

**NIGHT SONGS****Author:** Michael Fitzgerald**Published by:** Rainbow's End Books, no date, 12 pages**Distributed by:** Kalimát Press**NEW SEEDS****Author:** Michael Fitzgerald**Published by:** Rainbow's End Books, 1991, 25 pages

Here, we have two additional works by the American poet Michael Fitzgerald, who seems to be a very consistent and prolific writer, having at least eight books of poetry to his credit since 1988 and perhaps another by the time this review gets to press. These last two are rather slim volumes. In fact, *Night Songs*, with twelve pages, might be classified as a chapbook. However, they do make very genial reading, and, in addition, the distinct quality of the paper on which they are printed as well as the format for both books is commendable. *New Seeds*, for example, is produced on a light off-white mat, comparing favorably to *Night Songs'* glossy black and white surface. It may not seem very important in such thin publications, but one would have liked to have seen a contents page, if only as a reference.

In the epigraph to *Night Songs*, the poet slyly uses a shortened quotation from Shoghi Effendi: ". . . we all have a dark side," but no reference is given for its source. The dark side, undoubtedly refers to the ego-self.

As in previous publications, many of Fitzgerald's poems are interlaced with concerns that might plague the mind of anyone struggling with the self, especially during those hours near midnight, or in moonlight, which apparently affects poets in strange ways, by sleeplessness (insomnia), often a cause for a combination of worries to haunt the troubled mind. Most of these poems dwell on the poet's restless nature:

I sit here deluged by debt,  
 burgeoning luck has collapsed  
 brain drain has hit my own—  
 ("Blues After Midnight" 2)

I rip through my day's pain and  
 roil in my thoughts, here,  
 flat on my back in bed—  
 ("Laughing" 7)

It must be 3 A.M. and  
 here I am reading the want ads,  
 listening to the radio,  
 bed turned down, rumped,  
 ("Insomnia" 10)

Although one may infer from the above that there is not much that is original here, it would be unfair not to mention that there are also some strong lines as well. In a majority of the poems Fitzgerald occasionally surprises us with an aphorism that lets us know he is firmly in control.

This is why it remains a little puzzling to find that, despite all his output, he persistently continues to dwell on that confrontation with self, as though by going over this kind of attrition, he forces us to look at the problem and admit that yes, these uncertainties are real and can be a hindrance. What he does not seem to realize is that they are a drawback to the very solutions he seeks and will remain so until humanity accepts the prescriptions revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. Nevertheless, a certain portion of Fitzgerald's audience will surely find the poetry difficult to absorb, especially if the supply is more than the demand.

We not only need to be entertained by what is written but, in turn, the subject should, one hopes, attempt to change or move us. Expression alone is not enough, the poet has to be at one with others to forge the invisible bond.

In *New Seeds*, we are heartened by such lovely lines:

The trees vibrate today  
with a lucid resonance—  
there is something wholly adequate  
about spring, today—

In a poem like this we come to understand more than just what is being said and can use our imagination as the poet carries us through to its thoughtful conclusion:

above all, a tree, today,  
makes ground by standing silent—  
after all these centuries,  
trees may mean something still—  
(“How Trees Vibrate” 14)

A quite different feeling emerges when Fitzgerald writes about his apprehension of God: “as much at odds with / the unforgiving world / as you are” (*Night Songs* 9), and again: “I venture this much—that God is / the reason for a sufficing terror” (*New Seeds* 13). But in the poem “God’s Gift,” Fitzgerald speaks of a more excruciating truth:

In the utter breakage  
it is to embrace the gift of God,  
there is this thin-lipped promise—  
never to be only happy about it all—  
(*New Seeds* 5)

Fitzgerald's attempts at ascribing gender to God are somewhat bewildering when it is known that Bahá'ís believe God to be an unknowable essence. It might be that Fitzgerald is simply pointing out some of society's contemporary beliefs. It is reminiscent of the joke back in the sixties where a person claims to have visited heaven and on their return to earth announces that "I have seen God, and She is Black!"

The poems in these two books, though often touching on a personal level, do not necessarily reach conclusions, nor is it a requirement that they must. Rather, they act as a kind of ladder to a higher dimension toward which Fitzgerald seems to be aiming. Yeats pointed out that all such ladders start in the "rag and bone shop of the heart," so we still have confidence that Fitzgerald will meet our greater expectations.

A poet's thoughts are what his or her intellect has been attuned to, and it is this which every poet uses when his or her creative powers are released. Still, one feels almost obliged to point out that here is a poet who is a Bahá'í, who seems very proud that he resides in Virginia's beautiful Shenandoah Valley among the Blue Ridge Mountains. He has amply shown us that he can write in a clear voice and that his poetry can be curious and sympathetic. Would it not be more advantageous for him to explore the folklore, the traditions of that region and possibly to relate some of these things to his faith?

He has already caught a touch of this perspective in earlier works, and this is felt again in "Diner Days":

Endless refills  
on 6 A.M. cups of coffee  
for the ham-fisted men at the counter—

waitresses straight out of the depression  
with names like Frankie, Thelma Lou  
Doris and Dee Dee—

(*New Seeds* 23)

To the average or even sensitive ear, many of the poems restrict themselves by their simple preoccupation with the introspective self. Yet we know this is not always the case and that certain images are firmly crafted and extend to a verbal felicity, proving, as Fitzgerald has shown previously, he has more to give than what we have so far seen.

The creative spirit and the compassionate spirit are not two separate entities, as Norman Cousins, writing in his book *Human Options*, says, but rather kindred manifestations of a response to life. Michael Fitzgerald clearly proves that he is capable of enunciating these qualities, and we in turn deserve more from him.

As we were about to go to press, *Report from the Edge*, Michael Fitzgerald's latest book of poems reached me (Rainbow's End Books, 1993, no

page numbers, distributed by Kalimát Press). It seems only fair then to add a further comment.

Among the majority of these relatively new poems, particularly in Part I, are those that get to the heart of the matter and immediately hold one's attention. Unfortunately, one cannot dwell on them here. Notable are "Between the Chaos and the Dream," "The Road," "Lexicography of a Cafe," in "Good Days" wonderful lines like "The farms / went by like distant relatives / . . . Jews crossing the desert over / the map of your childhood"; "Robert's Gospel," and "Selma, Montgomery and the Army."

In these especially, Fitzgerald speaks with a strong contemporary voice, and his veracity forces us to sit up and take notice. It is a performer's score and worthy of his many talents.

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