

**Getting into The Spirit of Things: On Alec Finlay's *Play My Game*
(Stewed Rhubarb, 2023)
Greg Thomas**

On the back page of Alec Finlay's new collection of poems is a pantheistic re-working of the *rock-paper-scissors* rules:

CLOUD
obscures
MOUNTAIN

PAPER
absorbs
CLOUD

MOUNTAIN
pulps
PAPER

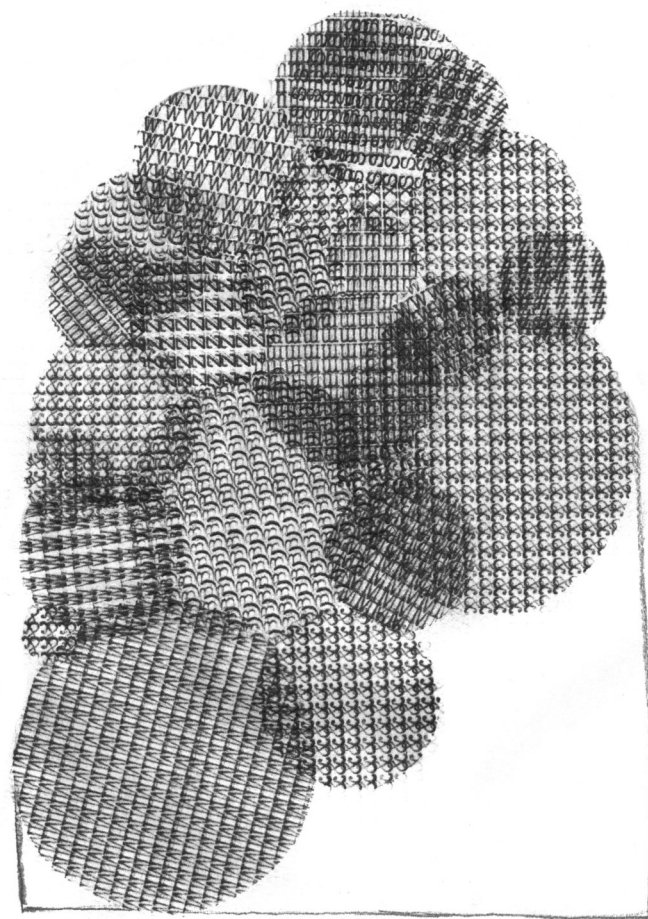
The verse reappears on the opening pages, with a little directive as preface: “gazing up at snowy peaks/ why not play our new game/ ‘paper-cloud-mountain”

We are invited to picture certain visual processes, either spurred by the sight of real snowy mountains or amidst the peaks of the mind's eye. Indeed, the simplicity and declarative mood of the language, mirrored across the book, leaves us no other options within the rules of the poem-game; there is no *grammatical* artifice obscuring what is shown to us. But it gets trickier to hold the visual transactions in our heads as we parse the verse. Cloud obscures mountain? OK. Paper absorbs cloud? Might we imagine cloud as vapour, paper as the hapless hiker's soggy OS Map as they venture along a high ridge? Mountain pulps paper? Are we now to picture a vast, stone fist? Perhaps geological processes unfolding across the sweep of deep time, pulping, as it were, humanity's paper stocks, along with all other trace of our creative endeavours?

I exaggerate for effect, and, of course, the above poem is also a game: the reader is encouraged to suspend their disbelief to get into the spirit of things (as it were). To understand that basic premise is, perhaps, to grasp the joy to be found in many of Finlay's little lyrics. It takes a while to accept the idea, though, because we are used to many of the forms whose outlines he faintly traces—the haiku, the kenning, (it must be said) the poetic dictums and maxims of his father, Ian Hamilton Finlay—unfolding some moment of revelation. Suddenly, the metaphor slots into place and the world shines with a new clarity. *X means Z because Y*. But in Finlay's universe all is gentle flux. Things are like other things but not *really*—not to the exhaustion of all the other things the first thing (and

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From *Stained Glass Windows*
Sacha Archer



the other things) could be or become. Sometimes the metaphor seems consciously stretched, or frayed, as if we were being reminded of the gaminess of the game. Or it has veiled layers of meaning that remind us we could be playing another game.

Some examples from another sequence early in the book, “questions and answers,” a set of riddles-in-reverse inspired by Celan’s “surrealist questions:” “*what’s a river?* a flower with its roots in the hills/...*what’s a lake?* a glass rinsed by cloud/ *what’s the sky?* jug of blue.” The idea of the river as a flower contains its own inbuilt word-play, but this also serves to magpie us of the clarity of the river-as-flower conceit. Maybe the poem is simply telling us the river is a river. A lake is like glass, but wouldn’t we expect the glass to *reflect* cloud rather than to be rinsed by it? How can water vapour be used for the purposes of rinsing anything? The sky is blue but it’s hardly jug-shaped. Might we be seeing it between the outlines of faces, as in the famous optical illusion—perhaps those of friends in a sunny park? If metaphors are vessels, Finlay’s contain inbuilt fissures and cracks allowing their contents to spill, playfully, nourishingly, into other shapes and forms. Thus, whereas we might expect a riddle to begin with the question and then offer the solution, Finlay’s “questions and answers” start with the answers then fill them full of holes.

I focus on the playfulness, the soft-pedalled surrealism. But this is, in a wider sense, also a book about loneliness, particularly the loneliness of life with chronic illness during a pandemic, as in the sequence “ABD:” “one bath/ *the poet*/ / another bath/*the poem*.” We can talk again of form, of how the metaphor overflows. Are the poet and the poem like two bathtubs next to each other, each filled with its own contents, not mingling with the other (New Criticism in the bath)? Or does the scene stretch out in time rather than space, the poem written during the second bath with the first bath for solitary introspection? But before and after it invites questions of grammar and imagery, this poem, like many others in *Play My Game*, seems to evoke long hours at home, alone: times of convalescence, recovery, self-care.

What saves the poems from grief at times is an authorial sense of endless imaginative possibility, the unique inscape of all things, if you like. Edwin Morgan, another Scottish late-modernist poet open to change, was enamoured of this concept of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s. In Finlay’s world, it may also reflect an investment in Buddhist and Taoist philosophies—late on we find a sequence after the I-Ching, “From the Book of Changes,” containing the line “too much stiffness/ stifles the heart.” Either way, one cause-and-effect of all this flux seems to be an impression of the narrator (and author) as open to change and to being changed, as an unfixed point through which ideas and connections might flow in new ways each day, each hour. Jump in the flower.