Excerpts from Neil’s blog, “Fighting and Otherwise”

Neil’s interest in boxing dated back several years. He trained almost daily in New York, most recently at Five Points Academy, a gym that specializes in Muay Thai, a type of kick-boxing that is a national sport in Thailand. Neil left for Thailand on January 29 and returned to New York on March 29. He trained at four Thai gyms. The first and last were in Bangkok, the other two on the resort islands of Koh Samui and Phuket. These are brief excerpts from the blog he wrote about the trip.

**From the first post (January)**

It’s my last day of work. My plane leaves in about 40 hours, and I’ve more or less accepted that no catastrophic bike accident will prevent my being on board; I’m going. I’d have thought I’d be giddy at this point, and I am, intermittently. But I’m mostly impatient. There are a lot of things I need to do before I can leave. My thoughts keep getting interrupted by quick little flashes of Thailand; they’re not exactly images, though, because I don’t know what Thailand looks like.

**Early March (Neil’s third gym, in Phuket)**

Training twice a day can be exhausting, like my body’s held together by naproxen and Tiger Balm. But this seems like the only way it can be right now. Sometimes I feel like I’m bored by everything but training, or else emotionally overwhelmed by it; other times I feel like if I’m exhausted and in pain, then this can’t be a vacation, which is good, because a two-month vacation would be frivolous. Because if this is a vacation, then I would feel pressure to be having fun. I would be on a failed fucking vacation, which is the most depressing thing I can imagine.

But it goes deeper than that, for sure. A couple people have asked me about what it is I like about boxing. It’s a subject I’ve sort of avoided up to now. I don’t feel particularly
qualified, and I don’t know where to begin; I have pages of scattershot notes, lots of them contradictory. There is also an intimidating body of boxing literature. Lately I’ve been reading “On Boxing,” by Joyce Carol Oates, which casts a long shadow in two directions: every insight I’ve ever had about boxing is in there, better articulated than I ever could have managed, alongside a lot of vaguely embarrassing things like “the triumphant boxer is Satan transmogrified as Christ.” I think there is a lot about fighting that is elusive, that is true until it’s spoken or even thought through, at which point it becomes sentimental or romantic or just wrong. And then there is this, also from Oates:

"That no other sport can elicit such theoretical anxiety lies at the heart of boxing’s fascination for the writer…. The writer contemplates his opposite in the boxer, who is all public display, all risk and, ideally, improvisation: he will know his limit in a way that the writer, like all artists, never quite knows his limit—for we who write live in a kaleidoscopic world of ever-shifting assessments and judgments, unable to determine whether it is revelation or supreme self-delusion that fuels our most crucial efforts…the boxer’s world is not an ambiguous one."

I can relate to this. In boxing, even failure is something that you can hold on to; alongside that, blog entries feel like a chore, irrelevant. As time goes on I find that the three roles I’ve been playing here—tourist, writer and boxer—are increasingly at odds with one another.

From the final entry—Neil’s fourth and last gym

Sunday morning I’m on a flight to Bangkok. I walk out of the airport and get into the first cab I see. I have a printout with the name and address of the gym—but written out in Roman letters, not Thai—and a mobile number and below that, two square inches of a Google map. I show it to the driver as I’m sitting down, and he glances at it and nods. We’re already getting on the highway once I realize how little English he has, and that he can’t seem to read the address.
He barks at me, “Name hotel?” and I tell him “Kaew Samrit Gym,” pronouncing this as best I can. He tries the mobile number a couple of times but can’t get an answer. After a while he asks how much I want to pay. I point at the meter, which is running, but he’s not having it. “No, no, too far, too far.” I consider pointing out that he doesn’t know where we’re going yet, but I don’t. He wants eight hundred baht, and I get him down to 650.

We continue on at highway speed, apparently blind. Periodically, the driver glances down at the paper again, as if the characters will spontaneously become intelligible, and on the sixth glance they apparently do just that: he points to the word “Talingchan,” and looks back at me and asks, “Talingchan?” I tell him yes yes, Talingchan, and he slaps his forehead and moans. “Is far, man! Talingchan! Not Bangkok! Far, far.” He renegotiates the fare up to seven hundred, plus the airport tolls, which I’d already figured on paying.

We turn off a dirty four-lane motorway into a hushed, residential maze: the streets are wide and shaded by drooping trees; there is very little traffic; the few dogs around are languid and even the children playing seem not to make much noise, or else the noise is swallowed up by the foliage. There are some of the hard-angled concrete row houses that are everywhere in Bangkok, but many larger, fancier houses as well, each one walled off from the others. These aspire to a western style of architecture but miss the mark somehow, throwing together columns and cupolas and gabled windows without much logic; the effect is like a man wearing a necktie, a sun visor and a watch on either wrist.

We are driving slowly down one of these streets, apparently close, when a woman runs out and flags us down. She helps me out of the car and leads me into the gym. She is very friendly but does not have much English. She leads me back past the first ring and around a corner, past a bookshelf housing about fifty pairs of running shoes and up a couple of stairs and through a door, into a dim hallway. My room is on the left, all the way at the end. The sheets and the pillowcases on both beds are peach-colored satin. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a room done up with so much satin; the effect is somehow
funereal. The pillow on the bed that isn’t mine has the words “Romance Mode” stitched across it.

I wander around the gym a little. I meet a couple of Thai men who look to be trainers; they shake my hand but don’t seem to speak much English either. There’s a stack of a magazines on a chair by the front office; I leaf through a French comic book that turns abruptly pornographic.

I wake up at six the next morning and then I lie on my peach satin sheets for awhile, staring at the ceiling.

The first day or two at a new gym is always hard. I know I’m being scrutinized and it makes me tense, and tension gets exhausting fast. And there is the litany of small proprietary adjustments they want me to make: to hold my right hand a bit higher, and keep my left hand closer to your cheek, and turn into my kicks more, and into my punches a little less. I’d forgotten, too, how thick and wet the air in Bangkok is, compared to the islands; there’s more junk in every breath, and less oxygen.

Within ten minutes the pain in my toes starts in again, rising up through my leg every time my leg connects, and the anticipation makes it hard to keep my form correct. And my shoulder hurts, and on my right shin, just below the knee, a bulge of fluid has begun to rise as if in protest of all the kicks that have landed there. I’m tired in a way I’m not used to; every movement feels belaboured and pointless.

The afternoon session has barely started and the back ring is already full of Thais, boxing Western-style with headgear and big 20 oz. gloves. This is the first time I’ve seen anyone wearing head protection in Thailand. One of the trainers approaches and asks if I’ll be sparring. I watch them for a few moments more and then tell him no. Things don’t go any better than they had in the morning. I’m exhausted, and everything hurts; I don’t feel like I belong here. I’m supposed to spend seven days here; in the end, I manage two. Something in me snaps shut, finally, about twenty minutes into the third morning. I muddle rotely through, then limp back to my room and start shoving things into a bag. The woman in the office doesn’t seem surprised that I’m leaving.
Two hours later, I’m seated at an outdoor cafe on a street which bristles with similar cafes, surrounded by Anglophone signage and men in cargo shorts brandishing rifle-like cameras and momentarily a waitress will bring me a Heineken and a milkshake and curly fries. There will be plenty of time in the next few days for ambivalence and worse, but right now it’s hard to feel anything but relief, at having left behind those opaque streets and that cavernous pink room, at having nobody to fight this afternoon, at being just another sunburned asshole getting drunk.