

# **the answer to everything**

**SELECTED POETRY OF KEN BELFORD**

Edited by Rob Budde & Si Transken,  
Consulting Editor Jordan Scott

CAITLIN PRESS 2021

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## FOREWORD

by Rob Budde

I remembered the answer to everything—  
there's always something wrong  
with everything.

Ken Belford, 2019

“The answer to everything” is Ken Belford’s last poem, written a few months before he died February 19, 2020. It was written through the pain and exhaustion cancer imposes on the body, but it is written with determination, clarity, and generosity—all the elements of Belford’s indomitable spirit.

There are many elements that distinguish Ken’s poetry in Canadian poetics; I will discuss very little of them here because I want to spend more time talking about his private process and worldview. He established a distinct assemblage poetics based on semantic slippage and disjunctive other-than-lyric ‘gaps.’ His ‘lan(d)guage’ is like nothing else; he tied the rhythms and codes of poetry to the natural dynamics of the unroaded mountain country, from the perspective of out there, looking back at the cities from the forest, from Blackwater Lake (T’amuuts’whl’ax, north of Hazelton in the Skeena Mountains). His poetry asserted an outside, an other, in two ways: a cultural distance gained from 30 years as a back-country guide trained by Gitxsan hereditary chiefs (foremost being Walter Blackwater) and in terms of gender expression, openly resisting the sexist ‘paternal’ and misogynist ‘poetry boy gangs.’ It was an ethics we shared as close friends and structured our stand in Prince George/Lheidli T’enneh Territory against the status quo.

Ken’s ethics, his anti-racism (borne out of the treaty process), his feminism (informed in part by his partner Si Transken), and his resistance to more conventional poetics modes, all contributed to his remote place in the poetic landscape. I hope this book, selected with his input and edited by those who knew and respected him, is chosen by future scholars as a representative introduction to his work.

This introduction will be careful, kind, and personal, much the same tone an afternoon conversation with Ken over coffee would be. For those who visited Prince George and experienced Ken’s hospitality, I want you to recognize his calm gentleness and generosity. For those who have not met him, I want to channel my inner Ken—all the balanced ways of being he gave to me in our many years of friendship—to provide a context for the poems in this collection.

Ken often spoke of his ‘other lives’—specifically two other lives: one in

Vancouver as a young man and one on Blackwater Lake. His third life was here in Prince George where he lived on Central Street and then Spruce Street from 2004 until 2020 with poet/activist/social worker/professor Dr. Si Transken.

West End Vancouver in the 1960s was where Ken first started writing—this was the era of TISH, founded by such poets as George Bowering, Fred Wah, Frank Davey, Daphne Marlatt, David Cull, Carol Bolt, Dan McLeod, Robert Hogg, Jamie Reid, and Lionel Kearns. Ken sat in on poetry classes at UBC and SFU—not as a registered student (he had a Grade 10 education at the time) but, even then, as an independent scholar, a liminal presence, an outsider. In conversations with me, he identified as, not ‘anti-TISH’, but ‘other-than-TISH’. “Ken was one of the old-style, self-taught poets like Al Purdy, Patrick Lane and John Newlove who forged his art outside the academy and drew on the experience of work and the life of the street for his inspiration,” says Howard White, who published Belford’s fifth poetry book, *ecologue* (Harbour, 2005). As you will see in this collection of his work, Ken’s poetry transformed from the poetics of those self-taught poets into something different, something I don’t think compares easily to anything else in Canadian poetics.

Drawn by work and something else (“fate or dissatisfaction?” Ken once ruminated), Ken went North. Some fruit picking in the Okanagan but mostly North North, for a time working in a printshop in the basement of what is now Books & Company on 3rd Avenue in Prince George. Perhaps more importantly Ken worked in the Smithers/Hazelton area cutting cedar shakes. It was at this time that he felt the pull of the mountains and the green valleys north of roads and north of convention. He spent time with Patrick Lane, on worksites and out hunting, which produced the iconic cover photo of *Post Electric Cave-man*. Worked at other odd jobs, though Ken often said he has never worked a day in his life, which I always interpreted as he always did things he loved and/or never felt beholden to a boss. A good state to be in when writing.

After some years farming near Seeley Lake just West of Hazelton—a beautiful place Ken and I visited on a road trip back to that area—and meeting his first partner Alice, Ken went deeper, further into the mountains, buying the rights to guide on the territory around what is known on most maps as Blackwater Lake. This is Gitxsan territory and accessible only by float plane and walking in. And this is where Ken learned the old names (T’amtuuts’whl’ax) and developed deep relationships with chiefs (Walter Blackwater and Neil Sterritt most notably). With Alice and their new daughter Hannah, Ken hosted wealthy American democrats to experience the lake, rivers, and forest. At first it was fly-in fishing expeditions but then Ken transitioned to a form of ecotourism (before the word existed) that was low impact and did not kill fish or animals. He became

a vegetarian at this time and, as he would say, would eat “nothing with a face.”

I first contacted Ken Belford in 2004, on the advice of Barry McKinnon, who had known him for many years and helped him publish *Pathways into the Mountains* in 2000. I heard he was knowledgeable about fish and I had a question about Steelhead Trout. So, I emailed him and soon received a reply in the form of a 3-page love letter to Steelhead Trout. I was wondering if it was salmon or like the Lake Trout I knew from time in Yellowknife NWT. Instead I got a detailed description of the personality, family structure, and movements of the fish. He wrote about how returning Steelhead recognized him, as they looked up from a pool that they returned to year after year. This careful attention and genuine love for the life of all creatures is what I would want you to know most about the Ken Belford I know. The image of him quietly standing by a river eddy, greeting the Steelhead individuals and families, is something I will carry with me forever.

Ken spoke about how this time—time cutting trails, standing in the river, carving tool handles, interacting with the animals, the forest, the weather—changed him. That much time outside the cities, towns, rural, roaded and human-influenced places, changed his view *looking back at them*—back to the polluting cattle farms, back to the consumptive cities, from the mountains, from the edge of the forest. This specific form of biofilia is an element hinted at in his early writing but fully realized in his later books. The land knowledge, the ‘lan(d)guage’ Ken deploys is based on those 30 years walking the forest, encountering the animals, navigating the water, and relating to the ecosystems. This knowledge was a blend of book knowledge and lived knowledge, and came to be in stark contrast to the representation of “nature” in Canadian lyric poetry. The ‘lived’ knowledge was not just being there and seeing things, but in practice and building knowledge—a relationship with the land—over time. He spoke often of learning, after much practice and experimentation, how to walk best hip deep in various kinds of river currents. He spoke of recognizing how the lake would ‘flip’ its waters at a certain time of year and certain temperature. He spoke of learning to hear moose calls up and down the valley in the evening, if one sat very still, and how to recognize the very loose wide-ranging ‘herds’ that they created.

He compared working on editing poems to making tools—and he made many, often carving handles and even engine parts from wood—until they work right and fit well in your hands. This poem from *Finding Ft. George* was inspired by that discussion, but also an imitation of how Belford often interleaved references to material/natural phenomena and writing:

## the slurry

as ideas move across, a wet inter  
action will form, made  
of material from the sharpening  
mind and the listener--it is junk  
remains in the poem to facilitate  
slippage and friction

as the moisture in the language  
drops, it is crucial that it be kept wet,  
slurry re-applied to the reading act because  
it contains all the particles—the pieces and fragments  
shift shift shift of thought up until that point in the  
text—and so will sound  
out meaning: fine, keen, ready to work  
out there

The word “interleaving” is one term I think accurately describes Ken’s compositional process; he would often take disparate semantic realms of thought and interweave them throughout a poem or set of poems. This juxtaposition functions not like a metaphor, but created resonances across the locations of thought in more subtle complicated ways. So, one of my reading strategies when spending time with a Belford poem is to open up my reading stance so I am not looking for a single line of argument or location of representation, or even two parallel tracks, but instead I am paying attention to the ways the zones interact, like the complex ecology of a place.

The relationship he built with the physical place of Blackwater Lake was partly guided (the guide being guided) by Gitxsan elders and chiefs. By boat and on the ancient trails still visible in the region, Ken spent time with these holders of knowledge that transcended the colonial books and ways of seeing. I imagine, the elders, chiefs, and other Gitxsan knowledge-holders took Ken into their confidence because of his growing knowledge of the land and the respect he had for it. They gave him hand-drawn maps, showed him traditional sites and CMTs, and walked with him on the ancient trails of the region. Some of this contact and communication came around the deliberations and consultations on the Nisga’a Treaty, which came into effect in 2000. From Ken’s account of the treaty process it was incredible complex and divisive. The main role he had, given his knowledge of the region, was to help establish Gitxsan title to lands that the government had mistakenly (or deliberately, in order

to create discord) proposed as Nisga'a territory. The process produced three effects on Ken that I could discern: one, a sense of the value of careful and considered negotiation, two, a wary eye to the machinations of affluent white men and, three, a deepening of his respect for Indigenous ways of being and knowing (TEKW). As a white man, Ken knew not to make any claims to this knowledge, knew not to recolonize by taking that knowledge as a possession or accolade, but it did change his world view, and is an indispensable lens when looking at his poetry.

Ken's time at his lodge ended with a divorce with Alice and a move to Smithers and then Prince George. The move into town was a kind of retirement, the physical demands of guiding becoming difficult. It did mean more writing time and closer ties with writing communities. On the positive side this meant more contact with other writers in Prince George. On the negative side this meant more contact with other writers in Prince George. In our correspondence between 2004 and 2010, largely by email and over coffee at Second Cup at 15th and Victoria St. in Prince George, it became increasingly apparent that Ken did not feel he 'fit in' locally. His discomfort came from several aspects: his decision to not drink alcohol, his feminist grounding, and, enveloping all this, his sense that his experiences had led him away from what he saw as generally conservative forms of writing.

So, his relationships switched to stronger and continuing relationships with a wider set of writers: Jordan Scott, Rita Wong, Larissa Lai, Jeff Derksen, Jay MillAr, Jake Kennedy, Reg Johanson, Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, Christine Stewart, and Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, to name a few. He was influenced by political activist work by Carol J. Adams, Harsha Walia, and Vandana Shiva. Well-worn books on his shelf included ones by Frank O'Hara, Adrienne Rich, Charles Bernstein, and Robert Creeley; the later of these he had a long extensive correspondence with and he visited Creeley in Florida in the late 1990s.

I have a record of the many years of correspondence between Ken and myself, emails from 2005—2014. They trail off when we switched to texting. It was an exchange that helped form who I am as a man and thinker and poet, and I owe Ken a debt of gratitude for that. It was primarily a conversation around an ethics we shared all along and helped structure our writing and mentorship of other new writers:

On 10/8/06 11:45 AM, "Ken Belford" <kenbelford@shaw.ca> wrote:

Back when I workt in the treaty process, there came a time when racism and sexism became more than intellectual or political principle but a poison to me, a moment when I consciously moved into the



knowing how vile these two human habits are, so when confronted by it since then, I resist it in the now. Like I say, I'm proud of you and your values. I honour our friendship. We are good for each other and our relationship is healthy.

I have many memories: visiting Gitwangak/Kitwanga "Battle Hill," a KSW reading at Coop Books, biking downtown, spending time with Ken and his little cat CB, the trip we took with Si on their honeymoon, stopping by the glaciers on the way to Banff, walks all over town. I feel like Ken and I had more work to do; but I guess that will have to wait for someplace else another time.

On 7/27/06 10:05 PM, "Ken Belford" <kenbelford@shaw.ca> wrote:

I thought of a place where we could share a cabin but we'd have to fly in but it could be set up legally. On Wiminosik Lake ... or on Nass Lake. Wiminosik would be the least vulnerable and a little cheaper to get to. It's probably too far. Wiminosik is a Gt-xsan name for a chief, a chief who is a friend. Wee—min ah sick is how you'd say it. Win-minosik is not too far from Blackwater. Really wild. Grizzly country. Many little rainbows. Great wild berry picking, especially Raspberry. It's the wildness though. Good drinking water too. Well, at least now you know one place is there. I'm not sure I'd want to start all over with building again but maybe. The place exists. In this conversation, one would have to license it under my old guide license, otherwise, there's no way. It's a thought, a lovely thought. Maybe best kept that way. In my mind I see it.

Okay Ken. Meet you there.

### **The Legend of Ken**

If that is his name, walking away  
from the main, from the culture of knowledge  
and response, if that is his body there  
leaning into the currents just this much, just  
enough to step ahead of the force, talking  
to the steelhead, making language old again;  
if those are his words flowing around  
each other and making the animals tracks and fish  
paths in the development slough;  
if that is Ken then I am his friend,

following his rhythms of letting go,  
of leaving behind the poet voice, of foregoing  
the kill shot, of side-stepping the place affiliations  
that erase, that cede, that road over something other;  
if that is Ken then let this be the offering,  
the sharing over a hearth, the saying of the names.

In my view, Ken hit the pinnacle of his poetic abilities in his last four books. He admitted to me he was a little embarrassed by some of the pieces in his early books. 'Another life' he would say. The final years of Ken's life was, I think, another life too; it was a time of pain and struggle as cancer came and went through his body. But it was also the time he wrote through the pain to produce *Slick Reckoning*, his last book. My last meetings with Ken were at his townhouse on Spruce Street where Si had planted and developed an amazing garden for birds and stray cats to take refuge in. We met there because he felt nervous about venturing out and not having the energy to make it back home. So, with seven cats lounging and participating, we spent his last months discussing this book, what poems to take from the early books, a few edits and tweaks there, the balance of pages across the books, what themes to pull forward in the selections, what publishers might be interested, and who might help with an introduction. It was only a few weeks after we had finished that process that he had a fall and could not recover.

Well over a year later I am still coming to terms with this loss.

Working on this book has helped; it is an odd mix of celebration and mourning. I am grateful for the loving work of Si Transken, Jordan Scott, Sarah Corsie, and Vici Johnstone in bringing this book together.

I think this selection will give the reader an accurate sense of how the early books informed the later, how the themes of environmental awareness, his alienation, and his sense of social justice developed over the years. I also think it will be a suitable monument to a monumental man, my best friend forever, Ken Belford.