

NATHANIEL MACKEY

from LATE ARCADE

Late Arcade is Volume Five of *From A Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, an ongoing series of letters written by composer/multi-instrumentalist N., founding member of a band known as the Molimo m'Atet. Volumes one thru four are *Bedouin Hornbook*, *Djbot Baghostus's Run*, *Atet A.D.*, and *Bass Cathedral*.

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16.I.84

Dear Angel of Dust,

We got back from Detroit yesterday. I'd have written while we were there but it was all pretty whirlwind and we were going nonstop. Besides the gig at the Detroit Institute of Arts, we did an interview and performed in the studio at WDET, the hip radio station that's not far from DIA, and we hung out a lot with some of the town's up and coming musicians, Griot Galaxy, A. Spencer Barefield and others, who took us around. There was lots to see but at the same time nothing to see, a deep sense of hollowed-out prepossession I couldn't get rid of. It wasn't just all the burnt-out or boarded-up houses and buildings or all the empty lots, the stretches that were destroyed in '67 (*Destroyit* some took to calling it) and simply left that way, but something else, something more to do with me perhaps. I did feel my forehead thicken from time to time. I barely staved off a cowrie shell attack.

It may have had as much to do with time as with space, not just being in Detroit but being half a month into 1984, the ominousness of the date taken from it by it getting here, as they say, without incident, failing to live up to its portent. Is it that or is it that it arrived, rich with incident and portent, seventeen years early if not more? This was the question that had me teetering toward a cowrie shell attack, the teasing sense of anticlimactic arrival on the one hand and before-the-fact arrival on the other. I couldn't help hearing Yusef Lateef's "1984," the title track from his 1965 album. It came on strong, piped into my head à la previous cowrie shell cuts, the abrupt, keening onslaught the track opens with showing no mercy. The whistling, the whining and the moaning quickly followed, ventilated by the dicelike tumbings on the piano, the ad hoc bass and drum acrobatics. It was all I could do to ward off a full blown attack, having to do so more than once.

“1984” was a gremlin, an imp, it so kept coming at me. It seemed it insisted I appease it, a poltergeist, an offended ghost. It seemed the only way to do that would be to meet it head-on, so during the sound check I suggested we add a new piece to the program, one that “would honor one of Detroit’s own,” as I put it, “while getting some other business taken care of too.” I told the band it was Yusef Lateef I was referring to and that the piece was “1984,” something I wanted to work up our own version of, more a variation on it than a rendition, as much a departure from it. I told them about the sense of anticlimactic arrival I was beset by, the possibly before-the-fact arrival that also occurred to me, the repeated threat of a cowrie shell attack. I wanted to call our piece “1948” I announced, explaining that it was in that year that Orwell finished his novel and that he arrived at the title by having the last two digits trade places, a numeric anagram. I went on a bit about the arbitrariness of it, the concession to happenstance, the default on prophecy of something so often taken to be prophetic. I said something about the year not mattering, dates not mattering, something about the warning the book issued pertaining to no particular date, no particular time, but to all time, to every passing moment, something about hollowed-out prepossession holding all time, all futurity, hostage. I was on a run, a roll, prolix but both impelled and impeded by the sense that I hadn’t yet said what I meant to say, that maybe there was no way to say it. I spurted, sputtered, cleared my throat, rambled on. It was Aunt Nancy who finally bailed me out, offering a phrase that both summed up and opened up what I’d been getting at, trying to get at. “We get it,” she said demurely, ever so low key, as I stuttered reaching for a word. “We get it,” she said, demure but decisive. “Moment’s omen.”

To make a long story short, one of our hosts at DIA got hold of a copy of “1984” and we listened to the track a few times, putting some ideas together as to how to both refer to it and take it somewhere else. We definitely wanted to retain its aleatory, strung-out, far-flung sense of space and its various recourses to vocalization, though we couldn’t, we knew, use exactly the same instruments. Penguin came up with the idea of bringing Hendrix into the mix, reminding us of “1983 (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)” on the *Electric Ladyland* album, whose line “Oh say can you see it’s really such a mess” he said he especially had in mind. “I like the way it messes with ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’” he said, “sort of the same way he did on the guitar.” So we decided we’d each intone that line at some point in the piece, doing so hand-over-mouth, muffling it à la Yusef’s whimpers and moans. And so on. Everybody came up with ideas. We ended up changing the title, scrambling it further and calling the piece “1489.” “Right before Columbus,” Lambert

pointed out. “You land somewhere by mistake and tell the people living there it belongs to you. 1984 was around long before 1984. There’ve been a lot of 1984s.” So we added “1489” to the set list and to our book.

The other news is that the balloons showed up again. It wasn’t during “1489” but a piece we did later in the set, “The Slave’s Day Off.” It was during the solo Drennette took, a solo that began with the drum set seeming to collapse, come apart, the sort of thing Dannie Richmond would do with Mingus’s band to mark a tempo change. Drennette came out of that collapse, that mock breakdown, with a figure that was all feet — clipped hisses, that is, on the high-hat, hortative thumps on the bass drum. The first balloon emerged at once, slipping out between the two cymbals of the high hat as though they were lips. It bore these words: *I lay on my bed on my stomach, my head on my pillow, the sheet and the cover tossed aside. The sun rose, lifting the hem of my gown, warming the backs of my legs and my rump, bathing the bed in light.* The balloon, it seemed, hearkened back to “The Slave’s Day Off’s” inception on Venice Beach — the rollerskaters, the cellophane jumpsuits, the publicized privates. When Drennette put sticks to snare the first balloon disappeared from the high-hat and the second emerged from the center of the snare, bearing these words: *I felt him looking at me, his eyes on my shoulder blades, the small of my back, my waist and my hips, tailstruck, I could tell, though I couldn’t have cared less. He abruptly had at me, nose up my ass as though nothing else in the world mattered. He acted like his life was at stake.*

Lambert, Djamilaa, Penguin and I looked at one another. The balloons appeared not only to be reaching back to the very roots of “The Slave’s Day Off” but to be related to the x-rated balloons that followed Drennette home after the Come Back Inn gig a few months before. The second balloon vanished as she went to the sock cymbal and came back to the snare with a series of rolls and paradiddles, whereupon another balloon rose from the center of the snare. It bore these words: *What was the point I lay there wondering, reticent, unresponsive, letting him have his way with my cheeks and the insides of my thighs, his lips and his tongue all over them, rummaging my ass-crack as well. No moans escaped my throat, no sound at all. Bored, blasé, I lay silent, unmoving, no grinding the bed, no lifting my ass to his face. My reluctance worked him into a fever, my reserve egged him on, as though he wanted what he wanted not to be wanted.* When Drennette turned her attention from the snare to the tom-tom the balloon disappeared and a new balloon rose from the tom-tom bearing these words: *He kept at it, head up my butt, ostrichlike. My ass and loins were his North, the Gourd he drank from and followed, my “back door” the place the sun would shine someday. Someday, evidently, had come, though I could not have cared less.* A few

snickers could be heard among the audience.

Drennette kept at it on the tom-tom when the balloon disappeared, doling out a string of slow rolls. She played more softly as well, as if whispering, confiding, as though she herself was taken aback by what she went on to disclose. After three measures the fifth balloon emerged, rising from the tom-tom, bearing these words: *The world about to blow up, all he could do was bury his head in my behind, begging off. It wasn't his he said or it seemed he said, the world wasn't his. Muddy Waters was on in the background, "That Same Thing." That same thong he might as well have said.* More laughter rose from the audience, a little louder, more widely dispersed. Drennette worked the bass drum pedal as the balloon disappeared, a hurry-up insistence it fell to her left hand to learn from, which it did, quickening the tempo and passing the lesson along, both it and the right raising the volume over the next few measures, whereupon a new balloon emerged, this one from the bass drum: *Ripe with reticence, bottom-line romance, open-secret sex, the world was neither to be had nor held. He held me instead, my midriff and trunk some kind of surrogate, sweet respite no matter how moot it was to me.* No laughter greeted this balloon. The audience had grown somber, all ears, all eyes, absorbed. As the balloon disappeared a wistful sigh could be heard here and there.

Drennette took the volume back down, the hurry-up thumps on the bass drum a subdued patter she bought time with while putting the sticks down for brushes and then working the snare, all rub and stir. A new balloon, the seventh, rose from the snare, bearing these words: *What if it was otherwise his nudging nose and tongue demanded. What if governance were his it seemed he asked with each inhalation, each lick, each whiff, a new earth it was his to rule borne by the funk between my cheeks. What if my ass were a field his nose and tongue plowed, forty acres worth, what about that it seemed he wanted to know.* When the balloon disappeared Drennette left the snare for the ride and sock cymbals, applying the brushes with a malletlike or hammerlike address that crescendoed as the eighth and last balloon lifted off the sock cymbal bearing these words: *Planet Squat it seemed it all came down to, a dispatch, a dismissal, world without weal without end. World to be done with, done over, long wallow, world to so make it with me would remake.* The balloon disappeared and the solo ended. The audience erupted with thunderous applause and the rest of us came back in.

It was easy to see what the balloons had to do with "The Slave's Day Off," especially coming in a set that included "1489," but it was also clear, to Lambert, Aunt Nancy, Djamila and me, and to Penguin as well perhaps, that they had "Penguin" written all over them, the reference to another flightless bird, if nothing else, giving it away. As if that wasn't enough, Drennette, as

we were leaving the stage, Penguin told Lambert and me later, looked back at him and said, “Nice gig, eh, Ostrich?” and quickly, smiling, corrected herself, “I mean, Penguin.” Was it a come-on or a critique, he asked Lambert and me, maybe her way of getting back at him for the time he called her Djeannine.

It was indeed a nice gig, a nice visit, the audience receptive and especially excited that the balloons appeared, some of them thanking us after the concert for having, as they put it, brought them along.

Yours,

N.

©

18.I.84

Dear Angel of Dust,

We’ve been thinking about the expression a few people used after the concert in Detroit: “Thanks for bringing the balloons along.” Lightly spoken it may have been albeit sincere (they all smiled with a gleam in their eyes as they said it), but it got us thinking about doing exactly that, literally that. What if, we started wondering, we showed up for a gig with a big bag of balloons, not comic-strip balloons but literal balloons, rubber ones, the kind you blow up, and gave them out to the audience before we hit, one or more to each member of the audience, instructing them to use the balloons in whatever way they could to accompany the music, contribute to the music? “It’s an idea that has a lot going for it,” Aunt Nancy, who was the one who suggested it, remarked, going on to elaborate that it would not only, potentially at least, break down the distinction between audience and band, listener and performer, observer and participant, not only add further indeterminate elements to the music as we listened for and responded to the audience’s input, but also, perhaps, work as a “prophylaxis” against the comic-strip balloons. The word was her choice, “not unadvised,” as she herself pointed out, “given certain connotations and the balloons’ recent x-rated content.” She said this without looking at Drennette, with no need to look at Drennette. We all knew what she was getting at. Drennette herself laughed and quipped her approval, “Prepared ensemble meets visual pun.”

We’re wondering what approach an audience would take. Blow the balloons up and rub them? Blow them up and let the air out? Blow them up

and pop them with pins? Blow them up, put them on the floor and stomp them? Leave them uninflated, stretch them tight and pluck or strum them? Leave them uninflated and snap them? Blow them up and thump them? All of these? All of these and more? We wonder but we also worry that were we to do this we'd be acknowledging the comic-strip balloons too explicitly, identifying with them, no matter how playfully, making them a trademark, inviting the audience to think of us in relation to the balloons first and foremost, making them a calling card of sorts. Is irony lever enough to fend off what could look like endorsement? And what if the comic-strip balloons themselves got the wrong idea?

We wonder if it's a risk worth taking. What do you think?

As ever,
N.

©

22.I.84

Dear Angel of Dust,

Thanks for writing back so quickly. I shared your letter with the rest of the band. We agree that a balloon is nothing if not captured breath. That it contains or seeks to contain something too inchoate to be contained we also agree. That the comic-strip balloon and the literal balloon, the rubber balloon, have that much in common we see as well. We agree that using containment (would-be containment) to open things up is a kind of coup. That putting the audience's will or wish to containment literally in their hands carries an element of poetic justice has also occurred to us. That it carries an element of poetic license as well has occurred to us too. The tradition of balloons as a sign of ceremony does recruit color, as you say, to the binding of breath, much as music does. We couldn't have said it better, except we'd maybe keep going and say balloons are in a sense already music, a ritual disbursement of caught or constricted breath meant to consecrate, even where it borders on asthma (if not especially where it borders on asthma), the blessing breath is. If asthma can be thought of as a wildfire, we'd say, balloons are a controlled burn. They marshall caught or constricted breath intimating breath's possible extinction, festive recruit's cautionary aspect or address. Balloons are also, we'd go on to say, chromatic festivity's dark tone,

dark temper, so much depending on sacks of air. We'd want festive lightness given a gravity of sorts, each audience member holding a balloon as though it were his or her own lung.

We'll see what happens. We're more inclined to give it a try after getting your letter, more of a mind it's a risk worth taking. It's a moot question at the moment, however, as we don't have any gigs in the offing. As I've said, we'll see what happens.

As ever,
N.