

TRYING TO SURPRISE GOD by Peter Meinke. University of Pittsburgh Press, \$4.50 (paper).

Peter Meinke is a poet of this world. He shies away from the self-absorbed meditations and laments that characterize much of contemporary poetry. His art is public, not private. His compassion is real and deeply imbedded, his sense of humor indefatigable. In the poem "Recipe" he writes:

You live in at least two worlds  
yes?  
one fuzzy one where you always push  
the doors that say pull and  
one clear cold one where you live alone

This is the one where your poem is  
yes?  
no.  
It's in the other one...

Meinke's poems are in the world of supermarkets and teacups, ping-pong, women shoveling snow in Poland, school teachers and computer operators. In short, the world we live our daily lives in, where comedy and tragedy overlap each other so often that it becomes impossible to distinguish one from the other.

It has long been a given in American letters that if a poem is comic, it is not serious poetry, and

conversely, that serious poetry cannot be funny unless it is the condescending humor of the Absurdists or the cynical farces of the Black Humorists. One of the exceptions to this rule is Edward Field, a poet who is both funny and serious, and who is highly regarded in the poetry community. Meinke knows and obviously admires Field (one poem in this book is called "The Day Edward Field Came To Dinner"), and Meinke's poetry is clearly influenced by Field. Meinke heeds Field's advice: "Guard me from Poet's Head that dread disease/ where the words ring like gongs and meaning goes out the window." Peter Meinke's words ring like the reflex hammer doctors use, and produce the same effect -- an involuntary jerk of the senses which reverberates to the marrow and is oddly pleasurable.

While most of the poems in this book are laced with good humor, this is not a collection of light verse, intended for amusement only. The poet means to say something about our lives, and in the best of these poems he succeeds far beyond the ephemeral nature of jokes. The first poem, "Supermarket," illustrates some of Meinke's recurring concerns and his methods of handling them. The poem begins: "My supermarket is bigger than your supermarket. That's/ what America is all about." Here is America as a huge grocery store, a vast bedazzlement of color and light and slogans, consumerism at maximum vulgarity surrounded by Muzak. It is a metaphor for the society of conspicuous consumption. But no, this view is too easy, too obvious. Meinke reverses the image in the next lines: "Nowhere am I happier, nowhere am I more myself ... Everywhere there are lies, but in the supermarket we speak truth." The metaphor gets turned on its head. The supermarket is not really the villain, in fact, it is a crucial part of our lives, our source of sustenance. The crass commercialism and idiotic jingles are so obvious that they render themselves meaningless. The real evil arises when that

language and mentality is applied, as it is, to the things we hold most sacred: art, religion, love. The poet gives examples: "I lie to my classes, I say,/ Eat this poem ... I give green stamps for the most vivid images ... We lie in church, we say/ Buy Jesus and you get Mary free." In the closing lines of the poem Meinke responds to this wretched excess of the banal:

... this excess is unnecessary,  
I say, My friends, think Small, use the  
8-item line, who  
needs more than 8 items? All you really need is  
civility, honesty, courage, and 5 loaves  
of wheatberry bread.

Though it is with humor that Meinke often resolves the conflicts in his poems, many of the poems are short, compassionate lyrics, absent of a punch-line but full of memorable phrases. A few examples: Death is "a quirk of God"; "Beauty is nectar/ and nectar, in a desert, saves"; "I will praise how beautiful you are!/ the spiral staircase turning through your bones." One of the best poems in the book is "Robert Frost In Warsaw," which begins: "When I saw birches in Wasienki Park/ leaning against the wind, I thought of you,/ old ghost, so strongly have you claimed those trees/ for us." The poem is a moving tribute to Frost and the power of art, its ability to transcend the artist himself. Written in Frostian rhythms, the poem is masterfully executed, with a subtle rhyme scheme. The final lines are:

They tell me you were selfish, it may be so.  
I know you spoke to me through birches in  
Wasienki Park, kindly, and brought me home.

There are weak poems in this book, there are even a few bad ones. When the poem fails it is usually

because the humor falls flat, like this line from "Biography,": "I'm a wate bwoomer, I lisped, not mastering/ my l's til I was 24.". Or because the poem simply does not engage the imagination. One poem that fails is "Sonnet On The Death of the Man Who Invented Plastic Roses." The poem goes along pretty well, though predictably, until the last couplet, when the poet succumbs to a forced rhyme and Poet's Head that dread disease, and the poem collapses under its own ponderous weight. The last two lines are: "a vision of our tearless time discloses/ artificial men sniffing plastic roses."

Meinke takes risks in his poetry, and with risk comes occasional failures. More often though, the risks succeed, and the pay off is a fine, strong book of poetry. If Peter Meinke is not of the Promethean school of poets, those who somberly attempt to steal fire from the gods, he is no less ambitious for Trying To Surprise God.

Eric Nelson