Kolin, Philip C.


Philip Kolin’s new book of poems further confirms his place as one of the most prolific and imaginative poets of faith today. The title and haunting cover art say much about Kolin’s influence and themes. The title refers to a remarkable woman of faith—“Midge”—who for over thirty years was Kolin’s spiritual director and a Benedictine Oblate, or layperson who lives the Benedictine Rule in the world. In fact, Abbot Cletus Meagher, OsB, in one of the blurbs observes that Midge celebrated “the monk within” as she witnessed to those in her family and the greater world. Appropriately, the cover portrays a youthful St. Benedict, staff in hand, against the silhouette profile of a woman—Benedict’s Daughter—through whom Kolin weaves a powerful sequence of poems.

The collection opens with “_The Liturgy of the Hours_,” five poems on the ancient tradition of saying prayers at different parts of the day and night, starting with _Lauds_ at morning. The opening lines of the poem “Lauds” sparkle with Kolin’s inventive use of language.

The book of day opens

the papery fell of dew azure;
sun shafts sign the distant hilltops
overlooking the abbey
with heaven’s new covenant

....

Dawn has resurrected the world
From the denial of darkness.

....

The air is inscribed with Gospels
calling us to be part of forever:
the _Angelus_ and mass bells
the Canticles of rivers and oceans,
the blessings of soft-voiced breezes
all ring souls with delight.

Kolin turns this and other poems into sacred scripts, almost as if he is making a covenant with readers to go through _The Journey_, in the thirty-six poems that follow.

These poems focus on Midge, her family, Benedictine traditions, abbeys, and saints. Having to leave the convent because of illness, she returns to Mobile
where she hears “parables” in the gulls’ cries and later in “The Bridegroom Comes,” we see how God “fell in love with her jade eyes/searching for him on the river bank/ a few miles above Mobile/ at her father’s fishing camp.” And then “waiting in the moonless, salty night/... he called her back/ across the river raptured with stars/ their flasks overflowing with oil.” Kolin deftly alludes to the Biblical parable of the ten wise and foolish virgins transforming it into a southern narrative where Midge waits for her heavenly Bridegroom.

Throughout these poems Midge lives in two worlds, the sacred and the daily. The angels know her address on “33rd Street” and “sometimes they left silky feathers/ the quills God uses to write prophecies.” She bakes for cloistered nuns on Dauphin Street in Mobile, making each “cake look like/ Moses in the bulrushes.” At her Wednesday night prayer group, she “Kept a diary of voices/ times and translations of words that/ Ezekiel proclaimed on mountain tops/ and Noah caulked into the Ark.” Her garden “lay between Eden/ and the Dead Sea, the City’s drainage ditch” and she “spent the summer trimming ... along the city’s clutter, beauty and twined with mortality.” (Kolin juxtaposed a poem on Benedictine mystic Hildegard who, like Midge, “saw angels spinning in ecstasy” in “creation’s green glow.”) Midge’s dogs were “guardian angels without wings”; “their eyes blazed like meteors/ and their hair stood spike stiff” to protect her and would have “carried a pyx around their necks/ to bring God home from church” for her. Fascinating that Kolin combines canine hagiography with the sacred vessel “the pyx” used to bring Holy Communion to the sick.

Kolin has mastered a series of voices and the personas who speak them. These include Midge, her husband Al, her adopted Salvadoran son “who showed up, asking in broken/ English for work so he could eat,” and even St. Benedict who delivers a sermon on avoiding sexual temptations. But the voices that struck me as Kolin’s most haunting come from Fr. Luke, who served as Midge’s spiritual adviser.

He taught her to open God’s outdoor lectionary and read the messages written there—

to see the sky as his canvas
each rainbow a stroke of quiet color;

to look for the face of the Apostles
in the autumn clouds hanging

close enough to touch,
silvery rosary beads