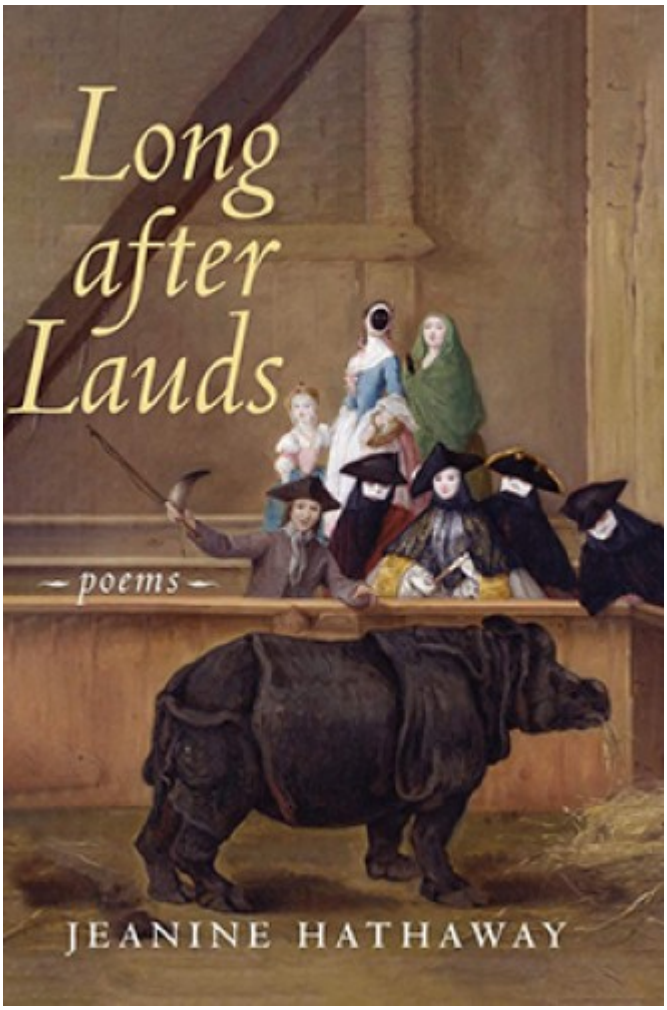
Praise, pilgrimage, and poetry

New collections by Jeanine Hathaway and Jeanne Murray Walker

by Peggy Rosenthal in the May 20, 2020 issue

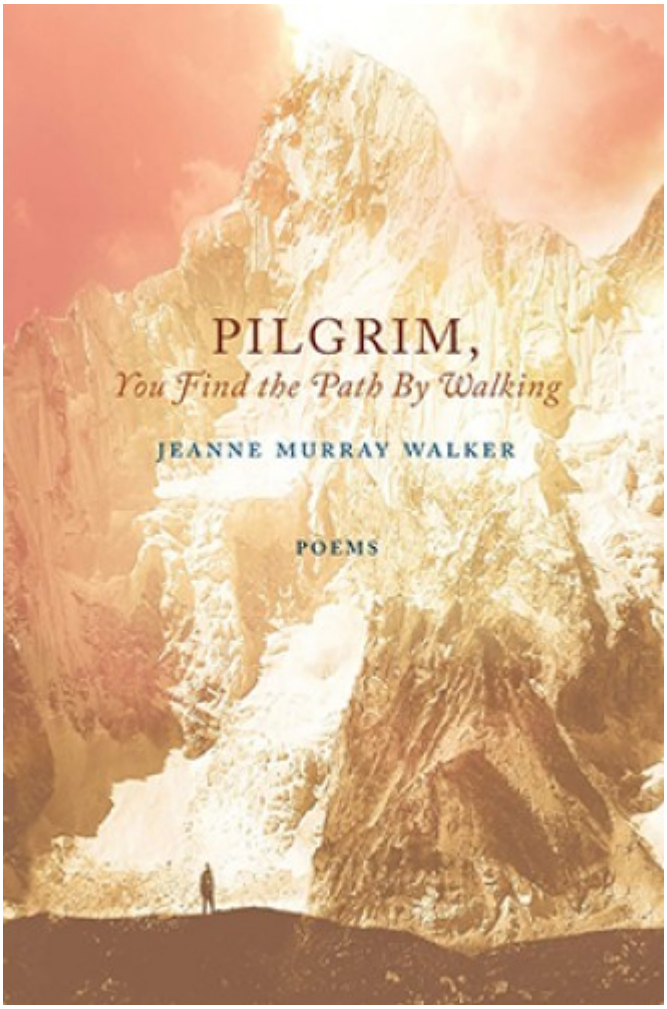
In Review



Long after Lauds

Poems

By Jeanine Hathaway
Slant



Pilgrim, You Find the Path by Walking

Poems

By Jeanne Murray Walker
Paraclete Press

There could not be a more fitting title for Jeanine Hathaway’s new poetry collection than *Long after Lauds*. Lauds is a monastic morning prayer, and Hathaway was a Dominican nun for nine years starting in 1963. Lauds is also Latin for “praise,” and these poems probe what God and human life are like long after you can simply praise them.

With delightful wit and grace, Hathaway explores in these poems what it means to live a secular life after being grounded in Christian community. Take “Routing,” a poem that pictures a sister’s brain, preserved for research on Alzheimer’s disease, “in a plastic tub shipped on the UPS truck next to my / high-fashion catalog choice.” The poet then plays with the concept of choice: “I gave up a life of promise, simplicity, direction, and chose // or was chosen—I want it both ways—to choose me.” She has routed her life away from the convent.

Yet the convent remains strong in Hathaway’s consciousness. Woven through the book are poems about the “ex-nun,” a character she invents in order to hold both perspectives—the secular and the religious—simultaneously. Just by naming this character in a poem’s title, Hathaway helps us see everything in the poem differently; the “she” carries her convent past with her wherever the poem goes.

So, for instance, in “Mid-Life, the Ex-Nun’s Body Tells the Truth,” she is undergoing a diagnostic medical procedure. The radiologist “traced monastic points: // detailed masonry under scaffolding of ribs, past curtains / of lungs.” (That line-break is trademark Hathaway: we picture literal “curtains” until we drop into the next line’s “lungs.”) Then the radiologist continues “Around the courtyard, bronchial trees / the lime-white cloister walk.”

In “The Ex-Nun’s Death,” the shock of the title is immediately cushioned by the first line: “will not be as she’d imagined.” Yet, with amusing irony, the poem goes on to imagine the ex-nun’s death. With her long-ago first communion students at her bedside, she leans toward them “to hear each / whisper a family rage or wager . . .” (here we see Hathaway’s typically playful internal rhyming). And then comes a pun on the nun’s clothing: “Out of habit / they reach for her.”

The book’s closing poem, “Sabbatical: Morning and Comfort,” aptly concludes Hathaway’s vision of her religious past intertwined with her present. The speaker’s boarding house room is her “cell”; she awakens “in candlelight’s secular Matins.” In the poem’s final alliterated words, she hears her landlady’s “pages of newspaper / turn lightly, like leaves, like Lauds.” This, the only mention of Lauds in the book, is in a simile. Lauds itself has long left the speaker’s life; but something like Lauds remains.

Both *Long after Lauds* and Jeanne Murray Walker’s new collection, *Pilgrim, You Find the Path by Walking*, begin with poems telling a creation story. Both are exhilarating

fun: Hathaway's alliterative "Play begat jellyfish: / no bones, or brain, or blood" and Walker's trees with "their endless rummage / for light, their photo-what's-it, how their growing / is barely regulated damage." The most noticeable difference between the two poems is that Walker's is a sonnet.

Walker's many previous books of poetry are in free verse (as Hathaway's are). But a teaching stint in Italy, where the sonnet was born some 500 years ago, inspired Walker to begin experimenting with the form. This collection represents what became her decade of pilgrimage with the sonnet.

These poems also trace a thematic pilgrimage: from creations (divine and artistic), to interpersonal relations, to death and grief, to silence and God. *Pilgrim* is a poetry collection with a plot.

Though Walker is more comfortable with Christian belief than Hathaway is, her poems are never in the least pious. Rather, they explore belief, often playfully. A perky poem on giraffes ends by evoking "mystery." Another poem, called "Attempt," invents homey metaphors to talk directly to God about trying to find him:

> In my hellion
> hair and ripped work shirt, I ransack the place
> to find my datebook. Gone. Or I've dropped
> my glasses and I'm crawling on all fours
> to swab the floor with outstretched hands. . . .

Not all of Walker's poems in this collection are lively, though. The sonnets vary widely in tone, from playful and joyful to reflective and pensive.

A series of poems on her mother's death is appropriately somber. In one, called "Grief," Walker writes: "She is on duty, grieving. Waiting till when / she gets some further dispatch—she'll stay / where shadows swarm the landscape, where the fen / might swallow her, alive, as well."

A pilgrimage takes its toll on shoes, and *Pilgrim* ends with three poems about shoes. In "The Cobbler," Walker writes: "You're embarrassed at how homely, / how foul they've grown. . . . / He listens, strokes them: / No, they might be holy." Walker places on the cobbler's wall the words from which her title comes:

Pilgrim, there is no path.
Attend.
You're breaking
unmarked ground. You find the path by walking.

Then, in "Shoes," the tone gets lighter: "Some are hardly more than a rubber stutter / against a foot. The slap of flip-flops / for instance, so sweet and sharp. The utter / honesty of sandals."

Finally, there's the pensive "Farewell," with its epigraph: *"The last heel's cobbled."* Every line of this poem is rich with the reluctance of parting and the fulfilment of completion.

May we find
ourselves by letting ourselves go. . . .
. . . . . .
. . . Goodbye, good path, good rooms, good shoes,
good walking.
Dusk falls. So much goes on
that we can't grasp. . . .

And then the closing lines, with their quietly brilliant double pun on *last*: "Our shoes are worn. The cobbler's gone. / And in his empty shop stands the last last." So ends the poem and the book.

We've been Walker's travel companion through her experimental journey with the sonnet form and her engagement with, it seems, every facet of our lives. By walking with these poems, it seems, we'll find our path.