

Ben Pulver

Oct 7 – Short piece for Writing Fiction group

Eloquence and Elasticity, of Time and Sound. Field notes on Song Production & the Production of my Mental Abyss

The calendar week is often visualized two ways. In one, the week runs Monday through Sunday and recycles perpetually as such. In another, the week runs on a sort of continual line, with no ‘new paragraph’ beginning on Mondays, just one loooooong timeline. No break, just endless days. No rinse, no repeat, just novelty (or monotonous continuity), week after week. I couldn’t tell you exactly why this was on my mind as I rounded the corner at Clinton and Bloor, but taking sips of my hot decaf coffee, I was semi-obsessed with trying to envision the week cycle differently. It was sort of a duck or rabbit exercise. Do you see the duck or the rabbit? Nothing else was unusual about today, it was an otherwise unremarkable Sunday morning. The leaves were turning, the air was fresh, and the ambient sounds were crisp and clean, as though they had been sound checked, expertly produced. As my new tradition goes, I took my morning stroll to Coffee Pocket, sung a brief harmonic note with the barista, and returned counting each sidewalk block, making sure to avoid the cracks of death between each. Sidewalk slabs and weekdays, all the same. Sunlight filtered through the trees, I took a deep breathe in, and closed my eyes for a few steps.

Could it be a C major? I don’t know, maybe that’s too cliché. What songs start with C major? Probably so many. What would Nico say? Maybe I’ll listen to some Velvet when I’m home, jog my memory. Oooh, that sound—was that an F? That poor bike will need some oil, but it did sing a perfect F note at the stop sign. Ok, so F.

As I reached the edge of the park, I totally forgot about the days-of-the-week conundrum. The grass was wet and a sort of unnatural green, reminiscent of both pesto and the fluid that oozes out of glow in the dark sticks if you crack them too hard. Did I order a decaf coffee or am I running on gasoline, I mean caffeine? I looked down into the grassy bowl. Everyone in the park was beautiful, natural to the landscape. It all reminded me of that painting by Seurat, I think it’s called *Un dimanche après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte*. Marching down the hill past the baseball diamond, the sand reminded me of Seurat’s pointillism. Far away, it’s all a cohesive form, the large bourgeois figures with their umbrellas held up, lifelessly gazing into the canal’s abyss, all the while, they’re not even one whole—they could dissolve in a heartbeat. They’re made of tiny little specks, not delineated but absorbed, dots that make you wonder how many atoms are in the universe, between my own two feet, between the E minor and the E chord. I wondered for a moment if this was another way to think about today, Sunday, surrounded by a million other days, possibly Monday, and improbably Thursday—a pointillist calendar. Maybe I could have a pointillist mentality, a lifestyle. A timeline fractured and peppered, shotgun to a window. This version was harder than the simple duck-rabbit version, this was probably a both-at-once impossibility, duckrabbit of the minor bestiaris. I was returned to the earth by my exposed socks in my sandals, getting wet from morning dew. But I was already past the communal garden where the tomatoes offered samples to the squirrels, the sun was higher, I was climbing out of the bowl, and somehow, I hadn’t stepped on a single crack in the pavement, another stroll for the books.

At the other end of the park, across the river of green, a lady in an all-red rain suit sat on a wooden bench. Her hand was relaxed, open, clasping an invisible mug with a softness that reminded me of the woman’s hands in Rembrandt’s painting *Young Woman at an Open Door*. The frame is the joke in Rembrandt’s world. The young woman rests her hand on the door frame as though she could step through it, out of the picture, and into our world. Frames, timeframes, what a joke indeed, Sundays, Mondays, calendars, as if time can be tamed, a punchline resonant nearly four hundred years after he painted it... genius. I walked by with a G chord ringing in my ears, that’s what the hand looked like! A perfect G chord hand. Ok so we’ll go from F major to G major, thank you mystery woman. Could the world be my ghost writer?

I picked up my pace, eager to pick up my guitar and try the sequence. Old Dorian was on her porch, and now everything looked like a painting. I saw her knitting a scarf and glimpsed Vermeer's *Girl Reading by an Open Window*. Her hand wasn't holding a letter, though, but it was handling a to-be scarf with the same care, and I knew I would hear it—a gentle A minor 7th chord wafted into my head. F, G, A Minor 7th, rinse, repeat. Dolce vita! I shouted and waved at Old Dorian as I threw my now depleted coffee fuel into her recycling and sprinted to the subway station.

I took a train to the studio and entered a world of images. Around me were hands of all contortions, fictions in their own. Contortionists and dancers, the hands held phones, scrolling through disparate items: images of deep sea life that would probably forever live under the depths of the darkest abyss, momentarily torn up into LED light and pixelation; purses made from rubber at the end of the world, synthetically marked like alligator skin; nieces and nephews cartwheeling out of the frame. Hands held rails, held bags, held belongings, held each other, held others. Each pair conjuring another painting from the depths of my mind—a scene of Degas' *The Dancing Class*, and the patron, none the wiser, taking form of the dance class violinist on the seat in front of me. To the right of me, someone leaning on the window metamorphed into Magdalene leaning on the rocks, it was a soft sadness from *The Penitent Magdalene* by Adriaen van Der Werff. I glanced left in a sort of hysteric euphoria, the old man next to me transformed into one of the ambassadors from Hans Holbein the Younger's painting, *The Ambassadors*, the real man holding his e-cigarette just like the ambassador held his gloves. Or was it the other way around?

Both worlds were now superimposed, and I couldn't see either clearly—painting turned to flesh, and creaky subway sounds to craquelure between frames. All of a sudden I felt my fingers tingle, my pupils dilate, and the subway car sped up to hypersonic speed. Where was I? Is this some new gallery experience, am I travelling in hyperreality—no no, that's just a book by Umberto Eco. Is it? Reference points began to fade, and associative thinking turned into a channel of thought that swept me asunder. Sweat formed on my brow, and I couldn't remember where I was supposed to get off. I was in an asynchronous subway car, it was anachronistic anarchy, nothing made sense. Garbled was the sound of the subway voice, and as it spoke, I saw the illusionistic skull from Holbein's painting form just above the subway floor. The skull in that painting is one of the most cited examples of anamorphosis, suggesting that the painting should be viewed obliquely, such that the skull is primarily visible, otherwise it appears to be flattened and elongated abstractly. Was this how I should think of my days, anamorphically?

The car sped up, and I began to try counting stations to calm down—Sherbourne, Landsdowne, Donlands, Kennedy—but we were much too fast. I was surprised our car hadn't produced a sonic boom—yet everyone around me was moving slowly, scrolling on their phones or turning pages of today's newspaper, and still I couldn't see what was painting and what was not—it was all a blur, made all the more blurry by my temptation to liberate time and think of my days obliquely like the anamorphic skull. We moved, faster, faster. My eyes began to twitch, and something smelled vaguely of falafel wrap, but it was a last-ditch attempt to draw me back to reality. I was spiraling, and all I could think of to calm down was the song I would write after this—F, G, A Minor 7th; F, G, A minor 7th; until infinity, rinse, repeat. Faint as a distant echo, I finally heard: "Please mind the gap when exiting the train," maybe I could still avoid the crack.

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*I was ambivalent to tag these on, sometimes imagining a painting you might not know is more fun, but just in case it's not—here are the one's running through the character's mind:



Georges Seurat, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte*, 1884-1886



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Young Woman at an Open Half-Door*, 1645



Johannes Vermeer, *Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window*, 1659



Edgar Degas, *The Dancing Class*, 1870

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Adriaen van der Werff, *The Penitent Magdalene*, between 1659–1722



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533