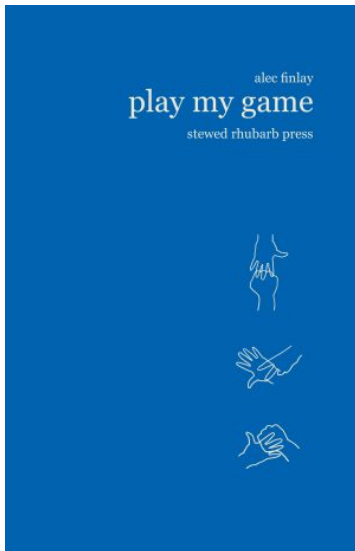


'play my game', by Alec Finlay

Review by Matthew Macdonald



This collection is unlike anything I've read in a long time. While it is presented as a series of twenty-two poems, the text of each poem is less grouped stanzas as it is borderline aphorism, or haiku, or dharma pop.

Each poem is composed of short, texturally dense snippets, clippings of thought and imagery. Unlike a traditional haiku collection, which presents each verse as a discrete entity of its own, the snippets of this collection are inescapably linked and yet could just as easily stand alone. It's a testament to Alec Finlay's handle of his craft that these poems dance around prior expectations of the poetic voice, or what poetry "should" look like.

This is not to say that the concept of aphoristic poetry hasn't been a part of the literary continuity for years, but more that what Finlay does, and does exceptionally well, is use the sparseness of these aphorisms to present incredibly detailed and nuanced ideas, as demonstrated by one of the couplet pairs in 'NBD' (expanded in the notes as 'Never Before Discovered'):

*if sighs could
catch fire*

*this bed would
be ash*

The layers of implication, intent, coupling and passion wrapped up in ten words displays the deft yet forceful touch present across the entire collection, and one which isn't just the preserve of emotionally dense topics, but shifts into wry humour -

*under 40 drugs are to keep
you awake all night*

*over 40 drugs are to keep
you asleep all night*

('ABD', Always Been Done)

or the slightly sardonic -

*the reviewer says
an early death saved her
from having to move
to the Isle of Jura (two women)*

or the surreal, as in the opening poem 'paper-cloud-mountain' -

CLOUD

obscurities

MOUNTAIN

PAPER

absorbs

CLOUD

MOUNTAIN

pulps

PAPER

However, the humorous leaning is by no stretch the dominant factor in Finlay's work, which presents the entire gamut of emotion from grief to political fervour:

*a pale band of skin
where there had been
a ring*

(from 'NBD')

'for Tracy Emin, after Gertrude Stein'

*a rose
may be
A c**t*

*But it's
Not a
Tory c**t*

Not only the individual poems but the entire collection is shaped in a very interesting way, too. Two of the longer pieces are 'NBD' and 'ABD', which form almost mirrored opposites, like two load-bearing walls. Both contain some of the most philosophical lines in the collection, the point where the aphorism comes to the fore and is almost inescapable. In the opening lines to 'NBD':

*is the poem
in her dream*

*the dream
in his poem?*

...

*the shelf of returns
is a venn of books*

*where we meet in
the best of what was taken*

and, from 'ABD':

*this urge to be home
that inconsolable*

*and curious
need to belong*

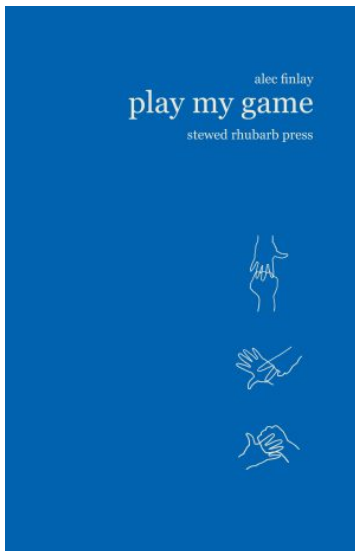
The poems in the collection are a diverse and wide-ranging group. There are concrete couplets, elegiac couplets, deep pastoral couplets in the 'Selected Names' and 'Out of the Books: a tour of Scotland with Johnson and Boswell'. This range of styles is one of the standout feats of the collection - no matter the topic or tone, each poem feels deeply and securely a Finlay poem, in that every line of the book feels like it has come from the same source, even accounting for the disparity in subject and hue.

For me, the centrepiece poem of the collection comes in the second poem 'questions and answers', commissioned for the Southwark Park Galleries. The mini poems fused together in this sequence are the closest to haiku, not in terms of following any rules of the form, but rather in the way they pose the question and provide the answer in the same lines, as seen in the opening question and answer pairing:

*what is a garden?
culture and labour producing
an annual surplus of colour*

Wisdom flows through the rest of the pairings in the poem, which demonstrate the pinnacle of poetic and philosophical meeting in the work of Finlay. What Finlay does well, and what this collection is a great example of, is the statement that what is ephemeral does not need to be insubstantial - a collection that, for all its apparent sparseness, allows for continual, ever deeper reading.

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