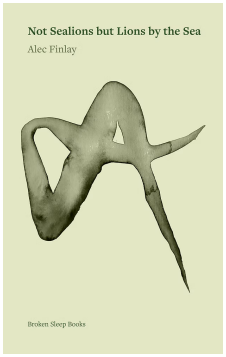
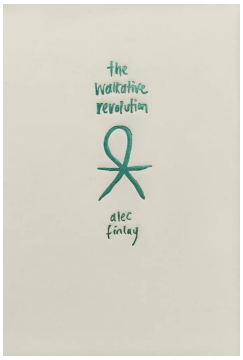
‘Not Sealions but Lions by the Sea’ and ‘The Walkative Revolution’, by Alec Finlay

Review by Taylor Strickland





Playful, allusive, interdisciplinary – anyone familiar with poet-artist Alec Finlay expects this rather constellated approachability. Yet, with every new book (and he’s prolific, so there are many), novelty catches us off guard. ‘Ha! He’s done it again,’ was my most immediate response to his two recent releases, *Not Sealions But Lions By The Sea* and *The Walkative Revolution*. The books are handsomely bound, one softcover and one hardcover, and they underscore the necessity for print media among an ever-growing digital environment: visual and textual hybridity – colour, script variation, dimension – are most nuanced on the physical page of Finlay’s work.

Said hybridity brackets *Not Sealions*. The book begins and ends with an

invocation of the conceptual imitations of daytime and poetry, and how they act upon us as 'viewers' – that is, by their common denominator in being perceived. It matters because, for Finlay, poetry is light, is living, and we as readers therefore participate in his diurnal poetics, whose scope here encapsulates a day as a lifetime, from his own childhood to the present.

Observations of selfhood are confronted immediately, urgently. An ever-changing self cannot be destroyed, so hints Canto 13 of Dante's *Inferno*. Finlay draws on the canto for consolation after the loss of friend and American musician Michael Stanley. His take on Dante either becomes pre-Christian, or post-, when it's read as renewal in nature, all life retreats to 'The Tree' (like the world-tree, or Yggdrasil), healed by 'years of overgrowth.' The poem is deceptively brief: not only is it personal elegy, but a re-reading of Dante. Its spontaneous voice enables expansion in content and concision in sound.

Elegy moves through many a personal quarrel in the book: the loss of friends, of family, of love, of childhood. The outlook is bleak:

> *… The task*
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> *Of keeping guard*
> *Over a possibility*
> *That died long ago*

If possibility is lost, why read on? Finlay's characteristic lightness of touch – lyrical, quick, luminous – offsets sorrow. No detail is left unturned. For it helps us remain vigilant, cherishing how the mind and heart process even the most fleeting minutiae:

> *Pin-thin pyjama legs*
> *Years of overgrowth fuse the callus*

Not Sealions defies cynicism, in other words, and instead embodies survival:

> *An even more wonderful dis-*
> *Astrous landing in the peaty burn*

Enjambment here illustrates the between-ness Finlay inhabits throughout the

collection. In its capacity for revelation, enjambment allows for the starry aster, or flower-like suffix, to complicate the slurry and 'diss' of the prefix. Two elements grow from the one. The technique is distinctively Finlay within the context of Loch Eck, because 'Eck' happens to be a nickname for the poet among friends, and thus adjoins person and place.

Connections are the result of a restlessness – they *mean* to happen. Which is all the more interesting if we consider *The Walkative Revolution*, Finlay's second new release. A major part of the collection, which collates years of various efforts to enable access to wild spaces for those with illness and disability, is not programmatic or didactic but instructive in making the case for 'rest'. Finlay, as the introduction to the book attests, struggles with ME and Long Covid. Add economic austerity, overindustrialisation at the cost of the environment, and being overworked, and the call for societal rest is necessary and urgent.

However, 'rest' shouldn't be misread as inactivity, but rather more 'retreat' for spiritual nourishment and reconnection with place, environment, and cultural restitution. Rest is healing in the deeper sense, but in turn, something a spiritual reawakening occurs. So a restlessness of spirit is encouraged. *The Walkative Revolution*, we find, is diagnostic:

> *sitting still I turn the hills around me*
> *saying their names, placing them in space.*

Finlay compares 'walking sticks' with 'writing sticks' (a 'pencil') very subtly recalling Heaney's juxtaposition of squat pen and his grandfather's spade. The result is meditation and translation play, or 'word mtns' made of place names:

> *G*
> *ARBH-B*
> *HEINN*
> *roughfell*

Couplets become code of conduct, both political and philosophical in nature, and thus remind faintly of the fictional, but now socially absorbed, Law of Jante, or even further back in time, the Hávamál, gnomic and poetic wisdom literature of early Scandinavia:

The path to Pity City is paved
With the bones of pitiless CEOs
No matter how far we walk down the path
We will never get ahead of the earth's curve.

Of course, Finlay's take on this medium punches more directly, and is self-aware in a way his forebears are not. He wants to disrupt the medium as much as contribute to it.

Artistic and literary inheritance, from zen gardens to Robert Creely, enriches Finlay two-sided mode of expression: like the land he enters, they provide a basis for his artistry and he wants us as readers to know. In a way, this too is a kind of accessibility. The books are, moreover, true to their inheritance: minimalistic, playful, experimental. Energy and zest of the spirit counterbalance the fatigue of health and let down. *Not Sealions* and *The Walkative Revolution* 'makes honey of failure'. Let us take some with our tea.

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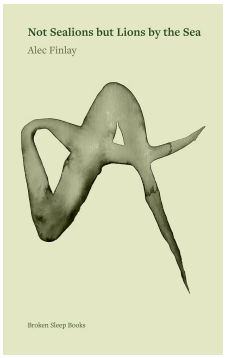
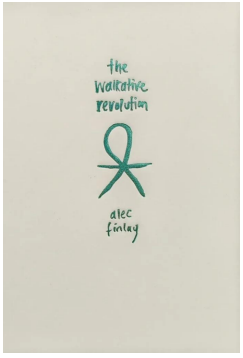
The Walkative Revolution is published by Guillemot Press





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