

Text of speech given by Brian Kirk at the launch of 'Depositions' by Anton Floyd on World Refugee Day 20th June 2022 at the National Bahá'í Centre, Dublin and published in Live Encounters Online Magazine Book Reviews July/August 22

When we think of the word 'deposition' we generally think in legal terms: a sworn statement or testimony given outside of court by a person involved in a legal case.

The recording of a deposition is an attempt to get to the truth of the matter. In this book of poems, 'Depositions' Anton Floyd presents the stories of those who have suffered the trauma of flight and exile and, using the poet's twin skills of memory and imagination, he presents a sequence of urgent testimonies from people living on the move and existing on the fringe of society.

This work is by its nature fragmentary, reflecting the broken lives of those we know as refugees, but these fragments, compiled in this collection, taken together create a mosaic which tells a fuller story, one that gives voice to the voiceless and extends its reach beyond geographical and temporal borders.

Every day, online and in print, we are confronted by the stories of those who have been forced to leave their homes because of war, famine or persecution of one kind or another. In our world of instant mass communication, we are in danger of becoming inured to the individual human stories behind the headlines. Anton Floyd, in this collection, has chosen to tell these difficult stories, using his own personal experience of displacement and relocation. Furthermore, he has built on that knowledge by engaging with others who have suffered the trauma of forced exile by listening to their stories. Floyd is a

teacher and a poet and he understands the unique power of language to bring to visceral life the experience of others.

At the heart of this collection is a sequence of one hundred and twenty tercets, or threeline poems, that reflect the refugee experience through skilful use of image and voice. These are framed by longer poems that mark out the poet's area of concern. In this chosen structure we get a sense of Floyd as curator as well as poet and artist. He opens with a translation by William Wall of the Italian, 'To the Victims of Mauthausen' by Maria Luisa Spaziani, and goes on in the epigraph to use lines from Anna Akhmatova's 'Requiem' which signal the poet's intention in this collection almost perfectly:

'I have woven you this wide mantle for them  
From their meagre, overheard words.  
I will remember them always and everywhere,  
I will never forget them no matter what comes.'

We get a sense of the extent of the poet's task in an early long poem, 'Michelangelo's Slaves Florence', 'What poem can confront this enormity?' he asks. And later in the same poem, there is a clear statement of intent:

'If any poem is equal to the act  
it must come from the gut...'

In the longer poem 'The Ghost of that Gadfly – a monologue', Floyd writes out of his own personal experience. But rather than feel an obvious and understandable bitterness for what he and his family have been put through, he manages to strike a philosophical note:

'...I should hate them all for all  
they'd done. For all I'd seen. But then  
I would have to hate myself and my own  
for what we'd done.'

The poet's desire to understand the experience of others shines through always, and this is matched by a natural empathy for those who have been displaced, those for whom home is just a memory.

Michael Hartnett was the first Irish poet to publish haiku and senryu. His *Inchicore Haiku* brings to life the quotidian experience of a migrant poet living in the city in snatches of remarkable clarity. The tercets that form the core of this collection act in the same way, giving the reader glimpses of lives lived in extremis, by giving us access to their world in panorama and in close-up. Although each tiny poem is separate, there is a sense of narrative throughout as each piece connects, telling a story that is unique and all too common, and marking the ground for us readers as we go, so that we can find our way back home.

'this story  
forged on the anvil  
this rasping file'

It begins with a view from afar:

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

As we progress details emerge, sensory images drop us in right there into the action.

'fingertips  
caress the walls of home  
reading braille'

In this way, we are somehow both inside and outside lived experience at the same time. Only poetry can do this. The fragmentary nature of these glimpses and images, eked out in a broken sequence, seems to me to be the only honest way to approach a subject which is so distressing:

'a child  
face down in the shallows  
line in the sand'

But it's not simply a matter of the poet trying to convey the horror of what those fleeing their homelands must endure. Floyd does that, but he also manages to capture the complexity of feeling that must accompany the displaced person when and if they arrive in safe harbour.

'of the rescued  
only the body  
is unlost' '

asylum feels  
like a hollow wasteland  
between drawn lines'

The final section of longer poems features two poems dedicated to Ilya Kaminsky, the Ukrainian poet. These poems and others in this section directly address the ravages of war. In 'The Grandmother's Sunflowers' the old woman offers sunflower seeds to the young invading soldier, telling him:

'Keep them safe. And when  
you're dead and buried here,  
they'll germinate in your grave.  
They'll grow a marker  
for your mother to find.'

And again in 'My Mamoolychka – a letter home' in an interesting switch, the young soldier writes to his beloved mother:

'And know this my Mamoolychka, all over the country we scorch  
hour by hour, the innocent have planted seeds and long after we  
have gone, sunflowers will grow – year on year.'

Somehow, out of all this suffering and trauma, and despite what history has shown us, Anton Floyd insists that we must find room for hope. In these poems, he has let the ego go completely, and pinned all his hopes on empathy and fellow feeling, allowing the emotional core of the work to emerge.

The final lines of 'Angel of History' spell it out for us:

'Minute by minute  
we sift from the debris  
vestiges of hope.'

I wish 'Depositions' a fair wind on its travels. I know it will bring understanding and solace to those who read these poems.