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That kind of door
by Alan Finlay
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Review by Kobus Moolman

> I want to give my son a door,
> to hang across his
> far room, something to open
>
> to close.
> Something to start.
> ("door")

Alan Finlay has published four previous collections of poetry, and has founded and edited two important literary magazines (*Bleksem* and *donga*, the latter with Paul Wessels). He was also editor of *New Coin* poetry journal from 2003 to 2007. Alan has lived most of his life, until recently, in Johannesburg. He currently lives in Pergamino, Argentina.

The blurb on the back of this new collection describes the narrative of the poems in the following way: 'A man loves a woman who lives on one continent and is a devoted father to his two sons who live on another – a situation that finds him sometimes in unbearable anguish.'

I am intrigued that the blurb should state 'a man', rather than 'the poet' or even 'Finlay'. What is the significance of this? Is there a hint here of the central challenge posed by these poems to the writer himself, and of his unique way of trying to resolve it? The challenge of an over-determining autobiography. In other words, do the poems allow any ways of reading other than the biographical? And if so, what? And how?

Is the biographical actuality (the fact that the author is divided between Johannesburg – where his sons live – and Pergamino – where his lover lives) in fact merely (I use that word guardedly – there is no mere in this poet's pain; it is irremediable and real) a method, a route, a doorway ('that kind of door') to something else? The symbolic perhaps. But that is too trite. To what then? To 'something / that can / be understood' ("curling gnocci")?

Pain, both physical and emotional pain, cannot be understood because it is outside language. In the poem "Wall" the protagonist (we assume it is one of the two sons) injures his arm by punching through a wall and through a window. The injury is graphically rendered as 'the white of fatty cells'. But the arm is also trapped, held by the window or wall, 'half poking out'. Then the writer adds, 'Without language'. The arm is trapped in its pain and unable to do anything about it because the arm is 'without language'. I am tempted to say that the arm is without the language that would transmute, make sense of its pain. But Finlay is far too subtle, far too astute, too sophisticated a poet to resort to such a naive resolution.

What then?

Here, I feel, is the real predicament of Finlay's writing laid bare – like that wound in his son's arm – and the real strength of his artistry: how to hold, not solve (for there can be no solution) the irresolvable, the unbearable. How to 'let it happen, go / let it happen language, a hurt, a scar' ("The crossing"). And in the way that his writing holds, not solves, the unbearable, the poet too, I argue, ultimately moves through and past the limitations of biography.

Throughout the entire collection the poet operates out of a set of binaries or opposites, even contradictions, that drive and energise, give raw intensity to, the urgency of the poems. The poems are stripped down. They are naked confrontations with the risk of burning (see the poem "For our fire"). Burning in and for love when love brings with it the risk of 'listening to those / who do not believe in burning' ("For our fire").

These binaries and contradictions occur in almost every poem, and they are signalled by the following tropes: here and there, in and out, opening and closing, coming and going. The tropes, metaphors even, carry the unresolved tension within each poem on both a symbolic (in terms of their language) and a structural level.

Structurally, the poems are balancing acts, they pivot on the edge of words, of lines; they see-saw, they go up and down. They construct their own way of being read; a way that points not in the usual direction of making sense and sequence, but rather one that points toward a different way of listening. An act of listening on behalf of the reader that depends upon the breath of the poet, the poet expelling his breath in words and lines that obey their own internal rhythmic energy.

This reminds me very much of Charles Olson's notion of Open or Field Composition, and his emphasis on the kinetic quality of such a poem: 'The poem must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge' (in Allen 1960, 387).

But Finlay is also highly conscious of the way in which his collection is structured as a narrative, with the poems slotting in and out of each other through his figurative language that repeats and emphasises these tropes and metaphors. In "The other son" he writes:

> One son came into the room, his eyes all red with aching.
> He looked at me as if i was still there.
>
> I said: But I am here.
> He said: But you *won't* be when you're there.

In this extract, it is brought painfully home to the poet, and to us, that even when he is 'here', he will still not be in the room, there with the son, because in the son's eyes he will be 'there' – in Argentina. So it is not even possible to live in the moment, in the here when he is here, and there when he is there, because in each of them is carried the terms of their own cancellation.

Notice too in this poem that the writer stands 'like a wolf at [the son's] door' and calls and calls, 'Let me in, let me in'. And how clever (and poignant) is this inversion of the children's nursery rhyme where the wolf stands at the door of the Little Pig and asks to be let in because, in fact, the wolf wants to eat the pig. Whereas here the poet wants to be let in, given access to the child's closed heart, because he loves him – knowing that he, the father, is the Big Bad Wolf in the eyes of the boy.

The wolf – and the poet's understanding of himself as wolf at the door wanting to be let in – is not an incidental metaphor. It occurs again in "Lagos 772" ('a shiver through the wolf'), in "A key in the

night" ('the wolf is running', 'licks him like a wolf') and in the closing poem of the collection, "stuck in San Nicolás" ('who lives / in the eye / of the wolf').

The poem "door" illustrates beautifully the poet's dilemma as father and lover, and hints at the sense in which this door ('that kind of door') is in fact – as I have argued at the beginning of this review – a doorway to 'something / that can / be understood' ("curling gnocci"). The poem is worth quoting in its entirety:

> I want to give my son a door,
> to hang across his
> far room, something to open
>
> to close.
> Something to start.
>
> a dark door
> a light door, a
>
> door painted red.
> It doesn't matter,
> a door, with hinges
>
> open, close
>
> keep lightly shut
> slam. open
> again
> that
>
> kind of door.

As in "The other son" where the poet is compelled by his personal circumstances to be both here and there (and neither), here he posits the swing action of a door that both opens and closes – the same object performing different functions at different times – as a sign of independence, choice and freedom. The trope of door appears here and also in "accept this", "Long-distance", "There is a sadness" and "A key in the night". In "There is a sadness", the sadness 'blows both ways, both ways' just like the door that both opens and closes.

But just as the poet clearly states that the door is of a certain special type ('that kind of door'), he also draws a very clear link between the function of a door (being able to open and close, letting in and shutting out) and poetry actually:

> I want to
> return, to this
> poem, this door,
> this unawakened
> earth, where
> ploughs are set to.
> All this dark earth
> all this wasted exhausted
> all this

impossible,
snow
("I want to read a poem")

So a poem, this poem, both the one that the poet is reading and by extension the one he is writing, is a door of sorts, 'that kind of door' again. It allows the poet to be here when he is there. And vice versa. It 'blows both ways, both ways', in and out, open and closed: the ability of a poem to do, to be so much more than the sum of its separate small, even limited biographical, parts.

And yet, as I have argued earlier, there is no way for the writer that the making of a poem will ever resolve his contradiction, or make up for it, or significantly, offer some special type of transcendence or meaning. The earth is 'wasted' and 'exhausted' and the snow is 'impossible'. The Modernist idea that the suffering of the poet is redeemed through his or her own creation (an idea that goes right back to nineteenth century Romanticism) is not permitted to Finlay. The wound remains:

[…] the father goes
is still going
a going that pours
silver back into the wound.
("A key in the night")

His arm (the poet's now) is still 'trapped there, half poking out / Without language. / Still' ("Wall"). It is a masterly tender and sensitive balancing act that Finlay pulls off, this being here whilst also being there, this painful, divided in-between ('lost signal between two cellphone towers') ("The crossing") that ultimately can only end by saying, 'We go, because we go. / We die, right here, in a field of white tulips' ("*Porque*").

Works cited

Allen, Donald M. 1960. *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. New York: Grove Press.
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