sky.

—from *Playing the Black Piano*, 2004

Andi Wang Weis horfir á Skagafjörðinn  
*Translated from the English by Einar Már Guðmundsson*

Mikið hefðu gömlu skáldin frá Kína dáðst að Íslandi!  
 Allt birtist eitt í einu, í órafjarska:  
 eitt gult villiblóm, einn brúnn fugl, einn hvítur hestur,  
 einn gamall bær að hrúni kominn, sem virðist lítill og langt í  
 burtu,  
 flekkótt kind og hátt svart fjallið  
 sem minnkar á bak við hana. Bóndi  
 á stærð við eldspýtu gengur út úr fingurbjörg hlöðunnar  
 að frímerkjareit akursins á meðan áin  
 fellur fram af klöppinni yfir höfði hans,  
 silfurprjónn sem hverfur inn í fingurinn.  
 Enn sérðu bóndann, jafnvel héðan úr þessari fjárlægð,  
 svört stígvélin hans, brúna frakkann hans, bláa hattinn hans,  
 yfirvaraskeggið og örlítið blóðhlaupin augun,  
 þar sem þú sérð Atlantshafið speglast  
 og allan himininn.





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*Cabins of Minnesota* (with Doug Ohman),  
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St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2007.

*Coming Home Crazy: An Alphabet of China Essays.*  
Milkweed Editions, 1990.

*The Dead Get By with Everything* (poems).  
Milkweed Editions, 1991.

*Eccentric Islands: Travels Real and Imaginary.*  
Milkweed Editions, 2000.

*Faces of Christmas Past.*  
Afton, Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press, 1998.

*The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth.*  
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Stillwater, Minnesota: Voyageur Press, 1993.

*The Music of Failure.*  
Marshall, Minnesota: Plains Press, 1985.

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*Brahms' Capriccio in C Major, Opus 76, No. 8.*  
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*Chocolate Chip Cookies for Your Enemies.*  
Tucson, Arizona: Josephson Publications, 1993.

*Minnesota Lutheran Handbook.*  
Minneota, Minnesota: Westerheim Press, 1982.

*More Shelf Space.*  
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*Holmward Bound: An Evening with Bill Holm.*  
EssayAudio.com, 2001.

*Notes from the Black Piano.*  
EssayAudio.com, 2004.

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College* (editor, with David Pichaske). Marshall, Minnesota:  
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and John Rezmerski). Westerheim Press, 1981.

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Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2002.

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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

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### Magazine essays

#### *Minnesota Orchestra Showcase:*

“The Violin in Greater Minnesota,” Vol. XXXVII,  
No. 6 (February 2005).

“Give Us This Day Our Daily Bach,” Vol. XXXIX,  
No. 3 (November 2006).

“A Low and Soulful Sound,” Vol. XL, No. 3 (November 2007).

*Bill Holm:*  
*A Writer's Life*

1943

Born on August 25 in Minneota, Minnesota, to William Holm, Sr., and Jonina "Jona" Sigurborg Josephson, first-generation Icelandic Americans.



1949 - 1965

Attends Yellow Medicine County District 90 rural school (1949-1954), Minneota High School (1955-1961), and Gustavus Adolphus College (1961-1965).



1965 - 1969

After graduating from Gustavus Adolphus with a B.A. in English, studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence. Receives M.A. in 1967 and leaves Lawrence in 1969 (A.B.D.); Bill Holm, Sr., dies in Minneota, 1966.



1970 - 1976

Teaches American literature and creative writing at Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia. Jona Holm dies, 1975.

1976 - 1978

Writer in residence at Lakewood Community College, White Bear Lake, Minnesota.



1977 - 1978

Tours rural Minnesota with the Poetry Out Loud troupe—including John Rezmerski, Phebe Hanson, and other writers—giving readings in libraries, churches, and nursing homes.





1979 - 1980

Receives Fulbright grant to lecture in American literature at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík. Publishes the chapbook *Warm Spell* (Westerheim Press).

1980 - 2007

Teaches English at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall.



1982

Receives Bush Artist Fellowship.

1985

Publishes *The Music of Failure* (Plains Press), *The Weavers* (Oxhead Press), and *Boxelder Bug Variations* (Milkweed Editions).



1986 - 1987

As part of a faculty exchange program, teaches English at Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, People's Republic of China. Awarded a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, 1987.

1988

Theatrical adaptation of *Boxelder Bug Variations* produced by the Lyric Theatre in Minneapolis; assembled, written, and directed by Sally Childs.

1990

Milkweed Editions publishes *Coming Home Crazy*, Holm's account of his year in China. Also published this year: *Brahms' Capriccio in C Major, Opus 76, No. 8* (Oxhead Press).

1991

*Coming Home Crazy* wins a Minnesota Book Award; *The Dead Get By with Everything* published by Milkweed Editions.

1992

Awarded a second Bush Artist Fellowship; teaches literature at Wuhan Technical University, Wuhan, China.

1993

Collaborates with photographer Bob Firth on *Landscape of Ghosts* (Voyageur Press); Josephson Press publishes *Chocolate Chip Cookies for Your Enemies*.



©Bob Firth Photography

1996

Milkweed Editions publishes *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*.

1997 - 1998

Invited to Madagascar by U.S.I.S. to lecture on American culture all around the island; wins Minnesota Book Award for *The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth*. Writes *Playing Haydn for the Angel of Death*, the Minnesota Center for Book Arts Winter Book. *Faces of Christmas Past* published by Afton Press.



1999

Purchases the cottage Brimnes in Hofsó, Iceland, and begins living there for the whole summer each year. Organizes two weeks of summer writing workshops for Americans and Canadians.



2000 - 2007

Publishes *Eccentric Islands* (Milkweed Editions), which is published in an Italian edition, *Isole*, in 2002. Plays piano duet and solo recitals with Dr. Daniel Rieppel of Southwest Minnesota State University both at the university in Marshall and in St. Paul.



2001

First spoken-word CD released: *Holmward Bound* (EssayAudio).

2002

Awarded an honorary doctorate by Gustavus Adolphus College.

2003

Presented with the Cobb Award for Service to Iceland by the U.S. Embassy in Reykjavík.

2004

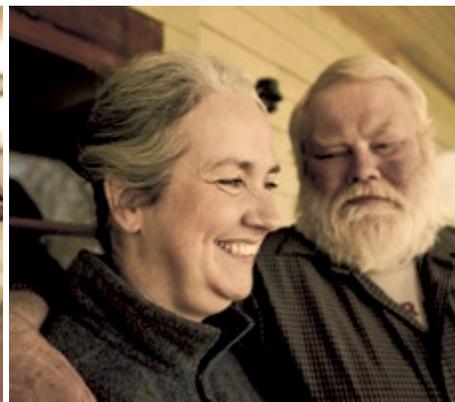
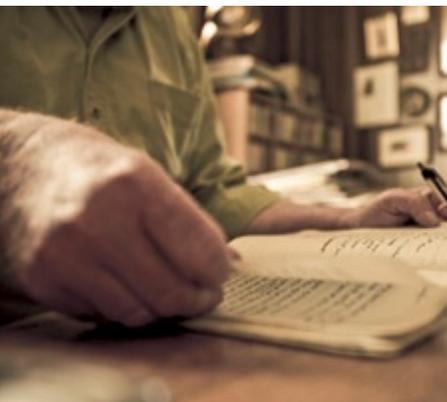
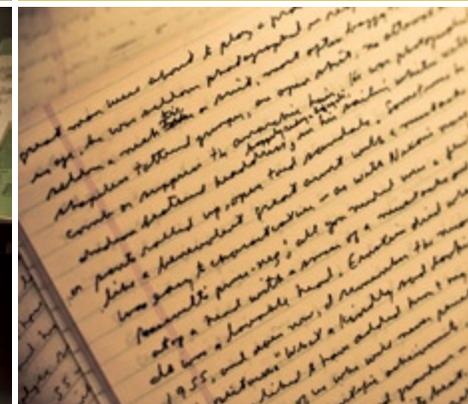
Invited to be the only American reader at the Nordic International Literary Festival in Reykjavík. *Boxelder Bug Variations II* presented at Jon Hassler Theater in Plainview, Minnesota. *Playing the Black Piano* published (Milkweed Editions).

2005

Edits and writes introduction for the Minnesota Center for Book Arts Winter Book, *There Is No Other Way to Speak*.

2007

Publishes *Cabins of Minnesota* (Borealis Books) and *The Windows of Brimnes* (Milkweed Editions). Collaborates with David Pichaske to edit *Farming Words* (Southwest Minnesota Foundation). Plays a recital of left-hand transcriptions of Bach violin partitas at Gljúfrasteinn, the Icelandic home of Halldór Laxness, 1955 Nobel Laureate in Literature.



2008

Lives in Minnesota with wife, Marcy Brekken.



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## About the Award

Vickie Benson, *Arts Program Director*, The McKnight Foundation

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When a reporter for the Marshall Independent interviewed Bill Holm for an article about his winning the McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award, Holm told her that while past winners have spent most of their lives working in Minnesota, not all of them have been as “damned Minnesotan” as he is. He said it with a twinkle in his eye, of course, but he makes a good point: Minnesota has not only been his lifelong home, it has also been an unending inspiration for his essays and poetry.

The Distinguished Artist Award recognizes artists who, like Holm, have chosen to make their lives and careers in Minnesota, thereby making our state a more culturally vibrant place. Although they had the talent and the opportunity to pursue their work elsewhere, these artists chose to stay—and by staying, they have made a difference. They have founded and strengthened arts organizations, inspired younger artists, attracted audiences and patrons. Best of all, they have made wonderful, thought-provoking art.

The award, which includes a \$50,000 stipend, goes to one Minnesota artist each year. Nominations are open to everyone, and those received by March 31 are considered the same year. The panel that selects the recipient is made up of five people who have longtime familiarity with the Minnesota arts community.

Our thanks go to panelists Philip Bither, Walker Art Center’s senior curator of performing arts; Graydon Royce, theater and arts critic at the *Star Tribune*; Stewart Turnquist, former coordinator of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Dale Warland, founder of the Dale Warland Singers; and Emilie Buchwald, founder of Milkweed Editions. Their high standards and thoughtful consideration make this award a truly meaningful tribute to Minnesota’s most influential artists.

# McKNIGHT DISTINGUISHED ARTISTS

1998 Dominick Argento 1999 Warren MacKenzie 2000 Robert Bly  
2001 Dale Warland 2002 Emilie Buchwald 2003 Mike Lynch  
2004 Stanislaw Skrowaczewski 2005 Judy Onofrio 2006 Lou Bellamy  
2007 Kinji Akagawa

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## About The McKnight Foundation

The McKnight Foundation seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations through grantmaking, coalition-building, and encouragement of strategic policy reform. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William L. McKnight and Maude L. McKnight, the Minnesota-based Foundation had assets of approximately \$2.3 billion and granted about \$93 million in 2007, of which about 11% was directed to improve the quality of and access to the arts. In Minnesota, the Foundation also makes grants to support children and families, our region and communities, and the environment.

The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content and, wherever possible, environmentally friendly inks. Additionally, we partner with printers who participate in the PIM Great Printer Environmental Initiative. This book was printed with soy-based inks on recycled paper containing 30% postconsumer waste. © 2008 The McKnight Foundation. All rights reserved.

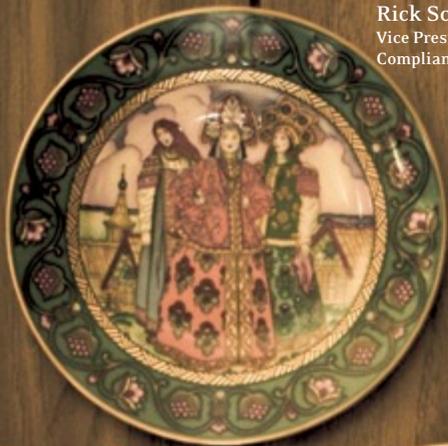
## Credits

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## Acknowledgments

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Minnesota  
is for  
Lovers



- Denny to Sandalukhin  
 Northwest August. The amount of your cut here  
 in a field/mix & the area on a hill among the  
 That small hole for a mile in the west end  
 Not a human here, except the Alaskan in the tracks cut  
 who turns the hay over & performs the same  
 This is a small yield activity  
 when you to join the global economy.  
 Another must will follow it.

Once I washed a machine out a robin a few feet  
 my kitchen window -  
 Great, had, Wump, even the tiny legs - Every day  
 + even open, stretched, Mottled  
 on a stream road -  
 The head would like a pump with a chain, up,  
 down, open, open

Bill Helm