

**The following is a slightly reworked version of the text of Poet Kieran Beville address at the Cork launch of *Depositions* at The Nano Nagle Museum on Friday 23 September 2022.**

These depositions are imaginative constructions presented as testimonials given or first-hand accounts of real people's experiences of displacement and dispossession by the calamity of war. At the heart of this collection of poems is the heart of the poet. He is more than an observer; he is an advocate. Out of his soul comes the heart-cry of those who are not always heard.

*Depositions* is a potently political text. And what I mean by that is that political poetry is related to social concern, protest and activism. The collection is crafted from the raw material of conscience. It speaks of his empathy, which is more than sympathy, and in doing so the poet enlists the reader's imagination. In a sense he is mobilising a counter offensive. His empathic voice challenges apathetic attitudes.

One can therefore say, 'Yes, the poems in *Depositions* are political', but they are not partisan. A patriotic and nationalistic poem is by definition political, but Floyd is not flying any particular flag with this collection ... except perhaps the white flag, not one of surrender but of peace.

Political poetry, ancient and modern, good and bad, frequently responds vehemently to social injustice. Thus, in the Old Testament we encounter the poetic/prophetic voice of Jeremiah crying out to a people who have forsaken the fountain of living waters for the stagnant water in a leaky cistern. I see the *Lamentations* of Jeremiah as a series of poems mourning the desolation of Jerusalem and the sufferings of her people after the siege and destruction of the city and the burning of the Temple by the Babylonians. In this sense *Lamentations* is a political poem...it serves in the construction of the Hebrew narrative and the shaping of its identity.

*Depositions* is characterised not only by passion but also by compassion. It too is a kind of lamentation. The poems have a lyrical beauty, a tenderness infused with a love of humanity. Yet they also indict apathy and complacency. In a more critical light, they also challenge ignorance and selfishness.

Michael Roberts has said that poetry is primarily an exploration of the possibilities of language. This is no succinct definition. I cite it here as it offers an insight into what Floyd has attempted with this collection. To illustrate my point, let me first list the colours of the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. A rainbow is more than the sum of its parts white light it can be broken down into its constituent elements in the spectrum where we see its many hues. However, light is not something we actually see, rather it is a means by which we see everything else. So too with a poem – it engages the senses yes, but it does more than that, it facilitates a rich perception of reality. It endows it with fresh insight. It invites the reader and hearer into the experience. It engages head and heart.

Once in a while some magazine with cultural prestige (e.g., New Yorker) features an article with a title like "Does poetry matter?" Especially in times of public trauma or crisis. 9/11 and more recently the corona pandemic are cases in point. *Depositions* answers that question cogently. It responds to a crisis of our age, namely population displacement and the ensuing refugee crisis which is having a worldwide impact. It reads as an act of resistance to emerging right-wing attitudes that can sloganise selfishness putting narrow nationalistic interests "first". Something about the genesis of collection will shed some light on how the poems speak to these traumas. I shall also mention some aspects of Anton's background to help put it all into perspective.

Four years ago, Mark Ulysses, the editor at Live Encounters, published 25 of these poems. The collection grew since to become the book. It treats of the traumatic refugee/asylum seeker experience in Europe, the Middle East and Africa primarily but the tenor of the book I believe applies both across time and place. It even resonates with the traumas of the Irish famine the history of which is writ large in West Cork where the Floyds now live. Sadly, with the War in Ukraine it has taken on an even more urgent relevance.

In fact, the number of refugees in the world has increased from 60 million when he started to 80 million by the time the translation work for the book was completed, to an astonishing 100 million by 20 June 2022 (World Refugee Day) when it was launched in Dublin.

Anton's friend, the poet William Wall, kindly gave his permission to use his wonderful poem in translation from the Italian of Maria Luisa Spaziani *To The Victims Of Mauthausen* as an epigraph for the collection. The poem adds another resonance to the book in that it refers to the victims of Nazi persecution in the Mauthausen concentration camp. The first stanza appositely establishes the spirit and substance of the book:

*in paradise I'll find the unspoken words  
capitals of columns left half built  
Splinters of exploded stars robbed of light  
ancient dry springs that discover songs*

The germ of the collection came after writing the poem, *The Angel of History* which is in Anton's debut collection of poems, *Falling Into Place*. It started to take shape reading the work of the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, specifically her poem *Requiem* and Ilya Kaminsky's poem *Deaf Republic*. All poems that articulate the poet's response to crisis showing how poetry does matter. Anton has confided in me that he was also tempted to use William Blake's poem *On Another's Sorrow from Songs of Innocence and Experience* too to contextualise the collection. He opted for Kaminsky over Blake his lines most effectively invite critical reflection that it is an act of human vanity to shift the blame of the world's travails to some external cause:

*At the trial of God, we will ask: why did you allow this?  
And the answer will be an echo: why did you allow this?*

How apposite it is and prescient to place reference two poets in a collection that deals with issues of war and displacement, Akhmatova, Ukrainian who lived in Russia under Stalin and Kaminsky from Odessa who fled persecution and is now living in America. As it happens some of the poems have been translated into both Russian and Ukrainian, Turkish and Kurdish, Greek and Armenian and appear on the same page. Symbolically on paper there is here the unifying spirit of the arts – a bridging of ancient animosities. The same could be said of Irish and English, Arabic and French - all speaking, with the voice of our common humanity.

A number of poems in his last collection *Falling into Place* deal with his Levantine origins. Born in Egypt, raised in Cyprus. He lived through the Cyprus War of Independence and the intercommunal strife that has dogged the island ever since. Sadly, and tragically, many of his closest friends on both sides were victims of the 1974 Turkish invasion. As you probably know, 250,000 Cypriots were internally displaced, becoming refugees in their own country - 3000 Greek Cypriot prisoners of War are missing. Both of Anton's brothers were seriously wounded by the EOKA fighters during the Cypriot War of Independence 1955 -1959. Two of his American friends were killed in Vietnam. His family history is a series of displacements - the troubles round Mount Lebanon in the 1860s, Haifa, Palestine in the late 1940's. Cyprus and Egypt in the 1950's. More immediate is the traumatic experience as a child in Cyprus of his family being evicted from their Nicosia home in December 1963 at gunpoint by Turkish militiamen. These histories as well as close contacts with Armenia and Lebanese friends have given much of the emotional heft to these poems.

About twenty years ago Anton and Carole Ann fostered two refugee boys from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Andy and John who have since married. *Depositions* is dedicated to them and by extension to their ten children who call Anton and Carole Anne grandpa and grandma! This is hand of friendship is not unique. Ireland demonstrated the kind of compassion these poems seek to heighten when it granted asylum to some of the Vietnamese boat people and later to a cohort of Iranian refugee families after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Today that support is being given to Ukrainians fleeing war in their homeland. While

almost without exception refugees are grateful for the protections they have in their host country, Anton told me that no refugee he as has ever met has ever wanted to leave home.

In reading the collection one becomes profoundly aware that pathos and poignancy in the poems derive from authentic experience. Especially so as when Covid restrictions were relaxed Anton workshopped many of the poems with asylum seekers in direct provision centres in Cork city and county to ensure that the poems resonate with their truths. This in turn seeded the idea of translating the poems. As a result, twenty languages are represented in the collection.

The collection consists of 120 tercets or haiku-like ‘depositions’ - fragments, snatches of words as a verbal record suggesting those often-harrowing experiences of forced displacement. These tercets are organised into seven sections with telling titles such as. *This Story; A Hollow Wasteland; The give and Take of the Sea Under a Black Star; A Map of Home*. One is struck by how he has worked to achieve a simple and authentic voice for example:

*the paths  
to the empty granaries  
abandoned by ants*

*the exile’s hand  
on the keening gate  
the rusted hinges*

*of the dirt  
under fingernails  
paradise lost.*

*forced from my home  
a stone in my pocket  
ballast*

These fragments are bookended by longer poems which are appropriate to the theme and includes a section of recent poems that came at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I understand that John Walsh at Doire Press strongly advised that they be included with two songs with sheet music.

You will notice the inclusion of a poem from the Gaelic collection *An Duanaire/The poetry of the Dispossessed 1600 – 1900*. It could have been written by a refugee today. The anonymous poet says:

*My grief on the ocean  
It is surely wide  
Stretched between me  
And my dearest love.*

*I am left behind  
To make lament-  
not expected for ever  
beyond the sea.*

*My sorrow I’m not  
with my fond fair man  
in the province of Leinster  
or County Clare."*

The song *Love in a Time of War* echoes the sentiments expressed here while the chorus of *Peace Will Come* which closes the collection strikes a hopeful note. The music for both songs was composed by Bulgarian maestro, Alex Zografov. In fact, Seosamh Watson, Professor Emeritus and Former head of Celtic Studies at UCD, immediately recognised the resonances of these poems with the Irish famine experience and translated them all into Irish. Anton sent the manuscript to an Italian poet Daniele Serafini seeking endorsement, instead of which he offered to translate a selection. I would point out how the Irish historical experience is a feature of the collection and given and given a contemporary relevance in the poem *Cry of the Hart* or *Nabil's Shield* which is a powerful reworking of the famous Prayer of St Patrick also known as *The Cry of the Deer*. Patrick being a title, I understand, meaning nobleman which is also what Nabil means in Farsi.

In summary then, the collection seeks to highlight the humanitarian catastrophe that is the fallout when politics of the so called 'civilised world' fails.

It is pleasing to see that *Depositions* is gathering a fair wind with readings planned here in Ireland and overseas. In fact the pedagogue in Anton is delighted to see that the collection has already been selected by a principal teacher in a Dublin school for work with next year's Transition students. Invitations to read have already come from the universities of Limerick, Galway and Glasgow. Later in the year he travels to Cyprus a the invitation of the Irish ambassador and the Pharos Arts Foundation. I'm sure we all share the hope that that aspect of the book's reception gains traction.

Tonight, we are honouring Anton, but we are also honouring the people who have undertaken to translate some of these poems into so many languages. Anton is acutely aware that this book has become their book as much as it is his. The Cyprus Postal Authority has granted permission to use the design of the refugee stamp. Carole Anne reworked in aquarelle the woodcut of the little refugee girl and their son Aodhán designed the cover. What a talented family!

Finally, let me say that UNHCR- IRELAND has given *Depositions* its imprimatur and that all proceeds from the sale of the collection go in support the vital work of that refugee agency.

So, without any further ado, I invite Anton now to read from his moving new collection and to allow the poems to speak.