



ENNIFER KABAT Last night I read the ending of your novel again, and I decided we should title this interview "Luminously Ordinary."

ANNA MOSCHOVAKIS I stole that line.

JK Who'd you steal it from?

AM It's Charles Nicholl's description of Rimbaud's life toward the end. I quote it, actually.

JK But it also fits your book. Just the way you describe the people in their spring coats in the street when it's actually winter, or this moment: "the air outside was translucent, as if particles of cold were suspended in it..." You're describing this scene in New York City; Eleanor's walking around and she sees the words 9-1-1 WE WILL NOT FORGET and we know where we are, but there's something about it that's unlike the description in most realist novels because you compress and repeat things in a way that unhinges the narrative.

AM I interviewed Renee Gladman recently and we talked about the question of detail—how fully to describe things in the world of a book. How true to geography to be, how to measure the trade-offs of naming versus gesturing toward. For a long time the street names in *Eleanor*, or were just initials, and then that started to feel distracting or too close to allegory. At the same time I wanted to de-emphasize the specifically Brooklyn aspects, so places are a bit off. Streets and police stations are in the wrong place.

JK Intentional weird geography.

AM I was interested in a phenomenological realism, or soft architecture: what you sense when walking through a space.

JK What do you mean by phenomenological realism? Or soft architecture?

AM I never know if I'm using a term correctly.

JK Oh, like *Office for Soft Architecture*?

AM Lisa Robertson.

JK Yeah, I love her.

AM I haven't read that book in over a decade and need to revisit it. In her *Manifesto*, she says something I love about description and politics that's impossible to summarize, though it includes the injunction "Practice description." The tendency to read with passion and still half-forget what I've read is also all over my book. The most autobiographical thing about this novel is

its intertextuality, the piles of books that Eleanor dips into, which both do and don't register fully on her person. But yes, I'm more interested in describing how what Eleanor takes in through her senses becomes inscribed in her body and thought than in trying to "map" or reproduce her point of view.

JK Can you give an example? It's an intense subjectivity.

AM There's a part toward the beginning where Eleanor's lost her laptop, and she has this habitual response, a cycle of shock, anger, and self-abnegation, modeled on the stages of grief. And while in that intense state, a somatic as well as a psychic one, she happens to be walking down a street, hoping her lover will be home.

JK There are moments when she notices things around her in a very acute way. The voice becomes lyrical, and then she self-abnegates again. It reminds me of that part in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* where the protagonist, Sasha, is walking down the street, and the houses come alive, standing over her "like monsters." They seem to shake their fists at her and point out her flaws: "Tall cubes of darkness, with two lighted eyes at the top to sneer." In realist fiction, the details around the character often reflect the character's state of mind, and it becomes super heavy and drives me nuts. But you seem to have found another way of using Eleanor's interiority as a way of seeing the world.

AM I'm glad you brought up Rhys, whose novels I love. When you work on something for so long, you sometimes think of the perfect solution to a problem and then forget it. One solution I had came directly from a Rhys novel, and I realized just now that I forgot to put it in the book.

JK But now we can have it as an addendum!

AM It's from *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. The protagonist has a relationship to chance and passivity that feels somehow similar to Eleanor's. She's trying to make a decision and decides if a car honks three times in the next X number of minutes, the answer will be yes. I was going to have Eleanor use the same trick.

JK Eleanor does tarot and other things as a way of understanding her fate, even as she disbelieves in that stuff.

AM Yeah, back to architecture: these divination-type practices are sort of non-geographical maps.

JK That's how I look at astrology, as a map of the future that might not be exactly accurate but gives you a guide.

AM You can look at a map of somewhere you intend to go or somewhere you're never going to go, and both

are valid uses. People argue about the "right" way to use recipes, etcetera...I'm interested in these shifting kinds of use.

JK In the novel there's a critic; his name is Aidan. And then there's the author character, the first-person I, who is not Anna Moschovakis. I remember when you added in the critic—do you want to talk about why you did that?

AM I always assumed that if I were to write fiction it would be a slim little book. Once I'd written the first two thirds of Eleanor's story, I thought that was going to be my little hundred-page, international fiction-influenced novella that I would never publish. But I was enjoying working out questions about fiction and particularity, trying to write something that made me feel the way certain novels I love do. Short ones! Like *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooks or *Forever Valley* by Marie Redonnet or Clarice Lispector's novels. Eleanor's story felt like a picaresque, which at first I'd liked, but something about it became unsatisfying. I shared those pages with people, yourself included. And I was making my own marginal notes. I do this with poetry too: a brutal takedown of my own piece, where I'll write down everything the meanest critic might say. Then I sleep on it, cry. And in the morning decide whether those are legitimate critiques, and if they are, whether I want to resist them—because I disagree, or because they serve as openings to conversation—or if they need to be addressed. At the same time I was getting these astute notes back from the people I'd given the manuscript. I did a couple revisions based on the comments, and it occurred to me that this process of resistance and integration was as interesting to me as what was going on in Eleanor's story. So I thought, What if I invent an interlocutor and put these interactions and arguments in the book? It brought up a lot, but was also freeing. And it created another problem: any thought I had about the book could be pretty easily folded into it, via a conversation with the critic or a question in the author character's head. I had to decide where to stop.

JK At the beginning, the relationship between the author character and the critic was mostly them reflecting on the text, but then it became a larger narrative with its own arc.

AM I didn't expect for that to happen, and that was the point where it started to feel unexpectedly novel. Their relationship became a way to explore a particular dynamic I decided to try to face. I was more bemused than anything. But then I just went with it. I'll do anything once.

JK Let's talk about that. One time we were having dinner with Lynne Tillman, and you said you'd been writing longer and longer poems and that fed this project.

AM I had written the first fifty pages of three novellas and each time lost interest. I think a couple of things led to my finishing this book. One is that my poems had become more discursive, more essay-like, with figures and characters, with extension. Though prose, argument, and a certain level of narrative have always been part of my poetry. And then I'm a freelance translator, and over the last ten years I've translated five novels from French. The process of translating is a little like writing without the anxiety of figuring out what you need to write—it can feel like training, like covering songs in order to learn how to write them. I envied the type of immersion I presumed would happen if I wrote a novel. I'd always written poetry in the cracks of my life, never establishing a regular studio practice. I was just talking to Sawako Nakayasu, and she told me that this year she boycotted Thanksgiving and wrote a book over the long weekend. Years ago, I spent the Fourth of July weekend locked in my room writing the long poem that ended up completing my first book. The kinds of jobs I've had, and maybe my psychology, made it impossible to centralize writing as a daily practice. And at a certain point in my life the question arose, Can I change that? It turned out that, especially during the summer, there were many days when I felt I could afford to spend ninety minutes writing without hurting anyone (that was how I put it to myself). But since that was not my way of writing poetry, this new habit led me to try again to write a novel. With this book, instead of relying on the cracks in my schedule, I would go through a two-month period where I wrote every day. I would have to drop it, sometimes for as long as a year or more, but then I'd pick it back up with sustained intensity. It was a palpably different way of working. It took maybe six years to get to where it was basically done. I was also craving the play-space of doing something I didn't expect to publish. My friend Carin Besser, a great editor and writer, gave it lots of time and challenged me to see it through.

JK Your novel conforms to a traditional novel in ways you probably never expected. But it's still experimental.

AM Probably the only way in which it's experimental is that I didn't have a plan when I wrote it, so I was experimenting.

JK There's also the way you use repetitions and compress time. Repeating "time passed" instead of filling up that time. There's the refrain of "She got up," which was the original title. The critic character and I both think that was a great title.

AM That's funny. "She Got Up" was the title of an older, fragmented prose piece I wrote, which was where the idea of "the thing that had happened" came from. I was struggling, both in my life and in writing, with how to

talk about the effects of acute but everyday trauma, like grief and loss. Or the destabilizing shock of the unexpected, something not turning out the way you planned. And the paralysis that can come with that, either temporary or more long-term. I was trying to figure out—back to the conversation with Renee—how many particulars are necessary. What's just the right amount of particularity to get across the emotional effects of something sharp, painful, and consequential?

K Right. So there's an unstated moment of grief or trauma that happens before the beginning of the novel that we're only privy to indirectly; you call it "the thing that happened" or "thing prime." There's no sense of what it actually is. The backstory isn't filled in. And we have to live with that as an ellipsis.

AM I struggled with this. I didn't want to be coy. But I gave up that worry after a point. Often in poetry, especially when there's autobiography, this question comes up: What is the right amount to reveal? When is the intensely personal or specific useful to the piece? I just rewatched Moyra Davey's video about Derek Jarman, *Notes on Blue*. And she goes through a litany of artists and thinkers who have said something to the effect of: the more intensely personal and specific it is, the more broadly affecting it will be. When I wrote "She Got Up," I was also learning how to meditate and was interested in the idea of emptying the narrative—which also means emptying the causality—from a feeling and trying to sit with the feeling itself. How do you talk about a feeling that comes out of narrative while reducing the importance of the backstory?

JK The novel is basically about how Eleanor deals with this unspoken trauma. She starts as a person full of grief. And she's a little solipsistic. And she ends up a more transcendently open person.

Plot involves this notion of progress, which neither of us is super into. Yet Eleanor changes. The ending is so beautiful and open. There's this line: "any thing may produce any thing."

AM That's from David Hume. I've kept that line with me since I took a course on Hume in college as a philosophy major because it was taught by the only female professor in the department. Hume was obsessed with how knowledge related to experience and causality, with describing whether or how we might ever be justified in claiming that A has led to B. The same events can be interpreted by one person as progress and by another as simply change or sequence. Eleanor does change—but the changes aren't so easy to describe. I was talking earlier about the body and all of the minute internal shifts that register on Eleanor's person. I trained in modern dance for a while. And what I loved most about that training was how you discover within your body—which you think you know—very tiny

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movements that you wouldn't have considered if someone hadn't called your attention to their possibility.

JK The difference between holding your wrist like that or like this.

AM Exactly, or a muscle tensing slightly, invisibly. Changes can be about focusing attention rather than proceeding through steps.

I've been thinking about whether we tend to perceive a categorical difference between transformations that feel forced upon us by events or circumstances as opposed to those that originate from within, with a desire to be a better person, to acknowledge privileges, to combat learned behaviors, to align our desires with our politics. On both sides of this flawed binary, the changes are about responding to facts of the world—facts we take to be beyond our control—but we locate our agency differently. Both kinds of changes are happening in Eleanor and in the author character. And maybe it adds up to progress in some way.

JK Your writing has a deep engagement with Western philosophy, and you unhinge it a bit.

AM I fell into studying philosophy as an undergrad and always felt excluded by the Western philosophical tradition and by the male-dominated rooms in which I learned it. I formed a relationship to it based on a lack of belonging, with a corresponding absence of the anxiety of influence. And maybe a propensity—common among poets—to read philosophy as "creative writing."

JK Totally. It's a way to use it in a different way, one you own.

AM Yes, though I struggle with notions of ownership! A lot of things I like about language and sentences came from reading those philosophers—often in translation—in that unauthorized way: specifically Wittgenstein, as well as Hume and Kierkegaard and Kant. My allegiance was to the continental philosophers and to theory, but the analytic philosophers fascinated me with what I felt to be an absurd desire to nail down experience—it often felt like fiction, or science fiction. How not to create characters for Leibniz's monads? I wrote in a poem about Hume's figuration of empathy, which he calls a form of sympathy. It's a diagrammatic proposition, describing what amounts to the transmission of affect, which depends on his belief that impressions and ideas are different in degree and not in kind. I loved how these descriptions felt wrong-headed yet kind of right. Plus his writing was just fun to read. So I formed a relationship to philosophy that was mediated through creativity or through the unauthorized use of the material. It wasn't subversive so much as survivalist, at the time.

Wittgenstein felt much closer to how I was thinking and how I still think. I read him for both style and substance. And Lévinas, the subject of my thesis, hit me hard—this is where the foundational nature of relation comes in. The idea that relation is not something we do after we become a self but is how the self begins is one I encountered most explicitly through my reading of Lévinas. His ideas, combined with later readings in psychoanalysis and whatever psychological makeup I inherited, fed my conviction that without relation, there's nothing.

I grew up the daughter of two logicians. Their domains in math fall under Constructivism and its subset, Intuitionism. I knew as a child that people who thought math was about cold, hard facts were wrong. I knew it was essentially creative. So the imagination became linked in my mind to what appear to be systems of structuring, describing the world. And you know, I work with two collectives, and we're always trying to invent or reinvent systems that are efficient but that preserve creativity. I'm drawn to organizational methods with that aim: collectivized labor, time banking, mutual aid.

JK We were supposed to do this interview at Bushel, a community space you started with other people in Delhi, New York. Your collectivist urge is really strong—the idea of the interpersonal creating something that can replace hierarchic structures. You also recently set up a time-share apartment in the city for adjuncts who commute from upstate—a kind of utopian experiment in how people can share space. And then there's Ugly Duckling Presse, a publishing collective. You and I both have an interest in nineteenth-century utopias and non-capitalist possibilities.

AM I hold friendship as beyond a value, almost as a religion, and this feels inborn. I'm thinking of the title of this beautiful essay by Ann Lauterbach, "The Given and the Chosen." I feel this kind of feral commitment to and belief in friendship, and not just close personal friendship but the possibility of commons and commune, is both a given and a chosen for me. Which doesn't mean I'm perfect at any of those things!

When I joined UDP in 2001, it was a group of friends who'd been making one-of-a-kind books and Xeroxed chapbooks and mounting performances wherever they could. We started making larger editions, and they confused some people because there were certain elements that belonged to fine press printing, like letterpress or hand stitching, but then we were using totally non-archival materials, sometimes Xeroxing, sometimes sending out to a commercial binder—combining all of these methods because they worked, they were available, and they didn't get in our way. We were young and we had more time than money. It was a lot about enjoying the process. We'd find dusty shops downtown or in Queens to acquire

lead type or free off-cut paper. Places that had been open for many decades (and now have been closed for years).

Bushel is a space that a bunch of us created in a tiny town that we felt lacked public venues for random encounters or collaborative activities. There are a million churches here, but we didn't see any spaces like that. At first people weren't sure what Bushel was, but we kept at it, and it's become a locus for organizing and for many forms of assembly and exchange. I think with Bushel and with UDP, there was an interest in responding to voices that say, "You can't do that. You shouldn't. That's not how it's done." And to say maybe we can just do that, or even if we can't, we can try.

JK That's what I've learned from you as a writer—not to wait for someone to say, "It's okay, now you can start to do this thing." Find your own way through it. And that allows you to write in ways that shift one's relationship to authority figures.

AM The relationship to authority is an important engine for the novel—the author is struggling to author her book, just as Eleanor struggles to author her life, and in each case there are looming (male) figures that hold up the *shoulds* and *shouldn'ts* that oppress and get internalized. I often feel like my relationship to authority is unresolved. One of the ways I deal with that is by keeping my focal length pretty short when it comes to what I'm making. Just me working, or just me and you talking, or just this small group of people and the ways we can engage with our immediate community. Anything beyond that is like *hmmm*, just a hum that I don't have the wherewithal to focus on, because I'm going to keep my nose to the grindstone and keep plugging away.

JK It stops authority and success from being these things that sit on your shoulder.

AM It's a refusal to engage with certain forces that might otherwise paralyze me. Which may or may not be okay. It's fairly avoidant, but also adaptive. For now.

JK In the novel there's a constant purr of the outside world, news events that press in, giving a sense of the timescale, and there's also a sense that the interpersonal becomes the political.

AM There's a tension there, because to focus too much on what an individual can or should do, especially what a consumer can or should do, is to fall prey to a kind of fiction that can do a lot of damage. And at the same time, what we do as individuals, how we respond, matters a lot to us and to the people we engage with, and maybe to the world.

A related question came up in my conversation with Sawako: What is the political value of a feeling?

To feel bad about events in the world. To feel guilty. To feel implicated in the systems we participate in. What is the status of those feelings? It can be tempting to think they're only political insofar as they promote action. At the same time, they are real; we seem to want to account for them. And to deny that is to deny that they can also act as excuses for not changing your relationship to your own givens. Or that they can be so oppressive they become incapacitating, making you a burden on whoever's taking care of you, if you're lucky enough to have someone take care of you. All of these things add up to it being almost impossible to live. A graduate student of mine, Alisha Mascarenhas, is writing a sequence of prose poems called "All my friends are sick & sad." So many people I know are struggling with not knowing how to be, wanting to fight but facing such extreme exhaustion. And deep alienation.

JK Clearly Eleanor has these feelings that shape her existence in the world.

AM In the first part of the novel, Eleanor is in a kind of decadent mode. I can't totally defend how or who she is.

JK Grief shuts her off from the world.

AM And at the same time, her manic relationship to the news—being hyper-stimulated by it and having to reduce it to a hum—is familiar to many of us now, the way news gets flattened. Things that happen at a distance. Things of which our knowledge is always mediated by so many unknowns, as well as by methods that we understand or think we understand. The politics of Eleanor's trajectory, and the author's too, are under revision. They're mired in a confusion about how to break out. Maybe that's the biggest way in which this is a middle-aged novel: just when you get to the point—and to me this has felt gendered—where you're a little bit less susceptible to trying to do things right or doing things to fit in or just to pass unnoticed; just when you try to claim your subjecthood from your habit of letting yourself be overrun, then there's a new panic. You think: I need to reassess everything because of all these things I haven't been letting myself say out loud. I have to look at what those things are in a new way, and see if I like myself or believe in this haphazard formation of self that I have let occur by following the exigencies of material needs, or the dictates of largely unconscious needs. So there's a massive question mark at the heart of the novel. And at the end it's still a question, but it's maybe, I don't know, set in a better font.

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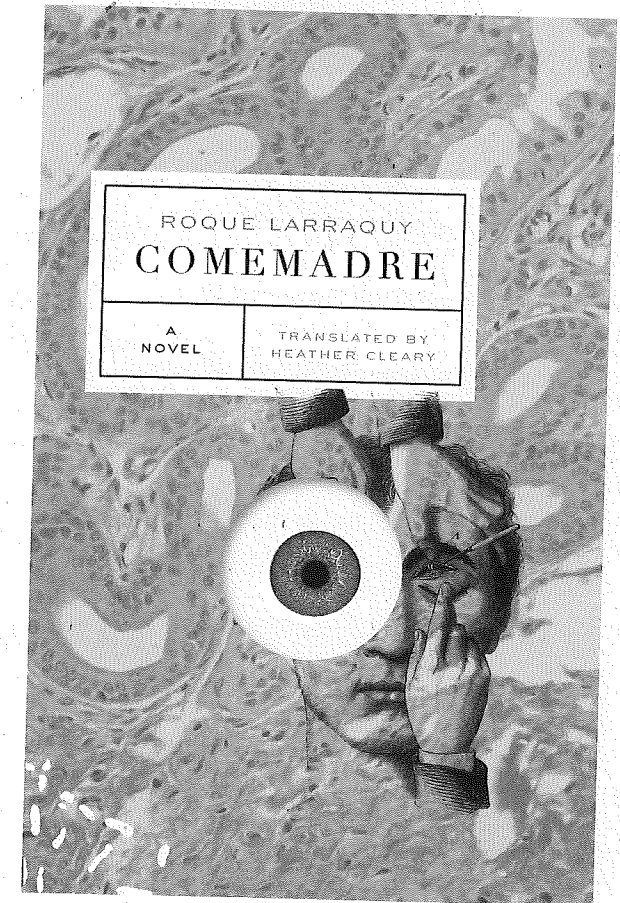
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