

“Poetry will help you be human”

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There was never any question of being torn between his two early loves: literature and medicine. Shane Neilson wanted them both. “I wanted it,” he says, “I really wanted it.”

Now 42. Now a family physician at the University of Guelph Student Health Services. Now widely published: nine chapbooks, four books of poetry plus nine other books — memoirs, anthologies, short fiction. A critic and doctoral candidate, with accolades galore: a silver National Magazine Award and Trillium Poetry Award shortlist, the 2017 *Walrus* Poetry prize.

These accomplishments speak to how Neilson now has “it” but obscure the odds against this success. To understand that, we begin with his family: a father who drank, was sometimes violent and had a “turbulent mental health condition,” according to Neilson. Neilson was likewise afflicted with mental illness.

This was offset by an industrious mother, a leader in nursing who loved reading. She encouraged her antisocial son to play hockey and baseball, to be a Cub Scout. It was difficult but without that encouragement, “I would have just kept being strange,” said Neilson.

He began writing poetry in primary school; he recalls being incredibly moved in grade 12 by Alden Nowlan’s posthumously published novel, *The Wanton Troopers*, about rural Maritimes, alcoholism and illiteracy. Neilson’s work is still rooted where he was born in rural New Brunswick.

But Neilson also loved science and biology. At 20, he began medical school at Dalhousie University in Halifax. “I walked into medical school out of a traumatic household with a violent, alcoholic father in a New Brunswick setting where stigma was powerful, and walked into medical school, flagrantly unwell. Flagrantly unwell through the whole time. I have what is recognized now as bipolar disorder.”



Shane Neilson, family physician and widely published, award-winning writer.

With his “near-eidetic memory,” exams were a breeze, but he missed assignment deadlines. In his second year, he was called to the promotions committee but refused to say he was unwell. “I thought it was weakness.” The committee assigned extra work and Neilson got through the workload. “It’s a cyclical illness, so productivity ... is a learned strategy. I have to put the energy somewhere. If I don’t, it consumes me.”

His first published poem was in the weekend supplement of the Saint John *Telegraph Journal* newspaper: “It was terrible,” he said, laughing at the memory. He persevered, publishing poems in literary journals about his roots, family and love. Then in training, he realized he could explore the unique language of medicine, psychiatry and mental health.

... As we work, the ward clerk calls out phone lines like bingo numbers: *Cardiology on seventy-six-fifty, Thoracics on sixty-nine-hundred, General Surgery on seventy-two-hundred*. Residents blink at one another bleary-eyed, our patients splayed before us like toppled dominoes that will not right again.¹

During his residency he became a regular contributor to the *Medical Post* and *CMAJ*. Neilson won a contest sponsored by Frog Hollow Press in 2003, which published his first chapbook of poetry. Shortly afterward, he became an editor at the press. He had recently moved to Guelph, where his wife, Janet Sunohara-Neilson, was enrolled in veterinary school. He took care of Zee, their three-year-old daughter,

and worked on an anthology: *Alden Nowlan and illness* (Frog Hollow Press, 2004).

Neilson's first clinical placement was at the University of Guelph Student Health Services in January 2004. He wrote in early mornings and evenings. At the end of the 2004 academic year, he did a summer locum in Erin, Ontario, attractive in part because it is home to The Porcupine's Quill, a legendary literary press. Neilson joined the Erin clinic in January 2005.

His poetry improved, but he was dissatisfied with his prose. Poetry, he said, requires a lot of reading and understanding, then "I'd be moved to write something and I'd do it. I think that's the spirit of a poem. You don't need the ass-in-the-chair approach of a prose writer." He did manage a memoir about his training, *Call me Doctor* (Pottersfield Press, 2006), "which wasn't bad for where I was at the time."

His disorder brought immense industry and capability, he said, but it engendered disorganized thoughts, making structuring a poetry manuscript difficult, something he then wrote about.

One day, I was looking for a prescription pad in my pocket. I was taking care of an elderly poet, and I had to fish through wadded-up receipts, keys and change. My hands kept scrambling through the right pocket, then the left pocket, then back to the right. His response was devastating: he said, after a minute of this, "I fear for your poetry."

It was uppercut Rilke: how can one create anything out of such disorder? I announced myself as a mess.²

A friend helped him compile a manuscript: *Meniscus* (Biblioasis, 2009). A year later, *Complete Physician* (The Porcupine's Quill) was published, followed by a second memoir, *Gunmetal Blue* (Palimpsest Press, 2011). That is two memoirs by age 35. "I find myself interesting," he laughs but is immediately critical. "*Gunmetal* starts out like a house on fire, but I was not able to make this book thing [work], which is a real skill. ..."

The opportunity to acquire that skill came after another challenge. In the fall of 2010, his 30-month-old son, Kaz, began having seizures. Sometimes six daily. The record was 13. Janet had just started a residency, so for three months Neilson looked after his son. He returned to work at Erin but needed to be nearer to Kaz's daycare at the University of Guelph. Neilson transitioned back to Student Health Services by July 2011. In September, he started his Masters of Fine Arts at Guelph; he wrote *The Saving*, about Kaz's illness, and his first collection of short fiction, *Will* (Enfield and Wizenty Press, 2013).

He persevered in academia, completing his Masters of English in 2014 with a thesis on representations in pain in the novels of Catherine Bush and Karen Connelly. He became an adjunct professor of English at McMaster University and in 2018 hopes to defend his doctoral thesis, tentatively entitled, "A CanLit Care Manual: Methodologies for the Medical Humanities."

Neilson finds universities' attitude toward mental illness much improved, less stigmatized. Sometimes students approach him for support. "I'm not ashamed at all to talk about my own experience. It's only fair to anybody on the other side of the table to know. I'm treated and I would say 'normal' now. I go to work every day and take care of my family and things are good. But once upon a time ..."

His prodigious output continues. Since 2015, he has edited three collections of poems by Travis Lane and another anthology, *Play: Poems about childhood* (Frog Hollow Press, 2014). He also published the last of his "affect trilogy" of poems with The Porcupine's Quill: *On Shaving off his Face* (2015) and *Dysphoria* (2017).

Neilson believes that for people — doctors included — who appreciate beauty, poetry can be a transformational experience. He recently saw a book entitled *Poetry will save your life*. "No shit! It saved my life so many times."

Will it improve a doctor's observational skills?

"It will for the person who is open to it. And it will do so much more. It could change the way someone looks upon their life. That's pretty powerful and meaningful. Poetry is possibly the quickest, the zero-to-sixty moment for emotional power when it comes to literature."

"Narrative is a to b. Narrative is words and time. There's an impetus to it; there's a resolution, oftentimes. Poetry is simply being with. At least the nonnarrative kind ... You can just be with a patient, instead of taking a history. That would be the difference between the prose mode and the poetry mode. I personally think poetry is so much more useful: it will change the way you are, it will help you be human."

I'm telling you what you cannot understand. I wonder if we are lost, or merely waylaid; where the ultimate question, and your smile belie years receding into perfection.

... Did you know that, at the end, you may lose your smile?

You will only have a few months to live then. Poets know this. Doctors sign the death certificate.³

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