8.2 To gallop again and again into failure: Kaveh Akbar and Pardis Dabashi (SW)

Transcript

Sarah Wasserman

Hello, and welcome to *Novel Dialogue*, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with *Public Books*, an online magazine of arts, ideas, and scholarship. I'm Sarah Wasserman, one of the hosts at *Novel Dialogue*. This podcast brings you lively conversations between brilliant critics and the most exciting novelists out there to talk about how novels get made and what they mean. And today we have a great episode that I'm really excited about. Pardis Dabashi is here to talk with the award-winning poet, editor, and novelist Kaveh Akbar. Kaveh Akbar is the author of two poetry collections, *Pilgrim Bell* and *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, in addition to a chapbook, *Portrait of the Alcoholic*. He has received many honors for his poetry, including multiple Pushcart Prizes, and in 2020 he was named Poetry Editor of *The Nation*. Kaveh teaches at the University of Iowa and in the MFA programs at Randolph College and Warren Wilson. His novel, *Martyr!*, was published in January of this year and quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller. In a review for *The New Yorker*, Katy Waldman called the book, quote, “almost violently artful, full of sentences that stab, pierce, and slice with their beauty,” end quote. I'd add that in addition to being wounded by the book's beauty, I found myself at other moments laughing aloud, contemplating the importance of both Rumi and Lisa Simpson, or gripping the book tightly in suspense. *Martyr!* is a book that gives readers all the feels. So welcome to the show, Kaveh. Thanks for being here.

Kaveh Akbar

Thank you so much for having me, and thank you for that intro, too. Thank you for being so generous with your time and your attention.

SW

Well, we're just really happy to have you here, and we're happy to have Pardis Dabashi, who is Assistant Professor of Literatures in English and Film Studies at Bryn Mawr College. She is the author of the 2023 book, *Losing the Plot: Film and Feeling in the Modern Novel*, which argues that plot in modernist novels was deeply influenced by classical Hollywood cinema. She has written many articles on modern literature, film, and issues in higher education, and she is currently at work on new projects about Islam, Persian modernism, and Iranian New Wave cinema. Pardis has a capacious and incisive mind, and she's exactly the right person to help us explore the many and expansive themes of Kaveh's work. So, Pardis, thanks so much for being here today, and I'm happy to turn things over to you.

Pardis Dabashi

Thank you so much, Sarah, for that introduction, and Kaveh for being here. I'm so excited to be talking to you after having read your novel a couple of times and thought about it a lot, and I'm also familiar with your really incredible poetry, and maybe one of the things that I can start us off with is asking you what your—what it was like writing a novel after having written a considerable amount of poetry. Like, what was the distinction for you between these two modes of expression?

KA

Yeah, first of all, thank you so much for reading the book. Reading it multiple times is insane. I'm not—I have truly, truly, truly not gotten over just the eclipsing opportunity cost of reading a novel today. Like, it's just, the opportunity cost of reading a novel has never been greater, and I mean, instead of reading a novel, you could learn to tango on YouTube, or you could, you know, learn Esperanto on Duolingo, you know what I mean? Like, you could do literally anything else.

PD

Absolutely, that is true. [laughter]

KA

And, and just an unprecedented array of alternatives in our species history, and I'm happy to spend that with other people's novel, but it still utterly, utterly, truly, like, somatically feels unbelievable to me that people are spending, like, 10, 12 hours reading, you know, 85,000 words that I write. And then also I will just say, you know, poetry trained my ear, you know, the same way that memorizing the Psalms or Morrison or Nabokov will train your ear, you know, like, just really trained my ear.

PD

Yeah.

KA

And it made me good at the, just the sort of, like, purely mechanical ability to have people say gnomic sounding bon mots to each other, you know? What it never prepared me for was, like, putting people at tables, or having them walk through doorways, or explaining how they got the money to pay for their lunch, or, you know what I mean, like, that stuff there's no real correlative to in poetry, at least not in my poetry, maybe for like a very narrative poet there would be but I'm not a person— And so it actually felt pretty far from, it felt pretty removed from poetry, it felt quite a bit like a totally new thing.

PD

Yeah, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And, and yet there are also moments in the novel where suddenly language becomes, like, disorientingly crisp. Like I'm thinking about this moment where—I forget which character is talking to which other character, but there's a moment where Cyrus is thinking something like, I think he's, I think he's talking to Orkideh and he's saying something like, he's thinking to himself that in talking to her about this book that he wants to write about martyrs, he's, he's suddenly giving form to something that has been formless, and then there's this phrase that you use that goes, it was like, it—I'm gonna hopefully not botch it—it was something like, it was like “throwing flour on a ghost.”

KA

Mhm. Yeah, totally.

PD

You know? And, and I was like, oh my god, I know, I know exactly what that is, like, I feel that when I’m writing an article or like I feel like that when I’m, you know, trying to produce an idea when suddenly, oh okay, something comes into focus, or something invisible suddenly becomes visible. Um, anyway, that’s all by way of saying that it’s really cool to hear you talk about how writing a novel has been so different, but also, I feel like one of the ways that people have been responding to this novel is in recognizing the, like, sudden moments where language just kind of like comes so powerfully to the fore in a way that’s really unignorable.

KA

Yeah, I'm so grateful for that, um, for your attention to and articulation of that idea in the novel, and especially that moment, that moment is such a, I mean like, it's uncanny that you point to it. I don't know that anyone with whom I've spoken about the novel has pointed to that specific moment, but that specific moment feels like, sort of the, I don't know, the Rosetta Stone for the whole book. So much of the language of the book, I mean every character has a soliloquy at some point in the book about the limitations of language or their frustrations with language as an instrument for its, you know, the sheer inarticulability of like the most profound experiences of our life, like, we are made and shaped by the things that we can't name, right? And so, the, you know, sort of Ars Poetica, right, it's like I, you know, like, the idea that, you know, I'm in this sort of quixotic enterprise to gallop again and again into what I know will be failure because, like, what can be said with language, a human invention, about something as ineffable and ephemeral as love or desire or rage or loneliness or despair, fear of God, or, you know what I mean, like all of the things that actually sort of animate and make me and indelibly shape the algorithms of my consciousness are things that there is no language for, there's no sufficient language for. And so it all feels like the actual thing, the thing that I'm looking at, the thing that I'm always writing towards, is this—you know, if the Chomskyian neurolinguists are to be

believed, the thing that distinguishes human language from all other language is its recursiveness, right, so I can say “the man on the phone call” or I can say “the man on the phone call with the beard” or I can say “the man on the phone call with the beard and the shirt,” right, like, I continue adding to it forever. And the zenith of such recursiveness is that the language actually just becomes me. Right, like, the language, like, giving you the, you know, atomic coordinates of every atom of my makeup and suddenly it just becomes me, right. But short of that, you know, short of giving you—and, the atoms are always moving, you know, whatever—and short of that, the language is always going to fall short, right. The language is always going to fail to mention something, right, and not, you know, it's like [unintelligible]. And so, and so I'm much more interested, I think, as a language artist, at pointing to the insufficiency of the language, at pointing to what the language can't do instead of saying like, “here's the ghost,” to say, “here's a bunch of grains of flour thrown at the thing,” you know.

PD

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. To somehow throw it into relief.

KA

Yeah, yeah. Throw it into relief. That's a beautiful way to say it, throw it into relief. All that big, long rhapsody that I just gave—“throw it into relief” is so much better language.

SW

I was going to jump in with a question that—it sort of picks up on a few of these different threads you've both been talking about, but maybe it doesn't, maybe it takes us in a different direction. And it's about dialogue, I think on one level, my question, but on the other I think it's more about the impulse in this novel to escape oneself or to get beyond the limits of one's self. I mean I think like, a very flat-footed reading of the novel is like, look, it's autofiction! And why I'm calling that flat-footed is not to say that it isn't, but you know, the protagonist has this profound desire to escape himself, I think in many different ways, and whether that's like the limits of the body or the feelings of shame or the limits of language, you know, there's always this sort of, like, restless movement towards that. And I'm interested in how that, for you, does or doesn't hook into the emphasis in this novel on dialogue. I mean you wrote all these amazing dialogues between historical figures, between characters in the novel, between completely fictional characters, and I'm interested in whether or not dialogue for you felt so important because you're thinking of this as a primarily relational story, because it does feel like a novel that's also written in one voice. Which is why I think it feels like autofiction at times, and I don't know if, for you, that tension between conversation and relation and the container and limits of the self, like, how that structures the way you think about writing, even.

KA

Yeah, it's such a beautiful question and I, you know, it sparks like 37 different things that I want to say. I like writing dialogue because I can ventriloquize opposing viewpoints that I, to which I subscribe, right, which is to say you know I think the pathologization of cognitive dissonance in the twentieth century has led to a lot of sort of hollow-feeling performances of certainty in the twenty-first century, or performances of monolithic monocognition, right, like, “this is the thing that I believe about this thing” and, you know, and it eclipses all other thought, right. That—I mean, such is the idiom of social media, right. And that kind of rhetorical certainty is just, if it exists in anyone's minds—it certainly doesn't exist in mine, right. Like, every thought that I have, I am concurrently on the same neural charge thinking the opposite thing too, you know, and second guessing it and being like, “oh, well, of course you want to do that, Kaveh,” you know, like and, you know, like, or “of course you believe that,” like, “doesn't that make you feel, you know, enlightened” or, you know what I mean, like I—every thought is met with its counter thought in my mind, right. And the ability of narrative art to, you know, put your hand in one sock puppet and have them say the one part and put your hand in the other sock puppet and have them say the other part back, right, is so thrilling to me, right. I mean in poetry you can call it negative capability or objective correlative, or—but, in narrative art, the form that I find most accommodating for that is dialogue, right. It feels very dynamic, and so I appreciate your—I mean, maybe people will read the book and say, like, all the characters just sound the same, I hope that's not the case, but—

SW

I don't think that's true.

KA

Yeah I mean—you wouldn't be able to say—I mean, you couldn't tell me right now even if you did think it was true but, what I'm saying, I don't mean to—

SW

No, I mean, no, there are amazing novelists, all of whose characters sound like—Faulkner is a novelist, all of whose characters sound the same.

PD

Yeah.

KA

Yeah, that's cool, yeah, that's a good, yeah—but yeah, but I'm just, I say that to say, I mean, obviously I share some biographical symmetries with Cyrus, um, we're both born in Iran, raised in America, poets, addicts, alcoholics, you know. But I feel as autobiographically represented by Orkideh and and Arash and Ali, you know what I mean, like the sort of the superficial identity

symmetries may be a little bit different or more stark, but the things that come out of their mouths are, you know, just, truly I just turn to face a different corner of my brain and write that character. I, yeah, I will end this by saying that the book actually began as like the earliest, earliest, earliest drafts and pages began as just this sort of purely, purely, purely conversations with Orkideh, like, and just, it would be random people sat across from her and she would be, you know, this font of oracular wisdom, and there would be sort of these ciphers, and then the next person would sit down and, you know, and it was sort of this, like, “Tuesdays with Morrie” sort of deal. [laughter]

PD

Oh man, so much better. Don’t even invoke, don’t even invoke that.

KA

It certainly wasn't the—I recognized pretty quickly into those drafts that while it might be interesting to me because I'm, like, utterly enchanted by my own, you know, feats of lexical acrobatics or whatever, it was not particularly narratively interesting, it wasn't propulsive in any way, you know. And I recognized quickly that the person sitting across from her had to be as interesting as she was, right. So thus was born Cyrus, which is interesting because now Cyrus sort of reads as, you know, if the novel has a protagonist I think most people would say it's Cyrus, but, but it began with Orkideh, it began with that character.

SW

That's really fascinating. That's really fascinating.

PD

I'm so, so excited by what you just said about the kind of, like, the way that you're using dialogue as a way of thinking about, um, as a way of kind of offering yourself an opportunity to play out, um, the different sides of our minds, right, like the—and, and the pressure, um, in public political culture but also, like, public social culture to, to express certainty.

KA

Yeah.

PD

And I'm, I'm so glad to hear you talk about that and I would love to talk a little bit more about that because I think one of the things that, um, Cyrus really seems to want is certainty. Like, he wants to, like, you know, like we open the novel with him being like “give me a clear sign,” for Christ’s sake, you know, like “give me a clear sign so I can know,” um, but then the rest of—he,

he is so self-doubtful, um, and so the, um, and the expression “grief and doubt” comes up a couple of a couple of times, I think, in the novel and um. Anyway, so I—the way that I would love to approach this question is actually to, to ask you about how you think the problem of certainty or the, the desire for certainty in a character who is so doubtful of himself, um, converges with Islam. And the reason I say that is that, like I'm thinking of the first line of the second surah of the Quran that says like, “this is a book in which there is no doubt,” you know, like there's, like, a commitment to—like, being a believer is in overcoming doubt, right, um, and this is something that Cyrus wishes he could do, but he simply can't. Um, so yeah, could you talk a little bit about doubt and certainty?

KA

Yeah, I mean, it's such a beautiful question, this is, I love, I mean, you guys have really—it's cool to be able to talk about this stuff with people who have really, um, thought along the same lines clearly for as long as you have. I mean, the word that appears in the Quran most often is not “Allah,” it's “verily,” it's the word that we translate to—it’s the Arabic word that we, you know, it's “verily.” Verily, like the Quran is, like, constantly trying to—I mean, it's just, I mean, it's a fascinating text in 20,000 trillion different directions, obviously. Um, but the way that it is like, “this is self-evident,” “this is self-evident.” There's the surah called, you know, called “The Poets,” and it's like, you know, the poets and only the deviators follow them because they, you know, say that which they don't know, right, and, and basically the argument is like, if you guys think that Muhammad is just, like, this beautiful poet who's, like, writing this stuff, like, you go try to do it. You know what I mean, like you go try to write something that like, slaps this hard, you know. I mean and, and it's like the exorcism of certainty is so foundational—of, of doubt rather—

PD

Of doubt, yeah, absolutely.

KA

—is so foundational and I just, again, I'm just not that certain of anything. I'm not, like, and, and I—there's a scene in the novel where Cyrus is talking to his AA sponsor and Cyrus is like, “um, I think I want to be a martyr” and his sponsor is like, uh, his sponsor says something to the effect of, like, “oh, you want to strap a bomb to your chest and walk into a cafe, like, you can't even wash your own clothes,” right? And, and Cyrus is like “first of all, that's racist, second of all—[laughter]

PD

I love—I love that scene so much, I think it's so funny. And so true! You know.

KA

Yeah, but, but that's another, you know, that's another moment of, like, that certainty thing that we were talking about too is, like, and that, like, sort of two-mindedness where, what he says, you know, that, that Cyrus is, like, just not serious enough about anything to do that, is, is racist, Cyrus is right, and it's also true, you know what I mean. Like, like both of those exist concurrently and it might not be his place to say it, but maybe it is his place as a sponsor to just, like, bypass the sort of rhetorics du jour or, um, but anyways. I—I share that to say, like, that there's a, you know, I have always—I, Kaveh Akbar, the writer, have always thought about how, you know, everyone that you read about in the Old Testament or in the Quran or, you know, um, they had all these miracles happening around them all the time and so then, you know, like, even as Job was being tortured, you know, he knew that there was a God—you know what I mean, it's like, all right, like, do whatever you want, like, I know that this is like a tiny bridge on the path to the hereafter, right. Whereas we're all sort of like wandering around without any burning bushes talking to us, right.

PD

Yeah.

KA

Um, and you know, without anyone, like, parting the Red Sea in front of us to see that there's, like, obviously a thing, you know what I mean, um, and, you know, some would say like, “oh, well, photosynthesis, like, the star from 93 million miles away sends light into Earth and then it turns into matter,” right, I mean, you know, like, you can find things, but, uh, the absence of, like, those just, like, undeniable miracles has always sort of made our faith seem, you know, those who have it, seem like, you know, black belt-level faith compared to the, you know what I mean, like—and there's actually, there's a hadith about, um, the prophet in Islam about, sort of, this idea where one of the followers of the prophet asks him “how close will we be to you in the hereafter?” and the prophet's like “not very, bro” like, in fact, I mean, “because you see me running around doing all these miracles,” you know what I mean, “the people who will be closest to me and God in the hereafter are the people who will be born hundreds of years from now who won't be the beneficiary of this direct vision”—you know, almost, you know, this hadith exists almost as a riposte to the kind of doubt that I'm articulating, you know, um, to say that, like, our faith is in fact deeper and that—I mean it also, like, um, I don't know, epistemologically implies the existence of like tiers of heaven-ness? I mean, like, you get, like, the extra good heaven which is, you know, troubling in a hundred different ways too.

PD

Yeah, you open the first page of this novel and, um, there's mention of Virginia Woolf and Iraj Pezeshkzad, um, *To the Lighthouse* and, uh, *My Uncle Napoleon*. And I was like, when I—when I saw that I just was, um, stunned because I thought, okay, we're in a different moment where there is a generation of, um, Iranian Americans who have this whole archive, right, we have *My Uncle Napoleon*, we have Ferdowsi, we have Hafez, Rumi, etc., etc., um, and we also have

Virginia Woolf and James Joyce and Tolstoy and all these other, you know, all these other things, and so, to open—and Melville, and, you know, all, all the folks that you mention.

KA

Yeah.

PD

And I just, I'm, okay, so first I just want to kind of recognize that and say, that strikes me as being a really exciting thing, a really exciting new thing. Um, the other thing is I—how I could formulate this into a question is, um, how have you felt as a novelist being a member of the Iranian diaspora, um, talking about what strikes me as being at least two worlds that, that are relatively unfamiliar to a lot of people. One being the world of 12-step recovery, the other world being that of the history of literature in Persian. You know, and how do you kind of manage the—I mean, there seems—is there a burden there. It strikes me that there may be some sort of burden there of explanation, you know, like what do you choose, like in your practice, like in your craft, right, like, what do you—what governs your choices in terms of, like, okay, I'm gonna kind of explain here that this kind of mythology of Ferdowsi, for instance, right, or here I'm gonna explain what you know what it means to quote, unquote, “be in the rooms,” you know? Yeah, so, I would love to hear you talk about that.

KA

Yeah, I mean, it, it is thrilling. I mean, it's thrilling and I think that, I'm—I'm tethered to my subjectivity like every other human being who's ever been, right? Um, so when I say—

PD

Speak for yourself! [laughter]

KA

Uh, and so when I say, you know, I mean, uh, Borges says Kafka influenced Cervantes, right, which is, which is to say, you know, he read—he read Kafka and then he could never read Cervantes the same way, right? In my case like *My Uncle Napoleon* influenced Chaucer, you know, I read *Napoleon* before I ever read *The Canterbury Tales*, you know, and so—

PD

That’s a beautiful way to put it.

KA

Yeah, and so it's like—it's like, I…this is, this is my unprecedented reality, right, and articulating from that, right, like when I say—and like—and so I think that my…to the sense that I feel burden or obligation, it's just to staying, like, rigorously true to that. You know what I mean, not being like, here's a bunch of pomegranates and hummus and, you know, the grandmother farting and everyone giggling, [laughter] you know what I mean, like, whatever, you know, like. But instead just being like, you know, what is in my bedroom is, you know, Virginia Woolf and, you know, *My Uncle Napoleon*, and, you know, whatever else, you know what I mean, like, it's just whatever, and that persists throughout the book, right, like there are conversations with Lisa Simpson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and also Rumi, and there's also a long chapter about Ferdowsi, and, you know, and, um, because that's what my consciousness feels like, right, like I don't have one lobe of my brain for, like, thinking about person shit and like, you know, whatever, and another lobe of my brain for being able to talk about Yeats, you know what I mean?

PD

Yeah, absolutely.

KA

Like it's just all in there sloshing around, and I want to make a thing that sounds like that slosh.

PD

Absolutely, absolutely. And I think—I mean, I think one of the things that's really exciting for me as a scholar reading a book like this is like, there's still a lot, I mean there's been a lot of scholarship, there's been a lot of attempts on the part of scholars to kind of think what's often called, I think, like, really, you know, um, limitingly and problematically, like, transnationally or globally or whatever, you know, um, but there's often this very, very elaborate, um, theoretical apparatus that has to be erected around, like, pairing folks who are in, let's say, like, the Euro-American tradition with, um, folks who are from, you know, Asia, you know. And there's a, and there's a, you know, that's, it's understandable, you know, like, for a lot of readers it's difficult to kind of understand—I intuitively immediately understand what you mean when you say you know, like, *My Uncle Napoleon* influenced Chaucer. Like I—you read Chaucer through *My Uncle Napoleon*, that makes—

KA

100%.

PD

—makes complete sense to me without any explanation whatsoever, but it is very, potentially very difficult for folks who don't have that experience to understand, you know. And so, anyway,

I just thought, I think it's an exciting moment where we have this, like—it's a generational thing, too, you know, it's a couple generations out from the Iranian revolution, you know, like the Islamic revolution, and so—

KA

Well—I'm sorry.

PD

Yeah, no, no, go ahead, go ahead.

KA

I just, I mean, that's something I think about a lot, too, though, is like, the generation who remembers the Iran that our parents tell us about, you know, when you see like, corny, you know, listicles about “look at all these Iranian women in miniskirts before the revolution,” you know what I mean, whatever that—you know, but like our parents, who actually, you know, my dad was obsessed with the Rolling Stones, for instance, like he, like, before he knew a word of English he could sing along to every Rolling Stones song

PD

Totally. My mom, it was the Bee Gees.

KA

Sure, yeah, yeah, exactly, but that's what I'm saying, and like—and like, the Stones came to Tehran, you know what I mean, like. Uh, and there was, like, I think it was under—my, my dad talks about how there was like a top 10, uh, like a, like a Casey Kasem sort of deal but, uh, it was like a top 10 songs of the week and the DJ or whatever on the radio station was like, “number 10, ‘Under My Thumb’ by the Rolling Stones” and they played it, “number 9, ‘Under My Thumb’ by the Rolling Stones,” [laughter] and, like, the entire top 10 was just that, so like, that's how big they were. You know what I mean?

PD

Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

KA

And, like, the generation who remembers that shit is like, is—they're not gonna be around a whole lot longer.

SW

I have a question that's actually for both of you in a way that follows from this, um, you're kind of—so, in thinking about the way that you don't have one lobe of your brain for one thing and another lobe for another, and part of the way—one reason, I think, that's what you're talking about, Pardis, that this book feels so fresh and so contemporary to me is it does this blenderized thing and whether or not I understand every reference, it doesn't preclude me from understanding the whole, whatever we're using that to mean, and I can look things up and learn more, or I can not and, you know, it begins with an epigraph from Clarice Lispector and it's like half of the epigraph and I just think that there's a kind of, um, maybe it's a poet's relationship to taxonomies, maybe it's an iconoclast's relationship to taxonomies, and I think in the scholarly world we're so obsessed with "what is this thing," "what genre is it," "is this—," you know, I said autofiction, but "is this mystery," "is it a künstlerroman," "is it," you know, "romance," and I wonder if when you're writing, if this again just boils down to, "that's not how I inhabit the world, that's not how really anyone probably inhabits the world," and so that's what takes shape, or if you have a more conscious desire to break down some of these rigid ways we think about things, or if maybe, Pardis, if you feel like we're in a moment—I mean, it's hard to say, make a claim like this, right, but if we're in a moment with fiction where the fiction itself is showing us that the categories we've held on to as critics are actually moot. I don't know, questions for both of you, you can take this in any number of directions.

KA

Yeah, yeah, no, I'd love to hear you speak about that, Pardis, I think—I'm not—

PD

Oh god, oh god. [laughter]

KA

What is the Saul Bellow thing where he's like, uh, "I'm not an ornithologist, I'm a bird," right. [laughter] It feels a little—feels a little self-flattering, but like, I, in this instance, I actually am more interested in what you would say about that question than what I have to say or think. I think I'm too…it's like trying to describe a cloud—yeah, it's like trying to describe a cloud from inside the cloud.

SW

But it's also like, you have an agent or you have someone who says "we're going to market this book in this way" and so you're having that like you're having to live with it probably on the daily, in some way that's in relationship to this too but—

PD

Well, I—okay, go ahead, go ahead.

KA

No, no, no, no.

PD

Okay so—okay, so my way that I can answer this, I think, right now, and I should—full disclosure, I am not as—I'm not an expert on the contemporary novel. My, my period is more earlier twentieth century. Um, but I can say that in my, like, jarringly, disorientingly, uh, like, mimetic experience of reading this novel, you know, where I was like, whoa, this is, you know, uh, I have, I identify with this character along so many vectors in a way that I just don't usually because novels like this don't exist because this generation hasn't gotten old enough yet, and now we're old enough, you know, like where we write novels and publish them and identify with each other, you know. And so, uh, there's there's a great moment where one of the characters references, um, Queequeg in Melville and I think, like, Cyrus says something along lines about like, how he always sort of saw himself in Queequeg, or something like that, and I think that is a perfect example of how, you know, communities of color or, like, you know minoritarian, like, folks have to kind of find historically have had to find, kind of like, uh, you know, what someone called, like, disidentificatory paths toward literature. You know, like, um, that's like José Muñoz's, like, idea of, like finding yourself in images of hegemony even though you yourself don't occupy—

KA

Yeah. Yeah.

PD

—that position, um, but that in that kind of indirection that there's actually some sort of, like, generative, interesting, kind of, like political work being done. Um, what happens when you read a novel that you're just like, whoa, I feel like there's this one-to-one—the ratio is like one-to-one, you know, um, and that—it was the, I think it—for me it was the first experience of, of—first hand experience of what it's like to see yourself in a work of culture. And, on the one hand it was disorienting, and then on the other, I thought, okay and, you know, this is getting back to the question of, like, you know, fluidity and, and genre-bending and, and stuff like that, it's like when you're, um—more than ever, I felt, on a, like, sort of somatic level, that these, um, categories are so, so inadequate, um, to capture, like, what we were talking about earlier, like, talking about Woolf and Iraj Pezeshkzad in the same page, you know, or, like, in the same sentence, um, or like, thinking about W. E. B. Du Bois and, like, Safavid mirror art, like, in the same breath, you know, like this is very…there's no, um, there's no box for that, you know, like there's no convention for that, and, and so maybe one of the, you know, like one of the things that's

been—there have been tons of, like, incredibly smart critiques of like the DEI sort of, like, you know, moment or whatever in higher education, and also, like, public life, but I think one of the really exciting things about it is that it's offering us these opportunities to, like—yeah, of course somebody's always going to come along and, like, misread the project. You know, like, somebody's always going to come along and be like, “oh, this is a work of…XYZ,” you know, like “this is a—” and slap some name on it and make it sound far more reductive than it is, like that's always going to happen no matter what, but if there's a kind of, um, a critical mass of people who are able to understand, um, oh no, like this is actually tapping into a, like, I think the word that you used earlier, Kaveh, was unprecedented, like this is actually an unprecedented moment and not because it's like, you know, metaphysically special. In this case, I think it's a question of time passing. Like, the revolution happened in ‘79, now there's this whole other generation who are living in the wake of that, in the U.S. We have a whole set of different experiences producing this new literature that is, like, very difficult to categorize and, like, generatively and importantly so.

KA

I think too, a thing that distinguishes this moment from some in the past is that we're…I think that readers, just ye old literary fiction reader, um, has a greater appetite for intersectionality, which is to say, like, my Iranian novel isn't just about, like, the Shah or the Ayatollah or, you know, like, it's also about Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and it's also about queerness, and it's also about addiction, you know what I mean, like. And, and this idea that, you know, we don't need to flatten everything to just the single most obvious identity marker, right, like, the way that queerness works in the book, right, is, like, it sort of thumbs its nose at taxonomical designation—one of my favorite novels ever is Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, um, he was a contemporary of Achebe, um, in Nigeria and in the mid twentieth century, and while Achebe, sort of, you know, you can hang his sentences in a museum next to Morrison or Nabokov or Woolf, um, you know, he masters the European novel form greater than any living—you know what I mean, like, his, uh—Tutuola goes the other way, right, and he, um, his novels are full of, you know, just, Yoruba storytelling and logic that doesn't—I mean, even the book's titled *Palm-Wine Drinkard* instead of palm-wine drunkard, right, like when when it was published the Nigerian literary establishment was like, “we don't talk like this, like, we know English,” you know, and Tutuola was like, “I know, I'm not trying to prove that we do, like I'm past that, I'm not trying to prove anything to anyone,” you know what I mean, like, “I'm doing my own thing,” you know. And I find that so moving, so radical. Still to this day I reread it and I'm like, if this were published tomorrow I would be bowled over by this, let alone when he published it, you know.

PD
Yeah, yeah.

KA

I don't mean to create this dialectic between him and Achebe like one is better or worse, you know, it was just like, um, but, uh, I find myself so moved every time I think about that novel or read that, I mean, and that relationship, that sort of like, you know, it's one thing to, like, prove mastery of the colonial idiom, right, but it's a totally other thing to just be like I don't really care if you think I'm at—you know what I mean, and and I'm interested in that, I'm interested—I mean, like, to go back to what you were saying about, you know, seeing yourself, I mean, like, how many, for hundreds of years Caliban has been that for people, right, in the Tempest, right, like, it's just—there are entire, you know, supernovas of postcolonial literature born out of one character because like, you know, everyone teaches everyone Shakespeare and, like, the one character in all of Shakespeare that, you know, you can really glom on to in the subaltern world, they're experiencing, sort of, alterity, right, and thinking about just, like the radical potential of just creating, you know, and the sort of, like, the sort of, like, mystery miracle of it is the more granular and specific you—like I'm a, I wrote, I'm an, I wrote a book about a midwestern Iranian American drunk addict who writes poems and listens to The Locust and thinks about, you know, and, you know, if you make that Venn diagram narrow enough like the—it's just me left in it, you know what I mean.

SW

So now comes the time, and this is a very funny segue into this season's signature question, we, we close every season by asking all our guests the same question, and, um, the question this season is inviting you to take us all elsewhere, um, the question is, if you could live anywhere else in the world for a year, where would it be and why, and I'm gonna bar you from saying, not inside my own brain. [laughter] No, I'm kidding, I mean, I think probably that's a very delightful place to live, but, um, we're talking actual geography.

KA

No, inside my brain is just the constant process of wearing lesions into yourself. [laughter] Uh, I mean, this is not, like, as funny and quippy an answer as probably this is meant to be, but I think that what—what immediately came into my mind when you asked is to just be in Iran. I've never—I'll never be able to go back to Iran in this lifetime, um, because of myriad institutional bullshits and political whatnotaries and what I've written and what I've translated, etc., etc., and it feels, you know, there's just a, there's just a part, I mean, Persian was my first language, right, um, English, you know, and which, again, to linguistic—neurolinguistically means that my mind, not my language mind, but my mind mind, was terraformed by this way of thinking that, um, that I can't experience immersion, in, right, um, and so to be able to go back, um, for any amount of time, for a year, for whatever, um, yeah, I mean, inshallah, another lifetime.

PD

Inshallah. Inshallah.

SW

I think it's a beautiful answer and I think that readers are lucky to have the chance to inhabit the terraform of your mind, um, in English, for, you know, those of us who are English readers, um, and so, with that, I'll just say thank you, Pardis, thank you, Kaveh, for being here, and I do want to remind listeners that you can buy Kaveh's books in bookstores and online and we'll have some links to those on the episode's web page and as always we are grateful to the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, to *Public Books* for its partnership and to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rowan University for its support. Beck Daly is our production intern and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer. Check out past episodes featuring Sheila Heti, Chang-rae Lee, Ocean Vuong, Jeff VanderMeer, and many more. And if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. From all of us at Novel Dialogue thanks so much for tuning in, keep listening and keep reading.