

ABSTRACT

TO THAILAND, WITH RONALD

by Christopher Alan Cox

To Thailand, With Ronald is a hybrid form of creative writing combining travel writing, roman à clef, and memoir depicting an unnamed narrator and his friend, Ronald, as they go on a backpacking journey through Thailand, where the narrator gains an increasingly critical stance toward contemporary tourism. The introductory article, “The Western Gaze Upon Itself: Techniques for the Future in Contemporary Travel Writing,” examines how several contemporary travel writers (J. Maarten Troost, Jon Krakauer, Paul Theroux and Elizabeth Gilbert) relate to the genre’s history of colonialism and imperialism, the ways they deal with this both implicitly and explicitly, and a potential way forward for the genre.

TO THAILAND, WITH RONALD

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Dedication

To my parents, Tim and Judy, where music, writing, humor and curiosity originate from.

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The Western Gaze Upon Itself: Techniques for the Future in Contemporary Travel Writing

Christopher Cox

Travel writing is sometimes maligned as a genre, a form that seems irreconcilably connected to a history of colonialism and imperialism. When we think of travel writing, we think of European explorers and their racist descriptions of “savage” indigenous tribes, British colonial officers sending dispatches from the outposts of their empire. We think of Sir Richard Burton flagrantly sneaking into Mecca in the 1850s or Mark Twain’s various gibes at Arabs as ugly, backward and deceitful (“I also took along a towel and a cake of soap, to inspire respect in the Arabs, who would take me for a king in disguise” (Twain 161)). Post-colonial scholars write of how travel writing, along with “mapping, botany, ethnography, journalism” were a tool of “colonial expansion... travel writing disseminated discourses of difference that were then used to justify colonial projects” (Edwards 1).

Even in the arguably post-colonial (if not post-empire) age, mainstream travel writing seems to have something inherently imperialist and Western-centric in its very DNA, the idea of someone from the West venturing out into the lands of the African or Oriental “Other,” to report back on their foibles and habits to a Western audience, as if in this globalized and digital age the Other were not fully capable of doing such reporting themselves. Jessa Crispin describes the persona of the travel writer as being a kind of “expert witness:”

From Sir Richard Burton to Bruce Chatwin to Paul Theroux, the traveler is an essentially masculine force, driven by the need to conquer, to experience life at its extremes, but most of all to explain. This travel writer not only goes off to see what he can see but also becomes a kind of expert witness who explains the natives to interested parties at home. That most of these writers, the polyglot Burton aside, did not speak the language, only spent a few weeks in their chosen locations, and came with a colonialist’s baggage stuffed full with preconceived assumptions did not make their audiences any less credulous about their authority. (Crispin)

To a certain extent I think this is true. When examining the texts themselves, however, grey areas emerge. Particularly in more contemporary works there seem to be specific areas and moves being made that fall outside of the umbrella of a typically imperialistic text, that seem even to be critiques, be they implicit or overt, of imperialism, even as the author falls neatly under it in other ways. This is true even in the most popular of mainstream texts, works that seem like they would be most susceptible to imperialist tendencies. As such, there seems to be a way forward that, while perhaps not fully realized, indicates that travel writing has the potential to not only transcend its colonial roots but to even be a vital counter to it.

In this article I examine three examples of contemporary mainstream travel writing. *Headhunters on my Doorstep* by the comedic travel writer J. Maarten Troost, *Into Thin Air* by the adventure journalist Jon Krakauer and *Dark Star Safari* by the renowned travel writer and novelist Paul Theroux. Each of these writers seems to be following in a classic travel writing tradition: Troost is a humorist, Krakauer is a journalist, and Theroux is the swaggering adventurer. Each writer is best-selling and well-regarded, their books are ubiquitous in bookstore travel sections, and each writer also seems ripe for criticism for following an imperialist tradition. And each writer also makes certain moves within their texts that seems to push back against that tradition. I also discuss briefly Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, one of the most successful travel books of the recent past, and examine whether it is making similar moves to the other texts, or doing something else entirely.

Though largely plotless (*Into Thin Air* may be an exception), much travel writing seems to have a central conflict as a major driving factor, that of the conceptual vs the material. Edwards and Grauland in their introduction to *Postcolonial Travel Writing* describe “a convergence — an interlocking — of the conceptual and the material,” but it is where the conceptual and the material clash that seems to pre-occupy much of the writing I examined. Both the conceptual and material seem to be rooted in travel writing's history, and an ongoing question may be, how much is the writing representing the material reality of a place, and how much is it representing the author's conception (of course, the two concepts are intertwined enough that they can likely not be fully separated)? Earlier, more colonial minded travel writers likely erred frequently toward the conceptual: “simple savage” conceptions likely break down pretty quickly if one actually understands the complex social systems and hierarchies of various indigenous peoples. Contemporary travel writing often deals with a kind of conflict in the writer between

their own romanticized conception of what a place is, vs what they experience. Of course this isn't entirely new; Mark Twain spends much of *The Innocents Abroad* grousing about how his various experiences throughout Europe, Africa and the Middle East do not match the picture in his head, sometimes to the point of directly calling out other travel writers for printing inaccurate depictions.

It is where the conceptual and the material diverge, where they clash against each other, that I see a lot of the potential for travel writing to move forward. Hacks and liars aside, a travel writer's credibility comes mainly from their ability to give an honest depiction of a place and the people there — and as we shall see, often these honest depictions run directly counter to those of globalization and imperialism.

J. Maarten Troost

J. Maarten Troost's *Headhunters at My Doorstep* is a mostly humorous account of Troost's voyage through the Pacific Islands, beginning in Tahiti and continuing on through the Marquesas Islands, Kiribati and Samoa. The journey is in part inspired by a similar journey taken by the 19th century writer Robert Louis Stevenson. In Robin Hemley's book, *Field Guide to Immersion Writing*, he describes several styles that "immersion writing" (of which he considers travel writing to be a part, along with "immersion memoir" and "immersion journalism") can take, including experiment, quest, infiltration and re-enactment. *Headhunters* fits squarely into the re-enactment camp (though has elements of the other styles as well). Indeed, re-enactment seems to be a common theme to travel writing, at least in the works examined here. In this case, *Headhunters* operates as a re-enactment in multiple ways. The idea behind the trip is literally, to try to retrace the journey of Robert Louis Stevenson as he traveled through the Pacific Islands in the late 19th century. However, it also becomes a re-enactment in a much more personal way for the author, as he returns for the first time in almost a decade to Kiribati, the setting of his first book, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*. This return to an earlier location lends greater depth to the work in several ways: as the book begins, Troost seems to be having something of a mid-life crisis, recently struggling to achieve sobriety from alcohol and hold his marriage together, as well as facing the prospect of not having had a successful book in several years, even detailing a recent failed project. As such, returning to Kiribati has personal significance for Troost, being not only the site of youthful memories, but also the launching pad for his now stalling career.

The emphasis on re-enactment has several potential functions for the text. It puts the author's journey into a context, both on a historical and personal level. On a historical level, it shows who else has made the journey, when they made it and what outcomes may have resulted, which can then branch into a larger historical discussion if so desired (certainly key if the author wants to push back against a negative historical legacy). It also shows that the author is not an island unto themselves, that there have been others who have made such journeys. On a personal level, it provides greater personal connection and thus potential drama for the reader, and also helps to establish the author's ethos. Since Troost has been to this part of the world before, we know that he knows certain things about it, and we know that he is a traveler of some degree of competence. It also adds to the development of the conceptual, which may be diverged from later through the material. There have been other writers and reporters of the journey, who have added to the West's perception of the regions. And Troost has been there before, and so he has additional pre-conceived notions of the place based on his memories and past perceptions.

It gets even more complicated. Anyone raised in a culture (i.e. everyone) has certain conceptions of the Other that are drilled into them in varying degrees. In this case, much of the Western writing on the Other emphasizes either exoticness or negative qualities (including fabrications), often to justify projects of colonialism and exploitation. None of us can go to Kiribati and just see a person, devoid of some kind of pre-conception. However, this person may diverge from our conception, and thus the writer may discover that their conception (again, almost unavoidably influenced in some way by a negative project of the past) is wrong, thus calling into question the pre-conception and its outcomes. Troost's own re-enactment adds even yet another layer to this, as he is recreating a journey taken by Robert Louis Stevenson and thus adding Robert Louis Stevenson's writings as pre-conception and context for his journey. Stevenson was exposed to even more racist pre-conceptions than in our time; yet Stevenson also diverges somewhat from this pre-conception, writing favorably (if ensconced in the terminology of the time) of the indigenous populations that he encounters. Thus by identifying himself and his journey with Stevenson, he adds Stevenson's divergence to his own ethos.

Troost's re-enactment of his previous journey pays off on the personal level in the ways in which *Headhunters* diverges from his previous work, *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*, as he describes swimming with sharks in Fakarava; a recurring theme of *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* is Troost's persistent fears of running into a shark in the water. This scene works to characterize

Troost as older and more experienced, differentiating him from the younger version of himself, a person he is both nostalgic for but also in conflict with as a recently recovered alcoholic. In *Sex Lives*, he comedically describes the lengths he would sometimes have to go on Kiribati to get beer; in *Headhunters*, he instead describes an AA meeting he finds on the same island in a Catholic rehab.

A common scene in travel writing is an early description of life before embarkment, which is often depicted as mundane, the writer beset by a sort of existential restlessness. In Troost's case, it has some pretty material manifestations; the disappointment of failed book projects and his alcoholism and struggle with sobriety. *Sex Lives* had a similar beginning, as he describes his sense of aimlessness post grad-school, prompting him to travel with his wife to live on Kiribati for two years. The specifics almost don't seem to matter: similar scenes pop up in both *Into Thin Air* and *Dark Star Safari* (one of Jon Krakauer's other books, *Into the Wild*, in addition to detailing the life of the adventurer Christopher McCandless, is also a book length study on the restlessness that inspires people to travel, and subsequently risk their lives doing so). In *Headhunters*, Troost relates this malaise to the life of Robert Louis Stevenson, who he describes as having a case of the "fuck its." In this way, Troost explicitly connects himself to a larger tradition of travelers, motivated by restlessness rather than glory, thus giving himself a kind of justification for his trip and working to establish a kind of ethos, which contributes to the establishing of the expert witness persona described by Crispin, demonstrating that he is knowledgeable of the historical context of his journey. This connection to older writers is also a common move from contemporary travel writers, contributing to their ethos as witnesses and simultaneously justifying their own journey while also showing their awareness of its historical place, including the negative connotations of such an endeavor, though they are rarely on the nose about this. Later Troost provides additional historical context for the region he is traveling to, more explicitly detailing its history with regards to colonialism and imperialistic exploration, as well as contemporary, though often humorous, critiques of globalization.

At times, Troost plays the expert witness persona straight. To an extent, I suspect the conventional travel writer has to, at least to the extent of assuring the reader of the accurateness of the observations depicted (though there's always the Hunter S. Thompson route). At other times however, he seems to subvert this, with a fellow more historically knowledgeable traveler actually interrupting moments of Troost's contextual exposition to correct historical inaccuracies.

This indicates an awareness of the expert witness trope in travel writing, if not a degree of discomfort with it. Ironically, these moments may serve to further enhance Troost's credibility as such, with a writer so reliable that he will even admit when he is wrong or doesn't know something. In a way then, he seems to be partially eschewing the prototypical expert witness persona in favor of something similar but perhaps more in line with modern sensibilities: that of the "honest witness." Whereas the expert witness seems irrevocably tied to a colonial concept of the world, placing the impetus of deciphering and explaining the world for the reader upon the Western traveler and his ostensibly sophisticated knowledge of the cultures he is observing, the honest witness places no such loftiness upon themselves other than a promise to honestly depict what they are observing, potentially allowing room for the knowledge and narratives of others (including the Other themselves) and the acknowledgement of error and personal and cultural bias. Though not a perfect vehicle, the honest witness works to dismantle the assumption of superiority that comes inscribed in the expert witness, placing the author on more equal footing with the people they encounter. In Troost's case, it also reinforces his comedic travel writing persona, lampooning what he clearly recognizes as a trope of the genre at times, though not to the extent of actively giving out mis-information.

The comedic persona in some ways makes it difficult to interpret how much criticism is intended. At times, Troost seems to challenge the colonial legacy, referencing many of the shitty things colonialism has wrought. He frequently dips into a region's colonial history, often with a tone more of resigned sarcasm than fiery critique, and depicts both the losses the indigenous people suffer as a result as well as what he sees as their resilience: "Of course, not so long ago, many of these isles were nearly extinct of people and more than a few were bombed to the edge of oblivion, but leave something alone for long enough and it will return to its natural state, like a seedling on the slopes of Mount St. Helens or a colony of cranes in the DMZ" (Troost 20). He also notes the continuing impact of colonialism on the regions he travels to, such as France's impact on Tahiti, though this is often as much as for humor's sake than serious critique: "And come to think of it, didn't he think it weird that we were speaking French, and even stranger that we were at this very moment actually in France? Was he not aware that nearly every colony in the world achieved independence, I don't know, sixty years ago, and yet Tahiti remained as French as Bordeaux? Did he listen to Johnny Hallyday? Did he think Jerry Lewis was funny?" (Troost 24). He's a little more somber later when writing of France's impact on the Marquesan

Islands: “It seemed obvious to me that the Marquesans actually *cared* about their heritage, which may seem obvious – what culture doesn't – but these islanders had become nearly as extinct as the dodo bird, and what they'd found when the onslaught of disease and contagion had finally run its course, leaving but a bare sliver of survivors, was a new regime of French functionaries and stern missionaries, determined to exterminate the last vestiges of the old ways” (Troost 72). Earlier, when writing about early Western writers tendency to exoticize the Pacific Islands as “inhabited by winsome available women and savage headhunters,” he states: “Which is fine. Nothing wrong with that. I'm all for the titillating yarn,” though then goes on to state “But among the early books on Oceania, none rang particularly true to me... where were the human beings? The islanders depicted in these pages had all the complexity of a coconut frond” (Troost 9).

Troost himself sometimes has a tendency to exoticize “Otherness” and difference, worrying about the impact of global culture on Kiribati, but less because of the potentially negative impact on its people, and more because of his personal preferences for what he describes as a kind of semi-quaintness (though he does not use that word himself). This may be more pronounced in his earlier book, *Sex Lives*, where although he does address globalization and historical imperialism, he also takes a lot of delight in showing the shitting and sexual habits of the islanders.

Where a lot of this comes to a head is a moment on Kiribati where Troost first reflects congenially on how much of the island seems familiar to him, before then coming to the shocking realization that the island itself is sinking as a result of global climate change:

The shop was exactly as I remembered it, a sky-blue cinderblock storehouse with a tin roof and a counter behind which lay cans of corned beef and bags of rice. I took a gander at the fridge, which contained the familiar boxes of Longlife Milk, stacks of Victoria Bitter and XXXXGodl, and a few wilting vegetables. I left feeling strangely elated. It's. Exactly. The. Same... It was only later, as I gathered behind the guesthouse, standing on a seawall to enjoy the sunset, that I sensed profound change... The tide had come in and I watched it rise. And rise. And rise. Soon, it was bubbling beneath me, seeping into the seawall, and escaping like babbling fountains. The seawall was but a soggy, collapsing peninsula, suddenly surrounded on three sides by ever-surgings waters. I looked around me with particular interest, and noted the trees and bushes that just an hour or two earlier had been dry and undisturbed, but now lay immersed in the lagoon. Many of the coconut

trees, I now saw, were dead, standing like mute sentries above the encroaching water.
The island was sinking, its destiny foretold in the great beauty of the gathering sea.
(Troost 224-226)

This scene is a clear example of the divergence of the conceptual (in this case, his memories of the place) and the material, directly informed by Troost's re-enactment of his former journey. His memories of the place are directly upended by this harsh new reality. It is here that I see the potential of contemporary travel narratives to challenge the colonial legacy of the genre. The climate change that will likely decimate the island that he observes is a direct result of Western action and policy, action and policy that is tied directly to a history of colonialism and imperialism (which then led to globalization). Playing the persona of the honest witness, attempting to accurately report the truth of what he observes and experiences, he thus finds himself reporting on the ugly realities of Western imperialism and globalization (the modern heir to imperialism, or perhaps its twin brother). His writing here becomes the Western gaze upon its own historical outcomes, a position and theme which will come up again and again in the other works I examine.

Jon K

Into Thin Air is Jon Krakauer's devastating account of a disastrous expedition to climb Mt. Everest, one which ends up costing multiple lives. Though very different in tone from the often light-hearted, occasionally digressive style of *Headhunters*, it employs many of the same techniques toward similar ends.

Like *Headhunters*, *Thin Air* is a re-enactment of sorts, one which operates in multiple ways. There have been, of course, numerous Everest expeditions throughout 20th century Western history, often characterized as a great feat of empire, many of which have been documented in writing, or more recently film. As such, *Thin Air* becomes a re-enactment of those. Furthermore, the company through which Krakauer performs this endeavor is one which is centered around the repeated successful climbing of Everest for paying tourists of various stripe, in a sense becoming a continual re-enactment of this great imperial feat, the continual conquering of a foreign behemoth, repeated forever. *Thin Air* then becomes a re-enactment itself of this continual re-enactment, this time with disastrous results, which lends critique toward the idea of such commodified re-enactment in general. Tragically, the re-enactment that the

company sets out to accomplish (the repeated successful mounting of Everest's summit without casualty) becomes instead a re-enactment of the numerous deadly attempts on the summit throughout history, attempts which Krakauer details at length throughout the book.

As in the journey in *Headhunters*, the endeavor also has a closely felt personal connection for Krakauer, which he establishes in a similar “pre-journey” section of the book, writing of his long held fascination with mountain climbing and exploring a similar sort of restlessness with domestic life to that felt by Troost. Krakauer writes of his early mountain climbing ambitions: “Secretly, I dreamed of ascending Everest myself one day; for more than a decade it remained a burning ambition. By the time I was in my early twenties climbing had become the focus of my existence to the exclusion of almost everything else” (Krakauer 23). Later he becomes disdainful of the prospect, as had become the fashion among “serious” mountain climbers. He even gives up mountain climbing for awhile, trying to settle into a comfortable domestic life with his wife. However, this does not last. “I’d failed to appreciate the grip climbing had on my soul, however, or the purpose it lent to my otherwise rudderless life. I didn’t anticipate the void that would loom in its absence. Within a year I sneaked my rope out of storage and was back on the rock” (Krakauer 87). Over time, though, his restlessness seems to subside: “My hunger to climb had been blunted, in short, by a bunch of small satisfactions that added up to something like happiness” (Krakauer 28), a blunting that is interrupted when *Outside* magazine offers to send him to Everest: “Given the disdain I’d expressed Everest over the years, one might reasonably assume that I declined to go on principle. In truth, the call from *Outside* had unexpectedly aroused a powerful, long-buried desire” (Krakauer 27). This desire is characterized as so powerful that once again it leads Krakauer to moments of deception: “I explained to Linda and anyone else who expressed skepticism about my Himalayan qualifications that I didn’t expect to ascend very high on the mountain. ‘I’ll probably climb only a little way above Base Camp,’ I insisted. ‘Just to get a taste of what high altitude is about.’ This was bullshit, of course” (Krakauer 87-88).

These depictions of the malaise of life at home (as also discussed in *Headhunters*, and which we will also see in Paul Theroux) may be where these travel works most reinforce the attitudes of colonialism, essentially unquestioned representations of an inherently colonial idea, that home boredom can only be cured by using someone else’s country as a playground, the motive of every “ugly tourist.” Jamaica Kincaid skewers this archetype mercilessly in her book-

length essay *A Small Place*, writing that the natives of tourism heavy countries are “too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself” (Kinkaid 19). Undoubtedly these are true impulses as well, and the writers would be remiss not to include them. However, none really questions why they might feel this way, or probably more importantly, the inequality that allows them to indulge in this.

Krakauer is careful in his depictions of the locals he encounters, indicating a clear desire to represent them with respect and dignity. At one point he describes an encounter between an obnoxious tourist and a local Sherpa woman:

When I returned to the dining room, I approached the proprietress, Ngawang Doka, to ask for a beer. A small, graceful Sherpani, she was in the midst of taking an order from a group of American trekkers. ‘We hungry,’ a ruddy-cheeked man announced to her in overly loud pidgin, miming the act of eating. ‘Want eat po-ta-toes. Yak burger. Co-ca Co-la. You have?’ ‘Would you like to see the menu?’ Ngawang Doka replied in clear, sparkling English that carried a hint of a Canadian accent. (Krakauer 45)

The tourist continues to address the woman in this offensive manner, which prompts Krakauer into a discussion on the contemporary and historical context of Sherpas and their relation with other climbers. Once again we see a divergence between the conceptual and the material, as the reality of Ngawang Doka contrasts significantly from the tourist’s racist conception of her, a conception so powerful that the tourist continues to hold it even when confronted with the reality. The scene serves both to set Krakauer aside from the image of the ugly, ignorant Western tourist, as well help establish him as a reliable witness (it works for either expert or honest variety), someone who can see beyond ugly cultural prejudices and present things accurately. He does not elaborate on cultural commentary, merely presents the scene, not allowing any type of critique to derail the narrative, but including it all the same.

Krakauer also includes various depictions of the effects of globalization on Nepal, critiquing it in places, but also taking care to steer away from the fetishizing of Otherness that can sometimes occur in its place:

Longtime visitors to the Khumbu are saddened by the boom in tourism and the change it has wrought on what early Western climbers regarded as an earthly paradise, a real-life Shangri-La. Entire valleys have been denuded of trees to meet the increased demand for firewood. Teens hanging out in Namche carpet parlors are more likely to be wearing jeans and Chicago Bulls T-shirts than quaint traditional robes... The transformation of the Khumbu culture is certainly not all of the best, but I didn't hear many Sherpas bemoaning the changes. Hard currency from trekkers and climbers, as well as grants from international relief organizations supported by trekkers and climbers, have funded schools... It seems more than a little patronizing for Westerners to lament the loss of the good old days when life in the Khumbu was so much simpler and more picturesque. Most of the people who live in this rugged country seem to have no desire to be severed from the modern world or the untidy flow of human progress. The last thing Sherpas want is to be preserved as specimens in an anthropological museum. (Krakauer 47)

This avoidance of falling fully into either narrative lends credence to Krakauer's ability to depict nuance in the world, his ethos as an honest witness. It is worth noting that this does dip into presenting the narratives as a binary either-or choice. What the Sherpas want is likely to be neither condemned to living as historical "specimens" nor to have their lands and their persons exploited by the Western globalization machine, but rather to engage with the modern world on something resembling equal footing. This is somewhat mitigated, however, by including a message board post from a Sherpa, a more explicit anti-imperialist critique than any of Krakauer's own observations: "But my people went the other way. They helped outsiders find their way into the sanctuary and violate every limb of her body by standing on top of her, crowing in victory, and dirtying and polluting her bosom..." (Krakauer 299). That Krakauer leaves this harshest of critiques, one of the last words in the book proper (excluding the post script), to the voice of the Other seems a direct refutation of the expert witness persona, an acknowledgement that his voice should not be the only one included.

The narrative itself casts some doubt on Krakauer as an expert witness as well. Throughout, Krakauer presents his journalistic prowess and in-depth research into the history of the mountain. However, as he ascends the mountain and begins to feel the effects of high altitude sickness, his presentation of events becomes sketchier, something he readily admits. He has an entire encounter with a fellow climber, who he believes to be one person, and then later finds out

(to his horror) is someone else entirely. Rather than a rhetorical strategy, it seems that the mountain itself is challenging Krakauer's ability to accurately depict events outside of his subjective experience (essentially, the foundation on which the expert witness persona depends upon). However, by reporting on his own faulty perceptions and potential incredibility (in later editions of the book, he also includes a postscript documenting various challenges to his version of events, and his response to them), he is establishing himself as an honest witness, one who dutifully relates the experience as he recalls it, but acknowledges that memory and perception themselves can be somewhat mercurial.

Krakauer never outright damns the commodified Everest climbs he is writing about, nor the original imperial climbs themselves, and there seems to be a certain reverence for those who undertake such feats and the mountain climbers of old (similarly, there is a certain reverence for the doomed subjects of *Into the Wild*) even as he shines a spotlight on the problematic elements of contemporary climbing, writing that Everest is "no longer merely a mountain, but a commodity" (Krakauer 80). In this case, the commodification led to the deaths of 9 people. However, Jon is quick to point out, death has always been a risk of mountain climbing, even for professionals. His own feelings on the sport, one which he has engaged in his whole life, seem to be somewhat ambivalent, and he never quite questions whether people should be climbing mountains like this in the first place, particularly Westerners who travel to foreign countries, whether tourist or mountaineer. But his deep ambivalence toward the climbing of Everest (particularly by amateurs) and its commodification, and his feelings of remorse for the deaths of his fellow climbers, indicate a clear sense that all is not well, and certainly raise the question, with all the lives it has cost over the years, what business do any of us have on the mountain?

Paul Theroux

Paul Theroux is one of the more esteemed travel writers of the late 20th and early 21st century, the author of more than a dozen travel books, covering places ranging from Asia, Europe, South America, the Pacific Islands and, most recently, the American South. When Crispin writes of the expert witness as the quintessential travel writer persona, she refers specifically to Paul Theroux. *Dark Star Safari* is Theroux's account of traveling by land through Africa in the early 2000s, starting in Cairo in the north, and journeying by a variety of methods – (bus, car, boat, walking - never flying) – to Cape Town in the far south. As with Troost and

Krakauer, this is in many ways a very personal journey for Theroux. He spent several years in Africa (Malawi and Uganda specifically) as a young man in the 1960s, working for the Peace Corps. *Dark Star Safari* is the first time he has returned since. As such, the journey involves lots of moments of both re-enactment and the divergence of the conceptual (Theroux's memories) and the material (the current day reality).

He describes his impetus for the journey thusly:

All news out of Africa is bad. It made me want to go there, though not for the horror, the hot spots, the massacre-and-earthquake stories you read in the newspaper; I wanted the pleasure of being in Africa again. Feeling that the place was so large it contained many untold tales and some hope and comedy and sweetness, too – feeling that there was more to Africa than misery and terror – I aimed to reinsert myself in the bundu, as we used to call the bush, and to wander the antique hinterland. There I had lived and worked, happily, almost forty years ago, in the heart of the greenest continent. (Theroux 1)

He later wonders, “Had something fundamental changed since I was there? I wanted to find out. My plan was to go from Cairo to Cape Town, top to bottom, and to see everything in between” (Theroux 3). Theroux is clear to couple this ostensibly more noble justification with a more selfish one, the desire to disappear. He writes of his frustrations with the mundanity of home life, its predictability, the interconnectedness of technology such as e-mail, and his impatience with constantly having to wait on others. “I was going to Africa for the best reason – in a spirit of discovery; and for the pettiest – simply to disappear, to light out, with a suggestion of I dare you to try and find me” (Theroux 5).

His restlessness aside (it seems similar to Troost's and Krakauer's), I find his first reasoning (to see for himself) interesting because it fits so readily into the model of the expert witness persona, indicating a belief in one's own authority so strong that no other conclusion can be trusted but those of one's own making. This seems very much in the mold of the earlier travel writers, jetting out to explore supposedly hostile lands — and after all, Theroux clearly establishes how dangerous Africa may be right there at the beginning, before dismissing the danger with a wave in the style of every rugged (and masculine) adventurer from Richard Burton to Indiana Jones. On the other hand, the skepticism with the “official narrative” that underlies it seems crucial to establishing the kind of honest witness persona that could potentially offset the

influence of imperialism. Like Troost's frustration with early writings on the Pacific, Theroux is driven in part by a desire to see accurate depictions of a region he feels a connection to.

Theroux describes his former time in Africa as somewhat idyllic and optimistic:

...in those old undramatic days of my schoolteaching in the *bundu*, folks lived their lives on bush paths at the ends of unpaved roads of red clay, in villages of grass-roofed huts.

They had a new national flag to replace the Union Jack, they had just gotten the vote, some had bikes, many talked about buying their first pair of shoes. They were hopeful and so was I, a teacher living near a settlement of mud huts among dusty trees and parched fields. (Theroux 2)

This is contrasted later in the book with the harsher present day reality of Africa, which he concludes has indeed gotten worse since his time there in the 60s. In addition to tying into much of the book's central criticisms (many of them about the role of foreign aid), it also reinforces more personal themes as well, about the passage of time. There is a third, more covert impetus for the trip, that of Theroux's approaching 60th birthday, and he becomes more candid about his conflicted feelings toward aging later in the manuscript. At one point, he slips into a reverie about Lady Margaret Roseveare, an old role model of his, which becomes increasingly fantastic as he imagines staying in Central Africa permanently, only to interrupt himself with a shocking revelation: "Living in this positive purposeful way would be so healthy as to be life lengthening. I would be a pink-cheeked bore in baggy shorts, a beekeeper in in the *bundu*, running a school of overachievers, imagining the gossip: Whatever happened to Paul? He's somewhere in Central Africa Just upped and left. Been there for years. 'Lady Margaret, she is dead,' a girl told me at the school" (Theroux 289). He seems to intentionally avoid revealing his emotional reaction to this, but a later passage is telling: "Their graves were rectangular slabs set side by side in the muddy churchyard, Lady Margaret's unmarked, Sir Martin's inscribed *Beloved by All*. The graves were overgrown with weeds and looked not just neglected but forgotten. As serious gardeners, haters of disorder, they would have been dismayed at the sight of this tangle of weeds. So I knelt and, as a form of veneration, weeded their graves for old times' sake" (Theroux 290).

Many of the techniques discussed previously are at play in *Dark Star Safari*, though with their own Therouxian flavor. Throughout *Safari*, he links his journey to that of others, seeming to feel a particular affinity for the French poet Arthur Rimbaud who spent time in Harar, Ethiopia, who he characterizes as "the happy captain of the drunken boat. Like many of us, he made a

meal of his suffering – complained even as he was rather enjoying it, thrived on adversity and grumbled dishonestly about savagery and bad food, discomfort and poverty” (108). Like Troost and Krakauer, he provides these accounts partially to give his trip historical context for the reader, but also, it seems, as a way of understanding himself and the drives that led him to carry out the actions that make-up the book.

More than the others, and with no attempts at subversion, Theroux presents himself as seeing with a clear eye almost always. He is an equal opportunity critic, bashing all forms of regime (left and right-wing), tourists and locals alike. Indeed, the very exigence of the book is that he wants to see for himself how bad it really is, not trusting other witness accounts. He playfully mocks backpackers listening to Enya but expresses similar skepticism toward many of the locals. In almost every country he writes of the devastating effects of current and past political regimes, be they the communist Derg of Ethiopia, who murdered Haille Sailasee, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and his redistribution of white owned farms, or the history of apartheid government of South Africa. A recurring device throughout the book involves Theroux talking to former political prisoners, and presenting accounts of their experiences. He seems to relish in including scenes where he manages to come out on top in some situation, whether that be with tourist, missionary, or bigoted local, lampooning ignorance as he sees it, and taking pleasure in teasing the various people he encounters. Though often entertaining, his portrayals and commentary on local people can sometimes have an uncomfortable similarity with earlier, more explicitly colonial or imperial (or just racist) writers, depicting Africans “howling” at him (though Theroux depicts himself on the verge of howling himself at one point), or depicting an Egyptian man that he meets as being obsessed with sex and having “bulging eyes” (Theroux 55). That he seems to be an equal opportunity lampooner lessons this perhaps, but these depictions can still have a tinge of colonialism about them, given their similarity to earlier writers.

One of the odder types of recurring encounter is Theroux' frequent interactions with locals who will try to goad him politically in some way, often declaring that “Bush is Satan.” Though Theroux is openly no fan of that regime either (nor Clinton), he still seems to find these encounters uniquely annoying, at one point writing, “I had become the West,” then going on to perhaps somewhat disingenuously state, “Well, I didn't mind, as long as it kept these people talking, for nothing is more revealing of a person's mind than a person's anger” (Theroux 25). This presentation of a detached, somewhat superior observer persists throughout. Similarly

throughout is a certain self-congratulatory tone, as he seems to delight in such “off the beaten path” endeavors as successfully getting a visa into a difficult country (in one case through showing off his own knowledge of a local language) or buying french fries (but no sex) for Ugandan prostitutes. Perhaps some of this confidence comes from experience: this is his 13th travel book after all, and Theroux seems comfortable with the expert witness persona that he embodies.

Despite this tendency toward patronization, an overt theme throughout the book is Theroux's persistent belief that Africans deserve to be the masters of their own destiny. This comes up most explicitly in his repeated criticisms of the project of foreign aid, a disdain for which seems to develop almost in real time over the course of the manuscript. (In my notes on the book, I found 10 separate references to aid not working, but this quote, said to Theroux by a political science teacher in Malawi, sums them up nicely:

'...all aid is political,' he said. 'When this country became independent it had very few institutions. It still doesn't have many. The donors aren't contributing to development. They maintain the status quo. Politicians love that, because they hate change. The tyrants love aid. Aid helps them stay in power and contributes to underdevelopment. It's not social or cultural and it certainly isn't economic. Aid is one of the main reasons for underdevelopment in Africa.' (Theroux 313)

In contrast to the several “Bush is Satan” type interactions, which he has disdain for, are scenes in which he converses with locals in depth and with a clear openness and curiosity, matters of local politics and elections. He also praises subsistence farming over the specialization that occurred in the decolonization period, and laments the treatment of the local populations from all sides: “Africans, less esteemed than ever, seemed to me the most lied-to people on earth – manipulated by their governments, burned by foreign experts, befooled by charities and cheated at every turn” (Theroux 1). His conclusion that foreign aid is a primary source for Africa's troubles (which at times runs eerily parallel to conservative arguments against welfare programs in the US) may be somewhat simplistic (I am skeptical that aid has a more profound negative impact than various unequal trade policies propagated by the West, or the lasting effects of the colonial period) but it is an honest one and one made in the spirit of African independence and self-actualization.

A Note on Elizabeth Gilbert

Perhaps the elephant in any room when discussing recent mainstream travel writing is Elizabeth Gilbert's massively successful *Eat, Pray, Love*. At first glance, this appears to further rectify the sins of travel writings past, particularly, its domination by male writers. However, I would argue that *Eat, Pray, Love* (abbreviated as *EPL* from here on out), while both popularly representing a woman traveler, and taking the genre in a completely different direction in some ways, actually ends up both reinforcing *more* negative colonial baggage than the other writers discussed.

ELP is Gilbert's account of a year of her life in which — inspired by a tumultuous divorce and equally tumultuous break-up — she embarks on a journey of personal discovery, spending 4 months each in Italy, India, and Indonesia. Her goal is to focus on a different aspect of life in each of those places: the pursuit of pleasure in Italy (personified by food), the pursuit of spirituality in India (where she stays in an Ashram), and the pursuit of balance between the two in Indonesia.

Early on, Gilbert explicitly outlines her plans to reject the persona of the expert witness, writing, "It wasn't so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves; this has been done. It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself set against the backdrop of each country, in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well" (Gilbert 29). Earlier she describes Bali as, "to be brief, a very nice place" (Gilbert 26). This goal holds true throughout as, with the exception of a brief detour in Sicily where she writes about the influence of the Mafia, we get very little writing that's actually *about* the places that she is occupying, neither history, politics, nor even much in the way of physical description. Instead, Gilbert's focus is on her own personal development, how she learns to achieve a more balanced life, meets her spiritual goals, and finally enters a new romantic relationship. As such, the travel aspect functions mostly as a backdrop to add flavor — I suspect she could have had roughly the same journey without leaving New York, where there are no shortage of Italian restaurants, spiritual centers, and potential suitors. Beyond backdrop, the travel is significant *in that she is a woman*: much of the book is about bucking what Gilbert views as the accepted role for women in the West: marriage, children, a life as a homemaker. This bucking of stereotypes seems to transcend to the world beyond the page as well: though there have been women travel writers throughout history, they are generally not as well-remembered (or profitable) as their male

counter-parts... that is, until Gilbert. It is probable that it is by eschewing most of the content of traditional masculine travel narratives, and instead focusing on a narrative of the self (a traditional sphere for women writers), essentially writing a “women’s lit” book with a travel writing backdrop, Gilbert has been able to break a genre ceiling, and to enormous success. This sort of simultaneous bucking and embracing of gender norms is mirrored in the book’s narrative arc as well: though she embarks to escape a domesticity trap, she still ends up with a boyfriend.

Certainly there is nothing wrong with writing about one’s relationship with one’s self. However, by not also writing about and interrogating her relationship to the places that she visits, Gilbert ends up reinforcing the image of the imperial tourist: the lands Gilbert travels to seem to exist solely as a playground for the West, a place in which tourists can discover themselves, achieve self-actualization, and even conquer, if just in the conquering of delicious meals and spiritual practices. She provides none of the ambivalence or complications of the other three writers. Indeed, even the inhabitants of these places seem to exist mostly to teach Gilbert various lessons about herself. I certainly think this could be an honest account from Gilbert, but it is one in which she never really seems to diverge from her own conceptions of the world, missing that central tension between the conceptual and the material that provided much of the depth and potential of the other works.

The most egregious example of this may be her depiction of the Ashram she goes to in India. She explicitly explains she will not give the Ashram’s name to protect its privacy, but writes of its deceased founder, a Guru that she describes as “controversial” without elaboration. With some internet digging, it seems that the deceased Guru is likely Swami Muktananda and though it’s impossible to know what she means by “controversial” (because she doesn’t elaborate), one of the “controversies” attached to this particular Ashram was its founder’s tendency to sexually abuse his female followers (Shah). Is this omission important? Well, if one is following the journalistic model of a Jon Krakauer (or the expert witness model), it seems borderline criminal. But, as is made abundantly clear, the focus of the book is entirely on Gilbert’s journey, and since this may have had little to no impact on her personally, why bother including it? In the conceptual world of Gilbert, the Ashram is good, and good it will remain. Thus where there would have been potential for divergence, for Gilbert to reckon with her initial conception against a more complex material reality, there is only the conception, one that

ultimately serves to prop up a potentially negative modern stereotype, the “sacred” Indian Guru, untethered by the flaws of ordinary humans, and the idea that this is a resource that Westerners can take advantage of.

Jessa Crispin notes many of these problems, noting that travel writers should not aspire to be Elizabeth Gilberts, but also noting that the world doesn’t need any more expert witness style travel writers either. It is certainly a complicated and at times problematic genre, with a complicated and problematic legacy. Crispin advocates the creation of a new type of travel persona, one which is “willing to break free of travel writing’s colonialist tendencies, whether expressed as contempt for backward others or admiration for their ‘authenticity’ and guidance. On the other side of this dehumanization are compassion and the will to listen” (Crispin). However, in these works I see the steps toward a kind of redemption of the genre. Specifically, by eschewing the expert witness and its baggage in favor of one that is simply an honest and curious observer, through noting where the conceptual and the material diverge, through maintaining an awareness of the re-creative aspect that travel writing inevitably takes in a world thoroughly explored, and through focusing the Western gaze upon its own historical outcomes, the contemporary travel writer may be able to transcend the legacy of colonialism and imperialism that the genre is tied up in. Of course, this may not be as new as it seems. For his various faults, Twain also made sure to depict the excesses of his fellow Western travelers, including a scene of a man literally trying to chip away parts of the Sphinx for personal keeping. And on the nature of travel, *Innocents Abroad* contains this quote, seemingly antithetical to many of his more troubling depictions: “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime” (Twain 243). Ironic in the context (the quote seems to be oft-shared online, likely often by people with little knowledge of its original context). But he may have been right in the end. Later in life, both Twain as well as Sir Richard Burton expressed vehemently anti-imperialist views, likely inspired, at least in part, by their travel experiences.

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To Thailand, With Ronald

***"It is almost axiomatic that as soon as a place gets a reputation for being paradise, it goes to hell."** — Paul Theroux, *The Happy Isles of Oceania**

PART 1

1. Beginning; Planning the Trip; A Couple of Jobs; A Brief History of Backpacking; Barroom Encounter

When I was in Thailand, I watched a lot of bad movies. I did a lot of other shit too, but for some reason my memory gravitates toward the movies that I watched. This is a recurring phenomenon for me. I loved to travel when I was a kid but I would always focus on the wrong parts, the hokey shit. Restaurants with nautical themes, boardwalks, phony ghost towns – this is what I looked forward to, as well as the pop culture I was allowed to consume along the way. I would collect brochures from motel lobbies for places like wax museums and theme parks and dinky hikes in the woods where they would shove little stereo systems into the branches of trees so that they seemed to talk to you. I no longer remember much about the Grand Canyon, but I do remember that it **was on our family's annual road trip to Arizona that I got my first Spiderman and Batman comic books**, which I read over and over while we drove past the endless expanse of a desert where they filmed every single western. And I find now that what I remember about Thailand is watching bad movies in hotel rooms.

It was Ronald's idea to go to Thailand. When I asked him what he wanted to do there, he said, "get a massage, eat some cheap food; maybe get a dental check up. I hear you can get those cheap there and I don't have insurance." Later he said, "I want to drink a cocktail out of a skull."

I went to Thailand in the summer of 2012. I had graduated from college a summer earlier with a degree in journalism. At the journalism school at the University of Oregon, they give you a choice of what you want to focus on. At first I had chosen **“Electronic Media”** because I thought that had to do with the internet. When it turned out to have to do with television broadcasting, I had switched to **“communication studies.”** This was the broadest and least practical option. Rather than focusing on a marketable craft, such as print journalism or broadcast journalism, we studied post-modern theorists and watched movies. I was really good at watching the movies; the theorists mostly ran together for me. Afterward, I had no idea what I wanted to do. I thought I might try to get a job at a newspaper somewhere, but city papers don’t hire you if you don’t have experience, and having grown up in a small town, I didn’t really want to go back to one. They weren’t really jumping to hire me anyway. At one paper I applied to, the interviewer looked at me skeptically. **“You know, it’s gonna be a lot of city council meetings and beauty pageants, right?”**

“Oh yeah, yeah, that’s fine,” I said, having no interest in any of those things. He didn’t hire me.

Instead I moved to Portland, Oregon. I didn’t have anything to do there though, either. It just seemed better to me to be doing *nothing* in a place that I liked than *something* in a place that I didn’t. Eventually I got a job loading trucks for UPS. I got paid minimum wage for 5 to 6 hours of throwing people’s packages. Most of the people that worked there were fresh out of high school. Being fresh out of college, this made me somewhat more worldly than them, though not by much. They were fascinated by sex and their conversations contained a steady stream of dirty jokes and apocryphal warnings about maggots showing up in used condoms, or condoms disappearing into **women’s vaginas, which was entertaining if disgusting. But the work was boring.** I didn’t even have an iPod to listen to music on like some of the other workers. Just the sound of cardboard boxes sliding down a conveyor belt and the occasional shit talking. I was 23 years old. I was itching for some adventure in my life.

At first I think it had just been shit-talk between me and Ronald. Ronald had gone to my high school, and we’d become friends over a mutual love of snotty punk bands. I’d

come back to Oswald for a Christmas break during college. It had snowed, and I remember the two of us were **climbing on top of a giant snow pile we'd found in a** parking lot and talking about what we wanted to do with our lives. Someone, maybe me, had brought up backpacking through foreign countries.

"Yeah," Ronald had said. Maybe that had planted the idea in his head, or maybe he would have gone anyway. In either case, a few years later he started telling me about Thailand. He was working as a DJ at a country radio station in a small town in Montana then.

"Here's the deal," he said, calling me one day from the radio station where he worked. **He didn't have a cell. "You really only need about three thousand bucks, but a** thousand of that is for the airplane ticket. Food? Super cheap. Hostels, super cheap. Everything is super cheap once you get over there, it's just the plane ticket that's **expensive."** I heard a rustling sound over the phone. **"Hey, this is Ronnie and you're** listening to KLXR! Up next we've got Waylon Jennings! Alright, so, the visa lets you stay for 60 days, and costs about 50 bucks. You also need to get shots for malaria. And I **need to get my passport. You're still down, right?"**

The talk had turned into planning.

In addition to getting tired of UPS, I started worrying about injury. One day my supervisor stopped me after I didn't lift a package using the appropriate method. **"I'm not trying to scold you, just point something out," he said. "You see this?"** He did kind of a shuffling motion. **"That's me trying to bend over. I can't bend my back anymore! And it's all because I didn't lift properly way back in the day."** A different day I tried to pick up a 100-pound metal grate. I got it up but I felt something sort of give in my lower back. It was like a little voice that said, **"don't fucking lift that shit anymore."** I quit fairly soon after.

The next job I had was at an inventory company. I would get up at 4 in the morning to drive to grocery stores and count all the different items they had. I had a machine that I would strap to my wrist that I would scan a product label with; then I would input the number of items. So say there was a row of 12 bean cans. I'd scan the label for **"beans"** and then enter **"12"** into the machine. I would do this for around 4 to 6

hours. It wasn't much more interesting than UPS, but I wasn't going to throw my back out right away.

In either experience I wasn't a fast worker, or really an efficient one. I'd spend too much time thinking about other shit; I couldn't focus on the beans and packages and shit like I was supposed to. I once worked a try-out shift at a catering company kitchen. "Too slow," they'd said. I'd been scared I was gonna cut myself with the paring knife.

I've never read *The Beach* by Alex Garland, but when I was 15 or so, I watched the first part of the movie, the one with Leonardo DiCaprio. I remember him staying in a weird looking hostel, then finding a dead body in the room next door. Later I think he's smoking a joint around a bonfire on a beach.

Yes, I remember thinking.

Modern backpacking is thought to have its roots in the "Hippie Trail" of the late 60s and 70s, an informal traveler's route from Europe through the Middle East and Southeast Asia that became enormously popular among counter-cultural types, generally in their late teens or 20s. Travelers (they preferred to be called "freaks" to hippies, at least according to Richard Gregory) from Europe would follow the route, also known as the "Overland Trail," hitchhiking, driving in VW vans or taking one of several commercial buses, through Yugoslavia and Greece to Istanbul in Turkey, and on to Tehran in Iran, Kabul in Afghanistan, through Pakistan and on to India, where they would head south to the beaches at Goa or east toward Kathmandu, from where they could continue traveling east on to Bangkok, Singapore, and even Australia. Travelers from Australia would go in the opposite direction, starting in Bali and continuing West. Frugality was the name of the game. Travelers would set out with little money, traveling by what ever means they could, sleeping in cheap guesthouses, the homes of hospitable strangers, or just outside under the stars.

India in particular seemed to capture the countercultural imagination – this was of course also the age of the personal "guru" and the sitar in popular music. The influential Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder traveled together through India in the early 1960s, as did the Beatles at the other end of the decade. Many of the travelers of

the route were motivated by a desire to find a way of life outside of the norms of Western influenced culture, a life of supposed deeper authenticity or spiritual practice. Of course, drugs also played a pretty big role. Hashish was readily available through much of the route (though any contraband had to be ditched in Iran) as was opium and heroin. This was not without its cost. While plenty of travelers were legitimately interested in either spiritual practice or cultural enrichment (or just the spirit of adventure), others more or less disappeared in giant clouds of hash smoke. It is said that the graveyards of Kabul are filled with the graves of flower children who died of overdoses. Even those that escaped the pitfalls of drugs sometimes ended up staying in one of the countries on the route, falling in love with a person or a place.

The locals of these countries initially reacted mostly hospitably if somewhat bemusedly toward these travelers. With the obvious exception of the Vietnam war, it was a rare time of relative peace for the East. Then in the late 70s, two events occurred that made a significant portion of the route inhospitable to travel: the Iranian revolution in 78-79, and the 1978 communist coup in Afghanistan and subsequent Soviet-Afghan War.

Although much of the original Hippie Trail was now inaccessible, travelers continued to explore Southeast Asia, creating a loose route consisting of Thailand, **Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam known as the “Banana Pancake Trail,”** after the supposedly ubiquitous backpacker staple (I never saw one myself). Air travel became **cheaper, and the “overland” ethos of the original backpackers was replaced as newer** travelers would fly in to their destinations (Bangkok was and continues to be a major hub for this) and embark via commercial bus or train. Emblematic of this is the evolution of the *Lonely Planet* series of guidebooks. Originally the personalized tips of Hippie Trailer Tony Wheeler, the series evolved by the mid 1980s to a major, multi-author producer of commercial guidebooks. Critics point to all of these developments as having a homogenizing effect, turning the major travel destinations of Asia into a series of indistinguishable tourist ghettos.

Setting out, I did not know any of this. My idea of a “backpacker” was a sort of synthesis of ill-formed tropes picked up through cultural osmosis, a hybrid creature of half original Overland Trailer, half 90s rave kid. While I did not expect to meet too many

authentic hippies on the road, I thought I might meet their cultural descendants, the global version of the kids I had met at the co-ops back in Eugene; white kid dreadlocks, prone to wine-drunk acoustic guitar sing-alongs and veganism, a strong emanating scent of patchouli and b.o.. A people I would be obligated to make fun of, but nonetheless would enjoy interacting with.

The modern backpacker, however, while bearing a few psychic resemblances, did not turn out to be very much like this at all.

Before we left, I stopped by a bar in my hometown in Eastern Oregon, and ran into an old classmate of mine. He had been in the navy, and told me about the shore leaves he used to take in Thailand. The stories he told me were incredible and frightening, describing a heightened reality of reckless hedonism. I was no stranger to hedonism but the stories made me nervous. He told tales of mobsters using deadly scorpions to assassinate each other and seedy underground sex shows that stretched the imagination's limits of anatomical possibility. He told me that while he was there he had paid money to whip somebody, a kid. This stood out to me as particularly gruesome **and cruel. "Why?" I asked him. "Why not?" he said, indicating that in Thailand, this was** just kind of what you did. I left the interaction feeling unsettled. First of all, I thought, who does that? But also, what **the fuck kind of place was I about to go to? I'd never even** been out of the country before. Exactly what was I getting myself into?

Later, I remembered that he was a notorious liar.

2. Getting to Thailand; Ma Boon Khrong; Khao San Road

It was a 10-hour flight to South Korea, during which they kept the windows shuttered because the light from the sun reflecting off the ocean was too bright. They gave us paper slippers for our feet and a warm damp towel for our face. Each seat came equipped with its own screen featuring an abundance of different entertainments; news casts, movies, albums, games. I watched a BBC newscast and then tried to play a fighting game and my screen froze. Mostly I just stared off into space, like I usually do when in transit.

In the South Korean airport, where we would transfer to a flight to Bangkok, we drank Red Label Johnny Walker and ate mediocre spaghetti in a complimentary lounge and smoked cigarettes in air-sealed rooms that smelled the way your pocket does if you keep old cigarette butts in it. It seemed like every other surface was a hospital gown white. We were there for three hours then it was time to get on the plane again. It was another 7 hours to Bangkok.

It was night on the flight, though time was meaningless. I tried to sleep. The **windows were unblocked but it was too dark to see anything. I listened to Paul Simon's *Graceland*** on the personal entertainment system and watched lightning flash through the porthole windows, the terrain it illuminated massive and dark and unfamiliar.

I don't remember going through customs. Whereas the South Korean airport had been bright and white, this airport seemed bathed in tones of dark red. We collected our bags and walked outside to smoke. The night air was hot, and hit us as soon as we got outside, a wet heat that to me, raised in the western United States, signaled foreignness. Holy shit, we thought. Holy *shit*.

There was a row of shuttles parked in the street in front of the airport. Ronnie had the foresight to book a hotel for that night in advance, and we found one that would take us there. I remember they played light music box sounds over the car stereo, perhaps to soothe the addled nerves of the tourists. Of us.

We were too wired to go straight to bed, so we walked to a nearby restaurant. There was adrenaline coursing through us as we sat down outside, a feeling that our **bodies were conducting a special kind of electricity. The restaurant didn't have an** inside, just a roof over the kitchen and some tables set up next to the sidewalk. We drank Heinekens and ate something that I ordered off a picture menu. A group of 5 or 6 teenagers ate at a table next to us. They all piled onto motorbikes when they left.

We tried to buy more beer at a 7-11 near the hotel but they told us it was after selling hours so we went to bed, Ronald transfixed over the tiny differences in junkfood he had seen in the store— sea weed flavored potato chips and chocolate Pocky sticks from Japan.

The hotel provided a complimentary “traditional American breakfast” which consisted of coffee, eggs, toast, and two hot dogs. I’d read online that this was a common experience for tourists in Thailand – they use the hot dogs because it’s cheaper than sausage or bacon – but this was the only time I ever saw it. Ronald **didn’t** eat his hot dogs.

We decided to buy a cellphone, so we took an above ground metro called “the skytrain” to a shopping mall downtown, Ma Boon Khrong, which gave us a view of Bangkok – a mass of skyscrapers – but shielded us from a view of the street. Any worries I might have had about sticking out were soon quashed; the train was crawling with backpackers and nobody gave us a second look.

The mall was the first real bit of culture shock I had; instead of the stream lined rows of name-brand stores like American malls, the mall in Bangkok had a bazaar like atmosphere, with kiosks and booths and carts all crammed together. There were seven floors in the mall, and each floor seemed to be dedicated to a specific type of item. There was a floor dedicated to cheap t-shirts, another to electronics. It felt like the shopping mall version of a shanty town, as if the mall’s architects had forgotten to put store fronts in it, so they had just opened it up to dealers to set up shop wherever they found a space. The walls were adorned with giant advertisements for American and Asian action films and pictures of the king. It was filled with middle class Thai teenagers.

We found the floor that had cellphones and bought the cheapest one we could find (we lost it soon after), then we went up a floor and got lunch in a Subway where I watched two American tourists talk about the tattoo parlor they were going to visit.

There are an awful lot of white people here, I thought.

The famous backpacker hang-out in Bangkok is “**Khao San Road,**” so we decided to head there next. We eventually found an exit from the mall that led to the street. It was mid-day, and the heat had come out in full force, mixing with the noise of city traffic and smells – sewage, spices, car exhaust – to become a full attack of the senses. The streets were busy with taxis and motorbikes. The sidewalk around the mall was lined with tuk-tuks, whose drivers shouted at us as we walked past them. Eventually we got on one – a motorized rickshaw that looked like a golf cart shell

powered by a motorcycle but with three wheels instead of two – which weaved in and out of the traffic, thick but somehow never seeming to stop moving. The first couple times on a tuk-tuk are exhilarating; you are cognizant that you may fly out of the vehicle at any time, and the drivers drive with the aggression of big city taxis, but with more ability to maneuver, taking tight corners and dodging around cars, trucks, and the endless stream of motorbikes with casual recklessness, the open air blowing in your face the whole time. On this first ride, I found myself fighting the desire to hold onto the side of the vehicle; by later rides I was barely paying attention.

The tuk-tuk driver dropped us off on Khao San Road, which was to become a sort of base of operations for us over the next several days. Khao San Road itself is just a short strip of several blocks, a jangle of crooked signs jutting from store fronts with fading paint and some open air-booths selling shirts and sandals and bottles of liquor. There are several travel agencies on the road, emphasizing its both maligned and honored (often at once) reputation as ground zero for the modern Southeast Asia route, a place where travelers go to drink and exchange information before booking buses and trains to Chiang Mai in the north and the southern beaches.

Susan Orlean writes that the first guesthouses began to pop up in Khao San Road in the mid-80s, and explicitly forbade the housing of locals, hoping to further appeal to the growing crop of young tourist.

We wanted to check in at a hostel that Ronald knew about, which was several blocks away. My backpack felt heavy on my shoulders, pressing into me and forming a dark patch of sweat on the back of my shirt. We crossed a bridge over the Rop Krung Canal, a several yards wide moat hemmed in by concrete and stinking of sewage. As we moved away from Khao San Road, we saw more local people: children in school uniforms – girls in pleated blue skirts and white socks – and young men on motorbikes needling through traffic and beggars who were missing arms and legs, sitting looking dazed on the side of the road, a phenomenon I've since wondered about often.

We found the hostel we were looking for, down at the far end of a side street. We walked through a peaceful looking courtyard to the lobby, where a smiling round-faced woman checked us in. She reminded me of a Cub Scout den mother, exuding a kind of maternal warmth as if all us backpackers were her personal charges. The beds were

more like mats on the ground, but there were two of them in our room, and cooling from an electric fan. The bathroom was communal and located near the lobby, and had a strange smell to it that I would encounter in other bathrooms, a kind of soapy plant-like smell that I decided was used to cover up the smell of shit.

We made our way back to Khao San Road later that night. We walked through **the crowds, past the bars and restaurants. There was a giant neon lit McDonald's at the** end of the street, marking itself as a safe haven for homesick tourists. We walked past middle-aged Thai women in beaded hats peddling trinkets to tourists – wooden frogs **that would “croak” when you ran a stick along the ridges in their back and tops that** would light up and spin in the air when a string was pulled – and old European men walking arm in arm with young Thai women, girlfriends or wives or prostitutes. Somehow we ended up in a pizza parlor, and got mediocre pizza, the bread bland, the cheese too stiff and the sauce too runny.

Most of the tourists were young, though not as young as I had been expecting, with many appearing in their early to mid 20s, with decent amounts of three days scruff, tans and **t-shirts with the names of Asian beer brands. They didn't look like hippies to** me; they would have looked perfectly at home in the downtown of any decent-sized mid-western college town.

There's a spot in Khao San Road where two 7-11s sit on either side of the street, facing each other, and we went into one of the stores and bought bottles of “Chang” beer, which is the beer with the green label and the picture of the elephant. They were the cheapest ones and we sat drinking them on the curb in front of the store, watching the people walk by. A tourist from France sat with us for awhile. He said his name was Remy and that he was alone in the city, but was supposed to meet his friend in several days. We finished our beers and walked back toward the hostel. There was a table set **up on the sidewalk with a paper “bar” sign attached to it and folding** chairs, like an adult version of a lemonade stand. We got mai tais in clear plastic cups. We were drunk by then, not just on alcohol but on night air and the city. It was our second day in Thailand, and everything seemed possible. We drank the mai tais and turned in.

One of the first things on Ronald's list was to get a massage. I didn't have much interest in this, so I stayed at the hostel while he went in search of a massage parlor. I **sat in the hostel's courtyard** and looked at an english language magazine I had found. I **read an article about the rise of skateboarding in Thailand, and one about "Nazi kitsch."** Apparently Nazi imagery was popular among younger people; more born out of the fascination with the imagery than out of sympathy for the ideals, of which, the article implied, **"Nazi kitsch" fans were mostly ignorant. You could buy framed pictures of Hitler** and objects with swastikas on them at souvenir stands in tourist hubs, alongside the bootleg DVDs, fake designer watches, and plastic bracelets with the word **"fuck"** on them (very, very prevalent).

Ronald came back sometime later and told me about his experience. **"I feel like I just got my ass kicked!"** he said. **"I mean, I feel great now, but dude. It was painful! You should definitely get one."**

Eventually he talked me into it. So the next day I went with him back to the massage parlor, located down a narrow side street. The streets in this part of Bangkok were not uniform, and came in a variety of different sizes. The parlor had a menu of different services you could select from. One of them involved putting your feet in a tub of water with fish in it, a practice that I later found out might have originated in Turkey. Supposedly, the fish would eat all the bad shit that had accumulated on your feet.

"The one you want is the Thai Massage," Ronald said. "That's the one where they kick your ass." He was going to get the apparently tamer **"head and neck massage."**

While I waited, a woman washed my bare feet with a damp cloth. Then she had me go into the backroom, where different sections were divided up by silk curtains. In each section a mat was placed on the floor, like the kind I imagine you might find at a yoga studio. She told me to change into a thin white tunic and that the massage artist would be with me shortly.

I sat on the mat and waited. Ronnie's description of how painful it was ran through my head. I could hear people talking outside of the curtain. It rustled slightly as someone walked past. I felt like I was in a horror movie waiting for the killer to show up.

I imagined I would see them in silhouette first, outside the curtain, like the scene in *Psycho* where Janet Leigh gets stabbed in the shower.

Instead a tired looking woman walked into the room and told me to lie on my back. She massaged my head and shoulders first, digging the flats of her fingers into **the bare skin. This isn't so bad, I thought. It was a little bit like getting a shampoo at a haircut place.**

Then she grabbed my arm and started pulling. She pulled it across the front of **my body, farther and farther and I heard a "pop" in my shoulder. She did the same thing to my other arm, also resulting in a "pop."** She grabbed my hands and pulled each one of my fingers. Each one of them made a **popping sound. I'd had no idea my body was so noisy.**

She moved down to the area between my legs and stomach, and I became acutely aware of my privates, and their general position to things. At one point she started digging her elbow into my pubis bone. **I wasn't sure what this was supposed to accomplish. It didn't feel good; it felt exactly like someone driving their elbow into my pubis bone.**

She started to work on my legs and I asked her who usually got massages. I wanted to know if any locals got them.

"All tourists," she said. "Koreans." She grabbed my leg and somehow managed to pull it up to my face.

She told me to roll over onto my stomach. I did and she started massaging my neck.

"You have a lot of tension here," she said.

I grunted.

She started rubbing a lotion that felt like icy-hot into my skin, then began massaging the bones in my spine and shoulders. She was using her elbow and fingers, and it was far harder than I had expected. The lotion she was using burned as her fingers dug little trenches into my muscles. It was starting to become almost unbearable, and I tried to think about other things, the people on the mat in the room next to me, what Ronald was doing, but my mind kept going back to the holes she was carving into my back, giant gaping pits at this point.

She stopped massaging my back and I was relieved. Then she put her foot into the small of my back and grabbed me by the arms, one in each hand. Keeping her foot firmly in place, she pulled on my arms, lifting me until one half of my body was perpendicular to the other, like a centaur, or someone sitting in reverse. She did this several times; she was amazingly strong.

I felt great when she was done. Ronald was right.

A lot of my time in Bangkok was spent sitting in the hostel reading, while Ronald went to accomplish various bits of business. I tried to get into a routine. Every morning I would do 40 push-ups and 40 sit-ups, then get a breakfast of Pad Thai at a food stand on Khao San Road. In the mornings, it was clear of tourists and I could watch the trucks make their deliveries and the vendors set up their carts. It was nice to know I was in a real place, where people lived and worked, not just a constant stream of drunken backpackers drifting through on their way to the jungles in the north or beaches in the south. In the afternoon, I would read in the courtyard. Ronald got a haircut and turned his long shaggy mane into a buzzcut. He went to a dentist one day; an eye doctor for a pair of contacts **the next. He said he did this because he didn't have health insurance in America.** He talked about maybe getting a fake college diploma, but I advised him not to.

One day as we were walking around Bangkok, a very friendly man walked up to us and asked **us where we were going. We were not ignorant as to what "friendly man approaches tourist" generally means, but figured there was no harm in engaging him** briefly. We told him we were going to Khao San Road.

"Have you seen the Big Buddha?" he asked us.

"Big Buddha?" said Ronald.

"Yes. It is a big, big Buddha." He motioned with his hands to indicate how big it was. "Today is a special day," he continued. "It is a holiday. You should see the Buddha today."

"I think we're just gonna go over here," said Ronald.

A while later, we were sitting on a bench next to the street drinking milk out of coconuts that we had bought from a food stand through a straw.

A man sat down on the bench next to us. He asked us where we were from.

“Canada,” said Ronald. He’d been telling people this all trip, a carry over from the Bush years when American travelers were sometimes advised not to reveal their actual home country. The two of them got into a conversation. Ronald started asking the man about music. “You know, uh, NOFX?” said Ronald. He started singing: “He spent 15 years getting loaded; 15 years til his liver exploded..’ You know that one?”

The man didn’t. I finished my coconut and threw it in the garbage.

The man started giving us a similar spiel to the one we had heard earlier. He told us we could get a free tuk-tuk ride to all the different temples if we took a **“state-sponsored”** tuk-tuk, which he said we could identify by the color blue on the exterior.

I’d read about this before the trip. The scam is that the tuk-tuk takes you to a bunch of different gem shops. Supposedly you can get a good deal on the gems, and then make money selling them back in the States. Except that the gems are basically worthless. The gem shops will routinely move location to avoid angry tourists who **discover they’ve been ripped off. I’d told all this to Ronald.**

But the sun was out and we felt giddy with possibility. Fuck it, we thought, and decided to do it anyway.

The man flagged down a tuk-tuk and we got in. The tuk-tuk took us to a temple, containing a large statue of the Buddha. The temple was mostly deserted; the only person we found inside was a man who seemed to be a janitor. He told us about how the temple had been visited by the royal family and showed us a picture of the king. We had him take a picture of us standing in front of the statue, and he told us that the next place we would go to was a suit shop, supposedly a favorite of the royal classes.

We got back in the tuk-tuk. The man at the temple was correct, and the next place we went to was indeed a suit shop. Suit shops are a staple of the tourist areas of **Thailand. There’s a spot on Khao San Road where there are several suit shops located** next to each other. Salesmen, many from India, stand on the street shouting at the **tourists who walk by. “My friend,” they say. “You look like you need a nice suit!” It’s not uncommon to be stopped by two or three of them all right in a row. Despite Thailand’s** reputation for certain kinds of travel, I was propositioned by suit sellers far more than I was by prostitutes.

We were greeted at the door by a well-dressed man. He smiled broadly when he saw us and motioned for us to follow him back into the store. We walked past various **displays of men's suits toward** the back of the store, while he animatedly told us about the suits we could buy. At the time, the whole thing seemed ridiculous to me; rushing through Bangkok traffic in a tuk-tuk, walking into places I knew to be con jobs. The suit man was talking to Ronald, who was wearing a **t-shirt of a Boise punk band**. **"You know tailor?"** he asked him.

"Yes, I know Taylor!"

I couldn't help myself, I started laughing.

The man smiled at me. **"What is funny?"** he said.

"Oh, nothing," I said.

The man stopped smiling. **"You do not want a suit?"** His whole demeanor had changed. Perhaps we had made him **"lose face"** as the guidebooks put it, or maybe he had just been working hard all day. In any case, he thought we were making fun of him.

"Sorry," said Ronald. I felt like I had fucked up. I hadn't meant to offend him.

"When you die, you will want something nice to be buried in," said the man. He scowled at us and we walked back out of the store.

The next stop on our tour was a gem store. **"Don't come out so quickly,"** the driver told us. **"Stay inside awhile. Look around."** The tuk-tuk drivers get a gas voucher from the stores that they take tourists to. He needed us to stay in the store long enough to collect it. We went into the store. The jewelry was all laid out on tables. Some of it was in glass cases. The woman who worked there smiled at us. She pointed at various objects.

"You could buy this necklace for your girlfriend back home," she told me.

After awhile, she got tired of pretending like we were going to buy something.

"You can go now," she said. **"He has his voucher."**

The driver gave us cartons of apple juice when we came back out. Despite **'taking us for a ride,'** he seemed nice enough. **We drank the juice and he took us to** another temple. There were a bunch of people praying inside, kneeling in rows in their bare feet, so we walked around to the garden, walking through on a carefully curated

pathway past rows of flowers. In the center of the garden was a circular area with several benches. A man was sitting on one of the benches. He had sunglasses and long black hair pulled back in a pony tail.

We started talking to him. He told us that he lived in Australia but that he used to be a monk in Thailand. He had started studying at a temple when he was just a boy. He told us how as a Buddhist monk he wasn't allowed to handle money, and how he would walk through different neighborhoods collecting food, an old tradition meant to honor the first monks.

In the stillness of the temple garden his words seemed to take on a special resonance. He was sharing an intimate part of his life with us.

In turn, we told him about ourselves. We told him we were from America and that we were taking a tuk-tuk ride through the city, and that we had just come from a gem store. The man listened seriously.

“Yes,” he said. “You can get very good deals on gems here. You can take them back with you to the States and make a lot of money. I do it all the time.”

After the temple, the tuk-tuk driver took us to another shop, then to another temple. He told us he would wait for us while we walked around. The temple had a large gold colored Buddha statue at the center, about 20 feet high. We walked around the statue but **couldn't get close to it because it was closed for some sort of** maintenance.

There was a spot near the temple where you could buy live birds in a wooden cage. If you walked into a room in the temple and let them free, it was supposed to be good luck. I bought a cage and went into the temple and let them free. The birds flew out of the cage and into the rafters. Another tourist was doing the same thing. I think we recognized something in each other, a mutual knowledge that we were being ripped off somehow.

“There's probably a tree that they all fly to so they can be picked up again,” he speculated.

When we left the temple, our tuk-tuk driver, despite reassuring us that he would stay, was gone. We thought about getting a taxi, but it was only a mile or so back to Khao San Road, so we walked back.

"It struck me when I was in Thailand last year that no one is even pretending to be beat any more," says the young British novelist Hari Kunzru. 'You'd quite often see white guys with dreadlocks pulling wheelie cases down Khao San Road. The great adventure that was travelling overland in the Sixties and Seventies has become a middle-class ritual. The notion that you would throw yourself at the mercy of the road, and by doing so, gain some self-knowledge or even maturity, is long gone.'"-Sean O'Hagan, "America's First King of the Road"

END OF PART ONE

PART 2

1. Ronald

When I first met Ronald, I don't think I liked him that much. I was in a band that used to play school dances – we would play all the pop rock hits of the time, which were mostly terrible, faux emo tripe that had more spiritual connection to Hanson than Rites of Spring – and Ronald, who was two years younger, would come up afterwards and ask me a bunch of questions. I don't know why this annoyed me but it did. Every time we would hang out it would just be a series of questions. "So," he would say, "what's the best concert you ever went to? Ok ok so ummm..... what's the *craziest* concert you've ever been to?"

At some point though, things changed. I remember hanging out with a friend of mine and agreeing that, actually, Ronald was pretty cool. There was a certain tenaciousness to him, a resourcefulness that was masked by a sometimes stoned-seeming exterior. He was capable of taking a lot of shit – we all ragged on each other

pretty hard in those days, and I once watched another friend take a shit in the back seat **of his car as a prank, not to mention the “Ronald is a Homo” song that a band of mine** never quite got off the ground (to my later gratitude, as I ditched my adolescent homophobia). There was more to it than that though, and over the years I watched Ronald rustle up a number of gigs and hustles (country dj, legal pot farmer, bartender, hospital janitor) always with the same relentless enthusiasm he had when he would ask me about concerts.

About two years after the Thailand trip, I went to visit Ronald in Montana. I took the train from Portland, and Ronald and his dad, also named Ronald, picked me up in a town called Coyote Creek and drove me to Otis, the town of about a thousand people that Ronald lived in. We spent the weekend hanging out at the tavern that Ronald was a bartender at and riding around on his motorcycle. Everywhere that Ronald went, he would see someone that he knew, and they would chat for a few minutes. I'd thought it was weird that he'd moved to such a small town, but after a while, I started to get it. There was something nice and kinda lazy about all these chats. We dropped in on a **couple of Ronald's friends; some kids playing pool in a basement, an old women chain** smoking in her living room. They all seemed to love him. The next day we took the motorcycle to Canada and got Chinese food.

A little later I met him in Eugene Oregon. We ended up closing down the bars, going to a lot of my old college haunts – Rennie's and Max's and Fathom's, the bar underneath Pegasus Pizza. We were staying at a friend's house but they had gone to bed, leaving us with a two-mile trek. We wanted more beer so we bought a 40 of Mickey's, and passed it back and forth, walking at first but then sitting up against a cement wall.

“Man,” I said. “We've been all over the world together!” though all we'd ever been to was Thailand and Oregon and Montana and a Chinese restaurant in Canada. Ronald tried to pass the bottle to me, but I dropped it and it shattered against the pavement. But we probably didn't need it at that point.

2. The Train to Chiang Mai; A Routine is Established

The northern train to Chiang Mai took 12 hours overnight. Ronald bought some beers and snacks at a kiosk in the station, dawdling long enough while I sat on the train that I thought briefly that he was going to miss it. The sun was beginning to set as we took off. We chatted briefly with an American man and his Filipino wife, who told us about some of their travels; the man told us we should go to Pattaya because it was a good party town. As the train exited Bangkok, it rolled past a number of shanty dwellings, **makeshift houses constructed out of scraps of wood and metal. They'd been** built right up next to the tracks, so close the floors in the houses must have shook as we rolled by. Many of them seemed like they were only partially constructed; some were missing walls. We could look right into some of the homes, see the sparse mats that had been set up for people to sleep on. I remember seeing a man with his shirt off in **one of the buildings. He had his back to us and didn't look as we rumbled past.**

The American told us that some buildings were only temporary; the next week the area might have an entirely new set-up.

There was a pretty backpacker a few seats ahead and Ronald, beer in hand, invited her to chat with us. She was a few years older than us and British, and she said that she had just spent some time traveling through Australia, where she had encountered giant spiders and leeches. She told us about battling a particularly **aggressive Funnel Web spider for control of the room she was staying in.** "It reared up on its hind legs and *charged me*," **she said. On another occasion, she flushed a leech** down the toilet, only to have it crawl out again. Mostly though, we talked about American tv shows, *Game of Thrones* and *Breaking Bad*. **"On every episode, you see a pair of woman's breasts," she said of the former.**

We thought smoking wasn't allowed on the train, so a couple times we snuck smokes in the bathroom, holding the cigarette out past the metal bars that covered the tiny window. The train had two bathrooms, a **"Western style" one and an "Eastern style" one. The "Western style" had a flush toilet; the "Eastern style" was just a hole in the** floor. Later, we found out that we could just smoke in the area between where the cars

conjoined, blowing our smoke through the open doorways on the side, and watching the rice fields, black in the night, roll past.

In Chiang Mai we stayed in a guesthouse, a nicer place than we'd stayed in Bangkok, that had a king-sized bed, a tv and air conditioning in the room. It was run by a man named Toi, who was middle aged and had thin wire framed glasses. Toi had a lot of young male family members, who would help out at the desk and could be found hanging out in the lobby at all hours. He seemed to be the sort of man who had his hands in a lot of different pots, though we never really found out what they all were. One night we sat up with him and he asked us who we thought the next American president **would be, Barack Obama or Mitt Romney. "Ron Paul," Ronald told him.**

Chiang Mai is 700 years old and located on the Ping River. I found it to be more laid back than Bangkok, with a wide main road, but a lot of winding side streets, occupied mostly by motorbikes and pedestrians. The side streets were littered with tiny shops and eateries; none of them had front walls, and were covered by tin roofs held up by poles. There were several bookstores that we went to, and no doubt various other cultural aspects that would have been covered in the *Lonely Planet Guide to Thailand*, something I was eternally planning to read but never quite got around to.

The whole city was surrounded by an ancient stone wall, reinforced with brick, originally a defensive mechanism, and seemed like a maze at first with all the narrow streets and alleys, though we managed to find our way around before too long. Often the focal point of our wanderings was a square in the center of town, flanked by a **McDonald's and a Starbucks. There would be a number of motorbikes parked in the** square. Crossing the streets could be a nightmare with the number of motorbikes, many of them driven by young adults or university students, sometimes with families in tow, a **kid holding onto the back or sitting on the driver's lap up front. I've heard the** trick is to **just keep walking forward and the bikes will all drive around you; it's when you stop** suddenly that they fuck up and crash into you. I never had the balls to try it, and would end up standing for minutes at a time, waiting for any semblance of a break. All in all though, the town was easy to navigate; at one point we rented bicycles from Toi, and

spent a night peddling around, ringing the tiny bell that had been placed on the handlebars: “Ding Ding Ding.”

Before long, we settled into a daily routine that went something like this: Wake up sometime around 9 or so. Turn on the tv and watch Fox News (usually it was *the O'Reilly Factor*; since the time zone was reversed we could catch *Fox and Friends* in the evening if we wanted). Ronald would loudly criticize it, though it often seemed like **he criticized the wrong parts** (“Oh right,” he would say sarcastically to what seemed to me like a perfectly legitimate news story. Ronald and I did not agree on politics – Ronald was some kind of libertarian/anarcho-capitalist, and I was a liberal who was only just starting to follow a siren song of leftism – but we both liked taking the piss out of it). Eventually Ronald would get fed up with the news and change the channel. I would walk to a 7-11 down the road and buy a fruit drink and a pastry for breakfast. Ronald would go to an internet cafe, where he would talk to people on Facebook and watch music videos, a mixture of punk and outlaw country – Hank Williams III, the Andrew Jackson Jihad. I would stay in the room for awhile, absently watching music videos of Korean pop singers, teenage girls and androgynous looking boys, music as imagined through assembly line. Around 1 I would get lunch at a place near the guesthouse. I went to the same spot every day, an outdoor restaurant occupied mostly by locals with a large steam grill displayed prominently up front, where they would cook the food. I could get a large plate of rice and meat, chicken or pork, for less than two dollars. Then I would go to the internet cafe and check my various e-mails/Facebook, look at basketball scores (Portland was out of the playoffs, so I was rooting for Oklahoma City) and look in on the latest from the Republican primary; in a bar in Seattle I had bet Ronald 20 dollars that Ron Paul **wouldn't win the nomination. Ronald was convinced that he would. Around** this time we would often meet up, and get fried ice cream from a Vietnamese restaurant, a dessert in which they drop a scoop of vanilla ice cream in a deep fryer, producing an orange ball that you could eat with your hands. We would walk around a bit, get some dinner, and then get tipsy on bottles of Chang that we bought from the various shops.

Sometimes we would go see the sights, but a lot of what I remember from Chang Mai is this; hanging around the guesthouse watching tv and walking to the 7-11. Maybe this sounds like a waste but looking back I find it is moments like these that I am the most nostalgic for.

When I was young, I thought this is what my life would be like. Moving from place to place, meeting people, having adventures. A life constructed from Jack Kerouac and the end credits of the *Incredible Hulk* tv show. I thought maybe playing in a band would do this, but none of the bands I was in ever stuck together long enough to go anywhere.

An anxiety started to grow out of this, a deep fear that it was all going to pass me by somehow. I remember having a personal crisis at the ripe old age of 21 that I had missed my shot at something important, that some intangible quality of youthful roaming had come and gone, perhaps encountering me in the night, shaking its head, and passing me by.

I was worried that at some near future date, society would track me down, stuff me in an ill-fitting suit and send me off to work in a cubicle for the next 40 years at some faceless company dealing solely in numbers and middle management. A future I was planning on going into kicking and screaming, except then the economy collapsed and everybody had to scramble.

So I had jumped at the Thailand trip. When I was there though, I started to feel listless. I think this feeling started in Chiang Mai.

3. Sunday Night Market; Muay Thai

One of Chiang Mai's big claims to fame is its Saturday and Sunday night market, a large bazaar that opens up weekends around dusk. The market is a long sequence of folding tables set up under tent awnings, rows of electric lights strung up for the multitude of tourists and locals, expats and buskers, milling through stands selling framed artwork and clothing, knit shoes, statues and figurines of the Buddha and local animals – increasingly rare in the wild – touristy t-shirts with fake logos or beer logos or pictures of Western pop singers, neon tank-tops popular in the southern beaches, hand **crafted jewelry and “hand crafted” jewelry that was probably imported from China,**

wooden carvings of weird, goblin-esque faces, singing bowls, spices, trinkets, oddities. Interspersed throughout are Thai massage artists with unfolded mats or stools for foot rubs, musicians playing guitars or hand drums, women dressed in tribal garb dancing to pre-recorded music on tinny cheap speakers. Farther down are rows of food carts offering fried meat on skewers, noodles, fried ice cream, other unidentifiable things, not just Thai cuisine but food from all over Asia.

We went to this market several times, buying souvenirs for people back home. Ronald wanted to buy a dress for a girl we had stayed with in Seattle. I bought a couple things for my parents: a wooden elephant figurine and a cloth tapestry with a picture of **a tiger on it (the tiger hangs in my apartment now; my mom said she didn't like walking down the stairs in the middle of the night to find it staring at her).**

What was more interesting to me, however, was a couple t-shirts I found with **drawings of Western pop culture figures on them. Of course there's a lot of cheap t-shirts in the tourist areas of Thailand. These were different though. I didn't see these** anywhere else in the country. One of them showed a picture of Mickey Mouse, blowing his brains out with a shotgun; you could see the scribbly black brain matter coming out the back of his head. Another one showed Minnie hanging herself. The one I was most interested in showed a picture of Mario the Nintendo icon, haggard from years of substance abuse, a five o'clock shadow and deep bags under his eyes. I marveled at its strangeness and wondered at the motivation behind it. A couple Disney mascots offing themselves made sense to me; I might have drawn that on a middle school binder if I were a little more morbid (and a better drawer). But the decrepit drawing of Mario seemed so specific. I didn't buy it though I was close, thinking maybe I would if I saw it again later on down the line, but I never did.

While we were visiting the market, it started pouring rain and we took shelter with some other tourists under a big tent that was home to a large collection of t-shirts. We watched vendors as they hurried to pack up their wares. The drops were big and the air was still hot; I never felt it get cold in Thailand.

Muay Thai kickboxing fights were heavily advertised in town; there would be flyers posted around, black and white photocopies with photos of the fighters and

English descriptions, and sometimes a black truck would come by, adorned with flags of different nationalities and color cardboard pictures of the fighters, broadcasting news of the fights over a loudspeaker.

The big stadium for tourists was Thaphae Boxing Stadium, a big room with a concrete floor and ring in the center. We went to a Saturday night fight, paying the cheaper price and getting a seat by the bar. The bartender was a pretty young woman who would sometimes take shots with the tourists, though **she didn't take any with us**. By the end of the night, she seemed kind of tipsy. Gambling was encouraged, and you could place bets through the bar.

Muay Thai is as old as Chiang Mai, about 700 years, and is known as the Art of Eight Limbs, being the fists, elbows, knees, and shins. Fighters will practice by hitting bags repeatedly with their shins, which is fucking bonkers. According to legend, Nai Khanomtom, a great martial artist of Siam, was captured by the Burmese during a time of war in the late 1760s and was given the option to fight in hand-to-hand combat for his freedom. After besting 10 of the best Burmese fighters, he was allowed to return to Siam. In at least one version of the story, which I found shared on an MMA fighting site **called "Bloody Elbow," the king also let him choose a prize, either two beautiful** Burmese wives or some kind of unimaginable quantity of wealth. He chose the women, **reasoning that riches are "easier to come by," which, damn dude, I guess love's tough** for everybody.

Muay Thai fighters traditionally wore hemp ropes around their hands instead of gloves but modern fighters wear gloves. Muay Thai styles of fighting are often **incorporated into Western MMA matches. Since the early 20th century, it's had a sort of** inter-mingling with British boxing, and boxing techniques are often mixed with leg and knee kicks. Clinching is also involved, where the fighters grapple each other, often to **the ground, though this seemed to be less common than in a lot of the MMA fights I've** seen, which usually turn into people just kind of rolling on each other.

There were a number of fights that happened the night we were there, with the fighters progressing in age as the night went along. The first couple fights were between children, probably around age 9 or so. This is fairly standard; according to Bloody

Elbows, most Muay Thai fighters start training even earlier than that, and it's typical for Muay Thai fighters to peak before their early 20s. Many of them come from poor regions like Isaan in the northeast, which is occupied by the descendants of Laotian and Khmer people who can be very culturally separate from the rest of Thailand (generally occupied by Thai Siam and Thai Chinese) down to speaking a different language. As teenagers, many aspiring fighters leave their families to train in specialty camps, sending whatever prize money they make (not much) back home.

The kid fights were usually scrappy, but not particularly intense, which is probably just as well.

Before each fight, the fighters would **perform a ritual known as “Wai khru ram muay,” usually shortened to “Wai Khru.”** Nai Khanomtom performed it before his first fight against the Burmese, and they thought he was performing sorcery. The ritual is meant to express gratitude, both to the fighter's teachers and whatever spiritual beings they happen to believe in, usually Buddhist or Hindu, though there are Islamic versions as well. The ritual itself often consists of bowing three times followed by dancing; the dancing can be individual to each fighter, though commonly includes half kicks, flapping motions, and spinning the hands around each other. This was set to pre-recorded music of hand drums and a Thai pipe called a Pi which sounded a little bit like bagpipes. Music like this played during the fighting as well.

Between some of the fights would be some “entertainment,” which consisted of a half dozen blindfolded men being led into the ring, who would then swing wildly, mostly at the air, though occasionally they would connect with one another and be able to follow through with a few hits. Sometimes they would just spin around with their fists out, hoping to connect though usually these fighters would end up getting dizzy and fall **down. I don't know how much of this was a serious attempt, and how much was** theatrical. I would guess the latter, though occasionally when they would find each other they would get pretty vicious.

Ronald spent a lot of time deliberating about whether to place a bet or not. “I keep picking the right one,” he would say after a fight. “Oh man, I definitely would have won that one.” The fighters were divided into two colors, red and blue, as indicated by

their shorts. Red was in the left corner from where we were sitting, and blue was on the right. For whatever reason, red usually won.

As the fighters increased in age, they also increased in intensity. During one fight, a fighter, who could have been 18 but could have been younger, caught a sharp kick in the midsection. He crumpled immediately, clutching his stomach, an expression **of intense pain on his face. I don't know if I've ever quite seen that expression on** someone; his face seemed to be simultaneously scrunching in and stretching out to the **sides. He couldn't move after that, and I think it's likely that his ribs were** broken. Some of his friends came into the ring and helped carry him out.

I would sometimes go see MMA fights at the armory back in Oswald, so the experience was somewhat familiar to me. In those fights, they always seemed to match up a white guy with a Chicano. (Maybe fights are one of those zones where we can **watch the literal clash of cultures in blood and fists. I don't know the nuances of Thai** identities enough to know if something similar was happening with most of these fights, **though it wouldn't** surprise me. It was clear enough in the main fight.)

The final event was the "International Fight," in this case between a Thai national named Detgarong, and a white American who had been advertised on the flyer as **"Ryan Alaska-USA."** Like most of the Thai fighters we saw, Detgarong was strong and athletic, but also fairly slender, with a body that seemed built more for agility than brute power. Meanwhile Ryan Alaska looked like an American action star. He had a well-kempt beard, bulging muscles and well toned abs and pectorals, the kind of motherfucker who gets up in the middle of the night to drink a protein shake.

I wish I could say that Detgarong's subtle mastery of the art form allowed him to beat the larger opponent, but the fight was a mismatched shit show from the start. **Detgarong's strategy was mainly focused on kicks and knee kicks; Ryan Alaska** countered with a few kicks of his own, but pretty quickly shifted into what looked to me like western boxing, pummeling Detgarong with a series of punches that grew increasingly punishing throughout the fight. To his credit, Detgarong never fell. But he lost in the end.

Thaphae Stadium was mostly full of tourists, though locals and supporters of particular fighters were gathered over in a different section of the room, lounging around

or leaning up against the wall. Of course the big deal Muay Thai fights all happened in Bangkok, at either Lumpinee Stadium or Rajadamnern Stadium, but even in Chiang Mai, I got the impression the “real deal” fights happened elsewhere. Looking back, I can see what a mistake this was, and I regret not making the effort to venture a little further out in search of “the real thing.” How exciting can a sporting event be if most of the spectators don’t know what the fuck is going on?



The author, en route to Chiang Mai

4. Cowboy Bar

The bars in Thailand often had English names, usually a noun tangentially **associated with the bar's décor.** The **"Pitstop" bar, which was in Phuket, and is forever** lodged in my memory as **"the Race Car Bar"** though I don't remember if anyone ever called it that, had automotive related posters and stickers strung up on the walls; the **"THC Rooftop Bar" near the city square in Chiang Mai, had Rastafarian colors and neon** psychedelic graffiti in the stairwell. We didn't go out to the bars every night, but some nights we would, and it was on one of these wanderings through the side streets of **Chiang Mai that we found a place called the "Cowboy Bar."** Like most of the businesses in this part of town, the bar was housed in a building with a roof but no front wall, with a giant metal door that could descend to keep the rain out. I believe we were first attracted to the Cowboy Bar because of its prominent display of a pool table. There were only three people in the bar as we approached: a middle-aged woman, a younger woman and a younger man, and on seeing us they urged us to come in and have a drink.

We ordered Changs. Ronald started chatting with the people inside and we learned that the older woman was Nim, the wife of the bar's original proprietor, **"Cowboy," a Thai national who had been really into country western music. He had** recently passed, and there was a shelf in the bar that was set up as a kind of shrine. It had a framed picture of him, a sort of Thai Willie Nelson in a cowboy hat. The picture was adorned on either side by unlit candles. The other two people in the bar were Nim's adult children, Lin and Ping. Lin was 40 and good looking. Ping was gay and kind of spindly. We shot pool with Lin and Ping and ordered beers for everyone in the bar, the four of us chain smoking while country music played over the stereo, the spirit of **Cowboy felt from his corner shelf. Ping referred to the game as "schnooker" and kept** trying to give me pointers, telling me to get down low when I shot so that my eye was perpendicular to the table. Various other patrons drifted in and out, stopping by to shoot a round or have a drink. All of them were locals; we were the only foreigners I ever saw in the Cowboy Bar.

Ronald was connecting with Nim over the music. "I'm a country radio dj back home," he told her. Every time a song came on that he recognized, Willie, Merle, Hank or Waylon he would say something like, "yup, yup, this is a great one." Later, he motioned me aside. "You notice how Lin keeps going to the bathroom?" he said. Then he rubbed his nose and looked at me conspiratorially, a down-low way to indicate that she was on coke or Yaba, a kind of regional speed. To be honest, I hadn't really noticed. This is Ronald's gift. He chats congenially with everyone around him, while at the same time working everyone's angles over in his mind. Meanwhile I sit in the background noticing... not much, really.

Lin got bored after a while and wanted to take us to some clubs, which she called "discos." Nim seemed unsure about this. She demonstrated what she thought of the music at those places, a series of thuds. "Would you rather do that or stay here and listen to good country music?" she asked.

I was torn, but Ronald wanted to go. I liked Nim. I think she was worried about her daughter. But the idea of having an attractive local show us some cool spots was too hard to pass up. So we followed Lin through a winding route that passed through an alley, then across a foot bridge that led over a stream, the moon reflecting big in the black water, to a section of town with several thumping night clubs.

Most night club districts I've been to in the States seem to have a palpable layer of grime covering everything, but I remember this area as being clean, though that may have just been the beer, that place of intoxication where life becomes a series of blurred snapshots, lights and sounds.

We posted up at an outdoor club with a pointed roof and white wooden pillars, like a giant gazebo, and I ordered a rum and coke from the bar which they served me in see-through plastic cup. Techno and American pop thundered throughout, music I scoff at ordinarily, but will dance to anyway with the right level of drunkenness.

At some point we switched to an indoor club, a big empty room with a disco bar sending streaks of colored light spinning methodically along a hard floor and then, like specks of dirt caught in a whirlpool, found ourselves careening back outside to the first spot. Ronald somehow got lost in the transition so I danced with Lin, her dipping into me in time with the music.

We stopped dancing to smoke, and found Ping standing in the street between clubs. **"Where's Ronnie," I said. Ping told me he had gone home. I think he was there to retrieve us.**

I had no idea how to get back, so I followed Ping and Lin through more winding streets to a small apartment that they apparently shared. Lin had a cotton mat on the living room floor that she slept on. She lay down and motioned that I should lay next to her. I had the only key to the guesthouse.

"I have to go find Ronnie," I said.

"Stay," she said. "No sex."

"I could come back tomorrow," I said. But she told me she was leaving town.

In my memory I kissed her on the cheek goodbye, then Ping handed me a bag of Pops cereal from his kitchen to eat and I followed him back to the Cowboy Bar, where I could find my way back to the guesthouse. I stopped to talk to Nim on the way back, **standing just outside; I told her we'd come back the next day.**

I found Ronald in the guesthouse courtyard, sitting on the bench.

"Oh thank God dude!" he said. "You came back!"

I told him they had told me he had left.

"No man, you guys just disappeared at one point," he said. "I tried to find my way back, but I got lost. I went down this alley, and then this stray dog started chasing me. I managed to lose it, then a tuk tuk picked me up. I didn't have any money, just this broken watch I've been carrying around. I think the driver just felt sorry for me and could tell I was fucked up and had no idea where I was, so he took the watch and I gave him the piece of paper that says where the guesthouse is, and he gave me a ride back. I don't think he needed the watch though. Then I was like, fuck, I'm going to have to wait out here all night, then you showed up."

We never made it back to the Cowboy bar. While writing this, I decided to look it up. All I found was a single thread in an online forum for ex-pats, where someone was asking about Cowboy's passing. The bar is apparently closed now.

One of Chiang Mai's main claims to fame is its proximity to Thailand's northern mountain ranges, which extend into Myanmar. A popular tourist activity, then, is a **"jungle trek,"** guided tours of relatively easy weekend hikes through the mountains. We signed up to go on one through Toi at the guesthouse. Toi gave us the option between a two day overnight trek and a three-day trek that takes you to stay with a **"hilltop tribe"** and includes white water rafting as well as a short ride in a bamboo raft on the way back down. Both included a stay at an elephant camp. We opted for the three-day trek, which **wasn't that much more money and sounded more adventurous.** On the day of the trek, we met our driver down in the guesthouse lobby, our large backpacks strapped onto us. **He laughed and said that we shouldn't take them, it would be too much work.** He gave us smaller packs to put our stuff in, more like satchels really, the strap digging into my shoulders uncomfortably, lacking the specially designed strain-reducing frames that our bigger packs had.

We loaded onto a red truck – known as a *songthaew* – that had benches installed parallel to each other in the back for passengers (no seatbelts), and drove north 50 or so kilometers. We were taken to a supply store in a small town, where I bought a pair of flip-flops that had a picture of an orange guitar and a list of bands on them: **"Slipknot, Linkpark, Maroon 5, Scorpion, Madonna, Eric Clapton."** I wanted to wear these when we went rafting. We met up with about 15 or so other tourists, all young and European, in a park like area with a covered section for picnic tables. The tour company gave us seaweed and sticky rice wrapped in plastic to eat for lunch. Most of the food we ate in Thailand with a knife and fork, which is actually how the locals do it, but this we ate with chopsticks. My chopstick abilities are nothing to write home about, but I managed. Then we set off, the group following our tour guide, who I will refer to as Chaow, across a small bridge and into the Thailand jungle.

Chaow was chubby and tan, and extremely amiable, telling jokes and singing snippets of songs for much of the way. He said we would get to the elephant camp (where we were staying the night) at **"Chang o'clock,"** referring to both the beer and the elephant that it's named after, and he would describe things as **"same same but different,"** a Thai tourist cliché, though this was the only time that I remember hearing it.

We walked up a gently sloping hill that ran parallel to a valley of grassy fields on **one side, and a dense jungle on the other.** “Maybe we’ll see a tiger,” said Chaow, then laughed. I knew tigers had become very rare in the wild. We could see houses in the valley, and the trail was well kept. Gradually we entered into a steeper section, deeper in the forest, surrounded by tall trees, where we took a break to drink some water. The hike wasn’t that strenuous but the heat made it more so, and the other trekkers didn’t seem like they were really serious hikers anyway. Chaow had a hat that he had folded out of a giant teak leaf, and we took turns putting it on and taking pictures.

We started up again. Before too long we were at the elephant camp, the whole thing taking about an hour and a half. The camp had a bar so we got some beers and waited our turn to go on an elephant ride.

When not working, the elephants were kept in a fenced off pen in the middle of the camp. I could see one, its foot in an ankle bracelet attached to a thick chain that was staked to the ground, which made me feel uneasy about what we were doing. It came to be our turn, so we got on a wooden platform seat that was strapped to an elephant’s back, while the *mahout* (the elephant handler) straddled the elephant bareback up near its head. We began abruptly with a prod from the mahout while the seat jerked slightly forward. The ride took us around a circular track through the jungle, momentarily splashing through a small pond, and back out. The seat was a little wobbly though not dangerously so, and would rise and fall with every step. To steer the elephant, the mahout used something called a bullhook, which was a black stick with a crooked hook at the end. He would poke the elephant sharply with this, and scrape the hook along the elephant’s neck to get it to change directions, which would leave little lines of indentation in the folds of its skin. I found this appalling. I wanted to whisper in the **elephant’s ear, “when the revolution comes, he will be the first against the wall.”** The ride lasted around 10 minutes. I did not know this at the time, but the bullhook is very controversial, and mahouts have been accused of abusing the animals, with some even allegedly going as far as to stick the hook up the elephant’s rectum. In turn, elephants will sometimes try to kill the mahout, stomping on them or charging them with their tusks.

I talked to Ronald about my discomfort with the elephant ride several years later, how I felt that it was cruel and exploitative. **“Yeah, I knew it was fucked up,”** he agreed. **“But dude, it was a sunny day, I was a little high, I had a beer and I was riding an elephant. I was just trying not to think about it.”** Still, if I ever go back to Thailand, I will not be returning to the elephant camp.

It was evening and these two British dudes – who I am going to refer to as Heckle and Jeckle – had brought a pack of cards and wanted to play drinking games. A group of us gathered around a table that was near the bar, Heckle and Jeckle holding court, and we played games I remembered from college under names like **“Presidents and Assholes”** and **“Fuck the Dealer,”** drinking rounds of Chang from the camp's stockpile. Ronald was elsewhere, having gone off with a couple from the Netherlands who had brought a spliff.

Though the card games were fun, I couldn't help but feel a vague sense of disappointment. None of this fit in with my fantasy of rugged jungle exploration, not the tourist trap camp, not the hedonistic other trekkers who were dressed more for a day at the beach, not the Western style drinking games I had played in college. We should have been drinking harsh gin straight from a bottle, huddled around a dying fire, listening to a thousand insects under the moonlight, experiences I wouldn't have been able to find on Fraternity Row and a day at a shitty zoo.

As night fell, a campfire was started, which we sat around in foldable camping chairs. Chaow had procured an acoustic guitar from somewhere, and he plucked around on it for awhile playing snippets of Beatles covers. I have a love-hate relationship with impromptu guitar playing, and this was further taking the fantasy away from jungle exploration and toward **“weekend getaway with the boys.”** All the same, I found myself asking for the guitar, upon the procuring of which Heckle immediately started asking me if I could play **“Wonderwall.”** After some false starts I was able to figure out the chords, which kicked off a very shambling sing-along until we got to a part where no one remembered the words. I followed this up with **“What I Got”** by Sublime, which I assumed would have the same kind of campfire resonance that it does in the States. **“Is that the song from *American Pie*?”** Heckle asked.

We slept that night in a large wooden structure, big enough to have individual rooms (though lacking front walls), buried under mosquito netting.

The next day we watched the camp employees lead some of the elephants to a pool of water to bathe them. One British girl hopped on top of one, straddling it bareback like Sheena or some warrior from an old colonialist movie about Africa. Later on at the camp, I watched a leech attach itself to someone's feet; he rubbed it off leaving a little petal of blood in its wake. We left the camp mid-morning.

Most of the trekkers were heading back to Chiang Mai, so we started hiking out to the road, taking a short detour to a waterfall that formed a natural waterslide. We took turns sliding down into a deep pool of water below, the shock of cold water refreshing in the morning sun. One woman took the slide and her top came off; she bobbed awkwardly in the water while someone retrieved it for her.

Continuing on were me and Ronnie, the guide, and Heckle and Jeckle. Our **destination that night was a "Hill-Top Tribe," which could have been any number of a** diaspora of different people including Karen, Lishu, Akha, Lahu and Meo, each a culturally distinct tribe with its own language and cultural customs. Naturally none of us (the guide excepted) had any idea which one we were going to see, or any notion of the significance if we had.

We set off, hiking up a long steep trail that wound into the mountains. We stopped several times to take water breaks, Ronald and I, smokers since our mid-teens, probably appreciating these breaks the most. Heckle and Jeckle wore flip-flops the entire time. I was wearing jeans despite the heat, anticipating rugged trails filled with poisonous plants, mosquitos, ticks, who knew what else. But the path was clear the whole time. Heckle and Jeckle passed the time by telling stories about the islands down south, the parties they had gone to, the drinks they had imbibed. They showed off the matching foot tattoos they had gotten, tribal symbols or kanji, the meaning more in the act of doing it than in the image itself. One of them had apparently slept with a **prostitute. "You got a bird down south though, didn't you?" his friend ribbed. "And how was it?"**

As we hiked up the mountain, a man came rolling down in the opposite direction on a motorbike. He stopped and chatted with the tour guide for a second, showing him something in a large bag, and then continuing on down the mountain.

We got to the top, a vista of green trees, the tops of other mountains obscured slightly by distant fogs. We followed the dirt road into the village, a collection of wooden structures and hauled up to where we were staying, climbing several wooden steps to a raised deck connected to two hut like buildings. The five of us sat on the deck and me and Ronnie smoked cigarettes while a group of women spread out a collection of crafts they were selling on a blanket in front of us.

“Oh no,” we told them. “No thank you.” I thought we were being non-superficial, favoring raw experience over physical tokens. Looking back, God knows how much they could have used the money.

Next they offered to sell us massages, which Heckle and Jeckle accepted, while me and Ronnie stayed on the porch.

When they got back from their massages, a man came up to the deck and sold **us a thin joint of Thai weed, which we passed around. “I think I feel it,” said one of the** British guys, though that may have been wistful thinking on his part. The tour guide **strummed his guitar for a bit, then gave it to me. I played “What I Like About You” by the** Romantics. We also played a card game – Bullshit – with the Brits. Damn, I think we might have stayed on that deck the whole fucking time.

That night, after Heckle and Jeckle had gone to bed, Ronald said, “hey, c'mere.” I followed him to a dark room in the hut across from ours, where I watched a man with missing front teeth smoke opium through a long bamboo tube. He was lying on his side, his head on a small pillow, and he carefully rubbed a sticky black substance onto a groove in the tube, then lit it using a short wooden stick with smoldering end. Chaow waxed rhapsodic about growing up in the mountains nearby. He said that when he was a kid, every village had their own stock of opium. It was rarer now. I gave the toothless man some money, and took his place on the pillow. The man lit the pipe for me and I took a pull, the taste and smell reminiscent of certain types of incense. I felt nothing at first, but later went outside to smoke a cigarette and noticed a feeling of calmness and a moderate inner glowing sensation. Of course people smoke pipes and pipes of the stuff

so what I felt was undoubtedly mild. I went to bed shortly after, falling asleep almost immediately though that might have been from the hike as much as the opium. I don't remember if I dreamt or not.

We hiked back down the next day, taking a different route that led more directly through the forest. We made good progress, stopping at a waterfall to drink cans of Pepsi, where we ran into Remy. We asked him if he had found his friends, and he said that he had.

As we hiked out of the forest and through a large rubber tree plantation, Chaow would periodically run into people that he knew, coming up the mountain or working out in the field, and stop to talk to them.

We reached the Ping River a little after lunchtime, where a wooden structure had been set up where the rafting portion of the trek was going to start. We were close to a road, so Chaow was going to take a truck and meet us further down the river. The raft guide gave us helmets and life jackets, and Ronnie and I and Heckle and Jeckle and the guide all loaded into a rubber raft. We drifted down a fairly peaceful river under tall trees, occasionally going through a minor rapid, though nothing like rapids I've done on the Deschutes in Oregon. At one point the raft guide let us jump out into the water and swim. As we swam alongside the raft, we saw a baby elephant bathing itself in the water. At first I thought it was wild, but then I saw the *mahout* coming up alongside it, a gaggle of tourists behind him.

We reached another structure along the river, where we switched out to the bamboo raft, a series of thick bamboo tubes tied together into a long platform. We sat cross legged on the middle of the raft while the guide stood, balancing easily at the front end with a long wooden paddle which he used to guide and propel us through the water. We drifted down the river on this for about 15 minutes, then reached the final dock and got out.

We said goodbye to Heckle and Jeckle, who had opted out of the additional **“village tours” that we had signed up for, and rejoined Chaow** in one of the red trucks, sitting in the back while he took the driver's seat. The first stop was a Karen Village, where I mostly remember looking at a pig in a wooden sty. We then traveled to a village **of the “Long Neck Tribe,” usually either the Kayan or the Padaung.** The women in the

village had brass rings running up and down the lengths of their necks and were dressed in white tunics and floral patterned skirts. The rings, which the women start wearing very young, press down the collar bone, which gives the impression of an extended neck. You could walk through the village, take pictures of the residents and buy souvenirs. Some of the items for sale seemed like crafts made there in the village – I remember seeing a woman weaving something on a loom – but much of it seemed like the same touristy trinkets you could get at the bazaars in Chiang Mai, or sold by the wandering merchant women on Khao San Road. Ronald took a picture of me sitting next to two children, rings already placed around their short necks. In the picture I am smiling, but something about the whole thing made me uneasy. I later found out that the members of the village were likely refugees from Myanmar due to a civil war. The Thai government lets them live in refugee communities and work in the tourist villages, but denies them citizenship. The money from tourism almost certainly helps them. But it's not like they have the option to be computer programmers.

It took a long time to get back to Chiang Mai. We picked up a number of tourists along the way, and Chaow kept making unscheduled stops, pulling into driveways of **various shops and disappearing for a few minutes, then coming back out. “What, does he need to ask for directions?” one of the tourists asked, rolling his eyes. Ronald kept** shooting me conspiratorial glances, but I didn't know what he was getting at. I listened to one of the tourists tell a story about another tourist getting stabbed in a bar fight on one of the southern islands, where we were heading next.

Ronald explained **to me afterwards: “Ok, so you know how they said that was** one of the last villages that had opium, right? And then you know how the tour guide went down the mountain carrying that big pack? And then he kept stopping to talk to people, and then we kept making **all these stops on the way back, right?” I remembered** the guy coming down the mountain on the motorbike, and got what he was getting at. Ronald thought Chaow was distributing opium, though if he was I couldn't say for sure.



The author with some Kayan children

6. Pilgrimage

We needed a break. We'd been in Thailand for three weeks; Ronald kept making **jokes about opening a food stand that would sell "Pabst and Biscuits and Gravy,"** things we had as yet not seen in Thailand. We got into a weird habit of **watching "Looney Tunes" every evening in the guesthouse.** We kept going to different Italian restaurants, which never seemed to meet our decreasing expectations.

For me, it wasn't so much culture fatigue as the lack of a defined objective. I felt myself losing that initial sense of forward momentum that had propelled me onto the plane in the first place. I didn't know what to do with myself in Thailand. I barely knew what to do with myself in America.

So we decided to go on a vacation from our vacation. We decided to go to Pizza Hut.

There were two Pizza Huts in Chiang Mai and the first one we went to told us that their oven was broken. They offered us some salad, and when we didn't want that,

they offered to call us a songthaew to take us to the second Pizza Hut, which was at the mall by the airport.

Unlike the mall in Bangkok, I don't remember anything about this mall that would differentiate it from a shopping mall in the States. It had stores, a food court, a movie theater on the top floor, was air-conditioned and full of teenagers. It was perfect.

We found the Pizza Hut on the top floor of five. We went all out: a big meat lovers with cheese stuffed crust and a side of wings, giant Cokes to wash it down. It's possible this was the most expensive meal that I had in Thailand, and after the various bad local attempts at pizza that I'd sampled, it was heavenly; filled to the brim with grease and fat and carbohydrates, processed meat and cheese, a perfect artifact of western excess and comfort exported halfway around the world and housed in a temple of American style consumption. I think some of the kids that walked past were even wearing designer brands.

Ronald often would comment how much healthier he thought the food in Thailand was than in America. **Now he said something like, "honestly though, I could probably eat pizza everyday. Pizza and burgers. And ice cream. Chicken wings."**

"Yeah," I said. "Me too."

We decided to go see a movie, *American Reunion*, **the fourth in the "American Pie" series.** In Thai movie theaters, you pick out which seats you want to sit on when you buy the ticket. Before the movie begins, you have to stand while the national anthem plays over a series of videos of the king, all from years ago when he was relatively young. The movie was presented in English, with Thai subtitles. There's a lot I could criticize about the movie: Jim's big moment of moral triumph in the movie is choosing not to cheat on his wife with his inebriated teenage neighbor; the whole series tends to turn women's, especially older women's, sexualities into a punchline (inevitably, **in each movie, one character will fuck another character's mother) and so on.** But honestly, it was a such a familiar stupidity, in such a far off place, that I just enjoyed the experience.

This would become a recurring activity for us. Whenever we would get burnt-out on the vacation, we would go to a shopping mall, maybe spend a little time in the arcade

if they had one (I was a fan of air hockey and the basketball game) and then go see an American movie.

7. Ladyboy Cabaret; Las Vegas Bar; Wat Phra That Doi Suthep

They say getting sick is an inevitable part of extended travel, and Chiang Mai was where we both had our first experience with the shits. Mine wasn't too bad, a bit of diarrhea, though it happened the night before we left on the Trek, and I remember sitting on the toilet with this horrible vision of trudging through the jungle with my backpack, having to stop every 5 minutes or so to relieve myself in the jungle (or shitting my pants outright.)

Ronald's hit a little later. We'd gone to a large Night Bazaar one evening to walk around. **Ronald bought a “singing bowl” and stopped for a few minutes outside of a music vendor, his foot on a stool while he strummed “Baby I'm An Anarchist” on an acoustic guitar that was for sale. Later that night, we went to a “Ladyboy Cabaret.”**

Ladyboy – *kathoey* in Thai – is a tricky concept, almost but not quite lining up with the American conception of a transgender woman. Like trans women, they are biologically born men who live, express themselves, and otherwise identify as women; **however, unlike trans people, the “third gender” already has a long historically** precedented place in Thai society, for both good and bad. It deters things like street harassment, but also can relegate kathoey to certain societal positions: namely, sex work and entertainment. There is a considerable social stigma associated as well. Writing for *the Daily Beast* in an article titled **“Thailand's Transgender People Aren't Just 'Ladyboys' Anymore,”** Jay Michaelson says that **“many Thai believe that being a kathoey is karmic retribution for bad deeds in a past life.”** During my time there, **“ladyboys” would often end up the punchline of jokes, told by locals and tourists alike.**

Same same but different.

In any case, the show was much like an American drag show. Performers came out dressed in elaborate costumes, colorful sequined dresses evoking both Las Vegas style showgirls and famous pop divas of the past, and perform elaborate dance routines, lip syncing to mostly American pop music. The performers were bathed in colored lights while smoke rose around them. One performer had dressed half of their

body in a stereotypical men's suit, and the other half in a flashy dress, and lip synced the duet **"One Man Woman, Two Timing Man"** by Paul Anka and Odia Coates, flipping from side to side so the corresponding gender half would be visible depending on what part of the song it was. The performer ended the song by doing the old **"getting fresh with myself"** bit, feeling themselves up with one hand, then slapping it away with the other. Another performer lip synced Shirley Bassey's 1989 cover of **"My Way"** as the lights dimmed until only her face could be seen, during which time the performer discretely changed from a dress into a suit; the recording then changed to the Frank Sinatra version of the song for a roaring finish (I can't remember the names of half the streets I was on, but for some reason I can remember the names of all the corny old American pop music from the cabaret show). I am sure at one point **"It's Raining Men"** came on.

A larger-bodied performer, essentially playing the role of a waitress, would frequently come out to the audience and flirt with them. She came to our table several times. **Did we get a kiss from her? I don't remember. What I do remember is that** afterwards, Ronald's shits kicked in, and he ambled back to the guesthouse on his own. I was too restless to go back though. I had been drinking steadily through the Cabaret. I wanted to see some fucking rock n roll; fuck all this lip syncing and casino schmaltz.

I ended up finding a bar back near the main square that had a band that played covers of AC/DC and Beatles songs. The band was Thai but everyone else in the bar was a tourist. I sat at a table listening to the band and drinking by myself, watching a group of tourists at a table across from me. A loneliness began to creep in. I watched them order mixed drinks, sing along to the songs that they knew, while I sat there by myself sipping a Chang and wondering what the hell I was doing there. Not just there in that bar but *there*. It got to be too much for me after a while, so I left, the band powering through **"Let It Be,"** and headed back toward the guesthouse. **Weirdly, a makeshift bar** had appeared on the street in front of it, serving a single patron. The bar was a wooden cart with a sign that said **"Las Vegas Bar."**

The patron saw me coming and motioned for me to join him. He was a heavy set British man with a trim white beard, probably in his mid-50s. We started talking, and before long he said, **"I gotta order you this shot. It'll really get you going."** He ordered

two, I don't know of what, from the young man working the bar, and we cheers'd and took them together. The shot was a foul concoction, unrecognizable to my already drunken tongue.

After the shot, the man told me about his travels; he liked Chiang Mai alright but what he really liked was the resort towns to the south, particularly Pattaya and Phuket. **“Great birds down there,” he said. “You know what I mean by birds, right?” He smiled at me. “The girls!”**

The next day I decided I wanted to go to a famous temple on top of a mountain: *Wat Phra That Doi Suthep*. **Alone, because Ronald didn't want to go (“You can go!” he told me when I asked him.)** Aside from the night before, and morning trips to the 7-11, I hadn't done too much venturing out on my own. I was a little peeved that Ronald didn't want to go but I didn't want to spend another day in the guesthouse watching Fox News. I wandered toward the main street until I found a group of songthaew drivers gathered around, and hired one of them to take me, overcharging me just a little. Since it was just me, he let me ride in the passenger seat instead of in the back. We left town and before long were on a winding road going up the mountain. The driver kept alternating which side of the road he drove on. I'd noticed that the cab drivers often had a fairly cavalier attitude toward road laws. At one point, we passed a large billboard with a picture of the Buddha on it and the driver briefly put his hands together and bowed his head forward.

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep is famous for having for having 309 steps. The driver dropped me off at the base and said he would wait for me. On either side of the stairway were statues of gold and green serpents, the naga, their tails extending all the way up the stairs. Out of the serpents' open mouths, four other serpents extended, as if the main naga were expelling other serpents from their bellies. I walked up the steps. At the top was a large terrace where there were more statues of serpents and elephants and bells. There was also a spectacular view overlooking three miles of jungle and the buildings of Chiang Mai stretching on into the horizon. I had to take my shoes off to go into the temple, leaving them in a pile of other shoes just outside. In the middle of the terrace was a large golden *chedi*, a ridged cone that towered over everything, as tall as a three story building. Temple legend says that a piece of the Buddha's shoulder bone

was placed on a white elephant, which then walked into the mountains, dropping dead at the site that the temple would be founded on. Visitors are encouraged to leave lotus blossoms at the temple shrines, though I left nothing myself.

There were many monks in orange robes milling about; I thought about asking one of them a question but I couldn't think of anything. I stood awhile looking at the view. Then I walked back down.

8. Tiger Kingdom

We were advised not to go to the Tiger Temple in Bangkok because they were said to sedate the animals. So we opted to go to Tiger Kingdom instead.

At The Tiger Kingdom you could pay to go into a large pen and have your picture taken with one of the animals. The most popular (and expensive) option was to have your picture taken with baby tiger cubs. I suppose this makes sense, since baby cubs are mind-numbingly cute. But I wanted to get my picture taken with the biggest, baddest motherfucker available. I wanted to get my picture taken with an adult motherfucking tiger, something that might take your head off if you sneezed at it.

The tigers were kept in a largish fenced enclosure that had trees and a fake pond. We watched a group of tourists get their pictures taken with them, then the handler motioned for us to go in. The tiger was stretched out lazily by the fence. We lent the handler our disposable camera, and he had us pose next to it one at a time. I kneeled next to the tiger's hind legs, away from its head, and lay my hand gently on its back, just above the tail. I remember the warmth of its fur and its skin pulsating gently with each breath. The handler used a plastic prod to move the tiger over to the pond. He had us sit on the enclosure while the tiger submerged itself in the water. He had Ronald pose as if he was about to sneak up behind the tiger and leap onto its back, and he had me pose holding onto its tail. Then our time was up and we went back out of the enclosure.

There was a break between tourists, so the handlers let another tiger into the enclosure, and I watched as one of the handlers stood up on a raised platform and used a piece of robe attached to a stick to play with them, lifting the rope up and down as the tigers leapt at it. One of them dove at it and landed in the water with a giant splash.

They looked just like giant house cats. They didn't look sedated to me, though I am certainly no expert on animal pharmacology. I was reminded of a story I'd heard about big dogs behind little fences. I'd heard that even though the big dog can technically leap over the fence, psychologically it believes that it can not, and so the fence ends up being an effective barrier. If the tigers had wanted to, they could have ripped that handler to pieces.

We decided to wander around the rest of the exhibit for a little while. We found an enclosure of teenaged tiger cubs, and Ronald pulled up a long piece of grass and poked it under the gap at the bottom of the chainlink fence so that one of the tigers swiped at it. He entertained himself like this for several minutes, until one of the Kingdom employees told him to cut it out. We also found a large adult lion in another enclosure; **the employee told us that the lion's name was Jack Nicholson.**

Unlike the elephants at the camp, the tigers did not seem to be in any obvious discomfort. However, these kinds of places have been under criticism lately; *National Geographic* has accused the Tiger Temple (the one we didn't go to) as running an illegal for-profit breeding service and in 2016, inspectors found the dead bodies of 40 tiger cubs packed into a freezer. As yet, this kind of dirt has not been found on the Tiger Kingdom.

There's a running joke about dudes using posed pictures with tigers in their online dating profiles. I was not aware of this, and used the picture for a long time. When I became aware of the cliché, I took it down, thus sending the picture the way of the fedora collection I had in high school.



9. Bangkok Again

Before going to the southern islands, we spent another couple nights in Bangkok. We were hanging out on Khao San Road on one of these nights and ran into this kid **named Keegan. We'd met him** before; he was an American from Seattle, the kind of perma-faded traveler that you encounter a lot in places like this, every word he said drifting through a swirl of half remembered parties and raves, delivered with a kind of chummy acknowledgment that dude, we are *all* here to get fucked up. He liked to spin poi, which involves spinning weights attached to strings around in elaborate patterns, **sometimes lighting the ends on fire first. I don't think he was too into temples. He told us** how we could cheat the fare when taking the ferry to the different islands by re-using old tickets, switching the color-coded sticker depending on what day it was. He told us how he and his friend had been visiting pharmacies for Xanax, and how his friend had gotten busted by the police and taken to jail. He told us another story, about going to different nightclubs in Vietnam with a taxi driver. He had asked his driver about scoring some coke, and his driver had found a bag of powder for him. He had taken the bag into the bathroom of one of the night clubs and snorted it.

“Then I was like, oh fuck, this isn’t cocaine this is heroin,” he said. “But that was alright with me. I was fucked up all night.” This was one of the only other American tourist that we ever met.

Every time we were in Bangkok, we heard about something called **“the show.”** Tuk-tuk drivers would pull over beside us and make **“pop pop”** noises with their lips. They would hand us laminated menus with various **“entertainments”** listed, enigmatic names like **“Goldfish Show”** and **“Bird Show.”** I think it was always going to be hanging over us; whether we were going to go or not.

Ronald had heard that we could make arrangements through the hostel we were staying in. We were staying at the same hostel as before. We asked the lady who worked at the front desk, the smiling lady who reminded me of a Den Mother from Cub Scouts about **“the show,”** and she looked confused for a moment, then smiled again exactly the same and said, **“oh, of course.”** She told us she would order a taxi for us.

We waited for the taxi in the courtyard and talked to two tourists, both fitness trainers from England. They were both wearing tank tops and had bulging biceps. I sat with them in the courtyard drinking a can of beer that I had bought from the mini-fridge in the courtyard, asking about the gyms that they worked at, and the girls there. **“Real fit, huh?”** I said, using the British slang because I wanted them to know that I knew it. Eventually the conversation turned to where we were going, so I told them.

“Is that right?” one of them said. “We thought about it, but one of our friends went and she told us some bad stuff about that. She told us that sometimes the girl starts crying. It just seems like a bad scene all around.”

I was already apprehensive about the whole endeavor, and this made me more so. I knew I was doing something that was going to be transgressing my own personal moral code. And yet I felt compelled to do this, drawn to witnessing this particular bit of darkness first hand, despite the potential consequences to my psyche.

The taxi arrived. “Let us know how it is,” one of the fitness trainers said.

We made small talk with the driver as he drove us into a part of Bangkok we’d never been before, leaving the tourist district behind. He was a young man, around our age maybe. We asked him if he’d ever gone to the show before.

“No,” he said. “I would, but it’s too expensive for me.”

He pulled into a side-street full of unmarked buildings. He let us out in front of one of the buildings, a path to the entrance delineated with a felt rope like the runway to a fancy party. There was a man standing in front of the door. He told us how much it was to enter, somewhat more than we had been told at the hostel. We had already come this far though, so we paid, and as we did I wondered about the money, supposing it was going to a mafia of some kind. The man motioned us inside. We were in a large dimly lit room. There was a bar and a stage set up in the middle of the room with tables and chairs set up around it. We went to the bar for drinks. I'd been drinking beer at the hostel, but switched to whiskey and coke. A pretty Thai woman walked up to us and asked if either of us wanted to buy her a drink; we both declined and the woman moved on to someone else. The room was full of white tourists drinking and laughing. We sat at a table; I had a pretty solid buzz on at this point, but even still I had a strong loop of **“what the fuck are you doing?” running through my head.**

Dance music started playing, and a young Thai woman, completely nude, walked onto the stage and started moving in time to the music, moving her feet up and down in a way that I thought resembled marching more than dancing. I remember she was very pale. She dance/marched for a few moments, then reached down between her legs and began pulling a long silk scarf out of her pussy, an anatomical twist on a magician's trick. She finished pulling the scarf out and left the stage. Another woman took her place. She dance/marched like the woman before, then squatted down. She had **several ping pong balls and she would shove these between her pussy lips, then “pop”** them back out again by flexing. A third woman came on stage. She did the same thing, but with a set of darts and an inflated balloon. With one of the darts, she was able to pop the balloon. A fourth woman had a bottle of beer, which she held to her crotch and somehow managed to pop open. She gave the beer to someone in the audience, who chugged it.

None of this seemed arousing, sex reduced to pure anatomical stunt work. The performers looked tired and disinterested. The audience seemed to hoot with jaded amusement, a defining moment on their big vacation. It made me profoundly uncomfortable, and I had to take a piss.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I told Ronald. I wandered back behind the stage, where I thought there was a toilet, but went too far and ended up in a backroom. The performers were sitting on stools next to a long table. They were topless and eating plates of rice, all in a line. They looked at me awkwardly when I entered; **"sorry," I said** and quickly left. I found the bathroom, which was covered with a black curtain, and pissed. As I was walking out, I ran into one of the performers in the doorway. She looked at me with big embarrassed eyes. She was holding a cloth up to her pussy; in the dim red light of the club it looked like it might have been stained with something dark.

That was enough for me. I walked back to the table. "Dude, let's get the fuck out of here," I said. "It hurts women."

"No way dude," said Ronald. "I paid 30 bucks for this! I don't care how shitty it is, I'm staying here for the whole fucking thing!"

"Fuck this," I said. "I'm out of here."

I walked briskly out of the club. I've heard of people being stopped as they try to leave, charged additional "drink" fees and other extortionist tactics, but nobody stopped me. I walked through the alley and out to the main road. I thought maybe we were in an interesting red light district and I could walk around and look at the go-go bars. I also thought maybe I could find a drink somewhere. But there was nothing. I walked first in one direction, then in another. All I saw were blank office buildings, each one indiscernible from the next. There was nobody else on the street, not even any cars, and I had no idea where we were; for a moment, I lost track of which alley I had come down, and I felt a growing panic as I pictured myself wandering around a strange neighborhood in a foreign country for the rest of the night. I backtracked my steps once, and then again, and found it. Ronald was standing next to the taxi looking worried.

"Fuck dude! I didn't know where you went," he said. "I should have gone with you! After you left, this woman and this guy got on stage, and the guy just started, like, mounting her." I remember he used the word "mounting" not fucking.

We got back in the taxi. "Don't ever go to that," I told the driver.

"Oh, no?" he said. I wonder how many times he'd heard something like that before.

We asked him if he was Buddhist, and he said that he was. “Good,” we said, speaking practically in unison, although neither of us were. As if we couldn't imagine an ethical Thai man without the driving force of religion.

The taxi took us back to the hostel. Ronald went to bed immediately, but I was still wired so I went out to Khao San Road. I went to one of the 7-11s and sat drinking a **Chang on the curb. I didn't talk to anybody, just watched the swirl of people walking** past. I finished the bottle and started heading back to the hostel. On the way back a young Thai woman standing on a corner grabbed me. I'd seen her on this corner before, but she'd never been so aggressive before.

“No thank you,” I said and pulled away out of her grip.

“Don't go,” she said but I was already walking away.

I have seen some discussion of the ethics of a Ping Pong Show. Some insist that the women involved are essentially slaves or indentured servants; immigrants from countries like Laos who end up working 7 day weeks at these places, getting only one night off a month. I've seen others argue that they are making a deliberate decision, choosing to go into this kind of specialized sex work because it makes more money than the factories, and that to cast them as victims is condescending and sanctimonious.

I'll say this: Whatever the case, these women have had to make far harder decisions in their lives than I will ever have to.

END OF PART TWO

PART 3

“One of our traveling companions from the San Antonio summed up his brilliant life philosophy with one fine phrase: ‘Stop arsing about you assholes. Why don't you get off

your asses and go back to your asshole country.” - Che Guevera “The Motorcycle Diaries”

“You don't have it any better

You don't have it any worse

You're an irreplaceable human soul with your own understanding of what it means to suffer

And that's a huge bummer” - Andrew Jackson Jihad “People II 2: Still Peoplin”

1. Haad Rin; Reggae Bar

We arrived in Haad Rin a week before the Full Moon party, a monthly bacchanal and tourist staple on the island of Koh Phangan. It had been my suggestion to go to the Full Moon Party, and my suggestion to arrive a week early. To get to Koh Phangan, we had taken a train south from Bangkok, staying the night in either Chumpon or Surat Thani (I had stopped keeping a journal at this point) in a guesthouse that was out in the country, dining with a young American man and his Thai girlfriend (Ronald privately insisted that he was paying for something called “the girlfriend experience” and that she was an escort), then taking a ferry to the island. Haad Rin was a resort town on the island's southern tip; to get there from the port, we'd ridden in a songthaew over windy jungle roads which made me think of stories I'd heard of tourists renting motorcycles and then crashing them.

We checked out a hotel not too far from the beach, but decided it was too expensive. As we were walking down the road away from the hotel however, the front clerk came running out and offered us a better deal, which we accepted. This was by far the most “resort” like place that we stayed. It had a pool, a free buffet style breakfast, and a private balcony from which we could see the ocean. It was across the street from a place that offered laundry, and a place that we called “the Reggae Bar,” which would blast Bob Marley from loudspeakers throughout the day. Periodically a Thai man with

shoulder length hair would come out of the bar and swing a giant Rastafarian flag. Just down the street was a restaurant offering sandwiches.

Haad Rin was a town with dusty streets, tourists whizzing by on rented motorcycles. It was only a 10 minute or so walk to the beach, on which we would pass souvenir shops selling neon colored tank tops and cheap sunglasses and t-shirts with pictures of American celebrities on them, bars, bucket stands, mangy-looking dogs, Italian restaurants, tattoo parlors, written advertisements for something called a “foam party,” tourists, tourists, tourists.

The town was occupied by a seemingly never-ending supply of young and attractive Europeans, the men wearing tank tops and aviator sunglasses, the women, strappy vacation dresses. Here, finally, all pretense of “cultural immersion” could be dropped. These people were here to drink themselves into oblivion, fuck each other, and mostly ignore the locals. Many of them were traveling for a lot longer than I was: three months, six months, a year. Four weeks into my own adventure, that seemed an almost unfathomable amount of time to be stuck in the limbo of traveling, bouncing around between beaches and parties, an endless search for the next cultural high. Didn’t these people have lives and hobbies to get back to?

To me, these modern-day backpackers seemed more the spiritual cousins of American frat boys than any sort of counter-cultural seeker of the sort I had imagined. Their voices were loud as they’d bellow down the streets, the men would often travel in packs of three or more. At night, the beach was filled with the sound of blaring EDM. When they got back to their home countries, I imagined, they would return to their pre-determined paths of being fitness trainers or working in “finance,” with nothing to show for their experience but endless tales of getting loaded.

The great travel writer Paul Theroux, in his breakthrough book *The Great Railroad Bazaar*, describes encountering some of the early “hippie trail” travelers on a train through Turkey: “On the whole,” he writes, “the hippies ignored the Turks; they played guitars and harmonicas, held hands, and organized card games. Some simply lay on their seats lengthwise, hogging half the compartment, and humped under the astonished eyes of Turkish women who sat staring in dark yashmaks, their hands clasped between their knees. Occasionally, I saw an amorous pair leave their

compartment hand in hand to go copulate in a toilet.” So perhaps they were not so far removed after all.

Ronald quickly found his place in Haad Rin: everyday he would go to the Reggae Bar. He told them he was a radio DJ in Montana, and before long they were letting him “DJ” there too.

I on the other hand, was significantly more restless. The town was small enough that I felt like I had explored it by the end of the first day. I tried the sandwich shop and the Italian restaurant, I swam in the ocean, I drank whiskey at the hotel bar next to the pool. But I was bored. So I started watching movies.

Our hotel room had “Cinemax,” a movie channel that seemed to specialize in movies with cheap broadcast licenses. I’d never heard of most of them, and many of them were awful. I’d watch these while Ronald went to the Reggae Bar, usually in the afternoon after a morning swim.

An incomplete list is as follows:

Cyborg (1989) - A Jean-Claude Van Damme vehicle about a post-apocalyptic world. Most of the movie consists of Van Damme and a woman trying to escape from an evil gang, with lots of digressions for extended fight scenes. For a good portion of the movie, the only notable dialogue is “arrrrgh!” and at one point Van Damme gets nailed to the mast of a ship in the middle of a desert. He kicks his way off.

Man’s Best Friend (1993) - In this movie, a dog that’s been genetically altered to be a killing machine wreaks havoc while humans battle an evil scientist. The tagline was, “Nature created him. Science perfected him. But no one can control him.”

One Night Stand (1997) - A romantic drama starring Wesley Snipes. Snipes plays a married man who ends up having an affair with a woman after the two of them are confronted by muggers. Robert Downey Jr. makes an appearance as Snipes’ artist friend, who is dying from AIDS. If I remember, when Snipes returns to his wife just after the one night stand, the family dog keeps sniffing at his crotch, implying that the dog

can smell the scent of infidelity on him. He is lucky it wasn't the dog from *Man's Best Friend*.

The Flash (1990) - A feature length pilot for the short lived "Flash" TV show from the early 90s. The bad guys in this one are a post-apocalyptic motorcycle gang.

A Nightmare on Elm Street 4: The Dream Master (1988) - The fourth entry in the long-running *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. This one's notable for a couple of reasons. The first is that it features the awesome Dramarama song "Anything Anything" on the soundtrack. The second is that this is right around the period where in my opinion the *Nightmare* series starts to turn into a sort of R-Rated *Goonies*, as a team of teenage misfits bands together to stop the evil Freddie Krueger through the power of friendship. Except a lot more people get killed than in *The Goonies*.

Surviving the Game (1994) - Ice-T stars as a down on his luck man who ends up getting hunted for sport on an island full of rich people, including Gary Busey. Truly, man is the most dangerous game.

Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides (2011) - An improvement over *Pirates 3*; I think the *Pirates* series works best when it's mostly centered around the misadventures of Johnny Depp's rascally Jack Sparrow. 3 got bogged down in giant sea battles and epic, LOTR-style storytelling devices. This one goes back to the hi-jinx. Featuring Ian McShane as Blackbeard the pirate.

Son of the Mask (2005) - I watched this one in the restaurant down the street while eating a chicken sandwich with slices of cucumber. If not one of the worst movies of all time, then certainly one of the most annoying. Jamie Kennedy stars as a man trying to take care of a baby. The baby gets his hands on the mask from *The Mask*, which transforms him into a Looney Tunes quoting uncanny valley nightmare. If you've ever wanted to see a CGI animated baby do the "Hello My Darling" bit from Looney Tunes, this is a movie for you, but also *why*?

Chasers (1994) - Some kind of road movie buddy comedy about sailors, directed by Dennis Hopper. Two buds, one of them is a slick con man, one of them does things “by the book.” With music by Dwight Yoakum.

The final third of *Lost Boys: The Thirst* (2010) - Vampires!

The second half of *30 Days of Night: Dark Days* (2010) - Vampires! On a boat!

The first half of *The Rookie* (1990) - Clint Eastwood is a cop. Charlie Sheen is his young partner. Lots of gunfights in this one.

Just Cause (1995) - Some kind of courtroom drama starring Sean Connery and Laurence Fishburne.

Point of No Return (1993) - Bridget Fonda is... an assassin I think? Some of these movies are hard for me to remember.

Bunraku (2010) - This one’s actually a lot of fun, a heavily stylized martial arts/old west movie starring Josh Hartnett and Japanese pop star Gackt both as mysterious Man with No Name types, out for vengeance in a gunless future run by gangs. The bad guy is played by Ron Perlman, and the voice over narration is provided by Mike Patton of the band Faith No More. Woody Harrelson plays a wise bartender. It was panned when it came out, but I liked it

And two episodes of *Spartacus: Gods of the Arena*.

Every night, I would walk along the beach, and every night the party goers seemed to multiply. What on the first night was a mere 20 or so revelers, dancing to the same American dance music that seemed to follow these people around like some kind of strange odor of four on the floor and Pitbull features, multiplied to more than a 100 by

the third. People, almost all of them westerners, began to come up to me with propositions for more partying.

“Man, there’s gonna be this party on this boat, right? It’s only X amount of money to get on, and there’ll be plenty of girls and alcohol. Haven’t you always wanted to party on a boat? It’ll be sick!” one might have said.

“You gotta check out the foam party, mate. I was at one last year, it tripped me the fuck out! I couldn’t see shit, all I could hear was the music! I was so wasted, I had no idea what was going on!”

Some evenings I would hang out with Ronald at the Reggae Bar, which was two stories with a pool table on the top floor. A short staircase led up to an alcove where the DJ computer was set up, and a second staircase led to the top. In addition to the pool table, the top floor also had hammocks for the tired or stoned tourist to laze in. I didn’t see too many tourists there during the day but sometimes at night tourists would come, a place they could get stoned in relative privacy. There wasn’t a record player or anything, but the computer was hooked up to the bar’s sound system. The way Ronald would “DJ” would be to load up Youtube videos of songs, much of it faux jam band Sublime knock-offs like Slightly Stoopid and Rebelution, but a fair amount of Toots and the Maytels as well. He would play one and let a second one load at the same time so as to be able to have seamless transitions. When I visited him in Montana, I got to go to the radio station that he worked at; he did more or less the same thing.

One night, Ronald became too stoned after drinking a milkshake infused with magic mushrooms, so he let me take over his DJing. I am not a reggae aficionado and played a lot of the same stuff he was playing, a lot of Toots (we were really into their cover of “Country Roads”), the obligatory Bob Marley song, some of the white-boy reggae stuff I was into in college, but I tried to incorporate some left-fielders as well; old ska and roots music, some punk. I remember I played Joe Strummer’s “Coma Girl” and the guy with long hair gave me a thumbs-up. A little later, some passing tourists came up to the computer nook.

“Way to go,” he told me. “Love the music!”

Later, we walked on the beach, Ronald still stoned from the mushrooms, wide-eyed and freaking out over the crowds and lights from the dance floors.

Writing it out now, it honestly sounds great. Going to the beach every day, drinking cheap beer and listening to reggae, shooting pool every now and then.

But at the time, I do not think that I was happy.

2. Buckets

The most popular way of drinking for tourists on the Thailand beaches was to get a “bucket” which could be purchased from a number of make-shift stands set up on the beach. The stands would be decorated with poster board, usually prominently displaying an American name (“Sam,” “Jack,” etc.), the word “cheap” and, for that extra advertising kick, the word “fuck.” A bucket would consist of a colored plastic pail, like the kind a kid would use to build sandcastles, filled with ice, into which was poured a pint bottle of some kind of alcohol (generally whiskey or rum), a bottle of either Red Bull or “M-150” (a Thai energy drink), and a can of Coke. To make this more exciting, the energy drinks in Thailand were said to have ephedrine in them, essentially a type of speed.

We drank these a couple times, usually splitting the bucket so as not to over-do-it, though this always seemed to lead to additional buckets, rendering our precaution effectively moot. In any case, they were potent fuckers. I remember one night me and Ronald started wrestling each other, rolling around on the beach unselfconsciously, until Ronald pinned me to the ground.

Another night I wound up back at the Reggae Bar with some other tourists who were rolling a spliff.

“I just love traveling,” one girl said. “You can learn so much about the world through it.” I think she was from Australia.

I remember trying to explain how even though traveling could be fun, I thought that there was more to the world than just bumming around, going from place to place, partying and occasionally soaking up little bits of culture.

I realize now that the idea I was trying to get across, though I couldn’t think of the word, was “community.” Building relationships with people that don’t disappear every few days. Finding a hobby or craft or vocation. Putting in work to make a better

environment for yourself and those around you. I had started to crave these things, even more so than Pizza Hut or B-movies or rock music. Maybe I'd been craving them for a long time.

The people I was with weren't really getting it though, so I tried to think of an example.

"Like stand-up comedy," I said.

"Oh, do you *do* stand-up?" someone asked.

I'd been going to a comedy club for a little while back in the States, so I said yeah.

One of the guys lit the spliff. "Oh, now you just *have* to do some comedy for us," he said. I was reluctant. I never liked feeling like a dancing bear. But I also wanted some of their weed and thought if I did some bits, they'd share some with me. So I told them a bit I'd performed before about Muppet food.

"Ok, so have you ever noticed that in the Muppets, the food is sentient? I mean, yeah there's Miss Piggie... that's bacon, right?" I paused for effect. "But I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about the actual food that the Muppets supposedly eat. Like, they'll have a tomato or a head of cabbage or something, right? That's supposed to be their food. You know, they'll be in the kitchen and all this food will be laid out and it will be singing and talking — it'll even have little eyes and mouths on it — and the Swedish Chef will be there and he'll be singing and dancing, and he'll start tossing the food into a giant pot... Motherfucker, that's a serial killer right there! That's fucking Hannibal Lector! You know, Kermit and Gonzo will be chowing down on something that was just having a conversation a few minutes ago..."

"It puts the lotion on its skin or else it gets the hose again." This last part I delivered in a Kermit the Frog voice.

"Oh, that's pretty good," the tourist with the spliff said. I asked him if I could have a hit. "Sorry mate. Haven't got that much left for sharing."

I felt sullied when I got back to the hotel room. Ronald was on the balcony, and I went out, smoking a cigarette and raving. I think I might have been close to tears.

"After all that," I said, "those motherfuckers wouldn't even give me a hit."

“Dude, I don’t give a shit,” Ronald said. On the page, that looks like a fairly casual statement, but when he said it, he sounded angry, which may have had to do with the speed we may or may not have been on. He continued: “What’s your fucking problem? So you told them a fucking joke and now you’re bitching because they wouldn’t give you their weed?”

I was offended in the way that only a pretentious young *artiste* can be. A joke? I thought. A fucking *joke*, this little bit of my soul that I had laid on the line, that just happened to be about Muppet food, reduced to something that I might have gotten out of a joke book or heard as a kid from a slightly older cousin?

More than that though, whatever tiny seeds of resentment against Ronald had been planted in Chiang Mai suddenly sprang into full belligerent fruition. Ronald, who had dragged me halfway around the world (never mind that I had wanted to go on the trip) to listen to reggae and drink – **let’s face it** – pretty bad beer and cocktails with a bunch of weed-hoarding douchebags. And at a critical time in my life too! The time when I was supposed to be figuring out what the fuck I was supposed to be doing.

“Dude, what the fuck is *your* problem?” I said. “Man... it’s like we’re all the way out here and we’re not even fucking like... *doing* anything! I’ll be like, let’s fucking *do* something and you’ll be like, ah, I don’t feel like it! I’ll be like, let’s go to the temple in Chiang Mai, and you’re like, oh, I don’t feel like it. But it’s like, this sucks. I don’t have anything to fucking do, and I don’t even know what the fuck I’m doing in Thailand in the first place.”

“Fuck you dude,” said Ronald. “If you want to go do something, go do it! Nobody’s stopping you! And *also*. The other night, after I took those mushrooms, and we were walking around? I was fucking *scared*. I wanted to go back in because I was tripping out and you fucking kept wanting to stay out and I wanted to go back in but I **didn’t know where we were. But I was fucking fucked up. You were supposed to be looking out for me but you weren’t even listening to me.”**

A moment passed. The distant sounds of a beach party could be heard in the distance.

“I’m sorry,” I said. It had all come to this. I was a soggy bag of shit.

“Bullshit,” said Ronald.

“I said I was sorry,” I said. My voice was trembling. “But if you won’t even accept my apology then I guess I should just fucking leave. I guess I should just take the next plane and get out of here.”

“Dude, don’t just bail,” said Ronald.

“I don’t see that I have any choice!” I said. I realized, in that moment, that I was miserable. Not just in Thailand, but in my whole life. It felt like there was a specter of unhappiness that followed me around. Sometimes it was close and sometimes it was far, but never completely out of sight. I told this to Ronald, there on the balcony.

Ronald’s face grew very concerned. “Dude, I’m really fucking drunk,” he said.

“Me too,” I said. So we went to bed.

I did not book a ticket home. And in the morning, with the alcohol out of my system, I felt better. Ronald and I kind of looked at each other.

“So uh. What do you want to do today?” I said, and that was more or less the end of it.

3. Full Moon Party

Scottish ex-pat and journalist Colin Hinshelwood offers a description of the first Full Moon Party on Koh Phangan in a 2013 piece in Time Magazine. The year was 1988 and Hinshelwood was living on Koh Samui, where he owned a bar on Chaweng Beach. The bar’s generator would only run from 6 pm to 10 pm, so they would make bonfires on the beach.

According to Hinshelwood, “The thing about the beach in 1987 to 1988, is that packs of mad dogs roamed at night, and there were muggers and the occasional shooting. When there was no moon you couldn’t see a thing and few travelers – for no! We were not backpackers or tourists back then, oh no! – would sally forth down the corridor of darkness. But on full moon nights, well, that was a different story...” Hinshelwood describes a beach “shrouded in blue mist” with sand that “glowed silver and... waves [that] danced alive as they hit the shore.”

Electricity came to the island in 1988, much to the dismay of some of the older farang (Thai for foreigner) hippies that occupied the island, who saw it “as part of the

incoming juggernaut of commercialization and clean-shaven tourism that had followed them around the world all their lives.” Hinshelwood writes that some of these “old heads” decided to take a fishing boat to neighboring Haad Rin “where there was no goddamn electricity to spoil things.”

Hinshelwood describes this very first Haad Rin gathering thusly: “We had about 20 souls, maybe 25 including a couple of Thai locals, and a few faces that somehow appeared in the middle of a trippy night. We had tents, sleeping bags, some crates of water, Coca-Cola and some food. I think we had some Singha beers as well, but not many. Perhaps a bottle of Mekong or two for some. Not much alcohol at all; certainly no buckets. For the majority, it was ganja-smoking rituals by the bonfire followed by magic mushrooms and an evening of getting naked, splashing in the sea, and dancing around imaginary Stonehenges. It was pretty groovy, if truth be told.”

This kind of vibe did not last however, as electricity soon came to Haad Rin as well. Hinshelwood writes: “I could see that the hippy ambience was being replaced by the new wave of the ‘80s gap-year traveler.”

By the time I got there, 24 years after its genesis, the Full Moon Party on Haad Rin was a staple of backpacking culture, commonly advertised as one of the largest beach parties in the world. It has also acquired a decidedly seedy and occasionally dangerous reputation.

Warnings I had heard prior to attending the party were various. Don’t buy any drugs, because sometimes corrupt police officers will set up shake-downs, in which you buy drugs from a “friendly” entity, who will then report you to officers who will shake you down for bribes using the threat of severe legal penalties. Watch out for thieves and pick pockets, and make sure you keep your belongings in a hostel safe if possible, as rooms will frequently be broken into. Avoid the “burning rope,” which is giant rope doused in kerosene and lit on fire which volunteers are encouraged to leap over jump-rope style, but which leads to numerous third degree burns and other injuries every year to overly confident or inebriated tourists. Drownings happen, occasionally a result of a travel boat becoming overloaded with people, as do stabbings, shootings, bike accidents. And of course there are also numerous reports of sexual assaults every year. A 2014 piece in *Cosmopolitan*, “The truth behind Full Moon Parties” by Lorna Gray, reports that “over

four months in 2012 alone, there were, according to official figures, one stabbing, three rapes and a shooting involving British tourists at Full Moon Parties.” Gray speculates that there could be as many as “hundreds of cases of [drink spiking] every month,” which the article depicts as often being a collusion between bucket sellers and local gangs, for purposes of robbery or assault. While there, I heard stories and warnings circulate in the backpacker community: people who would just “disappear” afterwards, or scenes of people, usually women, being carried off by strangers.

I think it’s worth noting that these stories are always depicted as involving mostly-white western tourists, usually in their teens or 20s, getting “in too deep” and being caught up in the criminality of various sinister local factions. How many rapes, I wonder, happen between tourists themselves? Or to locals, especially those working in the sex industry?

In 2014, Thailand’s military government banned “quarter moon” and “half moon” parties due to noise pollution bothering the locals. The Full Moon party itself remains, but these bans may point toward a cultural shift, with Thailand attempting to retarget its tourism industry away from the gap-year hedonist toward a more upscale clientele (and one with deeper coffers). Michael Sainsbury, reporting for News Corp Australia, quotes Koh Phangan police chief Colonel Prachum Ruangthong as saying, “the sort of tourist that comes here to drink too much and take drugs are not the type that Thailand wants.”

Just as the first Gen-X rave crowd pushed out the old-school hippies, this more high class tourist may one day push out the trashy millennial club-kid. Just picture, where once was the gutted Haad Rin beach, littered in abandoned drink pails, old cigarette butts, used condoms and other post party rubbish, a bunch of soused Brits playing footie during the day and covering themselves in neon glow-paint by night, there may someday be a string of high quality resorts, accessible only to the world’s upper-middle class. The old heads are spinning in their sleep-sacks either way.

It rained at our own Full Moon Party, big thick drops that rattled on the ceiling like movie machine guns. We held up at the Reggae Bar for a bit, watching the storm from the big open windows on the top floor. When it didn’t seem like it was going to let up

raining, we decided to say “fuck it” and head to the beach anyway, protected by cheap plastic ponchos that we had bought earlier in the trip. The rain did not deter people from partying, but it made little rivers on the beach that had to be traversed to get around. We bought a bucket to split, which we drank fast so as not to consume an excessive amount of rain water.

Large stages had been set up that people could dance on, and lots of orange and yellow and green neon lights shone in all directions, glowing warmly like the embers of a fire. We decided to make our way over to a bar that was on the far side of the beach, where we bought beers and then stood outside, talking to a group of British tourists. I was hopped up on the Red Bull and drunk from the whiskey. One of the girls in particular seemed to be responding to my bullshit rather well, laughing at my jokes and so on. I did not try to tell her that I thought tourism was a somewhat shallow way of experiencing the world.

We, the girl included, climbed up onto one of the raised stages. I danced by myself, and the girl disappeared into the crowd with her friends. She emerged from the crowd again, went over to me and grabbed me by the arm. We walked across the beach, her leading me by the hand, to a bar on the opposite side of the one we had just came from.

“I have to go pee,” she said.

I told her I would wait for her, and she went inside the bar. Then I had to pee also, so I walked down to the ocean, enjoying the sensation of the warm water rolling over my bare feet. I had left my flip flops somewhere by the stage, and it had stopped raining.

I finished up and went back to the bar. I waited outside for a minute, listening to the party and feeling the damp sand under my feet, but she didn't show up. I wandered into the bar and looked around but I didn't see the girl. The party had swallowed her whole.

As I recount this story, I realize now that there are several hours that are unaccounted for, because in my next memory the sun is already coming up. It couldn't have been that late standing outside of the bar, waiting for the girl to come back, could it have been?

Perhaps what happened is that the distance I had felt the whole trip between myself and the other tourists had temporarily lifted, and I lost myself in the type of communal party experience people claim to have at raves and festivals, becoming one with a crowd of bodies.

Or perhaps I had just wandered around aimlessly, stopping occasionally to have more drinks, alone in a crowd of 20,000 people, until I eventually ran into Ronnie again.

When I did find Ronnie, I remember walking through the town, the sun coming up. Ronald kept stopping groups of people and drunkenly asking them, "Hey, can you do me a favor? Can you have a really nice day?"

A little later, I remember running up onto another stage, dancing with a girl until Ronald ran up to me yelling, "no dude! No! She's a hooker!" and pulling me away.

I also remember getting one last bucket, and sitting in the sand like children watching the sunrise. At some point the British people from earlier found us, sans the girl I had lost at the bar. They hadn't seen her either. And I remember feeling vaguely unsettled by this.

They were serving breakfast back at the hotel, so we went and got some. The eggs were greasy, the potatoes were cold. It was awful stuff, really.

I thought it was the best food I had ever tasted.

4. Koh Phi Phi Viewpoint/Soccer Bar/Tourist Muay Thai

The tourist culture of Koh Phi Phi, an island in Thailand's middle southwest near the province of Krabi, was similar to that of Haad Rin. We stayed in the beach town of Phi Phi Don, which had narrow winding streets that reminded me of the side streets in Chiang Mai. Scattered throughout town were advertisements for diving instructors lettered out on sandwich boards. There were no cars and very few bikes, so the streets were mostly made up of walking pedestrians. There were a number of dogs on the island, some of the mangiest mutts I've ever seen, scrawny with coats of short, wet looking hair, some having weird spots of black or white around their haunches. The Thai seemed to have different attitudes toward domesticated animals than those of the west,

and the dogs didn't really belong to anybody, but restaurants and individuals would sometimes leave plates of food out for them.

We stayed in a guesthouse owned by a woman named Lee. She was a kind of stern looking woman with rectangular glasses, and the guesthouse had giant metal doors that slid down from the ceiling like a garage.

We'd heard there was a viewpoint overlooking the island. The *Lonely Planet* guide even recommended it (one of the few times I used the thing). A few handmade wooden signs pointed the way, taking us past the bars and fruit drink stands (make-shift wooden stands that sold smoothies blended out of fresh fruit, one of my favorite features of the islands), and up a steep trail past mangrove trees. The hike was short, but a little tougher and more physical than the leisurely island tourist lifestyle we'd adapted to. It felt good, the strain on my legs and repetitive action of putting one foot in front of the other.

At the top, we looked out over a canvas of jungle to the relatively thin strip of island that the town was on, flanked on either side by the Indian Ocean, which then expanded out into the green covered humps of numerous mountains.

Later, walking on the beach, Ronald told me about his own history of anxiety.

"I used to worry all the time, about everything," Ronald said. "Then I just sort of decided, fuck it. I didn't want to worry anymore. Now I just try to make sure I watch the sun go down as often as I can."

I will probably always be restless though. As I've gotten older, I've learned how to ride it, trying to swim with tides rather than against them. Coffee, Nicorette, and exercise have slowly begun to replace alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs, things that would manage my ennui in the short term, but have probably kept me sick in the long run.

Still, we are who we are. When discussing a draft of this very work with my thesis chair, Margaret, I went over some of the themes that were in the piece.

"I was very frustrated," I said. "When I was in Portland, I refused to commit to anything, dreaming of a life on the road. Once I got on the road, I just wanted to settle down and commit to something."

"And now you have this great writing community!" she said.

"I know," I said. "And I can't wait to get out of here."

The last night in Koh Phi Phi, Ronald and I went to a bar catering to British nationals, while England played Norway in a “friendly” soccer match on a big screen TV, a few weeks before the start of the European championship, the bar full of British tourists who would frequently jump up on top of the tables, chanting along to “Vindaloo” and otherwise carrying on. We left before the end of the game, and went to a bar with a giant boxing ring in the center, where tourists are allowed to sign up to fight each other in mock Muay Thai matches. We watched two tourist buddies duke it out for a few minutes, neither seeming to get the advantage over the other.

“You wanna go up there?” Ronnie kept saying, only half joking.

I watched the two tourists, drunk and flailing at each other. “Not a fucking chance,” I said.

5. Phuket; Race Car Bar

I was beginning to get sick by the time we took the ferry to Phuket, with a sore throat and an overall sense of fatigue, not unlike strep throat or the flu. I found a seat, and tried to push myself as far into the corner as I possibly could, an attempt to inoculate myself, perhaps, against reality itself. We hit some heavy wake in the water, the boat cresting up over the waves and then slamming back down, but I was so out of it that I barely noticed, slipping in and out of a doze the entire time. Ronald was sitting beside me, and he kept getting up and going up top; he told me later that he was getting sea sick and had to keep throwing up over the side.

A van took us from the dock to the city of Patong, a large resort town, passing through some jungle roads to get there. The road took us over some cliffs overlooking the town, and I was struck by an appearance of whiteness: white beaches, white multi-story hotels, white boats on the water, intermixed with a carpeting of green foliage, that expanded out to hills in the distance.

We checked into a hotel close to the bars and got a room on the third floor. Ronald wanted to go out that night, but I was sick enough that I just wanted to stay in the room, staring vacantly at the television set. I do not remember what I watched. I could hear music coming from the street outside, not just the thump thump thump of the

techno, but live music as well, guitars and drums, and I could see the neon lights of the bars, the siren songs of a city at night. At some point I went to an ATM in a nearby shopping mall to get some cash and bought a Whopper from a Burger King; I took it back to the room, ate half of it and threw the rest away. I was worried that I might have strep throat at this point, which would have made the rest of the trip very, very shitty.

The next day I decided to go to the doctor. There was a clinic for tourists along the beach, so I walked to it with Ronald, getting my first real view of the city streets, a mixture of the beach tourism of the islands and the hustle of Bangkok: go-go bars, suit **sellers, pharmacies, souvenir shops, food carts...** The clinic was next door to a tattoo parlor, and Ronald talked about the tattoo he might get, while we sat in the waiting room.

Eventually it was my turn. I told them my symptoms and they agreed to give me a dose of antibiotics, a shot and a series of pills. They had me lie down on my stomach on an operating table and pull my shorts down, and they gave me a shot in the ass. This was all probably unnecessary; I was actually already starting to feel better and had probably just caught a 24-hour bug. Additionally, I had no idea what was actually in the shot they gave me, or in the pills, which I took dutifully for the remainder of the trip until they started to give me stomach cramps.

As I went to pay for the medicine, I noticed that my debit card was not in my wallet. I told them I might have left it in the hotel, so Ronald waited at the clinic as a kind of collateral while I went to go check. It was of course not in the hotel room, so Ronald paid for my medical bill and I told him I would get him back when I could. I went to check the mall bank, thinking I had left it in the ATM machine the night before (I did not know that ATM machines will shred your card if you leave it in them) and found it a strange kind of inverse of what I had been experiencing up to that point. Whereas most of what I had seen in Thailand looked different from the west but was full of white people, the bank looked exactly like a bank in the States but was populated exclusively with Thai. I waited in line feeling very out of place. This was not the tourist portion of Thailand; I felt like an audience member that had suddenly wandered backstage. The bank clerk told **me that he didn't have it. So I used a pay phone** to call my bank back home and tell them to cancel my account. For the remainder of the trip, I was dependent on borrowing

money from Ronald (I ended up owing him about 240 American and paid him back 220 – Ron Paul had lost the GOP primary).

On the plus side, I felt much better.

Prostitution is everywhere in Thailand, but even in Bangkok it felt at least a little veiled in shadow. In Patong it was overt and in your face.

There are various anti-prostitution laws on the books in Thailand, but in practice it **is more or less tolerated. This may be changing however: in July 2016 Thailand's tourism minister, Kobkarn Wattanavrangkul condemned the practice, stating "We want the sex industry gone.... Tourists don't come to Thailand for such a thing. They come here for our beautiful culture."**

Many of the women who become sex workers are from the villages up north, just like the factory workers, the hospitality workers, the Muay Thai fighters, the taxi drivers... They often go to work in tourist centers — Soi Cowboy in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Patong, where they frequent the go-go and karaoke bars, offering to hang out and drink with tourists, and then fuck for money on the side. The culture seems to have developed partially as a result of Thailand becoming an R and R spot for American soldiers during the Vietnam war. However, it is not just a tourist phenomenon, and there are many brothels that cater to Thai nationals. Though not exactly encouraged, it is tolerated as perhaps a kind of necessary evil, supposedly a place for Thai men to satiate their otherwise unquenchable sexual urges.

There's a documentary, *Whore's Glory*, that documents several sex workers in brothels in three different countries: Thailand, Bangladesh and Mexico. The Thai women work in a brothel in Bangkok called the Fish Tank. The working women all line-up on one side of a two way mirror, so that the customers can pick which women they want to sleep with without the women being able to see them. Most of the customers are Thai men, although there is also an American in a cowboy hat, who says to one of the woman something like, "You've got such a pretty smile, it's ok that you don't speak much English" (the feminists in my readership have no doubt started to vomit uncontrollably). The most interesting part to me though, is what happens after the women are off work. The documentary follows some of the women as they go to a

club... and end up spending the money they made on male gigolos. The money always manages to find its way back.

Interestingly, a tangential sub-genre seems to have arisen on Amazon, books with titles like *Thai Girl Naked: A Former Bangkok Bargirl Tells All (Thai Girls Book 1)* and *Thailand Bar Girls, Angels and Devils*. These almost all appear to be self-published, and come in one of several different varieties: some are dating guides or lessons in how not to get ripped off (there seems to be a frequent refrain among sex tourist advice givers — “**don’t fall in love**”), **others are tell-alls**, former bar girls revealing the secrets and scandals of the industry, though with the help of a (presumably) white and western translator. Still others are first person accounts of white tourists and clients, who, despite the advice of the guidebooks, did fall in love and managed to create lives for themselves as ex-pats, whisking the women of their affection from their torrid lives as semi-whores to (perhaps) less torrid lives as housewives.

Ronald had told me about this bar he had gone to, which he called the “Race Car Bar.” He said he had talked to one of the girls that worked there, and that he had become friends with her. We decided to go there for a few beers, walking past a number of go-go bars advertising dancing girls in neon signs, to where the bar was, right in the center of Bangla Road, **Patong’s notorious bar district. The bar had a black and white** checkered floor and was adorned in race car paraphernalia – posters and stickers **advertising “Good Year” and “Ignition” and NOS. We sat at a table close to the street,** and watched the steady stream of pedestrians walk by: shirtless tourists heading to and from the beach, fat old men walking hand in hand with petite Thai girls of indeterminable age, though always young. Every so often several people, speaking loudly with an English accent, would **walk by wearing a sailor’s cap and shirt. I never found out who** they were, but they always had the gait and self-absorption of moderate drunkenness. A second-floor bar, just above the one we were at, was advertising strippers from Russia.

At the Race Car Bar, we were eventually joined by a woman who worked at the bar, a pretty woman in her mid-20s **who I’m going to call Pheung, though that wasn’t her name. I don’t know what the exact nature of her job was; possibly just to hang out and** drink with the tourists. Ronald had met her the night before, and she sat at the table and

had beers with us. She was funny, and she got a huge kick out of Ronald. He had a pair of sunglasses, which he put on and pretended to be blind, walking with his arms outstretched in front of the bar. Still playing blind, he started to pantomime feeling a **woman's breasts.**

"Give me those," Phueng said. She put them on and started pantomiming the same thing, then she laughed.

The whole thing felt refreshingly normal, watching Ronald flirt with a pretty girl. She did not seem to be trying to sell us anything, at least not overtly.

Attractive women would walk by, and Phueng would identify them as ladyboys, **though I don't know if she could actually tell or not. She said you could tell by things** like height and the size of their hands. The conversation feels invasive to me now, trying to catch people in the act of being themselves.

Phueng said she wanted to move to Australia, but she didn't know if she'd ever get enough money to get out of Thailand. **As far as I knew, she wasn't a prostitute, but** the money must have been very tempting.

Since I was ostensibly still sick (feeling better all the time though, no thanks to the antibiotics), I went back to the hotel room early, but Ronald still wanted to party. I sat up and watched TV for awhile, and looked out the window at the lights of the street below. At some point I could see Ronald across the street, his form silhouetted by street light, and I watched him make his way back to the hotel. A few minutes later he came in. **His eyes were wilder than I'd ever seen them.**

"Dude," he said. "I'm pretty sure I just got fucking roofied."

"What the fuck," I said. I followed him out into the hall so we could have a cigarette (they let us smoke in the hallway at that place) and he told me what happened. **Apparently he'd been in a club and had been hanging out with a woman (not the woman** from the Race Car Bar). He had gotten a drink and then the woman had gone to the bathroom. While she was there, Ronnie chugged his drink. When he got to the bottom of it, he found a pill, half-dissolved.

"So I got the fuck out of there," he said. "It's a good thing I drink so fast."

He figured either the bartender or the woman had slipped him a mickey so that one or the other or the both of them could rob him when he passed out. You hear about **stories like this sometimes. I'd heard stories about entire buses full of tourists that got** pumped with sleeping gas so criminals could come and have their pick of the loot, the stuff of urban legends.

I didn't know if it was dangerous for people who had been drugged to go to sleep or not, like it is with a concussion where you want to stay up for as long as possible. As we stood in the hallway smoking, Ronald grew more and more out of it. His head started to droop a little bit, and his words grew more slurred and less coherent. I probably should have taken him to a hospital. Instead, we somehow concluded that he should take a shower, and that after the shower he would be fine to go to sleep. I stood outside the door and listened to the water run and wondered if I should do anything.

The next day, Ronald was fine.

6. Bangkok Again, Again

We took a night bus back to Bangkok from Phuket. This was to be a short stay, and we were flying out in a few days, back to the States.

There's a bar in Bangkok that's on the 63rd floor of a skyscraper. It's semi-famous, making appearances in such films as *The Hangover 2: Assholes Assholin'* (this is not actually the subtitle). Despite a growing personal disengagement from the trip, I still felt like we needed to go there, one last thing to check off the list.

The hostel we were staying in was in an alley. We went out to hail a taxi, passing **several tuk tuk drivers who made the "pop pop" sound at us with their lips, us walking** past without engaging. We found a taxi and told the driver we wanted to go to the Sky Bar.

"Skyboy?" he said.

"Sky Bar" we told him.

He drove us down the street for awhile. "Skyboy?" he said again.

"Sky Bar."

He pulled over to talk to another taxi driver. This did not fix the problem, and our routine went on for awhile.

“Skyboy,” he said.

We told him no. He pulled over to talk to a different taxi driver, then said something to us in Thai. He drove us to a section downtown, skyscrapers all around us.

“Here you go,” he said.

We went into the building that he’d pulled in front of. The people at the front desk pointed us to the elevator and told us to which floor to go to. At the top of the elevator, we followed a hall to a giant open-air platform overlooking the city. There was a bar in the middle of the platform, ringed with LED lights, and it was crowded. I had been a little concerned that we would stand out in our grubby backpacker clothes, but I do not **remember the outfits of the other patrons to be radically different. It wasn’t like crashing someone’s fancy cocktail party or anything, which in retrospect is a little disappointing.** I went up to the bar and ordered an overpriced cocktail and Ronald got a beer and we **looked out at the city skyline, peppered with light. I didn’t feel any closer to the city or** the country than I had when we had first gotten there; we could have been anywhere in the world.

7. A Few Conclusions

I think that this kind of third world tourism has a very toxic element.

I am a lover of grit and grime, the odd, the curiosity, the dingy and the slightly seedy. For a lot of my life, I have made my home dive bars and basement shows. I worry about when things get cleaned up, what treasures get lost. It seems to be happening to many cities across America; I question whether this makes them any safer. I wonder if you're not more likely to be raped in a clean fraternity house than at the corner bar that serves 2 dollar wells. And I find a charm there, in the fringes where people find community

But the kind of seedy I found in Thailand wasn’t like that. Instead what I saw was a cycle of exploitation. The locals exploit the tourists of course, selling them cheap goods and bogus pre-packaged experiences, when they're not outright ripping them off. And the tourists exploit the locals, running rampant in a country with less regulation and cheaper everything. If there's a real Thailand to be found, I caught only a glimpse of it.

After I got back to the States, I would return to Portland and flounder about for a long time. Within a year, I was back working at the inventory company.

8. Seoul 2

We had another layover in Seoul on the airplane back. I was feeling pretty shitty – burnt out on the trip, homesick, worried about what I was going to do when I got back to the States, and continually getting stomach cramps from the antibiotics I was taking. We went back to the lounge **area that we had been in before, but I didn't want to drink.** I watched Ronnie pour himself a large helping of Johnny Walker Red. He was talking about biscuits and gravy, the food he was going to get when he got back to the States. He was talking very animatedly, and I watched him pour himself another glass. Before too long he had finished off the bottle.

We went to go smoke. After we finished, Ronnie said, "Uh oh."

"What?" I asked him.

"Dude," he said. He was wasted. "I don't have my fucking plane ticket."

So I walked with Ronald back through the airport, Ronald going up to people in **the places we had been and asking, "excuse me, have you seen an airplane ticket?"**

We retraced our steps, but we couldn't find it anywhere. There were crowds of people walking past us from all over the world.

"Look," Ronnie kept saying. "Look at all these people peopling!"

He was blown away by it.

NOTES

Information about the Hippie Trail was taken primarily from the Austrian public broadcast documentary series *WELT Journal+* episode **“Verlorenes Paradies das Kabul Der Hippies,”** translated as **“Lost Paradise - the Kabul of the Hippies,”** which as of the time of writing this can be found on Youtube with English subtitles

And from the Australian Radio National series *Hindsight* episode **“Asia Overland: Adventures on the Hippie Trail,”** which can be accessed on the Radio National website.

And from the article **“A Brief History of the Hippie Trail”** by Richard Gregory.

Information about the Banana Pancake Trail was taken from the essay **“The Banana Pancake Trail”** by Claire van den Heever.

Information about the early days of Khao San Road was taken from Susan Orlean’s amazing essay, **“A Place to Disappear,”** originally published in the New Yorker in January 2017.

Much of the information about Muay Thai was taken from the article series **“The Beginners Guide to Muay Thai”** by Kyle McLachlan.

Some information about the role of Kathoey in Thailand was taken from the article **“Thailand’s Transgender People Aren’t Just ‘Ladyboys’ Anymore”** by Jay Michaelson and originally published on the Daily Beast.

Information about Full Moon Parties was taken from the article **“Silver Sand and the Sound of Waves: It’s 1988 and Thailand’s First Full Moon Party”** by Colin Hinshelwood and originally published in Time Magazine, July 2013.

And the article “The truth behind Full Moon Parties” by Lorna Gray and originally published in Cosmopolitan, Sept. 2014.

The quote from Thailand’s Tourism Minister about the sex industry was taken from the Reuters article “Thai sex industry under fire from tourism minister, police” by Patpicha Tanakasempipat, published July 2016. I switched the order of statements around from how they are originally presented for greater coherency.

Further information about prostitutes in Thailand was taken from the 2011 documentary *Whore’s Glory*, directed by Michael Glawogger.

The reference to Thai hospitality workers being from Thailand’s northern regions was taken from the BBC documentary series *Stacey Dooley Investigates* “Thailand Tourism & the Truth.”

Additional information was taken via a liberal usage of Wikipedia.

Virtually all names have been changed and dialogue has been stylized for dramatic effect. But you probably already knew that.