

# Of Poets & Poetry



A PUBLICATION OF THE FLORIDA STATE POETS ASSOCIATION VOL. 47.3

May/June 2020

## PETER MEINKE

See page 5



Cover photograph by Jeanne Meinke: On the Train to Neuchatel 2016

PETER MEINKE  
FSPA CHANCELLOR

**The Contracted World**

February when leaves sift down  
like phosphorous  
behind a sparking comet's dying thrust  
above the cloudy gardens of our town:  
azalea season Puffs of pink  
and white illuminate the shade  
of limbs that twist out fifty feet and link  
Brobdingnagian branches where handmade  
children's tree-homes hover: abandoned stations  
above already fading constellations

Nearby a smokestack spits its bit  
of sulfur on  
the breeze affirming flowers will be gone  
but pollution stays: nothing sticks like shit  
Leaves for example: How they toil  
not though on their descent they spin  
adding rich acid to the sandy soil  
decomposing even as Solomon  
did helping to shape death's hypnotic wick:  
part of nature's wisdom or nature's trick

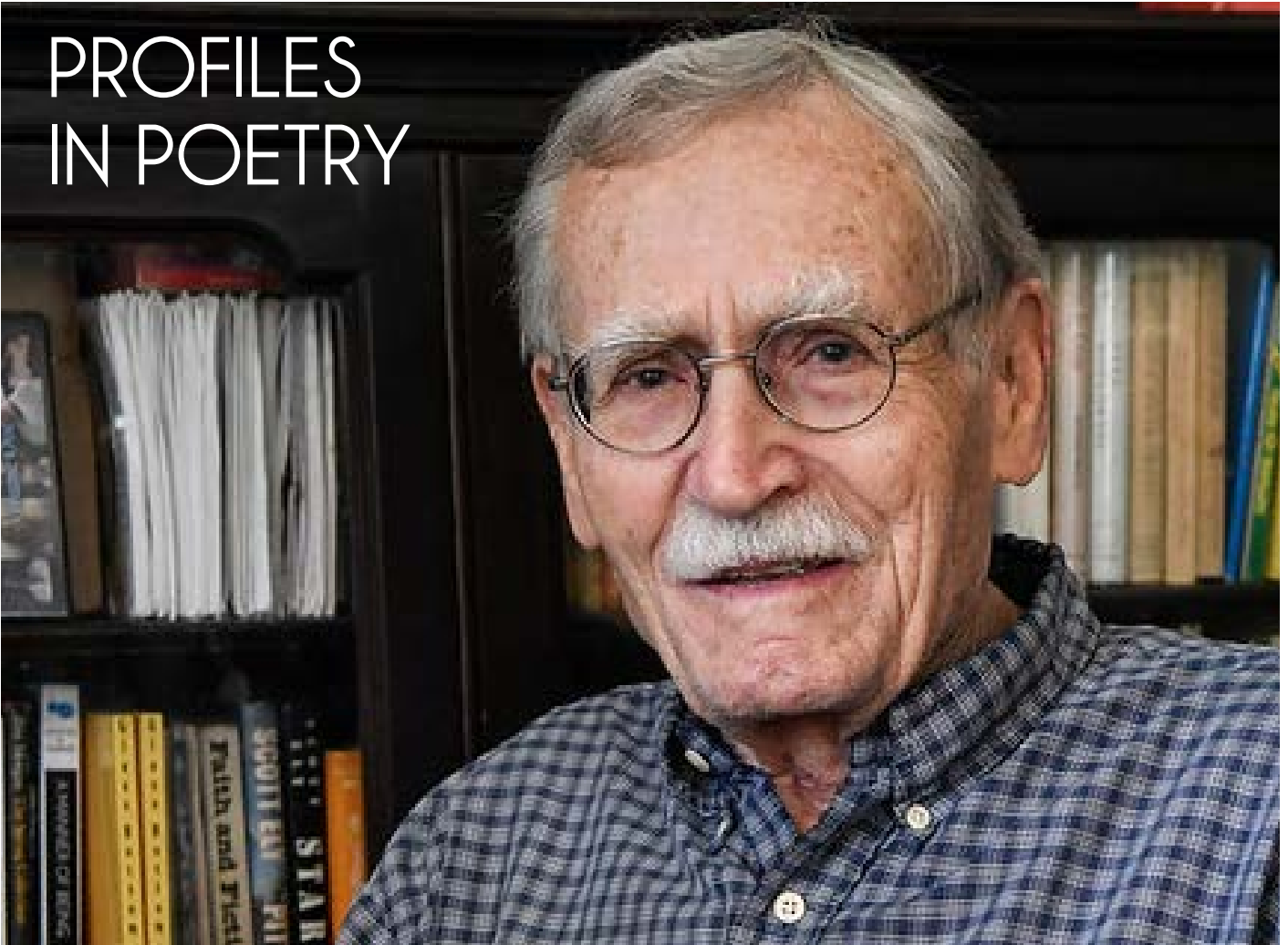
Our vision's Lilliputian  
Like falling rain  
there's always one hundred per cent of pain  
available but its distribution's  
random if not perverse In San  
Francisco de Nentón the troops  
descended like a plague of dogs and ran  
merciless from hut to hut Here soft loops  
of Spanish moss slip from the oaks They tangle  
in the blooms That's what we see: that's our angle

How much of happiness should be  
earned? How much joy  
in every accidental breath alloys  
our just thoughts and natural sympathy  
until we can't connect with lives  
unfairly far away in all  
respects? Next door our neighbor's seven hives  
buzz like engines as he bends behind his veil  
The end result: azalea-scented honey  
It takes time It takes love And it takes money

~ **Peter Meinke,**

*from The Contracted World (U of Pittsburgh Press)*

# PROFILES IN POETRY

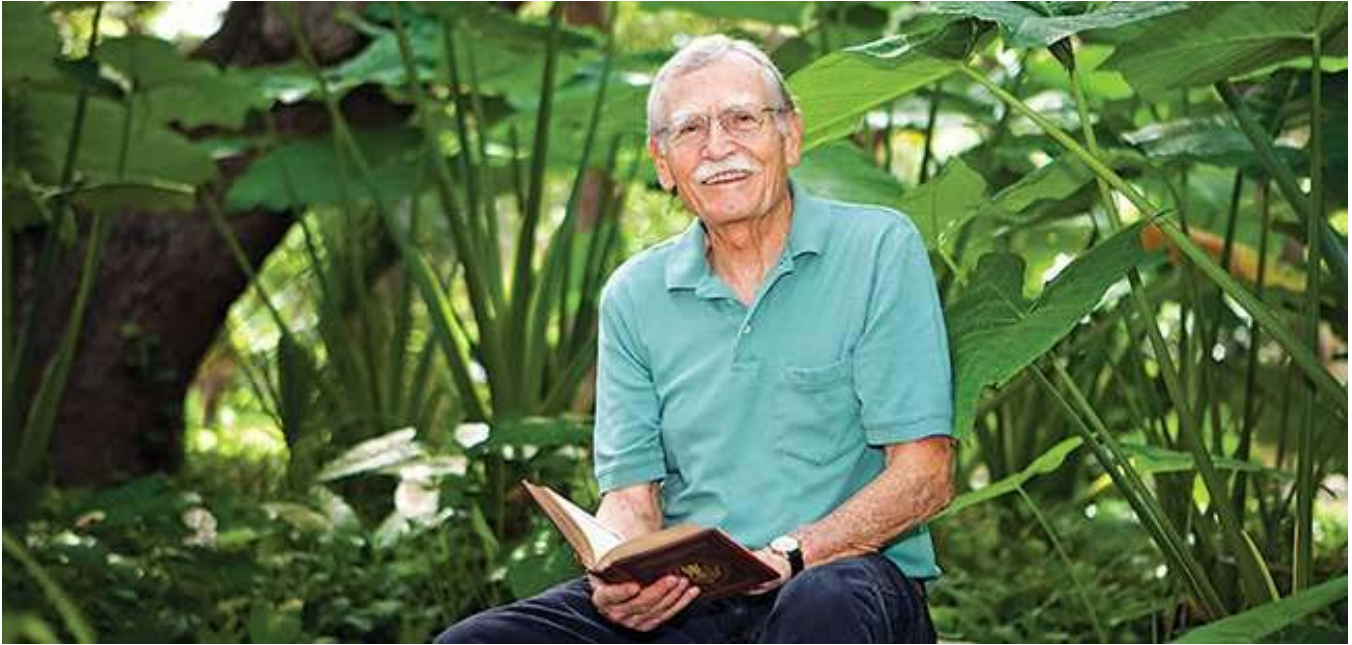


Florida State Poet Laureate

## Peter Meinke Q&A WITH AL ROCHELEAU

Peter Meinke, recent recipient of Florida Humanities Lifetime Literary Award for Writing, has been both Poet Laureate of St. Petersburg and Poet Laureate of Florida. His latest collection of poems is *Tasting Like Gravity* (U. of Tampa Press, 2018). His book of essays, *To Start With, Feel Fortunate*, illustrated by his wife Jeanne, received the 2017 William Meredith Award. Other books include *The Expert Witness* (2016), a collection of stories, a children's book in verse, *The Elf Poem* (2015), and *Lucky Bones* (2014), his eighth collection in the prestigious Pitt Poetry Series. His work has appeared in *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, and dozens of other magazines. He has published over 20 books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. *Truth and Affection*, published by the University of Tampa Press (2013), is a collection of his Poet's Notebook columns with his wife Jeanne's drawings, from Tampa Bay's alternative newspaper, *Creative Loafing*. His poetry has received numerous awards, including two NEA Fellowships and three prizes from the Poetry Society of America. His book of short fiction, *The Piano Tuner*, won the 1986 Flannery O'Connor Award. Mr. Meinke directed the Writing Workshop at Eckerd College for many years and has often been writer-in-residence at other colleges and universities, including a Fulbright Professorship at the University of Warsaw in Poland (when it was still under communist control, but with revolution rumbling in the universities). [www.petermeinke.com](http://www.petermeinke.com)

(Continued on next page)



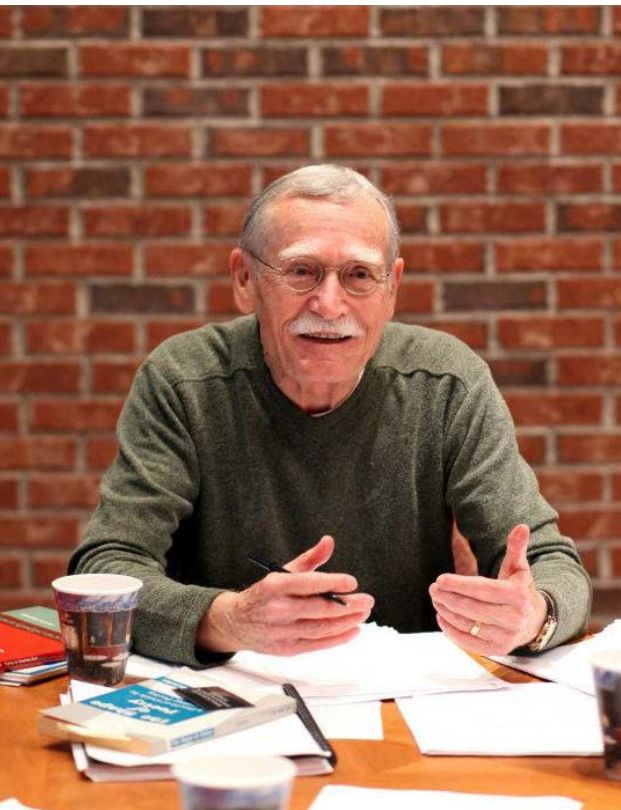
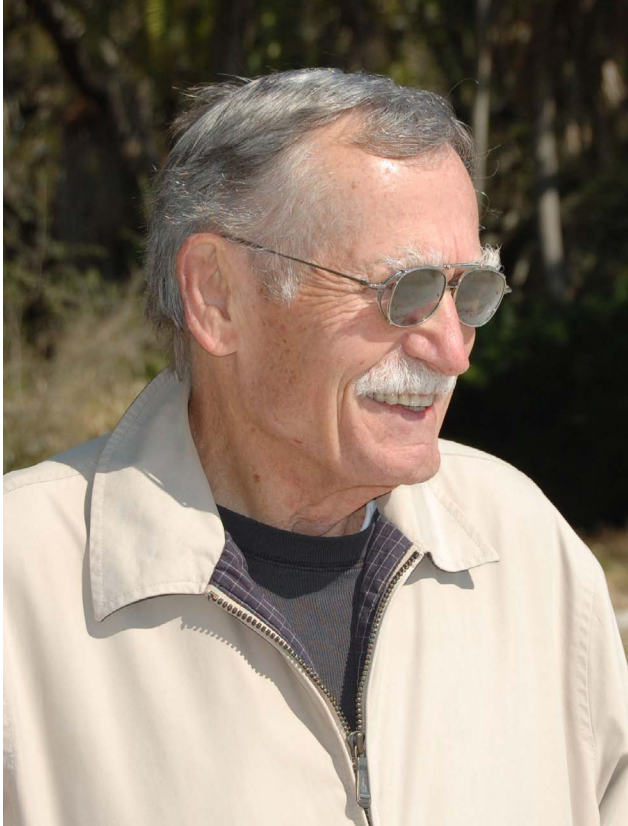
What follows is a conversation between FSPA President Al Rocheleau and Peter Meinke:

**Rocheleau:** Any thoughts on our current situation, and how poets in particular may be affected or effective? **Meinke:** My joke about the current situation is that poets don't have to worry, their readings don't attract big enough crowds. Not so oddly, I seem busier in this locked-in period of the pandemic saga. In America, where poetry generally languishes in dusty corners of independent bookstores, it steps out like a First Responder to offer aid and empathy to the afflicted. So, as Poet Laureate, I'm approached from many directions, poems flow in from all over, with requests for poems that heal. So I'm less lonely than one might think, and I answer as many as I can.

**Rocheleau:** Your role as Laureate, which while officially over has been practically extended as caretaker until the new Laureate is named, has involved many events and much travel. How would you sum up that experience? Any special memories of these years? **Meinke:** Because I believe in the healing value of poetry (elusive as it is to pin down), my experience as Laureate has been intense, fun, and—I hope—useful. I was impressed by how many people wanted to hear it and write it. My most moving event was when I read poems with the Parkland students about a week after the shootings; extremely difficult to handle the emotions there. (I also read "One Year Later," my poem about the Pulse massacre, on NPR and elsewhere.) I think this Laureateship is an important position, and I'm disappointed that somehow the passing it on to a new poet has been muddled. It should be a well-publicized and dignified event, and it's already 10 months behind schedule.

**Rocheleau:** You and the late Lee Bennett Hopkins were the first FSPA chancellors installed. Along with Lola Haskins, installed the very next year, you have all taken part in many FSPA events. In fact, the reliability of all of our otherwise busy chancellors has astounded us throughout their tenure. How do you see FSPA's role, now and in future as part of the arts community of Florida, and your own role as a chancellor? **Meinke:** I've done everything the FSPA has asked me to do, but nothing specifically as chancellor, except the title gets mentioned sometimes during introductions. I think it would be a good idea to have readings scheduled with chancellors of other states. I represented poetry as something that holds value for everyone, for Florida and for America: I suppose that's what I was supposed to do as chancellor.

*(Continued on next page)*



**Rocheleau:** Going back in a many-decade career as a teacher of writers, and author of an exceptional poetry writing manual, is there one overarching paragraph of good advice you might offer the new or working poet? **Meinke:** My advice: Read as much as you can (prose as well as poetry); write regularly (don't wait for inspiration); rewrite a lot (don't be too easily satisfied); and finally, say Yes to everything (whatever comes up: keep the windows open: [a little common sense is necessary here]).

**Rocheleau:** Your slim book on Howard Nemerov many years ago was one of the best critical examinations of that grand-master. While he was largely a formalist, that seems not been your area of exploration until more recently. What drew you to Nemerov originally, and what did you learn from him?

**Meinke:** Choosing a subject for my Ph.D. thesis at the U. of Minnesota, my young advisor said "Let's do something original. Pick a living poet you believe will become important, and write your thesis about him, making that point." I chose Howard Nemerov, and that was a very important event for me. Although I was writing poems, I'd never taken a poetry workshop in my life, but reading his poems closely over and over I think—I hope—I learned how to write poetry. I finished my Ph.D. in 1965. Later, around 1970, teaching at Florida Presbyterian College (now Eckerd College), I invited Howard (whom I had never met) to read at FPC. During dinner at our house before the reading, my wife Jeanne said to him, "You have the bluest eyes I've ever seen!" Howard Nemerov seemed very pleased.

**Rocheleau:** You have been both an award-winning poet as well as an award story writer and noted essayist. What moves you to go one way or another in framing a particular feeling or idea?

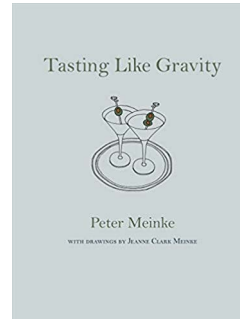
**Meinke:** While writing poetry, I seldom have an idea in the beginning. For me, a poem almost always starts with a line, or a fragment of a line (something I saw, or heard, or just popped into my head). I pursue that image as long as possible. I have notebooks full of abandoned images, occasionally going back to them and beginning again. I always hope to surprise myself: Robert Frost wrote, "No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader."

**Rocheleau:** Your wife Jeannie is a very fine visual artist; what are the advantages of having a partner who works in an allied art? **Meinke:** It's been a delight to have an artist (Jeanne) as my wife, with shared interest in the arts in general. But Jeanne doesn't help with my writing (except as an occasional inspiration) and I don't help with her drawings (except as an occasional subject). As Jeanne says, "We collaborate in separate rooms." Of course, there's a built-in recognition of the need for some quiet concentration.

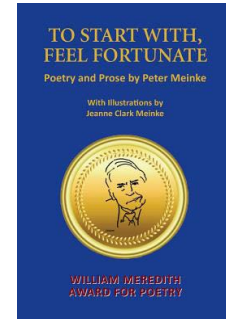
*(Continued on next page)*



## TWO RECENT BOOKS



[Link to Book](#)



[Link to Book](#)

**Rocheleau:** In what ways did your sojourn in France, and absorbing the French lifestyle and culture affect your writing? **Meinke:** Most writers enjoy travel, for the experience of new places, people, and food; but travel naturally turns one's mind to language, and this is a useful study. We lived for at least a year (always with students, on Fulbrights or Overseas Study courses) in London, Paris, Neuchâtel, and Warsaw, and these naturally became "settings" for stories or poems; but even more valuable was our meetings with Polish, Swiss, & British writers, and the focus on speaking and reading in a foreign language. I think specifically that travel has helped me to be more careful in my word choice, and perhaps even making changes in a poem's "music." I think Emily Dickinson would have gone to Paris in a flash if her dominating father had given her a chance.

**Rocheleau:** What are your simple guilty pleasures, those that have to do with you and not your writing? **Meinke:** My semi-guilty time-consuming pleasures for most of my life were playing the piano (not well, but adequately so we could sing along at parties, Christmas carols, etc.), and tennis, which we played "religiously" every Sunday morning for 60 years. Moving into my 80s brought along a damaged hand and bad knees that ended both activities, but I'm not despondent; I had decades of enjoyment. Let's see how long Tom Brady and Roger Federer can play. A minor guilty pleasure still going strong is the cocktail hour that sometimes features a martini; obviously our locked-in situation can only encourage this.

**Rocheleau:** In your eighty-seven years, you may have changed many times and answered or re-answered many questions about yourself, the art of poetry, and the world at large. What questions have you yet to answer? **Meinke:** When I received, a month ago, the Florida Humanities' "Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing," I was honored, of course, but also thought, "Uh-oh, somehow that sounds like the end." And maybe it is. But a question I haven't been asked is what I would like to do, literarily speaking, with my remaining years. I'm grateful to have had this extra-normal time to get some more writing published. I'll try to hang around writing some more poetry that could wind up in a book called "Collected Poems." That wouldn't be necessary, but it would be satisfactory.

*(Continued on next page)*

POEMS BY  
PETER  
MEINKE

**The First Marriage**

Imagine the very first marriage a girl  
and boy trembling with some inchoate  
need for ceremony a desire for witness:  
inventing formality like a wheel or a hoe

In a lost language in a clearing too far from here  
a prophet or prophetess intoned to these lovers  
who knelt with their hearts cresting  
like the unnamed ocean thinking This is true

thinking they will never be alone again  
though planets slip their tracks and fish  
desert the sea repeating those magic sounds  
meaning I do on this stone below  
this tree before these friends yes in body  
and word my darkdream my sunsong yes I do I do

~ Peter Meinke  
*(from Scars, U. of Pittsburgh Press)*

**The Gun Lobby Makes Its Sales Pitch**

‘What d’you say?’ the NRA  
chief panjandrum began to bray  
‘What d’you say when a drug-crazed crook  
hammers your door and breaks the lock  
and shoots your children while they pray?’

We need good guys with guns or they  
will damn well shoot you first—Each day  
it’s them or us So Write your check!  
What d’you say?’

. . . Dayton . . . Aurora . . . Mandalay  
Fort Hood . . . Columbine . . . Pulse . . . LA  
DeKalb . . . Omaha . . . Sandy Hook  
Nickle Mines . . . Red Lake . . . Virginia Tech  
El Paso . . . Parkland . . . Santa Fe

That’s what I say

~ Peter Meinke  
in “Tasting Like Gravity,”  
U. of Tampa Press

POEMS BY  
SILVIA  
CURBELO

**Zinc Fingers**

Though scientists inform us that criminals  
have insufficient zinc I've always believed  
it's insufficient gold and silver that gets  
them going The man who slipped his hand into  
my front pocket on the jammed Paris Métro  
wasn't trying to make friends His overcoat  
smelled greasy and it was unpleasant holding  
hands above my wallet pressed in on all sides  
like stacked baguettes There was no way to move or  
take a swing Still some action on my part seemed  
to be called for: we stood nose to nose I tried  
to look in his eyes but he stared at my chin  
shy on our first date so after a while as  
we rattled along toward the Champs-Élysées

I lost concentration and began to think

of our scholarly daughter working at Yale  
on a project called Zinc Fingers scanning a  
protein with pseudopods each with a trace of  
zinc that latch on to our DNA and help  
determine what we become This brought me back  
to mon ami the pickpocket: I wondered  
how he chose his hard line of work and if as  
a boy he was good at cards for example  
or sewing and for that matter what choice did  
I have either so when we reached our stop and  
he looked up from my chin at last I smiled at  
him and his eyes flashed in fear or surprise and  
I called It's OK as he scuttled away  
Tout va bien! though I held tight to my wallet

- Peter Meinke  
from Zinc Fingers, 2000) U. of Pittsburgh Press;  
first published in America, 1998.



POEMS BY  
SILVIA  
CURBELO

**Learning Italian**

*for Kiara*

*The man is walking with his red dog  
How blue the sky is! I am studying  
Italian so I can talk to you my teapot  
la mia bella nipotina*

*Would you like an iced tea? The bus  
is very crowded We shall visit Parma  
in the summer and I shall say  
We eat in the kitchen not in the dining room*

*O that my tongue were younger  
and I could sing A granddaughter  
is a wren in an old man's tree  
but instead I shall hold your perfect hand  
mispronouncing Will you write many letters?  
Here is the spoon The doctor cannot swim*

~ Peter Meinke  
*in Scars, U. of Pittsburgh Press (1996)*