

Rochford Street Review

Passion and Elegance: John Foulcher reviews 'Mosaics from the Map' & 'Under this Saffron Sun / Safran Gunesin Alinda'

by [Admin](#)

Mosaics from the Map, Doire Press, 2018 by Robyn Rowland and *Under this Saffron Sun /Safran Güneşin Altında*, Knockarone Press, 2019 by Robyn Rowland, with Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel.



(<https://rochfordstreetreview.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/robyn-rowland.jpg>)

Robyn Rowland

in the blurred lines of identity Rowland trails behind her. It's a vivid reminder that only first nations Australians can claim an identity in this country. The rest of us are caught between the knowledge that this place is our home and it's not; we're languishing among lines of heritage, a kind of collective memory that we may belong elsewhere. But of course we belong elsewhere, and this is where we share Rowland's journey. Particularly in *Under This Saffron Sun*, Rowland remains the visitor, no matter how close she comes to her hosts, no matter how much she longs for the place to be her own. By transposing this anxiety about identity to a country so unlike this one, she's constantly reminding Australian readers of our common transience, our restlessness. Where Australia has a history of poets with British or European heritage digging more deeply to find identity here (such as Les Murray or Judith Wright), Rowland's use of a context alien to most of us to explore this dilemma is an experiment few poets have made over the years – some have done this, but they usually end up as expatriates. This doesn't seem an avenue open to Rowland. It's what gives her work its sparkle, its edge.

Linguistically, Rowland isn't like most Australian poets writing today either. She tangles us in dense

There's no one quite like Robyn Rowland in Australian poetry. For a start, she rarely seems to be here, in Australia. For years, Rowland has threaded a life between Ireland and Australia, the country of her heritage and her birth country. Her poetry has always been marked by the tension inherent in this dual sense of identity, but these two books take it further, adding a passionate engagement with Turkey to the mix. Australia makes cameo appearances in these books, but it's never the focus. As she says, adopting the voice of her great grandmother: '... I'm restless./I want to keep moving. Maybe it's in the blood, roaming.' ('Arriving Sydney Annie Harding Lambert, 1889).

But that's not quite right. Despite Australia's literal distance in these effervescent books, it's always there,

thickets of words, long lines and slabs of stanza. She loads her lines with allusions, with place names and snatches of history, with voices other than her own; in this way, her poetry becomes a kind of historical record, a recreation of particularities of place and time. But it never ceases to be poetry, and fine poetry at that. There's never the sense of detail for the sake of detail. This is internal and external world creation, and the reader is constantly aware of the recorder as well as the record. In this, her

work is reminiscent of Mark O'Connor; in another, very different context, O'Connor's work is marked by its meticulous attention to physical detail, its acknowledgement that the world 'out there' exists beyond and despite us, just as Rowland does. An engagement with landscape is a common trope in Australian poetry, but many of our most impressive practitioners in this regard, such as Robert Gray or Judith Beveridge, use imagery as their point of stylistic focus. Rowland rarely uses imagery, it's not her strength. The poems have a remarkably straightforward quality to them: this is what I see, this is what I feel, they say, as Rowland lets a vividly recreated world do the talking for her.



(<https://rochfordstreetreview.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/mosaic-from-the-map.jpeg>) *Mosaics from the Map*, the earlier volume, seems transitional in more ways than one. It begins in Turkey, something of a new love, then shifts in time and place to a series of poems about two characters truly up in the air, pilots Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown, who flew between continents and between war and peace ('Sky Gladitorial'). After that, war dominates, in a series of brutal, stinging poems about the terrible and avoidable tragedy of the Bosnian war and the siege of Sarajevo in 1996, 'War. What is It Good for?' These remarkable poems display an extraordinary and convincing empathy with a conflict imagined rather than experienced, though Rowland has spent time in Sarajevo. In 'Breadline Massacre', one can see the bodies of the dead in intimate detail:

The knee is smooth, lovely in its meniscus-shaped curve,
thigh pale from lack of sunshine close to the torso,

and the foot, its cardboard tag, five toes pointing towards
the sun, surprised almost, caught off guard.

After this, Rowland turns to her personal heritage with a series of monologues in the voice of her great grandmother migrating from Ireland to Australia in the latter stages of the nineteenth century ('Touchstones'). Rowland's restlessness is the thread in this sequence; she identifies so strongly with the speaker of the poems, Annie Harding Lambert, that she could be speaking in her own voice. Lambert and her offspring are dogged by scarlet fever: in Ireland, she loses five of her eight children to the disease. One of her grandchildren is also taken by scarlet fever after she and her remaining children settle in Australia following her husband Joseph's death in Cork. There's always loss in shifting homes, and just as she can't outrun scarlet fever, Lambert can't outrun her sense of rootlessness, no matter how much better life is in her newly adopted country:

So much has gone missing, I splinter with loss.
My heart thumps a double beat like two hearts
in the dark cave of me. But when I look up, radiance.
Yes, a good choice. Such a bright sky here.

– 'Arriving Sydney Annie Harding Lambert, 1889'

The book concludes in Rowland's own voice, as she tugs herself between continents, from 'Slivers of an Australian Summer' to 'Connemara Man'. She finishes on a note of gratitude and well-earned peace in beautiful lines remarkably unlike the style and tone of most of its poems:

peace in beautiful lines remarkably unlike the style and tone of most of his poems.

. . . this is the feeling that's best,

fluid old-fashioned thanks, almost in tears
for the friendship and the slow ways home
and the twilight, dripping orange and blue
under a three-quarter moon before summer.

– 'that together, we went'

There's much to explore in these visceral and arresting poems, particularly in the poems about Sarajevo, but it's the later book, *Under This Saffron Sun*, which beguiles. It's a bilingual volume, Rowland's poems accompanied by the Turkish translations of her collaborator, Mehmet Ali Çelikel, on facing pages. As well as indicating the book is as much for Turkish consumption as English speaking readers, it's a constant reminder of the conflicting space in which identity is formed.

Under This Saffron Sun feels like a delirious bus ride through Turkey – indeed, at times it literally is. Rowland arrives in Istanbul and then explores both the people and the country with a fervour that's infectious and exhilarating. This tone is wonder and excitement, evident from the earliest poems:

Say *Istanbul*, and taste it, mouth flooded with pomegranate
juice tight to bursting from each translucent aril, purple-pulped,
their pith invisible. So large, a hand can barely hold them.

– 'Say Istanbul'

The book is full of allusions to food. Unlike our other poetical gastronome, Eileen Chong, whose images of food and cooking are precise and intricate, Rowland's food imagery is riotous and indulgent. It's as if she's gulping the experience down, never satiated, always up for taking that next bite. She's not choosy about what she eats, devouring everything, from a terrifying bus ride down a lean mountain track in the snowy dark, to bustling city markets and the spare stone country of Cappadocia. It's hard not to be swept along in the courses of this feast.

Music and dance are also constant refrains in the book. *Under This Saffron Sun* is bookended with poems about dervishes. In 'Intangible Flight', the book's fourth poem, Rowland calls us to:

Step into the world of the *Sema*; step outside all worlds.
Voice chants a deep song of praise calling – *choose love*.
Saz musicians prepare. The drum beats: *Be*.
And now to begin – no hurry –
for that which waits was always there, is always.

(<https://rochfordstreetreview.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/under-this-saffron-sun.jpg>) The dervish is a fitting image for the poet's experience. Rowland uses it to suggest the richest experience is immersive, as she herself finds in one of the book's most light and enthralling poems, 'Spontaneous'. In this poem, Rowland books in at a hotel in western Turkey to be asked by the desk girl, 'do you like to dance?' The answer is obviously in the affirmative, as the girl takes our bewildered narrator to the hotel manager who then spirits her away to the dance festival of the Roma. Rowland is hesitant but goes – and dances. When it's time to leave, the hotel manager – with whom the poet had assumed she would return – places her in the care of what appears to be the local 'geniş' – a sharp dresser whose car

John Foulcher has written eleven books of poetry, most recently *101 Poems* (PSP 2015), a selection from his previous books, and *A Casual Penance* (PSP 2017). His work has appeared in national magazines and anthologies for over thirty years. In 2010-11 he was the Literature Board's resident at the Keesing Studio in Paris. He lives in Canberra.

Mosaics from the Map is available from https://www.doirepress.com/writers/m_z/robyn_rowland/ (https://www.doirepress.com/writers/m_z/robyn_rowland/).

Under this Saffron Sun/Safran Gunesin Altinda is available from <https://robynrowland.com/portfolio-view/under-this-saffron-sun-safran-gunesin-altinda-turkish-translations-mehmet-ali-celikel/> (<https://robynrowland.com/portfolio-view/under-this-saffron-sun-safran-gunesin-altinda-turkish-translations-mehmet-ali-celikel/>).

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Cactus by Stevi-Lee Alver

(<https://rochfordstreetreview.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/cactus.jpg>) Based in the Northern Rivers region of NSW, Stevi-Lee Alver has had her fiction, poetry, and reviews published across Australia and the United States. In 2014, while studying at the University of Massachusetts, she received the Class of 1940 Creative Writing Award for poetry. She was one of the winners of the 2014 Questions Writing Prize for her short-story 'Phoenix'. She received the 2015 Southern Cross University award for Excellence in The Arts and has published a number of reviews and articles in *Rochford Street Review*.

[A Small But Explosive Book: Moya Costello Launches *Cactus* by Stevi-Lee Alver](https://rochfordstreetreview.com/2016/08/17/a-small-but-explosive-book-moya-costello-launches-cactus-by-stevi-lee-alver/)

(<https://rochfordstreetreview.com/2016/08/17/a-small-but-explosive-book-moya-costello-launches-cactus-by-stevi-lee-alver/>).

Cactus Beach: famous for its left and right hand breaks. Two women soak up sea, desert, sun and sensuality in this spare meditation on love.....
.....-Susan Hawthorne

Cactus is a sensate invocation for entanglement in our biosphere-in-delicate-balance. Via her own fine judgement, emerging writer Stevi-Lee Alver potentiates the prose poem, making a 'surfie chick' narrative into a deeply affecting bel canto.....- Moya Costello

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would return – places her in the care of what appears to be the local spiv, a sharp dresser whose car is ‘a coupe, all cream leather, dove-soft/sleek luxury’. The ride back to the hotel with the roof down is a sensuous delight. When she returns to the hotel, the desk girl asks in excitement: ‘Did you dance Mrs Robyn, did you dance?’, to which Rowland replies, “‘Yes. Oh, Yes. Yes!’” The sheer exhilaration of that reply – each word emphatically capitalised – is delightful.

There are darker moments on the poet’s journey of discovery. In ‘On the Beach’, the poet strolls along the beach with friends, past a longstanding shipwreck. They come across a ‘faded lifeboat’ which the poet assumes is from the wreck. She’s corrected by her friend, who talks to her as if she were ‘a child barely able to grasp meaning’. This boat is from Syria, and it contained asylum seekers who were clearly unsuccessful in the journey to Lesbos: ‘Beside the wreckage sits just one shoe, a man’s walking shoe, / faded brown, its many laces salt-stiff.’

Such moments are important to *Under This Saffron Sun*, as is the tacit acknowledgement of the fact that the poet comes from a nation which was a onetime enemy of Turkey; without them, Rowland could be accused of starry-eyed naivety, of idealising a people and a place because of its veneer of ‘exoticness’. Indeed, such a criticism would still hold weight, such is the intensity of Rowland’s fervour

about Turkey.

But the achievement of the book is in the way Rowland overcomes such reservations on the part of the reader, simply because of the weight of passion and the elegance and control of these poems. A tendency to overindulge is kept in check by the sobriety of craft which is at the heart of Rowland’s poetry. Robyn Rowland’s unique place in Australian poetry is enhanced by these books which tells us of ourselves on foreign shores.

Robyn Rowland 'On the Beach'



Robyn Rowland reads ‘On the Beach’ from *Under this Saffron Sun /Safran Güneşin Altında*

– John Foulcher
