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## On Gary Holthaus

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# REVIEWS

## *Unexpected Manna*

Gary Holthaus

Copper Canyon Press

Port Townsend, Washington

\$4, paper

Several years ago I was given as a gift a magic 8-ball, a mysteriously black globe that when rubbed answered all questions. I remember receiving answers to such important things as whether any girls loved me, when and if I was to go on my first date—all the trivia that was swimming around in my pubescent brain. Now, after the sad facts of maturity, those grave problems have become, among other things, lines from poems, memorable rhythms, troubling similes and metaphors. When I see a paper bag or a newspaper rolling over and over in the street I say, without fail, “unlike a man” from the poem by William Carlos Williams. When a man passes me dressed exquisitely in a Brooks Brothers suit, I cannot help but recall the last three searing lines of indictment from Kenneth Rexroth’s poem to Dylan Thomas, “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” And so many others. They are glue to the imagination. They somehow make the object or scene at which one is looking more accessible.

The same was true last summer flying the polar flight to Alaska. While floating over Greenland, the St. Elizabeth Islands and finally over Pt. Barrow and the Brooks Range, I could see the slow glacial push into the sun, the small villages blossoming one after another until they all became Anchorage. And as best I could, I recited to myself:

Down country,  
Past the wild hay’s stirring  
The rancher leans back toward  
That earlier time his dad  
Rode a horse from Dillon to Denver  
Never opening a gate.

Though thousands of miles from Dillon or Denver, those lines from Gary Holthaus' UNEXPECTED MANNA rang true.

Strangely enough, despite Alaska's overwhelming awe and the presence there of all the primal freedoms that Americans have long sought, the country fosters very few books of poems of any merit. And usually it holds true that a writer's tenure there is a short one, a matter of months perhaps. The solitude and the isolation are tremendous, like nothing in the Lower 48 states. The land holds a pristine mysticism, is aloof and uncompromising. It defies tradition or, at least, the traditional ways of looking at things. Gary Holthaus is one of the few poets who has stayed. And with the exception of a few poems dealing with Iowa and Montana, his UNEXPECTED MANNA deals exclusively with Alaska, both as geographic space and as state of mind.

In many ways his poems are reminiscent of Loren Eiseley's work, not so much Eiseley's poetry which grew increasingly unforgiving at the end, but Eiseley's probing and humble prose. Like Eiseley, Holthaus is a writer who prefers to keep himself in the background while letting all the things that speak so quietly have their day in court. Though sometimes clumsy in style, awkward in punctuation and line-breakage, when all is said and done UNEXPECTED MANNA is wise, honest, and unpretentious.

E. M. Forster, in assessing a book by Virginia Woolf, wrote: "It is for a voyage into solitude that man was created." I think of that statement when I read UNEXPECTED MANNA for certainly this book documents a solitudinous journey, one moving steadily North by Northwest reverring many of the myths and legends of Early America and its inhabitants, whether real or imaginary.

It is no coincidence that many of the poems are dominated by the heart-like rythms of the Alaskan Eskimo drums, a sound so eerie and hollow that once one hears it the sound will never be forgotten. In fact, dancing is mentioned in no fewer than five poems in section two of the book. It is as though, through the dance and with the drum as his instrument, Holthaus somehow mesmerizes nature, turning an angry she-wolf into something docile and benevolent. He employs it as a keen, community-oriented means, which all Eskimo dances are, "to make music the measure of life" in an environment that is hostile and indifferent in its dealings with mankind. In fact, as in "Turnagain Arm," the dance becomes a bodily prayer performed by an entire universe of flux:



Though no one is near, it is not just me  
Moving through this country  
But this country moving about me  
Glaciers and tides and winds  
Are larger than these  
The sure drift of the continent  
The globes slow turn inside the sun's turning  
Within the revolution of older suns  
Until  
There is no still point  
Central to this world's turning  
Only the vibrant, molten quaking  
The mystic centering union is dancing  
Minds moving into minds.

Do not believe in stillness . . .

Out of the movement the dance is born  
Out of the motion the song is sung  
Out of the union the light is borne  
Out of the dance the longing begun

When one considers that twenty-two hours of each winter day in Alaska is dark, that dusk and dawn are one and the same, both happening in a short two-hour span, then one can understand why so many of these poems are rarely centered under the bright sun. UNEXPECTED MANNA hovers in and around the dark, trying to find some kind of union between day and night, light and dark, the conscious and the unconscious. Any sun mentioned is more often a metaphorical one and is highly symbolic as in "Don Quixote's Warhorse Dreams of Victory":

In lightning, fever,  
We fumble to repair our armor,  
Race against a new reality—  
Again are broken, lifted to tread  
The stars and light, and fall  
Find deep within our falling  
The elements to make us rise again  
Until at last we stride rust-free  
And silver in to suns beyond  
Any Icarus dared to fly.

It is the soul that finds the light, the searing union where all colors collide. The body stays in darkness, a part of the igneous rocks and

the dust:

Tyrannosaurus  
And eohippus  
Little Crow and  
Bigfoot  
The dust of the dead long ago  
We walk it in our prairie furrows  
Climb it in our mountains  
Breathe it in our cities  
Dust fills my grin  
And grates my eyes  
I close them;  
It fills the cracks in my skin,  
I open and look again;  
I see myself in dust  
My children dissolving  
In dust fine ground  
Before Neanderthal became a cell.

UNEXPECTED MANNA, however, is by no means an impersonal book, one that speaks so obsessively of the raw elements of Alaska that human relationships are forgotten. Interspersed throughout the book are poems of love and remembrance, some of which are too nostalgic but are forgiven by the reader simply because this book speaks of humanness on every level. But the pervasive mood is one of darkness and of being lost, the poet's attempt to come to terms with an alien landscape, to find that sublime solitude, that full-blooded communion with the "old ways and old places."

What amazes me is that one rarely has seen any of Gary Holthaus' work in the numerous journals in the United States. I think of Sid Marty in Canada writing poems while working the highline of the Rockies, and getting little or no attention until Al Purdy saw fit to include his poems in an anthology he edited. Like Marty's *HEADWATER*, there is a privacy to *UNEXPECTED MANNA* that makes me think Holthaus shies away from the journals. It is the same kind of privacy one encounters in the diaries of the early trappers and woodsmen, individuals who realized perhaps it was best after all to talk to oneself.

William Carlos Williams wrote: "If it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem." And certainly these by Gary Holthaus are a pleasure. I assure you if given the space and the opportunity I would love nothing more than to cite poem after poem until I had made myself believe it was I