

Peter Makuck

Crossing the Causeway Bridge into Atlantic Beach and looking down, you might spot Peter Makuck in his Boston Whaler, fishing the sand bars and tidal flats or simply taking friends out for a swim. Makuck and his wife Phyllis live just a little further down on Bogue Banks, where they have made their home for the past nine years. Poet, essayist, and fiction writer, Makuck has edited the renowned *Tar River Poetry* for nearly all the 30 years that he has taught at East Carolina University, in Greenville. He is the author of five books of poetry and two collections of short stories. His new book of poems, *Off Season in the Promised Land*, will be published by BOA Editions in October, 2005.



photo by Sherryl Janosko

In Makuck's poetry, physical know-how and literary thought are not separate but happily joined, as in "Tight," his poem about repairing a chair and remembering a carpentry trick of his father's. Makuck is a learned man, with degrees in French and American literature. His talk is full of humor and graceful erudition. In his poetry—and perhaps a key to what makes it so true and convincing—lies an important connection to the natural and work-a-day worlds. Whether he is watching the ocean and listening to "its drunken repetitions" or sitting in a chair stroking a favorite cat purring "her one mantra," Makuck offers us a powerful lyric sense of the things of the world and how they might speak to us. —John Balaban

John Balaban is the author of eleven books of poetry and prose, including four volumes that together have won The Academy of American Poets' Lamont prize, a National Poetry Series Selection, and two nominations for the National Book Award. His Locusts at the Edge of Summer: New and Selected Poems won the 1998 William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. In 2003, he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Mr. Balaban is Poet-in-Residence and Professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. In Spring, 2006, Copper Canyon Press will publish his new book of poems, entitled Path, Crooked Path.

Off Season

All day the ocean's been burning
a cold blue that matches my mother's willowware,
the few cracked cups that I've kept.

And because there's a mood on the water

I've come along a path through the dunes
to listen to the ocean's drunken repetitions—
that story about the *Wendy Lee*,
how she went down in rough weather last week,
four mothers turned into widows.

Just off the bar, there's a shrimper hauling nets,
red and green running lights, a Christmas tree
in the oncoming dark.

A string of black scoters angles to the south, skims
a surface still lit with a last brandy tinge.

This white sickle beach is empty
but for a scatter of sandpipers in winter white,
unbothered by immensity, all dash and wistful peep.

The sea mood deepens.
I've felt it before, wallowed in windy emptiness,
feeding a feeling that won't go away
and won't become something else—a voice
you once loved, her hand on your cheek,
the way your father squinched his eyes when he laughed.

But reunion doesn't happen like this.
No lambent figures looming through cheap-effect mist
with a password that opens
the radiant purpose of all things.

What do I want? I know about the lost,
what search and rescue means—
every small thing is a clue. A single light comes on
in the long curve of off-season houses.

A pelican hangs overhead like a cross.
Something invisible wants to be seen.
Gulls squall and flicker in the half dark.

The boat is disappearing
but I still see a mate in dim light working the cull.
Only the work of seeing can save.
I've known this for years.

Pretty: At the Oceania

We're jigging for blues,
sunset doing its fiery fade, showy
as this tourist couple that ambles out,
all spiffed in summer whites,
glasses of zinfandel, hot for something to see.

And as if to please,
a guy gets a screamer strike on a live bait rig.
Now a twenty pound cobia slaps the planks,
and the woman in white wrinkles her nose
with a line you might have predicted:

"He's not going to keep that poor thing, is he?"

Then it gets worse.
There's a trawler two hundred yards off the beach,
pulling nets through what's left of the sunpath,
a blizzard of gulls at the stern.

"So pretty," she says at my shoulder, "isn't it?"

No, it's *not* pretty, I want to say.
When you see a squall of gulls
behind a trawler on a sunset sea,
don't think beauty,
think bycatch: small blues and menhayden,
spots and croaker, unsellable mullet
littering the surface for acres,
feeding the gulls.
Think trawl doors that plow the bottom,
kill coral, fill the crannies
and hiding holes for next year's fry.
Think analogy:
harvesting corn with a bulldozer.

Pretty still echoes in the air,
and she *is* too.
Lips glistening with wine, she asks
if all this ain't as pretty as a postcard?

Looking down at the cobia making mouths,
dying, slowly dying,
I tell her it is.

Hurricane Warning: Surfers

Around the bend slides an ocean eerie with storm light
and them at serious play: red and yellow wet suits, blue

and lime, their unconcern a reminder of something
long forgotten but now too strong to let go. Wind tugs

our pants and sleeves and has our hair fly back like spume
from the crests of fifteen footers rolling in. We lean

against the wind and hear the fringe of pampas grass
threshing above the beach where these boys worry

not a jot for tomorrow and make light of leaden swells—
a dream of Waimea Bay and the ache of endless summer

come at last to the Carolinas. Oblivious of snapping red flags,
riptides and undertows, they wait and wait for one moment

to lift them, a force evolving shape within us, making us
wait too, smile when the curl flexes and tilts them ahead

toward a lethal bottom of sand. How they tame the edge,
gravity giving way to a grace of their own making!

Some miss the moment and wait still, and when we leave
the island, exiled inland, I'm not even thinking of our house

turned to matchwood. Days later, through sweaty hours
of shingle and tack, chainsaw and tree limb, I still see

that boy farthest out, the one waiting past friends, now up
in one motion, his wetsuit blazing orange, ready to defy all ruin.

Peter Makuck's stories, essays, poems, and reviews have appeared in The Hudson Review, Poetry and The Sewanee Review. Author of five books of poetry, he has edited Tar River Poetry at East Carolina University for twenty-seven years. Off Season in the Promised Land, a new volume of poems, will be published by BOA Editions, Ltd. this fall. His second short-story collection, Costly Habits (University of Missouri Press, 2002) was nominated for a Pen/Faulkner award. He lives with his wife, Phyllis, on Bogue Banks, one of North Carolina's barrier islands.