

Frameworks for Faithful Living

Review of

Long Rules: An Essay in Verse

by Nathaniel Perry

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Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

This is an enchanting collection, an incantatory tour de force, an immensely creative fusion of monastic history, the life of contemporary monasteries, country and folk music (from, for example, Willie Nelson, Jason Molina, John Prine, Kelly Jo Phelps), love of place rendered in exquisite detail, all in highly crafted, polished and accessible poetry. In the interest of full disclosure, of the five Cistercian monasteries about which Perry writes, I have visited four, one has been a spiritual home to me for decades, and section V (Cumberland County, Virginia) is part of my geographic heritage. I am not an objective reviewer.

Subtitled “An Essay in Verse,” the book opens cozily with a quotation from Longfellow: “Welcome, Basil, my friend! Come, take thy place on the settle / Close by the chimney-side, which is always empty without thee.” Hereafter “Basil” is St. Basil the Great, whose appearances, along with those of St. Benedict, St. Gregory and St. Bernard (with Thomas Merton and Gerard Manley Hopkins making cameo appearances) are leitmotifs that unify the book. Others include music (often of the Southern Appalachians), monasteries and repeated phrases in the various sequences.

The poet’s attention to the beauty and intricacies of the natural world are “keeping something so others / might know it is kept,” because “constant things deserve / a pointing to” (35). The last phrase seems to me the *raison d’être* of poems which concentrate meticulously on landscape, architecture, turnips, caterpillars, bluegrass music and monastic chant, and make obvious why Perry previously won *American Poetry Review*’s first book prize. I am jealous both of his students at Hampden-Sydney College and the plants in his gardens.

Each of the six poetic meditations/essays begins “Listen, child of God” (as, of course, does Benedict’s Rule: *Obsculta, o fili*) followed by a suggestion of what one should listen to. Each is an invitation to share the poet’s observations about Our Lady of the Angels, Holy Cross Abbey, Mepkin Abbey, Our Lady of Gethsemani, Cumberland County, Virginia and the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. Each is divided into several poems of approximately the same number of lines (most with 11 to 13 beats) describing the author’s experiences at the particular monastery. Each reflects profound, “digested” knowledge of Christian monasticism’s origins as well as exhibiting mastery of the demanding requirements of blank verse. Along with “verbal post cards” of the monasteries,

Bonnie Thurston, a founding member and third president of the International Thomas Merton Society, has written or edited over two dozen books on scripture, theology and spirituality as well as eight collections of poetry. Her *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton’s Monastic Spirituality* was published in 2020, and she is author most recently of *Stones of the Last Week: Impediments to Easter* (2024). Following an academic career, she now lives in solitude in her native West Virginia.

Perry shares heart-rendingly beautiful observations. Here are some examples:

- “the land is some asked-for graceful prayer made real / around us” (7);
- “it is our native sense of loneliness / that drives us all not only back into / ourselves but also to communities / of solitude” (12);
- “strangeness and surprise might be the bedrock / of faith, if faith is comfort in what you don’t know / or understand” (23);
- “solitude a room inside community” (33);
- “Solitude, then, is a living / memory of the places we lose, and every / place we live in, of course, is already lost, / evening shadows the shadow of an absented host” (34);
- “the moon is never lonely / but beautiful in the way it stays alone / with us” (53).

St. Basil wrote to his friend St. Gregory Nazianzen “of a mutual acquaintance,” that he was “Three in one. Community, / solitude, and self” (59). These are the three “subjects” of Perry’s poems, which attend to exteriors of place and interiors of person, undergirded by interiorized Christian history and monastic theology. Nathaniel Perry is the genuine article. His poetry is erudite without ever being snooty. Such is the achievement of his most remarkable and very highly recommended book. It closes: “We move together and we move apart, / our movements strangely familiar to each other, / like letters or a tune, or blue light, or time, / or like the echo of remembered rhyme” (61). Perry’s poems echo and will be long remembered. *Obsculta, o fili, et inclina aurem cordis tui.*