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ZINC FINGERS

By Peter Meinke

Univ. of Pittsburgh Press. 88 pp.

Because no man is a prophet in his own country, many in the Tampa Bay area have little idea how billowing a national reputation St. Petersburg poet Peter Meinke enjoys. But when a colleague from the Midwest sent me her favorite Meinke poem last fall and I read it to a University of Tampa class, students there told me they'd already read it in their Advanced Placement classes at high schools in all corners of America.

There's a reason. For three decades Meinke has formed a constant web of interconnections between the most common events and objects and the lining of the human heart. He does what Shelley tells us the great poet must: lift the veil from the familiar to show us what is really there.

Meinke's latest collection stands among his best, using a variety of forms from free verse to sonnet to villanelle and a wide range of tones from light to "first person jugular," to use Meinke's own phrase.

Both in his readings and on the page there's a warm affability to Meinke that disarms the critical faculty. He helps us laugh at shared irritants, as in "The Examiner's Death," where a driver's license examiner upon dying must wait 200 years in line at heaven's gate only to learn she'll have to take a number; "You should have made an appointment," says St. Christopher. A retired Eckerd professor, Meinke laughs too at his former colleagues in "The Professor and the Librarian," in which a librarian's nobility easily outmatches a poetry professor's erudition.

Yet, Meinke's own erudition is dazzling, from his obvious allusions to Shakespeare and Homer to his subtle twist on Eliot's Prufrockian technique of turning a poem's opening 180 degrees in tone by a simple line change:

*making love with the one
armed girl in the library
conference room ...*

His easy wit turns the frightening into the playful:

*I have a prolapsed mitral valve
so my heart murmurs her name*

The perfect image comes readily in *Zinc Fingers*, as it does to this resident of a retirement home in "Assisted Living":

*In the elevator our spotted hands
and heads shake like mushrooms in the rain*

and in Meinke's picture of pickpockets in a crowd:

*their
boneless hands nosing like carp through
crusted doubloons*

Meinke lets us see how a poet enjoys his own acrobatics in "The Open," written while watching last year's French Open tennis finals, where art and nature merge into a Mobius-strip perpetual unity.

In the best of Meinke's work his impressive skills yield poems of scope and extraordinary power. He limns the irony of how his "Christian neighbors" poisoned his cat, who limped into the garden and died "modest and self-effacing as a fern." He sifts the mutual disappointments of parents and children in "Nailbiters," and in "Vincent" he cries out an apology for an act of childhood cruelty, far too late to mend the damage done to the three people involved.

His greatest gift may be his ability to shed enormous light through small windows, to let him see the world in a lump of coal in "Coal" and do a wonderful twist on the Elizabethan garden poetry convention by starting with the prosaic act of mulching a lawn and musing wistfully:

*If only we could mulch our own mistakes
before they harden and stain
dropping the rinds of argument and affair
shells of dead dreams nasty shocks
skins of bad habits lumps of neglect
and sad pride into a pile
that bubbles and burns in the dark
until it's usable and by using
we'd learn for a change
and open and soar like hollyhocks in a country garden*

Most of us can mulch and most of us can muse, but only a genuine poet can forge that lightning connection between such things over and over again.