

Lusting after the tastes and aromas of Istanbul

Under This Saffron Sun by Robyn Rowland (Knocknaronone Press)

BY KEVIN HIGGINS Galway Advertiser, Thu, Dec 19, 2019

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The poet Robyn Rowland. Photo:- Mike Shaughnessy

AUSTRALIAN-BORN poet Robyn Rowland has been a significant figure on the Irish poetry scene since she first came here in 1983, and it is more than a bit ridiculous her poetry is not more celebrated than it is.

One of the many collections she wrote while living part of the year near Clifden included her sequence 'Dead Mother Poems', perhaps the most explosive set of confessional poems published in the English language in recent decades.

In her best work, Rowland is a kind of thinking person's Sharon Olds, less content than the more famous American to rely of reproducing versions of her earlier self for an already applauding audience. There is a freedom bestowed on a poet when s/he thinks it is possible that next to no one is listening - you can say what you want without any of the restricting handcuffs of literary decorum or fashion.

In her new collection, *Under This Saffron Sun*, Rowland turns her gaze almost lustfully to Turkey: its people, politics, tastes, smells, and also – and why not – its young men. In the exquisitely executed 'Capture', she writes about a young Turkish man who was her guide on part of her journey there: "Shielding me, he has taken charge./I could travel like this forever, his leg pressed on mine,/ethereal happiness suddenly pausing here./False heaven, he muses. Perhaps. But heaven anyway."



In 'High', Rowland takes us with her on a guided hike up one of Turkey's highest mountains, Mount Nemrut [pictured above]. Here, she shows herself to be one of best poets around when it comes to evoking an atmosphere so vividly the readers feel the tension in their own body, and the cold, thin air in their lungs. In the first stanza she writes: "Half-way up, our five minibus drivers argue wildly,/arms flailing, voices harsh in language/we can't decipher". Then, in the turning point fourth stanza, they begin their descent in a similarly crazy fashion: "In flimsy boots we sail down the glacial slope,/short of oxygen, altitude-mad with laughter."

Rowland's poems are full of a sensuality which we could spend our time here relishing, in the way she clearly relishes the pomegranate juice, pink skies, and glorious young people of Istanbul; if only the dark, oppressive, forces, which she in equal measure acknowledges, would get out of our way.

Rowland knows Turkey well, having travelled there extensively over the past few years, and published the collection *The Intimate War Gallipoli*, which was launched in 2015 as part of the commemoration of one of the most disastrous episodes of WWI. As well as Rowland's poems in the original English, that collection included translations into Turkish. *Under This Saffron Sun* similarly includes Turkish translations of each poem by Mehmet Ali Celikel, making it a substantial book and ludicrously good value at €12.

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