

# COUNTERFLOW

SPRING 2023

2

# COUNTERFLOW

## ISSUE 2

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Eve Wolvès, *In Dreams*, photograph.

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Adam, *Untitled*, photograph.

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# INTRODUCTION

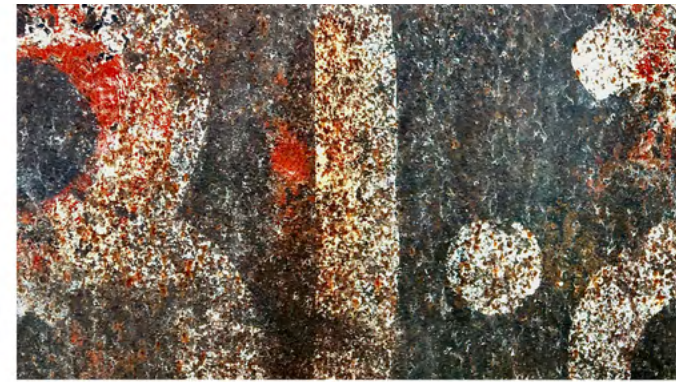
In selecting submissions for this issue, I began by asking myself what my criteria were. In the end, the best answer to that question may in fact be “read on and find out”: I didn’t know what I was looking for, but I knew I’d know when I’d found it. I read to be astonished, and to be reminded of how finicky, how slippery, the art of arranging language can be. Ben Lerner defines poems as “events in language,” and I extend that definition to fiction, to nonfiction, and to all hybrid genres; writing is an act of filling up the silence of the present. When done intentionally, life – in the broadest terms – gets enriched.

I’m a relative newcomer to Nanaimo. Sometimes I still crinkle my nose at the smell of pulp. Sometimes I forget to pack a raincoat and pay dearly for it. Editing Counterflow appealed to me as an opportunity to feel out this community; what better way to arrive at a place than to learn how its residents (and those from surrounding areas) wield words? I was greeted by stark images of landscape, shoreline, and weather; stories of consequential encounters and lingering memories; and fervent calls for accountability and justice. Here are writers who remark on the beauty and fragility of their surroundings, who notice the precarity (and sweetness) of relation, who speak up. I am glad to have been, and to be, in their midst.

Every submission in this issue began the same way, with its author overcoming the stifling question *why do this?* and daring to write. I hold the core belief that the more closely we attend to the difficulty of conveying anything clearly in language – feelings, memories, hunches, facts – the more equipped we become to explode our daily routines and live compassionately, sensitively, responsively, and responsibly. In turn, I would venture that every submission in this issue also began with its author overcoming the equally stifling question *who will read this?* and daring to invite a stranger in. I sent back my selections feelings refreshed, refurbished, and renovated.

As I wrote this introduction, the sky dimmed then turned black. From my rented farmhouse on Calder Road – between spikey, silhouetted firs – I can now see a steady trail of headlights on the highway tunneling through the dark. I wonder if you, readers and writers, are among those drivers, but I am simultaneously relishing the idea that a newcomer, this very instant, is arriving here, to this island city and its vibrant community of authors, to share their voice with us.

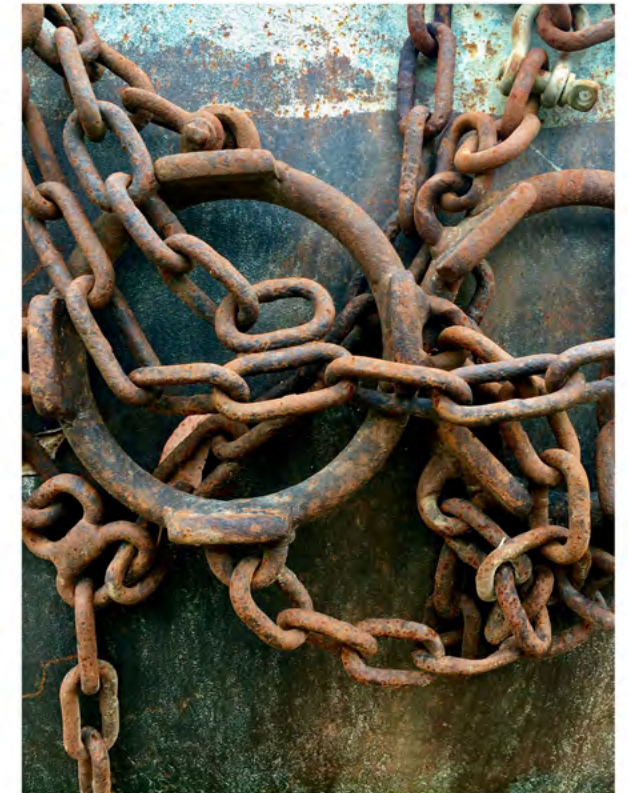
**Neil Surkan**  
Guest Editor, Issue 2



palimpsest



hitched



entanglement



pinup



beach hieroglyph #7

Diana Kolpak, *palimpsest/hitched/entanglement/pinup/beach hieroglyph #7*.

## HAROLD RHENISCH

# The Poet's House

I went to a school for poets that was at no university. It was in a house full of paintings. The house was a home for the poet Robin Skelton. He once wrote that a house with no paintings has no windows. He did not mean windows out onto the apple tree in his yard, or the street, or the sky. He meant windows into the stories that are the world.

Robin was a witch. He lived in a world that moved around him in painted, eternal pictures usually called the deep archetypes of the unconscious. He knew them as eternal stories. His life was spent absolutely still, "hunched over the altering verse," washed over by the waves of these stories until they carried him away and he was part of the Earth again. "There is life in eternity," he told me once, "but we live there alone. It's only here, on Earth, that we have a chance to touch and laugh and cry and love each other."

That was Robin. He was a man who heard messages and wrote them down. He never said they came from his own mind. Most he did not call poetry. He also had a ghost in the bedroom down the upstairs hall. When I stayed with him once, in that room, he asked his wife Sylvia to take a polaroid picture of the two of us under his apricot tree before I left. He wanted to be sure that the ghost hadn't attached herself to me and wasn't going out to cause some trouble in the world. When she didn't show up in the photo, he wished me well and sent me on my way.

That's not really a normal creative writing school. For Robin, creativity meant what poets do between the world and a poem and one draft of a poem and the next. My poem, "The Poet's House" which I wrote for Robin in eternity, watches this as well and begins like this:

It was back in the years when people used to photocopy body parts.  
We all lived in the poet's house. Instead of windows, it had oils.  
We looked out through them at a story that was living us:  
goddesses and lovers and the damned and other lovers.

A house like that is not a house, really, if "house" means a shelter from the world. Robin wrote many times about the moon shining in through the windows: a living thing, vast and present, right there.

My poem begins with the night in 1978, when the artist, Professor Pat Martin Bates, was laughing and showing photocopies of her elbow and, if I remember rightly, her knee. They were pretty blotchy. It was long before quality scanning imagery, selfies or electronic photography. Pat was arguing that these blotches on wrinkled paper were as much art as any of the paintings on Robin's walls. Robin's were big modernist abstracts constructed out of bold gestures of paint like buildings, the kind of thing it takes a lifetime to learn how to do. I thought Pat was just being academic, but she was leading us into a future where art was no longer about such talismans containing something called the soul. Robin was.

Robin was quite deliberate about it, too. We were his brushstrokes. The evening was his artwork. So was the city: Victoria. We weren't Professor Skelton or Professor Bates or students, only living creatures, delighting in life together, or at least trying to, and at best in wonder. For Robin, we were enacting an ancient story. He was bringing it to life and watching what it did, with delight. Unlike eternity, it didn't last forever.

Robin had convinced a bookseller, Ivy Mickleson, to shelve his ideal library, his real university, in her store. It was a complex collection of books both ancient and modern, books of Irish and British Columbian poetry, world mythology and Jungian and Freudian psychology jumbled together with obscure, lyrical novels, and a whole lot else. This was before Canlit came to town and washed it all away. It lasted just a moment.

As I was peeking through collections of romanian mythology and festschrifts of Jungian spiritual collectives in Switzerland and the welsh poetry of David Jones one day, bold books in which the Roman army on watch on Hadrian's wall was contemporary, living in a time that opened and deepened but did not pass, Ivy came up beside me and said softly, "Are you a poet?" I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"You're looking at these books," she said. "Most people don't."

At that moment, I knew the answer. Yes. I was.

Those books are all on my shelves now, and Ivy is gone. Her bookstore, though, a university out in the city, that was something that is still alive: in this essay right here, for instance.

On my next visit to Robin's house, he left his guests raucously drinking scotch and arguing loudly about some literary topic or game of one-up-man-ship. He had a bottle of red wine in his hand, found me in the hallway, passed me a glass, poured it full, filled his own, and toasted the Goddess. "It all comes from her," he said, and drained the glass back. "Don't you think?"

Well, until then I hadn't. It was a very Christian world back then, but who was I to argue. He spoke with such conviction. "Yes," I said, and tipped mine back as well, realizing that as I did it, there was no back.

In that hallway, Robin also told me that I had written a real poem that week. By that, he meant one dancing in an eternal sky. He didn't tell me all of that, of course. Neither did he tell me that he had asked Sylvia if they could print a collection of my poems with Pharos Press, a spiritual series they published. "No," she had said. "He's not ready." Robin just left to give private messages to the others in the house and by the time I was ready Robin and Sylvia were gone and the house was no longer full of poets.

It was full then, though, and we were living its pictures. Here are two:

The house had glasses of red wine raised up in private like chalices of blood. There were cases of the stuff.  
It had a ghost. Years later, I slept with her, in the cold sheets,  
and woke up to white light, like milk, and a moving curtain.  
It was at the top of a curving stairway and down the hall.

Every room in that house had a different collection of books. Jokes and humour were in the downstairs bathroom, because, as Robin said, all that stuff was pretty funny if you thought about it. The Irish poets were on the curving staircase, to honour W.B. Yeats and his book about the world as a hawk rising on an ascending gyre of air or wool wrapping around a spindle. “Where else would they be?” Robin asked. Fair enough. The ghost was in the guest bedroom with her collection of ghost stories and Graham Greene (“It’s all mysteries,” Robin said.), and literature was in the basement, on sagging shelves next to the big rock that anchored the house and a big table on which Robin cut up magazine photographs and arranged them as collages. He liked to watch what they revealed when they were brought together — what they said about the mind in its own house, the skull, looking out and sometimes seeing itself for the first time, as it had seen so many times before. Robin was mesmerized. I think you’re feeling comfortable in this house now, so let me let you walk around for a bit, as the pictures guide you:

I could take you there. You could see for yourself,  
but now there are new people in the house,  
although it does not mean it’s theirs. The poet  
took a snap to see if the ghost had come down with me,  
past the Irish poets on the stairs. He didn’t say.  
I presumed she knew her place. In those years,  
artists came over excitedly with an elbow,  
a knee, a hand, an arm, and passed them around.

Perhaps you can see the poem spiralling in Yeats’ gyre no, revisiting its themes and deepening them as it goes? I hope so. It’s what a poem can do. It can grow within you, and carry you. It can be Robin, whatever he was. “A man,” we’d say today. Robin didn’t.

Poets don’t speak of goddesses as Robin did any more, either. That age of the world is over. We have freedom from such old conceptions, when a body responded to a body as a body, and then tried to make sense of that sudden loss of mind’s dominion in a flash rather than through intellectual arguments. Pat Bates was ahead of us in that, showing us through her delight in the freedom of a world in which art was not a thing made but a sharing noticed. Robin honoured such moments of transformation as well. I think we’d call them “creativity” now, perhaps without thinking of how bodily an experience they are.

For Robin, though, poems were spells, charms and talismans, even healing spells that set broken bones and guided children to the world. The poem has its own things to say about much of that, like this:

It was our first inkling that the age of the body was over,  
that a stone was no longer a stone, and water no longer water,  
but we were young and had only the memory  
of something that came before bodies at all,  
that was waking in us, but we had no selves — none at all.  
That is something it takes a long time to create,  
or it did, before photocopiers. I lived in a tower.  
The moon lay across me like a mouth and called me out,  
and I went, at 2 a.m., every night, down to the park,  
and through the woods in wind and under stars,  
then walked my fatigue back. That was my city.  
In its place, a ghost gave me eternity.

My days in that city were dreamlike with exhaustion after such nights. At the university, though, Robin had other things he wanted to pass on: about how poems worked; about how you could help energy from eternal symbols flow out into the world; and even about how to create symbols out of thin air. Nearly a half century ago, he led a dozen of us through Welsh poetic forms and complained that we had no ear at all. He had us write about paintings, then told us that we were describing them without becoming them. He showed us a modernism built out of deep psychology. He taught us spellcraft, and opened a door into Anglo Saxon and Old Norse. We weren’t to know it, but these were modern movements across the European North, which would live on in pop music from Helsinki to Reykjavik.

At first, I only learned to imitate his gestures. Then, I learned to make poems out of sound. Then, I became poetry myself, as he had been for a time. Here, for example, is the gyre of the poem circling around its themes again. This time, look at its sound deepening, finding the bass notes of the basement and the heart:

Twenty years later, the poet wrote from his basement,  
*We might all live in eternity, but we live there alone.*  
By then the blood was pooling in his heart  
and he was going home without a candle in the dark.

There are old words, reverberating: the spellcraft of bodily movement. The poem’s body has moved from sound in the centre of the head, the high skies of “It was back in the years when people used to photocopy body parts,” into “blood” and “heart” and “home” and “dark.” There is no candle. There is no light. You have to feel your way, but bodies do that.

For Robin, to be a teacher meant to keep the conversation going and to intervene only when it was going off the rails. Once, he said to me simply, “You have nailed it, but I can’t hear the music in it, and if there’s no music in it, I don’t trust it. You’re not done.” The process of finding that music, of living a poem through its windows rather than through the narratives of a culture in which fiction is the primary literary form, has carried me a long way. I’m still exploring Old Norse and Anglo Saxon as an Indigenous language woven with the Earth.

This poem, “The Poet’s House,” which I wrote 15 years ago and have never published was a central realization of how much of a tradition had been passed on. I had practiced it before, of course, when I edited Robin’s last book of verse, “Facing the Light,” after he died in 1997. When I was one, I wrote 365 poems in 6 weeks, in conversation with Robin. At their heart was the series collected in my book “The Spoken World,” where Robin’s voice and mine are one. Even I can’t tell them apart. I eventually realized that I didn’t have to.

This poem, though, “The Poet’s House,” was the first time I spoke of these matters as my own self, and, ironically, as no self at all but the voice of the words, ancestral words, speaking from deep in the world and time. I had just come back from the Northern Camino, between Mainz and Dresden, where the man I had used to be had vanished. I was a ghost, shedding an old self for a new one.

Now the house is sold, and it has windows, and no one  
has a body anymore, just a cage of words  
in which they sing such cricket songs as these,  
that we put on paper and call our selves,  
even those of us who sat in the poet's house  
and drank blood and know this better than that.

A ghost is a spirit so attached to the Earth that it is at home there. Another word for home is haunt. Death cannot tear us away. Robin passed on his passions, his life, if you want, his house, before he became the world again. Long before, he had given himself away. To each of us who knew him well, he gave one piece: to one, his life as an editor; to another, his life as a spirit of Celtic Earth; to others literature; to others Wicca; to others friendship and healing; and to one poet a glass of blood and such cricket songs as these.



**Harold Rhenisch's** poetry explores British Columbia's Okanagan Valley where he lives and grew up within an immigrant culture involved in developing orchards and vineyards. He has won The Malahat Review Long Poem Prize (twice), and the CBC Literary Prize. His *The Wolves at Evelyn* won the George Ryga Prize for Social Responsibility in British Columbia Literature in 2007. He has been the education chair and communication chair of the League of Canadian Poets and has worked as a member of the B.C. Ministry of Education Fine Arts Curriculum Overview Team. He actively mentors and edits writers from across North America. His latest books are *Landings*, *Poems from Iceland* and *The Tree Whisperer*. <https://haroldrhenisch.com/about>





**SHELLEY STEIN-WOTTEN**

## Cafe Ritual

Boris leaned over the blonde, reclaimed plywood table, over his white-ceramic coffee mug, his hands folded around its curved walls. His half-cup had reached the lukewarm stage; he wasn't siphoning any heat from the liquid, but he had seen people in this cafe, and the one across the street and the one around the corner, wrap their hands around their mugs and he always thought they looked reflective and soulful.

Upon reflection, this ritual of interlacement was making him feel soulful, even if only because the people walking past the cafe espied him assuming such a reflective and soulful position, and thus believed his mind was in the aforementioned state. He closed his eyes slowly and breathed in deeply as if to suggest he could remain like this for hours on end because he had never in his life felt so blissfully reflective and soulful. He would not, but he grew content believing others would think so.



PAMELA MEDLAND

## The Fall

I slipped my hands into the pink-fleshed  
hearts of a pair of salmon oven mitts,  
their back fins singed, their gaping mouths  
a little soiled.       The world

muffled, as if there was water  
in my ears. The view skewed;  
light, refracted through  
    a viscous green,  
pressed on both my lidless  
    side-skulled eyes.

I lost my balance,  
couldn't find my feet;  
    fell,  
swathed hands first  
into a long slide along the lino,  
    waterfalls roaring in my ears.



Lorraine Martinuik, *mandala for the herring of the Salish Sea.*



TAYA HILL

## Collages of Myself

Two lamp shades in between me and a pair of scissors  
If I could cut parts of me out I would  
I sit there on the carpet, knee caps touching collar bones, cheeks touching unshaven legs  
Heart muttering sweet nothings,  
Mind cussing like I've slipped.  
I slip paper in between the blades of kids' scissors, the sticky kind  
What parts of myself would I miss if they were gone?

ALEX SKOROCHID

## A Metaphor

The camas clings  
to the rocky spots  
development hasn't  
favoured

once ranging  
the wide west  
now fenced  
with rough-wood planks

and signed:  
keep out please  
vegetation restoration  
in progress



Shoshanah Moss, *shopping for nature* (top),  
*searching* (bottom).

**ALEX SKOROCHID**

## Wind Grading

Still playing at being grown-ups,  
we gathered what we could in our arms  
and tossed it to the winnowing wind

We watched as it blew the chaff away,  
then crouched, just as we'd seen our parents do,  
and mimed collecting grain

**VALERIE GALVIN**

## Forest Fire

Smoke filled air:  
the sun, a dark red disc  
leaving a pink tail across the  
still water of the Sound.  
The nearest island is a murky shadow.  
The atmosphere is dampened,  
the trees still, everything  
held in suspension.

I sense the air, eerily cool on my skin.  
I pull an inhale - the sensation  
is like breathing dust.  
Foreboding seeps into my chest,  
like sooty poison.

Here I sit, hundreds of miles from the fire,  
yet my world is obscured by its reach,  
invaded by murk and distant destruction.

Who is to blame?  
Who can I rage against?  
I drive, use too much water,  
buy things I don't need,  
distract myself from  
overwhelm and guilt with  
Netflix and a good glass of wine.

Here on this mountainside,  
I know I am part  
of the forces I sense,  
in ocean, trees, earth, and air.

I was taught, respect the one  
who has given you life.  
Do I, in my life? Yes.  
Is it enough? No.  
Does it matter?  
Only if I believe that  
each consciousness matters,  
Each small action.  
Which I do.

Will I ask myself, more often:  
Is this an act of honouring?



**VALERIE GALVIN**

## Blessed

Industry on the water:  
the ferry departing,  
little Stormaway chugging to Keats;  
another sturdy boat making its way to Gambier;  
a tug pulling a barge: human industry, robust, against  
the backdrop of mountain and sea.

A hawk sails, then dives,  
and the wind whips the trees.  
Life force everywhere.

I am that vigor, too,  
amid all this magnificence.  
When I pause to see and sense,  
my body breathes it in.  
I feel a visceral change  
and I become One whom  
Radiance has entered.

Perhaps this is what it is  
to be blessed by God.

JAMES GIFFORD

## Robson Creek

Stuck; drops; sits; pools in  
ditch; trench; basin. Cool reeds  
grow in; stop; plug. Through these the  
slim stream eddies and sits. Then piped  
through and pooled, gathered under the  
roadbed to bear a new wakening: Robson  
borne through concrete partition.

Out of the  
culvert of trickling flows of the waters the  
Robson runs through to ravines cutting  
downward eroding the blockage of history,  
cutting down wire mesh contracts of past into  
future and trauma to memory – aches of the  
whimpering water past stone over land and  
erratics gone silent while witnessing  
channel and concrete.

Railbed walls  
bar the way. A bunker hellmouth  
swallows darkness – eats the green.  
Shudder under cement stelae:  
Ceremony, Opening of the Mouth.  
An immortal burial chamber  
descends the throat, corridor to  
canal in dark desecrations.  
The well falls to the Manson Canal  
under warehouse, feeds on waste of  
junk in rotting, rusting red flows  
bleeding iron. But this lies.  
Never stela, never an underworld,  
Robson's waters, stowed low, flow to  
opening, hastening, wakening out to the  
life of the river to flow into time without time—



Lorraine Martinuik, *the creek at high water overwhelms the forest.*

JAMES GIFFORD

## Mahood Abhainn

Boundaries bow down, hunching under  
buried pipes, too hurried in to  
crooked pathways, crawling through to  
burrs and thorn. Draíocht under boughs of

alders and oaks, watersongs soak,  
emerging singingly to the lea, under tree  
over rock, opening woven blue thought  
to leaves. He grieves while Mahood smoulders.

He watches sheens of oil on water,  
what watchers write, wanting paths  
to revivifications. To  
petrol rainbows preying on those

thirsting roots, thrumming shoots of  
green life reaching, teaching him strife  
borne of beseeching thorn of complicities,  
shorn of longing for bowed down boundaries—

JAMES GIFFORD

## Invergarry's Bon Accord

Beating heart of our rough river mouth  
makes alliance to the flat land high  
above to the ravine banks hidden  
beside crag, under rock. Bon Accord's  
flow pulses from thorn vines that hedge in  
tamed land, through blue beating life unseen  
in the derelict scar hidden from  
sight 'til a downward instinct calls like  
to like on the long bank of river.  
Thorn deep walls, the garden river, and  
the confluence of waters scrub soil  
from rock like a crack splitting a heel:  
fissures opening for stones to drop,  
erosion of roots that crack the cairns,  
their rolling clacks at the pace of stars.  
You cannot follow it. Strong swimmers  
cannot climb. The streambed encloses  
itself. Digging down to curl under  
the cellars of the land, the words root  
in tongue after tongue. Drink down a draught  
of the stone-toothed stream and find hand and  
foot holding bank – body, soul, and tongue –  
back to surface. But words under words  
and tongue-tangled roots do not speak the  
confluence in Invergarry's abhainn.  
A fast runner could climb from its banks,  
but the bubbling Bon Accord talks over  
the words that whisper tirelessly.  
Sibilants running through rock and earth,  
whisper their songs to roots and hold the  
hills to flow: an artery of life  
under the skin but folding in to  
muscle and stone of body beating—



**ROBERT BOWERMAN**

## Heron in Nanaimo Harbour

perched on the deck  
of an old, battered scow;  
behind it the dark bulk  
of an outboard motor.

I'd seen lots before, poking  
in tidal flats, or in marshes  
standing on one leg, the other  
tucked up under plumage,  
ready to strike at the first flicker  
of life.

In the water beside that boat  
only the slick sheen of oil  
and bits of wood and plastic  
slowly swirled.

It was close enough I could gather  
it up in my arms  
but it was far too fierce  
for that.

This grim grey sentinel  
stood completely still  
and stared straight at me,  
its neck a crooked question mark.



**ROBERT BOWERMAN**

## Insomnia

The older I am the less I sleep  
but the more I dream.  
Every night I shuffle  
along endless corridors  
of regrets.

The faint shadows of my youth  
are but an anxious fuel.  
Instead, I breathe in the relief

of wakefulness

and somewhere,  
now not so far away,  
I hear a clock ticking.

**ROBERT BOWERMAN**

## Wabi-Sabi

This old mug, now chipped,  
That she gave me long ago.  
Everything was new.

**ADELIA MACWILLIAM**

## Poaching From the Dark

You're shouting at Gary over engine noise in *High Tech*, a boat so weathered sometimes you pull grass, roots and all, from the bilge. It's the only boat in the Sound tonight, destination secret.

The first stars are out –Venus to the west, burning with eros, Jupiter in the east, partying on. Nearby islands are dipped in millennia old charcoal dreams beneath a vast mulberry sky so beautiful you want to merge with it with the same wistful longing you had for certain boys when you were thirteen and it was too soon.

As the sky dissolves into a snowfield of stars, you send out a silver cord to pull yourself back. It flickers out from you, ephemeral as the lick of phosphorescence around your gumboots as you step onto shore. Water's northern lights, the brush of them erotic. You speak to yourself. See this? See? Worth being here for. That, and the language of skin.

Now you and Gary dig. Taste of juniper berries, wet cedar on your tongue. Poach from the dark: grit, stones, polished oyster shells. Fight against entropy with each scrape of a rusty shovel, each heave into the wheelbarrow, each wobble-dance up the plank to the barge. He'll build a greenhouse wall. Grow tomatoes.

On the way back flaming arrows with fins dart away from the bow, and the water beneath the barge you are hauling is a glowing cross. Land here, you tell yourself. Here, where the phosphorescence has created a landing strip in the dark.



ADELIA MACWILLIAM

## Tsolum River Blues

It's raining as you cross the bridge over the little river,  
Cowboy Junkies on the car radio –  
blue velvet in the languid melancholy  
in the female singer's low-pitched voice.

You once had a fine house near this river,  
floors of old growth Douglas Fir,  
a house you abandoned  
for Europe.

You knew this section of the river  
and all the pathways along its shore  
as well as you knew  
all the meridians of your lover's body,  
this long-legged river  
that bends like a dancer  
as it descends  
from Mt. Washington.

You once compared the shafts of sunlight  
shining through its clear water  
to the light in your lover's brown eyes.

Where is he now?

You poured some of his ashes  
out of a tin foil package  
into an elbow of the Danube  
from a high up bridge during a snowstorm  
then sat in a Bratislava bar  
with your German artist girlfriend  
drinking to love. The beer there so cheap  
you drank all evening  
and then poured yourselves  
onto the train back to Vienna.

Did you really drink to love?  
At least you remember his eyes.

You'd drink to them now.

And you'd still drink to the river,  
but to a different part of it.

ADELIA MACWILLIAM

## Dog

The dog in the dream turned,  
his terrible love for me coming into focus  
like a fire, his grey fur beneath my hands  
rough, crusted unbreakable bread  
as I took in the full of him: silky ears,  
curve of white canines,  
dingo spots, my Virgil in the dark forest,  
those years at the house.

How the swans descended, trumpeting,  
into those autumn evenings, scattering their formation.  
each swan's V as it landed,  
stitching pond to rippling sky.

That first hint of snow on the hummocky field;  
nothing in my cupboards but flour  
and salt.

My cross-eyed dog asleep on the porch  
dreaming me in fifteen years dreaming him,  
dry paw pads like dried figs curled against his belly,  
red-gummed dingo jaws open upside-down.

The state of my plates on the table back then  
bare scraped clean.

How the dog watched me,  
when I was waiting for the crack to appear  
in the wall, or a door that wouldn't lock,  
ears half turned.

Candles lit in the candelabra over my plates



**BRUCE MCRAE**

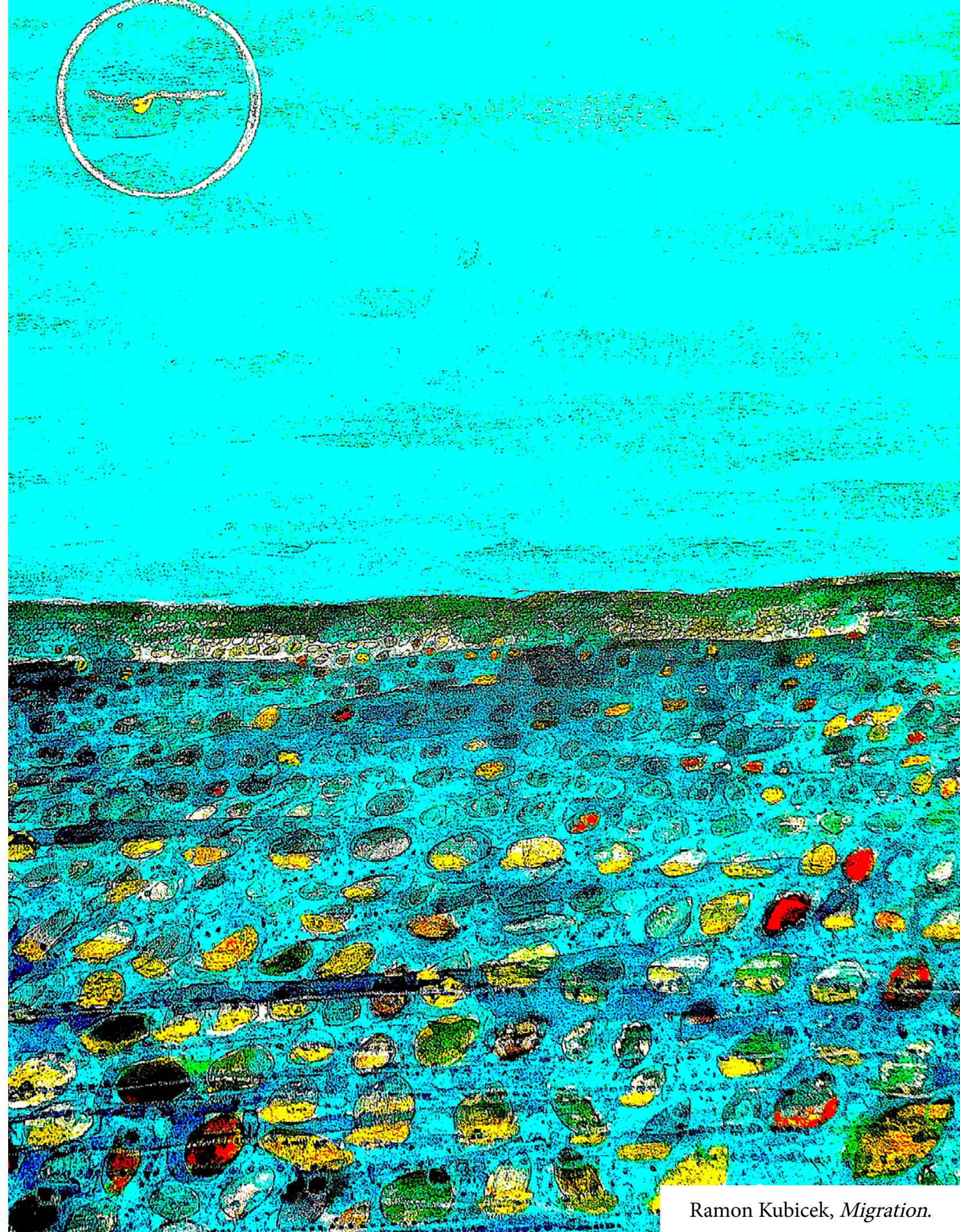
## Running With The Wolves

An hour of joy, an ounce of sorrow.  
This monumental moment, in part and in whole.  
I'm being touched by moonlight, so a little bit mad.  
Moonstruck and nightblind. Gone the way of the wolf.  
I'm lying in a loony half-light and recounting the myths,  
the stories we tell ourselves in order that we might carry on.  
Meaning imbued over coincidence. Memories shorted.  
The past redacted and redressed, so all is calm.  
You can put away those nerve-pills and quack confections.  
You can rest easy. Write a poem. Go whistle.  
A full harvest moon, and you can see into the darkness.  
You can sail that moonbeam over the shallows of paradise.  
Hang tight, my passenger, it's full on into morning.

**BRUCE MCRAE**

## There You Have It

Hypothetical clouds in a proven sky. A stranger's sock in my laundry. Disbelief suspended from a wire, differing truths at loggerheads, trading an I for an I . . .  
When I had wanted to say  
there were two gods out one day, walking and talking, admiring one another's handiwork, comparing notes, taking pains when criticizing the other's vistas and incredible distances.  
Two gods who stood outside of life and life's meaning.  
Who agreed on the need for mystery, bordering our light with their darkness, inventing the scales of death and liking what they saw —  
the invisible confines of Mankind's suffering.



Ramon Kubicek, *Migration*.



**CHRIS LIHOU**

## Stones

she walks slowly barefoot  
eyes down  
every so often stooping  
to pick up a pebble  
with colour or shape meaning something  
adding to her collection  
while the gentle swells  
swish back and forth  
back and forth  
smoothing edges of angular stones  
one against the other  
with a noise of a muted rattle  
what do these water-honed stones  
hold for her?

CHRIS LIHOU

## Slack Tide

the surface  
oily and silent  
languidly creeps forward  
is it water or sky?  
the dripping greyness  
has made each  
imperceptible  
from the other

drip by drip  
this moisture reaches into  
my being  
calmness, quietness  
overwhelms me.

the peacefulness soothes  
while somewhere near  
a loon breaks the silence  
with a haunting,  
strangely comforting  
sound

seaweed  
other flotsam  
slowly float landward;  
pebbles disappear  
a moment when  
all is still  
the tide is slack





MARY NELSON

## The Size of the Scar

Picking scabs has long been of interest.  
Since childhood I've picked my own  
and other people's, if they'd let me.  
Few tolerate my curiosity.  
I want to know: is it almost better?  
scab still stuck? what colour lies beneath? any pus?

Mother would chide. Don't pick at it!  
Advice largely ignored  
in my quest for learning.

It's like that with past lovers.  
Curiosity presses me to poke,  
to ponder their welfare.  
Are they eating better? putting on weight  
or losing some? Are they happier now,  
without me?

While scabs announce the wounding—  
hide shattered dreams, cushion a vulnerability,  
alert to tender spots—the truth will out,  
conceded by the size of the scar.



## What I Like

Lena sifts through the invoices strewn across her lap. Across the room, Charles reads his newspaper. You pronounce it *Shaahhl*. He does not like to be called Chas or Chuck or Charlie. He consumes roasted cashews while reading the National Post or a new financial planning book. Sometimes he reads Rolling Stone and he'll tell her about some new music release they ought to acquire.

Lena and Charles have built a fine life and in a few more years they can quit the rat race and move to their home in the country. Charles has done the calculations set out in that book about how much is enough and has decided that in seven more years they will have *enough*.

What Lena likes is that she is no longer irked by Charles' habits that in their younger years drove her mad with rage. She no longer gives a hoot that he slurps when he drinks anything with ice or that he uses expletives as nouns, adjectives and verbs more than anybody she knows. That when he knows he's right, he is right. She supposes this is what happens if you stick with it long enough. It is not relationship resignation, but maturity of perspective.

Lena and Charles are no longer lovers. It doesn't matter, at least not to Lena. She is through with all the sweating and groping. And she is relieved to know it appears Charles is through with it, too. They often walk naked around the house, but it is not because they think it sensuous. It just is.

Lena and Charles. When she says their names aloud, it's as though they've become one entity. They are *lenandcharle*. Long ago they shared a ritual while on holiday in Egypt wherein they forgave each other all past transgressions. They accept each other for who and what they are; faults, foibles, and grace melded together whatever future days might deliver to them.

None of Charles' habits make the skin at the back of her neck tingle anymore. Except one. She burrows deeper into the cushioning of her chair and adjusts her earbuds. As usual, she cannot resist looking. She is a voyeur passing a macabre highway crackup, wishing the moment away while freeze-framed within it.

Charles gently removes his top teeth. Then slowly, like a satisfied feline preening after a hearty breakfast, he begins licking and sucking them clean. His technique is almost seductive. *Almost*.

The cashew bits get stuck. He has no choice, he claims.

*But do you have to do it in public?* she once asked.

He'd only grinned, his lips receding like the memory of an event long past.

*You are not the public, Lena.*

She smiles wanly at her oblivious beloved across the room and searches Spotify for the Romantics' "What I Like About You".

# COUNTERFLOW

## ISSUE 2: CONTRIBUTORS

**Adam** is someone that loves the moodiness and drama of the coast and the mountains. The photos they submitted are on Fujifilm stocks taken on Pentax cameras, like much of their other work.

**Adelia MacWilliam** has an MFA from the University of Victoria. Place figures hugely in her work. She believes that if you cast the imagination across a piece of land that you love everything will out.

**Alex Skorochild** is a writer and visual artist who lives with his partner and two sons in Victoria, BC. When he can steal back enough time and energy from his day job he writes poems and builds and shoots pinhole cameras.

**Bruce McRae**, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines around the world, including Poetry, Rattle and the North American Review.

**Chris Lihou** spent a career as an expat engineer in five countries. Being settled in retirement enabled him to fully engage his creative side including wood and ceramic creations and poetry. Free verse allows him expression about nature and the realities of aging. Chris and his artistic wife live in Qualicum Beach.

**Diana Kolpak** is a storyteller who uses theatre, fiction, clown, poetry, photography and music as her media. She is the author of the children's book *Starfall* and is grateful to be living and creating on the unceded traditional territory of the K'ómoks First Nation. [www.dianakolpak.ca](http://www.dianakolpak.ca)

**Eve Wolvës** is a film photographer based in Bremerton, Washington.

**James Gifford** is an editor, teacher, and author of the Mythopoeic Award winning book *A Modernist Fantasy*. He has taught in six countries on three continents. Find him on Twitter @GiffordJames.

**Jordyn Dauphinee** is a film photographer from Victoria, BC. She takes her camera with her on her many adventures around Vancouver Island. Photography has always been her way of encapsulating the beauty around her.

**Lorraine Martinuik** is a poet whose work appears in anthologies and literary journals in Canada and the US. She holds an MFA in poetry and a BFA in visual art. She practises writing and other arts on Denman Island (Taystayic), in the traditional territory of the K'ómoks nation.

**Margaret Lonsdale** is a writer and photographer residing among the cedars of North Saanich, on Vancouver Island. Her work is influenced by the natural rhythms of heartbeat and music, the wonder of human resilience, and an awe of the natural world we are privileged to inhabit. Website: [palefacewriter.com](http://palefacewriter.com)

**Mary Nelson** moved from the prairies to Duncan about fifteen years ago. She has had the good fortune to study with Patrick Lane, and at the Banff Centre. She has published a text book for Grade 5 students, a Junior Novel, and numerous poems. She is working on a memoir in poetry.

A graduate of SFU and the University of Toronto, **Pamela Medland's** poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies. Medland is the author of two collections: *Bright Blade* (2020) and *Echo of Ash* (2021).

**R. Michael Fisher**, is a local artist, researcher, educator, who has had a 50 year art career, once working as a wildlife artist professionally, now he likes to do all kinds of art.

**Ramon Kubicek** is a visual artist, writer, and former instructor at Emily Carr University and Langara College. He works full time as a painter. Originally from Montreal, he loves the city and still has connections there, appearing in group shows and interviews, but he loves to be near the ocean and the Coastal forest.

**Robert Bowerman** is a retired teacher living on Vancouver Island. Among others, his work has appeared in the *White Wall Review*, *Sea and Cedar*, *The Anti-Lang Project*, *Portal Magazine* and on the Nanaimo Arts Council website. In 2022, he won first prize in the Island Short Fiction Contest.

**Shelley Stein-Wotten** writes humour and eats mostly vegetables from her home on Vancouver Island.

**Shoshanah Moss** is a photographer working mostly in the medium of film. She enjoys the challenge of evoking emotion and response through capturing quotidian weirdness.

**Taya Hill** is a student at Vancouver Island University and has plans to see the world, take photos and write. Currently she is learning the art of film photography. She has always found herself wanting and needing to express herself through art.

**Valerie Galvin** has lived in many places. By grace or good fortune, her home is now on a hillside overlooking the sea, in Gibsons, B.C. The landscape teaches her about wonder every day. She is new to writing poetry and is learning to use fewer words to express the inexpressible.

