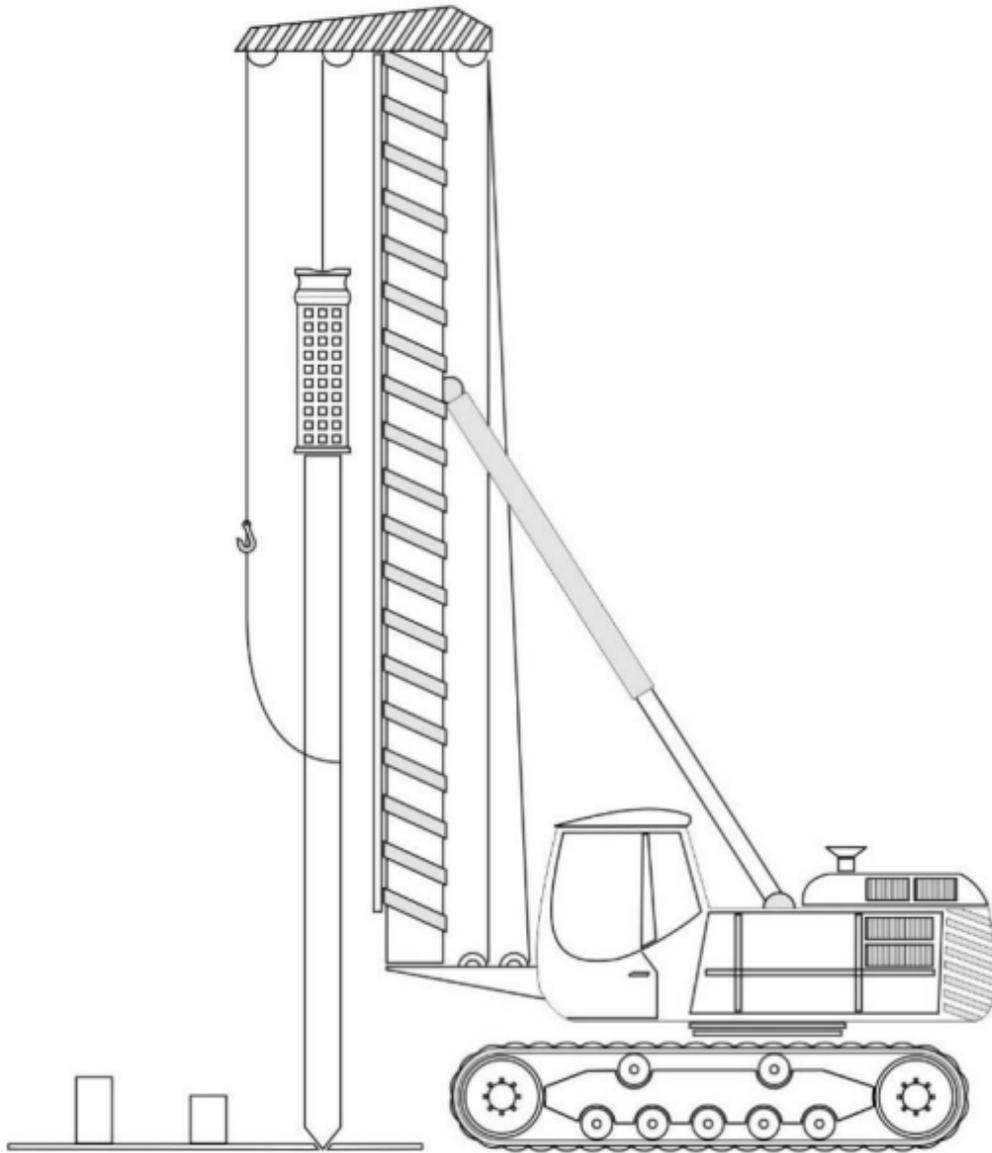


THE MACHINE



microfiction

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The madness begins at seven thirty-four in the morning, or sometimes at seven thirty-five, this only variation owing to some vestigial humanness in it all, for certainly the machine could be set to initialize itself at some precise time, sparing me the thirty-odd second or so infusion of hope.

Hope? No ... thirty-odd seconds of pause, is all—a pause of uncertain length to consider the inevitable, which is maddening in itself, so the madness begins either way at seven thirty-four, I suppose.

Then again, there's the way my mind wakes every day at seven thirty-two in anticipation of it all. Why?

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

Resoundingly, I'm reminded that there are beginnings and there are *beginnings*.

And if the machine did fail to start one morning? No matter—more time to consider many more things until the inevitable resumes on a nearer block. Louder. On and on.

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

The machine is new to our side of the city, but I've been expecting it. Other, different machines came before. Hunkered onto concrete pedestals set squarely along massive halls of grimy brick and iron, no manmade thing ever seemed so immovable. They're gone, now—melted right along with their products. Refashioned into more sprightly designs, while whispers of the illusion they wrought chase dry leaves across scars left where progress skidded away.

And where the beat moved on, the offbeat moved in.

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

No offbeat about it as the piles get driven down, down, down through soft fill once hauled in to ready the marshes for those old machines. The new machine will find bedrock, from which a new edifice will soar, illusive of the sky, but a lattice of crystal and alloy somehow harder and colder than the brick and iron that came before.

Upscale apartments. There is demand for centralization. For efficiency. There is a world of business to be conducted by an ever-tightening knot of conductors. Suburbs? There is no time. Family? There is no room. Reflection? There is no respite.

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

The machine cycles. The pile is driven. Where longtime a more diffuse tempo scattered along the avenues of this neighborhood, the report cracks with ferocious regularity over the syncopated souls of her beatific. Her beautiful people. Her LGBT and all the others. Her alternative.

How many left will know they've been warned?

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

An occasional eye lifts from a device to verify its surroundings.

It will take time—millions and millions of beats. Humans tire of contemplating such spans, leaving them no more aware than the machine of the totality of events. To acclimate, they dissociate. Dissociated, they are assimilated.

On and on, the beat will muscle their hearts, enlisting their souls.

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

Too late, some will scramble to erect barriers. Some will move on. Some will pass away. In time, most will seem to have simply disappeared, their own slight vibrations reformed along the beat.

Ponk! ... Ponk! ... Ponk!

And when the machine has passed, a taller and wider city marching in its wake, only a dwindling few will recall a neighborhood swinging to a different beat.

"It's got a backbeat, you can't lose it," Chuck Berry sang, and then Lennon.

But you can.