

ROBYN ROWLAND IN CONVERSATION WITH DENISE O'HAGAN

December 11, 2020

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Robyn Rowland has 14 books, of which 11 are poetry, including *Mosaics from the Map* (Doire Press, Ireland 2018). *Under This Saffron Sun – Safran Güneşin Altında* (Knocknaron Press, Ireland 2019) and *This Intimate War Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/Çanakkale 1915* (republished Spinifex Press 2018), are bilingual, with Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel. She lives between three countries. Her poetry appears in national/international journals, over 40 anthologies, and eight editions of *Best Australian Poems*. She has read in India, Portugal, Ireland, UK, USA, Greece, Austria, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey and Italy. She reads for *National Irish Poetry Reading Archive*, James Joyce Library, UCD. <https://robynrowland.com>

Denise: Good morning, Robyn, and thank you agreeing to this conversation. Perhaps we might start by looking at what prompted you to begin writing poetry – at 11 years old! – and who or what your earliest inspirations were?

Robyn: Thanks for inviting me to do this, Denise. It's always good to reflect on this poetry life and how we got here. Yes, I was young. I only realised in my 40s that I probably began writing because no-one was listening to me, hearing me. My mother was a live-wire but also had depression (undiagnosed then). By law, she'd had to give up work when pregnant and never got over that. And she hadn't wanted children. She was also invasive so with both the turning away and the overwhelming intrusion, I was lost. I was writing early but only to myself. I was a lonely child, bullied and beaten up at and after school. My mother had been a solo child and had no skills to assist us in developing friendships. It made a reader of me then – but hell, it was lonely.

Then, at 18, I was published in *Overland* by Barret Reid. After that it was *Poetry Australia* with Grace Perry and Les Murray. In those days it was truly wonderful because the editor, established writers or editors themselves, had time to respond to individual poems and I learned a lot from these three readers. Barrie edited and worked with me on my second book, *Perverse Serenity*, when he was living at Heide. Shelton Lea was living there too and made great orange cake!

Inspiration, I think, began in primary school with a poem I still love. We used to get School Readers and there were always poems we had to learn to recite. It was 'The Australian Sunrise' by James L Cuthbertson. Lines like: 'The morning star paled slowly / the cross hung low to the sea / and down the shadowy reaches the tide came swirling free, ... the lustrous purple darkness of the soft Australian night...' I loved that the poem was so active; that it used adjectives almost to excess (which I still do myself). I loved its level of passion and deep particulars of nature.

But also, my father used to (and still does at 100 and a half!) recite the old ballads like *Clancy of the Overflow* and *Bellbirds*. I learned from those ballads that words can sing. Yes, there was rhyme but even without that they were singing. And I knew then that narrative was important, that the poems spoke to me of experience, of living.

I was also lucky to have a strange schooling and a wonderful and eccentric teacher for English, Mary Rose Liverani, Scottish and married to an Italian communist. She made us read Shakespeare out loud in the class and 'with passion'. She loaded me up with books I'd never have come across, such as *Of Human Bondage* by W Somerset Maugham, and *Brighton Rock* by Graham Greene. You can imagine my mother gasping at these in a massive pile in our caravan on school holidays!

Denise: Those early influences stay with us! You describe yourself as a narrative, lyric, free-verse poet. Has your style changed over the years?

Robyn: Yes, in many ways. But idiosyncratically. I feel that we all need to serve an apprenticeship. To read what has gone before. Early on I became enamoured of the American poets like Adrienne Rich and Robert Lowell, Robert Frost. They seemed to be unveiling life; to be allowing feeling in that struck deep. I hope for that in my work. If a poem doesn't move me emotionally or intellectually, I can't see the point of it. It's as if poetry is meant to dig and dig until we discover something we may not be sure of but is precious.

Free verse looks easy, but it's harder than a poem which rhymes because you must have the music *inside* the lines. And we need the transforming power of metaphor to carry the poem.

I'd hope that as a poet I'll always be growing. But I don't want to grow into traditional form as it rarely fits with my concept of breath. And breath in the lines is important to me. My line endings have changed markedly. I was keen on the breath always pausing at the end of a line. I became friends with the great Canadian poet Lorna Crozier who told me off about it! So I began experimenting with changing that musicality and letting a sentence fall into a second line and finish there. Then I had sentences beginning in the middle of a line. It felt strange. untidy. But now it feels like a flow, a swerve towards impact as the first word on the second line makes its emphasis.

My earlier books spoke of life experiences: family, love, death, breast cancer, childbirth. And really the so-called 'confessional poets' gave this permission. The strongest inner personal poems I think are in *Silence & Its Tongues* (Five Islands, 2006) which includes three sequences that enter the Dark (my depression) then struggle towards light. It includes *Dead Mother Poems* which I wish were a stand-alone book.

When I wrote my new poems on the Kamikaze pilots in *Seasons of Doubt & Burning. New and Selected Poems*, a new sense of the importance of history hit me and the way we rarely consider our experiences as shared across boundaries, across difference, in war. Those young pilots – I read their stories, I researched the documents, I read the manual given to them. I thought of my own sons. And the mothers. <https://digital.ucd.ie/view/ucdlib:46273>

In *Shadows at The Gate* and *Line of Drift*, I was finally able to explore my connection with Ireland and the landscape there, as well as parts of Irish history like The Great Hunger (really Starvation) / An Gorta Mór, the Famine, that so distressed me. My poem 'The Long Walk' took three years to write and has been read and used many times as it encapsulates the Famine experience. The epic I wrote, 'Unbroken Stone in a Stubborn Sea', is really a history of the Irish through the experience of/on the island of Inisboffin.

This movement into history stayed with me but waited until it really expanded in my Gallipoli book: *This Intimate War Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/Çanakkale 1915*. I wrote there what I call Documentary Poetry. For me that means using material to create poems that are as truthful and accurate as possible. (I feel these two things are not synonymous but that's another conversation!) I used photographs, diaries, recordings, old film, newspapers, books and interviews. I collected images from objects, such as in the Military museum in Istanbul, the small museum near Gallipoli. There are letters from French, British, Turks and Australians in the wonderful local museum on the island of Bozcaada. I talked with Turkish people whose families were involved and they showed or gave me treasures in books of photographs – in memories. I think the only way to write such a book is immersion. Like learning a language. You need to be there in that place; to smell it, taste it, hear its sounds. In the end I was almost drowning in it. My dreams were quite violent and sad. Then you have to be careful. You can get lost.

In *Mosaics from the Map*, I stretched history out, exploring further how history is lived in the intimate, the personal. I wrote the poems individually but when assembling the book I saw what I'd been doing and the mysterious cross-fertilisations. Personal stories were linked in war, family and friendship – in Ireland, Turkey, the Balkans and Australia. Ottoman Turkey entered Bosnia and Serbia in the sixteenth century, yet a war was fought in the 1990s to 'take revenge for the Turks'. After playing for two years in Sarajevo ruins, the 'Cellist of Sarajevo' moved to Ireland. During the Great Hunger, Ottoman money and food was sent to assist the Irish. Post-Famine my family emigrated to Australia from Cork, a city where an Ottoman Armenian later created the famous Hadji Bey's Turkish Delight. Marconi invented the wireless which should democratise communication, yet the *Titanic's* safety was impeded by a build-up of first-class passenger demands, passengers who came from a multitude of countries. Alcock and Brown successfully crossed the Atlantic by

air and landed near the place of my Irish home. Yet both had been prisoners during World War I, Alcock in a Turkish camp. I had also discovered that he was the first man to bomb Constantinople. *Mosaics from the Map* explores the interwoven nature of peoples, and the ephemeral nature of empire with its intersecting shifts.

Denise: Thank you for these insights into your works, which really give a feel for how your style developed over time. Now, your background as third-generation Irish, born and raised in Australia who has forged ties to Turkey confers on you a unique perspective. It also raises the question: To what extent are our literary instincts formed by our inherited culture and ethnicity, compared to the culture of the country in which we grow up?

Robyn: Ah, a complicated question! Growing up in Australia, I was taken out bush camping quite a lot but slept with the sea in my ears at home every night. There's a rhythm and spirit to landscape. And it's so different here to Ireland and also to New Zealand where I lived and taught at Waikato University for three years in the late seventies. I lived near the Waikato river in Hamilton which itself is close to Tūrangawaewae Marae, the Maori royal residence and meeting house. In so many ways New Zealand is *not* like Australia. I really felt my difference there and had Maori friends so there was a sense of strangeness. The landscape where I lived was lush and green and often cold. I enjoyed it all greatly but I see poems in my first book *Filigree in Blood* (Longman Cheshire, 1982) that seem to hunger for some other place which I interpreted as home: 'I need that brown dry country like a fix.' I was surprised to read this because you'd think it being so green my Irishness would be satisfied. I think I thought my sense of unbelonging was because of landscape alone. But it was cultural and I hadn't identified that.

In 1983 I went to Ireland for the first time. Many strange experiences were part of that trip which set the scene for decades to come. I remember driving into the Wicklow hills and weeping suddenly, having to pull over. It was 20 years before I realised that experience as genetic cultural memory. In every annual trip I experienced a new pain on returning until eventually I created life for the last 20 years in one place there, becoming full time eight years ago. My Irish citizenship and passport mean so much to me I simply can't explain. It was so strange to receive a birth certificate declaring me Irish by 'foreign birth'.

Now, so, what happened to me was a sense of fit. In 2004, I was asked to speak at a NSW Poet's Union Fourth Australian Poetry Festival called 'Ngara. Deep Listening'. The question was 'How might the non-Indigenous Australian be at home here? What can we learn from Indigenous culture?'

In my address 'Belonging: from the state of exile' I wrote of the conflict on the issue I'd discovered in my poetry and my hope that through a trip with my sons in my campervan in 1999 to Uluru and Alice Springs to take the Aboriginal tours there we'd learn about 'our place in culture'. The Uluru tours were a women's and a men's tour, totally different experiences. Then there was the political tour. What I learned about was the nexus between spirit, land and cultural practices like song and dance and marriage. What I felt reinforced in myself was that my indigeneity lay elsewhere. That paper is published in an excellent book *Ngara. Living in this place now*, edited by John Muk Muk Burke and Martin Langford (Five Islands Press, Melbourne, 2004).

Denise: Thank you for this comprehensive reply. Taking it further, how has your experience informed your poetry?

So my inherited belonging has given me a rhythm of language, and that was happening before I even knew it. Someone once scornfully told me my language in *Perverse Serenity*, my first book anchored in Ireland, was archaic, eighteenth-century. And it wasn't until decades after and living there inside the familiarity of Irish English that I knew what that meant – the placement of words.

Launching my book *Shadows at the Gate* (FIP, 2010), Grace O'Grady said 'where does she live now but inside language' because I can't find 'home'. But I don't live inside Irish, and in 2002 I really saw that. Invited to read at Éigse Michael Hartnett for the first time, I attended an Irish language event with Louis de Paor reading his poetry and Cormac Ó hAodha singing *sean-nós* – traditional Irish singing of old songs, the sound of which I try to describe in a poem 'Éigse Michael Hartnett 2002', republished in a book of poems dedicated to Michael Hartnett, the great Irish language poet. Then I record the loss:

That's when I really knew

*I'd lost everything but the pulsing trace,
a language long gone that
once I might have heard myself in
or maybe could have heard them –
those shadows that walk with me
from Kilmallock's fairy field
where she was bred.*

*Lost maybe on the boat out, or here,
burned away in the harsh light
where oral tradition faded in an English colony;
where respectable wasn't the voices of the bog,
or words that couldn't be pronounced
even when they had shape before the eyes.*

*This was a language to be lived in
and so much here had no Irish to it:
eucalypt, turtle, wombat, damper, billabong, kangaroo.
Somehow they slipped the skin of it,
mo chuisle mo chroí
sloughed off like a snake
on an island St Patrick had not cleared.*

*IV. Last night I dreamed in Irish,
head flooding with the clarity of streams,
mouth full of stars, all named, each one
bright, drithla, above the globe of golden moon
ringed with an amber bow
in the autumnal haze of the sea's wet sky.
Gritty longing had rubbed
history's dust to pearls,
words were light, familiar,*

living tissue of that language slick in my flesh.

*Waking, my mouth is full of dumb memory
tonguing the phantom pebbles of sound,
the slish and ca of it caught adrift between speech
and the floating gasp of exile,
only rhythm left
only the stories
and maybe an echo of song in the placement of words.*

I've come to think we inherit genetically some residues of language, some smells of place, some sounds and tastes that live on that may or may never need to be explored. The smell of silage! I love it! In Ireland, too, my love of narrative solidified. That's how we understand the world. Story. It's in everything: place names, the old tunes, the lines of heritage. Judith Wright said it about old Jim in 'South of my Days', that stories 'are hived in him like honey'. That's what we contain. But also, it's to do with the land. For Irish people, that has always been so important and somehow it returns us to something primal in belonging.

In Ireland poetry is so respected, understood, wanted. I ran a session for eight years at Clifden Arts Week for Australian poets/performers and housed them, organised other readings. They were so thrilled at the responses to their work and to see how poetry is integrated into life. The Irish poets don't feel it so much, but then they have always belonged in that milieu and never known what it is to live where poetry is barely remembered, acknowledged, supported. A country where the Department of Arts and Communications was merged/submerged into a department which includes infrastructure, transport, and regional development!

Living in Irish culture gave my poetry a stronger sense of itself, a surety of purpose, though this was for a long time unconscious.

I lived on a finger of land, a peninsula into the wild Atlantic. It was rural and 10 miles below Clifden town, Connemara. The house had wide windows, and

overlooked two lochs, *The Spectacles*, and stony rolling fields to the sea where there was a coral strand. I could have lain myself down there and each dip and hillock would fit the landscape of my body. When I travelled into west Clare or near Tipperary, the green was the colour in my veins. I wrote that place and the place wrote me. I sang up the histories I was given and the fields by name.

Denise: You have read and taught in Ireland for over 30 years, and recordings of your work are held by the National Irish Poetry Reading Archive in the James Joyce Library, University College Dublin. Can you tell us more about the origins of your sense of connection with Ireland?

Robyn: My connection with Ireland must come from family I suppose. I think I've inherited the feeling of loss involved in their leaving. The body holds so much genetic memory. And my grandfathers sang many of the old Irish songs, though their connection was never mentioned to me. Only when my mother started to look further into it two years before she died in 1988, did I really hear anything. Before that, it was just an unnamed urge to go, just to go. And I didn't really search very hard. Pieces of the puzzle fell to me. Often by strange, serendipitous accidents. And when I arrived, I wrote in *Perverse Serenity*:

*..... Rural Ireland rubs a grain of memory.
Green beyond belief, marked by age and
suffering, I feel it part of some old stirring: the place, the
voices familiar. Reverent and irreverent alike know it when
the strings are played and the note is true. Fuchsia, tree-tall,
drops its crimson purple flowers in tears onto the road.*

In *Mosaics* I finally got the 'family' poems finished and their story is there; their losses, their lives, their decision to leave. And still in the last in the sequence are the lines:

*I live between – pulled by a relentless tide. Love is there and here,
soul-scape is here. I am everywhere and nowhere, longing pulses
inside the green whispering in my blood. Belonging, exile – the sea-saw.*

That word home – it draws itself out like a skewer.

I'm shaped by landscape, by history, by the narrative lyric Irish style in much of the old poems there. And yet in Turkey I feel a 'homeness' too. In 'my Turkish brother' I still struggle with it; as ŞerifAli asks me 'why do you come, what are you looking for?'

Denise: Let's turn to Turkey now, which has historically occupied a unique role as a bridge between East and West, the religious and the secular. What spiked your fascination with the Ottoman Empire, which resulted in your ground-breaking, bi-lingual and unflinching poetical account of the Gallipoli campaign, *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/Çanakkale 1915* (2015)?

Robyn: Thank you for your kind words on that book, Denise. I felt here in Australia, it sank into invisibility, even though it was the only book of its kind and came out in the Gallipoli centenary year.

My once sister-in-law shared an interest with me in archaeology and ancient history. I had even wanted before university to become an underwater archaeologist! Finally she told me to go to Turkey. I'd been fascinated by Sevil's stories of her childhood there. In 2009 I was invited to read at a festival in Istanbul and went for six weeks with my younger son who was almost 16. During that visit I fell in love with Turkey, its people and the Ottoman period of Suleiman Kanuni, Suleyman the Magnificent to the West. It was the Golden Age and so much flourished: the arts, libraries, science, medicine, mathematics, architecture. Suleyman the Magnificent was an interesting man who broke many established traditions, and it was the period of the great Architect Mimar Sinan. Leaving Istanbul, we travelled into the deserts of Cappadocia and south, then west. I decided my son should see Gallipoli so we found a Turkish guide and that was a real journey into otherness. I made some small notes and left it behind me.

I had been invited to read and teach an English poetry workshop at the University in Çanakkale by the Australian Consul there in 2012/2013. Initially I had no intention of writing about Gallipoli! But strange and serendipitous experiences led me into it and from a surprising perspective. In addition, I visited the Naval Museum there and reading the histories and seeing myself

described as ‘the enemy’, I was again hit by my sense of being ‘the other’ and with an understanding of my limited knowledge of that war; my ignorance.

Earlier I spoke about the elements of Documentary Poetry. But writing poetry out of history like that has pitfalls. After all, the work *must* be poetry. Just as we need to be careful of sentimentality in love poems and polemic in political poems, we need to watch that history has become poetry. So somehow it needs the transforming hallmarks of that. Image, music, metaphor and use of the particulars which is what I always teach in workshops: taste, smell/scent, colour, seasons and touch. It needs to be tactile. In some way, poems about war need to hurt readers and open up to them something new.

Denise: You return to Turkey in a different way in your most recent book, *Under This Saffron Sun* (2019) which is a lyrical journey through the country, its language and culture. Can you tell us about it?

Robyn: I like this book very much because I feel it successfully captures a great deal of Turkey and the people there. Also ... it does *not* have war in it! Though it does allude to the migration crisis and terrorism, but subtly.

I’m fond of the Bozcaada Island poems because I love that place and people, but also the Istanbul poems because of the lusciousness of them – food and colour, scent and sounds. Then there is the desert and Cappadocia with its hidden history, underground cities. And I like the struggle to understand love, where Turkish has so many different words for love compared to English. Of course, there was a young man who inspired some of these and that was a challenge!

But it also led me into a kind of archaeology of language, a further exploration of a kind of macronomics. I came across this word long after I had been incorporating some Irish words into my poems. They came about naturally as sometimes place names are more evocative and of course more indigenous. But also the Irish word beside its English counterpart gave a kind of song to the line and felt like it belonged. For instance, in the poem above: *mo chuisle mo chroí* – pronounced *ma cushla ma cree* – my pulse, my heart.

I have a remaining small grief over not speaking Irish. I made my attempts and aimed to speak it by the time I was 60. But it was too difficult and the variations across counties make for defeat. So I learned to *drink* Irish instead and now know my Irish whisky quite well! *Uisce beatha* it is called in Irish, *water of life!*

When it came to the Turkish I felt a natural movement into that language, again not an easy one. But I have some Turkish now and love the song in that too. I try to name correctly the important things and feelings in the poems, like the prayer call, *ezan*, because it has an authenticity for me. I feel it's respectful. And I suppose those words are like language pegs, that situate the poem:

*Here on the balcony chair I spread my cotton
pesh-te-mahl, soft Turkish towel wet from a swim*

Pronounced as *peshtemal* (emphasis on first syllable), there is a lovely music to it.

The most complicated poem was 'Different Ways with Love'. This poem is set like a query to my translator to help me explore the different Turkish words for love, while the poem is exploring different forms of love: love that makes you as Mehmet said 'tear the flesh from your bones' to love in a passing friendship.

I was struck by how Turkish people say to me 'I love you, Robyn' and it is real to them. I so enjoy it myself to be told that. But of course friendship, sisterhood, lovers, we have so many different experiences of love. And there I was in a powerful connection with a much younger man trying to figure out what this feeling was, and how to treat it. We did very well. I think. Love sometimes requires constraint. Mehmet and I spent many hours over two years getting that poem right in translation. And we discussed my use of the Turkish words and how he might then translate for the Turkish version.

I wanted the Gallipoli book to be in both languages facing each other, as one reviewer said, as the soldiers did in the trenches. I was concerned to make the book accessible to speakers in both languages. The poems are written from

both the Turkish and Allied perspective and have stories from both. The idea is that in some poems it could be people from either side speaking or both.

This has been very well received in Turkey. Mehmet's translations have been lauded as beautiful, accurate but also poetic. There are times when the translations bring a newness to the original. Audiences at our joint readings in Turkey have told me how wonderful his translations are, often giving me examples. And I know that to be true. He is very courageous. We read together with a PowerPoint presentation behind us carrying the poems in both languages, so listeners can compare as we read. We also include images I've used to write those poems. Being Turkey, we sometimes have music accompanying us.

Denise: The area of poetry in translation is an interesting and often under-examined one (though *The Blue Nib* has recently set up Translation Point managed by Clara Burghlea for precisely this purpose). Would you care to shed some light on how you worked with Mehmet Ali Çelikel, who translated your own works, and how Turkish readers responded to your evocation of their country?

Robyn: Yes, I'm so glad *The Blue Nib* has this section. I find it fascinating to read translations especially if there is a literal translation beside the poetic translation as in a recent issue of *New Divan* with the work of Gonca Özmen.

I find that generally our emphasis and that of journals is on translations *into* English rather than *from* English. And being a living poet translated into Turkish is a rare thing. Trying to get bi-lingual books published is so very difficult. I was told by bookshops in both countries that no-one would buy them. That has been proven wrong. *This Intimate War* was published by publishers jointly in both countries and with funding from Çanakkale Municipality. *Under This Saffron Sun* was published by a small Irish press, Knocknarene.

My poetry is also in Spanish, Bosnian and Serbian, but with no input from me. And being translated was a non-event for me previous to this, as my academic work translated into Japanese, Swedish, German, Spanish was done at a

distance and was literal. But in poetry the translation experience is so different as the translator has a different role – not literal.

Mehmet and I met in Bursa in 2013. I had emailed Mehmet three poems to work on and discuss. We met where I was staying in Kitap Evi Hotel, which means Book House Hotel, on old Ottoman building, itself resonant with literature and a sense of timelessness, which had once been a bookshop.

We discussed the purpose of translation and went over the three poems I'd sent, line by line. He heard the music in them, the tone, my voice. The questions he asked about the poems gave me confidence in his translations and that he understood what I was doing in the poems. And he said he wanted to keep my 'voice' and translate that into the Turkish. That was the most important part of our discussions for me – what is voice? – and I decided then, he was the translator I wanted. I felt he could crawl inside their meaning and music and give those to the reader in Turkish.

We've worked together now for seven years. In his recent paper 'Insights in Transnational Translation: A case study in Robyn Rowland's Poetry' (Transnational Literature, vol. 12, November 2020, <https://transnationalliterature.org/>) he writes about 'the idea that translating them [the two books] is interwoven with a form of rewriting for both translator and poet.' And this became most evident May 2019 finishing *Under This Saffron Sun*. The most exciting time for me was our work then in Şiir (Poetry) Hotel in Denizli when we were really challenged by the poem 'Different Ways with Love'. My using the Turkish language in poems beside the English caused challenges which Mehmet outlines. What was exciting for me were the possibilities of looking for more nuanced English as well as Turkish words, in order to get lineation to fit in both languages and meaning without repetition. There were a couple of times when I changed an English word to get a clearer meaning in Turkish. His article is very interesting as he takes apart both languages showing clearly how he works. I recommend it for a read. He writes:

During the poet's visits to Turkey, we worked diligently together to overcome the difficulty of semantic and syntactic differences between the two languages. A similar mutual production during the translation process occurred with "Different Ways With Love" in which the poet explores the richness of the different words for love in Turkish

compared to English, and the poem is a direct example of how the poet and the translator work together to explore the best way to translate a poem. Thus, it turns into a process of re-writing it together in both languages.

And I feel that Turkish poets and academics have endorsed my work in Turkey and Mehmet's translations. In her back cover comments for *Under This Saffron Sun*, the Turkish poet and academic Didem Gülçin Erdem wrote:

Robyn Rowland feels Anatolia. With a woman's sensibility, Rowland puts her hand under the water that flows from its heart. The poetry blooms in the fruitful soil of Turkish through Mehmet Ali Çelikel's meticulous translations, a language the poet clearly loves. You will meet a woman with humanism in her heart; whose homeland is empathy.

Denise: Your poems are ambitious in their subject and scope, yet lauded for being intensely felt and unafraid to draw on personal testimony. Do you find there is a particular theme, or angle, to which you find yourself returning across cultures?

Robyn: It's hard to say, Denise. Because I write as life takes me along and it's mostly as I put a book together that I can see the themes emerging. For example, with *Mosaics from the Map*, I'd sorted poems into sections and sequences. And those were often very different; for example, from the Bosnian conflict to my family leaving Ireland. But when I did that I asked myself what they were saying as a whole. A book is not just a collection of poems. It is a whole and has its own identity. Often if I read manuscripts for poets I help them to work a book draft until the bones of the book come forward and you can see its real shape. Mine have an underlying narrative too which means it's best to read from the beginning through.

When I was shaping *Mosaics*, there was a poem which needed writing and added in and the first poem there is the newest and summed up what the book was trying to do. To show the way empires have dragged people's lives with them and the way people have always moved or been removed across the world under the pressure of power. But it also encompasses the truth of our similarities, rather than our differences; our loving friendships and our interwoven histories and ancestry.

But my way of entering these big themes seems to be through the personal. I need to experience that place or that feeling or that history is some way. I want the stories, the photographs which tell the tales. It's in the intimate histories, the particulars that my poems live.

Denise: The presence of boundaries, both literal and metaphorical, is implicit in much of your work, from the lines drawn between countries to those between one person and another. Would you say that poetry is one way of deepening our appreciation of the 'other'?

Robyn: Yes, I would. And boundaries are such an interesting issue both between people, in families and across nations. Important to keep in place personally, but national boundaries have always caused problems. And yet they have been ways of our defining ourselves too and have enforced the creation of differing cultures. If we can cross those boundaries with a sense of wonder and awe at difference instead of judgment and bi-polar ideas of good and bad, we'd have a great richness at our disposal.

One of the best things about travel is to open ourselves. I was a kid from a small seaside town. I never imagined I'd stand inside a mosque built in 1560 and feel an overwhelming peace and awe. After enforced retirement from academic life in 1996 with breast cancer and burnout, I thought travelling was finished. Then poetry opened up the world to me. All the things I've learned about place and people can never fill my books. It's been a gift and blessing.

I hope this poetry now is a way to open understanding of 'the other' and an admiration. Our ignorance, such as of Islamic history, science, medicine art and writing, is astonishing. Our refusal to see the complementarity of religious teachings leaves us poorer in compassion. Each of my books at some point reaches the spiritual poem, the one which moves into a sense of 'other' that is not locked into the body, this carapace.

Denise: Thank you for your refreshing embracing of the 'other'. Now, would you share with us your routines in writing and editing your work?

Robyn: I wish I had a routine I could discuss! I do know that I do not feel well in myself – physically, emotionally and mentally – if I’m not writing. Writing is not catharsis but exploration, searching.

I wish I could tell you that I have a set of neatly aligned notebooks on my shelves! I have varieties of notebooks and those I travel with are usually school writing books, the cheap ones. I’ve been given and even bought in Venice, handcrafted paper and writing books too beautiful to mess up with my scribbling! I also have boxes full of miscellaneous notes written down in post offices on bits of paper and so on. Life moves fast and I can’t keep up with any order!

But here is my process. I think we don’t *do* poetry, we *be* poetry. Always as a poet I am observing, listening, watching, entering. It’s a hard thing to teach that. So really living is important and I do agree with Rilke about travel:

Poems are not, as people think, feelings (one has those quickly enough), – they are practical experiences. For a single poem one must see many cities, people and things. One must be able to think back to journeys in unfamiliar regions, to days in quiet, subdued rooms and mornings by the sea, to the sea in general, seas, to travelling by nights, which murmur along ...

To travel far, far – and that first morning’s awakening under a new sky! And to find oneself in it – no, to discover more of oneself there. To experience there, too, where one has never been before, one’s own continuity of being and, at the same time, to feel that something in your heart, somehow indigenous to this new land, is coming to life from the moment of your arrival. You feel your blood infused with some new intelligence, wondrously nourished by things you had no way of knowing.

However we can also travel in the mind. And we can stand still observing our backyard. I am currently living at home with my father as his 24/7 carer. I gave up my rented Irish house and moved back early December but not to Victoria where I rent an apartment. NSW is where he lives and where I grew up. Back in a small village where I have one friend since childhood and with Covid, no chance to explore. Very challenging times. I felt dry of creativity for some time as I cleaned and repaired and created two rooms that would suit me. Then I decided on the brink of despair and exhaustion that I needed *one lovely thing*

each day. And so I practised and continue to practise a re-entry into nature around me. I'm fortunate in that we have the sea and in NSW an amazing selection of flowers and plants, butterflies and birds. I remembered that small things can also engage the delving mind of the poet, the search for understanding.

So observation, note making, photographing first. Then the writing, when it takes me. When I feel a kind of physical inner urge. I can't always plan it. The way into a poem can be varied. An image, a voice heard, a sight seen, a feeling stirred, a recollection. Then the creative moment which I've described before as a 'self-goneness'. An absence of self and impossible to teach and barely understandable, but essential. What Picasso called 'magic' – big help! – Virginia Woolf called it 'receptive listening'.

Then the bones are linked. Time for the flesh. To make sure image is strong and conveys what I want. That colour is in it. Movement, a strength of narrative. A kind of layering of image. My poems have often been described as painterly. I like to watch people close their eyes in readings as the lines fall into their consciousness, their own vision, helped by the poem itself.

And then, the real work. The editing. I do many drafts as I fidget with lines and reshape stanzas. Everything is deliberate even if it looks like it was easy. As Fred Astaire once said of his dancing: *If it doesn't look easy, it is that we have not tried hard enough yet.* So many hours are spent on a colour or smell. Some poems take a long time to emerge properly. 'The Long Walk' wanted three years.

If I'm uncertain about a poem I'll check it out with a poetry friend to see how it fits for them. I do it for others too on condition they understand that it's only my reading of a poem. Writers themselves must do what they feel right about. Almost like it's in your body.

I don't like 'dry' periods. I think for most writers these are scary. I've learned to live with them to some extent. but then the 'unwellness' becomes disturbing. Many writers have these Louise Glück speaks of two years without writing. Yeats had seven. I was dry when I was doing years of political work in feminist critiques of reproductive technology. What broke that open was the poem 'Lost Muse'. Totally from the unconscious that one. And I think that's what we do

often, ride back and forth across the boundaries of the conscious and the unconscious.

I remember telling my friend the Irish painter Vera Gaffney in Ireland once that I'd 'lost it'. She said she had this painting and 'the damn thing won't come forward towards me'. I asked, 'What do you do?' and she said, 'Trust your process of course!' And that's it – trust your own process. It's stayed with me through the hard times.

I always felt that I needed extended time and quiet to work properly. But currently I get at most two hours four afternoons a week and have to work with interruptions all the time. And yet, I am managing some poems. I think I've had to adapt to survive! Part of the secret is to declare to ourselves that what we're doing is 'work' and must be done. Give the writing its due.

Denise: I think this is the first time I've asked this question, but I'm intrigued by the covers of your books! They are as evocative as the titles themselves. Would you mind giving us an insight into what lies behind your cover designs?

Robyn: Well, I believe that the cover should be an extension of the contents and relate to those. But also I want to have the work of artists I have met whose work captures something of life and poetry. I've been blessed in these friends. Some have painted to the poems themselves, such as Lynda Burke's work for *Mosaics from the Map*. This painting was created after she'd read the manuscript. At the time she wrote a very moving email to me:

I feel that I have just travelled the world this past hour and assaulted my senses...I have tasted bergamot Turkish delight and rose jam, I have got drunk on the fumes of fruit liqueurs and got high on the aroma of Turkish coffee. I have smelt azaleas, amber orange roses and tulips of all hues. I have walked the streets of Cork searching out their names, looked over the high grey walls of Innis Meain and watched the sun set on the Aegean. I have held my breath with a Mother in her kitchen as her son plunged into a ravine, felt the sting of ice in the cockpit of a Vimy and had a thrilling ride in a coach on Mount Nemrut. This book is a tapestry of fisherman's knots beating on the drum of the ship's salty planks... I am truly blown away by the scope of it. Being a romantic, I love Moon Dreaming and all the promise of what might have been in a shell ring.

And then she painted. The image is a stunner. Many of her paintings have graced my covers and one of my CDs. Always she brings the ethereal and the concrete together with amazing textures. I've been privileged.

Vera Gaffney has also been generous in allowing her work for covers. 'The Poet's House' was painted after my 60th birthday and captures the colours of sea and lochs where I lived as well as my white house. She paints directly out of landscape.

For *This Intimate War* I was lucky to find Fehmi Korkut Ulüg in Turkey. Korkut, a dear friend now, allowed my use of two of his paintings from his Çanakkale series for the first and second imprints. The serendipity here is astonishing.

I had visited for the second time, the gallery at the Naval Museum in Çanakkale opposite Gallipoli. His exhibition was there and I was so taken by the paintings I wanted to find him. This proved difficult through social media and finally I asked Mehmet to call him at a gallery phone number on a website. The most exciting emails were exchanged. But before that I had found a painting of his grandfather and his regiment which Korkut had done and tracked down the original photograph he'd used – amazing. I had then written a long poem ('Çanakkale Revisited') about his *Gallipoli War of 2015/Gelibolu Savaşı* series, alongside 'The Myth Rider' on Sidney Nolan's Gallipoli series and 'Sketches at Gallipoli' about paintings by Major LFS Hore who served at Gallipoli. The sequence of poems is 'Ways of Seeing' after John Berger (with his permission).

So you can see I take the covers to be very important as an integral part of a book or CD! I want the books to be a piece of art themselves, as far limitations allow. And I also know from experience that a cover sells a book. And when my book lies on a festival bookshop table with hundreds of others, I want mine to be the one the eye alights on and the hand picks up.

Denise: Your covers certainly command attention! A brief look at other people's work now – what books are you currently reading?

Robyn: Well, for the last 11 months I've been living back home as a carer. As I'm back in Australia I'm trying to catch up on poetry here. I was astonished by Judy Johnson's book *Black Convicts* in which her poems record the arrival of 11 black convicts on the last convict ship to Australia, two of them her relatives. Of course, I like that weaving of poetry with historical information. I've just finished *Strokes of Light* by Lucy Alexander which was captivating and *(Un)Belonging* by Nathanael O'Reilly who also has the mixed longings for both Ireland and Australia but lives in America. I find I enjoy the books coming out of Recent Work press in Australia. I've now also started David Malouf's *An Open Book*. And I'm re-reading Judith Beveridge, a superlative Master. Mail is now being sent from Ireland again and I've just received Mary Dorcey's books, *To Air the Soul*, *Throw all the Windows Wide* and *Perhaps the Heart is Constant After All*. I've loved her work so I'm reattaching myself. My pile to come to includes: Maxine Kumin, Denise Levetov (again) and Dorianne Laux, But I find myself a bit lazy these past weeks as I'm physically very tired.

Denise: Being a carer takes a good deal of energy, so I'm not surprised. On a different matter, poetry tends to flourish at times of crisis, and with our increasing reliance on social media, it is becoming easier than ever before to share poems. What are your thoughts on this, and do you feel there is any downside to this popularisation of the genre?

Robyn: That's an interesting question and I'm conflicted on it. On the downside – I see the need people have for an explosion of words while we are all suffering a variety of impositions and constraints and distancing from those we love. Fear, anxiety, astonishment and uncertainty are great motivations for writing. But everything is not poetry and I have avoided much of the 'gush'. Poems can easily be 'out' too soon, with no editing and re-thinking. It is too easy to post unready work I think.

But there is also a richness of online material now accessible. I've read and heard a great deal about and from Louise Glück, for example. A fine voice and superlative poetry, deserving of the Nobel Prize.

Also, as sitting uninterrupted for any length of time is difficult with my situation, I've been enjoying the selections posted in some Facebook groups, such as those by Chris Murray in *poethead* giving voice to Irish women poets

and her other links (<https://poethead.wordpress.com/>); Jack Grady (who seems to have a similar taste in poetry to me) in Ox Mountain Poets and poems in the WS Merwin group. I'm reading online journals when I can and, of course, the wonderfully rich *The Blue Nib*. For Turkey I'm in a closed group Neil Patrick Doherty set up, 'The Most Beautiful Sea'. Originally Irish, he lives in Istanbul and translates both Turkish and Irish poetry. It's wonderful to read both modern and older Turkish poets this way. Their style rhythm is so different and I'm hoping that in my opening poem in *Under This Saffron Sun* I've captured a sense of the old Ottoman style. I particularly like the work of the women Gülten Akin and Gonca Özmen. You can see some of this excellent Turkish work in *Turkish Poetry Today 2017* edited by Mel Kenne, [İdil Karacadağ](#) and [Neil Doherty](#), for which I wrote a back cover comment. There are previous issues also through Amazon. When I wake up I take a quick look at poetry Facebook posts to fortify my day!

I've done zoom readings at two festivals and a conference, one in Turkey. Wonderful to do, but afterwards, there is the terrible silence of that aloneness. I miss the audience engagement and their alive presence. In Turkey, I am used to a great outpouring of conversation on the work Mehmet and I have read or the paper I've given. Then we all have a gala dinner, some raki and dance! I really miss the dancing!

I also miss teaching at festivals. My workshops were always well attended and such good work came from them. I put a great deal into the experiential component of the workshop, and that is simply not possible online.

But yes, there is a great gift in the social media we can access now.

Denise: What an excellent comparison of the pros and cons of social media. Lastly, what would you say is the greatest challenge facing those of us wishing to write poetry today, and is there any advice you would offer aspiring writers?

Robyn: That's a hard question! The challenges will be different for everyone, and there are so many writing good poetry. Getting published is harder as book publishers shrink in number. I've done that job too with Five Islands after

Ron Pretty retired from the press he started, and it is often thankless and heavy duty work.

I think it is still hard for women, who still end up with domestic duties beyond what most men face. Not just in household work but in child rearing work and caring for aged parents. In 2009, I wrote about this in *Island* while being consistently interrupted. I included the interruptions in the piece! It was titled *Broken Time: women poets and the politics of intimacy*.

(<https://robynrowland.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Broken-Time.pdf>)

We need also to think of audiences and how to bring poetry alive to them. I find giving readings the most uplifting experience. There I relive the writing of the poems and the experiences in the poem. And it's direct communication. The sharing of poetry live is irreplaceable.

As to advice... Poets always say, 'read poetry'. And yes, do that. But not to the point of mimicry or being drowned so your own voice is lost. And read history and newspapers! That's where we often hear voices, the living. And live life! Explore. Unfold your pathway so that your writing is authentic and experienced. The task of a poem is to bring the reader *into* that experience. But have it first if you can. Be. Observe. Enter.

I feel that newer poets need to hold back their work. To refine and re-edit. To look to those who have gone before, even if their work differs. In my early days, we couldn't hope to have a book out until we'd been published in at least 10 good journals. We had to serve apprenticeships. I think that idea of apprenticeship has disappeared and the poetry published is sometimes the lesser for it. Getting a book out too soon can stunt growth. I remember a friend of mine and fine Cork poet Paul Casey, after my urging him to get his first book out (and he'd had a book offer) telling me it simply wasn't ready and he wouldn't rush it. He was right. That first book was without flaw.

And we need stamina. The urge to keep going even when success eludes us or the writing pauses. Silences are challenging. Rejections are challenging.

For myself, in what I consider my mid-career (I hope!) as a poet, I find it a challenge to know where I'm going next in the work. I heard a great interview with Louise Glück, when she talked about one of the challenges of being an established poet is the feeling of being neglected. This was obviously before she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature! And I do experience that feeling often. And a sense of failure, of invisibility. I think this is partly the territory of creative life, but also of being late middle aged and a woman. But it needs to be watched or it becomes despair. I see theses being written on poets long dead, and over and over the revisiting of those poets who have already been written about. I feel it's time academics and students take a look at the living. And at women! We're here. Many women of my generation with long bios who have lived interesting lives should be established in the body of biographical and critical work!

Denise: Robyn, enormous thanks for this hugely informative and illuminating conversation, and for generously sharing your thoughts on so many aspects of writing, translation and the particular role of female poets in our society. There are so many parts of this conversation that I, for one, will be returning to – as I am sure our readers will! Especially during this period of social restrictions, the sort of insights you share are invaluable. Let us conclude with your passionate call to live which must surely lie at the heart of poetic creativity: 'We don't *do* poetry, we *be* poetry!'