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## Phillip Hall reviews *Under this Saffron Sun* by Robyn Rowland

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Robyn Rowland, *Under this Saffron Sun/Safran Güneşin Altında*. Turkish Translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel. Ireland: Knocknaron Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-5272-4934-9

*Phillip Hall*

I have long loved the poetry of Robyn Rowland: her Australian-based Five Islands work celebrating the natural world while documenting such fraught personal history as her recovery from cancer (*Seasons of Doubt and Burning: New & Selected Poems*: 2010); and her Irish-Australian poetry that continues to celebrate the natural world but is also attuned to cultural/historical/political nuances (*Line of Drift*: 2015). And then in 2009, her Australian/Turkish sister-in-law inspired a prolonged engagement with Turkey, thus beginning a compelling connection with history, people and place culminating in the Australian/Irish/Turkish travelogue through the prism of Gallipoli (*This Intimate War Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/Çanakkale 1915* : repub 2018, Spinifex) before the celebration of contemporary Turkey in *Under this Saffron Sun*, a work that moves away from war in a celebration of friendship and place. Rowland's transnational poetics is not based on any superficial or fleeting travel tourism which is so characteristic of western travel shows and YouTube vlogs. Her poetry is the culmination of prolonged

residence and experience of place, including collaboration with local artists: *Under this Saffron Sun* is, thus, a bilingual masterpiece, the result of Rowland's partnership with Mehmet Ali Çelikel (an esteemed Turkish translator and academic). Unfortunately, I am not bilingual in English/Turkish so will have to confine my comments to the English versions of Rowland's poetry.

*Under this Saffron Sun* opens generously with homage to Sevil Kılıç (the sister-in-law, 'yenge') who was the inspiration for this project. 'Sevil's Gift: Turkey' begins:

*Song bird of history, how thrilling your call.*

*Nightingale is not sweeter, nor breakfast honey comb.*

*You drew back the curtain on this Turkish world*

*where fine silk filaments wove together my map.*

And what a map it is. 'Night Opening on Istanbul' is characteristic of Rowland's transnational poetics. This is a poem that celebrates the exotic, but in a way that is keenly open to new enriching experience, in transformation. This poem is written in twelve quatrains, lines of mostly five or six beats, a keen ear for alliteration and eye for imagery heightening the sense of exoticism based on respect and wonder. This poem opens:

*Domes are blurring in twilight that swathes the city in dusky  
silk,*

*skies pewter-blue over sunset-bright waters opposite*

*piers at Eminönü. Inside the Rüstem Pasha Mosque,*

*Iznik tiles will be glowing rare coral-red in the dying light.*

*We sit as the young man cracks crates apart to feed our fire,  
waves slipping along the concrete walkway at Kadıköy  
while ferries channel their way towards the Sea of Marmara.  
Galata bridge is a snail trail of lights, fishing-lines still  
dangling.*

*It is dark-blue, this water, and the sky deepening as Istanbul  
begins  
its shimmer into night, a crowd of fireflies rising, twinkling  
in a galaxy of its own. Lights stud the darkness of evening  
to the sky's dome; minarets needle-sharp, tremble towards  
heaven.*

There is a formality to the poetics in his book that is richly evocative of Islamic architectural and artistic styles where geometric, arabesque, floral and calligraphic patterns all reflect on aspects of cosmic balance. Rowland also often writes of Istanbul's archaeological sites, the 'stone memories' that are 'carved in desert earth, mountains of fire' as she 'grapples to absorb nine-layers of civilisation', but *Under this Saffron Sun* is never overwhelmed by this weight of history, and Rowland maintains her focus, to celebrate contemporary Turkish people. So, 'Night Opening on Istanbul' concludes:

*Our fingers begin to freeze at the end of raki-fluid limbs.  
Under a blood full moon, rising whole, uncut by cloud,  
waves of light are thrown onto river and dome.  
This moment difference dissolves. A warm union binds us.*

*Under this Saffron Sun* concludes with another tribute piece to Sevil Kılıç, this time a sequence written in couplets, where every line has between five and seven beats, and is titled 'Cherry Blossom Dreaming'. Each of these two poems begins with a quotation from Rumi, and forms a beautiful hymn of thanksgiving to the empowering friendships between women, and to mature/independent female lives. They conclude so movingly:

*Your children with burnished smiles, dark hair, hazel eyes,  
are blending themselves unknowingly out of the story of your  
past.*

*Dream now your return visit with them dear song bird,  
rejoicing*

*with your uplifted tongue. Garlands of blossom will fall*

*upon your neck, jet-hair flecked with petal. Your song will rise,  
that*

*invisible wind, its crushed-rouge scent, brush its breath along  
your lips.*

There is a formality to the poems in this collection that befits its ambitious and richly evocative style. In the lives of her nieces and nephews Rowland finds the perfect image to encapsulate her vision of fluid boundaries: a hope that is appreciative of natural beauty and of archaeological riches, informed by peace studies, enlivened by ideas of respect and equality, but always singing a hymn of thanksgiving to a world full of wonder, joy and love.

**Phillip Hall** lives in Melbourne's Sunshine where he is a passionate member of the Western Bulldogs Football Club. His publications include *Sweetened in Coals* (Gininderra Press), *Borroloola Class* (IPSI), *Fume* (UWAP) and (as editor) *Diwurruwurru: Poetry from the Gulf of Carpentaria* (Blank Rune Press). He has a new collection forthcoming from Recent Work Press in 2021. Phillip publishes the e-journal (Burrow) at: <https://oldwaterratpublishing.com>.