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The Emotional Last Mile: A reflection on music and how it affects us. A program conceived by Benjamin Seror as an extension of his solo exhibition *Fascination* that ran at CRAC Alsace from November 2021 to February 2022.

Conversation with Karim Kattan, writer. This conversation took place in July 2022.

This conversation took place on one of the hottest days on record. We are publishing it today, two years later. In the meantime, the situation in Israel-Palestine has deteriorated dramatically, and in January 2024 the International Court of Justice warned that Gaza was at risk of genocide.

Benjamin Seror: A few years ago, Karim Kattan and I took the bus back from an event at the site of the Pythia of Delphi, in Greece, where we were both invited. The bus ride gave us the opportunity to get to know each other and talk about our backgrounds, the places we'd lived and where we'd like to live one day. We talked about the landscape between Delphi and Athens where our bus was heading, and how this landscape could evoke Palestine, Karim Kattan's native land. We also talked about Karim's obsession with the idea that Palestine would one day disappear, and how writing can be a tool to resist or help cope with this situation. I often think back to that bus journey, and since then have often wondered what sounds Karim hears when he writes. This new conversation was an opportunity to get back to these questions, with the idea of asking ourselves what tools we might have in common when writing songs or science fiction short stories.

Hello, for this first interview I have the pleasure of discussing and sharing ideas with Karim Kattan, who is here in the room with me. It's certainly one of the hottest days on record on this planet, and all the windows are closed to avoid hearing too much street noise. Karim, perhaps you'd like to say a few words to introduce yourself. First of all, I'll say that you're a writer, that a few months ago you were awarded the *Prix de la Francophonie* and that you've published two novels and several short stories so far. Do you have anything to ...

Karim Kattan: Hello, no that's about it. I'm a Palestinian writer. I write in French and English. I've been publishing for a few years now, in French I've published two books and in English mostly short stories, more science fiction at the moment. That's about it.

B.S.: Some time ago, you also had a radio show at night on which you played records.

K.K.: It's true, during the entire first year of the pandemic—the first pandemic, one might say—I had a show on a Palestinian radio station, at the very beginning. It was entirely due to my insomnia, I spent whole nights without sleeping, so I said to myself: there must be other people who don't sleep, so I'll play these things that relax me on the radio, so it was really music for insomniacs. Then the show became more thought out, though I still played music I liked, especially a lot of ambient stuff, a lot of Japanese music, once a week on the radio. I've stopped since then.

B.S.: To provide a bit of context to this interview, this conversation: I've been working for some time on a project that gave rise to an exhibition at *ORQ Alsace* in November 2021. In the exhibition, this project took the form of songs, songs that I call "sentimental", which are very emotional, very sad, which are songs that speak of our times, our environment. This work was the unfolding of research into the following questions: how are we affected by the things around us? How do we let ourselves be affected? And how are feelings conveyed through works of art and writing? What enables us to convey emotions? How do they reach us, and how do we let ourselves be touched by them? I've found music to be a very special tool because of the fact that so many people these days carry music around with them, listen to music. Music is everywhere, and with music we have a tool that helps to build our emotions, that in any case helps us to share a very broad and varied spectrum of emotions. And I wanted to ask myself how we use these emotions, what tools we have to help us channel our great sadness, our rage, all the emotions that overwhelm us, and I have this intuition that music is something much more important than the place we give it in our representations of how our thoughts travel and are transported. So I thought it would be interesting to share these questions with a number of authors and researchers, to try and elaborate this point of view and these tools, and so to begin this interview I'd like to start with a question: are you a musician? Do you practice music?

K.K.: Not at all, actually. When I say "not at all", I mean that not only am I not a musician and don't practice music, but I also don't have any tools for interpreting music, which means that—precisely in relation to what you're saying—in my imagination, music, the way I represent my relationship with music, can sometimes feel totally peripheral. It sometimes gives me the illusion of being peripheral to everything I do. But I think it's actually the material I consume the most, like many of us, from morning to night. And as a result, it totally informs everything I do, but without my having any competence or professional relationship with this object. This is not the case with most other arts, where I have at least one or two tools to relate to.

B.S.: So your main tool in music is listening?

K.K.: Yes, and it's a kind of narrative listening, which is very aesthetic. But I often can't even identify the instruments, for example.

B.S.: Right. From the point of view of my research, the reasons why I thought I'd ask you about it cover two slightly different areas, this idea of how one works with the presence of music. Because it's something that's very important to you, and we'll talk about it again, the fact that music is present at every stage in the conception and realization of your work. Thinking more specifically about this question of emotions, the transfer of emotions, there is a question that also interests me in terms of practices, customs and areas of knowledge. What's the difference between tools such as philosophy, sociology or writing for transporting emotions and understanding how they are affected? To be more specific—because in this work I've also developed a tool that I find very useful—this is what I call the "sad song". It's a song that I would describe as something that has the ability to cross space or to stop time. A sad song isn't necessarily a song that's melodic or poignant when you listen to it, it's also a song that has the capacity to overwhelm you emotionally. It's something you'd listen to, and if you heard it for the first time in a bar, for example, you'd stop talking completely and suddenly listen to more than just this music, which would become the horizon of the space you're in. And I was wondering if you had a piece of music you could share with us, to provide grounding and perspective to this interview, so that we could have this music together in our heads to imagine what we're talking about when we talk about a song that is important to you.

K.K.: Yes, I do. The two of us already talked about it in preparation for this discussion, and in fact, since we've been talking about it, I've been going over these things in my mind again. It was quite an interesting exercise, precisely because my relationship with music is passive, but I've been going through what I listen to over and over again. Each time, I asked myself whether this is something that "is", or something that "isn't". And the piece I ended up with, thinking that it really embodies, for me at least, this idea of the sad song, is also a song that remains indecipherable, but we'll come back to that. I chose a song from Sinéad O'Connor's first album, *The Lion and The Cobra*, which came out in 1987 or 1988, at the end of the '80s, called *Troy*, which is a rather complex song, and like many of Sinéad O'Connor's songs, it's pop, very specifically so, extremely emotional, to the point where it's embarrassing. For me, it's embarrassing. In fact, I was hesitating quite a bit between Sinéad O'Connor and another singer who has the same effect on me, Tori Amos, and in both cases it's the type of songs that bother me emotionally more than anything else, even though I listen to them compulsively. So here's *Troy* by Sinéad O'Connor, I'd like to go from there.

B.S.: Okay. Shall we listen to it?

K.K.: Let's.

[Sinéad O'Connor's "Troy" plays]

B.S.: Ok, thank you for choosing this song. It's a very sad song indeed.

K.K.: Ah, I'm glad I understood the criteria.

B.S.: It's really, really piercing and intense. There's a rapport, a way of engaging the listener in a very strong way. There's a kind of contract with the listener that I find really strong. Is this a song you use? When I say use, is it a song you listen to during specific times? Because it's _.

K.K.: I don't know if I can pinpoint specific times when I listen to it. But this song, like the whole album, this first Sinéad O'Connor album, is a kind of learning experience, for my own practice more than anything else. Like this song. So, Sinéad O'Connor is a singer who comes from a pop music background, and who, while being part of pop, at the same time completely rejects the tools and grammar of pop music. But not in

a pretentious "no, I'm not making pop music" way. She's really seizing it completely and with pleasure, but doing something else with it, and what she's done, for me at least, throughout her career, starting with this album, is to make herself completely unreadable, and it shows. I think the album cover is very striking, it's blurry. It's in a position of both defense and defiance of the other's gaze. We know what it's like to be a woman who makes pop music, and it's also the moment when Sinéad O'Connor chose, against the very strong advice of her producers, to shave her head in order not to... it's not even not to fit the canon, but it's really about blurring a lot of lines. And this song *Tróy*, which is... we don't really know, if you pay a little attention to the lyrics and all, the identification of the subject is a bit weird. Because at times, you get the impression that it's a kind of love song, or rather a break-up song. Sometimes you get the impression that it's a song about some kind of abuse, sexual or otherwise, and that _ . It's a lot of different things, and they're impossible to identify. You can't say *Tróy* is a song about this or that. But what we can say is that it's a song that has that effect, that's undeniable. We're not happy afterwards, I think. You're not happy. But at the same time, it's got a very strong form of energy. It's not a sad song in the sense that you're down afterwards, it's something else. And so to speak of use, I use it a little like that, namely when in my practice I'm tempted to be ultra readable, ultra accessible, easygoing, this kind of song, this one in particular reminds me that in fact you have other options. You can choose to be neither readable nor friendly, or even to make sense. Because it's a song that doesn't make sense. It's about the metaphor of *Tróy*, the destruction of the city of *Tróy* in flames, but then it's full of emotional, incoherent variations. It takes us through a lot of very incoherent stages without really leaving the pop song behind. And I find that incredible. It's not classic pop, but it's still a song that stays in your head, it's a rhythm all the same.

B.S.: All the while using forms of silence, of rupture, which, if transposed into written language, is more akin to poetry or poetic language than prose.

K.K.: Yeah. I think that fundamentally what I find amazing in this song isn't much, it's the silence that arrives in the middle. There's a short silence before her voice comes back without an instrument, and I find that moment incredible.

B.S.: I'm interested in the fact that this type of writing allows you to consider other kinds of tools, other writing spaces, and so it brings me to this question of other tools. This echoes something you said before we listened to the song, which was that this emotional connection somehow felt embarrassing. Could you elaborate on that? How does it bother you and how does it become a potential tool?

K.K.: I think *Troy* is an explosion of absolute vulnerability. I mean, it's really a song of vulnerability, with a very vulnerable voice that despite its control is completely unhinged, un-..., all the adjectives in un-, it's really un-limited, then at the same time unreasonable, well really completely crazy. Which bothers me on several levels. First of all, it's not a co-listening song. I find it very awkward to listen to this song together with others. Not because it embodies anything intimate, but just because it takes up too much space. It's a bit like what you were saying earlier about a song you listen to in a bar and it actually takes up too much space. So it's very strange, you're there and you don't know what to do while you're listening to the song. And for me, both in cultural terms and in terms of my practice, I come from a place and an upbringing that strongly favors the absence of feeling, or at least the right kind of feeling, even when it's very strong. In fact, feeling has to be sculpted, made aesthetic, made understandable, it has to have a real form in fact. And here in the song, it has no shape.

B.S.: Yes, there's a lot of shouting coming through. We can imagine that the recording was something very strange, with these very calm violins and Sinéad O'Connor's voice, which is completely beyond the register we normally use in pop songs. In preparing this conversation, we talked at length about Dalida.

K.K.: Yes.

B.S.: We talked about the emotional field that Dalida summons, which is always very strange because it's both very sincere and very constructed. When I was listening to this one song, I thought a lot about what you said afterwards about the obviousness of feelings. There's something that comes and crosses the room, that crosses the room you're in, that really comes and tells you something very directly in your ear, as if it were disregarding everything else around it. And I thought of Dalida's bust, which stands on her tomb in the Montmartre Cemetery, an absolutely fascinating monument. It's a sculpture on a scale of 1:1,

it's her whole body appearing as if she's about to tell us something. There's something about this very strong presence that she has, which comes to speak to us directly. I think it's very strong the way the song has the ability to stop time, but there's also an address to the audience that's very intense in the lyrics. This brings me to a new question, which is, how do you think you hear music—we've heard Sinéad O'Connor, Dalida, and you mentioned Tori Amos. Do these emotional fields help you work? Are they repertoires? Is this discomfort that you just described—which I think is also something that speaks of the way in which the song suspends time around you—something that you manage to use in your work? Are these sentimental tools that help you in your writing, that accompany you?

K.K.: Yes, yes, yes. They always accompany me in a rather strange way. First of all, they're not at all the songs I listen to when I'm writing. Obviously so, because it just wouldn't be possible. It's not possible to listen to Sinéad O'Connor and write at the same time. I mean, it is possible, but I think it would be very weird. Dalida more so, because I think that there's a side to it that conjures up a whole imaginary world, beyond that of addressing the public. There's a transcontinental imaginary that Dalida conjures up that's quite particular. I think it speaks to me as someone who's been exiled in a way, who doesn't live in their own country. But more generally, I think it's something that speaks to a lot of Mediterranean people in general. And her music allows me to convey that in my writing. So, sometimes I use Dalida in a very direct way. Like, there's this thing where she'll sing classics from all over the Mediterranean and in that process bring forward a country that doesn't exist. She'll make a country that doesn't actually exist, which is quite extraordinary. As I was saying, I use these songs as a template for writing sentences. I'll try to explain, because I don't do this voluntarily, I don't say to myself "well, I'm going to listen to *Tróy* and then I'm going to draw certain elements from it." It always brings me back to the question of how to explore lyrical voices or very strong emotional voices in writing, which are not necessarily what I'm most comfortable with. But by using this type of song (I don't like the word "use"), by immersing myself in this type of song, I find that it models your way of imagining sentences and seeing the potential of sentences. You were talking earlier about this silence, you said "it's more a question of poetic writing". That's true, but at the same time it's something you can perfectly well do in very classic prose fiction. It's something I'm very sensitive to, silence in prose. I think the silence of

the page, the page break, is amazing. It really is an incredible instrument. What she's doing here is a page break. So there you have it, that's my reference point. It's like she opens a Word document and "insert[s] a page break" which creates a very particular rhythm. I find that songs in general, and pop songs in particular, because they're not at all constrained by the need for narrative coherence or shame, teach you too much about __. You have to let go of the narrative and let go of the respectable, what seems respectable or acceptable to you. Dalida has no shame. I really don't think she's ashamed. There's something about not being ashamed that's very strong.

B.S.: Do you listen to music while you write?

K.K.: Yes, I listen to music when I'm writing, but not this kind of music. Sure, if the context calls for Dalida, Dalida will obviously be invoked. But generally when I'm writing, I tend to listen to either instrumental music of all kinds, or music in languages I don't speak at all. By which I mean that I have zero understanding of that language, I can't even distinguish syllables. Because music with words that you can recognize while you write, it's difficult. It just makes it hard to focus. You know how you're often asked about your influences? I always find it hard to answer that, because I've got lots of them and because influences are something you actually absorb unconsciously. It's not something I voluntarily call upon, it's the combination of a lot of things you've read or listened to a thousand times, which then become part of your cells and come out.

B.S.: But it's not so much a question of influences for me. It's more a question of trying to understand the specificity of the tools in the simple idea that we live in a world that's so violent, we're constantly assailed by aggressions, dominations of all kinds, and the ability to name them is very important, but there are very different things to name. But I have the impression that we can name, that we have several different tools for naming. Sociology is very good at naming, quantifying and saying very specific things, Philosophy too. And what interests me is trying to understand how... in our everyday lives, what tools do we use for feeling, naming and sharing things that are very difficult? I'm curious to find out how music differs from literature, what your tools are, maybe your impression of what you manage to say with literature that seems specific to that field. And something that interests me in their dialogue is also this idea of specific tools. Are

there specific tools that you ever borrow from music, in order to say things that your own space wasn't necessarily able to?

K.K.: Yes, absolutely. In this case, I think there are two fundamental things that are hyper-specific for me—I know that these things vary depending on the person—for me, music doesn't actually name anything. It allows us to bypass this need to name and to say, to communicate something else in a way that's not necessarily non-verbal, because yes there are words, but we don't name what we want to talk about. So it's always something that works by detour, which I find quite impressive and very powerful indeed, very effective. And the other aspect that I try to take from music is that a song is very short. It's succinct. It's a whole universe, a world. As you say, it's often an emotional adventure lasting two minutes. When we listen to Sinéad O'Connor's *Troy*, it's like "oh my, what a long song, six minutes". So the very fact that these are emotional universes that are born and disappear in a very short lapse of time, in which a lot can happen, not only from the point of view of the person making the music but also from the point of view of the listeners, who fill what they listen to with lots of things, lots of emotions, who create contexts for what they listen to. I think it's something I'm using a lot now in my writing, which is to try to connote, to give away certain elements but not everything, to say but not say everything, to name but not really name. It's about going through the emotion rather than being explicit (which is how I write naturally) and through music I find that you learn not to do that, to go through much more emotional explicitness and verbal implicitness, so to speak.

B.S.: Does music appear in your writing? Do the characters listen to music? Does the music accompany the _.

K.K.: Yes, yes, yes. I find it very funny because it's very difficult to write. Because as soon as you write it, it immediately becomes... If you say—I'm going to take a completely stupid example—"this character is listening to a Tori Amos song", you turn it into a total cliché. You take away the specificity of both the character and the music he's listening to, and turn it into "I'm showing a character listening to this". But music is still there. In my latest novel, there are two musical scenes. Two scenes in which music is referenced very explicitly. There's a scene in the character's childhood where he listens and dances to a Fleetwood Mac song. And there's a scene at the end, near the climax of the novel,

where there's a song by Abdel-Hakim Hafez playing. But what I always find quite interesting is describing music. Again, especially as someone who doesn't know the grammar of music, I have to do something else, because I can't pretend. I can't say to myself, "Let's give it a try".

B.S.: At the same time, it would be strange for writing to become a score if you had these tools.

K.K.: Yeah, but it could bring a kind of precision. You see, it's like describing nature. It's interesting to be able to say that this green plant is such and such. But since I don't have access to that, it's kind of fun not to. There are plenty of times when I describe the music, or the musical desires of the characters.

B.S.: In preparation for this conversation, you told me about the presence of colors. That, to you, colors are very important when writing, that you perceive them and that they name the general atmosphere. Are these colors also linked to musical feelings? Do you remember music when you re-read something, or are there sounds linked to the writing itself?

K.K.: Definitely sounds. To answer the first part of your question: yes. Often, when I try to conjure up music in my texts, it's going to be through color anyway. So, for example, there's a short story, I just thought of it, that I wrote a long time ago, where there's a person in Gaza who wants to listen to music and who says to himself I'd like to listen to something light, I don't remember exactly what he says, but basically something white and blue and a bit grey, polar, which summons certain colors to talk about a type of music that he can't identify, that he'd like to listen to, that would take him away from where he is. When I re-read, no. I wouldn't necessarily be able to identify what was going on, what I was conjuring up musically at that precise moment. But I also know that sometimes I do this in a very direct way. I mean, if I want to describe a green scene, which in my head is green for all sorts of reasons, I'll put on what in my head is green music to give me certain referents. Green concentration. Like a palette, and then you choose the colors.

B.S.: When you reread what you've written, does the color come back?

K.K.: I think that's a hard question to answer. Because I can't. I'll have to test it the next time I reread something I wrote. Because when I'm writing, there's a lot of that, but when I'm rereading, I don't know.

B.S.: I think we get it, you listen to music all the time. Or at least a lot, and you move around with music. You've got headphones on, and music accompanies any journey through the city. Do these moments of listening, these moments that aren't necessarily work, also participate in the writing process?

K.K.: That's a very interesting question because I think it raises the general issue of latency for all of us. What happens in our moments of latency, which are becoming increasingly rare? In fact, when I listen to music while walking, like everyone else, I'm imagining things. In other words, what I'm listening to is set in a very specific narrative. I don't know how to illustrate that. Let's try again: I'm walking, I'm listening to *Troy*, it's hot outside. I'm going to imagine in what kind of story someone might be while listening to, singing, or even composing this song. So there's a lot of storytelling going on in my head, but I don't do it voluntarily, telling myself I'm creating stories that I'll use later in my practice. But it completely structures my relationship with fiction because I'm always imagining stories as I walk along and listen to these songs.

B.S.: This question is very important: the prevalence of our headphones, the fact that, thanks to these headphones, we bring along very strong and intimate emotional doses into spaces that don't have these qualities at all. I can imagine someone listening to Sinéad O'Connor's song just before going to talk to their horrible banker, and there's an anger, a strength that comes out of it that's very important, which also allows worlds to collide.

K.K.: I'm not particularly adept at identifying my feelings in a personal way. I don't really know how to. You mentioned this when we first started talking about this conversation, that in fact with our headphones we're transporting all our sensory universes out into the world. What's more, you can use them to your heart's content. Not only can you decide what you're going to listen to, but you can do what I often do, and I think it's an extremely common practice: sometimes I

won't listen to the whole Sinéad O'Connor song from beginning to end. I'll put it on and go to the highlight I want to listen to. I'll fast-forward to the silence and then repeat it three times in a row while walking. Not so much for the emotionality, but for all the meaning it evokes. Sensuality in the sense of what provokes the senses. Colors, hearing, vision, because it's also very visual. It's a very cinematic song. You're just walking down the street acting normal, you just seem like you're not all there, and meanwhile in your head there's this. It's all very bizarre.

B.S.: This is an idea that I've tried to develop through this research, which for the moment I've named: the "theory of the last mile". It's something that refers to the idea, in public transportation, that in recent decades we've tried to_. In the cities of the seventies, there were stations in the city center that operated as a central node. It wasn't a very "radio-friendly" gesture. These railway stations were in the center of towns, and routes all radiated outwards from the stations. Today, we're trying to take the transit stations out of the city centers and create local networks so that public transport points are as close to home as possible. But there's still a very specific problem, and that's what we call the last mile. What happens in this moment, in this transition, when public transport becomes a private space? You're at the station and then you're going to walk the few hundred meters to your home, and there's a problem. If we want people to stop using their cars, we have to figure out what mode of transport they're going to use for that last segment, which could be a scooter, skateboard or rollerblade. It's something that's still quite complicated. I think there's something very interesting in this idea, because it's an interesting tool for talking about the question of emotions. How do songs, cultural objects that we all share, start to speak to each of us specifically? And what makes Dalida, in my personal universe, in the family unit, have a very particular meaning that is not the same as it will have for you, and yet will create very strong emotions that will enable me to move forward in my life, while also enabling me to reflect on a more specific question that Sara Ahmed describes in her book *Living a Feminist Life*: "emotional work". The question of how to do your daily homework in emotional matters. I think it's a very important question. This idea that, as a researcher, we can spend our days in the library reading, thinking about questions of domination, about how to think about emancipation, yet what happens on the way home, in the evening, when we leave the library, go home and pass by the bakery, go shopping, go out clubbing, meet people, what happens in the reality of our relationships? Things

are in a global place and concern the entirety of our interactions, but at some point they also become intimate, sensitive and personal.

K.K.: Yes. With or without Dalida. That thing that we call a song is located at this intersection, it's a bit of a crossroads between the particular and the general. It's intimate in the sense that you take the song and turn it into something that makes sense for you or your family unit or the people immediately around you. And then, there's also the more general meaning of this song for a given population, at a given time. Dalida is a good example. To me, she embodies so many things, so many different emotional realities. I was telling you earlier about the Mediterranean. But even on a more personal level, there really is "Ma mère et Dalida" [My Mother and Dalida], this book I'm going to write one day. I mean, so many people could write "Ma mère et Dalida". My mother's possibility is made possible by Dalida. There's that, but at the same time I'm also very aware that, for example, to others, Dalida can embody this sort of nostalgia for a cosmopolitan Egypt, there's also a very problematic side. Dalida is many different things. And the icon in general, the icon of the song, she manages to put herself out there, she doesn't manage to answer, as you were saying, you were making the gesture... I've forgotten the word, what did you say?

B.S.: To radiate.

K.K.: To really radiate both in the general body and in everyone's private life. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's what it really brings to mind. And it reminds me of that in particular because, in a way, that's what you try to do when you write. You write something, you hope it will be read on its own terms, but you also hope that the reader will be able to read it and make something of it for him or herself. So there's always a bit of both. You always want it to be that thing you've made with your hands, but in fact this thing made with your hands can have other resonances and other possibilities in the minds and reading of others. And this balancing act, this equilibrium between these two ways of thinking about a production, a work, a text, I find that the song is really, specifically the grammar of the pop song, it's really a model. It can be a model because on one hand it's hyper-constraining, and on the other hand it leaves you all the freedom of imagination in the world. You're really somewhere between the two because it's very restrictive, you're in a given industry at a given time, which is an industry where there's a lot of money, so there are a lot of financial commitments of all kinds

that make pop music what it is. And at the same time, within this globalized, completely liberal and capitalist production, there are lots of things. It opens up a lot of things, it creates a lot of things. It's full of contradictions. What I've just said is nothing but contradictions.

B.S.: I actually wanted to ask you a question about ambivalence and contradiction.

K.K.: Sure.

B.S.: It's an aspect I particularly appreciate in Dalida, and it's something I've also looked at a little to feed my own work, and I talk about it with my students as part of my job as a teacher. Dalida has this absolutely incredible ability to be both the most emotionally moving and the most mechanical. It's the same tools. When she sings *Je suis malade*, she has this series of gestures that she'll do over and over again, and each version includes the same gestures as if they were included in the score of the song. She points her finger, she sticks a knife in her stomach, she points it back up... And there's something I find very strong there, this ambivalence between the mechanical and the emotional that evokes something that's really about emotional strategy. And coming back to Sinéad O'Connor's song, there's something I find very beautiful: this hole in the middle. And these shouted moments, it's very experimental writing. It doesn't make sense. This piece crosses space when we listen to it, because there are moments that don't make sense, that come out of a very slickly produced aesthetic, as you write. I find what you describe very interesting, the idea of how readers get involved in a piece of writing. Is it in the place where, as an author, we prepare things down to the last millimeter? But aren't the places where we leave holes also places where we leave the possibility of filling in these holes, and thus these ambivalences, these moments of vagueness? Does this emotional writing allow you to consider how to write with holes?

K.K.: Yes, yes, yes. Both as a reader and as a writer, it's something I particularly like. Our capacity in general to fill in the gaps and to do so in a completely automatic and very childlike way. It sounds a bit obvious, but it's actually not that obvious. If I describe a tree and say: "The leaves on the tree are green" and that's it. Anyone who reads it is going to see a brown trunk, and may or may not imagine apples in the tree, or something else. In fact, we'll immediately create an entire universe

from one or two descriptions. And that's why writing is all about holes. Because it's not exhaustive, you don't want to be. Well, you could be, but then it's experimental. But, in general, we'll only highlight certain elements of a description and then the rest will be filled in both formal and emotional terms by the person reading. In my latest book, there's one thing I'm really not happy with, and that's the narrator's voice, which I really, really don't like. I find that the narrator just hasn't found his voice in the novel. And what often surprises me, when people read and like the book, is that on the contrary they find that "oh la la the narrator is great". They find him much more complete and precise than I do. It's not that I'm very critical of my own work, unlike the reader. It's just because they read and complete it. As a result, I find this incredible, this narrator who is a bit shaky, shall we say, but isn't. To use that word again, he's a bit too mechanical, there are things that really don't suit me in his voice. Well, there are readers out there who will read it and turn it into a different emotional reality. Based on the elements given, they don't do something totally different, but they really fill the image in their own way and find, for example, that he's a great narrator. I think he's a shitty narrator.

B.S.: So you think some readers will have a better read than you?

K.K.: Not necessarily a better read, but a much more, how shall I put it? Just a much fuller reading in a way. Just to illustrate this: sometimes while I read books that I find incredible, that I adore, that I really find amazing, well sometimes I become very sad for the person who wrote it. I say to myself, "It's horrible how she wrote this book, she's never going to have the pleasure of reading it. She's never going to have the pleasure of discovering this work, because for her it's always going to be this book that she's written and that she'll see in this way." But for me, as a reader, it's a much fuller experience. And I think that's really what a song is. If I met Sinéad O'Connor tomorrow and started telling her about *Troy*, first, I think she'll have forgotten about it. It was a very long time ago. I don't think she's very emotionally invested in that song, in my opinion. And two, I think she'd think I was talking nonsense.

B.S.: It's funny, these are things I'd never thought about before. For example, when you're making films, there's a complex stage in the editing process: you have to forget about the reverse shot. You look at the images, but there's always a space where you see films with people on the beach, horses, people with poles, catering, there's a concrete

reality behind. In music, it's quite different because there are recording studios, which are often in the middle of nowhere, and in writing, there's the place where you write. It's true that the place where the work is produced is also the place where memory is frozen. I find this idea interesting: when we write, what do we remember about the moment when we wrote? It's very different from the moment you shoot a film.

K.K.: Yes, it's different. At the same time, I'm wondering, I don't have an answer to this question, and I imagine it's different. I wonder where the memory is frozen in writing, because in writing, there's the real moment of writing, the physical gesture, but there are also all the moments of latency where many things are played out and emerge. There's the rereading, which is a very important moment, and then there's the work of the book-object, and therefore the proofreading with a publisher. I don't know at what point the memory stops, I wonder. I'll try to find out next time, it's intriguing. At what point does the thing you imagine to be this text freeze? Is it when you finish a novel and send it to your editor? Is it the moment when, with the editor's feedback, you send off the final page proof? What's the concrete moment that fixes it?

B.S.: That fixes the memory.

K.K.: I don't know when that is. It's very interesting.

B.S.: On a slightly different subject, the question of landscape and the disappearance of Palestine. It's a very important theme that recurs both in your writing and in conversations. I wanted to ask you a question at that point: is there any music that can be linked to this feeling of disappearance? That accompanies this feeling or that can help you define it or help you imagine it?

K.K.: Yes, there's music. But then—correct me if I'm wrong—I think this kind of music departs from the realm of the sad song. Though perhaps this is also sad song. I'd say it's often music that allows me to give meaning to this disappearance and to the complicated and ambivalent existence, to use your word, of an evaporating landscape. That's where I'm going to come back to, often ambient music or pieces that tend to be very ethereal and wordless. Because for me, they represent things that are of the unspeakable order. And sad songs are also something I can get to grips with because I'm a human being, because I have a narrative relationship with the world, because this because that.

Ambient music, which is a genre I'm really fond of, is something that has a kind of _ . It's a bit indecipherable but it helps me understand disappearance. I really wouldn't know how to explain it or why. It doesn't help me understand but it helps me imagine what a disappearance is. To try to imagine. In fact, the disappearance of the landscape and of Palestine is something that is fundamental to what I write, but not necessarily explicit. I write a lot of things about this disappearance, but there's also a lot that's informed by it, without it being the subject or nodal point of the text. I'd like to give a literary example, because that's what I can most easily relate to. A novel that I adore, that I find really misunderstood but really incredible, is the *Princesse de Clèves* [The Princess of Clèves]. A really crazy novel. And it's a crazy novel for one incredible reason: there's a narrator who doesn't understand what the protagonist is doing. So, the thing about the *Princesse de Clèves*, in a nutshell—and I think this is why the novel is misunderstood—is that in fact, when we read it, we generally assume that the narrator agrees with what the *Princesse de Clèves* is doing, except that in fact the narrator is describing a character she understands nothing about. And who escapes her. The novel concludes with the character having completely escaped the person telling the story, and she doesn't know what to say. And it's amazing, it's incredible, and it's also a bit of a tale about disappearance, of a beautiful escape. She escapes meaning. It's crazy, crazy, crazy. And for me, it's a bit like ambient music: there's a side where you're there, trying to grasp, trying to make sense, trying to put your own values on what's being presented to you, and in fact you're completely helpless. And it's such a beautiful and efficient way of thinking, understanding and processing. To process disappearance.

B.S.: Are there any Palestinian musicians who produce ambient and can share _ . Is it a feeling you can find or summon in people who produce this music?

K.K.: Not exactly like that. But also because I listen to a lot of contemporary music from Palestine. There's also that side, what you were saying earlier, that we're constantly assailed by violence and we're actually crushed by it. Thinking about the disappearance of Palestine is no laughing matter. It's really depressing, it's really heavy, it's a really important feeling, and it's exhausting. It's emotionally exhausting so, in fact, I often don't try to find that in Palestine. I try to find it in areas that have nothing to do with Palestine. Hence, for example, my interest in Japanese ambient. Because it allows you to

think about it from the other side of the mirror, from very very very far away.

B.S.: Is there any music perhaps more related to science fiction?

K.K.: Palestinian?

B.S.: In general. The ability to imagine, to project yourself into places that don't exist.

K.K.: Yes, there are lots of them. I'd have to think about it, but there are lots and lots. The Blade Runner soundtrack by Vangelis remains a reference for me.

B.S.: Thank you very much Karim.

K.K.: Thank you too. It was really great.

—Interview with Karim Kattan, recorded in July 2022.

The *Emotional Last Mile* was mixed by Victor Donati (R22), transcribed by Héloïse Prax and translated by Thomas Patier.