

**Robyn Rowland. *Mosaics from the Map*.
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**Robyn Rowland. *Under a Saffron Sun / Safran Güneşin Altında*. Trans. Mehmet Ali
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The past leaves its traces, like granular wavy lines across the sand. However, as prolific Australian–Irish poet Robyn Rowland’s recent work suggests, poetry has the capacity to re-arrange these fragments of personal and collective history into an art of the extant, challenging the reader with a vibrant and collaged view of lives lived, of places loved and left and struggled for.

In her two most recent books of poetry, *Mosaics from the Map* and bilingual collection *Under a Saffron Sun / Safran Güneşin Altında*, Rowland takes the reader on a series of evocative journeys through interior landscapes of feeling and experience as well as visceral geographies of place. The sensuality which operates at the heart of these journeys is emphasised by Lynda Burke’s cover images for both collections—thick, textured swirls of intense colours to indicate both the physicality of landscape and the perceptions which shape and inhabit it. This sensuous and lyrical dimension of Rowland’s work in these volumes is also stylistically counterpoised with narratives of bricolaged detail—what Rowland refers to elsewhere as a kind of ‘Documentary Poetry . . . using material to create poems that are as truthful and accurate as possible.’¹

Rowland’s is a poetic infused with a combination of a restless desire to be always moving, and an intense love for the specificity of place, in particular the landscapes of Turkey and Ireland. In this context, the distinctive voice which runs through these poems creates a rich weave of attentive observation and response to what is encountered. Similarly, the idea of home, or at least a longing for it, becomes something that the poems both draw towards and yet ultimately pull away from—there are always goodbyes to be made, buses to be caught, something somewhere else that must be attended to. The poems in both books are mainly written in long prose-like lines that offer an intricacy of story entwined with the particularities of place. Braided together within and across poems, these threads construct a dense cartography of desire and longing—a sometimes hypnotic palimpsest of to and fro, cause and effect, here and there.

In *Mosaics from the Map*, her tenth book of poetry, Rowland ranges across a wide canvas, from large-scale events of documented history to her own personal experience and that of her historical immigrant family. This is a collection about movements of many kinds—in place, as we crisscross from Australia to Ireland, from Istanbul to Sarajevo, as well as in time. The roving perspective of the poet operates as the focal point for these overlapping strands, drawing them together in ways that point both to the specificity of different people, different moments in history, differing currents of sociohistorical influence as well as the commonalities of human experience. The collection’s title poem, ‘Salt Mosaic. Notes in Vienna’ (*Mosaics* 7), makes explicit the poet’s view of this confluence of factors that contribute to our understanding of the past and its influences upon us:

History is a wave washing back and forth across maps, dragging empires
 behind, trailing haphazard shapes. It leaves salt mosaics.
 Time is synonymous with itself—a point, circular
 continuum, a series of parallel links, so histories
 co-exist. Story survives through time.
 Feelings, friendship, grief, all our
 leavings.

This motif of the salt mosaic also signals the methodological approach of the collection, which is characterised by the interdependent processes of articulating these ‘parallel links’ between people and places and the creative curating of the mosaic itself. Art—as that which is constructed from the shards of what has gone before, the glimpses left in the mind’s eye—has the capacity to evoke, to make connections for us and thus to generate identification and compassion.

Concerned with the patterns of inner and outer life, Rowland’s poems cover a range of topics. The great-great-granddaughter of an Irish settler in Australia, Rowland has divided her time between Australia and Ireland, finding the shifting concept of home in each; she has also spent time in Turkey and, as *Under the Saffron Sun / Safran Güneşin Altında* makes evident, some of her work has been translated into Turkish. Like her Irish ancestor, the poet may travel—in both body and mind—for a myriad of reasons, yet there is always a recurring sense of ‘restlessness,’ a desire to keep widening the horizon and resist the impulse to ‘settle’: ‘I won’t be anchored by place,’ she writes in the poem ‘Roving’ (*Mosaics* 22). For this peripatetic poet, the waves of history are particularly evident, as she traces tides of human movement and political power. The poem ‘Empire,’ for instance, follows the rise and fall of Ottoman power from Istanbul to a sweetshop in Cork and through the tumult of the Great War; the long sequence ‘War. What is it Good For’ offers a powerful insight into the siege of Sarajevo, where past fractures in Balkan politics continue to lead to murder and suffering. These war poems are both descriptive and detailed in the listing of horrors and highly moving in the evocation of individualised loss—the father who finds what’s ‘left of seven children . . . in a cloud of dust’ (*Mosaics* 42) or the severed leg, ‘its cardboard tag, five toes pointing towards / the sun, surprised almost, caught off guard’ (*Mosaics* 45).

Poetic narratives of movement and transition are used to mark shifts across time and space as well as the elements of challenge and risk that are inevitably involved. In the sequence ‘Sky Gladitorial’ for example, we are drawn into wider historical narratives through the lens of specific individuals, here pioneer pilots Alcock and Whitten Brown, whose paths link themes of conflict in both world wars as well as Alcock’s imprisonment in Turkey. Reminiscent of Colum McCann’s exploration in his novel *Transatlantic* (Bloomsbury 2013), Rowland uses the men’s inter-war flight from Newfoundland to Ireland to knit together places on a physical map and to evoke the ecstasy ‘of the air’ they travel through (*Mosaics* 35). However, these triumphs of the air in noisy, uncertain aircraft, are ghosted by the later death of Whitten Brown’s son, a pilot in the next war, whose loss haunts his father, ultimately sending them both, shattered, to ground: ‘This is the only place I meet him now, in our falling / together at night, the dark air all clamour and dinning war’ (*Mosaics* 38). Similarly, the poem ‘Titanic—a very Modern Love Story’ also uses detailed prose poetry to track another dangerous crossing, where ‘Screams of the dying scratched at survivors, then, frozen silence’ (*Mosaics* 10). Rowland’s poetry highlights this experience of being ‘slung between’ points of apparent stability or arrival, suggesting that while such high-wire journeying can be intoxicating, it is also a great height

from which, like the curious and determined Icarus, it is possible to fall, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Under this Saffron Sun / Safran Güneşin Altında is explicitly focused on the poet's experience in and with Turkey, a place and culture introduced to her by her former sister-in-law: 'You drew back the curtain on this Turkish world / where fine silk filaments wove together my map. / Threads drew me on through Ottoman gardens / abundant flowering roses of tangerine-scent' (16). This book, containing a number of poems which overlap with *Mosaics*, evokes the poet's physically and emotionally immersive encounter with Turkish place, culture and language. As she tells a handsome young man over cups of Turkish coffee:

'... I begin here in the body,' I say
—hand swooping up my trunk between breasts—
'and the poem slides along my skin,
it moves up through heart and out,

and I taste it in my mouth, rose jam,
hive-honeycomb, and its scent is
amber-orange roses in this garden tonight'
(*Saffron* 94)

The sensuality of the poet's openness to such encounters is seen to be linked to the production of poetry; creativity is envisaged like the vivid colours and experiences of Turkey itself. Embracing the sometimes-complex position of the desiring older woman, Rowland's poems celebrate the ongoing connection between the sexual experiences of the body, the sensory pleasures of place and the emergence and re-emergence of the creative voice—the impulse that constructs the mosaics, that curates the shifting, multicoloured pieces of experience.

Like her previous collection *This Intimate War: Gallipoli / Çanakkale* (Five Islands 2015; republished by Spinifex 2018), Rowland works with translator Mehmet Ali Çelikel to provide parallel versions of the poems in English and in Turkish. As well as highlighting the homage to all things Turkish, these two 'speaking' of the poems create another kind of crossing—a visual and linguistic recognition that while the signs of language inform our lived experience, they are not identical to it. Words—however loved and savoured like 'hive-honeycomb' and however linked to the specificity of culture and place—remain, for the poet, a loose and evocative net across which to map individual experience and the tidal stories of the collective.

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¹ Robyn Rowland in conversation with Denise O'Hagen, *The Blue Nib*, December 2020, <https://thebluenib.com/robyn-rowland-in-conversation-with-denise-ohagan/?fbclid=IwAR0hevgScs5zpnDbP3Ib30NvPvbALsLp8GRvedFJICgC-488LViZWA9m8Hs>