

# TODAY'S NEWS

**The Startled Land** by Rochelle Mass

## THE STARTLED LAND

Review by Tryst

Imagine, if you can, a book of poetry that delivers more than was expected of it, more than it promised (if it promises anything at all) and without provocation startles you with its revelations, quiet voice, and a narration that takes sudden unexpected turns and twists to lead you by the hand gently through a strange and fascinating, new land: The Land where the speaker claims "cotton grew out of yellow hearts/where bitter olives were picked and cured where/melons with green flesh grew on the top of the hill where/etched numbers from camps were/told and told again"; where "the sky bleeds white, points to the shore, then steadies"; where, the speaker claims, "I came to join



the women before me."And whether that land is describing Jerusalem, the Gilboa Ridge, Jenin, the valley of Jezre'el, Ludlow, the prairies of Canada, or an event in Prague; whether that land is alluding to the speaker's body as in, "I Only Know It Happened"; or, a place in time, preparation of food in which Hummus must be "wiped"; and, whether that land is a yearning for home, stability, places imagined or real, experienced or dreamed of, the speaker asserts:

*"I want you to know about this morning.*

*For months the earth has twisted  
from the sun. The crust opens now,  
trusts again, accepts.*

*This I would tell you also:*

*The rain's intrusion heals,  
can bring dry bones back."*

Here is where “simple things can be gathered,” the author, Rochelle Mass writes as she opens her arms to gather her wits, her courage and a firm resolve through *The Startled Land*. *The Startled Land* is more than a collection of poetry, more than just one woman’s voice, and objective observations. It is a collection of carefully crafted poems that speak of universal themes as marriage, family, war, and tragedy. The poems are concise and seamlessly pieced together to tell a story that invests in motional impact without sacrificing verse. There are some beautiful lines that ache to be quoted:

*“heat hovers low. Summer here is a form of speech.  
There must be a way to read these blinding rays.”*

I cannot claim to know all the dynamics of this book’s intent, but I do know what it is not: *The Startled Land* is not a book of confessions based upon guilt:

*“I was fat and round  
with chicken soup  
and bedtime stories  
while Jews ran  
to their death  
without shirts  
or shoes.”*

And yet, it is not a book without some recriminations or regret about one’s childhood memories of a troubled relationship between a daughter and a father, who was a watchmaker. Understandably, time, control and demarcation become some of the central themes to many of the poems: “In Prague”; “Two Nights and a Day”; “Five Hours is Long Enough”; “Between the Shutter Slats”; “Controlling Memories.” Furthermore, there is some foreshadowing of imminent danger in the background illustrated by the presence of guns, catastrophic events and restlessness to say the world is not always a safe place. There



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The psalms followed me back and forth as I piled  
one length over the other. Each time I raised my head  
Praise and Heaven came over me. Each time

This is not a book about simply “reinventing” the self inasmuch as self-discovery through exploration and redefining one’s boundaries by returning to the land. So when the book ends on the poem, “The Mind of Winter”:

*“Winter, where I was born, made the earth a deeper place  
filled it with loneliness as tough as the coal piled  
in my father’s basement.  
I believed the wind ruled—  
not a careless power  
rather the one constant  
giving me no choice but to bend,  
invent new posture”*

It answer the questions, “Why did you come?...I couldn’t say then but/after twenty years and more I know/I came to join the women before me” to a land where “the cotton is swelling again.” It meets the promise of rebirth and regeneration signaling the end of one woman’s journey ultimately coming full circle. In conclusion, I was not satisfied with one read through of Rochelle’s book. I needed several careful rereads to digest and absorb all that *The Startled Land* had to offer. It is a masterpiece that deserves to be recognized. Anyone familiar with Anna Akhmatova’s work will instantly recognize the movement, Acmeism (which Anna espoused) in *The Startled Land*. Acmeism insisted upon the virtues of lucid, carefully crafted verse by reacting against the vagueness of the Symbolist style. There is nothing vague about Rochelle Mass’ silk-spun style of writing and nothing left to dispute—it delivers a story in over a hundred poems with the wisdom and assured grace of a woman who has no illusions or apologies about life.

