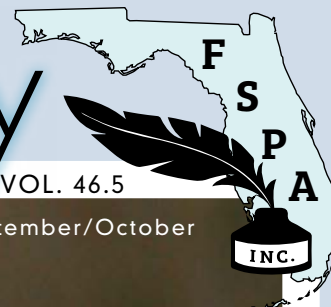


Of Poets & Poetry



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Lola Haskins

FSPA Chancellor

Photograph by Albert Hall



Profiles in Poetry

A dialog with FSPA Chancellor

Lola HASKINS

Q: Your books have won national awards and have been favorably reviewed across the country. What advice do you have for poets who may be reaching the point of putting together a collection of their own?

A: I hope the small successes I've had over the years have had something to do with how I put my books together, but since my luck has always been a mystery to me, I can't claim that's true. I will say, though, that when you put a book together, you shouldn't be thinking about awards, you should be thinking about what you owe your poems. They're a little like children in that you want to put them in an order that will allow each of them to shine. Here's one approach to assembling a manuscript (but it's not the only one – I have tried others). First, no matter what you do later, go through the candidates to be in it and set the poems aside that you don't adore (you may bring some back later, once you see what's needed to complete your sequence). Once you have the for-sures, you'll be in a position to start thinking about the whole. At this point, if you grant that poetry is music, then it would follow that a book of poems will be some specific kind of music, what kind is your choice. You could start, though, with a symphony or a concerto. Group your poems – each group will be one movement – then place them on the overall arc you've decided on. This arc will move the reader from the beginning to the end – let's say you start quietly, then crescendo then decrescendo then rest, then rise slowly towards a final sequence that may end rousingly, like Beethoven, or quietly like Satie if his mode had been concerti. I devoted a whole chapter in my advice book, *Not Feathers Yet, a Beginner's Guide to the Poetic Life*, to this subject. So please, if you'd like to read more about approaches and the various ways you might realize them, look there.

Q: You have taken part in so many events for FSPA. While we know what our experience has been with your teaching, performing, and intimate sharing, what has your experience been with us?

A: I've loved getting to know the members – that there are so many kind and interesting people who love poetry too is a blessing. I've also appreciated their openness to me, both about poetry per se, as when I've read my own poems, as well as when I've gotten to share my enthusiasm for other poets' work – for example, the time I did a talk on poets of the Middle East; and for trying new things, as in the plain air class I once ran.



On stage with Dance Alive! National Ballet

(Continued on next page)



Homage to Baudelaire, photograph by Albert Hall

Q: We'll be installing one or two new FSPA Chancellors at the Fall Convention 2019, and one as well at Spring Fling 2020. When you accepted your own chancellorship, joining Peter Meinke and Lee Bennett Hopkins, what was your view of our organization, and what you might bring to it?

A: I'd spoken for FSPA two or three times before and the last time I did, I'd been sad to see how much the membership had declined since my last visit. Someone's done some great work since then because the group that invited me to join as chancellor was a vital one. As for what I thought I might bring to it- I just hoped I could be useful. Also, over the time I've been a chancellor, I've found role models for what's possible in that way, both among the officers and among others who don't have titles, people who've done selfless work for years and years for the betterment of not just the FSPA but for poetry in Florida in general.

Q: You have now been nominated twice for Florida State Poet Laureate. While each Laureate naturally proceeds in his or her own way, what are some aims or projects you would like to see pursued on the state and local levels to promote our art?

A: Oh, I love that question! Here are a few ideas I have:

1. Work with design students at UF to come up with posters to be put on dentists' ceilings and in counselors' offices (the second I added recently because a friend who counsels said she'd buy at least one, probably for the restroom but that's good.) Sell those for not too much at dental conventions and use the dollars to fund
2. A course for high school students and maybe middle school too in looking at nature via poetry
3. A series of scenarios for silent walks for kids followed by writing + drawing sessions
4. Stacks of take-home poetry pamphlets (8.5 x 11, folded) for ERs and walk-in clinics and MD's offices and the family waiting room parts of hospitals
5. Talk airlines into putting poetry into their magazines—A spanish version (chosen and introduced by native speaker poets) and an English version for the other (editors, TBD)
6. An annual reading in Tallahassee for the winners of poetry contests in each level of schools, public and private, and a national poetry month reading of adults, poets or not, reading their favorite poems
7. Also in April, "happenings" of street corner poems in some cities.

There may be more..My overall goal is to convince people who think they don't like it that poetry has nothing to do with school and is for everyone, regardless of background, and also show them that if they want to, they can write their own.

Q: Your academic background, both as student and teacher, is unique. Can you share a just bit of that story?

A: My academic background is a program called “Social Thought” which began at Stanford when I was an undergrad there – it involved one professor in each of eight disciplines in the liberal arts, including English, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, etc. Following that, I did grad work in Anthropology. But, despite the fact I’d never had a single class in it, I taught Computer Science for 28 years at UF. How was that possible? Well, I can read. And also I found I could adapt what I taught to reflect one of three disciplines in which I do have some formal background – philosophical logic (programming), history (history of technology), and art history (web design). I loved teaching something other than what I really do – it expanded my mind. Same with some things I’ve studied as an adult — classical piano, north Indian classical singing, and insects.

Q: You are grounded in two places, North Central Florida, and in Yorkshire, England. Can you compare and contrast those two places, and what they have meant for your poetry?

A: Both of those places are vital to who I am. Both are deeply beautiful, but in very different ways. Florida’s is southern, Yorkshire’s is northern. Florida’s way is hot and lush, Yorkshire’s is cold and spare. Florida is mostly (not entirely) flat, my part of Yorkshire is steep (Yorkshire is the biggest shire in England and has a wide variety of landscapes.) Both Florida and Yorkshire have lakes and rivers; both have coasts but the aspects of them couldn’t be more different. And each has inspired my poetry in more ways than I can go into here.

Q: Your talks are always full of great advice, and are always unique in tenor. You’ll be speaking at our Fall Convention 2019 in October in Daytona Beach, and again at Spring Fling 2020. The October piece is entitled “How to Surprise Yourself.” In what direction might that take us?

A: The October piece comes out of the times when either I run out of gas completely or I keep puttering along, boring myself all the way. I’ll talk about how you can know you’re getting boring in the first place (other than sensing it yourself), and demonstrate some exercises that can’t be done with boilerplate approaches; in other words, they’ll force you out of your funk whether you like it (or them) or not. By the way, don’t get threatened – the exercises are designed to show you potentially new slants in yourself, not to generate finished work.

Q: You often write about family, and just as often, about nature. How are the two approaches different?

A: Fundamentally, they’re not. I feel a tenderness for each, and each in its way is family.

Q: You have never been afraid, in either your poems or your talks to poets, to open yourself up. Has poetry helped define aspects of your life in this way, or has the unfolding of your life demanded this kind of mirror from you, given your gifts?

A: I have an odd answer to this one. I had an emotionally difficult childhood and I strive to be the opposite of my abusive mother with every word I write and with every person I meet.



Photograph by Albert Hall



Images clockwise, from top: Son Django and his Silas (in plaid shirt), Lola in her living room, Lola in Fakahatchee Strand with a naturalist friend, Daughter-in-law Lauren with Silas and baby Arden

Q:Your international connections in poetry have grown with your career; can you share an impression or two of other great poets whom you know well?

A: The first clause in that sentence exaggerates my breadth of connections—not that I don’t appreciate it—to the point where I can’t usefully answer the question other than to say that I’ve known Ted Kooser quite well and he’s just like his poetry— highly sensitive to other people and absolutely unassuming. We spent 10 days together once on a small faculty in Arkansas and we discovered that we share the passionate conviction that poetry is—without exception—for everyone. I was thrilled when they appointed him US Poet Laureate. They couldn’t have chosen a more appropriate person. I can also tell you that Ted is such a fine watercolor painter that he could have made a career of that too.

Q:You have just released your latest book, *Asylum: Improvisations on John Clare* (Pitt Poetry Series), and you’ll be speaking about Clare himself in the spring, and how he came to be embedded with your collection. Have you begun to think about what you might share in that talk?

A: I have but it’s a secret! For now, I’ll tell you that Clare was a 19th century British romantic poet who lived all his adult life in an insane asylum, and that I admire his poetry so much that for the past 20 years at least, I’ve checked his collected poems out of my local Yorkshire library and kept it the whole time I’m there, AND that he has a good deal to do with why my book came out the way it did.

From Desire Lines by Lola Haskins

For Someone Considering Death

I told you.
Life is one big Hanon
up and down the piano,
ten fingers skipping over each other
in every conceivable way,
two hands getting stronger.

And sure,
the notes are the same for everyone,
but you can choose to whisper or shout,
to fade or grow.
And haven't you noticed that some people's hands sing,
but others are midwestern on the keys,
each crescendo a secretarial swell.

Think about this.
How can you dream to play the Pathetique,
how can the moment come for you
to look into someone's eyes
and say The Hell With Everything, I Love You,
when you haven't done your time,
hour after hour, year after year
in that small closed room.

Love

She tries it on, like a dress.
She decides it doesn't fit
and starts to take it off.
Her skin comes, too.

(in Spanish)

El Amor y La Mujer

Se lo prueba, como si fuera un vestido.
Decide que no le queda
y empieza a quitárselo.
Su piel se desprende, tambien.

From Asylum: Improvisations on John Clare by Lola Haskins

---From section 1

Mortality

Every thrown stone falls.
But there is a moment first
as it hangs in the air

that the blurred hand
that tossed it will not come again,
thinks the stone as it flies.

Down the Hall, A Bell

I can't do it, said the coroner.
I knew this man. Which was
how my father came to lie
on a cold steel table that night
with no one to probe
his nakedness for the gap
through which his life
had billowed like a curtain
and then, like the scrim
it was, disappeared.
Down the hall, a bell rings.
We hear it everywhere.

---From Section 2

In the Stark Lands

there are no trees to slow the wind.
Creatures underground come out only
with the stars. There are no other lights.
The distance to the horizon is a fierce
happiness. This is a portrait of my heart.

---From Section 3

Selected Twinkle Twinkle (selections)

Where Wolf

Listen, friend. I know what is and isn't a pillow when
I see one and I'm not taking a single clo off in this
room let alone getting into bed. So give it up.

Weird Wolf

A Vietnamese lady is leaning intently over your paw,
finishing your French nails. Little bits of fur are float-
ing in the footbath.

We're Wolf

That's us, bad boy, silhouetted on the hill behind
your house. Be nice, or else.

Ward Wolf

In the night-lit hospital a sister, black-and-grey hairs
sticking through her wimple, clicks in to check on
Granny. Check? Well, not exactly, *check*.

Whirr Wolf

A pest with wings who meets his petite amie at you
and they suck your blood through a straw.

--From Section 4

The Night after the Total Eclipse

we wanted to see stars so we drove past the
villages with their closed pubs, past the odd house,
past the darkened farms, past the walled monks'
road, past Grassington, and after miles of dips and
rises we turned into a field. But the moon was so
huge, so swollen -- like lips after too much kissing--
that it paled the sky, and, looking up, we could not
be sure of anything and should we have been adrift
at sea, no sextant ever made could have saved us.

From How Small, Confronting Morning by Lola Haskins

The Lake (selections)

Wood Stork, Wading

an arched claw and
its liquid twin
pas de deux for one

*

Mockingbird

the silence between twigs
songs asleep on
their mats

*

Cardinal Chick

little fire
little heart-in-hand
what a lucky tree!

*

Sunset

the lake has
eaten fire
quietly
the ibises roost

*

Flight

if i eat feathers asks the child
will i be able to fly?

you already can says her mother
any night
the lightness in you may lift you
from your cot
that's why i close the windows

when i get old enough the child
wonders

will you open them? oh yes
comes the answer

(sorrowing) that's what
mothers do

*

The Hawk on the Branch

i like the cut of his speckled jib
i like his throat in another dimension
he would hoist me with his hooked beak
and sail me to his nest which would be high
and surrounded by needles

and that would be all i wanted everything