



The Last Mosaic

Elizabeth Cooperman

Thomas Walton

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“A fragment defies the mind’s impulse to make things whole. Defies it, and entices it,” and from just such fragments, Elizabeth Cooperman and Thomas Walton cobble together a hybrid work—parts travel journal, memoir, lyric essay, and prose poem. The authors take Rome as their muse, exploring its history, art, architecture, and famous dead to create a new palimpsestic work that enriches the bounty that Rome has inspired.

The concept of the fragment is introduced early on. Art includes many iterations of fragments, all parts of wholes—from vellum scraped and written over again to mosaics to photographs and memories. The historical voices of Plutarch, Lucian, Keats, and Shelley are overlaid with those of Lyn Hejinian, Sarah Manguso, and Anne Carson. Rome comes into focus as a result of history, art, etymology, and experience all overlapping.

Repetitive elements weave throughout the book’s poems; they take on additional resonance as they return and juxtapose with their present positions as well as their pasts. The book’s form reinforces the notion that many Romes coexist.

The authors suggest that the presence of beauty depends on one’s lens and perspective. Dying Keats, dying Nero, and murderous Romulus all become a mode of seeing. The Coliseum has seen both Paul McCartney and the gladiators; their histories intertwine. Just as Rome is home to many, it is utterly exotic to others; each of these ideas threads through the book’s meditations, which offer critiques and praise of both contemporary and ancient life. Occasionally, the writers end their poems with unnecessary and didactic questions comparing the two.

The book can be read as a series of poems or as a number of vignettes. But it is perhaps most useful to consider it by its own terms: as fragments that are beautiful in and of themselves, and which also function as a sum greater than its parts.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (July/August 2018)

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