

[“Brave and Frail and Hopeful”: The Motif of Communication in Selected Short Stories of A. L. Kennedy]

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[Abstract] *The present paper analyses the motif of communication using the example of three selected short stories by the Scottish woman writer A. L. Kennedy. The aim of the analysis is to trace the development of this motif over the course of Kennedy’s writing career. For this purpose, the stories for examination are selected from Kennedy’s first published collection, from her middle period and from her most recent collection. A close reading of the stories reveals a tentative development from solipsism through one-sided communication towards a dialogue where both parties are on a par.*

[Keywords] *A. L. Kennedy; Scottish literature; short story; communication*

Over the course of its existence, Scottish literature has grappled with its tenuous standing in relation to the broader British canon, struggling with a sense of being overshadowed and absorbed by the dominant literary traditions of the larger nation. This relegation of Scottish culture and national identity to a position of marginalisation, neglect, and even exploitation has left a lasting impact on the literary scene. It is crucial to acknowledge that Scotland existed as a sovereign nation until the enactment of the 1707 Act of Union, which merged Scotland and England, forming the present-day United Kingdom. Following the unsuccessful eighteenth-century Jacobite risings, aimed at restoring the Scottish House of Stuart to the throne, there have been persistent endeavours by the Scottish nation to attain greater independence from England. The devolution referendum of 1979 failed to garner sufficient support, but a subsequent referendum in 1997 revealed a shift in public sentiment, resulting in the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament. A growing demand for full emancipation culminated in the independence referendum of 2014, and while it fell short of achieving the desired outcome, the prevailing political climate suggests that the possibility of a second independence referendum remains strong. This string of political actions spanning over three centuries demonstrates that Scotland has been experiencing enduring unease within the union with England and has made continuous efforts to dismantle the existing bonds.

With respect to the devolution of Scottish literature, Alison Lumsden and Aileen Christianson argue that the failure of the 1979 Scottish devolution referendum paradoxically triggered an unprecedented upsurge in new modern writing, characterised by a remarkable diversity and innovation across various genres (Lumsden and Christianson 1). The aftermath of the referendum witnessed a pivotal moment with the publication of Alasdair Gray's iconoclastic novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), which served as a catalyst that reverberated among established and fledgeling writers alike and ignited what is retrospectively referred to as the second Scottish literary renaissance. As the term itself suggests, this was not the first attempt at forging a distinctive national literary tradition, yet it was the most resolute and fruitful transformation of Scottish letters, one whose impacts last even today. As Berthold Schoene points out, the significance of the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s lies above all in a democratic broadening of the literary mainstream, which opened up to accommodate a heterogeneity of voices and modes of expression that had previously been marginalised on the basis of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or other biases (Schoene 10).

The increasing public recognition of the value and relevance of Scottish writers was accompanied by often self-imposed expectations to focus in the first place on defining what it means to be Scottish and on contributing in creative writing to the evolving discourse on the national identity. The emergence of women writers who challenged the traditionally hypermasculine Scottish cultural heritage added another layer of complexity because these women were not only expected to play an active role in the ongoing discussions around nationalism but also to navigate the so far unfamiliar terrain of feminism. This means that particularly in the early days, writers found themselves balancing between their perceived obligation to join in creating a body of national literature and

their personal inclination to explore any range of issues of their individual choice. This dynamic also presented a threat of foregrounding the agenda at the expense of the art, which would have authors slipping into insular parochialism and uninspired reactionism or even becoming a conduit for promoting a particular political ideology.

One of the writers who embarked on their literary careers at this time and who managed to evade the above-discussed pitfalls is A. L. Kennedy, who happens to be Scottish as much as she happens to be female, but she resolutely refuses to be defined by these restricting labels. In a 1999 interview for a London newspaper, Kennedy expresses her slight vexation at the stereotypical question about the Scottish strain in her work, implying the limited usefulness of the author's nationality as a critical category:

That's the frustrating thing, people down here will say: "What's it like being a Scottish writer?" and I'll say: "I don't know, I've never been anything else." I'm not being awkward, but it's a question you don't get asked if you're from London. (Merritt 13)

The other obligatory question presented to a female author concerns feminism and how she engages with women's issues in her work, which is what Kennedy was asked in an interview for a Scottish magazine as late as in 2017, when she had long been a widely acclaimed writer well known for her sceptical views on any overt political or social agenda in works of fiction. In her poignant response, Kennedy dismisses the feminist label and declares a more encompassing approach: "I am a humanist. I believe in the potential of my species. Beyond that any political standpoint will be too doctrinaire to help me make individual characters. I write fiction, not essays. If I'm writing an essay my viewpoint will be humanist" (Mieszkowski n.p.). Although questions pertaining to nationalism and feminism arise naturally and bear relevance in connection with Kennedy's fiction, these one-sided approaches tend to downplay the more general and universally relatable aspects of her work. There is a need for critical discernment when authors discuss their own writings, as their purported interpretations and intentions may not correspond to the result that they actually achieve. In the case of Kennedy, however, there is a clear consistency between her professed aims and her creative practice, which indeed shuns campaigning for any agenda.

Even so, it would be amiss to consider the Scotland-born and -bred woman writer Kennedy as an isolated phenomenon, detached from the context of her sociopolitical milieu, which must have exercised some degree of influence on her creative concerns, attitudes and sentiments. Being aware of Kennedy's position within the Scottish and British tradition does not necessarily mean forcing her into neat categories; quite the contrary, it may prove helpful in discerning and making sense of the "thread of Scottishness" in her work, as Kennedy calls it ("Not Changing," 102). Subtle hints at Scottish features in Kennedy's fiction include, according to Summers-Bremner, her preoccupation with navigating fluid, shifting and even multiplying borders (123), which figure less as a physical place in Kennedy's representation and more as a metaphorical space for the "travails of the anxious or neurotic mind" of her protagonists (124). The lack of fixed borders further facilitates Kennedy's inclination to contrariness; as Summers-Bremner points out

(123–124), this has been routinely cited as a Scottish national characteristic ever since G. Gregory Smith’s coining of the term “Caledonian antisyzygy” and Hugh MacDiarmid’s elaboration of the concept. However, far from conceiving Caledonian contrariness, or antisyzygy, as a simple contrast between antithetical opposites, Kennedy explores various configurations of pluralities, not only thematising a clash of incompatible qualities but also tentatively exploring the possibilities of their mutual reconciliation.

In keeping with her self-declared humanist attitude to fiction writing and character development, Kennedy sets out to explore the complexities of human experience, exposing the intricate interweaving of subjective perception and objective reality, inward identity and outward appearance, personal struggles and larger social challenges. Although her narratives focus on the particular, the specific and the individual, she subtly situates her stories within a broader context of the community, the society and the world at large. At face value, Kennedy writes seemingly uneventful stories of unremarkable characters, but interspersed throughout her texts there are hints at how these small lives fit into the grand scheme of things. As Kaye Mitchell observes, “her focus is on specificity, particularity and the ways in which such lives are subsumed by some greater whole or system. Kennedy demonstrates an awareness of the potential violence of this subsuming” (58). Ultimately, by concentrating on ordinary people, Kennedy makes them known, seen and heard before they are subsumed by a larger indifferent discourse.

Much of the strength of Kennedy’s fiction lies in her masterful portrayal of characters, which relies on her acute observation skills, sense of detail and ability to vividly capture subtleties of behaviour such as peculiar gestures or idiosyncratic word choices. Her characters come to life with unwavering honesty, all the while being treated with subdued empathy devoid of excessive sentimentality or melodrama. Kennedy extends her insight beyond the grandiose, concentrating instead on small people leading mundane lives, typically showing them at a moment when their everyday routines are disrupted by unexpected but otherwise perfectly unexceptional circumstances. Ali Smith notes about Kennedy that “the impetus for her writing is the giving of voice and articulacy to ordinary people who have been silenced by their ordinariness, the calling for due recognition of the complexities of their lives” (180). Along these lines, the protagonists of Kennedy’s poised stories often explicitly call for acknowledgement of the simple fact of their existence and for validation of the extraordinary courage required of them to make even small choices as they struggle on their personal journeys.

Although her narratives tackle a wide range of topics, Kennedy is particularly preoccupied with the motif of communication as a way to connect not only with others but also oneself. Her mastery of the genre of the short story shows her paying close attention to subtle nuances of speech, whether in internal monologues or dialogues of her characters. The compact narrative framework of the short story requires the writer to distil meaningful moments and poignant revelations, which Kennedy often achieves through deceptively simple language. She utilises the tension between the formal meaning of the words that are spoken and the actual sense that is conveyed by them in a particular communicative situation. Her carefully crafted dialogues often reveal her keen sense of un-

derstated dark humour, which serves to point out the absurdity of the human condition rather than to exercise deliberate cruelty on the characters. At the same time, it is not only the characters who communicate with one another in the fictional world of the story; it is also the author who meticulously chooses words to encourage a dialogue with the reader. In her own words, Kennedy explains: “When I write, my aim is to communicate, person to person. I am a human being telling another human being a story which may or may not be true, but which hopefully has a life and truth and logic of its own” (“Not Changing,” 100).

As has been already discussed in the introductory part of this paper, Kennedy prefers to be regarded as a creative artist rather than a social critic, a political commentator or, worst of all, a propagandist. At the same time, as the quotation above illustrates, she thinks of herself as communicating with the reader through her writing. Kennedy never preaches, never drives home an argument, never explicitly addresses the reader to explain and interpret. Instead, she observes and reports from the limited perspective of her narrators, entrusting her readers with the agency to reach their own conclusions, leaving it entirely up to them whether they draw any lesson from her texts and what lesson it might be. Kennedy does not pretend to have all the answers, and accordingly, she eschews the omniscient narrator once typical of grand narratives in favour of unreliable narrators recruited from among the characters, who not only do not have access to the minds of the other characters but also choose to present the contents of their own minds selectively. Hence, the communication from the narrator to the reader remains incomplete and lacking, which in turn reflects the deeply flawed or outright failed communication between the characters in Kennedy’s fictional worlds. In terms of communication between characters, Kennedy works with a range of strategies: from solipsism springing out of helpless resignation, through one-sided communication serving to pre-emptively evade rather than to discuss a looming issue, to fully fledged two-sided communication evidencing effort on both sides.

Having established communication in a broad sense as the overarching concern of Kennedy’s body of work, the following analysis examines in more detail how the motif of communication has been treated over the three decades of the author’s literary career so far. To this end, three short stories have been purposefully selected, each representative of a different stage in Kennedy’s writing development. These stories are drawn from her earliest published collection, *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* (1990); her most recent collection, *We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time* (2020); and her middle-period work, *What Becomes* (2009). Significantly, the titular story from each of these volumes will be examined, relying on the assumption that the one story which lends its name to the entire volume is deliberately chosen by the author or publisher on grounds of its being most representative of the overall collection. A close reading of the selected stories reveals a notable shift in technique, perspective and overall sentiment, marking a transition from bleak despair towards tentative hopefulness. Her early work shows a young writer honing her skills on a smaller scale, experimenting with narrative techniques and exploring predominantly interpersonal relationships, only tentatively hinting at broader

social frameworks at play. However, as Kennedy matures as an author, she becomes more adept at forging connections between the private and the public, the specific and the universal. Her later work starts to transcend the boundaries of the domestic realm, creating links with the realm of the foreign and even venturing into the cosmic, as exemplified in the story “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time” by the juxtaposition of an individual’s attempt to connect with their partner and humankind’s collective mission to communicate with potential extra-terrestrial civilisations through the *Voyager* probe.

When Kennedy entered the literary scene with *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* in 1990, she won immediate critical acclaim, and the short story volume received the Scottish Saltire Society Literary Award as well as the British John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. As David Borthwick suggests, it is “a volume which now reads like an early manifesto of her work” in that it introduces “Kennedy trying to elicit personal meanings from an uninterested world whose wider, often media-driven, historical narratives seem to be so remote and alienating as to be of no comfort or relevance to the minor, lone individual inhabiting the late twentieth century” (267). The eponymous short story sets the tone of much of Kennedy’s later work, as it relies on poignant introspection, evocative imagery and a lyrical quality, where the external events are far less important than their internal perception by the characters. It also presents Kennedy’s staple subject of defunct relationships, familial and romantic, and establishes her thematic concern with “the loss of any spiritually fruitful or intellectually rewarding intersubjective communication,” as Borthwick aptly puts it (267).

From the point of view of its first-person female narrator, “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains” retrospectively recounts the gradual breakdown of a marriage, using non-linear chronology and culminating with an incident when a small spontaneous change in the unnamed narrator’s routine results in her coming home early and finding her husband Duncan with a mistress. The story reveals at its very beginning that the marriage has ended and then proceeds to loosely string together a series of minor events and signs of Duncan’s multiple affairs over the course of the marriage, which the narrator refuses to acknowledge even to herself, less so to mention anything to the unfaithful husband. The narrator responds to any events that are happening to her with solipsistic paralysis, without attempting to actively influence the course of her life and without as much as thinking about it. When she eventually admits to herself that Duncan is cheating on her, she quietly resigns, remarking in a matter-of-fact manner that communication of feelings and thoughts is irrelevant, or perhaps hopeless: “I couldn’t see why he should know what was going on inside my head when, through all the episodes of crumpled shirts and then uncrumpled shirts and even the time when he tried for a moustache, I had never had any idea of what Duncan was thinking” (“Night Geometry,” 32).

The short story “What Becomes” in the eponymous collection from 2009 offers another take on the subject of a failing marriage, as it incorporates the motifs of loss and bereavement that have meanwhile become another of Kennedy’s recurrent concerns. The marital discord in the story seems to be triggered by the couple’s loss of their only child in a tragic accident, which tears the husband and wife apart rather than uniting them

because they each struggle to come to terms with their grief alone rather than together, and they do so in mutually incompatible ways. Unlike in “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains,” communication is at least attempted here, though only on the part of the husband Frank, whose almost obsessive stream of words appears to be designed to drown his own grief in the noise. While the unnamed wife limits herself to an occasional single-sentence exclamation of frustration with her husband, Frank goes to great lengths to anticipate his wife’s needs and wishes and fulfil them before she can even express herself. As Pilar Somacarrera interprets it, “Frank’s capacity for empathy reveals itself in his being too worried about his wife’s feelings to take any notice of his own grief,” so that he ends up suppressing his grief rather than starting to process the trauma of loss mentally and emotionally (8).

The story captures Frank at his Friday evening ritual, which is preparing home-made soup for his wife from carefully selected ingredients, something that “he quietly thought of as an offering—*here I am and this is from me and a proof of me and a sign of reliable love*” (“What Becomes,” 6; emphasis in the original). The evening goes awry as he accidentally cuts himself when chopping vegetables, and perversely fascinated by the bleeding wound and the sharp physical pain, he systematically starts dripping, splattering and smearing his blood over the kitchen surfaces, which is how his disbelieving wife finds him. Frank’s handling of the situation could hardly be more absurd:

“Jesus Christ, Frank. What have you done. What the fuck are you doing.”

He’d turned to her and smiled, because he was glad to see her. “I’m sorry, the soup’s not ready. It’ll be...” He’d glanced at the clock and calculated, so that she’d know how to plan her time—she might want a bath before they ate. “It’ll be about nine. Would you like a drink?” (“What Becomes,” 8)

The wife reacts to the bizarre scene as could be reasonably expected, but Frank assumes that she is upset about the soup not being ready yet and does not address that she is in fact crushed by her child’s death and confused by Frank’s irrational behaviour. At the moment, Frank seems almost exhilarated by his tangible physical injury, which helps to push into background the unspeakable emotional pain of child loss. Following his wife’s shocked comment, he genuinely seeks to connect with her, thinking that “he needed to apologise and uncover how she was feeling,” but she has no understanding of his good intentions (“What Becomes,” 8).

The most recent of the short stories under analysis, “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time,” is included in the eponymous collection from 2020 and marks Kennedy’s shift to greater abstraction, generalisation and universality. Again, the story deals with a romantic couple’s conflict, but it dispenses with external details, does not mention the cause of the conflict and instead traces the steps of the couple as they are climbing to the top of Cologne Cathedral while having a violent argument. Interestingly, the story avoids the use of direct speech during the fight and instead provides a running commentary as the fighting unfolds from the perspective of the unnamed first-person female narrator, who describes her partner Tom and herself as “yelling,” “howling” and “screaming,” as

they exchange insults and obscenities (“We Are Attempting,” 262). The narrator remarks that this is the first time she has plunged into a fight rather than remaining quiet and passive, and this is also what makes this story different from the ones already discussed above. Where “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains” depicts a complete lack of verbal communication and “What Becomes” demonstrates uneven communication on one side only, “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time” presents an instance of communication where both partners are on a par. Though they are being “awful and unreasonable,” “take to it like knives” and resort to blaming, shaming, generalising, stereotyping and all other imaginable argumentation fouls, their anger connects them, and their argument eventually dies away, anticlimactically (“We Are Attempting,” 268).

Returning once again to “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains,” the story tentatively outlines a confusion of communication and violence, a motif to be developed in more depth in the two later stories under examination. When the narrator finds her husband in the act of infidelity, she does not break her silence but almost unwittingly grabs a kitchen knife, though she has no clear idea what to do with it: “I don’t believe I said a single word. There wasn’t a word I could say. I don’t remember going to the kitchen, but I do remember being there, because I reached into one of the drawers beside the sink and I took out a knife” (“Night Geometry,” 33). She decides to stick the knife into the worksurface as a warning or threat, but the knife slips, and ironically it is herself who ends up injured by the unfinished act of violence. This image brings to mind Frank’s similar kitchen knife accident in “What Becomes,” speaking to Kennedy’s interest in juxtaposing physical and psychological harm. Regarding “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains,” Alison Lumsden observes that “the outward appearance of things does not belie, but usually illuminates the interior” (Lumsden 158). In keeping with this, the knife wound can be interpreted as an external manifestation of internal mental anguish which would otherwise remain unseen.

The motif of violence as a means of communication, however ill-advised, is treated in more depth in Kennedy’s middle-period story “What Becomes.” Apart from Frank’s knife injury, which symbolically serves as a beckoning for him to pay attention to his bereavement trauma, it transpires that his wife has been routinely hitting him. This tends to happen when Frank says something wrong, which seems to be any time he opens his mouth, from his offering comfort with “It’ll be fine” to his brave attempt to open up when his sentence “I want her to be—” is interrupted by a punch at his chest and then his eye (“What Becomes,” 9, 19). While the sentence remains unfinished, it clearly refers to the couple’s dead daughter and likely should have ended with the word “alive.” Paradoxically, the couple connect only in the fleeting moments when the wife finds limited release in hitting her partner, but these moments are quick to pass and the connection is irretrievably lost:

Afterwards they had rested, his head on her stomach, both of them still weeping, too loudly, too deeply, the din of it ripping something in his head. But even that had gone eventually, and there had been silence and he had tried to kiss her and she had not allowed it. (“What Becomes,” 19–20)

In her analysis of the story, Somacarrera points out that “emotions are not static but relational, and are permanently being reoriented” (14). Accordingly, the bereaved husband and wife experience changes of emotions in relation and in response to each other, such as when the wife’s grief becomes transformed into anger in reaction to her partner. Furthermore, as Somacarrera suggests, “anger is not always a negative emotion” because it “can imply connection and survival” (14). In the above-quoted excerpt from the end of the story, the wife’s outburst of anger and violence serves as a proxy for communication between the partners in that they are briefly able to mourn their shared loss together.

Sarah Dunnigan describes Kennedy’s body of work as “fictions of communication” (Dunnigan 144), which is a fitting epithet on multiple levels. By her own admission, Kennedy is “drawn to the border between what you want and what you want to say and what you need to say and what’s actually possible” (March 117). Regarding her typically inarticulate, even solipsistic characters, Kennedy continues to explain: “The people who come to me tend to be people who can’t say what they want to say, so I say that they can’t say what they want to say” (March 117). In retrospect, Kennedy’s work can be seen as a gradually unfolding project to establish in terms of literary fiction a communication of one individual with another, with society and with the wider world. This development can be traced using the examples of the three stories under analysis, starting with utter impossibility of any connection in “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains,” continuing with a tentative bid at connecting with the world outside in “What Becomes,” and culminating with an intertwining of the individual and the collective in “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time.” This is not to claim that Kennedy has fully evolved from a sceptical observer of people’s persistent failure to have a satisfactory conversation to an idealistic celebrator of humankind’s harmonious communication; rather, the overall tone of her work is becoming more mellow, more reconciliatory, more attentive to the possibilities rather than the limitations of communication. This developmental tendency applies to the body of her work considered as a whole, so that one can still find individual stories in her early period with a tentatively hopeful outlook and, vice versa, other stories in her more recent period that offer no prospects but despair.

To begin with, “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains” is a story of complete isolation which precludes the possibility of any communication. The setting of the story is restricted to the couple’s home and the wife’s train commute, which plays a symbolic role in that the text opens with the woman wondering why so many trains terminate at Garscadden, as if foreshadowing the impending termination of her marriage. Furthermore, the woman’s unexpected return home to find her husband in the act happens only after she had watched three Garscadden trains and one no-service train pass by one morning and gave up waiting for her connection. Trains represent here not a means of connection but rather a vain promise of it, because they either terminate at Garscadden or they do not arrive at all. In the bleak ending of the story, the woman desperately longs for anyone to acknowledge her bare existence, for “some proof, while I’m here, that I exist” (“Night Geometry,” 34). At the same time, she is fully aware that she is too unimportant to have her wish granted, no matter how much she, like any other person, deserves

the simple respect of being noticed: “We have small lives, easily lost in foreign droughts, or famines; the occasional incendiary incident, or a wall of pale faces, crushed against grillwork, one Saturday afternoon in Spring. This is not enough” (“Night Geometry,” 34).

The later story “What Becomes” moves in its setting beyond the domestic space, as it is partly situated in a cinema that Frank is visiting and there are additional hints that Frank frequently travels abroad, probably on business. Interestingly, it shows Frank talking to another person apart from his wife; this is not the case in either “Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains” or “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time,” where the partners only speak with each other. However, Frank’s communication with the box office clerk turns out as disastrous as his conversations with his wife. The film that Frank is about to watch starts playing without sound due a glitch, which reminds him of the times that he would watch foreign-language pictures when abroad, not understanding the words but still being able to grasp the overall story. This seemingly minor detail evidences Frank’s willingness to connect with others and his earnest effort to understand. At the present occasion though, Frank is the only spectator in the auditorium, so it is up to him to complain about the missing sound in the film, which is a message that he does not seem to get across:

“There’s no sound.”

“What?”

“I said, there’s no sound.”

The boy seemed to consider saying *what* again before something, perhaps Frank’s expression, stopped him.

“I said, there’s no sound. ... I can’t hear. In the normal way I can hear. But at the moment I can’t. Not the film. Everything else, but not the film. That’s how I know there’s something wrong with the film and not with me.” (“What Becomes,” 11–12)

After a few more honest tries by Frank, which are countered by the indifferent clerk’s blank stare, the clerk reluctantly moves to remedy the situation. The film starts playing again with the sound on, but in a symbolic gesture, after all his communication attempts ended up in frustration, Frank turns his phone off and deliberately disconnects himself from the world, not wanting to hear from it: “That way he wouldn’t know when it didn’t ring, kept on not ringing” (“What Becomes,” 20).

Finally, “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time” figures as the latest, most mature and most complex among the three stories under analysis, as it abandons the confines of domestic settings and takes place in Germany, for the most part on the winding staircase of Cologne Cathedral. The choice of setting enables Kennedy to interweave the present and the past, the private and the public, the personal and the global. As the couple ascend the stairs to the spire, they are passionately immersed in their private fight, which they have nevertheless chosen to have in a public space, inopportunistically a busy tourist attraction whose layout requires visitors to literally brush shoulders. The place throngs with foreign tourists, who are inadvertently drawn in the British couple’s argument and forced to respond in some way to what they are witnessing. No one intervenes,

but there is a clear clash of languages, cultures and individual attitudes, with reactions ranging from curiosity through indifference to almost physical discomfort manifested by one young female Japanese tourist. There is a mingling of personal history as the couple blame each other for their past wrongdoings, of family history as they recall each other's parents in far from polite terms, and of larger cultural history as they occasionally observe some architectural detail that they are passing on their climb.

The short story turns at the point when the argument is exhausted and so is the couple, who now find themselves in a mellow mood, as if the violent fight has strengthened the connection between them. Reflecting on this experience, the female narrator feels overcome by the urge to initiate a more intimate and more pleasant conversation, longing to ask her partner about all the small things that she ought to know about a loved one. However, she fears that she would ruin the rare moment of connection and significantly, she starts talking about the *Voyager* probe launched by NASA into space in 1977:

So instead I talk about this satellite they sent up, ages ago - we were practically children then - pushed it out into nowhere and let it shine. ... To let outer space understand us, the satellite carried along information: birdsong and thunder and measurements and music and a message in languages. I've always remembered that part of the message said, *We are attempting to survive our time*. This seemed, to me, very brave and frail and hopeful. (“We Are Attempting,” 275)

In one breath, there is the smallest possible instance of communication involving no more than two individuals, juxtaposed with the largest conceivable communication of collective humankind, initiating conversation with possible extra-terrestrial civilisations. It may seem a waste of effort to blindly send signals to unknown and perhaps non-existent addressees in the vastness of space, and Kennedy's narrator acknowledges how “frail” the message is, but at the same time, she considers it “brave” and “hopeful.” Ultimately, this may be true of any attempt at communication on whatever scale: it takes bravery and hope, but looking beyond our individual selves to establish a connection with others is always worth the effort.

However, the story “We Are Attempting to Survive Our Time” does not conclude with the end of the couple's argument. It goes on to relate the couple's evening, which they spent having a meal, strolling the streets and attending a concert. “Lucky, lucky. Tiny. Tiny,” the narrator keeps on chanting in her head, as she is reminded by numerous tiny instances how lucky they are to be alive, well and together (“We Are Attempting,” 275). She first realises their luck, for which they did not even have to try, when they give away all their coins to the beggars surrounding the cathedral, but there are more beggars than they have coins: “We walk under our luck like a type of shame, a heaviness. We have money, our country still has intact buildings in most places, intact homes, no indiscriminate destruction raging yet. There's only a little fighting, here and there, more suffering, more shouting” (“We Are Attempting,” 274). This may not be the most enthusiastic counting of one's blessings, but then there comes the ultimate reminder of how lucky they are to simply exist. As the couple sit down to enjoy a concert, they notice

a suspicious unattended bag in a seat in front of them, and the narrator spends the performance alternately wondering what type of bomb the bag likely contains and trying to reason with herself that it is probably a false alarm – which it is, as it turns out eventually. However, the fact that “in this moment, or this moment, or this moment we could be torn apart by flying horror” serves to put the trivial argument that the narrator had with her partner into a more appropriate perspective in the grand scheme of things (“We Are Attempting,” 277).

As Summers-Bremner sums up, “if we read Kennedy’s work as a whole, we find there is a far greater emphasis on human vulnerability, miscommunication and aggression within relationships than on happy, rationalised solutions, and on the unconscious level where desire’s chief characteristic is the trouble it encounters and sometimes finds a way to adapt or accommodate, but often does not” (124). This is precisely why Kennedy’s oeuvre can be read as a continuing and ever-evolving effort to navigate the precarious terrain of interpersonal relationships and to explore the intricate connections between individuals and the larger social fabric. In focusing on the small lives of small people, Kennedy passionately argues for the intrinsic worth of each person and demands that their quiet everyday bravery be noticed and acknowledged. At the same time, Kennedy relentlessly pursues the possibilities of human connection and communication, highlighting failures indeed, but daring to hope that such possibilities do exist.

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