

Intimacy in the Masses: Connection in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*

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Else's life is surrounded by people. She observes the world, crafts stories of others, and remembers those of her own. After years of living on the street and being viewed as invisible, Else forgets words or specific details, yet she still recalls formative events of her life. Within these events is a distortion of the normal dynamic between privacy and expression. This upheaval carries on from Else's past to her experiences in the present. Else possesses an inverted sense of the public and the private; she finds connection within the bustle of the world rather than in quiet, personal moments.

As Else watches Clare Wilby across the street from her, she recalls the various ways people have treated her throughout her own time on the streets. Cataloging moments of so-called "love," Else remembers a teen boy. Within the rude remarks and acts of kindness, a boy asks, "How much?": "[Else] [takes] him to the multi-storey car park. It was evening; Deck D was quiet and lit-up; there, in the smell of the petrol and exhausts, on the concrete flooring between the back and front fenders of some small city cars: love."¹ In this emblem of urban society, surrounded by cars from different stretches of the city, Else has a conventionally private experience. This "love," or sex, happens with the "smell of the petrol and exhausts." Instead of a private room, the car-park is exposed to open air on all sides, with the threat of anyone stumbling across Else and the boy. And though Else relays the event as "love," the term obscures the actuality of sex-work, an unspoken facet of the world. Even without a physical person being in the space, the cars, packing the lot full with their "back and front fenders," create a sense of an occupied environment, one where Else conducts a typically closed-door affair.

Another person greets Else on the street, and asks for a window into her privacy, yet Else finds hope in the invasion. A journalist, on a project photographing people's pockets, takes

¹ Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (New York, New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 54. All subsequent citations are from this edition and will appear parenthetically

photos of Else's. She ponders the effect of the photos: "The insides of Else's pockets have maybe been seen by thousands of people" (74-75). Else realizes she does not have any of those objects anymore, but what the journalist took photos of was every one of her belongings. It was a deeply personal action to empty the "insides" of her pockets, thereby exposing all of Else in the open. These few personal valuables, Else notes, could have "been seen by thousands"—an intrusive exchange, yet one that also functions as a hopeful sense of connection. She wonders if the readers read her name next to the photos as well, and if it was then in "the memories of what could be millions of people" (75). These private moments for Else, fully displayed in public, do not overtly bother her, but rather prove comfortable: they are rare moments in which she is being seen.

Just as personal aspects of Else's life merge with public settings, an attachment to the outside world infiltrates her private life. When Else receives two ten pence pieces, her mind spirals down into memories of coins. She lands on the experience she shared with Ade that revolved around coins: "He passed a ten pence piece into her mouth, [...] flat on to her tongue like a communion wafer, she held it on her tongue like it would melt, then opened her mouth and took it out. The date on it was 1992" (37). Though the reader never learns much of Else's history with Ade, the coin episode is one of Else's most detailed memories, filled with sensory remarks. She relates the coin to a "communion wafer," a religious object used in the community of church, but this transcending experience is private; shared between just Else and Ade. After explaining her personal experience with the coin, its description overshadowing any of Ade, Else remarks on the date of "1992." A date of a coin reminds the holder of the small piece they make up out of all of the people and all of the coins in the world. A coin, an object defining societal

transactions, stabilizes her memory of intimate connection; the outside world becomes the currency in Else's relationship.

The confusion of the private and the public in Else's memories finally follows her into the present, as perfectly illustrated in her brief stay at the Global Hotel. In what should be a welcome respite from the cold, Else feels uneasy in her room and thinks of the carpet showroom: "She wonders what it would sound like to stand behind the showroom glass [...] She imagines sleeping in the showroom for the night" (76). A showroom, meant to display its contents to the public, becomes more appealing than the enclosed, key-accessed hotel room. Even in what seems to be an escape from the outside world, Else yearns to be surrounded by the city from within the "showroom glass." Else constantly lives behind a kind of glass. She exists as part of the outside world, never separating herself from it, but she only fleetingly looks into others' lives. She even wanders the streets at dark with Penny, to peer through the illuminated windows into people's homes: "Each time they found a window [...] the woman stopped outside it and stood by the gate where she could see" (158). Though surrounded by others on the street—sharing mutual exchanges and watching lives through windows—Else remains a degree removed, yet it is the closest to real connection that she gets. In Else's private moments, or lack thereof, she tends to desire a link to the public. A hotel room is supposed to be a guest's oasis within both the flurry of a city and the environment of the hotel in and of itself, but Else finds it constricting. Her upturned sense of privacy leaves her longing for the seeming connection and comfort she finds in a full space.

Bibliography

Smith, Ali. *Hotel World*. New York, New York: Anchor Books, 2002.