***Full Circle*** by Jonathan Holden

                                                For Alan Nordby Holden (1904 – 1985)

 Scared, I watched my son, eleven, his first

time on the mound, stare in

at the tiny lead-off man.

So tense, he’s poker-faced,

Zack’s practicing the politician’s trick

of  looking confident, as if a man

could be substantial just by looking it.

But pitching, I learned young, isn’t politics.

In the center of the dusty ring

where, as if under unremitting examination

by the lights, your squirmy shadow’s multiplied

by five, faking doesn’t work.

The one thing not to do, I told him earlier,

is issue walks.  We were playing catch.

I whipped one back.  I was talking

as casually as I could, worried

about tonight, but trying to hide it,

to talk seductively.  I was talking

in teasy little parables, embroidering them—

about the time I walked eight batters in a row,

about the time I got mad at the umpire

and started to cry—anything to make sure

what help I gave the boy would register

before he’d be there alone on the mound,

out of range.  His low fastball stung

my hand.  I whipped it back.  I told him

how sometimes in the middle of a game

if you get wild you can think about

your stride or where your shoulders face,

you can experiment, correct yourself.

As I talked and threw and talked, we never broke

the easy to-and-fro of pitch and catch,

The more I talked the better

I remembered how.  I understood

My own shock when my father used to pause

from his obsessive work to talk to me, to offer—

always shrewdly, at a slight oblique—

what help he could.  Zack throws.

The batter takes.  Ball one.  Ball two.  Ball three.

And I prepare myself for the first of many walks.

Zack pauses, on the next pitch eases up.

It’s nicked foul.  Impassive, Zack waits

for the ball.  He delivers easy,

call strike two.  If the advice is right

and handed out with style,

we never forget the things our fathers say.

They talk directly to our sons,

and our sons can deliver us

our own boyhood back a second time.

The batter whiffs.  We live redundantly,

and the second time is better than the first.

***How to Play Night Baseball*** by Jonathan Holden

A pasture is best, freshly

mown so that by the time a grounder’s

plowed through all that chewed, spit-out

grass to reach you, the ball

will be bruised with green kisses.  Start

in the evening.  Come

with a bad sunburn and smelling of chlorine,

water still crackling in your ears.

Play until the ball is khaki—

a moveable piece of the twilight—

the girls’ bare arms in the bleachers are pale,

the heat lightning jumps in the west.  Play

until you can only see pop-ups

and routine grounders get lost

in the sweet grass for extra bases

***Peter Rabbit*** by Jonathan Holden

The sunlight was dull, it might have been

morning or evening before the word Don’t

was said.  The grass, if there were grass, might

have been gray, it didn’t make any difference.

The temperature of the air outside the burrow

was normal.  Don’t.  It cast all the shadows.

The sun shrank back into focus.  He could see.

Under that harsh brilliant judgment

each whetted blade of grass had a black shadow.

And a gate was rearing against the sky,

a rebuke, a giant affront.  He squeezed under it,

his heart twittering.  Scritch.  Scratch.

He could hear—a rake, a bee fizz as it rose

from a daisy, the wind’s restless crowds

in the high reaches of the oak trees behind him,

wind encompassing fields for miles, birds

swinging on it, sparrow trapezes, wind,

enough sound to cover his tracks, don’t

don’t, to make sly twitches, faint substitutions

of grass that could be other stealthy creatures,

decoys to draw the fire of Mr. McGregor,

as Peter, now sick with hunger, crept,

toward the clenched hearts of the lettuce,

thinking, don’t touch the hidden parts you’ve

heard about, don’t finger the wet leaves, don’t

spit them out.  “Stop!  Thief!”  It sharpened

the shadows.  Don’t.  Don’t.  The leaves poised.

Each wisp of darkness held out the cool

palm of its hand, its hollow of safety, a silk

suit to slip into, try on, cast off.  He’d never

noticed such terrain.  How its curves console,

its hills reveal.  Without Mr. McGregor

he might never have seen a pot before.  “Stop!

Thief!”  The light was a nuisance.  Each row

was a boot step.  A scramble.  A heartbeat.

Each second a question.  Each door a new

answer.  The gate was a daydream, and he was

alive.