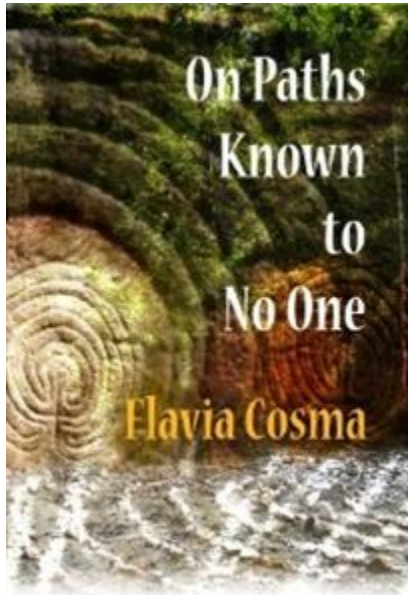


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On Her Own Path

Review by Diana Manole

Flavia Cosma's *On Paths Known to No One* (Červená Barva Press, Somerville, Massachusetts, 2012, ISBN 978-0-9844732-6-7) is a wonderfully crafted collection of poems that spans two continents and brings together some of her defining themes and stylistic traits, attesting to the artistic path she has carved in her work. The book opens with George Elliott Clarke's "Introduction," an excellent poem in its own right, which points a visceral male gaze at a more delicate feminine collection of poems. It identifies Cosma as the "honest poet... as diligent as hunger" but also as "a Dickinson seduced by Plath" who shows that the light has "the consistency of shadows," "Eden hosts angels—and maggots," and love "just doesn't suit pretty words."

Indeed, Cosma's vision is defined by complementary attitudes, which unwrap a world hidden under "layers of silence" (62), without spoiling or cheapening its raw beauty. On one hand, she uncovers the humanity of the natural landscape through surprising anthropomorphic details. The evening is "a brave maiden" (6) and the "rock's heart / Full of longings, / Sighs" (5), while the "sun-baked stones" (22) get old. Even traces of human spirituality are integrated into the natural medium, such as the "white crosses / Carved into rocks" (21). On the other hand, most of Cosma's lyrical characters gradually regain their primordial natural aspects and eventually dissolve into the surrounding landscape. A "man fancies he is / Both a bird and the sky" (19), a boy has the "steel of the sea in his gaze" (40), and two young lovers, with "weeping, willow-like arms" eventually "melt into each other, gently turning into / A fragile young tree with soft branches" (29).

Combining the two perspectives, Cosma excels at offering glimpses of reality, highlighting wonders of the everyday life most of us take for granted. A “waft of barbecued fish” (13) immediately places us on the shore of the Aegean Sea, where everything seems at the same time familiar and ritualistic:

The heat wave opens its arms and forgets

The savage embrace of the day past [...]

A mother leads her daughters by the hand,

Clothed in wall-like white [...]

Temporary, silence returns,

Frights disappear. (13).

But the poet also finds her way to “the land of the unseen and the unknown,” of the nymphs, satyrs, and “men-fish”, “wild eyed sirens with tresses flouncing in the wind” (16), “wicked fairies [who] moan, yelp, throw themselves against walls” (31), “Large flocks of ghosts [that] lie in wait / Through endless oozing hours” (67).

The sea gets special treatment in the first section of the book, “Songs at the Aegean Sea.” It births young though ancient-looking statues (7), caressing them with quiet, dancing waves (6). Like “a blue lung, [it] breathes noisily” (15), while the fish “congregate for prayer / Lighting coral candles / In deep, subterranean churches” (38). Cosma’s relationship to the water reaches intensely erotic tones, as in an act of bitter-sweet consummation: “This gentle lover / With its slippery body; / I drink its green tears and once again, / His bitter, salty kiss / Inebriates me” (20). The sea eventually seizes and carries the poet away, releasing her from her burdening humanity: “My burning skin, / The stony breasts, / The frightened heart, / Writhing in my chest” (14).

In contrast to the solar grace of the Aegean poems, Cosma’s rendering of the Argentinean “vast artificial Paradises” has a darker, though still delicate feeling of time and nature, as well as a paradoxical sense of order and symmetry. Her walks bring her to a cemetery, “a village with rectangular streets”, where she glimpses “flowery, lily-white bones, / Quietly resting in small boxes” (82). As she sees it, the Museum is also “a kind of cemetery” where “Colourless images still testify / About societies, schools and communes” that disappeared, “swept by time’s waters” centuries ago (83). In “Sunset Reflections,” the combination of mythical and consumerism is overwhelming: “And old artisan shapes shinny knives / With handles carved from mighty antlers, / Prehistoric scales and large bird’s claws. / Anything goes for a dollar” (84). Cosma’s sensibility allows her to see an Argentinean world “built of cardboard” where “nothing happens, / Life moves forward only in dreams” (94), but the dreams actually belong to the “long lost people” (90).

Cosma’s love lyrics are, however, the most jarring, melting together the collection’s main themes and stylistic characteristics. The poem that lends its title to the entire collection is a painful expression of longing for the loved one. When taking a walk in a place where they once were together, nature

alleviates the pain: "I would howl, / I would cry, / But the sea does it better, / While, bit by bit, the sun slackens / This unbearable craving of you" (115). The last lyric, however, ends the book on an optimistic note. In a world that has been technologically reduced to a manageable scale, the heart finds new means to heal and be reborn: "A new love awaits me in every airport, / Replacing an old one / With delicate petals, / Broken off from a star" (128).

On Paths Known to No One reveals Cosma as a highly sensitive artist, overwhelmed by a world where "victims turn into butchers" and the "crutch of the one-legged assassin / Beats its drum closer and closer / To the door of my mind" (68), foreshadowing imminent death. Hurt, she tries to hide among "thinner book pages," wishes to become "a silvery silk thread," and to "find a quiet hiding place / High in the clear sky / High in a dream" (68). Her lyrics do exactly that, attempting to defeat the unavoidable passing of flesh but also counterbalance ugliness and violence by masterfully imagining a parallel world "out of a few words, / Or a fleeting smile" (98).

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Flavia Cosma

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