

## **You Must Stage an Escape**

‘There’s no time here, not anymore’ – *Sapphire & Steel*, Season 4, Episode 1

Do you feel it, too, Ben? This hollowness. The sorrows of the rotten carcass economy. Diffuse schizophrenia. Rampant depression & anxiety. Dyschronia. Yesterday, I tried to explain to the psychiatrist down at the clinic that I had attempted suicide out of a kind of curiosity, or maybe as a challenge to the internet, to the cyber cosmos itself, to the recurring UV light. I felt oppressed by the ubiquity of screens. Putting the blade to my wrists was my way of escaping the omnipresence of the world wide web. Arms akimbo, I said: don’t you see, how hard it is to move in a body so congested with images of mutilation? Bloated with three-year-old Kurds lying dead on the beach.

She looked at me askance & said: Let’s talk about your childhood.

I sighed, reclining into the hard backed chair. Shut my eyes & listened to the rattle of the 12.05 train leaving the Observatory station.

Did I ever tell you about my father, why he cut off his ears with a razor blade & stored them inside a Ziploc bag? This was before I escaped from the dictatorship in my homeland. We had a single state-owned television channel & one radio station. Every 15 minutes the Dept. of Patriotic History would broadcast an archival insert from the Liberation War. Grainy footage of freedom fighters standing straight-backed before a firing squad. Seconds later shredded by Kalashnikovs. Bombs darkening the blue expanse of sky above the villages in the countryside, before the colour of an inferno filled the screen. The war had been over twenty years, but it repeated in an endless loop like scratched record. Day after day. Month after month.

Before he cut off his ears, & later, gouged out his eye balls, my father said: There must be some mistake. You must stage an escape. This is nowhere, & it is forever.

Was it Marx who said the historical dynamic of capitalism ceaselessly generates what is ‘new’ while regenerating what is the same? A dynamic that both generates the possibility of another organisation of social life & yet hinders that possibility from being realised. This is precisely what the dictatorship had accomplished. Its greatest feat. It had commandeered historical time itself.

By the time I folded myself into a brown suitcase & made my escape, I left my father as a grinning skeleton (he had sliced off his lips), catatonic before a television screen, hazed with static.

I am reminded of all this by the deliberate jumbling up of time in some of your work, the temporal bleed through from earlier periods in drawings like 'A record of wrongs,' 'Obscure messenger', 'The youth our great hope' & 'Here, at length, is an appalling disaster.' Drawings which, I think, simulate & remark upon the chronological incoherence of our present.

Historical time has broken down.

In his essay, 'Midnight,' the novelist Imraan Coovadia contends that 'science has yet to create a satisfactory description of time, an account of why it exists & how it progresses...the physical time of the cosmos, expressed in the changes of subatomic particles & forces & billion sun galaxies, differs from historical time, with its emphasis on economic & cultural processes, & also from the psychological time of human beings.'

You & I, live by different clocks as singular beings, but there's no denying that for each of us time has sped up. The internet & mobile telecommunications technology have altered our relationship to psychological time, turning us into automatons serving the dictates of the market. Zombies in perpetual motion.

If the essential problem for the generations before us was boredom, ours is anxiety & depression. We're simultaneously exhausted & overstimulated by Instagram & YouTube feeds. I see a tangential recognition of this in your bamboo cotton tapestry, 'Rehearsal for a yellow drawing.' A deliberate attempt to move in the opposite direction, to reset the lever & slow time down. To connect again with the world outside by hand.

In my mind, the importance of your work is that it has emerged precisely at this crucial point in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century when historical time has broken down. It feels as if we're marooned in the abandoned roadside café, from an episode of the science-fiction series *Sapphire & Steel*, where time has stopped. 'There's no time here, not anymore,' Silver, one of the characters, says.

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi refers to this atemporality, which is the hallmark of our present, as the 'slow cancellation of the future.' This is not to say that physical time has suddenly stopped moving forward. Life continues, yes, but cultural time has folded back on itself. The algorithms write history now & we have lost the ability to grasp & articulate the present. Or could it be, as Mark Fisher asks: there is no present to grasp & articulate anymore? All we're left with is this frenzy. This perpetual movement. The glare of screens.

All we're left with is this deflated sense of having arrived the party long after everyone has left. These days, Ben, when we say 'aluta continua,' we no longer complete the phrase. We no longer say 'a vitoria é certa' because we no longer

believe victory is certain, we have lost faith in revolution. In our ability to break free from the machines.

In the spring when my father began mutilating himself, he said: son, I live in a body that does not have enough light in it. True. Looking at his ribcage, I could see the decomposing bodies of guerrillas. The burnt remains of two women lying flat on the red earth.

My father said: when I talk about lightness I am talking about breath and space and movement.

I see this, too, in your work. Against this relentless onslaught on the psyche, you've carved a space with light, for you & I to walk a bit more freely.