



The Poet & the Sea: An Interview with Peter Makuck

by Gary Ettari

with photography by Sandra Carawan

¹ Quotations in the introduction are excerpted from Gary Ettari's email interview with Peter Makuck.

² When Vernon Ward, founder of Tar River Poets, retired in 1978, Peter Makuck was asked to establish a national literary journal. In an email to NCLR editor Margaret Bauer, he explained that he "decided to stick with the poetry format" but changed the title to Tar River Poetry "in order to reflect a change of emphasis from the severely regional if not local. . . . Then I started soliciting work from poets of national stature, did several large direct mailing ads, plus a few journals, and very slowly our submission and subscription base widened." He also "added a review section [and] later includ[ed] the occasional interview, [and he] upgraded the layout, printing, and quality of paper." The Dictionary of Literary Biography has listed Tar River Poetry as one of the top ten poetry magazines in the country. Just a couple of years before his retirement, Makuck received for Tar River Poetry a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (and just after his retirement, under the editorship of his former student and colleague Luke Whisnant, Tar River Poetry received a second NEA grant).

When you ask Peter Makuck about the journey he took from beginning writer to retired Distinguished Professor of Arts and Sciences at East Carolina University, he inevitably mentions the people who helped him on his way. When asked about his mentors, he responds:

At St. Francis College in Maine, Hugh Hennedy was the first teacher who caught my attention and forced me to start taking myself seriously. I had him for History of Drama and Shakespeare. A great teacher, I owe him a lot. Also Father David Flood, a freshman comp teacher, who recognized in me a talent for writing that I didn't know I had. Robert Parenteau was an excellent instructor of French literature who whet my appetite for Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Valéry and Verlaine. I also learned a great deal about poetry from Al Poulin who went on to found BOA Editions, Ltd.. But Leslie Norris was the mentor figure I was perhaps closest to; he was wise about many things beyond the writing of stories and poems. We became good friends, wrote to each other, and spoke with some frequency on the phone. He very generously read many early drafts of my stories and poems and offered invaluable feedback.¹

The litany of names that Makuck provides is a testament to the fact that, no matter how solitary the writer's life may be, it takes a number of dedicated individuals to make a writer. Makuck himself was a mentor to many young writers during his tenure at East Carolina, and *Tar River Poetry*, the literary magazine he edited for almost thirty years,² regularly features new voices alongside established writers of national reputation.

Between encouraging young writers and teaching a variety of classes at ECU, Makuck managed to publish six volumes of poetry and two short story collections, an impressive and eclectic output. One of the things that distinguishes Makuck's work, particularly his poems, is the variety of both