Clarion Review

Poetry

Poems and Stories from a Prisoner's Troubled Heart

Peter Knoester
AuthorHouse
978-1-4567-4311-6
Two Stars (out of Five)

Peter Knoester's slender fourth collection of poems reveals an empathetic desire to lend voice to society's fringes through rhymes that express anguish and regret—often in the form of invocations—from the vantage of several similar, incarcerated personae.

The author contemplates the results of long-term separation from loved ones, but vague language prevents his characters' emotions from becoming more than a generalized contrition. Earnest thoughts such as "I am a man who went astray / But I am looking for the day / When all of us, yes you and me / Get out of jail and will be free" recur in varying guises, including "Forgive my sins I did commit / I was like a mule without a bit" and lines that express Christian ideas of freedom, yet such potentially profound queries do not build toward richer complexities. The theme of a better afterlife is further emphasized by the cover, which features white light at the end of a tunnel, and by the Gothic font, which echoes medieval religious texts.

Many of the poems share themes of grace amid harsh circumstances and the ephemeral nature of life. Several concluding lines regard salvation as a means for renewal: "Who knows it may not be too late / for a new life to begin," "But in the end there's freedom, this I know," and "There is a road that's really narrow / That is the one that you should follow / The end of which is heaven bound / Make sure on this road you are found." Such exhortations, however, turn didactic without a context that allows the individuals portrayed to emerge as distinct figures with real histories who have arrived at a spiritual crossroads after personal crises.

Amid these repetitive, instructive missives, the pastoral poem "The Meadow" stands out, both in subject and form. The sole prose poem in the collection presents nature as an outlet for momentary respite while acknowledging that its balm-like effects cannot resolve the speaker's problems. Apart from occasional lofty phrasing ("clouds heralding") and explanatory remarks ("time moves on with unstoppable force," "we must all abide by the rules and laws of nature"),

it is here that Knoester at last seems confident. “The Meadow” is grounded in tactile detail, and it adopts less formal rhythms that invite the reader.

Knoester’s preface acknowledges that his collection is a beginner’s effort, remarking, “My writing may seem a bit amateurish and I am sure I could do with some improvement.” While the works in *Poems and Stories from a Prisoner’s Troubled Heart* reveal their simplicity, they maintain a tone of humility worth noting amid poetry that values linguistic feats of hubris.

Karen Rigby