

During the winter of 2008-2009, we interviewed poet Neil Aitken, the winner of the 2008 Philip Levine prize for poetry and the judge of our first annual poetry contest. His book *The Lost Country of Sight* was published by Anhinga Press in 2008, and you can find more information about the book and Neil's poetry at his website, neil-aitken.com.

PR: First, as you sit down, would you say it's appropriate for readers to envision you in an indie coffeeshop listening to emo music, wearing a beret, smoking cloves, and jotting bon mots in a Moleskin-notebook?

Neil Aitken: Sadly, I think I fail to live up to almost every part of that expectation. Up until recently I didn't even know what a Moleskin notebook was and I think the last time I wore a beret was as a Canadian Boy Scout.

Rather than coffee shops or indie hangouts, I tend to work best at my computer in my apartment or in the graduate student lounge at school (I know, that's boring). When I was working as a computer programmer, I would also write after hours at my desk or jot down lines on the backs of old business cards on my drive home. I have no special rituals or writing aids, and only have a few idiosyncratic tendencies.

In general, I prefer to work late at night in silence, composing directly on the computer. I like the ability to copy and move lines around, to create backups of the work, and to have multiple pages open at once. Often a poem begins as a series of fragments and title, or a particularly strong line which seems to demand an answer or further contemplation.

PR: Tell us something unique about yourself.

Neil Aitken: I have the strange distinction of having learned, forgotten, and relearned both English and Mandarin Chinese - so effectively both languages have been first and second languages. I also have the dubious honor of being one of the few people who at various points in his life has forgotten how to swim and how to ride a bicycle.

PR: We don't believe that for a minute but we'll politely move on. So let's talk business a minute. You've won a national prize, your book is out on a very well-respected press . . . professionally speaking, what are the differences in your life now compared to prior to winning the contest?

Neil Aitken: Perhaps the biggest difference is the increase in the amount of time spent thinking about or dealing with the business side of things: scheduling readings and trips, locating potential reviewers, and traveling to other places to read. Finding time to write takes more effort now than before. I also have received more invitations to submit to various journals, which is certainly flattering, but also puts more pressure on me to have good quality work ready to send out. These really aren't bad problems to have, but they do represent a change from how things used to be. I still receive rejection notices and sometimes struggle to find journals interested in the new work which is considerably different from the work that appears in the book.

PR: Generic question -- what inspires you to write your poems?

Neil Aitken: Usually one of two things happens. Either I run across a phrase or an image which strikes me and continues to haunt me for a time, until I can finally sit down and write my way through the thing I've been obsessing about. Or, I have an experience which moves me or troubles me, forcing me

to set it down in words and try to make sense of it. In general, I write out of a need to remember and to understand the things which happen around me and the people and places which are on the verge of disappearing from me. Kandinsky once wrote, "even a white trouser button gleaming out of the puddle in the street...has a secret soul" -- and so it is that often my obsession with memory seems to be grounded in physical objects, the material remains of the passing of a person or thing through space and time. Writing poetry for me has often been about giving voice to things that are silent, revealing the extraordinary and miraculous sides of the seemingly ordinary.

PR: How does being Canadian (*ed. note: Neil is Canadian*) give you a poetic advantage compared to being a wine-swilling urban American?

Neil Aitken: Although I've lived in many places around the world, Canada remains a strong influence on my work. I spent much of my childhood in Saskatchewan where the land stretches out flat in all directions, the sky, clear and unpolluted, seems to go on forever. As does the horizon. Outside the few cities, the population remains small, even today. It's easy to get lost in such vastness, easy to discover just how small, how almost invisible you are in comparison with the rest of the universe. And yet, with your hands in the earth pulling weeds, or your face half-frozen in the winter blast, you are also made aware how intimate and close you are to the physical world, how impossible is to separate yourself from it.

If there's an advantage, it's that it's helped remind me that broader patterns are at work, deeper resonances to consider than simply the elevation of the personal to the mythic or the celebration of the physically knowable world. On still nights, under an uncountable array of stars, there are things that can be learned which elude the senses, which strike and stir the silence deep within, making the unseen and invisible for a moment real and near.

PR: Talk about Canadian poetry, especially contrasted with American.

Neil Aitken: At one point in time it might have been easy to say that Canadian poetry tended to revolve around the land and the weather, and that American poetry centered around the myth of the self and the expansion of physical and intellectual frontiers. A lot has changed, but many Canadian poets still possess a deep connection to the land and the climate, although that connection may manifest itself in different ways.

The Canadian poets I know are very active in their communities, organizing festivals and local readings, establishing poetry non-profit associations, visiting elementary and high schools, and creating all sorts of other venues and opportunities for the sharing of poetry. In large measure, poets in Canada enjoy a greater level of respect -- the society as a whole is more literate and poetry more visible and present in bookstores, in radio, and in public events. For example, every year on November 11 (Remembrance Day in Canada), John McCrae's poem, "In Flanders Fields" is read to honor the veterans. School children memorize it. Television and radio stations broadcast readings of memorial events where it is usually read. The poem is very much part of the public consciousness. Somehow, Canadian poets have found ways to more closely integrate poetry into the culture. Still, writing poetry isn't really a day job. Only three MFA programs exist in the entire country, and so most poets don't teach, but earn a living some other way.

PR: We've actually heard that poets once had day jobs, and that it still happens in Canada delights us. What are the poetic advantages/disadvantages to having a "real" day job?

Neil Aitken: Working in an unrelated industry provided me with countless opportunities to steal good lines from people's conversations, observe a wide variety of human interactions, and engage in

discussions on unusual and unexpected topics (from astrophysics to neurobiology, from comparative religion to the applicability of economic and psychological models in virtual world systems – ie computer games). Needless to say each person's experiences will vary. Working in a non-academic, non-writing job puts you out there in a world full of interesting people (or at least boring people with interesting friends). The other great benefit that comes with working in the “real world” is the way in which your view of the world becomes distinctly colored by the type of work you have been doing. As a programmer, I became more and more interested in how things fit together and how they could be taken apart. I found the job's focus on language, efficiency, and structure helped me in my own writing become more focused in my composing and more ruthless in my editing.

PR: Since a large portion of young writers go into graduate writing programs, where they teach writing classes, and then get jobs teaching more writing classes . . . should they be warned away from the MFA-PhD-progression?

Neil Aitken: While I wouldn't warn anyone away from pursuing further education in writing, I would encourage young writers to carefully consider what they expect to get out of that education and to choose programs and paths that will help them develop into stronger writers. For some writers a future spent teaching just isn't attractive and therefore pursuing a PhD would likely be a waste of time. The key is to seek out opportunities and sometimes to create them when they don't already exist. Find out what inspires you to write - and more than that, what inspires you to live. Pursue that, and even if it isn't teaching, it will create its own set of opportunities if you keep your eyes open. Too often we are content to be disappointed and cynical under the guise of realism. Be realistic, but be open. Be diligent. Be happy. Be yourself.

PR: What are three sincere but clichéd pieces of advice you would give to college-age or younger poets?

Neil Aitken:

1. Show. Don't tell. We've all heard this one, and for the most part it's still really solid advice. Poems which spend more time explaining what they are about or how they will move us, generally fail to actually move us. The proof is the pudding, not in the list of its ingredients -- so just give us the pudding and let the reader be the judge.

2. Let content determine form. I really believe this. I find the best poems find their own shape and form. Trying to force form onto an idea or impulse from the outset usually leads to “square poem in a round form” syndrome.

3. Revise. Rarely do poems work out perfectly on your first try. More often than not, a poem goes through several revisions. Sometimes those revisions will happen at the same sitting (when you work on a computer, I suspect this happens more often), but usually there will be a few days, weeks, months, perhaps even years between the first version of a poem and the final version. It takes time to see what might need to be added, trimmed or moved. Revision applies as well to entire manuscripts. In case of *The Lost Country of Sight*, it was the 45th revision of the manuscript that was finally accepted for publication, and even then there were still a few minor revisions during the pre-press editing process.

PR: What are three new sincere pieces of advice you'd give young poets?

Neil Aitken:

1. Obsess more. Obsession is the beginning of great poetry, it leads us to gather details, to read deeply, to imagine networks of significance and correspondence, to do irrational things in a seemingly rational way.

2. Work. Get a day job. Doing something non-poetry-related is incredibly healthy for you as a writer. It helps remind us that there are many different types of people and experiences in the world. Physical labor, even repetitive actions like digging or construction work, can teach us a great deal about the rhythms of the body and breath, exposes us to the new environments, and reward us with a sense of accomplishment. Office work, retail work, professional practices, whatever it may be, work with its attendant joys and frustrations, is an essential part of being human. If we spend all our time in front of our laptops and notebooks observing and ruminating, we aren't really engaging in the larger world of human emotional experience, but instead merely spectating, maintaining our distance, trying to be safe. Safe is not where good poetry happens.

3. Reject the easy and expected. When writing or revising, push past what is familiar and easy. If you write a line or an image and aren't in some measure surprised, reject it and immediately write something else, keep rejecting and rewriting until something catches you off-guard. Train yourself to mishear and misread things that you encounter around you. Twist them unexpectedly. Instead of “a wreath and an angel make a holy place” find “wrath and an angel.” If you feel everything is predictable, start randomly flipping through non-poetry books and taking words and lines where you finger falls. Take things out of context. Make notes when you are exhausted. Defamiliarize what has become commonplace to you. Exaggerate to great detail. Use any or all of these things to arrive at someplace unfamiliar and disorienting, then write onward. Only when we no longer know where we are headed as writers, does the poem have the potential to take us and the reader somewhere new.

PR: Any great non-poetic texts ripe for language theft?

Neil Aitken: Anything on architecture theory or urban aesthetics. Artists' notebooks are also good fodder, it's always interesting to dig through someone else's ideas on structure and composition, especially when it seems to be distant and separate from language. One of the best books I've used to grab random snippets from to seed poems was a published doctoral architecture and community planning dissertation entitled “Architecture for the Poor” by Hassan Fathy. The prose itself was surprisingly eloquent and clear, the content offered interesting descriptions of many textures and objects, and the anecdotes were quite entertaining

PR: How can a layman tell if poetry is good?

Neil Aitken: A good poem catches you off guard, startles you, troubles you, leaves you haunted by an image or an emotion you didn't have before. If you've arrived at someplace new by the end of reading a poem and the world or you has changed in some small unexpected way, something is working.

PR: What's a poem that does that?

Neil Aitken: Philip Levine's “My Father With Cigarette, Twelve Years Before the Nazis Could Break His Heart,” Anna Akhmatova's “Requiem,” Patrick Rosal's “Notes for the Unwritten Biography of My Father, An Ex-Priest.”

PR: Could you suggest five poets that too few people read (or have heard of) whose books we must absolutely must rush out and get right now?

Neil Aitken: I've really enjoyed reading Santee Franzier's *Dark Thirty*, published by the University of Arizona Press earlier this year. There's a dark seductive quality to the language of these poems which weave violence, desperation, and loss together in an eerily beautiful fashion. It's hard to describe it exactly, but I feel that Frazier is doing something interesting to the way we think of narrative lyric.

The second is Ching-In Chen whose book, *The Heart's Traffic* (Arktoi Books / Red Hen 2009) is a stunning novel in poems. I haven't seen too many books in this genre and most seem to fail somewhere in the middle. Chen's book delivers poem after well-wrought poem, each working independently and as part of the larger narrative. I love the way she constructs the narrative out of disparate fragments and memories, tackles the task at hand with sufficient variety to keep us interested, and yet presents ultimately a strong thread which ties the parts together.

Andrea Baker's work is exciting for its formal risks, mixing lyric fragment with line and drawing artifacts. Her first book *like wind loves a window* (Slope 2005) evokes narrative through absence and gesture. On the experimental side, I find its daring captivating and inspirational.

I don't think Wendell Berry is read as much as in the past, but I still find his poetry a good place to go back to when I'm thinking about more traditional ideas of narrative and environment. In Berry, each line and image is weighed and a poem feels something akin to well-worn jade, polished by hand over many years. There is a genuine love for the natural world, a sense of humor, and an incredible attention to sound and rhythm. Berry also has some excellent essays that are well worth reading.

I'd also recommend Bridget Pegeen Kelly's work, especially *Song* which features some of the strongest narrative lyric work out there. Certainly she's being read, but I do think that many people would benefit from reading her more and becoming more familiar with just how far an idea can be taken, how strange a world can become, how devastating and beautiful a poem can be.

PR: In terms of audience, we've heard of writers who write in order to: heal the conflict in Northern Ireland; hang out with Henry Miller and Herman Melville in heaven (or hell); not embarrass their family; embarrass their family; get revenge; be therapeutic; meet deadlines; amuse themselves; pay mortgage. In writing the poems in *The Lost Country of Sight* and in putting the collection together, what various audiences or goals did you have in mind?

Neil Aitken: When I started writing the poems which make up *The Lost Country of Sight*, I was initially obsessed with the idea that somehow I was constructing in them a place to call "home" after so many years of moving around from country to country and house to house. However, "home" is an elusive thing. As Liu Hongbin, a Chinese poet I reference in one of my epigraphs, notes in one of his interviews, "Writing poetry is the beginning of exile" and to some degree, I think he is quite right. The act of writing indeed exiles the poem from the realm of internal thought and emotion into a new world of text. Exile and home naturally remained important parts of the project, but now seemed inseparably linked to the problem of memory and its fallibility.

After I graduated from UC Riverside with my MFA, I found myself back in Canada, suddenly immersed in a wide range of difficulties and personal challenges which come when you return to a country and community that you have not lived in for many years. Feeling somewhat displaced and in fact, much more of an exile in my own land than I ever expected, I found my book returning to the exile themes again, but this time merging with the growing realization that my father was dying and that our time together would be very short. I wanted desperately to finish the book for him while he was still alive, and yet even as I was writing and revising, I was gradually sensing the book would not be done in time, and further that there were poems that could not be written until I had dealt with his impending death. Even with this realization, I continued to write and used writing and blogging as my means of articulating those things which weighed heaviest on me. During those last few weeks, long after the point when my father had lost the ability to speak and could only use his eyelids to communicate, I continued to bring parts of the manuscript to the hospital and later to the hospice, and to read to him. I wanted him to be a part of the making of the book, as he had for many years been my first reader. I felt it imperative to keep writing, to keep working, and to sharing what had been one of the strongest ties between us. After my father's death, I realized that the book had evolved into

something of an elegy for the physical world that is always slipping away from us, an elegy in part for him, and in part, for the many other friends and family who'd passed away during the course of the last few years.

PR: How conscious were you of writing within the history of poetry?

Neil Aitken: It was very important for me to understand how other poets had grappled with the ideas of exile and displacement. After all, these are very old themes and many great poets within Western and Eastern cultures have already written on these subjects. How then to distinguish myself from them? How then to write something new?

To do something new, or more precisely, to take the reader somewhere new, it's necessary to understand what ground has already been covered, what vistas have already been revealed, and what has been found along the way by both the writers before us and the writers of our time. Studying poetry then, is something like studying the notes left by explorers who have traveled the way you are headed. Some things have changed, some of the old landmarks are gone, but essentially there are things to be learned from their experiences and ways in which your journey, your writing becomes a dialog with theirs. You can disagree, you can transform, or even transcend what they have done - but it would be foolish to simply pretend that they were never there.

PR: "To do something new" recalls Pound's dictum, of course. We don't imagine you have a checklist next to your computer -- spelling, form, sound, content -- that you go through, wondering what area will be 'new' this time. But do you consciously try to make your work new?

Neil Aitken: This is a surprisingly hard question . . . there's certainly no checklist by my computer. I think surprise plays a big role in newness -- if I know where a poem is headed, it's likely I've been down that road before and the resulting poem will seem expected and conventional. Knowing the destination in advance creates a sense of impatience in the reader, the poem becomes a postponement of the inevitable. If the writer is caught off-guard in the act of writing, a useful anxiety creeps into the work. We don't know what will happen. This anxiety is critical to creating 'newness.'

But I do find sometimes that the quest for the 'new' can take precedence over the quest for the 'good.' A poem that is simply 'new' for the sake of being 'new' isn't enough -- instead it is more helpful to ask ourselves what drives the formation of this particular poem and why is this particular type of 'newness' integral to it? Somehow there needs to be a relationship between these things, a 'rightness' to the fit between form and content, style and gesture.

PR: Setting is also integral to the collection, airports, beaches, snow-bound highways, Los Angeles.

Neil Aitken: I'm fascinated by liminal spaces -- anywhere we find ourselves between places and identities -- in large measure because I feel that these are the locations where the greatest transformations occur, where we move out of a familiar place and into the unknown. Dislocation and displacement then, are not only themes which appeal to me as a writer, but also part of the mechanism of producing writing. Sometimes the only way for me to write about a place or an experience is to leave it and go somewhere new.

PR: It's interesting that Los Angeles itself, where you've lived a few years, is featured rarely in the collection.

Neil Aitken: In one of his essays on exile in *Letters of Transit*, Andre Achiman suggests that exiles (I'd include expatriates like myself), tend to suffer from a double vision where each new place encountered

is seen through the lens of every place that has been left behind. Cities blur one with another, and after awhile, it becomes difficult to write or understand any place until you leave it. While Los Angeles rarely shows up as a named figure or place in my poems, I'd argue that it still lurks in the background -- or at least, there are poems which I think of as Los Angeles poems because they came about from the experience of living in the city.

PR: Dislocation equals homelessness, even at home. The unsettled soul. Non-literary types think writers are dark and brooding. Is there truth to that, beyond the generic stereotype? Can good writers be happy?

Neil Aitken: Good writers can certainly be happy, but most I know (including the happy ones), have things which they remain unsatisfied with, even if they have a place to call home. Sometimes what is homeless isn't the writer, but the idea or memory the writer is chasing -- always on the verge of expression and yet disappearing at the moment of capture. Often in reading a collection of poems, I get the sense that a poet has spent an entire book searching for a way to answer a question or to name something not quite nameable.

PR: Your poem "Hermit" is one of our favorites. Could you take us through its creation?

Neil Aitken: "Hermit" is one of a handful of poems which I associate more directly with living in Los Angeles, being born out of my years as a computer programmer. I would frequently work late into the night, then arrive home to my dark and empty apartment, exhausted mentally and physically, wanting desperately to speak to someone at the close of my day, but finding nothing but silence. The idea for the poem came on one of those nights as I stood in the kitchen staring at the gas stove which for some reason was taking its time to light. It occurred to me that even in as large a city as Los Angeles, I was effectively living the life of a hermit, dwelling in my own little dark cave, cut off from much of the world by my schedule and my profession. In a very real sense, I was the burner clicking away my life, waiting for something to happen, to transform my world. I sat down at my computer and wrote the poem in a single sitting, essentially as it stands. For a long time afterward, I felt the poem was a throwaway, something on the verge of self-pity and angst, which I didn't feel belonged to my project. As I reworked and restructured the manuscript though, I returned to it and gradually discovered in it something else, something closer to the spirit of the book. I hadn't really appreciated before how much that final image of the burner waiting to light had moved beyond simply standing for a frustrated and tired programmer and had become instead a figure for all of us who create, or at least yearn to do so and are standing there on the verge of creation, waiting for the spark to set our world ablaze.

Hermit

How the world is full of silence
you say to yourself, closing the door
behind you as you slip back into your cell
like a host or a letter returned unopened
its words unweighed, unknown. A cloud
before rain, before storm. A bottled wish
in a sea of grey with nowhere to go.

You stand next to the gas stove
listening to the stead click-click
of sparks in the empty space

trying to set the invisible
afire. And when it catches fire at last,
you watch it rush outward as if mad,
driven by a hunger for air, for something
to say to the dark and metallic world.

PR: Earlier you mentioned sharing your manuscript with your father while he was in the hospital and hospice. Some of the more affecting poems in the book are about him, of course, and are almost crushing in their honesty. Was it hard being so frank in *The Lost Country of Sight*?

Neil Aitken: The hardest poem was "How We Are Saved," written about two weeks after my father's death. It attempts to step into my last moments with my father, dressing his body before the funeral home came to take him away. In those two weeks following, I felt the urgent need to write something, to give voice to this intense sense of loss and awe, but didn't know how to begin or if I could even find the means or the nerve to re-enter that moment. Still, I knew if I didn't do it then, I'd lose the moment forever -- any return would be colored by nostalgia and be filtered by subsequent experience. So I set down and wrote as simply and honestly as I could, using those things which presented themselves, forcing myself to write without flinching, even if it was a hard and terrifying experience, trusting that something would appear on the other end, something that might offer a glimpse at the ineffable, the beginnings of a name for something that seemed unsayable.

PR: Your poem 'At the End of Poetry' ends,

"Outside always, a man in a heavy coat
with a lantern in hand moving through the dark
toward the whitening ghosts of trees."

Here and throughout the collection, the idea of absence -- of ghosts, of lost memories, abilities, people, places, and of course the title itself -- is hugely important. It could be said that poetry is an attempt by poets to reclaim something lost: do you agree with this? If so, what are you reclaiming?

Neil Aitken: I'd certainly agree with that assessment. Poetry, for me at least, has a lot to do with reclaiming and reconstructing a world that hovers on the edge of oblivion, whether that oblivion is a disappearance from memory or from the material world. Some things become more present in their absence -- perhaps that's the force behind elegy. We love what we are on the verge of losing - it's the precarious nature of our existence, it's the way that mortality works, and for me that's where the most compelling poetry is born -- out of loss or the threat of loss. Things that are certain and guaranteed don't move us in the same way, precisely because we count on them being there in the next moment. It's when that moment might not come or when something changes which may prevent us from being there in the same way, that we find a yearning to preserve or reclaim what was previously commonplace and mundane. In Jacquelin Gorman's memoir, *The Seeing Glass*, there's a scene where she sits down in the middle of her living room and surrounds herself with the photos of all her family members, trying to memorize their features even as her sight is failing, knowing that in the morning that her blindness will be complete and she may never see again. It's a powerful moment and in many ways represents what I see good poetry enacting -- an almost desperate attempt to capture the intense physical and emotional connections we have to the material world. In *The Lost Country of Sight*, my goal is just that - to knit yearning with yearning, loss with loss, delight with delight, until at last the world of wonder returns, or at least remains a moment longer on the horizon.

PR: What are you currently working on?

Neil Aitken: A manuscript entitled *Babbage's Dream* which explores the themes of exile and beauty in the world of computers and computer programming. The project gets its title from Charles M. Babbage, a 19th century mathematician and mechanical genius who drafted the plans for the world's first programmable mechanical computer in the 1830s and invested most of his life and savings in the construction of it, a task he never completed. He was a prolific writer, sometimes incredibly eloquent as he described his obsessions with efficiency and machinery in meticulous detail in his autobiography and other writings. Babbage was also a man of human passions, one whose love for his future wife led him to a marriage which alienated him from his own father and temporarily cut off from the family fortune. For me then, Babbage is the perfect figure for exploring the very human passions and obsessions that often lie buried in contemporary programmers. The poems are largely demonstrating that things might not be so different between the fields of writing and programming.

The hardest part of this project is making certain that at its heart there are still key existential questions which will bring in a reader and keep them reading. As a result, I sometimes find that I've written a poem that might work conceptually or functionally, but ultimately fails to engage a reader on this deeper human level. I find myself tinkering more and occasionally starting over from scratch. So it's ambitious -- but needed, at least for me.

PR: Why write poetry?

Neil Aitken: I think we all need to find our own personal reasons for writing. For me, writing is part of the preservation of memory, a means of dealing with loss, and the way through which reunion and restoration can occur.

At heart I'm still interested in revealing the extraordinary side of the seemingly ordinary and mundane, and I still find myself obsessed with the themes of exile and return. So perhaps this won't change for a while. I don't think I'll ever completely lose certain anxieties and aspirations. I want to write the good poem, the poem that lingers long after reading. I want to avoid complacency and self-sufficiency. I want to write unflinchingly and continue to be surprised by what arrives in the next line, next image, next page of whatever I'm working on for many years to come.