

Falling into place and Depositions / An angled review

By Jim Burke

The universe is a continuous web.

Touch it at any point and the whole web quivers. Stanley Kunitz.

Falling into Place is a delightful and illuminating poetry debut by Anton Floyd. His poems move between history and memory, linking the past and the present. They contain themes of love, loss, family, and displacement. He was born in Cairo, Egypt – a Levantine mix of Irish, Maltese, English and French Lebanese. Raised in Cyprus, he lived through the Cypriot struggle for independence. The title: *Falling into Place* was carefully chosen to encompass notions of innocence, loss and mortality counterbalanced by the challenges, disappointments as well as the satisfactions of time passing. Individual poems demonstrate Floyd's naturalist's sensibility and reflect his version of a personal history which he sets against the movements of larger historical and political contexts. The four haiku opening the collection subtly anticipate these concerns and establish his assured language:

*waiting
in the sheaths of ice
blades of grass*

His keen narrowing of focus and careful observation capture the spiritual and physical peace of the West Cork Hills, where he lives today:

*nightswim
in mountain water
touch of the moon*

The following epigraph by Ralf Waldo Emerson:

*(The ground is all memoranda and signatures;
and every object covered over with hints.
In nature, thus self-registration is incessant,
and the narrative is the print of the seal.)*

brings the reader into Floyd's poem *Tracks*, which is one of a number of sonnets in the collection. There is no doubting that in *Tracks*, we encounter the poet's deep interest in odyssey:

*all the winding tracks we follow,
all rituals of farewell and greeting,
we map the imprints as we go.*

Attention without feeling is only a report. Mary Oliver.

Floyd instinctively knows what Mary Oliver is saying, he uses vivid imagery and figurative language to show us what it is to live through political and civil strife, all the while these interesting times connecting him to history and humanity itself. His recall is sharp, philosophical, and avoids melancholy, yet it embraces emotion as in the following lines from *Through Slatted Shutters – December 1963*, a poem which narrates his family's eviction at gunpoint from their Nicosia home:

...we left by the kitchen door

passing under the orange tree.

*My father looking up said
no other oranges
will ever taste as sweet*

In the poem, *In That Dawn's Early Light 1974*, the poet recalls a day unlike any other:

*Absurd this surreal imagery
A dirty trick of the mind
to tell delicately how deadly
parachutes filled the sky.*

The Longest Distance between Two Places, is a prosimetri poem (haibun) where the poet shows what he has lost:

I know the picture is a memory I cannot have yet it possesses me

Many of the poems in the collection contribute to a complex layering that underpins questions of identity – being, and belonging. *Staying On*, is one such poem:

*Mikis told me and I believed
the lichen blotches
crusted on some stones
was the blood
shed by brave Cypriot heroes
to free our homes.*

There are many laudable poems in the collection. One such is *In Honour of Mahvash Sabet*, which alerts the reader to the persecution of Mahvash Sabet in Iran. (Sabet's *Prison Poems* was selected by the Irish poet Michael Longley for the PEN Pinter Prize, 2017). This, together with the poem *Kites – Nicosia*, long for the establishment of an empathetic, unified world:

*I imagine
every high flying kite
mastering the winds*

*to be John Birks, Dizzy Gillespie,
be bopping round the world,
his skywards pointing trumpet*

*reaching for the high note,
a prayer for the heyday
a world without passports.*

And then there's the poem *Angel of History*. It's a reworking of Walter Benjamin's essay on Paul Klee's painting of the same title. It is a clear-eyed assessment of a world in conflagration yet Floyd sees hope where Benjamin, a refugee himself, saw only despair. The opening and closing stanzas illustrate these contrasting mindsets and hint at a direction Floyd's next collection might explore:

*See his Angel of History
with wings out-spread*

*turn to face the past
and stare open-mouthed
at the single catastrophe.*

*...under the piling ash
that grows skywards
minute by minute.
We sift from the debris
vestiges of hope.*

Whether it is by coincidence or some unconscious design, we encounter beneath the following heading: Some Notes to the Poems at the back end of the collection, a note on the poem *Nightingale In Arnaud's Cloister Garden*. We are told the lines quoted in the poem come from a Provençal carol by Nicholas Saboly (1614 – 1675) translated by Daryl Floyd:

*what do you say my good brothers
when our legs grow weary
let us choose some spot
the little pipes
playing the light hearted love songs
helping throughout the long trip*

These lines, speaking of odyssey, reveal perhaps that one collection may have ended, but the seeds of another collection had been planted.

Floyd's *Depositions* (forthcoming Revival Press, 2022), is formally different to *Falling into Place*. The poet opens with a handful of troilet-style poems, before he then engages his subject with the haiku form. One thinks of Basho, in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Buson in the middle of the eighteenth and Issa at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth, as they journeyed from small rural villages to the capital Edo to learn their art with this small form. Floyd leaves behind a world familiar with the classics and fine art that surface occasionally in *Falling into Place* and directs his attention towards the displaced and the refugee. He searches for a kind of recognition that will allow empathy to flow:

*summers once
a glass blue sky
without cracks*

Depositions, is not a travel journey, it is a human journey, a sifting of *the debris*:

*a child
facedown in the shallows
line in the sand*

The poet's imagery is vivid and clear:

*lights
melting into water
emigrant boats*

The open-form haiku used in *Depositions*, allow Floyd access to a universal language and imagery:

*distant thunder
black smoke from the village
fringing the hills*

These rich images come alive engaging the reader:

*dry mouths
hovering around the empty pot
the thin syllables*

Shakespeare, Ford, Read, Auden, Lewis, Shire, are just a handful of poets who have added to the canon of refugee and displacement writing. In *Depositions*, Floyd, whose family history is nothing other than a story of displacement, bravely has his say. This is an exciting and relevant collection. There is empathy with the un-named people and places. And occasionally, we encounter a delicate touch, though for the most part the poet's voice is urgent and inescapable:

*only voices
unchecked
by razor wire*

A selection of the poems has been translated into languages widely spoken by the exiled. In this symbolic way their cause finds a rightful place on the page.

BIOGRAPHY:

Jim Burke lives in Limerick, Ireland, and, with John Liddy, is co-founder in 1975 of *The Stony Thursday Book* making it one of the longest-running literary journals in Ireland. He completed his MFA in Creative Writing in Manchester Metropolitan University in 2018. A selection of his haiku featured in the anthology, *'Between the Leaves'* (2016) edited by Anatoly Kudryavitsky. *'Quartet'* poems with Mary Scheurer, Peter Wise and Carolyn Zukowski appeared in 2019. *'Montage'* appeared from The Literary Bohemian Press in 2021.