BABBAGE'S DREAM

By Neil Aitken

Sundress Publications

"In stunningly elegant couplets, Neil Aitken transposes the dreams of machines and humans into musical, sonically deft lyrics that sing songs of creation, vision, possibility, futurity. These beautifully crafted poems—evoking the designs of nineteenth-century mathematician Charles Babbage, who conceptualized the first mechanical programmable computer—explore the tautologies between mathematics and song, science and lyric, the rational and the passionate, dystopia and hope. In the infinite tape loop of memory and imagination, *Babbage's Dream* posits a Turing Test in which the reader circles both anxiously and gloriously through aspects of making, maker, and the made."

—Lee Ann Roripaugh, Author of *Dandarians*

"In Neil Aitken's exquisite poems, Charles Babbage, inventor and thinker comes to life in an array of stunning images. The poems spark and leap in exhilarating assemblages as we piece together the narrative behind the concept of the programmable computer but further beyond, Aitken invites us to ask questions about consciousness, thought, and who we are in our daily lives. The jolt of the past comes back as "the bit of code we've let loose in the dark" and the fractals return as a heart in mourning. This is a transfixing book on memory, the human mind, and the possibility of rebirth in unexpected but musical planes."

—Oliver de la Paz, Author of *Requiem for the Orchard*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil Aitken is the author of *Babbage's Dream* (Sundress Publications, 2017) and *The Lost Country of Sight* (Anhinga Press, 2008), which received the Philip Levine Prize. Of Chinese, Scottish, and English descent, he was born in Vancouver, BC, Canada, but grew up in Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and various parts of western Canada. He is a former computer programmer and a proud Kundiman alumnus, and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of California, Riverside and a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Southern California. He is the founding editor of *Boxcar Poetry Review,* curator of *Have Book Will Travel,* and editorial board member of *Poetry East West.* He also translates contemporary Chinese poetry and serves on the editorial board of *Poetry East West,* an international journal of bilingual translation.

ABOUT THE PRESS

Sundress Publications is a (mostly) woman-run, woman-friendly non-profit publication group founded in 2000 that hosts a variety of online journals and publishes chapbooks and full-length collections in both print and digital formats. We also publish the annual *Best of the Net Anthology*, celebrating the best work published online, and the *Gone Dark Archives*, preserving online journals that have reached the end of their run.

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ADDITIONAL PRAISE FOR *BABBAGE'S DREAM*

Through Aitken's long lyrical lines and guided by narrative threads, I was pleased to make the acquaintance of the polymath Charles Babbage, his 19th century world and his language: the language of science and engineering, a language that at once halts and captivates. Come inside the Aitken's *Babbage's Dream* for new perceptions of the world.

—Kimiko Hahn, Author of *Brain Fever*

SAMPLE POEMS FROM *BABBAGE'S DREAM*

FLOAT

— A fundamental type used to define numbers with fractional parts

Like a bell, or rather the sound of it opening,
a silence that having tolled, speaks again,

suspended between states of incompleteness—
a point traversing a numbered landscape.

This country of small infinities is what we do
with what remains: bits of window panes,

refracted light, what gathers in the torn leaves
from the dimming edge of the red fields

grown dark. Say what you will, the body is no more
than the moon, a white trouser button in a pool

of gasoline, a halo of ash and flame
ascending the ladder of night.

COMPILE

This is how all small things come together at last.
The story I recorded night after night in code,

now made plain and simple, a liturgy offered to those
born of fire and desert dust, made lightning here

in this moment of translation, when the congregation
of lines that collected memory becomes a calculated will,

and something stirs each *yes* and *no* into a life
that will not be contained, that presses on, anxious—

always asking what is to be done, who will do it,
and what is this message that must be carried

to the world listening outside these trembling walls?

BABBAGE DESCENDING INTO MT. VESUVIUS, 1828

All day, your company has carried you on the backs of horses
and men humoring your strange obsession with flame and ash.

Now, long before dawn, you stand heavy at the crater's edge,
rope in hand, walking stick and measuring gear at your side.

Below you, a plain of fire and darkness spidering out
like the blood vessels of an eye revealed by artificial light.

No one is eager to follow you down. The raw earth exhales,
sigh after poisonous sigh. Your feet are lost in the grey remains

of unmade stone as you ride deeper into the cindery maw,
as you descend onto the troubled skin of what might be hell.

Here, the world is always being destroyed beneath your feet.
Your walking stick turns into a pillar of flame, a poor guide home.

Everywhere the hot breath of death and decline. Everywhere,
between the timed bursts of molten light and heat, the song that tears

through all the layers of earth, through so many moving parts.
How it beats like sorrow in a locked room, like the name of a love

buried beneath a mountain of iron and clay. It's a dark place here,
within your heart, at the end of a world emptying itself of meaning,

translating loss into fire and ash. What is grief to a man surveying
a landscape that will never be here again? What is the void that burns

the sky with a yellowish light? Here, in such radiant absence,
you turn your eyes away, imagine again her hand, her face, her skin.

INTERVIEW

What ghosts haunt your poetry? What are the voices and stories that dog you, the specters that find their way into your writing again and again?

Landscapes, mostly. I hold fast to memories of Saskatchewan and the childhood I spent there working in the sun, or wandering through vast fields of grain in the summer, staring up at a sky that refused number or name. I carry all sorts of things with me in my work and in my life. Behind every new city lies an array of the ones I have left behind, large and small – but it's always the prairies that end up dominating that view: the abandoned farmhouses, the forgotten roads, the fences that run the length of the horizon, everything speaks to something out of time, yet grounded to earth and sensation.

There are people that linger at the edges of my writing as well. My father, for one, now ten years gone into silence, and his voice which I've kept preserved on a little tape recorder, stored in a drawer, waiting for the day I can bring myself to listen to it again. He was my first mentor – the first to encourage me to write, to draw, to imagine things beyond the world around me – and to value the power of language as a means of transformation and possibility. When I teach I find myself falling back on not just on what he taught me, but how – the ways in which he refused easy answers, but equipped me to search out my own.

As a programmer turned poet, I'm haunted the memory of my first encounter with contemporary American poetry, of standing in the aisle of a used bookstore and thumbing through a copy of Philip Levine's *New Selected Poems* and the way "Letters for the Dead" rose from the page and took over my entire imagination. I remember thinking at that time, I wanted to write like that—and that yearning has carried me on a remarkable journey, page after page, through the minds and worlds of other great poets.

What led you to become a poet after working as a computer programmer?

In truth, I've been writing poetry almost as long as I've been programming. I started writing poetry in earnest when I was around 10, about the same time my father brought home an IBM PC Jr with GW-BASIC on it. One of my very first original programs was a haiku generator that produced pretty awful haiku. Even as an undergraduate studying computer science, I sought permission to take creative writing classes at the graduate level. For a long time, I thought I could juggle writing poetry with computer programming. Eventually, however, programming lost its luster and I stopped loving the work, despite still being good at what I did…[e]ventually, I received a call from UC Riverside offering me a generous full-ride MFA scholarship, which made the transition possible.

Other interviews:

- The Displaced Nation
- Queen Mob's Teahouse
- *Prism Review* (in issue 11)

REVIEWS OF *BABBAGE'S DREAM*

Excerpt from *Bellingham Review* (full review here)

At the heart of Babbage's story is a tragic narrative of negatives that refuse to add up, a groping for something in the gray haze of after.

Aitken's background as a former computer games programmer and poet puts him in a unique position to write about Babbage's ambitious undertaking. Some of the added poems found in *Babbage's Dream* riff on computer terminology, words such as "Array," "Loop," and "Short," which function as titles and launching coordinates for Aitken's imaginative exploration. Most of these poems include definitional epigraphs that, for me, a person with limited computer knowledge, felt cryptic at first, but through Aitken's poetic work, I could read as if from a deliberately altered angle. The terms take on new meanings through the energy of the poems […]

Other added poems in *Babbage's* Dream meditate on the relationship between creator and creature, the fine line between machine and mind. In several, the created speak back, sometimes accusatorily (as in "Frankenstein's Creature Bids Farewell to Its Maker"), sometimes with a mixture of menace and aching tenderness. In the last poem, the personified mind of Babbage's mechanical computer, which he referred to as "Leviathan," speaks to Babbage on his deathbed:

> You cannot even begin to see what lies ahead. How I will shed this form
> that you conceived. How when I rise again, it will be in lightning and war,
>
> in the service of blood and peace. How I will feast on many minds
> and grow fat, multiplying like the beasts until the earth is filled with my kin.
>
> Dear Babbage, creature born out of time, you dreamed me first,
> before language, before there were words or names for what I am. (*BD* 66)

Throughout the collection, Aitken plays with binaries, the language of computers that manifests as ones and zeroes. Poems that aren't written in couplets are sometimes split into two columns. One of my favorites is "Binary," where Aitken translates the visual poetics of binary code into language:

0000	:	Absence stretched to extremity, nothingness in all quarters.
0001	:	At the far reaches of the void, a glimmer.
0010	:	How it doubles in size, moving closer, leaving a silence behind.
0011	:	And how, out of that silence, an echo appears, an afterimage. (*BD* 35)

In addition to binary forms, the collection is ghosted with the binaries of presence and absence, living and dead, making and unmaking, creator and creature. Throughout, Aitken eloquently expresses Babbage's questing after the "unanswerable questions" and the mixed legacy of creative effort […]