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Snake in the Garden: Review of *Salaam of Birds* by Rachel Neve-Midbar

Eileen Murphy · Wednesday, November 25th, 2020

...stones

worn soft by a thousand laments,
stones etched by a thousand feet,

...a wall of stones

3500 hundred
years of stones,
each as smooth as the skin
that has rested there.

(“When Karen is Wheeled into the Operating Room in Pittsburgh”)

What would it be like to live in a place where each rock, pebble, and grain of sand is soaked in the blood of your ancestors back to the dawn of time—and not *ancestors* in the general sense of “fellow *homo sapiens*,” but direct ancestors who contributed to your own genes? And what would it be like to send your son off to fight in a deadly war happening in this idyllic place? The poetry collection *Salaam of Birds* by Rachel Neve-Midbar (Rachel Neve) (Tebot Bach, 2020) is partly a love letter to Israel, the poet’s adopted homeland, and partly a reflection on other topics such as war and death.

Although Neve-Midbar was born and raised in the United States, she lived for a number of years in Israel in what turned into a war zone. Many of the poems in *Salaam of Birds* are poems of witness about the war and the death constantly lurking in this almost-Eden. As Neve-Midbar’s speaker warns us, “There are snakes among the thistles. / God is always hungry” (“Perhaps”).

Drawing on Neve-Midbar's experiences, topics in *Salaam of Birds* range from a description of filling sandbags for protection from bullets ("Russian Poets at the Beach"), to erotic scenes saturated with sensual details ("Desert Rain" and "Boiled Carrots"), to a study of how sunlight crawls up and down a certain hill dotted with gravestones ("What the Light Reveals").



The setting of all the poems is Israel, a place where Rachel Neve-Midbar feels like she belongs and where she appreciates being a thread in a much larger tapestry. It wouldn't be any exaggeration to propose that *all* the poems in *Salaam of Birds* are ultimately about Israel.

Chief among the horrors described in *Salaam of Birds* is fear for the lives of our children. Rachel Neve-Midbar has had to defend her children from the evils of air raid sirens, gunshot wounds, and more:

...[N]o one is safe.

...The missiles continue to fall,...
Granules of metal glister the sky.

We mothers can do nothing.

("Mother's Lament")

*

When "the 8 AM #18 bus explodes—again," the speaker/mother asks:

Should I dress the girls?
Send them off to school?
These girls who taught themselves
to dance in gas masks,
jumping on the bed,
falling back into a jumble
of pillows and air filters,
the window behind them
buttoned in a masking tape cross.

("Glass in a Hailstorm")

The fear becomes excruciating when a mother's babies grow up and become soldiers. The speaker asks, "[W]here are our boys / those still broken-voiced and raw?" ("Searching for Our Stolen

Sons”). She almost wears out the “refresh” icon on her computer, repeatedly clicking to update the “feed” in order to discover if and when her child must go to war (“Refresh”). The speaker reviews her losses:

A bitter

night. A pillar of salt. Black
dogs, lost boys. *Come home,*
we call, *Come home*

(“Searching for Our Stolen Sons”)

No matter what the topic, throughout the book, Neve-Midbar’s language is musical and smooth, almost mesmerizing. I don’t mean that it makes me sleepy, but that these powerful poems grab the reader’s attention by the throat and pull it along line to line, stanza to stanza, not letting go until the last word. For example, the beauty of these lines will surely haunt me:

The evening outside closes

in a violet dusk
that reflects like ink

on our fingernails
and on the clouds

that blister the sky.
The hush of Shabbat

gathers in the corners
of the house.....

(“Shabbat Radio”)

Neve-Midbar’s use of imagery serves as a link holding the poems in the collection together. She uses language the way a painter uses paint. Her images are detailed and lush—without overdoing it. For example, the speaker describes an Arab style marketplace so the reader can “see” it:

A carnival souk tucked in a tight
and crooked labyrinth,

...fabric from Damascus

pots and pans from Amman
rain boots and watermelons...

...an oracle, tattered
as a straw bird, his long dress torn...

his *keffiyeh* dull,
wrapped twice around his head...

(“Casbah”).

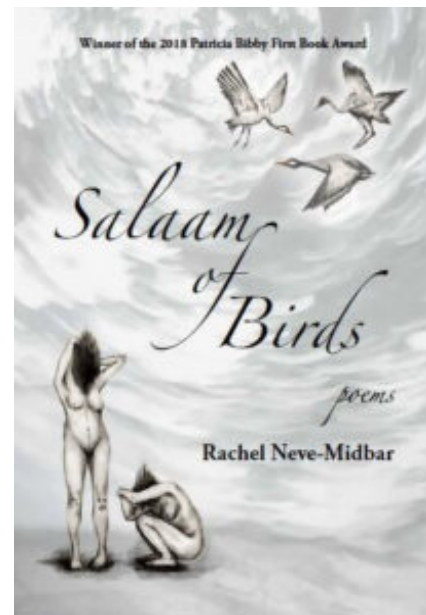
Taken as a whole, *Salaam of Birds* reminds me somehow of Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, a novel by a French existentialist that takes place in Algeria. One of the things that *The Stranger* and *Salaam of Birds* share is that they both have much to say about silence, loneliness, and the desert. Neve-Midbar’s poem “Snow in the Desert” ends (as her poems tend to do) with memorable imagery that an existentialist like Camus would likely embrace:

Life is gauze, more fragile than moth wing,
as lost as the wind across the dunes, and silent
inside the lingering death of a child.

Neve-Midbar’s allusions to historical and Biblical events and her liberal use of Arab and Hebrew words add depth and texture to this book. The title *Salaam of Birds* is a reference to the Arabic word *salaam* (meaning a gesture of greeting and/or respect) found in a poem by Mahmoud Darwish that goes: “What’s the name of the place... / a heavenly ground for the salaam of birds?” I like the way the words in the title *Salaam of Birds* sound when pronounced; the words conjure up a flock of birds twittering and fluttering and hopping around to greet someone.

Perhaps the salaaming birds image refers to Israel, since in the Darwish quote, “Israel” seems to be the implied answer to his rhetorical question. Thus, the title *Salaam of Birds* might be paraphrased as “An Israeli Welcome.”

Perhaps the salaaming birds in the title are meant as a metaphor for the poems in this collection, and they’re making salaams to invite people to read and enjoy the book.



Or perhaps, like William Carlos Williams’s infamous “red wheelbarrow,” a “salaam of birds” is a phrase the poet chose for imagery and musicality, not intending the phrase to be used as a symbol at all.

You don’t need to be Jewish or love Israel to enjoy *Salaam of Birds* by Rachel Neve-Midbar. This book is a must-read that will likely inform and delight readers from almost every background. Neve-Midbar refrains from polemics, lectures, and political commentary—she lets the imagery do all the work—resulting in a poetry that will feel “accessible” to any number of people.

And maybe it all comes down to the fact that these poems are really, really good.

I think I'll take my cue from *Salaam of Birds* and wish you *Shalom*. Peace. And so....

We all begin

and we all end, we murmur

like the sand itself whispers before the arrival

of dew.

("Reading Bruno Schultz on Rosh Hashana")

Salaam of Birds is [available here](#).

Rachel Neve-Midbar's website is: <http://rachelnevemidbar.com/>

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