Abstract

In this chapter we consider we discuss being and being oneself as a deeply nostalgic ontological condition, and being what one is not as and the lack of resources that might bolster the difficulty of facing this condition through an incident in the life of Beth close to Christmas time, when, without very many resources, she was forced to exchange a blowjob for a can of lager.

Inevitably we want to write about bodies. Inevitable to us because, as Agamben (1995) so dramatically detailed, what seems to become apparent when people live along the margins of society, and so by this process are divested of forms of identity that express their belonging, is that this is how they come to be represented: as bodies. Which is strange, but follows the logic we want to outline for you. It is strange because the mass identity of human being as bodies is, and has been historically, a reductive process. The genesis and development of bare life that Agamben describes, first in relation to classical Rome – wherein, for some, for those who do not belong, the political identity of human being is stripped away because it is unrecognised by the state, so that all of its markers of inclusion and belonging, such as rights otherwise guaranteed by law, are denied to individuals – has, in contemporary terms, an accelerating number of analogues, such as migrants and refugees, and has obvious parallels with regard to homeless people generally. It is in these circumstances that these people come to be represented as bodies. They are identified by the unwanted presence of their physical being. Their access to anything beyond the bare means of sustenance, beyond the state’s most reluctantly yielded resources of food, shelter and sanitation, but in lieu of education, work and other forms of social participation, expresses their being as a kind of absence; an absence which confirms their status, as the existence of their unwanted physical presence, in terms of the marginalised palpability of their flesh and the processes that sustain it, as bodies. And yet, this same object that emerges from this reductive
process, which strips human being of its identity in terms of rights to belong, registering instead the (unwanted) body as the unit of existence, is also the locus of the individual self. The individual self, the expression of authentic subjectivity, the carrier of personal integrity is – and this is the strange nature of the logic we want to describe – also expressed through the body. Of course, the body in this sense is always perceived to be the personal singular; but even so is realised as an imaginary experience, which is more or less sustained by the position it occupies in relation to its relative belonging. The body therefore always describes a political condition. And yet, such a political perspective seems to somehow elude the body itself; though, of course, this is not the case. Quite why and how this condition exists, we would now like to explore:

Across two sections, nestled against each other, of Esposito’s (2015) remarkable book, Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View, Esposito makes the following interesting observations: that language simultaneously represents and annihilates the thing itself; and also that, “In the modern world things are annihilated by their own value.” And in a way, the assumption is that across the two nestling sections, that the representation of the thing itself annihilates the thing itself through that act of representation, and that the value accorded to the thing also annihilates the thing itself, are somehow the same; or if they are not quite the same, then are related in some very intimate way; by an intimacy that is derived from their beings’ being simply differently inflected emanations of the same ontological property. Let us take, first of all, how Esposito tells us that language simultaneously represents and annihilates the thing itself:

Esposito notes that it is through language – or any system of representation – that we are able to attend to and know that which is being represented, or the thing itself, in whatever form the thing itself might take, such as the name that indicates a specific person, or some aspect of their being, or even an abstract concept. If, however it is through language – or any system of representation (including, importantly, that of communicating ourselves unto ourselves) – that we are able to become aware of the thing itself, and what it is or might be; that same principle of representation also always stands in for and takes the place of the thing itself; so that the thing itself is always absent; and in its absence, the thing itself, its being itself, is never known. As Derrida (1978) famously reports, this means that we
never encounter and really know whatever the thing itself might be, as its presence is continuously deferred through the intercession of an endless series of representatives, from which it is, of course, different, and ultimately alienated; but nevertheless expresses what Nietzsche (and Freud, though with some differences) would call a drive to be that thing which always eludes it, namely the thing itself. In this way the thing itself, even including when the thing itself is the body, is forever lost to us; and yet despite, well, actually, because, it will always be beyond our apprehension, it beckons us, irresistibly, towards an assurance of it being, and therefore of it being somehow there, but in a place that is inaccessible, and indicated only by means of its various representations, which also, inevitably, register its absence.

Whilst, though, we might assent with Esposito that representation in this way annihilates the thing itself, by rendering it in such a way that it is perpetually absent; we should also acknowledge that it is simultaneously only through this rendering of being’s apparition, that the essence of its ontological possibility is composed and registered, and in so doing designates the systematic desire, the drive to be and apprehend, that characterizes the thing itself.

But what is this second point that Esposito makes, this second point that nestles up to the first, and is assumed to be part of the same ontological weft from which the first point is also stitched together? It is that, “In the modern world things are annihilated by their own value.” The value that things are ascribed by the market, in a sense that has obvious Marxist overtones that Esposito draws out (but let us be more general than that, so let us say the world around you and the position in it that you or some other thing inhabits) is determined not by itself, but instead by the surrounding world; and more particularly that part of the world that you or some other thing else that we might be interested in, inhabits. So that, in a way that is very similar to how language and representation annihilates the thing itself, the value accorded to the thing, since it is not determined by itself, also negates any intrinsic identity that the thing itself might have. Or almost. Because there is something of a slippage here. Because even though the discourse about value and the thing operates around the assumption of the thing itself, what we are really talking about, in order to make this discourse work, is not taking this as an assumption; which, without the thing itself being an assumption, then allows there to be an assumed
distance between the condition of value, which is produced through the interactions and rhythms of the world, and the value that is accorded to things by these interactions and rhythms, as if that or any other thing already existed, and was therefore, prior to its value being determined for it, in that state already as itself, with its own intrinsic value. This then allows the conventional arguments, explaining this situation away as alienation, to flow. But alienation from what? Though before we begin to answer that question, I am going to say that I have every sympathy for the conventional alienation line, in many of its different incarnations; and I have no doubt that this understanding resonates in political and ontological terms that are felt all over town, every day, all the time, and that this has more or less always been the case. But you still have to ask: if the thing itself is actually forged through the interactions and rhythms of the world, in other words, through its complex and diverse representational mechanisms, such as language; what was there, prior to the operations of these mechanisms that forged the thing itself into existence in the first place? I mean, it might be disquieting, it might also be very inconvenient, but you still have to ask in order to find out what’s there. And do you know what is? Nothing. Well, almost nothing. So fine an almost, however, that it is, in itself, undetectable. That’s right. Of itself, there are only traces, made by those things that represent it, indicating, but indicating what? Indicating, well, an assumption of its being, of its ontological self, no longer – but assumed once to be – present. And it is this same assumption, or nub of assumptions that work in concert, indicating a prior, original condition, that is then perceived to be subsequently overwritten by representation, and overtaken by the value ascribed to it, which then becomes the locus, justification and repository of alienated being.

Alienated being is therefore always being that was once being itself, but no longer is; and involves the subject registering this absence by looking back, hoping to see beyond a point that is no longer perceivable, to where being itself, now lost, was, accordingly assumed to be at one time somehow present. This deeply nostalgic and ineradicable turn – back, towards an irretrievable time and place of wholeness, of belonging and self, which can now only ever designate the rending absence of these things – inevitably carries with it not only the sense of loss that accompanies this absence, but also, potentially, a sense of lost justice, of being as discarded authenticity, and of being corrupted as its truth is fabricated for purposes that systematically disregard and are careless of the unique and impermanent thing itself.
To refer to this as a deeply nostalgic and ineradicable turn is the antithesis of trivial concern. And it’s not like there’s a choice: there is no being rid of the drive to configure understanding and being as if it were in relation to the thing itself, however distant and lost and inaccessible its presence may appear to be. It is not a matter of being rid of this drive by having the requisite strength of character, the institutional determination, or the collective historical and social fortitude to reject its irresistible trajectory towards being and understanding as things in and of themselves. This deeply nostalgic and ineradicable turn – represented perhaps by a glance back to what might have been, an historical assessment of how things ought to have turned out, the recollection of what once was but is now gone – is not a condition that can simply be shrugged off. Nor is it simply a problematic state to which one can learn to be reconciled. Of course, we can saturate ourselves in the theory. We can do the thinking. We can follow the arguments, and regard the place where we have been taken.

So take me, for example. I genuinely believe in this stuff. As very uncomfortable as that might be. But when push comes to shove, and especially as the pushing and shoving becomes more extreme; so the tendency to become ever more concerned about the thing itself, whatever that might be, as some expression of who and what you believe you are or represent, becomes ever more tellingly important as it teeters under stress. You might bring any number of recognizable scenarios to mind, such as those times when the police turn up completely unexpectedly and there is just nowhere else to go; or the occasions when you have to attend a meeting where it becomes apparent that your employment is about to be terminated; or even worse, like the moment you realize your loved ones have become subject to serious illness or distress: the kind of desperation and reaction that these common sorts of incidents entail is one that overwhelmingly involves some kind of radical questioning if not thorough undermining of whom and what you appear to be. It’s your life that you can see going down the tubes, not some more or less arbitrary collection of Nietzschean drives, arranged by the world into which you have been thrown, and not by yourself, so that you are actually already dispossessed, but leaving you with a consciousness located somewhere along the illusion of your necessary and essential being. That’s never how it ever goes down. At least, not at the time of occurrence, anyway. In retrospect, perhaps when the sentencing is done, and you begin doing your time, you will get to realising that when
you get out, everything will be changed, your home and family gone, your career in ruins, and that who and what you are has been significantly redefined, and inevitably not as you might have wanted it to be; and that, inescapably, nothing about what you thought was your being, was, or is, inevitable, necessary, essential; and that you, whatever that might have been, are lost. Because the funny thing is, and just as the theory predicts, the more that the integrity of the thing itself is threatened, the more intense the questioning and sense of loss, as well as a retrenching of the mechanisms that hold the thing itself in place, tends to be. We see this all the time as ways of being appear close to jeopardy, expressed across every level that you can imagine, but most obviously at the level of the personal, family, community, and nation state being.

Whilst these are all rather extreme examples, they indicate a general condition, which is that: all of us, all the time – indeed, this is an institutional condition – repair and reassert, through the continuous practice of being ourselves, the necessary fiction of who and what we believe we are. And the reason being, because that’s all we have. It’s what – it’s all – we do. The processing of applications for British citizenship, for example, and the more or less continuous bureaucratic and political exercise of its associated machinery, in which we are all implicated, practices and affirms the ontology of national belonging and identity. And every moment that we speak, shop, think, walk, eat, shit, breathe, remember, feel cold, get dressed, and simply are, we practice and affirm being ourselves. Obviously, the more resources that you have at your control – the greater your cultural capital within the established order – then the more secure your practice and affirmation of being is going to be; and, too, the better equipped you are to fend off any questions, assaults, encounters, challenges from which everyday being is composed, that might otherwise reveal the fabricated nature of whatever identity it is, by which you find your place in the world. Let’s take for example, the blowjob. And not just any blowjob, but a specific blowjob. A blowjob for a can of lager. But first of all, we’ve got to situate it.

Even the most ethereal and sublime of blowjobs has got to occur somewhere. Even if as is always also the case this somewhere is in the domain of the imaginary, as realised in some specific subject in some way. The reason why we like to phrase things in this way, with the subject being the specific site of the realization of the imaginary, is because it emphasizes the role of the subject as being subject to
the Symbolic Order; it situates the subject as the site of this realization; and occurs through the rupture of the Symbolic Order in the subject as the subject’s imaginary; and is thus an expression of the way that the subject is articulated by the Symbolic Order through the imaginary; providing in this way the structure which determines the limits and opportunities of subjective agency. Desire, within this broadly Lacanian schema, is therefore always, with respect to the thing itself, engendered by the gap between that which is supposed to be, as its self-determined ontologically necessary identity, and the empirical experience of how this identity is contingently forged through the incessant workings of the Symbolic Order. So for each object, each thing itself, each body, there is a double registration of its being, perhaps even a double being: there’s its imaginary eruption in the ontology of the subject, where the thing itself is indelibly imprinted, but so being is forever deferred, forever unobtainable; though the distance between it, its assumption within the imaginary and – here is the second register of being – its empirical expression, can be more or less effectively misperceived, with this misperception held in place by its position and investment within the Symbolic Order, and their daily political, social, economic and cultural expressions. Like we said, earlier, this isn’t a case of voluntarism, of being able to come to terms, of knowing how to side step the problem, and somehow being able to hook directly into the main vein of the thing itself, whatever that might be, including, yourself, any self, or anyone else, or a blowjob. Because just as much as anything else, a blowjob is also a kind of double; which is not so much two blowjobs for the price of one, but its imaginary orientation and its empirical expression.

Let’s deal with the second of these first. First off then, this is a blowjob that is part of a process of exchange, namely a blowjob for a can of lager. And you might then argue that all blowjobs are part of a system of some kind of exchange, especially perhaps in the most loving and also mutually sexually charged of relationships. Since at the very least there is the continuous exchange of the pleasure that the blower may receive by rendering, in the blowee, an exquisite ecstasy through the nature of the blowjob that the blowee is delivering, or any variation that you might care to think about of this equation, up and down an erotic scale of your own choosing. And then there might be other, to some minds perhaps less honourable, more politically contingent, not so sensuously pure forms of exchange that might include a blowjob, including: I know what I want, and if I give him some of this, then I sure as Hell am getting mine; as well as, it kind of seems on offer, and I know it drives him wild; as well as the more blatant, I’ve sort of had enough, and this will get him off really quick. Yes, we are happy to admit that
these and an endless number of other scenarios could include the blowjob as being integral to a system of exchange, of being the instance of a practice in an economy that involves the body; such that the meaning of that economy is derived from how the blower and the blowee are situated, reflecting any power relations and any structural conditions that are in play. So that, for example, any inequalities might variously be reinforced or reversed, any identities entrench or transgressed, any fantasies confirmed or denied; but for each and every modulation of these and any other variables, there is always some referent, and whatever the assumed identity of that referent might be, its assumption depends upon and is articulated, as itself, by the same Cartesian neo-liberal imaginary. Wherein the economy of being is organized around the assumption of identities being themselves, and thereby have the natural inalienable right to be as such, that is to say to be subject to the place where their identity is so regarded by the Symbolic Order – the Symbolic Order as manifest, for example, through its discourses, by which it articulates your mouth and what your mouth says for each specific situation; by the range of choices and routes that it organizes for you to participate in being; and by its positions that you adopt as your own and the practices that it carries out through your body, including those in relation to the blowjob. And for this not to be so, within this Cartesian neoliberal landscape, for some subject to be precluded in this articulation of themselves, as being whom and what they are, then that would be an act that limited or precluded their agency; provoked by an act of nonconformity that distances the subject from being according to this imaginary order. This is because the Cartesian neoliberal imaginary landscape is defined and populated by individual identities that are identified by themselves, by individual identities that exercise the essence of their defining subjectivity by continuously evolving towards – as an act of realising your authentic self – empirical expressions of their imaginary essential being.

There are obvious and significant parallels here with Plato’s articulation of Socrates’ ontological understanding of the relationship between the individual, by which he meant the Athenian citizen, and the State. Most importantly, those who are not Athenian citizens are denied any rights that are accorded to this identity, and so, by not belonging, exist along the political and economic margins of being. As has for some very long time been noted:
Plato identifies the interests of his ideal state with the objective interests of its citizens (so they are not independent), and in his harmonious world, metaphysics, moral psychology, and political organization combine to ensure that those interests need never override individual mundane interests (not superior) for they never conflict: they coincide.

Hence in its political orientation, the withdrawal of the State from the lives of its subjects, whose identities are dependent upon their economic and social independence, as individuals, families and communities, and whose key characteristics are based around the condition of belonging, but are otherwise irrelevant, with belonging securing rights that support life within this established order (such as the ability and right to work, to be accommodated, to be part of the empirical expression of neoliberalism’s imaginary being).

But let’s suppose that you find yourself living in classical Athens, but are not, as it were, an Athenian citizen. Or let’s suppose that you find yourself living in a contemporary urban environment, set unyieldingly within a Cartesian neoliberal landscape, but for some set of reasons do not belong. Where are you going to exist, what place is there where you can be? And the answer is, that there is no real place, no designated place, nothing that matches your identity; because the rules of the game, as we have seen, mean that no real identity can be accorded to you, so that it is unregistered, unperceived, disregarded by the State. And this is absolutely relevant to the blow job for a can of lager. Both in relation to place, as well as in relation to its empirical expression of being. Because it means that the resources, and not simply the important material resources, such as having a job, living in a house of some kind, being able to afford food and a social life, but also other resources that are integral to acceding to and maintaining an identity commensurate with having access to these material resources as being your right within the State, such as being educated, being orientated in some directions rather than others, having distinct areas of your life within which you are able to operate with relative ease, none of these things are available to you. And these are the things that confirm or disconfirm within the Cartesian neoliberal landscape what your identity is; these are the things, practices and networks that stitch you to the Symbolic Order; and this is the means by which you are able to proceed through life – but not on the margins. So let’s think, then, where this blow job, a blow job for a can of lager, is going to take place. And the point about resources, or the lack of them, becomes immediately apparent.
Because this blowjob is engendered through a prodigious lack, just like the famous Lacanian lack. But before we think about the obvious ways that this is manifested, such as lack of alcohol, and lack of money, we need to remind ourselves of other expressions of lack within which these are nested, including the lack of a family capable of providing support from the moment that Beth was born, lack of good mental health, lack of education, so that we can gain some understanding of the extent of its realization. Indeed, so prodigious is this lack that it is has no resources with which to afford accommodation, and so occurs outside: outside, towards the end of November in the early evening, at just before eight. It’s interesting that Beth’s body – Beth, that’s her name, the homeless person, who, in around thirty minutes at about half-past-eight, will become the blower – has become the demonstrable site of this extensive lack, and is now situated on the edge of the city, behind Chick ‘o’ Land, where the big waste bins are housed, on Russell Street. This has long been a location for homeless drinkers: a recess in a cut through, with, on one side, one of the main arteries running out of town, and on the other, the canal side. On the main artery out of town side, there are virtually never any pedestrians. The canal side is host to a number of pubs, and restaurants, so by contrast to the opposite side of the cut through, there are often people in this area. But why would you want to cut through from there, along Russell Street? Are you really the type of person who, having got dressed up to drink and meet friends in one of the trendiest parts of the city, with its own range of attractive dining options, is instead going to want to cut through to eat from Chick ‘o’ Land? And whilst there’s street lighting at the end and part way up the cut through; initially, at night time, from the canal side, Russell Street looks dark and unfriendly. But this is where Beth’s body, along with other homeless drinkers, is located.

And in about half an hour, this is the area where the blowjob will take place. It’s an area that already, just before eight o’clock, is pressing itself into what will happen, is shaping its circumstances, forging the nature of what will be the crucial proposition, and is writing the significance about the nature of the blowjob encounter. It’s a hidden public place; or at least a semi-hidden public place; or is a public place where things can be semi-hidden; so that the thin grey light – its weak luminescence depressed almost into complete darkness by the shadows of the bins, is going to make barely visible the insistent repetitive, jarring motion – can be pulled over the exposed cock that will buck into Beth’s open mouth. Because without these properties, the night, the bins, the space organized into shadows that partition the area into successive places of obscurity, its location on the margins of human being, this blowjob
would not happen. It’s almost as if, as the night pulls and settles itself into Russell Street, in conspiracy with other parts of the city, the area gathers its actors into the cut though and stages their actions, and so writes upon them whom and what they are. So this is how Beth arrives:

She’s spent the first part of the early evening near McDonald’s on Foregate Street, begging, in order to get enough money together for a bottle of sherry. But anything would do. Sherry, you see, does have a number of advantages, it being cheap, relatively strong, having a familiar palatable taste, is reliably unproblematic to get down, has the capacity to get you wrecked, and lasts a lot longer than a can of beer. But anything, really, would do. The problem is that, and this problem has grown ever since Beth conceived of her plan, the reason why Beth conceived her plan about getting herself a bottle of sherry in the first place, the reason why this course of action seemed to her like a good idea, propelling her along Northgate Street, then turning her left at the Cross, and down into Foregate Street where it brings her to a halt outside McDonald’s, is that this has not quite been Beth’s own plan, it was never really quite Beth’s own idea. It was more of a compulsion, really. A compulsion that introduced itself at multiple, vague areas of her being. Like the taste in her mouth. And that not so much a taste, but again, an absence of a taste. Or what, is always really, the absence of the taste. The taste being itself not so much a taste, but a taste that registers a particular sensation: the emergence of the wall of alcohol blankness, up against which you can only barely feel yourself. And the absence because it always occurs like that at some specific time and place, though it’s also always there all of the time anyway, in the not too distant background. And it quickly escalates, the absence, from being a vague awareness, located around the middle of your tongue, and towards the back of the roof of your mouth, into something more pervasive, where it’s accompanied by a dryness, even though your mouth is also secreting a metallic and slightly acidic tasting saliva that now coats your entire tongue. A restlessness, that’s what’s also happening. A restlessness that invades your entire body. And an incorrigible dissatisfaction with everything. You’d like that to stop. You know it’s you. You’ve got a bit of a headache starting, both temples. A dried-out throbbing. If only you could slow things down a bit. God, you need that sherry. Because you’re sweating now, and cold. Nausea’ll come to get you soon. But first the shakes. Which is why and how your body has brought you here. To just opposite ‘Makees’. To get that sherry to make it stop. And then the wall of alcohol will come too.
So what you gonna’ do? Your options: limited. No money. No recognisable qualifications. No history of employment, though instead a long history of mental illness. And here comes the nausea. So your options boil down to this: settling on a spot, squatting down and asking passers-by for change; or doing spot requests, that is approaching strangers and asking them if they can spare twenty pence, or something similar. Some people prefer the settling on a spot long-haul, but it’s fucking cold already. Plus, the long-haul is ok if you’ve got even some cardboard to sit on, and have maybe some blankets to pull round you, but Beth has nothing. It’s busy now, too, so there’s nowhere to sit. And you’re vulnerable if you’re on a spot, you take a lot of stick sometimes from the public, and you’re literally a sitting target for the police too. So even though she would like to sit down, because of the nausea, her pounding dry head, the shivers and the shakes, Beth goes for the doing spot requests option. It’s about six o’clock. Because Christmas is approaching, so the street lights are up, and because of the hour, when people leave the city after their work is over, and because of the location, it’s on the main route to the railway station, there’s considerable footfall in front of Makees. In the mostly grey but tinged with flashes of neon shop light, Beth approaches strangers, mostly on their way out of the city, asking them if they can spare any change.

If only Beth’s appearance was a little more prepossessing. If only she looked like a romantically drawn street urchin. If only she looked like someone who wasn’t chronically homeless. And was not very ill. In the most unsavoury of ways. She is visibly unsteady on her feet. The skin on her face is grey and oily with cold sweat. Her fingers tremble. The strangers she approaches avoid Beth’s eyes, which anyway look down: no one, neither Beth nor any of the people she approaches, wants to engage at the level of being beyond an appeal to economic transaction. Excuse me, sir, could you spare any change? But what has Beth got to contribute in order to affect a return, of even a very little money? Well, almost nothing. Where this almost nothing is precisely the same as the almost nothing with which we began. This almost nothing being simply the assumption, the assumption of being, the assumption of its identity, of being itself: of Beth, herself. And in order to preserve this assumption, you need resources. Because it is these resources that will provide an affirmation of who and what you are. And it is with these resources, such as friends, money, social position, and the like that you represent, negotiate and
make your way in the world. As well as them providing the means by which you are able to engage in the various economies of being that define belonging; they also provide a buffer, or, if you like, a distance between the means of your engagement, and the assumption of yourself. So that it is not you who is exchanged, or some part of your being, but instead, something that represents you, something and that you have at your disposal. Ontologically, this is what, for example, money facilitates. Its practical property, of acting as a common medium of exchange, inevitably brings with it what Marx and others have described as a form of alienation, a distance, between the assumption of your identity, as yourself, and, in this example, the surplus of yourself (in the form of labour – of any kind – that you in some way own) in the form of money, that you can exchange, and which allows you to be an integral part of the Symbolic Order within which all of this is situated.

Unlike traditional interpretations of Marx with regard to alienation, where alienation is generally viewed as a bad thing, on many grounds, but principally because at root it separates the worker from their worked product (whatever those things might be) through the mediation of the Symbolic Order of capitalism, which turns them into subjects; from our perspective, there are massive disadvantages when we do not have the resources that affect a distance between the assumption of ourselves and how we represent ourselves by means of our ability to deploy them effectively, in return for an affirmation of who and what we are, even when this means something as trivial as being able to go into the Tesco Metro and buy a bottle of sherry. Because when this happens, even in order to get something as trivial as a bottle of sherry, the only resource you have is the assumption, the not very well protected, insecure assumption, of yourself, of who and what you are. And since the condition of being yourself is both all of what you have got, it’s literally all that you are, and at the same time is precisely what you do not have, it being an assumption, held in place and sustained by forces that are quite different to who and what you are, it becomes all the more precious, all the more significant, all the more wistfully troubling and incessantly demanding; since your being itself, your true being is, as we have seen, always something that is already, deeply nostalgically absent. Of course, belonging, having money, a job, a family, all provide you with resources that you can use to distance yourself from and cover up this fact. But in relation to their lack? What do you use to engage in an economy of exchange, an economy of being, when all that is available to you is, indeed, the abject demonstration of your lack? Because that’s what it boils down to, nothing other than a demonstration of your lack. That’s all you have to engage
with the world, your lack, that's what you present, the tragic absence of yourself, your identity lost, gone, sometimes barely glimpsed, that's what you beg with, your abject emptiness. Which is why what people notice about you is not an identity, but instead that your clothes obviously don't fit, and are old and dirty. That your long hair is long for the simple reason that it has not been cut. Glancing at your greasy, sweaty face, they fear that your body probably smells. No one wants to get close to that. No surprise then that after about an hour-and-a-half Beth has managed to score exactly no change. It's colder now, and she feels and looks much worse than when she started begging. Her body has taken on no sherry. So she's fucked. Which is why, quite soon now, she's going to get fucked in the mouth.

So this is what happens next:

It's probably about a five-minute walk from Foregate Street to the cut through of Russell Street. Beth is going to go via the underpass and up part of the City Road. She needn't go that way, but there's the prospect of a bit of begging in the subway, and a bit more with any people coming to or going from the station on the City Road. Scores nothing. Getting colder. Really tired too. But jumpy and swimming in nausea. Nausea, now there's a term. Nausea's like your churning, sweating, vomitus stomach has colonised – as the warm salty waves of its bilious undulations wash through your body – your entire being. That churning, vomiting sensation floods into your mouth and the sides of your head, whilst the rest of your cranium pitches into a contracting and expanding sweat, like a tightening and loosening band fastened all the way around your head. How the fuck are you going to fill in for that kind of lack? Beth's body knows. Because at the moment, well, there's no counselling, and nowhere to be counselled, and basically nowhere to go, so nothing really, to fill in and fend off where the nausea's come from. Apart, that is, as Beth's body knows, alcohol. Except – and this is the last stop it knows in its alliance of being with the city, or more accurately in its alliance of being within the city's margins – so far there's been none.

You see plenty of cars' headlights coming in and out of town along the dark A51, but no bodies. Were you to see other bodies, and you're thinking now about bodies that belong, because standing up, moving forward, getting one foot to go in front of another is a dreadful, draining, sweating effort at this point; and that's why, for less than a second, you are thinking about bodies clothed in the warm
assurance of no need for human kindness; because were you to see just one, then this would simultaneously provide some reassurance but not enough to over-ride its troubling meaning. Because if you were to blackout now, then no one’s really going to know, no one’s going to be around; so at least a warm body that belonged, a warm body making its way home, or from home, such a warm body might see you. Though then again, how often have such warm bodies that belong, pissed on you in the dark, pissed on you into a warm urine splattered wakefulness as you’ve been sleeping rough? The thing being though, encounters with such people, were they to notice you, now, at around twenty-to-eight, crossing the A51 in the thin black light, then what would they see? Anything? As Lacan and Barthes (1972) were fond of pointing out, we have a vested interest in the notion of our integral selves, and of them being in the Symbolic Order where they are supposed to fit: this is not really an orientation with much regard for lack. And it is, after all, dark now; quite a dark place to be. Russell Street is just ahead, on your left.

So you’re turning into Russell Street now, and what you need to imagine is this: that it’s a bit like returning home. Maybe after a hard day. Your completely beat, remember. You just have to crash. Somewhere completely familiar and safe. Putting your key in the lock of the front door. Barely noticing, because it is part of your everyday routine: the special way you have to twist your key; the wallpaper as you step across the threshold; the space where you drop your bag; the sound of the central heating; everything you take for granted, everything good, indifferent and bad in your surroundings that simply get subsumed under the fact of being you. Recall that feeling now, of thank God at last the day is over, I’ve made it back, I’m home, and can be myself and just chill, as you take your first steps beyond the bright street lights of the A51 and into the cut through, where you have been just as many times as you have in your real life returned home. Recall that feeling of your routinely reassured self, as you proceed along the increasing darkness of Russell Street to the alley where the bins are housed; because now, at this exact moment, that feeling met with this reality, means all of the good stuff, all the reassuring stuff, about returning home, has gone for ever. So that, each step that you take towards the bins, is also another step further away from what you have never had. How can you not know this? How can you not know that with each step that your chronically homeless body takes, is also irrevocably another step away from inhabiting a space where it belongs? Something you have no choice but to live through. So the important thing you have to do now, as you get closer to the bins in the alley, is to somehow
manage the experience of this perpetual loss, and try to exile it from your consciousness, as you get to know the negative space which is left. Because that negative space, opened up and arranged in the penumbra of the onto-urban geography of Russell Street, won’t go away. And anyway, at the moment, you need it. What could have been; what other people, people who belong, have; what’s supposed to be; simply other aspects of the imaginary of being; like the familial imaginary; the economic imaginary; the social imaginary; the corporeal imaginary; who and what you essentially might have become: gone. Actually, never really, as you know, there for you in the first place. But somehow, as we have already described, this deeply nostalgic and ineradicable turn, this lack that remains, of what could have been you, is something you will always have to more or less cope with. It’s what your alcoholic body living in the margins of the city has become. Though both cruelly and typically for you, yours is an alcoholic body lacking alcohol. Which is why it’s brought you here.

You can hear Kissinger, Ian Henry Kissinger, registered blind, physically disabled, mentally troubled, ranting in the dark alley long before you can see him, bobbing and whirling, his erratic movements making as much sense as the gobbets of language that he is spitting and spraying into the night. Someone, Kerry, recognizes who you are as you emerge out of the shadows of the cut through:

“Alright Beth, what you been up to?”

“Nothin’,” you say. “Been beggin’.” The road and pavement where you are standing are blanched with cold, so that they appear paler, even in the semi-darkness, than they would normally be, as if the colour has been frozen out of them. “Tryin’ to earn enough for a sherry, haven’t I. Got sweet F.A.” In many ways this is a typical conversation, engendered by the discourse of chronic homelessness. Typical because the discourse by which you speak – as it animates your mouth and tongue, and forms the words and phrases that you say – is characterized by absence. What have you been doing? And you reply that you’ve been doing nothin’, even though you’ve been begging, because it counts as nothing, since nothing occurred, other than your tiredness and cold. The experience of your being is now stacking up, negatively, against you. The absence of money, and its particular absence with regard to yourself, has brought you to this semi-hidden place; a place wherein penury compels its penurious subjects, in lieu of coin, to exchange some aspect of themselves for what they want and need.
Because there are practical reasons why this cut-through is such a draw for a certain group of the homeless community. One of them being the close proximity of a convenience store on the A51 that does not discriminate against homeless people: it sells alcohol, including super strength lager. What could be better? A place, on the margins of the city, where the police never go, and you have never been moved on from, where you can almost guarantee, during certain hours of the day and night, that a few other people like you will congregate; a bleak place, an alley, but not exposed, so where you can conspire for a while, with your surroundings, to be, by being hidden in its shadows. And basically, your presence there amounts to a question that you ask, not so much to an individual, but to that place where you are, in the alley. In response to which, Kissinger, who has been off on one, obsessing on an assault he suffered the previous night at a hostel from someone doing a safe seat, insisting with growing determination that he wasn’t going to put up with it again, is jagged out of the wound he has been discoursing on, and catches hold of the edge of the gist of what you have said. There must be some order to the words flying out of his mouth and into the night; they couldn’t really fly out of his mouth all at once; though that’s how it seems. Distinct nouns, spat improperly coalesced into the cut-through, revealing gobbets of barely conscious insight: your name; drink; fuck all; who. Causing him quickly next to stutter: “Have you got a drink, Beth?” And there, it’s done. Because the words that have been articulated through Kissinger’s mouth, the words, formed into a question, which on one level it is understandably appropriate to ask, on another level is a telling declaration about the parlous contingency of Beth’s being. A statement that she needs a drink, and a declaration that she hasn’t got one. Which could have been a plain statement of ontological fact, held in place by a bleak empirical reality, and nothing more than that, a headline about her exposed vulnerability. But it isn’t. It’s more. And that’s because Zack, a tall and skinny, hard as nails ex-tax collector from Belfast – though it’s been very many years since Zack, who is now against all odds around half-way through his fiftieth years, got sliced up and was lucky to make it out alive, was in his home town, and he sure as Hell is never returning – has just made his presence felt, emerging from the other end of Russell Street, and is feeling mean. And the more he thinks about this, the more opportunity it’s granted, the meaner his meanness becomes. For Zack it’s like being in one of those wildlife programmes, set in Africa, down at a waterhole, where you – vulnerable – and all the other animals are drinking, with your vulnerability exposed and immediately noticed by Zack, with Zack being a very mean lion. You already wish Zack wasn’t there, and you’ve only just noticed him. Because you already know, even now, what’s coming. And there
isn’t really going to be anyway to stop it. Zack being Zack, Zack is going to have some money. Zack lends money, on the understanding it will be returned, and that return will include interest.

The taunting, playing with his prey, softening it up, letting it know that it’s already fucked in order to ramp-up the fear before the final blow is going to be delivered – which Zack telegraphs ahead so that his prey can already see it coming – starts immediately. And he makes this clear with a seemingly very simple question: “Is that you, Beth?” Which, of course, is not really a question at all. And that’s because the only reason to ask when he already knows, when he can already see who and what and how you are, is to deadeningly confirm, principally to yourself, that no escape is possible. Because, “Is that you, Beth?” really means: I’m here; so there’s no way out, not from what’s coming; because you know and I know, indeed, we all know, that you’re a desperate alcoholic; and you have no means of getting alcohol; which is why you’re here, to scrounge a drink, the best, but in the end, any way you can. And just to confirm, and this is the part he likes the most, that all of this is true, that your situation cannot be commuted to something less desperate, but not because he’s some obsessive empiricist, more because he likes to demonstrate, in a razor-wire cutting through exposed flesh kind of way, that in his presence there’s no way out, no mitigation, he comes and stands uncomfortably close to you. “Has no one got a drink for you, Beth?” And he shakes his head, slowly to demonstrate how clearly he understands the graveness of the situation, saying, in his own way, that it is grave; so grave that you’re going to have to get down on your knees, just over there, between the furthest and furthest from last bins, and gag on his cock for a can of strong lager.

Zack, you see, has a protracted history of his own raw problems, which helped him to develop his special skill set, his special way of being. They help him to use the environment, to express who he is, to confirm what’s what. And that’s why, any second now, Beth’s open mouth is going to become the place where all of this is expressed, all of this, as the location, the bare life receptacle, for all this shit, in return for a can of lager. Her lips, over which some of this shit will be deliberately ejaculated, encircling an opening to her body, into which the rest of it will be shot; her lips, soft like yours, in another three minutes or so, will be bruised against her broken front teeth, by the sinewy-meaty friction of that thrusting cock.
Where are you sleeping tonight? Do you think about the taste of that cock in your mouth? Of any of the cocks that have used your mouth? Best not to. No. That's what the lager and sherry are for.