

from *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, Volume Five

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[*From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* is an ongoing series of letters written by composer/multi-instrumentalist N., founding member of a band known as the Molimo m'Atet. Volumes one through four are *Bedouin Hornbook*, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, *Atet A.D.* and *Bass Cathedral*. Volume five is not yet titled.]

4.X.83

Dear Angel of Dust,

I wouldn't say I'm taking a page out of the balloons' book, that I'm trying to beat them at their own game. Aunt Nancy suggested as much but I don't think that's it. No, this new thing I'm trying goes back to a story Yusef Lateef tells about the days when he was in Mingus's band, a story I was deeply struck by when I first heard it, a story I think about from time to time. Yusef says there was a composition on which he was to solo and that Mingus, rather than writing out chord symbols for him to improvise against, drew a picture of a coffin, that it was this that he was to base his improvisation on. A friend of mine once joked that Mingus simply meant that if Yusef messed up the solo he'd kill him, but I've long been intrigued by and attracted to the idea of getting musical information from a picture and it's this that led me to a certain experiment with my latest composition. Braxton's diagrammatic, pictogrammic titles and the solo concert of his I caught a couple of years ago, the scores for which looked like pen and ink drawings, nonfigurative but drawings even so, had a role as well.

The new composition is called "Fossil Flow." I wrote it thinking about oil spills, the increasing number of them and the damage they do. Just this year there've been two massive ones: in February, the Nowruz Field platform in Iran spilled 80 million gallons of oil into the Persian Gulf; in August, a Spanish tanker, the *Castillo de Bellver*, caught fire and spilled 78 million gallons off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. I was thinking about the distant past (prehistoric apocalypse, collapse or catastrophe)

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achieving fluidity, the oxymoronic play between fossil and flow of such dimension as to put the present at risk. It's as though it were the dinosaurs and the mastodons' revenge, prehistory's grudge against what came after, a brief against preservation or containment, fossil solidity, an entropic brief against past and present keeping their places. It's as though, Dredj-like, I saw solidity's hand and solubility's hand, gripped though they were by one another, holding history's hand, leading the way as it broke. Or was it, oil and water notoriously not mixing, solidity's hand and insolubility's hand? I'm not sure it matters. Recalling the rationing and the long lines at gas stations a few years ago, I saw dependency's hand and depletion's hand take solidity's hand and (in)solubility's hand's places, presided over by an entropic sun.

Much of the piece is written out but I'm trying something new, something of a built-in improvisation approach, by leaving gaps at various points in everyone's parts, gaps of a certain number of measures (which varies) marked by the words "Wild Card." The latter refer to a drawing and text with which each musician is provided, a 9" x 12" posterboard "card" on which he or she is to base what he or she plays at that point. I'm enclosing a copy. As you can see, the "card" consists of a drawing, captioned "Molimo m'Atet's Figurehead Consoled on the Revival Bench," beneath which is a brief paragraph. I struggled over whether or not to include the latter, fearing it might be spelling things out too much, taking away from the suggestiveness of the drawing. I decided in favor of keeping it, realizing that it adds a suggestiveness of its own, that words, regardless of how much they point or specify, can't altogether escape indefiniteness or inference, that, indeed, specification has a way of being shadowed by implication. What, for example, is to be musically made of the fact that the figurehead's ribs show, simply enough, in the drawing but also show, in an augmented, not so simple way, in the words "visible, as were the planks of the ship's busted hull"?

I'm also enclosing a tape. Let me know what you think.

Yours,

N.



Molimo m'Atet's Figurehead Consoled on the Revival Bench

An oil tanker had run aground farther up the coast and broken apart. Brothers in black before they knew it, B'Loon and Djbouche washed ashore with the news of the spill. People gathered on the beach to help clean up and help rescue seabirds, oil and tar stuck to their feathers from alighting on the water or, standing or prancing on the shore, being caught by the tide. Bright sun and blue sky notwithstanding, the spill cast a pall over everything and everyone, not least of all Djband, who, likening themselves to a ship, the sun boat of Egyptian belief, felt as though they too had run aground. Epitomizing the "boat-bodied lightness, light-bodied bigness" one of them had once extolled, the female figure gracing the prow of the ship they took themselves to be (the goddess Maat, some said) stepped away, walked ashore and sat down on a bench facing the sea, head down, dejected, ribs visible, as were the planks of the ship's busted hull. Impromptu patron saint of shipwreck, ad hoc angel, Dredj immediately sat down beside her and put his arm around her, offering comfort, consolation, recondite sun, as if to look to and be lit by eclipse were the only amenity.

Dear Angel of Dust,

Day before yesterday we drove up to Santa Cruz to play the Kuumbwa Jazz Center again. It was three years ago we first played there. It was good to venture north again and again we took 101 and then 1 where it branches off from 101 at San Luis Obispo. The coast was a feast of blue sky and blue water again, radiant sun and reflected sun's radiant sparkle on water. It was a feast we could hardly take our eyes off. Sunlight and sea lay hypnotically to our left all the while we put Morro Bay, San Simeon, Carmel and Monterey behind us.

We got going early in the morning, early enough to get to Santa Cruz by late afternoon. It was still dark, in fact, when we left L.A., so we pulled into Santa Cruz well in time for the sound check, the longer route we took notwithstanding. It turned out we got there with time to spare, which time we decided to burn by visiting the lighthouse. We walked around on the pathways and the sidewalk and the grassy field surrounding the lighthouse, watching the surfers, the bicycle riders, the skateboard riders, the frisbie throwers. Waves crashed on the rocks. Wind wafted salt.

The smell of salt addressed us again as we stood outside Kuumbwa later that night between sets. The air smelled heavily of the sea, prompting Aunt Nancy to note "a coastal piquancy" she said demanded we play "Fossil Flow" during the second set. She couldn't help, she said, catching a recondite whiff—imaginary, she admitted, but all the more insinuating being so—an oblique hint of oil threaded thru the marine bouquet the night air wafted. "I can't get those rigs off my mind," she said, referring to the oil platforms off the Santa Barbara coast we'd driven past in the morning, the site of a huge oil spill in 1969.

It was hard not to see the sense it made. The specter of the derricks had followed us up the coast, shadowing the sea and the sun's gleam and shimmer, dark prospect under an otherwise bright façade. "Fossil Flow" couldn't have been offered an apter setting, salt itself auguring future affliction, imaginary though the smell of oil might've been. The piece is one that wants to put pressure on flow, indemnify furtherance, bestow auspice and omen upon the undulacy it works. Ominous undulance had already, to an extent, come into play, a suppositious wave and waft Aunt Nancy picked up on mixing oil and salt. Bass player to the bone, she sensed a deep throb, eventual ache, dark unction, a waxing of promise and foreboding that was doubly on the tip of her tongue—oil she could almost taste, calamity she all but announced. It seemed all the more fitting that "Fossil Flow" begins with her playing a three-note ostinato.

There was no way not to see it made sense. We decided we'd end the second set with "Fossil Flow," a fitting end not only to the set and the gig but to the day, a fittingness Lambert would accent by switching from English horn to tenor for this rendition, more deeply resonating with dark uncton. Flow, the more we thought about it, cut more than one way, not spoilage or spill alone but excursion. We had, after all, driven up the coast. We had, after all, enjoyed it. There was a principle of nonexemption we grew apprised of, automotivity a fluid aspect itself: we were part of the flow, in on the flow. (I remembered the Buick Dynaflo my uncle had been so proud of back in the fifties. I thought of Ray Charles mentioning a Dynaflo in "It Should Have Been Me.") Enjoyment lent undulacy a lilt uncton wanted in on. This was the truth we both averred and would keep at bay.

We played "Tosaut L'Ouverture" next to last. When it ended we went right into "Fossil Flow," not waiting for the applause to subside, not announcing it. We came on with a slow lope led by Aunt Nancy's pensive, three-note ostinato on bass, a descending figure whose rotundity of tone edged over into omen, apprehension, foreboding, robust as it otherwise was notwithstanding. A table of sorts was being set—implicative, dark but brightened by the bit of shimmer Drennette's ride cymbal worked in, the calm, confident way she kept time. Djamilaa took up with that bit of shimmer when she came in on piano five bars in, starting out with a subtly happy-hand garnish that had something of glimmer and gleam to it and a prance aspect as well.

The horns, when Lambert, Penguin and I came in, stating the head on tenor, oboe and cornet, respectively, had an unprompted sense of aside, sotto voce not so much as reaching out from it, doing so with annunciative blare. Call and cry factored in as well, as also did no small amount of tartness, a ribald arrest of all one thought one knew, knowing the pensive lope it was. It seemed we wanted to say something about moment and simultaneity, moment's dismay at simultaneity's largesse, its doling out, moment's dismay at sequentiality's parsimony; it even seemed we had already said that something. This was in large part, insofar as we already had or possibly had, the work of Djamilaa's tolling chords and her solemn, sometimes grumpy left hand. Chorded ploy contended with chorded plenitude, sequential disbursement pressed and vied with by both. How to both unbraid simultaneity's bounty and give it its due, unpack to the point or brink of undoing, was the question we were called to confront in our solos.

The first to solo, Lambert was all business. He restated the head, grudgingly it seemed, put upon by quizzical misgiving, pestered by qualms. Calling to mind, in that regard, the solo Joe Henderson takes on McCoy Tyner's "Contemplation" on *The Real McCoy*, he allowed himself a certain hesitancy, opening gaps in the head's articulation, not so much a stutter as

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being repeatedly given pause (albeit stutter, sputter even, was obliquely the case). Bellow and beguilement volleyed, haloed by complaint at every point. Caught in a related quandary, Drennette beat the parade snare as though beating back tears, choking up on the stick and holding it at midpoint, swiping—rare vulnerability, rare admission, rare forthrightness, a clipped, cutting pleat, cropped egress.

I stood to Lambert's left, looking over his shoulder. When he got to the "Wild Card" gap within the head's elaboration it seemed it was the oil-drop extremities in the drawing that caught his eye, the figures' oil-drop hands, toes, fingers and feet. Working changes on classic teardrop tenor, he built on Drennette's choked-up admission but also brushed it aside. A parodic, moanlike drop to the lower register picked a bone with lachrymosity and, by implication, unctuousity as well. He would have nothing to do with suspect suavity, he declared by way of a more forthright return to the horn's middle octave, no matter the oil on his and everyone else's hands. It was a beautiful boast, made all the more so by his maintenance of a sober, unflustered tone worthy of Dewey Redman, a soothing, unhurried—did one dare say suave?—uptake or attack.

(No, one dared not say suave. What might've seemed so or one might've said seemed so was in fact a heuristic roughness Lambert plied and parlayed into scoured sobriety, sensibility abraded, a bumped entitlement or sense of entitlement tending more than one way.)

Drennette saw that her choked-up address of the parade snare no longer held sway. She returned her hand to the base of the stick, took the rim of the ride cymbal between the forefinger and thumb of her left hand and began to slowly mark time, the stick's tip hitting the cymbal with a tolling insistence Djamilaa quickly joined in on, repeating a single note in unison with it. Together the two chimed, Djamilaa's "tallywise" limpidity (one-two, one-two, one-two . . .) auditing and all the more endorsing the ride cymbal's understated ring. They too now bore the figures' oil-drop extremities in mind. It seemed they especially wanted to say something about digits, counting, and what it was they said or wanted to say Lambert agreed with, moving to the high end of the horn while remaining sober, keeping calm, as if to give them his blessing, say their tolling rang true.

Lambert allowed his solo to end there, a light, breathy peal floating above cost, consequence, toll. It floated above but not free of toll, telling, in its unperturbed way, of debts paid and debts yet to be paid, soberly tolling but no less tolling than Drennette and Djamilaa's ritualistic audit. It lay there a beat and a half, a thin, breathy peal whose remaining aloft ritual audit implied but quickly drew back from, Aunt Nancy, whose repetitive pluck had become part of it, announcing a new direction by pulling out the bow

and proceeding to play arco. She gave the bass a cello's Orphic swell, fraught songfulness and fret, a teetering on the edge of elation she let sweep thru the "Wild Card" gap she stepped into, treading gingerly as though her toes were dripping oil, her feet soaked in oil.

Aunt Nancy bowed with a wincing resonance, as though the bow were an exposed rib—as though, indeed, it were *her* exposed rib, as though she were the see-thru masthead whose ribs the "Wild Card" drawing apprised us of. She bowed as though coaxing the bow across the strings at points, a jittery luxuriance given uncommon reach, uncommon albeit reluctant reach. Drennette peppered Aunt Nancy's resonance and reach (plumb resonance and reach) with rapidfire outbursts on the orchestra snare, sanctified, spasmodic, pentecostal hammerings à la Sunny Murray.

Djamilaa had all but fallen silent, serving up chords every now and then, a more slowly doled out tolling meant to recall what had gone before. This left Aunt Nancy all the more at the mercy of Drennette's infectious pepper, a fact or effect eventually made evident by the percussive tack she resorted to. She came to a point where she lifted the bow and tapped the strings with it, letting it bounce lightly on them, much as Ron Carter does on "Barb's Song to the Wizard" on Tony Williams's *Lifetime* album, a piece, a passage and a technique Aunt Nancy had excitedly turned us on to ages ago. Here she took it farther, sustained and stayed with it to an extent barely broached by Carter's jagged innuendo. Rickety buildup grew possessed of growl and grumble, an aroused rattle and would-be rafter shake amassing senses of emergence or at least emergency, rummaging for voice, viability, ground.

The bow was a mallet, the strings a throaty dulcimer, Aunt Nancy's fingers, thumb and wrist exquisitely schooled. Though she made it seem the bow simply bounced, no aspect of touch or attack went without thought, throaty dulcimer by turns a croaking cimbalom, by turns a raspy santur.

It became clear, though, that the strings were neither dulcimer, cimbalom nor santur, that the masthead's exposed ribs were the focus of Aunt Nancy's solo, that the strings were indeed those ribs, vertically though they lay, the fact that the bow was itself a rib notwithstanding. Indeed, Aunt Nancy's rib-on-rib address accented intimacy and consolation, exactly the embrace the drawing shows the masthead held in, Dredj's embrace—rib-on-rib contact, rib-on-rib caress, rib-on-rib assumption of Dredj's counsel. Here, however, rib crossed rib and was let percuss upon rib, a fact that not only accorded with but in part conveyed the disconsolate tone of Aunt Nancy's solo, the worked arousal refusing to be put to rest it so starkly was.

Eventually Djamilaa fell completely silent and Drennette soon followed suit. Aunt Nancy's solo was now exactly that, Djamilaa and Drennette having bowed out as if to suggest the bass's taut strings had to do with tautology,

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the solo's disconsolate temper with self-induced or self-digested ordeal, self-conducted ordeal—a suggestion to which, given the way Aunt Nancy's bass revved its own ennui, the way she ransacked it for sound, there was more than a grain of truth.

Aunt Nancy played alone and was all alone, played along with being alone, left alone, “all alone in the world.” She allowed a hint of self-pity in, part parodic host, part woebegone orphan, not unrelated to Lambert's recasting of teardrop tenor. More specifically recalling Carter, she put the emphasis even more on *rev*, letting the bow ride and bounce on the strings with new and old verve, new and old volatility, mimicking or mining automotivity's old and new dream. A Model T on a bumpy road the bow might've been, so loudly did brake and sputter vie with flow.

Aunt Nancy played for all the world to know she stood alone, for all the world to know we all, no matter *rev's* would-be amelioration, stood alone, as though flow itself stumbled, stuck. Sputter never spoke more eloquently but even so she would not be done with fluidity, full-bodied arco, letting the bow glide between bouts or outbursts of coughlike exhaust, Carteresque bow-bounce. Such answering fluidity was nothing if not outright elegy, forthright lament, Aunt Nancy allowing the bass its low-throated moan. She spoke from nowhere if not from the heart (ribcage apse, alcove, atrium), no way if not on two fronts, both fronts, deep throb and bow-bounce both.

Point made, she put the bow away and went back to playing pizzicato, plucking the strings with chill serenity, ritual aplomb. She stood with her back straight, addressing the strings with a churchical assurance, churchical rectitude, as patient a fingerwalk as there ever was. She closed her eyes, exuding meditative calm, each ascending run seeming to say, “Alas,” each descending run whispering, “Amen.” Abidance was the overall note she struck, if there could be said to be an overall note she struck.

Djamilaa had left the piano to pick up one of her guitars. As the audience applauded Aunt Nancy's solo she began to play, pointedly chiming in on strings. She started off in what initially struck one as a Spanish vein but as she went further along one recognized a Malian or Guinean provenance, a *guitare sèche* excursion (it was an acoustic guitar she picked up) whose ambulatory rhythm feasted on recurrence. It sought to make its home in a reverberant ping a shade beyond the upbeat, a treble chime not so much home as haunt but beckoning as though haunt could make heaven home. Indeed, treble chime verged on going out of bounds, off scale or off record, verged on heaven itself, rang heaven's bell.

Aunt Nancy picked up on Djamilaa's Mande invitation and replied, playing the bass like a big guitar (rhythm guitar to Djamilaa's lead, bass to Djamilaa's treble), whereupon Djamilaa, gratified to hear her call responded

to, shot her an appreciative glance and began to sing. Together they plied a Malinke roll built on repetition, the chords fraught with a certain drama or an inference of drama (false drama perhaps), an inkling, inference or sense Djamilaa took pains to fend off, paradoxically furthering, in so doing, the very inkling, inference or sense it was her one wish in life (or so it seemed) to hold at bay. A buoyant bout with quicksand, were such possible, her voice took solace in its ability to declaim while being taken out, courting hoarseness to extol its testificatory prowess. Rescue was only what witness one could manage, were there rescue at all, and witness, were there, would suffice, it seemed she said or sang more than said or made singing say. Witness or no witness, her singing summoned words like *aria*, *recitative* and *recital* only to say that they fell short, failed when what was really real was afoot, that exactly that, the really real, was afoot. Strident, abrasive, bent on scouring the air itself if need be, her voice built with a certain insistence toward something none of us, her included, could name, imprecatory at points, complaint piled on complaint, coax plied with complaint.

Drennette joined in with a repeating figure that marked the strong beat on the high hat, setting it up with a tap on the bass drum, the barest percussive presence one could want. The three of them effected an ictic, riverine amble, Djamilaa's treble chime, as time went on, arriving a lengthening shade late, a hitch or a gimp or an eddy in the flow. It brought to mind, for me at least, the "Wild Card" drawing's abstract bench. It sat one down and it gave one pause, giving one to reflect on water's indifferent flow, time's indifferent flow. One sat on a bench on a bank overlooking the Niger.

Lengthening shade suggested the drawing's black sun had caught Djamilaa's eye, the river's consolation an intricate mix of solace and complaint. The river's destination was there by inference, the salt air that had nipped our noses complicating time's occult remit. Lambert, Penguin and I picked up on this and instinctively bowed our heads, letting Djamilaa, Drennette and Aunt Nancy's amble have its way with us as waves or rapids might. Shade-late arrival's beneficiary, Djamilaa's treble chime gathered extrapolative reach. Eking out a summons or a receipt that would be the chime's equivalent, her voice every now and again leapt, its timbral bound and embrace as raw-ribbed as Aunt Nancy's bow-bounce had been, a miraculous mix of stridency and grace.

Lambert, Penguin and I now lifted our heads. Carried in or carried out, we stood athwart all emollience, amenity's reset, lengthening shade's limp a new boon nonetheless. Listening to Djamilaa, Drennette and Aunt Nancy, one heard again and saw again, as though for the first and final time, that sound was the inner skin of things, the other side coming over, inside turning out. A fool's errand it might've been to see it so but one saw it so. It

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was ground we'd been over before, ground we'd go over again, ground that somehow never got old.

As Djamilaa's voice began to trail off, letting us know she'd had her say, the audience began to applaud and Lambert and Penguin glanced at me and nodded to say the floor, so to speak, was mine. I put the trumpet to my lips and began with a run meant to recall Aunt Nancy's model T on a bumpy road, eventually stating the head with a hesitancy aimed at recalling Lambert's grudging address as well. I stood with my back straight but churchical rectitude wasn't what I was after, at least not to begin with. Gaps and crackle made their way out of the horn, more "ahem" than "amen." Indeed, sputter might've been my middle name for all anyone knew, so hard-won was any articulacy (or seemed so at least).

I say "seemed so" because sputter was more than sputter. It was an archarticulacy, fraught with meaning, "meaning" meaning "wanting to say." It wanted to bear on exhaustion, eventual eclipse, fossil fluency's abject eloquence, black sun. It wanted to find fulsomeness in hemorrhage, bumpiness, unable not to know it fed on exhaust, extinction, fumes. Sputter was double-jointed. Wanting was to say.

I stood with my back straight, parsing, repeating, teasing out the slowgoing unfolding of black sun. My not aiming for churchicality notwithstanding, there must have been something of it to the way I made my way. Lambert, that is, bowed his head and lightly put his left hand on my right shoulder, a deaconly hand (mock-deaconly perhaps), as if to say, "Take your time, son. Take your time."

I took my time. It took all the calm I could muster not to be caught up in fossil fluency's depth and dilation, not to be carried away. I offered myself every caution not to resort to barrage, the Gatling-gun spray of notes I'd have bugled had bump's double joint had its way. I picked my way as though I walked in a minefield. A novice at a typewriter hunting and pecking, I pecked at sound and the possibility of sound. Aunt Nancy, Djamilaa and Drennette picked up on my cautious tread and lent themselves to it, letting their riverine amble subside. We no longer sat or stood on the bank of the Niger. Time dissolved into an aroused momentariness peppered by random event or invention—bass interjection, drum interjection, guitar interjection— isolate, asymmetric, intermittent, each a law to itself it seemed. It wasn't that time stood still but that time twitched, a volley of quivers that went for how long no one could say, trumpet, guitar, bass and drums each other's ricochet, no less random even so.

After however long it was, Djamilaa put the guitar down and went back to piano. She played a series of chords at the low end of the keyboard, a slow tolling that was a call to order, ominous and wistful at the same time—one-

two, one–two, one–two again, a two–beat rest between each pair of chords, a space Aunt Nancy noticed and filled with a two–note descending ostinato. Drennette heard the call and went from sticks to brushes, applying a tight, circular stroke to the parade snare, stirring the pot. The three of them laid down a midnight creep that brought “Mood” on Miles’s *E.S.P.* to mind.

I took my mute out of my coat pocket and put in into the bell of the horn. I blew a needle of sound that rayed out as it went thru the air, a tremulous ribbon whose advancing edge was a vibrating blade. It wasn’t that sputter had been seeking this, that obstructed speech ironically or fittingly found its voice in the mute. Sputter, I’ve been saying, spoke. Djamilaa’s call to order, moreover, calling randomness to a halt, was itself random. There was no reason for it to flow out of what preceded it and equally no reason for sputter to be said to have evolved into mute fluency. What happened happened. It was as simple as that. Sputter had spoken no less than mute fluency now spoke.

No less had sputter called flow obsolete (fossil flow indeed) than the mute bestowed fluidity and focus (mute fluency). I not only blew, as the old saw has it, from my diaphragm but set my collarbones abuzz with a sense of yet more remote origins, a faintly remembered myth involving clavicular spillage I’d read about ages ago in some Dogon lore. I vaguely recollected a creational aspect to it, something to do with Amma’s collarbone marrow spilling out. My sound thus had an occasional raspiness at its edges, escaping or expiring breath a constitutive leakage. My collarbones hummed and from time to time knocked, shook like radiator pipes in winter. Part leak, part letting off steam, it was a sound I let the valves tease out, expelled or expired breath conducting to a theme of extinct heat.

More immediate, though, was the impact of what had now caught my attention in the “Wild Card” drawing, the wishbone above the masthead’s ribs. It was this that my collarbones vibrated in affinity with, humming like sympathetic strings on a sitar. No matter how whimsical or wistful, I couldn’t help noticing, it was a wishbone as black as the sun, as though to acknowledge wish’s role were a dark admission, which in fact it was. The fact that it was was a fact I couldn’t get over, though I made my peace with it by way of a Dixonian recourse to flub effects, extenuating breath into what gave sound to my exasperation. Nothing could’ve been more slick than our midnight creep but Bl’under blew with me now and again. Mishaps would occur, I said or let Bl’under say, wish otherwise though we might.

Dinosaurs and birds popped into my head, the thought of them having wishbones in common. The wishbone struck me now as an emblem not necessarily of extinction, a harbinger of ostensible extinction evolved into flight. A furcula technically speaking (Latin for “little fork”), it was eponymously the fork in the road leading toward one or the other. Where there’s a fork there’s a chance I told myself, admittedly wishful but not, I hoped, overly so.

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It was a quick train of thought, feather and scale. Almost before I knew it, the horn emitted a Bowie–esque ratchet of sound, a careening squib that had a Dixonian contour as well, shades of *November 1981*. Feather outran scale, run reigning supreme, skid’s indigeneity to squib newly audible, flight’s tangential drift. Drennette went back to sticks to keep flight in line, upping the tempo after an onslaught of rolls that announced a new–day disposition tending toward all–out sprint (scale train, feather train). Scale to Drennette’s feather, I lagged ever so slightly, a syncopic microbeat behind the beat, an ever so exactly maintained messianic stagger, the gap, looking forward, saving grace turned out to be.

Aunt Nancy jumped on the new tempo right away. The fingers of her right hand scurried back and forth across the strings, those of her left scurried up and down. It was an avian pulse if there ever was one. She bore down, biting her bottom lip as she played, as though the pulse, the proverbial bird in hand, would fly away were she not to or did indeed, from moment to moment, fly away, notwithstanding she did. The flying, flown altercation she laid under it all gave the music wheels if not wings, legs and feet if not wheels. Djamilaa prodded us with pianistic chirp.

Hearing the buildup and sensing we’d soon crescendo, Lambert and Penguin took up their horns, Lambert his tenor still, Penguin soprano now rather than oboe. They saw me my wishbone wager and raised me a ribcage crown, blurting out the head with cairologic urgency again and again, four times in all. We played more loudly with each iteration and peaked on number four, whereupon I took the horn from my mouth and stepped back from the mike as Lambert did likewise, Djamilaa, Aunt Nancy and Drennette pulled back on the tempo and took the volume down to a whisper and Penguin, as the audience applauded my solo, embarked on his.

It was clear why Penguin had switched from oboe to soprano. He made a point, it seemed, of putting the oboe’s pinched, eked–out sound aside, its inturned embouchure aside, opting for a soprano sound as open as a duck’s cry, open as all outdoors. It was an openthroated sound à la Steve Lacy, with no tightness or constriction to it, resounding of nothing if not laryngeal openness, nothing if not esophageal openness, nothing if not, in a word, flow. He seemed intent on saying something about acceptance, something about flow bearing on depletion, departure, fluidity’s eventual arrest. It was a duck’s cry but without its frayed perimeter, the firm inside part of a strand of spaghetti cooked al dente.

Djamilaa, Aunt Nancy and Drennette continued at whisper level as Penguin started off. It was an unrushed, riverine amble they found their way into, Djamilaa now reprising on piano the Malinke way of knowing she’d earlier offered on guitar. Penguin’s accent on flow they backed up

and embroidered with a subtle, sotto voce roll extolling furtherance, a felt, otherwise fugitive equation of brightness and time.

For all its accent on furtherance and flow, there was an elegiac strain woven into what Penguin played. The horn was somehow buoyed by sadness, a deep, thoroughgoing sorrow so abstruse it could only turn sanguine, moan though it otherwise did.

The river, in other words, was back and along with it the lachrymosity Lambert and Drennette had earlier touched on or choked up on. Silly as it seemed, one couldn't help thinking of Julie London singing "Cry Me A River," especially if one had, as I had, seen the movie *The Girl Can't Help It* as a kid in the fifties. That she sings it as a specter haunting Tom Ewell especially came back to me now, conducting or contributing to a theme of payback and retribution I'd have sworn I heard coming out of Penguin's horn.

Penguin repeatedly had recourse to an E-flat pedal in such a way as to suggest conscience and also to say (or at least to imply) that he too, as I had in writing the piece, wondered if prehistory's grudge against the present were at work. The horn cried a river of regret, disbursing mixed-emotional strains of remorse and recrimination, as though evolutionary succession exacted dues, which evidently it does. Not since body first met soul had confession so wed complaint. It was a cry surmising gnostic entrapment, thug gnosis, the most accusatory mea culpa one would ever hear. Retributive spill was our fault but no less retributive it seemed he said, fossil fluidity's ominous underside. That it was our fault was not our fault it seemed he said.

I took my cornet up again, put it to my mouth and offered punctuation, endorsing Penguin's theme of demiurgic sting with a braid of mordents around E-flat. It was no more than punctuation, no more than a quick, ratifying run, but I too admitted fault while claiming fault to be a setup, I too took sublime umbrage.

Penguin shot me a glance, an appreciative gleam in his eye, going on as though newly fired up, made all the more adamant by my corroborative run. Newly adamant or renewing its adamance, his tone blended *accepting* with *incensed*, a tendency toward trill making its way in or having made its way in, a descending trill bottoming out into drone recalling Jo Maka, the Guinean soprano saxophonist. There was no way this would've been accidental. The river was back, decidedly so, running with quaint strain, uncustomary hustle.

Hearing her Mande insinuation expanded on, Djamilaa took to singing again or, to be more exact, semisinging, humming a song from Upper Guinea, "Toubaka." A few words from the song's lyrics emerged from her humming now and again, but mostly what she did was hum, a one-woman chorus commenting on Penguin's solo. She sang or semisang from a position

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of elderly repose, wise, as the expression goes, beyond her years. All weight, all ministry, all measure endowed her voice, an endlessly calibrated “alas,” an extended sigh. Penguin now shot her an appreciative glance. Her voice was drenched in time.

The river had come around again. Malinke ambit had come around again. Penguin blew beyond the horn, the river’s quaint strain and uncustomary hustle prompting him to heave an arc of implied intonation not unlike a fisherman casting a line. This arc was Dredj’s arm around the figurehead’s shoulder, the feature of the “Wild Card” drawing that had most caught Penguin’s eye, an extrapolative embrace whose coo and consolation he now beautifully brought to bear on the horn. His new recourse to diaphragmatic oomph aired a light-bodied bigness or a big-bodied lightness, his eye also caught by the figurehead’s thoracic largesse.

It seemed all we could do to contain ourselves. We stood poised on a precipitous edge it seemed. With the merest abrupt move we’d erode or evaporate, the figurehead’s thoracic transparency suddenly at large. All we could do, it occurred to Lambert, Aunt Nancy, Drennette and me at exactly the same time, was hum. All we could do was catch, as it were, Djamilaa’s choral contagion and hum “Toubaka,” which is what we did, the four of us easing into it, joining her, an antiphonal consort of sorts, a chorus beyond her chorus or, all of us having heard the version of “Toubaka” done by Les Ambassadeurs Internationaux, chorus to her Salif Keita.

It was an immediately soothing hum, a sonic lozenge at the roof of the mouth apportioning balm. Humming drew us back from the edge. We stood stout again, lodged resolutely where we stood, readymade remit, the fossils we’d eventually be. Hum’s vibratory dispatch came into collaborative play with solidity’s transit. It was nothing if not flow’s disclosure once and for all, an aggrieved emollient.

Thus it was that aggrievement and approbation ran as one. So it was we sang, if it could be said we sang, or, if not, semisang with our teeth clenched. Peal and ping rang from the keys under Djamilaa’s right hand as we hummed, as poignant as a Guinean guitar. Penguin worked and worried the arc Dredj’s arm inspired, a breaking wave, he’d have had it, as it broke, less a wave than a trace, audible to an imagined ear alone. The river and what it went out to were back.

Penguin leaned back a bit, mentally and physically both. He let himself be caught by the cushion of sound our humming had become, so relaxed he became all breath, all respiration, resorting to circular breathing as the music peaked. Circularity said it all it seemed he said, “What goes around comes around,” “Where there’s a wheel there’s a turn” and so forth, Malinke furtherance a dream of empathic escort come true. Breath was a ball roll-

ing atop our Malinke hum, a wheel buoyed by and rolling on water, wind roughening water.

The ball or the wheel gathered momentum and the music sped up, Aunt Nancy's bass advancing a jump-up rumble as Drennette's high hat hissed, hum nearly brimming over, a collective croon. There was more and more swell to it, more and more lift as well. We rode a low-spoken undulance, borne or abetted by Penguin's extrapolative surmise.

Just as it had as I ended my solo, the music crescendoed as Penguin ended his. Djamilaa, Aunt Nancy and Drennette again took the volume down to whisper level as the audience applauded. All the while we continued humming—quietly so, at whisper level as well. Once the clapping subsided an insinuating quiet obtained, an almost ominous calm. Penguin now joined our humming, the six of us ever so low-key yet stalwart, savoring the impromptu vibration humming had brought, the low-key visitation humming had become.

It was a soothing song our humming amounted to. A lullaby it might've been except its unremittingness roused us. We hummed possessed of alarm and assurance, an agitated mix whose intensification varied inversely with the tempo at which we hummed. We gradually, that is, hummed more slowly, curiously building intensity while winding the piece down, agreeing, without having to say so, not to return to the head. We instinctively and collectively knew that this was the way it should end—not so much end as fade.

Aunt Nancy, Djamilaa and Drennette eventually let their instruments go silent and we all continued humming a cappella. Here and there a few people in the audience picked up the tune and joined in, humming along with us, but it would be a stretch to say we set the entire crowd humming. Still, an infectious vibration seemed to affect everyone. When our humming finally subsided the audience sat silent for a while as though entranced, as though unaware the piece had ended or taken by surprise that it had, lost in thought. We felt we knew what they felt. Applause was beside the point. Yet when they snapped out of whatever it was they were in they rose from their seats and gave us a standing ovation.

We too were affected by the reading we gave the piece. I'm not sure I can say exactly how but even now it stays with us. How long I've gone on about it is a measure of that no doubt but I'm not sure I can more precisely pin it down. I will, though, mention something we've been wondering about. We couldn't help noticing and now can't help reflecting on the fact that, fossil fluency's extremity notwithstanding, no balloons emerged during the performance. Could it be that the "Wild Card" drawing was preemptive? Could it be that the drawing, conceding to caption as it does, inoculated us? Could it be that "Molimo m'Atet's Figurehead Consoled on the Revival

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Bench” kept the balloons at bay by rendering them redundant? Elated over the performance though we were, we began to wonder not long afterward and we still wonder.

As ever,

N.