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Lecture by A. L. Kennedy**

FALLING

Let me tell you three stories to try and explain my country. My situation is very simple - I am in the process of falling off a cliff. It is also very complicated. Many other people are falling and yet some of us have not yet noticed that the ground has dropped away. A handful of us believe that we are flying.

We can't fly.

We are falling.

Story one

I meet prominent human rights lawyer Philippe Sands at London's South Bank Centre on Sunday the 3rd of June. As the cultural climate in the UK has clouded we have both been spending more and more time addressing human rights issues, the role of the arts, our fall - in print and at various events, addressing audiences in a variety of contexts. This is still permitted.

Every time I have spoken, audiences have shared both dismay and impotence. Many of us are aware that hatred is a rabid dog and that our leaders have released it. Quiet articles in our press do mention a (relatively) bloodless coup that has left us in the hands of long-term Pinochet admirers who want to expel human rights legislation from Britain as a form of foreign contagion. Some of us stand on platforms and mention what is blindingly obvious: that the arts and the media colour culture and that culture has the power to restrain, enrich, or poison us. It permits action, legislation, social transformations for good or ill. To think arts activity is morally neutral is to volunteer for the fall. But we have been taught to think that.

Some of us, like Philippe, are aware that genocide is hard to prosecute because there may be no hard evidence of individual guilt: no tapes, emails, notes taken while seated at a lakeside villa's conference table. If a country's culture is toxic enough - if your versions of Der Stürmer, or Radio Mille Collines are operational, then traceable orders may be rare, or unnecessary. The population will simply improvise on themes of hate. After the nightmare, prosecutable individuals may well be low-ranking murders; local-level organisers: the man who distributed machetes, or an especially toxic journalist, implicated in the horror their words summoned up. Words are necessary, of course, cultural manipulation is essential, because sociopaths are unusual. Ordinary people in functional communities can only be convinced to set aside their lives and commit or enable atrocities if they believe they are acting in the name of self-defence. They need convincing - so you

convince.

Then self-defense will do the rest - after all, it's justified. Normal people with kids and hobbies and smiles for the camera and blueberries to eat at picnics will fight to keep their nice things and clean lives until they are covered in children's blood if you scare them enough.

So you put fear and hate in newspapers, magazines, cartoons, films, broadcasts, websites, social media, viral gossip, posters, rallies, political pronouncements, clickbait outrage. Produce figureheads just freakish enough for the media to love them, for the public to find them dreadful, but fascinating and disempowering, laughable but 'honest', comfortingly stupid and yet strong, so strong. Culture convinces. However free-standing we think we are - decent and independent - we are often malleable and will murder if murder is made decent. We are marinated daily in our culture, it tells us what to buy, in every sense.

On that June Sunday, after the hate-filled self-delusion of the Brexit vote, our assisted suicide, here is Philippe. We hug and swear softly - it's probably already too late for us. Philippe has prosecuted murderers from former Yugoslavia - once an expanding holiday destination with a diverse community and then dropped into hell quickly, predictably by speeches, songs, stories legends, fear. Brexit is not just a frightening expression of convinced xenophobia - it will bring economic chaos, take away normality and bring us the pains that demand scapegoats, targets, the exorcism of perceived malignity. We won't now simply admit that we've done a stupid thing, that our economic and political masters have done a large number of stupid things and that they abuse us and that we love them for it.

Repeatedly condemned by EU observers and currently campaigning hard for an additional exit from European human rights legislation, the UK's media are now mostly hate mills. Cost cutting, lack of experienced staff, thrill-seeking, various addictions and a handful of morally-corroded media barons have given us a pre-genocide culture. We could hope we'll be lucky and escape the final descent. Many are turning aside to alternative media, but the mainstream can feel overwhelming. Slowing revenues that have cut back investigative reporting, fact-checking, anything but gossip and kicks - they may bring an end to print media and its stranglehold on government. With no real mass media support, the leader of our largest opposition party, Jeremy Corbyn, has thus far weathered all manner of storms. If he, or a figure similarly committed to democracy and 'free' from corruption (and 'free' is a relative term with any politician) can use alternative media and micro-finance to succeed, we might save our democracy. But our economy will crash, blame will seek targets. We have a failing education system, shattered social care and a culture that denigrates knowledge and imagination. We may simply be waiting for a plausible demagogue to harness our pain. Or just that quiet coup, those men in suits.

Philippe arrives at our event both professionally and personally shaken. This is comfortable Philippe with comfortable colleagues, who don't look poor or vulnerable, Philippe who works in a fashionable and world-famous chamber. Philippe who was collaborating this week with another top-flight lawyer from India. A stranger abused her on her way to the chambers, simply for existing as black, a black human being, a woman a man could abuse. She had never known such a thing happen in years of visits.

Philippe and I are part of culture, too, but we are hardly News International. I have just published a novel, in part about a senior UK civil servant who can no longer stand the casual cruelty of his government, or its aversion to facts and devotion to its own delusions.

I'd hoped it would prove relevant. I shouldn't have. Disillusioned civil servants seek me out after every reading. Philippe has just published a book examining the lives of three Jewish men from the same part of Galicia. These were Philippe's grandfather, Leon Buchholz, and lawyers Hersh Lauterpacht and Raphael Lemkin. Buchholz managed to escape the bloody mechanisms of the Holocaust. Lauterpacht also escaped and was the lawyer who developed the concept of 'crimes against humanity' and legislation against it. He worked for the defense of the individual. Lemkin invented the term we now use to describe the destruction of individuals simply because they belong to proscribed groups: genocide. Lemkin focused on the defense of groups, because racists, genocidaires, will insist on refusing to see the objects of their loathing as anything other than fractions of groups, wrong things seething with interconnectedness to other wrong things. Lemkin sought to put legislation in place to keep groups safe from extinction. He is a personal hero of mine. I see Lauterpacht's point - defending the individual defends us all. But I see Lemkin's point too, making genocide the crime of crimes and actually prosecuting genocidaires (even when they have powerful friends and are rich and Caucasian) would send a powerful signal. Genocide is a step beyond murder and mass murder. It seeks to remove all manifestations of human immortality: neighbourhoods, languages, art, children, monuments, place names - everything. The whole culture. We might say it attempts a murder of the soul.

It should be the crime of crimes. It's hard to prosecute, the evidence is hard to gather, but then most criminals seek to conceal their crimes - we still try to prosecute them. And we know that the impunity with which Turkey committed its genocide and (although we mention this much less in the UK) the cheerful efficiency and pride of the British Empire's murder machinery, both emboldened Germany's genocidaires. Maybe Kissinger's impunity and the UK's championing of Pinochet have been of comfort to Tony Blair as he returns from the confessional. Crimes unpunished allow imaginations to imagine further impunity, to gather potential. And so imagination is appropriated by the enemies of humanity and creativity as surely as 'Lady With Ermine' was once displayed in the home of the Nazi who stole it.

As a writer, a producer of culture, I know that if I fail - if I do not adequately present the humanity of other humans to humans, then I do not help create a culture which defends humans against destruction. If I do not help the individual reader inhabit the Other, empathise, identify, experience, then I move us nearer our cliff edge by a fraction of a millimeter. And meanwhile multiple advertisers, keynote speeches, articles and interviews shove us onwards, meters at a time.

Which is to say, when people like me fail, people like Philippe have to step in, long after the blood has dried and the disaster has happened, trying to administer justice.

Culture at its most effective and sustainable, shows us people, human entities. The UK's current culture shows us caricatures, threats and freaks. It apparently seeks to make us all the Other.

Story 2

I am being interviewed by a German film crew soon after the Brexit vote. They want to film in various locations, one of them a train carriage. Once we're aboard, I find myself thinking, „I hope the crew won't speak German out loud. I hope no one sounds overly foreign. I don't want anyone in the carriage to get angry. I don't know how that would go.“ I didn't trust

the passengers on a commuter train I have ridden time after time without fear. The sound operator, a black Kenyan, had come to London to further his studies - he told me the city terrified him and that he was leaving as soon as he could. I wasn't sad but unsurprised.

Because the UK is collapsing. The kingdom is not united. England and Britain are no longer synonymous. The inclusiveness of our society's experience during World War Two and an awareness of Europe's part in that, refugees' part in that, the world's part in that - has been lost. The wonder in decades of European peace has been lost. There has been a lazy and toxic assumption that countries like Yugoslavia, or Iraq implode simply because they are filled with foreigners. Rwanda became a bloodbath spontaneously, because, well what can you expect - it's in Africa. (A continent our current foreign secretary thinks is one country.) As even the last vestiges of the British Empire slide away, the idea of the white man's burden, the pacification of the restless natives, joined with Blair's messiah complex to wreck the Middle East - against all informed advice - produce the world's worst refugee crisis since World War Two.

Meanwhile Wales has sunk into self-loathing and post-industrial bewilderment. Northern Ireland has been able to stabilize slightly (although its peace treaty relies on EU membership) and has drawn closer to the South. Scotland, after a degree of devolution, has been able to explore a modern, Europhile identity and to redefine what nationalism can be. With roots partly in a racist, right wing desire for spurious ethnic purity, Scottish Nationalism has spent decades exploring and embracing its other motivations - progressive social policy, the nation state (with citizens, taxes, laws, rights and responsibilities) pitted against corporate states (with customers, tax-avoidance, entitlement, reckless endangerment and a desire to avoid all responsibility). It currently has grassroots mass membership, microfinance party funding and a massive majority in the Scottish Parliament deriving from proportional representation and a relatively content and active civil service. This model is not perfect, but it is increasingly divergent from the Westminster model. Although Scotland's mass media landscape is very similar to that in the UK as a whole, the independence campaign (and a general frustration with poor media coverage) has spawned a rather more mature alternative media landscape that in the rest of the UK and a raised level of public and youth involvement in politics. The SNP are largely vilified by the mainstream media, but apparently do not need their support to win elections decisively. This suggests a new model of press/ political relations is more than possible.

In real terms, it means - among other things - that refugees in Scotland receive a letter from Scotland's First Minister and efforts are made to support them in their new communities and to keep those communities onside. There has been a sustained spike in racist attacks and hate crime in the UK since politicians and their media masters began opportunistically attacking The Other. This is occasionally bemoaned in the very papers fanning the violence, but increasingly ignored by Theresa May's Tory party and its openly race-baiting agendas. What isn't mentioned is that Scotland hasn't experienced the same spike. The most recent Tory Party Conference advocated, among other things, shaming companies by forcing them to admit how many foreign workers they were employing and only allowing foreign doctors to continue working in our desperately hard-pressed health service until UK doctors had been trained.

Hate has become the norm in the UK's public discourse, but within days of announcements that would disgust any democracy worth the name from the UK's

current leadership, the SNP first Minister and the leaders of all major Scottish parties had made statements in support of refugees and Europe. (These are the same Scottish political parties, which have continued to finally address centuries of sectarian injury and discrimination in Scotland and to effect slow change.) After the announcement of Scottish government solidarity with the Other, individual Scots spent a day flooding Twitter with #WeAreAllScotland messages - stating their mixed origins, partners, children, their various journeys, and reinforcing an idea of nationality which only requires self-identification. Born Scottish, raised Scottish, ancestrally Scottish, residentially Scottish, Scottish by marriage, Scottish with other identities maintained, or simply Scottish by choice - these are all being defined as equally valid and valuable. On 9th October an open letter appeared in The Scotsman, condemning xenophobia, signed by 300 academics and open to all thereafter. While Jeremy Corbyn and others on the UK or English or Westminster left have also condemned the hate, their words are seen in a context that has begun to simply define them as foreign. At the end of September, one statement of support offered by Corbyn to migrants was answered the following day by a racist cartoon in The Times, a mainstream, formerly respectable newspaper, showing an overloaded boat laden with threatening black bodies, captained by Jeremy and heading across the Mersey - a city with a reputation for Left Wing agitation and an established black population...

Not everyone in Scotland, of course, finds this agreeable, but the public discourse is not enabling the minority's racism. Despite a generally toxic and irresponsible reporting of events and nationalism in Scotland - or even because of it - a generally tolerant and experimental spirit is being maintained, running beneath the usual social and political to and fro. This idea of internationalist nationalism has its roots in a cultural renaissance and exploration that has been at least 60 years in the making - it is a thing of paintings, novels, songs, plays, anarchy, disaffection, irony, modernity and above all imagination. The promise of a newly independent nation that has yet to be (which would, of course, be less than perfect if it ever arrived) is nevertheless providing inspiration and a chance to think outside any of the approved boxes.

England - with its rich cultural history - is suffering a huge estrangement from itself, a loss of Empire, a loss of memory, a vacuum into which opportunistic hatred can be poured. As a Scot who remembers my country in the 1970's when doubt, despair, unbeing, empty machismo, soccer violence and hatred of the Other was commonplace, I had a sense of deja vu when I moved to England a few years ago. England is currently tearing itself apart, a vocal minority publicly howling to „take back“ what it already has and telling the Other to „go home“ when those homes may be only meters away. Many seem afraid to explore England as a cultural entity, complex, historically diverse and as beautiful as many. As the English Left slowly realizes that Scottish Nationalism is not reactionary, but a kind of „soft liberation struggle“, so the possibility of an benevolent English renaissance might still arise - not better than, not angry, not entitled, not reckless and scared as an over-reaching public school boy. I would like to have cause for hope - and so would hundreds of thousands of beleaguered human beings, living in England and increasingly feeling they may be the Other, or else surrounded by the Other on a train.

Story three

Or - my third story - they may no longer belong in their street, amongst their neighbours - like the Asian Londoner who simply, gently, sadly told me, „Nobody says good morning any more. Why don't they? Nobody says good morning.“

I want to hope this can be different, can still change for the better. I want us not to fall. Last night I watched Trump and Clinton's 2nd debate, watched one candidate promise to jail another, while conducting a campaign of unparalleled loathing. Today, before I finished writing this in New York, I walked into Central Park. I passed a Proudly-Veteran-Operated hot dog stand, meters away from a man and a woman performing their Asr prayer together, standing and then kneeling undisturbed in shafts of autumn sun, behind them an actress holding a script, pacing and learning her lines, beyond her, lovers lying together, embracing on a rock uncondemned, beyond that faces and bodies of all colours and constitutions and ages going about their joys and toy boats drifting on the lake, the only creatures screaming, two blue jays in a tree. People stopped and stared at them, because they seemed unusual. Any city, any country can have moments like that, when nothing is wrong with our manyness and richness and nothing is felt, or said or ruled to be wrong. Anyone who has anything to do with creating culture, anyone who has anything to do with humanity, who wishes to be part of the human project, can only battle to elongate those moments. And in the dark times we must make sure that we are singing - and singing about much more than the dark times.