

Late Blossoming

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The Time Being, by John FitzGerald, Gallery Press, 64 pp, €11.95, ISBN: 978-1911338086

Writers are obsessed with time: we mine the past for memory nuggets to weigh and polish, we observe the present in all its glory, and we imagine a range of other lives and futures. In her seminal book *Writing Down the Bones – Freeing the Writer Within*, which is thirty-five years old this year, Natalie Goldberg claims that writers live twice: “They go along with their regular life, are as fast as anyone in the grocery store, crossing the street, getting dressed for work in the morning. But there’s another part of them that they have been training. The one that lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and details.”

The Time Being is John FitzGerald’s first full-length poetry collection, following *First Cut*, his 2017 chapbook from Southword Editions, and *Darklight*, the limited edition letterpress printing of 2019 from The Salvage Press, made in collaboration with the artist Dorothy Cross. He was the 2014 winner of the Patrick Kavanagh Poetry Award and is a past recipient of a Key West Literary Bursary. Before you even open this book, the dimension of time looms indisputably. The title is a clever play on the phrase “for the time being” but, used without the “for”, it suggests other possible interpretations.

The cover image is a 1973 painting by Patrick Hennessy entitled *Bird Still Life*. It depicts a waxwing, perched on a china bowl on an old wooden table, which also holds three green apples on a crumpled dark cloth embroidered with white thread. The background is a mostly cloudy sky. Unlike many indoor still life works, you can imagine imminent movement: the bird flying off, the clouds shifting to show more - or less - blue sky. This mix of “still” and “live” items, along with the title, sets the reader up nicely for the forty-six poems within.

In *The Time Being*, FitzGerald gives us chronological and kairological offerings, with the chronicling of clock time nicely balanced with occasional “deep time” epiphanies, sometimes in the same poem. His awareness of impermanence and mortality infuses this collection, and he manages to address both concepts lyrically and often movingly. In an early poem, “First Lesson”, two children witness the death of a thrush who crashes into a house window, then cradle and examine the dead bird. Here is the first of many magnificent turns in this book:

they don’t need to question yet the sudden brutal
instant when everything and nothing stops and who
and what you were is of no consequence to the
brightening day.

In contrast, “Spring Thrushes” celebrates the living birds “drilling under” for worms on the lawn, and ends with this couplet:

Another hop-skip forward. A pause.
Their day has come, and they’re having all of it.

Many of the poems in this collection are set outdoors, reflecting the poet’s involvement in farming for most of his life, though he has also travelled widely and lived in cities such as Dublin, London and Florence (the poem “1 WTC” is set in New York, with the WTC standing for World Trade Center). However, it is the rural aesthetic which is to the fore in *The Time Being*, and its elemental focus is invigorating in a country where so many works of literature are set inside four walls. Some poems are pure meditations, inspired by a cat (“Rebus”), a

pond (“Pond Field Pond”), fields (“Fields”) or a pigeon (“Who”). There are a number of poems about the young speaker’s awe at the sheer strength and skill of farm men at work, as in the poems “First Cut”, “Heritage”, “Hen Boy” and “Husbandry”, some of these freeform sonnets. This is continued in “All Soul’s Eve”, a homage of sorts to Seamus Heaney, with whom comparisons are likely to be made:

I never saw my father use a spade or rake; ...
he wasn’t cut out for their kind of work.

Which is why Jack Gahan came with a scythe each
summer to trim the edges around the place. We’d watch
him lift and glide

the whetted crescent as if it could never falter in
anybody’s hands. When we took it while he rested it
fell heavy, crooked.

There are poems about other relationships too, most of which use the second person “you” in their address. I can understand that privacy concerns may drive this trend, and respect that, especially in this era of oversharing, but at times the guesswork pulled me out of certain poems. For example, the consecutive trio of “While Walking in the Armstrong Woods”, “Disappearance” and “Pact” address a female, and all provide tender, sensual detail, but the speaker could be talking to a partner, a friend, a sister or a daughter. Does this matter? It might to some readers. Is there such a thing as too much intrigue in a poem? Perhaps in some, such as in “Your News”.

A poem that shields privacy and addresses the topic of suicide in a gentle, non-judgemental way is “Augury”, in which a piece of rope, discovered by two friends in the first half of the poem, morphs into another one which I assume is used by “you” to take his own life:

to hold you at full
swing until

as good as could never be
undone.

This is devastating in its understatement. We find a similarly dark tone in a few other poems such as “Spindle”, which hints at an underbelly to counteract the bucolic bliss in others. The poet’s compassion and sense of social justice is evident in other poems such as the aforementioned “1 WTC” and the masterful “Valley Bachelors”, set in a rural pub, in which silence is personified as the enemy. This poem was chosen to represent Ireland on the London Underground for St Patrick’s Day 2018.

John Fitzgerald describes himself as a latecomer to poetry but, on the evidence of this debut, has managed to emerge with a fully-formed and refreshing voice. Perhaps being so close to great literature for many years, in his work as university librarian in UCC, has been a factor, but there is no doubt that his original perspective, range of themes and fine craftsmanship in *The Time Being* will establish him as a noteworthy poet.

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