The Incantation of Trouble

The Silver Jews’ “Trains Across the Sea” (1994) begins with a summons that is also a dismissal: *Troubles, no troubles, on the line*. It’s a magic trick, a sleight of line, in which troubles appear only to be shuffled away as the song proceeds, a train of thought disappearing over an ocean of time. In an earlier act of telephonic now you see it, now you see, Gil Scott-Heron’s “Lady Day and John Coltrane” (1971) stages a failure to conjure away the singer/listener’s troubles. If “you … call on” the music of Billie Holiday and Coltrane, *They’ll wash your troubles, your troubles, your troubles away*. If the first “troubles” summons troubles (and implicates the soiled listener) in order to dismiss them (and make the listener (come) clean), and the second “troubles” is less a negation than a reiteration of what has been washed away, the third “troubles” sounds desperate to make it so. The song ends with a deluge of “your troubles,” and by then we have been washed away with the singer and the troubles he’s shared.

That’s where the “troubles” are. Trouble itself resides in the next song. “Home Is Where the Hatred Is.” Here, there’s no “trouble” to guard him/us. The word would be a home, and *it might not be such a bad idea if I never … went home again*. Not even Lady Day or John Coltrane can wash these troubles away, and the singer can’t bring himself to say the word anymore, knowing the spell won’t work. Here trouble is a habit, and trouble is the source of the habit. It’s accumulation as attrition, returns diminishing to the point of no return.

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88 Scott-Heron repeats “your troubles” 11 times, including the reiteration of the entire line — *They’ll wash your troubles away* — to close out the song.
89 on the album *Pieces of a Man*
90 *Home is where the needle marks / Try to heal my broken heart*