



Book Review: *Mosaics from the Map & Under this Saffron Sun – Safran Güneşin Altında* by Robyn Rowland. Catherine Akca
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Mosaics from the Map (Doire Press, Connemara, 2018) and *Under this Saffron Sun – Safran Güneşin Altında* (Knocknaron Press, Connemara, 2019) by Robyn Rowland, Turkish translations by Mehmet Ali Çelikel
 Reviewed by Catherine Akca

Robyn Rowland was born in Australia of Irish ancestry, which accounts for the “green whispering” in her blood, the desire to roam but also to return (*Mosaics* 67). It may also explain her impulse to travel, to discover, to understand and, ultimately, to connect. Her poetry speaks of time and space, history and geography, origins and continuity, the ephemeral and the eternal, the personal and the universal. Two recently published collections of Rowland’s work, *Mosaics from the Map* and *Under this Saffron Sun – Safran Güneşin Altında* derive from this impulse.

In *Mosaics from the Map*, as its title suggests, geographically and temporally disparate pieces gain a new completeness in juxtaposition. The conceptual framework of the collection is crystallized in the opening poem, “Salt Mosaics. Notes in Vienna” (7): “Story survives through time. / Feelings, friendships, grief, all our / leavings.” Here, we have Rowland’s poetic approach to history. Time is not to be told chronologically. It is “a point, a circular / continuum, a series of parallel links, so histories / co-exist.” Nor is space restrictive: “Take a place, any place; / thread / it into a frieze.” What interests the poet is recurrent patterns of human experience, and the universality of human emotions. These are not new ideas, but the poet handles them with originality. For instance, bullet point by bullet point, Rowland gives us “*Titanic – A Very Modern Story*” (8-10), a prototypical account of so many subsequent disasters involving overarching ambition, the capitalist imperative, mismanagement, heroism, lucky misses, guilt and profiteering from tragedy: “It has heroics ... / It’s local ... / International ... / For some a lucky near-miss ... / Capitalism fired the floating city ...”

Many of the stories that Rowland tells in this collection recur around shifts in empire, and challenge the construct of war. In “Sky Gladiatorial” (32-40), the first of three long sequences of poems, World War I pilot Alcock unwittingly bombs civilians in an Istanbul marketplace, in what he naively believes is the war to end all wars (“High, Higher: Alcock” 34). After the war, Alcock, and his navigator Brown, complete the first non-stop transatlantic flight: “We’ve *overtaken time*” (“Dead Reckoning:

Brown” 37). However, echoing the myth of Icarus, human achievement fails to redeem flawed humanity, and the final poems in the sequence mourn the loss of Brown’s pilot son on D-Day in World War II: “Falling from a great height, the wounded, the dead, unfeathered, / unglued, wingless. They fell into the dark lake, into myth, into history” (38).

The title of the second sequence asks: “War. What is it Good For?” (41). Time and again, in one place after another, lives are shattered: a bread queue is decimated in Sarajevo (“Breadline Massacre” 45), echoing the bombing of the marketplace in Istanbul. A lament for children martyred in war opens the sequence: the monument “could be anywhere, but it’s Łódź. A heart cracked open / eight metres high” (“Stone Child” 41). In the last poem, in dreadfully effective symmetry, a fountain sculpture in Velicki Park, Sarajevo, drips maternal loss: “Nirvana Zeljković was 12. Her mother says / *she was a beautiful dancer*. Like the water” (“Dancing Like Water” 55). In the blood-smeared Balkans, the past reaches forward to contaminate the present: “children taught a history so vivid it’s become contemporary” (“The Skull Tower of Niš” 54). The Serbian “creature of religious certainty” (“Resistance, Always” 49) mutates into the “everyday murderers who call themselves holy” who terrorise Istanbul in the standalone poem “Warned Off” (28).

Devastation; death; the loss of children is the loss of a “future shrivelled to that moment” (“Siege: *Remember This*” 43). The imagery that Rowland uses is often graphic, shocking. However, even while documenting the human capacity for creating horror and the futility of war, she remains a poet of perspective and possibility. In the aftermath of World War I, Alcock and Brown fly again, not to fight but to “soar as angels must, surveying all the world / fretting over, solving, human anguish” (“Dead Reckoning: Brown” 35). For seven years, in Belgrade, outraged Mothers for Peace resist war: “*Not in our name*” (“Resistance, Always” 49). Vadran Smajlović, heroic cellist of Sarajevo, “bind(s) those left together in grief, in the fragile beauty of music” (“Strung” 47). Rowland too offers some measure of solace with an image of natural renewal, “gutted ruins remain, but trees / grow through them, flowers braiding their lace-iron railings,” that she extends into a message of hope: “The young are out. Stylish bodies flounce bud-like, / jaunty with fashion. Their minds might hold a hidden / vault of dark memory. But this moment, today, is theirs” (“Growing After War: Bosnia” 51).

Thus, Rowland consoles the reader with the human capacity for survival. In “Empire” (29-31), we encounter Harutun Batmazian, Armenian Ottoman, refugee from Constantinople, settled in Cork; purveyor of *Turkish Delight* to Ireland and the world; ever resilient in the face of persecution. He survives the fall of so many empires – Russian, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, German, British – and builds a more enduring sweetmeat empire of his own. These are poems brimful of information; but, this is never dry history. By unfolding each story in fragments, through the insights and emotions of its protagonists, Rowland achieves striking immediacy.

The theme of migration recurs in the final sequence “Touchstones” (56-67). In “Family Catalogue, August 1880,” the tragedy of Rowland’s

great-great-grandmother, Annie, who lost four children to scarlet fever in one month, pales contemporary historical events into insignificance. In subsequent sections, Annie tells her own story, culminating in her decision to migrate to Australia for the sake of her remaining sons. In the autobiographical “Postscript” (67), Rowland acknowledges Annie’s legacy of “food, learning, health,” but also liminality: “I live *between* - pulled by a relentless tide.” The final poems in the collection, swinging from Australia to Ireland, express this in-betweenness, the seesaw between belonging and exile.

Rowland associates this elusive sense of belonging with “soulscapes”, affinity, love. Several of the opening poems in *Mosaics from the Map* are set in Turkey, where she experiences this sense of connection. In *Under this Saffron Sun*, they reappear, slightly altered, infused with new meaning by the new poems around them. Here, Rowland pursues connection, both thematically and literally: “You said *Go Sister. Wash fear from your blue eyes / see resemblance in difference*” (“Sevil’s Gift” 16). Moreover, the impulse to connect is reflected in the fact that this is a bilingual collection. The fine Turkish translations are by Mehmet Ali Çelikel: “trusted friend, to be alone with my poems, / return them to me transformed, still holding my voice” (100).¹

The starting point is Rowland’s initial encounter with Turkey, on a trip with her teenage son. In “Night Opening on Istanbul” (18-21), awestruck, she shares her first impressions: “I grapple to absorb nine layers of civilisation / entering the weave that will become our pattern of days ... / food and colour, stone and tile, language and light.” Then, relaxing, “difference dissolves. A warm union” begins (20). “Say *Istanbul*” (22-27) is a must-read masterpiece, in which Rowland brings the city alive in a feast of imagery that overwhelms the senses and the intellect. Next, moving out of the city, travelling towards Cappadocia, Rowland spreads before us the landscape of Turkey: ancient, majestic, fruitful: “the land holds me captive” (“Bus Across Night to Göreme” 32).

If the early poems in *Under this Saffron Sun* are about the impressions of a visitor, subsequent poems are about anchorage, affection and affinity. In the sequence “Anchorage Bozcaada” (72-87), Rowland tells her “Turkish brother” that she returns because Turkey offers “friendship, understanding, / places older than I have known, continuity, peace” and perhaps the prospect of “a place to fit” (76). There is so much to Turkey that is idyllic: “How has pleasure become like this?” (“Book House Hotel” 66). However, Rowland’s poetry also reveals the other side of paradise: a bus driver risks the lives of his passengers (52); a young academician is murdered by her ex-husband (56); terror strikes Ankara and Istanbul (68; 108); Syrian refugees drown as they seek a better life (90). Of course, none of these problems is new or unique to Turkey, but the increasing depth of Rowland’s connection with the country enables her to perceive also an insidious fear of speaking out, and to qualify her faith in the potential of the young of Turkey with a hanging “– if” (60). This side of Turkey is only too real and one wonders what Rowland will make of recent developments such as the attempted coup of 2016 or the constitutional changes of 2017. Rowland has found anchorage in Turkey, but

anchors can always be raised. The paradox of this relationship is an interesting aspect of the book, addressed honestly by the poet in “Autumn Waste” (68-71). As suicide bombers stain the streets of Ankara with bloody carnage, Rowland departs Turkey for the safety of Dublin, where the carmine leaves are not metaphorical and the streets will simply be swept clean: “feeling a coward, I divert untouched” (68).

Woven throughout the collection are motifs of motherhood, of youth and experience, of memory and nostalgia, of language and silence, of the transcendental moment to be found in the dance of the dervish or in contemplation of nature, all of which repay attention. *Under this Saffron Sun* has so much more to offer the reader who is interested in Turkey and poetry than can be touched upon here.

Notes

¹ See also: Robyn Rowland, *This Intimate War: Gallipoli/ Çanakkale 1915 – İçli Dışlı Bir Savaş: Gelibolu/ Çanakkale 1915*. Five Islands Press, 2015.

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