All the Jacks

I

I am in Pa Tong, I think, or at least I have taken to referring to my immediate surroundings as Pa Tong, rather than Phuket, in the same way that I have taken to leaving the 7/11 from which I have purchased coconut water or cigarettes, with a hearty "khob-kun-Ka".

Each time I say this, I elongate the "Ka" for what seems like an age, imitating what I think I hear Thai people say, but in a way that is – realistically – such a dreadful rendition that I can't help but suspect that I sound like a racist Brit imitating Yul Brynner in *The King and I*.

It does not matter to me that "khob-kun-Ka" is a grammatical construction that designates me as female. I feel that the effort is enough, and that the trans girl serving me in the 7/11 is delighted enough by my well-meaning attempt at her language. Although, underneath her exuberant cheeriness, I am aware of the likelihood that she detests me.

Why am I here? That is a very *good* question. It is an *excellent* question with a very long answer that my therapist would have called *multidetermined*, meaning that the action in question has a multitude of causes, and to focus on one would be to commit an act of gross simplification.

For a variety of reasons – not least that I am dubious about the competence of my therapist – I am going to ignore his advice and simplify: I am here to document the social interactions of westerners staying in one of the largest party hostels in Phuket. It is the same reason that I have been in Bangkok, in Koh Samui, Koh Phangan and Krabi, and why I will soon find myself twerking a violently homophobic Welsh rugby player in a Chaing Mai nightclub.

Here, in Pa Tong, the hostel is more than a hostel. It is a *resort*. It is replete with a swimming pool, with multiple levels of dorms, with an outside bar and a selection of the very best inflatable pool animals. There is a wild cat that sits on one of the high, white walls and stares at me as I drunkenly purr down the phone to a woman in England that I do not love.

In a late essay, the recently dead French poet Yves Bonnefoy writes that poetry

> is a relation of the person to their environment that ensures a space in their consciousness for the needs and intuitions of the body as much as those of the mind: a living body, destined to die.[1]

[1] Yves Bonnefoy, 'Poetry and Photography', trans. by Ahren Warner, in Romer et al. (eds), *Yves Bonnefoy: Collected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020), 79.

sherman

The "needs and intuitions of the body" is something that I am thinking about… *why not*? I am also thinking a little about 'poetry'. After all, I am a *poet*, in the sense that I have published several books of poems, and in the sense that this rather peculiar activity pays at least *some* of my many and various bills.

Another old, French man – one that is still alive, if only just – has written of poetry, of the poem as a "lawless proposition". Alain Badiou has written that

> … what poetry forbids is discursive thought… presuming the existence of a thinking of the poem, or that the poem is itself a form of thought, this thought is inseparable from the sensible. It is a thought *that cannot be discerned or separated as a thought.* We could say that the poem is an unthinkable thought.[2]

There is an unfortunate romanticism to Badiou's description of poetry, a sense of the philosopher's reverence for an art he loves, but for which he, himself, has little aptitude. It is this same romanticism, the same wistfulness, that you can detect in so many great thinkers – in Derrida, in Heidegger and Kristeva – as they approach the work of art. It is, I suspect, also the pathos of the fact that "thinking about" poetry is never the same thing as the "thinking *of* poetry".

Is it too soon to suggest that there is a sense in which the "thinking about" a man stood in the middle of a bar with his cock and balls wilting on a ping-pong table is never the same kind of thinking as the act of dropping one's pants and splaying one's scrotum against a beer-puddled surface?

Perhaps it is too soon, or perhaps it is never the right moment to make that observation.

II

I am in Pa Tong, in the open air bar of a party *resort* and a Canadian woman is talking loudly at me, she is dropping her top and gesturing towards my camera as she squeezes her breasts in a rather unusual manner. It is almost as if her breasts are not attached to her body. She holds them as she might hold two soft toys.

With little common ground established between us, I can think of nothing else to say other than to ask her if she is planning to go on the bar crawl that the hostel staff are running later in the evening. The vest she has purchased, and which is now bunched around her stomach, is an indication that she is. Yet, rather than replying in the affirmative, she asks if I might like to take her up to my room so that she can "suck my dick".

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[2] Alain Badiou. *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscado (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 17.

I *demur*. It is still very early in the evening and, besides, I have noticed that her friend is considerably more attractive. I take this Canadian woman's photo. I smile and sidle towards the bar in search of another, strong vodka.

"The needs and intuitions of the body… a living body, destined to die". This is an oldie but an goodie, a version of what might be called 'finitude', the living being as finite, whether defined and limited by their own impending death, or by their radical separation from the 'other', or by the innate limitations of their own self-knowledge[3].

I am speaking to a young man called Bryan. Bryan is from north Wales and we have just engaged in a ritual known as the *shotgun*, in which a group of people each deploy a moderately sharp knife to pierce and cut an opening in the lower side of a beer can, before collectively following the lead of a self-nominated– but clearly experienced – member of the group, joining together in a boisterous chant and then, as quickly as possible, popping the ring pull of the can and allowing the through-rush of air to aid in the rapid imbibing of the beverage.

It is my twenty-second of the day, and the chant of this particular iteration is the following:

Here's to thinking positive
And here's to testing negative
Here's to tapping kegs
And here's to spreading legs
And here's to hoping the sperm
*doesn't reach the *fucking* eggs!*

It is clearly not Hölderlin. I cannot help but be disappointed by the failure of the rhyme scheme in the penultimate line, and yet I do my duty, chant along and down my beer with aplomb.

Bryan and I are discussing his experiences as a manager at a Vietnamese hostel, a kind of *super hostel* that occupies its own private island off the coast of Dáo Cát Bà in Ha Long Bay. At around $70 per night, it is considerably more expensive than almost all other hostels in South-East Asia, but includes all meals, a variety of activities such as rock climbing, and all day booze-cruises.

Bryan is a seriously attractive young man, with perfect, light brown hair that would not look out of place in a 1990s Australian soap-opera, a golden tan, a slender body that comes all-inclusive of a pronounced six-pack, a strong but delicate jawline and noticeably green eyes. Perhaps his only aesthetic flaw is a penchant for gaudy short-sleeved Hawaiian shirts, but I make an allowance for this as part and parcel of the accepted uniform for western males travelling via hostels in Thailand.

Bryan is beaming as he scrolls through a particularly lengthy list of names that he has meticulously constructed on the notes app of his Iphone. These names are subdivided with headers for the month and year, stretching back over the last eighteen months, and each is accompanied by an emoji flag representing the name's country of origin.

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[3] It was the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who pointed out that Freud's "discovery" of the unconscious effectively places a radical limit on self-knowledge. As Lacan stated: "thinking… bars access to knowledge, according to Freud… The 'Self-knowledge' (*Selbstbewußtsein)* of Hegel is the 'I know that I think', whereas the Freudian trauma, is an 'I do not know', itself unthinkable, since it supposes an 'I think' devoid of all thinking" (Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre*, text established by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Ahren Warner (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 273.)

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All the names are female, and each represents a woman with whom Bryan has slept. Bryan's record-keeping is meticulous, there are asterisks to represent repeated instances of coitus – two asterisks after a name denoting sex on two separate occasions, with multiple sessions on the same night deemed unworthy of comment – whilst women with the same name and nationality are numbered to differentiate between, for example, British Martha1 and British Martha2.

Bryan's most recent count has his list numbering 380 names, but by his own admission he has been too busy to input the additions he has made since he arrived in Phuket two weeks ago.

The finitude of the subject, you say? In Peter Osborne's *Anywhere or Not at All,* he identifies the two significant modes of contemporary art as 'fragment' and 'project'[4]: the contemporary work of art as constitutively incomplete, either in space (the fragment) or in time (the project).

In the long, drawn-out process of separating from my partner of thirteen years, both terms were put into play, were deployed repeatedly in the long nights of muted discussion and unutterably loud wailing that followed my own, voluntary admission of infidelity. The "project of the self" was how my torturously patient girlfriend tried to assuage the pathological self-loathing that had descended upon me as mania in the months preceding the night I had gone to a college party to get blind-drunk and fucked the first available female. We are all ongoing projects, she would say, with an emotional wisdom that seemed utterly impossible for me to ever achieve.

And yet, the sense of the self as "fragment", as the weaker, grubbier part of a whole, is what I felt. The strangest aspect of this experience, and no less painful for the absurd narcissism in which it was rooted, was that – for months – I was aware that my behaviour was hurting her, and still I was unable to change it, at least partly because I was unable to logically differentiate between the process of hurting my partner and hurting myself. After our nightly, marathon sessions of stunted disclosure and unbearable compassion had entered a state of exhaustion, I would leave our home for a hotel or a rented room to curl up and cry and not know if I was crying because of how I felt, or because of how I had made her feel. There was, it seemed, no way to tell the difference between the two.

III

It is just after 8pm in Pa Tong and I am speaking via Facetime with a woman I do not love. She is watering a small selection of pot plants that she has bought from a local garden centre and enjoying what little of Brighton's early afternoon sun has made it into her back yard.

I am telling her about Bryan's list, about the neurotic attention to detail that must be required to lead a young man to spend his time scrolling through the emojis of his phone to find the particular flag of Suriname. I am telling her of how he glowed as he pointed to one of two Mishas – Misha1, in fact – giggling as he explained that he "had never smashed an Indian before",

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[4] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 169.

although her flag appeared very much to be the Stars and Stripes, and further discussion would establish that she was a native of Michigan.

The woman I do not love is pottering back into her house, collecting a cup of tea and dramatically dropping into the corner of a tired, old sofa. She is somewhat less than impressed by Bryan's record-keeping.

"Do you know what really annoys me?", she asks.

"No", I say, or garble through a particularly vicious attack of hiccups that has suddenly taken hold of me.

"It's something I've had to deal with all my life, and it's insane". The woman I do not love is pushing her intensely thick, black hair out of her eyes and lodging it behind her ears.

"What?" The hiccups are increasing in both frequency and severity.

"It's men who seem to think that they're tricking a woman into sleeping with them".

"Uhuh" is what I mean to utter, although it comes out as "hicc… cup".

"As if we don't want to get laid too"

"I really want to get laid", I say, rather absently.

"Oh man…"

The woman I do not love trails off. She is staring away from the camera of her phone, staring out beyond the frame of my phone, towards something that is far more interesting than my libido.

"He's back again." She sighs with frustration.

"The one-legged seagull", I ask without mustering much enthusiasm.

"Yes, the fucking seagull."

In Brighton, a woman I do not love is being harassed by a one-legged seagull that constantly lands in her backyard and is then seemingly unable to take flight again. In Pa-Tong, the weather is turning and although it is dark, I can tell that the rains are about to begin, because the woman I do not love is frozen in a rictus of Seagull-orientated compassion, the onset of rain almost always heralding the demise of acceptable 4g connectivity.

I tap at my phone to end the call and heave myself up from the oversized, waterproof beanbag that I have become uncomfortably wedged within. "Back to work", I mutter to myself, as I wander slowly over to the bar and smile at Ban, the barman, who is already preparing my vodka and soda.

IV

"I don't object to you rubbing your cock against me", I say to Boris, turning to face his glistening chub of a body.

"You don't? Most men do." Boris looks forlorn.

"I'd just prefer it if you dried yourself first', I say, "Now I'm damp, and I have a camera."

"I'm sorry."

Boris is the first overtly gay person I've met since embarking on this tour of Thai party hostels. Such hostels are noticeably heterosexual environs, and I suspect anybody else *deviating* from the expected heteronormativity might not be as exuberantly open as Boris appears to be.

Given this, I am surprised to be informed by Boris that he struck lucky on Grindr last night and met a rather wealthy young man from Delaware at one of the few upmarket bars in Koh Samui. After a drink or two, a gram or so of gear and a couple of Xanex, Boris and the young man from Delaware had retired to the bed of the man's hotel suite and begun to fuck. Boris is emphatically a *top*, and by his own account he had been rather surprised when the young man from the Diamond State had buckled beneath him, having completely passed out.

It was, it seems, almost twenty minutes before this New England fintech consultant had roused himself, and proceeded to violently assault Boris, punching him twice in the face before pushing him through the glass divider that separated the sleeping and lounging areas of the upmarket suite in which they were ensconced.

"These things happen" I say, rather glumly.

"They do," Boris says.

"He may have been deeply conflicted about his sexuality", I say.

"He definitely was," Boris says, "but it isn't an excuse."

"It certainly isn't", I say.

I stand up and take my leave – Boris is absorbed in his own misfortune – I wander through the bar and out to the small pool beyond, in which two art students from Edinburgh – both called Matilda – are lounging on a large inflatable unicorn and sipping buckets of a strong, muddy concoction that is sold – here, in Koh Samui – as *Long-Island Iced Tea*.

v

Matilda2 is naked. I am lodged between her thighs. I am making good on my promise of a second session, after the first ended abruptly in the hostel pool as we absently rutted, our attentions directed more towards the incredibly tall Thai prostitute that was shouting at Brody, the hostel manager, and refusing to return his passport and documents unless he paid for the services she claimed to have rendered him.

I have been told that the perpetual concern of the conscientious ethnographer is the risk of *going native*, and yet this is not what I am doing. I am, I would suggest, simply making space in my long, working day for the "needs and intuitions" of my body[5] , "a living body", as Yves Bonnefoy rather glumly reminds us, that is "destined to die".

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[5] *lolz*

BODEGA
BAR
BRAWL

If Alain Badiou describes the poem as a "lawless proposition", a kind of thought that is "unthinkable" outside of the poem, or the poetic, itself, Bonnefoy attributes a similar notion of the "unthinkable" to the photograph. Writing of photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Gaspard–Félix Tournachon – known by his pseudonym, Nadar – Bonnefoy tells us:

> One can do no more than merely outline the history of photography if one does not recognise the importance of the inherently and wholly poetic decisions that…have attempted to give to being a new kind of foundation, even there where its thinking has been destroyed. [6]

For Bonnefoy, the 'unthinkable', the destruction of thought, that he locates within the photograph – or, indeed, within certain photographers' photographs – is a product of the *chance* that is inherent to the photographic image, that haunts the photograph on an *ontological* level. This relation between 'chance' and that which is 'unthinkable' is key to the argument that Bonnefoy advances in his *Poetry and Photography*, where he writes that: "chance is active in the photographic image, it deflects the aim of what we call composition, if there is one, it presents things existing as such in an existence beyond that which is reducible to thought"[7]. It as an argument that is not unrelated to that advanced by the great German filmmaker Harun Farocki. In *Industry and Photography*, Farocki argues for the photograph's "separation of reference and discourse… a separation of the subject as well as a separation within the subject itself"[8]. Farocki's argument is something we might return to later, but – of course – we might not.

Either way, in Bonnefoy's essay, the argument for the irreducible, innate existence of chance within the photograph is rather quaintly made via – amongst other things – the paintings of Lorenzo Lotto. As Bonnefoy writes:

> In the image, in fact, there is no place for chance. That which might seem to signify it has been deftly arranged. The folds in the Virgin Mary's dress, on an altarpiece, the cat that seems there by chance in Lotto's *Recanati Annunciation*, are the products of urges, desires, inevitabilities inherent to the painter's fantasy. There is no chance within the field of the image. The throw of the dice has truly abolished it.[9]

In contrast, the photographic image, originally – in the times of Daguerre and Baudelaire – captured on a copper plate rather than on film or the digital CMOS sensor, maintains an irreducible aspect of chance, of the haphazard and the unintended:

> … if we reflect on what, necessarily, was going to appear on that small plate of copper: the cloth on a table, soon the clothes on a body would appear before our eyes, with their real pleats decided by the chance of their material, not the art of the painter. This person that one makes a portrait of has a way of holding their arms that can no longer be completely decided

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[6] Bonnefoy, 88.

[7] Bonnefoy, 83.

[8] Harun Farocki, *Industry and Photography* (1979. 35mm b/w, 44 minutes).

[9] Bonnefoy, 80.

> by the photographer, and thus chance appears… And, soon enough, a cat wanders into the field of the lens, a cat that the photographer had neither planned nor wanted, something that one cannot say of any painting, despite the suggestion of Lotto's *Annunciation*. [10]

And, for Bonnefoy, this operation of chance, of material and reality beyond intention, beyond the decidability of either photographer or audience, is also the insistence of matter, of the world and of reality beyond the control of the subject and, indeed, beyond the parameters of the thinkable, beyond the parameters – indeed – of critical discourse.

I roll slowly away from Matilda2, sweating and breathless, and stand up to retrieve my underwear from the bed that belongs Matilda1, a bed on which my boxer shorts had landed at some point in the Pornhub inspired performance of *intense attraction* that Matilda2 and I had earlier enacted, and which I felt – even at the time – seemed a little overly dramatic.

Matilda2 has closed her eyes and seems intent on sleeping in the dorm bed that has been assigned to me, leaving me to sleep in the dorm bed assigned to Matilda2, itself rather uncomfortably close to the bed of Matilda1.

"You are on birth control, aren't you?" I say to Matilda2.
"We already discussed that", comes her reply, drowsily.

I cannot remember the discussion to which she refers, but – assuming that her earlier response must have been in the affirmative – I slump down onto the only free bed in the dorm, watching Matilda1 snore and sputter and mumbling something unintelligible in her sleep, as a naked young man called Bret retrieves his right leg from underneath her and heads rather coyly for the door.

[10] Bonnefoy, 83.