

Just A Moment: Paul Blackburn and the Fragmentation of the New American Poetry

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?It's a Martian thing. You wouldn't understand.?

--Paul Beatty

You can sit in the I can't call it a park, let's just call it a triangle, the one created by Stuyvesant and 9th and the fence round St. Mark's-in-the-Bowery, tipping into Second Ave. and find yourself *In. On. Or About the Premises* ("being a small book of poems"). The premises are of course Paul Blackburn's, the map the poem *The Slogan*.? The Church, did it break Paul's heart, is the question, and No, is the answer.

Paul Blackburn is the subtle father of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, the pre-spirit. Three trees were planted outside the Parish Hall near 11th Street, the one dedicated to Blackburn growing next to Frank O'Hara's, who died in 1966, the year the Poetry Project was founded, with the third dedicated to Wystan Hugh Auden, who was a parishioner at St. Mark's, often heard coughing in a back pew. Ted Berrigan's tree grows there now, as does Michael Scholnick's. The subtle father left a vision that grows as trees do.

In the early 60s, at Mickey Ruskin's *Deux Magots* and later at a coffee shop on Second between 9th and 10th called the Metro, Blackburn ran a poetry reading series that included as regulars Beats, New York School poets, Deep Imagists, Black Mountaineers, Umbra poets, Patrealists, and 2nd Ave poets, among others. He wielded a big bucket, and had a way of standing so that to get in, you'd either be squeezed or drop something in. *?Something for the poets??* he'd say. The different groups coexisted because Paul knew how to do it.

This was the flowering of the coffeehouse poetry scene. Paul would go from reading to reading, hauling his jumbo public-high-school issue Wollensak reel-to-reel, recording open and featured readings all over town. At night, he'd record jazz or rock off the radio, or read (rewrite?) his own poems on tape. He was a walking exponent of the oral tradition. His tapes, collected at the University of California at San Diego Library, are a document of an era, with the word at the center and poets breathing them in and out.

Blackburn held court long afternoons at McSorley's, this before the word *?writing workshop?* was invented. There he embodied what was to become the definition of what the Church, especially through the *?workshops?* of Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer, would be: a place to inspire, not define.

First the Poem.

Then, the Theory.

But back at the Metro, the center wasn't holding. A minimum was instituted: 25 cents, the price of a cuppa. A Goldwater poster appeared on the wall. Blackburn's sensibility, the owner

of the cafe's lack of sensitivity, the changing of an era. . . . In 1965, LeRoi Jones led a walkout and *The New American Poetry* fragmented.

The rest is the end of history.

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