

The Gull Wall

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In the autumn of 1960, after I had spent a summer in Mexico writing what I felt were my first real poems, Paul Blackburn and I had lunch at a place in New York City he refers to in his own poetry as "the bakery." At the end of lunch I showed him some of my poems, and after reading "A Very Old Woman" he looked up at me with a big grin on his face and with some superlative exclamation blew me a kiss. By doing so at just the right time he confirmed the fact that I had, on my own, at least gotten up on my feet. A few years ago, reading one of Robin Blaser's poems I came across the lines: "the poet's kiss/given caught *like a love-adept* on my lips." He was speaking of an actual kiss, and it made me think of what Blackburn gave me, which was a covenant given by an already-confirmed poet to another non-confirmed one. By confirming me when he did I felt Paul Blackburn had given me in an ancient and noble way a "charge," the Poet's Kiss, which would only be realized when in some original way it was returned. In 1964, in my poem "Niemonjima" I worked one of Paul's central images, the gull, and transformed it into the Gull-robe:

And it was only the robe that drove him on,
a vision of the inland sea, which is called the Gull-robe,
gorgeous, of white feathers emblazoned with stars & moons,
the lovely garment every loved woman wears, of midnight-
blue & silks, in which a light streams for all who ride
away into the darkness carrying the torches of imaginative
love, the softness & precision of loved desire.

A great deal of the meaning Paul Blackburn has for me, his life as well as his poetry, is involved with the role he played in my becoming a poet, and this is especially touching to me because during those years he was beginning to lose grip on his own life and writing. From 1962 to 1964 my first wife, Barbara, and I lived in Kyoto, Japan. I had published my first book of poems before moving there and the poems in it were written while I was either a student, on vacation in Mexico, or teaching. Upon moving to Kyoto, I found myself for the first time cut loose from any job or study routine to depend on; I was suddenly on my own, I had 24 hours to face and fill, and for most of these two years I was tied up in the frustrations from my past that I thought I had evaded by becoming a poet. I was reaching the point when I would either accept my own life as my material, or reject my life and continue to imitate other poets. This is the point at which what is previously amorphous in a young poet's work begins to appear either original or "academic" — where he begins to doubt the meaningfulness of his first influences. Since I chose the first alternative, I began to feel lost and it lasted for a number of years. Originality at that time meant little more than taking my own life to task; the writing that resulted seemed to mean less than what I would have written had I continued to imitate others. I understand something about this now, I understand that apprenticeship in the sense that I am speaking of it has a great deal to do with letting the heldback dam of one's past break through one's mouth with all its roil, its stones and silt, and that this act itself, taking years perhaps, is only the first stage of approaching an art of poetry, for as the dam gives way the novice must continually create *out of* what is struggling through him as well as keep the past itself in motion. It is the "creating out of" that is felt as a terrible friction, almost blockage to the longed-for flow, especially if the destruction of the dam is sudden. During those years in Kyoto I would sit for hours before the typewriter, sometimes just staring at the first line I had written trying to figure out how to make it yield poetry, or at other times typing the line over and over, varying it, repeating it, trying to dislodge it from my own common-sense world of the past, which I was still holding on to, not only because I was scared of losing all moorings, but because I was working with the past I was to a certain extent stuck with the way my mind in the past had functioned. Paul and I wrote each other about every two weeks during those years and every six months or so exchanged tapes. Our

correspondence was not strictly about poetry — it was basically about what we were seeing and doing and feeling. It was real sustenance for me because a friendship was being created and I was finding out that not only did I need to find my identity but that my identity was manifold.

In late October, 1963, Paul sent me a new tape which I took over to a man who had a tape recorder. I remember sitting in an empty tatami room by a large window which looked out onto a backyard filled with junk. It was cold grey out and had begun to snow. Paul's voice, filled with images of brick walls and nearly deserted streets, of men huddling by little trash fires in gutters, his peculiar vision of New York City which integrates the literary life with the viewpoint of someone on the Bowery, began to worm into my feeling for my life as it never had before. I was just opening up to seeing a world inclusive of outcasts that Paul identified with. For I too had been watching outcast leather-workers in Kyoto who seemed to live in the street as well as the migratory construction-workers who were building a highway down in the cut below where I lived. They worked all night long, keeping an oil-drum fire going, and I was very moved watching them standing around their fire with their yellow helmets and dark blue wool puttees. At that moment there was no distance between Paul's poems and the junk filled backyard, the cold in my hands, and the endless repetition I felt watching the tape slowly turn. But it was also a specific repetition, it was not just life repeating itself, but repetition becoming a state of mind through Paul's poetry and his voicing of it — he read some *Rituals* that day, which made me think for the first time, what is a ritual, is it any more than repetition, of doing something the way my father had done it, and if so, where is the warmth in that? Something about the way Paul was looking at things found a place in me, but it was a place I was trying to destroy by making poetry. What a dense web of ambivalence was being woven between the two of us that late snowy afternoon — I was being bound into the act of a voice which seemed to consume my defenses against poetry. At the end of the tape it was nearly dark and the snow had turned the junk into little castle-like hills — there was only a faint streak of rose-colored sun left in the light. At this point Paul read a poem whose title I do not remember, I remember only two images in the piece: the first was a vision of a group of primitive men standing around in a circle jacking off into the flukes of a dying fire, and the second came moments later: Paul cried out, "O Leviticus, Oil for the Lamps!"

All the negation in my own life was suddenly present, but it was present to me, a gift — Paul spoke my negation so that I no longer had to wear it but could begin to work with it as an object. The circle of primitive men became a circle of young Indiana men, pledges to the Phi Delta Theta social fraternity at Indiana University in 1953: I was one of them, and we had been shouted down from the dormitory late one night, ordered to strip, and then bend over holding hands making a circle around the double fireplace which hissed and crackled while "the actives" played "Slaughter

On 10th Avenue" at full volume (the fraternity was located at the corner of Jordan and 10th Street), and beat us bloody with long wood paddles. In 1963 I was faced in the act of finding poetry with this impotence in my own make-up – what anguish must have been buried in me that I would have allowed myself to be so abused! There must have been something, some ceremony perhaps, that never took place during my puberty, I thought, that had it taken place would have released me from boyhood into manhood – but what could that mean in my present life? I had been reading about an Australian sub-incision ceremony which climaxed a puberty initiation, where the boy was held down spread-eagled over the back of a kneeling man and his urethra split with a sharp rock. Would it have been better had something in my boyhood been bled out of me? It was not simply my manhood that I sought – manhood was too easily just a world of grown-ups. I sought the persimmon tree in the Okumura backyard, I wanted to be in contact with it. Blackburn got through to me that there was something that I experienced as being inside me that had to get out for the contact to exist. He made me aware of this not as one who had succeeded in getting whatever it was out, but as one who had failed and whose cry was uttered as a result of having failed.

It was dark when I left where I was and started back to the house of Okumura. At the point I passed the Senryuji Gate, which led in to the Ancient Imperial Burial Grounds, there was a long flight of wide stone steps which led into Imagumano, my neighborhood. I started to descend and immediately recalled an accident I had seen a couple years before, the legs of a Japanese school-girl extending out from under the rear axle of a bus. When I witnessed this I had a desire to roll the bus off her. Now the axle became a turnstile and as I approached the bottom of the steps I imagined that I was heading into death, but the death I was heading into was so singular it immediately became absurd – I was suddenly aware that I could not resolve Paul's misery nor could I resolve the death of the school-girl, and that my attempts to do so before were ridiculous. I had been living my life as if it were a life that could be solved from day to day, first I would do this, then get out of it, then that, get out of it etc., and as long as I had done that I lived with an awful anxiety but pretended there was no fear in my life. But no, that girl's death impinged upon me and it impinged in the living body of Paul Blackburn, and I could not keep Blackburn's sense of life away from me, I was not singular, what I was was not what I had identified myself to be – I reached the end of my steps, I got down to the turnstile I had felt I was descending to, my crib with only *one* being inside, and I was free of its singularity, wonderfully free of the absurdity of my life and within it.

The gull is more than a central image in Blackburn's poetry: it is the presence of the creation itself, the confirmation that Blackburn allows himself — when a gull or a flock appear in a poem there is hope as well as all that the phrase "the creation" suggests — I would almost say that the gull is the presence of God in Blackburn's body of writing but that would be making a connection he only alluded to in the opening section of what for several years (1963 to summer 1967) he considered to be his masterwork, "The Selection of Heaven," a 25 page poem that he was unable to complete.

GOD, that it did happen
that loose now, that
early confirmation
 of birds, the texture set in
 words, 1945,
a Staten Island beach in early October
here in more than flesh and brick,
9th Street, March 1963. . . .

This grey . soft . overcast . not-quite-rainy day,
that I can
swim my mind in it, swim it in overcast, the sun
tries, and there they are, the birds, my gulls
circle over a street to the North.

At about the same time that he wrote these lines in March 1963, Paul enclosed a photo of a gull standing on a rock in a letter to me, and wrote under the picture: *Dear Clay, Never look a gull in the eye, love Paul.* That admonition really puzzled me, because even then I knew that among all other things Paul Blackburn loved to look and watch — some of his finest poems have a basic fulcrum of Paul sitting someplace, like on a street-bench or in a park, and watching what is going on around him, presumably writing the poem in a notebook while it is occurring before his eyes. Anyway, I didn't then pick up the literary connection to the line which comes from the poem called *The Purse-seine*, written in 1960:

we cannot look one another in the eye,
 that frightens, easier to face
the carapace of monster crabs along the beach . The empty
shell of death was always easier to gaze upon
than to look into the eyes of the beautiful killer . Never
 look a gull in the eye.

The “we” includes the woman the poet is with, and thus by implication both she and the gull are held for a moment in the phrase “the beautiful killer.” I think that deeply for Paul Blackburn woman *was* the beautiful killer, and that since he insisted on always searching for and being with a woman, his failure to overcome that feeling explains much of his failure to develop as a poet and to live longer as a man.

But before I enter into these problems I want to make a few assertions so that the problems themselves can be seen in the proper context. Blackburn is one of the half-dozen finest American poets of his generation. The body of writing that he left us and the generations to come is much larger and much more impressive than what is now publicly and thus as his *image* available. He wrote first-rate poetry at several periods in his life and his finest poetry in the fifties when he lived in Spain and this work carries on into the early sixties when he lived in New York City. His gifts were various: he had an acute ear and eye that together enabled him to lay a poem out on the page in an utterly unique way — a Blackburn poem is recognizable about four feet away, one can spot it by its shape, the way the lines extend and break, run for full stanzas or bunch in neat units at any place on the page, often in short-lined quatrains. His ability to stop the poem the moment the poem itself stops is uncanny (e.g., “Hot Afternoons Have Been In West 15th Street”). In Blackburn’s poetry one always feels that the quatrain has not quite yet been abandoned, it appears, floats out, fragments, dissolves, is felt in two and three line units or is *sensed* at times through inner-rhyming: one will occasionally *hear* quatrains when on the page none are visible. In other words, the verse never becomes free, gets free of that traditional cohesive — I would even say *communal* — urge, while at the same time it is open enough to accommodate emotional glide (I almost said “drive” but Blackburn is generally not a driving poet — he more naturally enjoys gliding, veering and banking, or suddenly dropping to a fused position — for just a moment — like his gulls). In many ways, he is the Buddhist path between Robert Creeley and Charles Olson.

As for his content, his best poems warm the reader with a sense of a generous, compassionate and patient humanity, wry and foolish at times, bleak and helpless at others. While there are few revelations of being in Blackburn’s poetry, he does get, given the situation he is addressing, a great deal of what it felt like into the composition he is conceiving; he does not approach the poem (as does Gary Snyder for example) having thought its subject through — his poems most often begin with an impulse, a partial perception or sounding, and pick their way out from there. His strongest and most successful poetry is contingent upon a kind of distance that he creates when he is alone i.e., unobserved somewhere, not directly involved in the action he is watching e.g., observing Paul Carroll being tossed a white sun-burned body by breakers at Bañalbufar (“Affinities II”) or watching common people fill and leave stone benches at dusk on a busy

street in Barcelona in the lovely "Plaza Reál with Palmtrees." While his writing is free of dogma, there is an implied stance suggesting a way of being. One feels this most in his attitude toward women and sex — towards Romance. The source for this, in a literary sense, is the early-medieval Troubadour tradition, which he knew and suffered thoroughly. He spent over 20 years translating this poetry and when it is published in book form I believe it will not only be definitive but will never again be equaled in the American language.

One reason that Paul Blackburn translated the Troubadours is that Ezra Pound complained that here was a great body of poetry to be brought to bear on American poetry that no one had really even attempted. Pound's attitude certainly must have been Blackburn's original incentive. However, such an incentive needed a powerful fuel to sustain this project over two decades, and the fact that Blackburn never completed the Troubadour translation, or I should say, the fact that he completed it again and again, keeping it alive, revising and adjusting it, suggests that it kept an obsession in him alive, kept it churning. Central to this obsession is the idealization of woman as expressed by the Troubadours — a view in which woman is a grand icy queen of heaven the poet sings for, a queen who will never be lived with *period*, an untouchable in a much higher social station than the poet himself, who may reward him with her hand to kiss or with a benevolent glance (there are several tremendous burlesques of this maddening situation in the Troubadour poetry Blackburn translated, notably Guillem Comte de Peitau's "Farai un vers pos mi sonelh," but these pieces hardly dent the idealization). I can imagine how in 12th century Europe such an attitude might have had a great deal to do with the evolution of consciousness, adoration of spring and burgeoning being more and more associated with human love, and of course regardless of what it meant to the lives of those concerned, it produced a genuine body of art.

To consider why such an attitude was attractive to Paul Blackburn is complicated. I don't think he himself knew — for like nearly all men of his age he was sexually cracked in a number of directions and the parts never fit together. On one hand, he was a very warm and sensual man who loved cats and food and wine in a way much more European-Catholic than American-Puritanic, and in this sense he lacked typical American hang-ups regarding hygiene and order; he was messy (his desk was always covered with stratoms of unfinished letters, translations and poems) but not dirty, or I should say I always had a good natural feeling about the world in his presence. On the other hand, I had the feeling that for Paul sensuality and sexuality did not flow together — I always had the impression that he allowed the woman he lived with to rot on the vine. He had serious problems about his identity regarding men and women, and he expressed this conflict in a rare self-confrontational passage in "The Selection of Heaven":

houses as well as an eight-hour-a-day professional translator. If my sense of him is accurate, by the time he married a second time, shortly after the beginning of "The Selection of Heaven," he was losing grip on his life and numb to really living with who he did live with. When Sara left him the summer of 1967 he was utterly shattered and in drunk despair made a few attempts to hurt, or possibly kill, himself. The fall of 1967 he returned to Europe having finally received a Guggenheim Fellowship where he met his third wife, Joan, who was much younger than he and from a similar Irish-Catholic-American background; Paul lived with her and their son Carlos until he died in the autumn of 1971. I think they were deeply happy together, and I am certain that having a son meant a great deal to Paul — but he met Joan too late, he was too far into a downward spin, his body was too rundown from years of steady drinking and smoking. He died of cancer of the esophagus, and my impression was that the life-negative root I felt in him as early as 1963 was as much involved with this as anything else.

Most people who are artists though, are not so because they have solved great human problems or even the daily minutiae, but because of the particular way they feel these problems and minutiae are unsolvable in their own lives. It is not even a matter of simply feeling deeply, for there are many many people who feel deeply and suffer the world thoroughly who never have anything to do with art. No, it takes a particular set of imbalances, incredible stresses in some directions with unusual absences in others, faults, burning explosive deposits and areas of glacial motion that create the energy stresses that volcano under an art. It is not possible to say what is THE artistic conflict (or for that matter, the artistic glory) because each artist is a product of his upbringing, a crucible of his times, as well as a creator of his own vision. True, I can say that a thorough reading of Paul Blackburn's lesser poems reveals him as a man haunted by sex-in-the-head who viewed women as sexual-relief possibilities, but as soon as I point this out I am also aware that his so-called failures are part of the reason he is compelling, and fragments such as got through to me and burned me against my own stem on the 1963 tape he sent to Kyoto may be the very things that count. Perhaps it is fair to say that he did not explore his obsessions far enough, that he was defeated by the very vulnerability that allowed him to let in and assimilate his world. When I look at photos of Paul taken in the early fifties he looks amazingly compact and focused and in spite of what happened to him this plumb-line was present until the end. He was a very non-competitive man living in the fifties and sixties in the most competitive art center in the world — he absorbed too much — many people took advantage of his meager defenses, his own generation of poets lacked respect for him — it may be that he was simply too frail to withstand the world he chose to live in, yet when I say that I must also recognize at the very base of what I know of his being a kind of meaninglessness, a failure to know what he was about, to compete,

in other words, through asserting his ideas and making them felt in those he was in contact with. It is easy to be sentimental here — surely many people watched Paul Blackburn lug his 50 pound tape-recorder up 2nd Avenue to the St. Mark's Church to record poetry readings once or twice a week for seven or eight years, and many, not just a few, but many poets alive today are beholden to him for a basic artistic kindness, for readings yes, and for advice, but more humanly for a kind of comradeship that very few poets are willing to give. HE WAS AN ANGEL working for no profit or big reputation gain to keep alive a community of poetry in New York City — he stayed with the poets instead of the critics and publishers and he paid for it. In fact, those who let him down the most were often those he felt the closest to. I remember the formation of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church around 1967 when suddenly money became available mainly because a poetry program had been built up through Paul's unpaid efforts. The Church, by which I mean the minister and some local poets, decided to establish paid readings as well as a paid director, a poet who would be paid \$15,000 a year for doing officially what Paul had done before informally. It was obvious to a lot of people that Paul was the natural choice for the position, but it was not given to him. I recount this episode mainly for its aftermath: Paul continued to serve, continued to tape readings, read and help arrange readings. I think he continued because in a dogged and pathetic way he was like the old employee replaced by the machine who insists on continuing his work even if in a mock role. Paul lacked the anger to tell the whole gang to go fuck themselves and take his energy and intelligence elsewhere. This kind of mole-insistence is very interesting, and the more I think about it the more it reveals about Paul. When one paid him a visit often after being cordially met at the door one was turned into a listener for what Paul wanted to play among recent tapes or what he felt the visitor should hear. At times it felt as if he was teaching something, like helping one get over a prejudice about someone else's poetry — as for me, I never really knew what was up — certainly there must have been a reason to listen to so-and-so for an hour before being able to have a conversation — or was that just something Paul put me through? One thing I have had to struggle with in writing this is that I must not explain his meaninglessness, must not give it a mythic quality, for when I think of his death I think of an absence that was never explained in his life. It is possible to say any life is meaningless or meaningful, of course, depending upon the good or ill will with which one approaches that life — but I speak of extruding particularities with Blackburn — the anecdotes he enjoyed telling that became more and more without conclusion or point as he grew older and less in control. I have imagined his relationship to his gull as one of retreating into the gull's head to sit and be by himself, for it was contact with others that was much of his trouble, contact — to not have to stay in contact, to avert his eyes, to tell the story or put on the tape to derail for a moment the other so Paul

would not have to feel he had to make sense of his own life — I see him enter the gull's head and pick up little things in his hands to look at and puzzle over, like childhood toys he had almost forgotten — there he is safe, no one can betray or not betray him in this place — then he becomes anxious after a while and crawls back through the gull's eye into the presence of others.

I went over to Sparky's pen where the little turds were steaming with joy, I picked them up and placed them on the out-stretched Gull-robe. After I had a pile I began to mold them into a gull shape, then I wrapped it in the robe and dug a hole, burying the Corpse of Gull-robe by my childhood place of secret joy.

As I completed my task a figure loomed at garage edge, Weren't you supposed to clean the eaves trough this afternoon, it said,

I smiled, ok,
a ladder was in my hands
I was 9 feet off the ground, Clayton was standing under me, the despair in his face, checking me out for evil, concerned if I was doing a cud job, was I swallowing my cud, was I doing a cud or was I spitting out the influence, was I swallowing the cudfluence or was I manufacturing my own salts?

As he stared at me I transferred myself to 12 years old and through this transference maintained the vector of his stare through the eaves trough into the interior of the white garage. Here is the place I understood Blackburn is to transform himself. I kneaded the energy from Clayton's eyes, made out the white garage interior, in the rear was Sparky's inside pen, so she'd be warm in winter, above the pen the shelf where storm windows were stacked, building out from this shelf was a false garage ceiling Clayton had constructed, to pile boards and garden tools on -- the ridgepole and false ceiling made a hazardous little house at its peak four feet high, an attic of sorts, enormous wonder of my puberty body up there on a hot summer day interlocked with urine

Attis

saw, here I now crouched, unzipped, a vine institched with tiny skulls spilled out plums, persimmons, grapefruit, I transferred outside the white garage again and got more energy from Clayton's eyes pumpkins, pears, an outbranch of apples, the strengthened false ceiling now abounded in vegetation,

I transferred to a wall, picked off the grass stained hedge shears,
began to sever the fruits from my vine, hanging them on pegs and tool nails,
transferred down to Sparky's pen, scooped up her puppies
drawing the birth-glisten from their blind bodies

I built tensile webs; now the walls went into transformation, spider
guardians with red hourglasses on their abdomens began to scuttle
in and out of the vegetal wall, this circulation developed for a week,
the following Saturday I opened the right-hand garage door onto a
jungle! A place Clayton had never seen — I left the cavern and started forth,
Blackburn's presence was now everywhere, about a mile from the cavern
I could see the blue Mediterranean waters, out on the beach in solitude
a figure was seated on a little wood chair at a table writing,
as I approached it turned and watched me, its beak closed, its eyes
beady, unmoving, at the base of its feathered neck were human shoulders,
from the freckles I knew, yes, and from its short muscular build—
Can you speak, I said,

the creature nodded yes then shook its beak no

it sat at Blackburn's kitchen table on one
of his kitchen chairs,

I walked over to see what he had written:

In a way, it's hard to know that I know you anymore. Deep,
OKay, yes, forever, etc. But you've learned & grown & changed
so much in the last couple years, it IS hard to know. Things
do get thru in poems, to & from both of us, I guess, that are
not discussed in letters. Then long time when I do not feel
like letters or any other contact, that problem. And the whole
problem of experience, the sharing of it, giving it to someone,
or wholly.

I've returned the Gull-robe, I said,

and fashioned a place for you, for when it gets cold out here,
would you like to see it?

The Gullpaul stood up and began to walk
back with me, along the path he took my hand,
and we walked hand in hand to the Cavern of Self

I have to leave you here, I said—

as you gave me your life

that moment in Kyoto 1963

when I was nearly dead with despair,

so I have created

a place for you wrought

from the most intense moment of my puberty—

this is not how I thought it would end,
but the weight of the sadness of death is
in me, even facing you here—
I had thought to put a bar in along the right-hand wall
but that meant comfort, and the place I leave you
is shelter yet terrible, is formed of my spirit
which you helped form, yet dark with Clayton's eyes
transformed into spider guardians,
Use this place, or abandon it,

he entered it, his back lost in the echoing struggle