

A gut connectin

Award-winning poet Rochelle Mass explores her connections to Israel in her latest volume

CAROL NOVIS

WHERE'S my home? asks poet Rochelle Mass, in her recent collection of poetry. For those of us, who like her, were born in the English-speaking diaspora and have made a home in Israel that has perhaps not turned out exactly as we expected, this is far from a stale query.

"Home" encompasses the various places this award-winning Canadian-born writer has lived; her place as a woman in the world; the pull of family (*I'm still waiting for my mother to draw me home*); her place in time.

Home is where you go, she suggests in a poem of that name. *Home is where you go when you fall... No one can tell you how to get there.*

And in *Aftertaste*, an autumnal-flavored collection of wry and perceptive poems which explore all the different aspects of home — physical, moral and existential — he acknowledges the time has come for taking stock.

I should trim the years down shovel away the fragments acknowledge what's left

ROCHELLE was born in Winnipeg in 1943. When she was 18 months old, her unconventional workaholic father decided that the future lay out west and moved his family to Vancouver.

"My father believed passionately in the Labor Zionist cause and in Zionism. That was my parents' social group. Getting involved in the Habonim youth movement was a natural development. I felt that the message of settlement in Israel was there for me personally."

On May 14, 1948, when the State of Israel was declared, Rochelle was 5 years old.

"I remember that evening very well. My folks and their friends gathered around the wooden radio. I was very serious, the Jewish homeland was a big thing. As the vote came in, I started putting things on my bed, packing. In the end, when the *havirin* sang *Hatikva*, I was just delirious. I expected us to leave that very evening. Then they all went home! Every day, I made excuses for why we didn't go to Israel, until I decided that I would have to do it myself."

Life, though, went on in Vancouver until years later, on a visit to family in Winnipeg, Rochelle met a local boy and married him. She finished her last year of university at the University of Manitoba, studying education so that she could support her husband. "My parents pushed me. It never occurred to anyone that we could have taken out a loan so that I could go on with my own studies."

Once Rochelle had her first

baby, she had to quit teaching, since unbelievable as it sounds today, pregnant women were not allowed to teach, and she devoted herself to family and community activities.

IN 1970, she and her dentist husband Gary took their first major holiday and went to Israel. "We left our fur-lined coats at the airport in Winnipeg, and stepped off the plane into blazing sunshine. I said, 'This is the place!' Before we went to bed that night, we decided to be part of it."

The Masses considered living on a kibbutz, but concluded that it would be too big a leap, so they started construction on a home in Rehovot. In 1973, they made aliyah, arriving just before the Yom Kippur war. During the war, "we felt a sense of purpose. Gary would go out to army depots and deliver things — even toilet seats! For a month, we picked oranges."

With the war over and their house incomplete, they decided, after all, to try living on a kibbutz ("My Habonim spirit resurfaced"). While Gary was working two days a week in the Jezreel valley, they heard that kibbutz Beit Hashita was looking for a permanent dentist.

The job, initially for a year while their house was under construction, stretched to 25 years.

In spite of her initial hesitation, Rochelle came to love the kibbutz.

"The cultural life was so vibrant, and the members were wonderful. The kibbutz was full of independent-minded people who were not materialistic. When all the other kibbutzim were building fancy halls, Beit Hashita never did. It was a wonderful, rich life."

ROCHELLE worked as a translator and also became a painter and sculptor in stone.

"I never expected to become a poet, but somehow, I found that poetry has a tightness and narrative image that suited me. Sculpture taught me to look closely and to shape. And writing seemed so easy after dealing with the heavy rocks! I was at a stage with no mobile in comparison. My poetry and stories slowly gained recognition: a nomination this year for the Pushkin prize for works of small US presses; shortlisted in 1995 for the BBC radio prize; work featured on Poetry magazine web site, second prize in the Taproot Poetry contest in the US, and poems published in many journals and collections, including *Kibbutz Trends*, *Voices*, *London Magazine*, the *Jewish Spectator* and *Women's Studies Quarterly*.

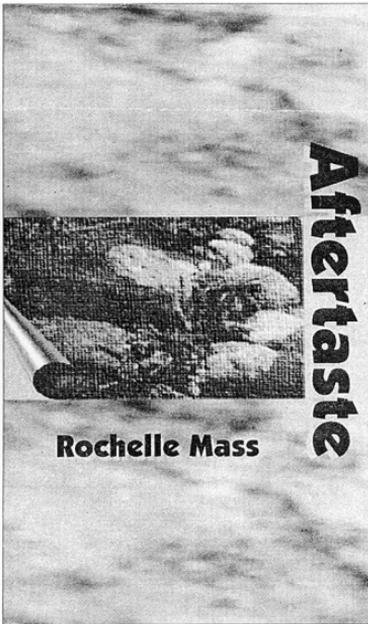
"People on the kibbutz were so interested and proud of me," she recalls. But after 25 years at Beit Hashita, the Masses reluctantly



Rochelle Mass

decided to leave since changes in dental insurance laws meant that Gary couldn't provide the service to his patients that he wished to. "We left with broken hearts. I thought I would perpetually have a sore neck from looking back at Beit Hashita."

Fortunately, they still owned a house in Rehovot, and with the funds from its sale, they were able to move to a home in Gan Nair, up the western flank of the Gilboa. There they live today, in the Galilee countryside they love, amidst fruit and olive trees.



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THE process of writing poetry for Rochelle involves a slow gathering and scribbling of ideas. "Then, when I have a pile of papers, I take the images I've gathered from reading or conversation to fashion a poem. It always amazes me that the resolution at the end is a solution that I wasn't aware of. There are a lot of surprises in writing for me and I feel very enriched by it."

Being an English rather than a Hebrew writer though, necessarily pushes her out of the mainstream in Israel. Though she is a member of the Israeli Association of Writers in English which is part of the Israeli Federation, "in a way, the work isn't as highly appreciated," she feels.

Speaking of the other English poetry writers, she says "there is an ambivalence in all of us. I would like to be able to write in Hebrew but I feel that I haven't yet gone deep enough into English. I have translated poetry though, and writing Hebrew is a goal."

LIKE good poets, who "make you look closely at the world reshape and transform," Rochelle's aim is "to examine my own life so that it makes sense to other people. It's about what becomes of experience. I want to hold the experience; to understand the gut truth of it."

Though her poetry does show, at times, a sense of loneliness and some regret, as well as some ambiguity about Israel, Rochelle has never really lost her sense of wonder at the existence of Israel, which first struck her as a small girl of five.

"I have a sister who still says, 'So when are you coming home? Aren't you scared?' but I have never doubted that sense of home here.

"Yes, sometimes I am afraid to go to Tel Aviv, but I just do it. Jenin is nearby. At night you can see the lights and realize how big it is. But I have never lost my sense of connection here.

As she puts it in her poem *Stones and Bones*:

*Why do you stay? they ask.
The stones and the bones of this place give me beauty I say
I am made of this earth. I came. I am here
will not return
I make a garden of this land,
flower the stones and bones
I came. I am here.*

*Why do you stay? they ask.
I have risen... I would say... from the stones
with the bones*

*They do not know that I wear this land
The stones and the bones are my jewels
They do not know.*

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