

“Father Kilian McDonnell’s new book of collected poems has the right title—*Aggressive Mercy*. The seventy-three poems give consistent evidence of the poet’s focus and conviction of the realities of an unnamable, incomprehensible Mercy, a ‘given’ that is ‘extravagant beyond beyondness,’ that one questions but relies on, and that permeates the biblical phrases through which he speaks. Fr. Kilian speaks as Mary, or Jacob, or Lazarus or Judas’s wife. He speaks from their torment and their ordinariness. From their bewilderment. At the Annunciation, Mary is wiping up a mess on the kitchen floor with a rag when light breaks into her life. It is encountering a different Annunciation from what we are used to: it could be us, stunned by the ‘glory of the preposterous.’

“There is no room for a doubt in these poems that we humans are inclined to ‘minor treacheries’ and ‘small mess[es].’ We make ‘unbalanced vows’ which mysteriously bind the Lord ‘while we are free / to plunge a dagger / into the heart of Love.’ Moses, for example, moves toward the ‘summit,’ where ‘Unseeing / in the presence of the Invisible / unknowing while beholding the Unknowable’ he waits. We do not have minds that can ‘lay hold God’s whole,’ and this God cannot be ‘packaged.’ We have only ‘the backlit blood of Yahweh’s / fingers.’ We are ‘the yawning sated’ keen for ‘the great gulps of the world.’ Father Kilian struggles with our ‘Numb fidelity’ and our ‘extinguished fire,’ but he reassures himself, and us, that ‘Cold desire is still desire.’ Throughout these searching poems, Father Kilian wonders about ‘the difference / between living / in God’s glory / and walking / in God’s shadow.’”

Kathryn Hohlwein

President and Founder of The Readers of Homer

“In his inimitable style, Kilian brings biblical characters and his fellow monks to life in poetic vignettes without airbrushing their flawed humanity. In this, he has no peer. Not even God always escapes the candor Kilian brings to his perceptions. With a mere phrase or short sentence he gives readers an amazing sensory feel for the realism of personages and their environments.

“By his own admission, Kilian does not write ‘pious poems,’ thus leaving readers totally free to experience the less than genteel, fully human reactions among his characters. One can imagine the twinkle in his eyes as he composes many of these poems. But caution is in order: with superb irony, Kilian often ends the episodes with sneaky little ‘depth charges’ exploding beneath the surface of entertainment, astonishing and provoking his readers in unanticipated ways.”

A. Regina Schulte

"Kilian McDonnell's *Aggressive Mercy* charms the reader with the voice of a seasoned poet at the top of his game and a monk in late life who still has a few arguments to settle with God and cannot resist the temptation to rewrite a few lines of Scripture. McDonnell retells the old stories from Genesis to Acts in clear, colloquial language that gives back to his characters from Adam to Mary and the Apostles a credible humanity and along the way offers the reader autobiographical vignettes from his own life. These are poems of faith that belong in the library of the heart."

Nick Hayes  
Professor of History and University Chair  
in Critical Thinking  
St. John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota  
Author of *One Fine Morning:*  
*Memories of My Father*

"*Aggressive Mercy* is an unapologetic inquisition of Scripture, God, and humanity. Kilian McDonnell pits his unparalleled knowledge of our biblical heritage against the tough questions and painful truths necessary for a life of faith. God is not perfect, but is humanized and fallible. Even Jesus holds God accountable, teaching us that we, too, might question our creator: 'You called me, / walked away / ignored my pleas / and left me alone / nails in my hands. / You left me alone.' McDonnell teaches us that questions and doubts are, in fact, the birthplace of faith: 'But you know our hearts from afar, you know we stutter and we stumble.' Beautifully lyric, unwaveringly honest, and immeasurably brave, this collection gives us the gift of a new way to read our history and ourselves."

Sivan Butler-Rotholz  
Editor, *As It Ought to Be;*  
Founder, *Reviving Herstory*

# **AGGRESSIVE MERCY**

Kilian McDonnell, OSB

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*To the memory of my mother and father,  
Dorothea (Dora) Auerbach  
and Joseph P. McDonnell,  
who raised eight children and, as far as I know,  
never quarreled*

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# PART I

## THE HAWK SWOOPS

*Where can I go from your spirit? Psalm 139:7*

You count our wanderings West;  
tell our staggerings East.  
Like a hawk, you eye us  
from afar. When you swoop low,  
your shadow covers us  
before we hear your wings go *swish*.  
If we crawl into the rocks,  
you eye us from the top of the pine  
and wait for us  
to show our heads  
to forage for food.  
When we hide under cover  
of the weeping willows  
at the waterfall,  
you're not deceived  
as we've hidden there before.  
If we explore Maine's forests,  
you fly so high,

you eye us through  
the canopy. As for me,  
when I see you

through the lattice  
scratching on my door  
with your talons  
my failings so terrify me  
I hide in the cellar, imagine  
you'll lift latch and kill.

Wrong.  
Your mercy stalks me.

GOD HOLDING OUT  
A BEGGAR'S HAND

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge  
of God! Romans 11:33*

Should a princess trust a prince  
who vows his deathless love knows  
no bounds and swears the flawless,  
off-white pearls he strings  
around her neck  
are the very same King Solomon gave  
the Queen of Sheba in 930 BC?  
Who would believe  
we send away with shrugs  
the one who lies in wait  
behind our tattered smelly lives  
with loot for us  
from a thousand heavens?  
Eye has not seen,  
ear has not heard,  
nor the heart imagined,  
extravagance beyond beyondness,  
that cache in the well of God's heart  
no plumb line can touch.  
Who would believe God

gives away gold bullion  
with professional absurdity  
but extends a vagrant's hand  
begging for our love?

ODE TO ADAM AND EVE  
AND DESCENDANTS

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Psalm 139:14*

Gathered from the dust,  
a little spittle  
added for binding  
to keep the trouble together.

Given to itches,  
pains in the head,  
fallen arches  
and flatulence.

Still, scrape away the crud,  
well proportioned,  
the angles are right,  
a certain symmetry:

two eyes on different sides  
of one nose, the mouth  
mostly horizontal,  
a not too accommodating chin.

Back before clocks  
began to measure movement,  
Yahweh spared a single breath  
from vast eternal lungs

and breathed it hot,  
like molten gold,  
to give it starch,  
  
imparted a spasm  
of God's own life,  
the disquiet of longing,  
a reach to touch beyond,

gave it shards  
of non-specific anguish,  
like a stormy dawn  
struggling toward the day.

In fact, in spite of a crooked nose,  
made a little less than angels,  
an image, now lightly skewed,  
of the one who bent

to breathe upon the worry.  
I sing a new song to the muck  
and wonder of our being.