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That kind of door
by Alan Finlay
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Review by Marike Beyers

That kind of door is a collection which explores love, separation and the continual stretching of familial bonds. The language is pared down, sentences run on between stanzas and there is often the sense of somebody being addressed, of snatches of dialogue and thoughts, of incompleteness – of not being heard, of words being taken up in a different way than intended – which gives a cyclical feeling to the book as a whole. Images, themes, disrupted thoughts are taken up again.

The collection is held within a narrative of a man leaving his country, his sons, to a love relationship, a new life and home. The poems stand open, without defensiveness, to the rage, resentment, the emotional turmoil of those affected. The tone is one of grief and helplessness, but also of love, of attentive awareness, of hope.

There are four sections: 'The door'; 'Here'; 'There'; and 'The longing'. We do not follow chronologically, but by emotional patterns of to and fro. Each section also contains 'epilogue' sections that weave patterns – if 'the door' opens with a helpless pain between father and sons, it also contains "For our fire" that brings in the poet's 'other life', in a new relationship and a different country. As such the 'here and there' of the poems always contain parts of each other.

Although the poems are rooted in personal experience, the poet depends on simple images to convey something universal in terms of the struggle to express oneself to oneself, to another, a way to understand and set free. The image of a door occurs several times and the beautiful cover (a painting *Detail of a wall* by Quinten Edward Williams) echoes in the title poem, where the door becomes a metaphor for enabling the son choices in his life. The poet wishes to give his son

a door, with hinges

open, close

keep lightly shut
slam. open
again
that

kind of door.

(*from* "door")

The varying perspectives on the door, the different meanings of it, are juxtaposed in the line positions, shutting it off with a full stop after "slam", but opening directly on the same line, in the pauses of emotional movement in the spaces. Later, in the poem "Long-distance", the door is more domestic, but forms the spill around which the son sidesteps the father's question. There is also a lovely and lively sense of a modern family set-up, communicating through skype. The son 'shows' his father their home by turning the computer's eye to its surroundings: "he took me outside//to show

me the garden". This leads to a conversation around shared memories that are both present and avoided:

> […] The garden's
> looking great
> he said
> at last, i said.
> What? he said, but i think he heard me.
> Is the doorhandle
>
> fixed? I asked
> no he said,
> and when you are alone, what do you do
> I latch it
> he said.
>
> (*from* "Long-distance")

Doors, windows, rooms – these are recurring images. To the beloved too, a poem of rooms, doors, windows indicates a belonging and unbelonging in these age-old images of shelter and ruin:

> accept this: open door, closed against
> the cold, winter heaving like a lung
> accept this, closed door, lung without a sky
>
> all these rooms
> take them into you, make room for another
> room beside the one you keep for me.
>
> (*from* "accept this")

The poem is presented more in phrases than in sentences, creating the impression of something between a list and instructions with the repetition of "accept this" and doors and rooms – hurtling between a claustrophobia and a vulnerable casting of the self outwards in the last line.

In "Amongst the fathers" the poet attends a rugby match and instead of the competitiveness and 'toughness' of this male sport, we see the son described in contradictions that shine with a tenderness: "the same decisive/uncertainty"; "the same hesitant/outspokenness"; "his/angled determination." The line breaks between these words describing the son introduce a small pause, a little awkward uncertainty, in the form of the stanzas, as in the son. In this poem and others, such as "Passport photo", the poet allows the anger towards him onto the page:

> his eyes two taught muscles
> daring you to fight, you father
> he knew would get the picture
> for the travel documents.
> and where will I put him,
> with all that
> rage?
> In my wallet?

(*from* “Passport photo”)

The poems communicate so directly because of the direct way they address the self, shifting perspective between the son and himself. The rage comes to a focal point in the lines getting shorter and shorter until the question ends in “rage” on its own line. The last line unites the outer subject of the photograph with the inner subject of emotional pain in a question that reads in its ironic humour like a helpless smile-shrug-crying. Although the father acknowledges the anger, he also sets the child free to have this response and be a person apart. Several poems present a son as growing, as being able to stretch in the outside world, a person in his own right:

> I have lost my child. He is
> strong. He
> has roots, he knows
>
> how to bake in windows.
> He has
> steel, growing wildly
>
> into the earth. He has
> delicate patterns like tendrils
>
> on the wall. He has a sky
> he has, these
>
> footsteps, now bone
> now

(*from* “wait for him”, part i)

“I have lost my child” can be read in different ways: the father seeing the child turn away from him in anger, feeling abandoned, but also the father seeing the ways in which his child is his own person, repeating the pattern of his child’s strengths in symbolic terms, keeping the sense of vulnerability through the breaking of the sentences, the lines.

It is not only his sons who are observed so attentively. In “Wings” the scene is of a working mother (who we assume is the poet’s lover) who feels frazzled by the demands of getting ready for a workday:

> She scowls at the doves that nest on her patio.
> she takes her laptop,
> she takes her child
> dresses her. Says: now you are a bird
> and the child cries when there are no wings.

The impressive gravity of this collection lies, in my view, in the presentation of vulnerability. The poems enact the poet’s attempt to give space to the difficult emotions directed towards him and to the unsaid and unsayable. Only in one poem does the poet verge towards defending the questions flung at him with a rhetorical “do you hear me?” repeated throughout the poem. The poem runs on from the title “There is a sadness”:

> that blows both ways, both ways

do you hear me?

The repetition of “both ways” enacts the doubling and the question brings a tone of despair or frustration. Can my experience be acknowledged too? Holding two sides of something is echoed in the continual closeness of these sides: “one wing” – “the other one”; “one way” – “another way”; “open door” – “closed door” (linking all the more complexly with the heart, leaving, forgetting):

One wing lifted, the other one
tethered, do you hear me?
[…]
There is one way to leave this earth.
There is another way to return.
[…]
An open door. You can leave
anytime. Or forget again.

A closed door, your heart
scratched out with pencil lead.

(*from* “There is a sadness”)

This frailty in relationship, even the frailty of the indelible parent–child relationship, opens the parent’s vulnerability, so different from a parent who gives to/admonishes a child who is a recipient only. This is demonstrated in the poem “I can hear your voice darkened”. The poem records a conversation, but one loses who is saying what – two voices unhearing each other, yet echoing each other.

Broken lines, incomplete sentences, voices trailing off – *That kind of door* voices in its forms how attempts at kindness can be blundering. How we wish that best intentions would be sufficient. “The crossing” embodies the choice, the choice to leave for the new life, presented as seafaring, as a ship crossing oceans – but without taking away from others (in this it is romantic and hopeful):

Let’s build the decking to the ship

we want to float, unhitch the sails
trapped on the mast, let go the birds
in all their detail – love, we are building ships

for us to travel. Let’s stay, let’s
make this plan work, divide the map
let’s make the map divided work in pairs

love, let it happen, go

(*from* “The crossing”)

The poem is an exhortation to hope. This is clear in the repetition of “let us” in various contexts, linking it with sound too, to “love”, to escaping, going to sea – “float”, “unhitch”, “let go”… “let’s make”… Yet, there are enough references to maps and divisions to indicate difficulties… from the other side of that going. *That kind of door* is a collection of poems that speaks from that other side. Taking on the implications of the decisions made, but without remorse, and also without certainty.

Why. There is no answer. *Porque*
[…]
[…] You can't say no. Why.

To change what is hidden
in history.
From those
who will not say.

Why? We pull like oxen
over the rim.
We go, because we go.
We die, right here, in a field of white tulips

(*from* "*Porque*")

Despite the repetition of "why" there is only one question mark in the poem, where it shifts directly to the unanswerable. Here and throughout the book, the poet teaches us to read his meticulous punctuation. *That kind of door* points to the silences inside us, reaching, yearning towards the outer and inner borders between people and within ourselves.

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