

# A More Extravagant Sense of Self

*An interview with Rebecca Solnit about apricots, fairy tales, Frankenstein, and The Faraway Nearby*

**Bidisha Banerjee**

*We think we tell stories, but stories often tell us, tell us to love or to hate, to see or to be blind. Often, too often, stories saddle us, ride us, whip us onward, tell us what to do and we do it without questioning.*

—Rebecca Solnit

**Winner of the Lannan and National Book Critics' Circle awards,** among others, Rebecca Solnit is a peripatetic writer who trespasses across disciplines, transforming them. She's a mapmaker who has heightened the possibilities of cartography and civic identity in *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*; a historian of art, technology, and walking who has deepened our understanding of the nature of the modern self in books like *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* and *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*; an activist, often compared to Howard Zinn, whose trenchant *A Paradise Built in Hell* has enriched the stories told by some of the key popular movements of our time; and an essayist in the tradition of Thoreau, Borges, Woolf, and Eduardo Galeano, whose panoramic, dream-like meditations on the color blue in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* seems to have inspired Beyoncé Knowles and Jay-Z to name their daughter Blue Ivy.

An anti-memoir that elaborates the scope of the memoir, *The Faraway Nearby* is Solnit's most intimate book to date. It begins with 100 pounds of apricots from her mother's fruit tree that end up on Solnit's bedroom floor. Solnit's mother can no longer care for the tree as her brain has become a fairy-tale site, a "neuron forest" overrun by the strangler-vines of Alzheimer's. Compelled by the overwhelming pile, and hoping to gain perspective on her troubled relationship with her mother, Solnit begins reading fairy tales. In the interlocking essays that follow, Solnit's own brush with cancer and the loss of her loved ones nestle against meditations on Scheherazade, Mary Shelley, Che Guevara, the Buddha, the Marquis de

Sade, and the Library of Water, an Icelandic art installation comprised of glacial melt-water assembled in glass columns inside a city library. Extraordinary encounters ensue: mirrors, labyrinths, friends, strangers, visual artists, readers, moths who drink the tears of sleeping birds.

*The Faraway Nearby* is Solnit's most visceral book to date. She gets a mammogram and is "irradiated by those machines whose vises clasp your breasts like a lobster clamping onto a clock." During a biopsy, she hears "the whirring sound of a tiny drill entering my flesh again and again through the hole in the table." Solnit approaches these ordeals through the entwined history of the microscope and of seventeenth-century *vanitas* paintings, which warned against ephemerality, while subtly celebrating it, by depicting subjects like a lobster grabbing a pocket watch or a semi-decaying basket of apricots. Facedown on a table, partially anesthetized, Solnit cranes her neck to view a "new *vanitas* picture"—lush images of her breast, blown up on a monitor and resembling "a night sky, hemispheres of darkness with pale streaky strands like clouds or vapor or the Milky Way in a desert night when the stars are so numerous they blur into radiant fields. Some of the bright areas, the microcalcifications or tiny calcium deposits that looked pale in that dark sky, were the grounds for concern."

Throughout, these particulars become case histories that illuminate Solnit's preoccupations: the nature and boundaries of self; the possibilities and, crucially, the limitations of empathy and storytelling; and the pleasures and terrors of closeness, distance, and estrangement.

I met Solnit at her home in the Mission district of San Francisco. She led me past a hallway filled with books and positioned us in her nest-like bedroom, near the window. The late afternoon sunlight tilted into dusk.

**Rebecca:** It doesn't feel like home yet because I'm still finishing the New Orleans *Atlas* and have a lot of other projects. There's a lot of things I want to do that haven't happened yet, things like finding a sofa... But it's getting there. And it's a beautiful, beautiful place. Some of the parts of nesting—I think it's the appropriate verb here—are fun. I just planted a back yard. And I'm really liking living on this side of town. It's really sunny. I live in the Bahamas of San Francisco, O thou who livest in the—not the Siberia—where would you be from?

**Bidisha:** I'd call it [the Richmond district where I live] Inner Mongolia. Because of the Chinese and Russian influence.

**R:** That's actually perfect. One of the maps I wanted for *Infinite City* was going to be the world mapped onto San Francisco. And Jaime Cortez's "Tribes of San Francisco" [which playfully maps the locations of various ethnicities and interest groups in San Francisco] took that idea and did something else with it, but I like the idea of seeing Siberia, Russia, China.... I don't think we have an India, but we definitely have a Salvador, a Guatemala, a Samoa and—

**B:** And a Bahamas.

**R:** It's funny how different it is. Last night I had dinner with some folks at 10th and Irving. And it was windy and cold and foggy, and I thought, it won't be like this when I get home, and it wasn't. Not to rub it in. Actually most of the nature is on your side of San Francisco. The air is fresher, and you have Ocean Beach, which is my favorite place on earth.

**B:** Yes, and we have foghorns.

**R:** You can't hear the foghorns over here, but sometimes you can hear mariachi music.

**B:** It's a good trade.

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**R:** So you took a look at the book?

**B:** I did. How did you come up with the title? How is “the faraway nearby” different from “the nearby nearby”?

**R:** I have two kinds of books. I have a bunch of books where the most beautiful title arrived early, and it wasn't a problem at all. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*—the title came to me before I knew what it went to. It was like having a collar waiting for a dog to walk up. And *Hope in the Dark*—I had the title right off the bat. And then I have a few books where I feel like I never quite got the title right, and the title was a lot of work. And this one had a number of titles that fell by the wayside. And it was very hard to describe it, the same way it was very hard to come up with an image for the cover. Because it's about these warm intimate things—apricots and bodies and family life and things like that. But it's also about the Arctic and spaciousness and emotional distance and coldness.

*From the Faraway, Nearby* is a funny title that Georgia O'Keefe came up with. Funny because most of her titles are very modernist. *Abstraction in Blue and Red*. Or *Seven Poppies* or *December Clouds*. Those aren't real titles. But they're like that. Simple, descriptive, trying to stay out of the way of the visuality. But *From the Faraway, Nearby* is this completely poetic title for the most surrealist of her paintings. It's an antelope skull with way too many antlers, hovering above one of those northern New Mexico landscapes. But it's also how she used to sign her letters to the people that she felt close to, although they were far away. And the literal language of near and far is interesting in the ways it doesn't describe emotional distance. You can be completely distant from someone next to you in bed. You can feel close to somebody on the other side of the world,

or someone who died two hundred years ago but whose work speaks to you. And navigating that closeness and distance—that funny exercise where what has been far becomes near, and what has been near becomes far, where suddenly you’re standing in the middle of a country you’ve dreamed about for a long time. It was such a beautiful phrase. I’ve never borrowed a title before. I tried to come up with parallel constructions, but the original was just so delightful that I decided to use it.

**B:** One of the neat things about that painting is how it compresses distance. You see the antlers, and there’s mountains in the back. The scale—it seems like the antlers are huge, and the mountains are small. In your book, there are so many dimensions through which you look at faraway and nearby. What were some of the tensions that interested you?

**R:** One of the things is having distance on your own story. We’re so compelled by our own stories. Of course. We’re made out of stories. It’s the material of your psyche as much as flesh is the material of your body. But the ability to stand back from your story, to see it as a construction and to see yourself as a storyteller, to get perspective on your own story and also to try and imagine the stories that other people are telling, and to have some kind of empathy for those stories. The book is so much about empathy, which for me is the ability to enter somebody’s story. Which is to say that empathy is both a means of travel and a storytelling art. What is it like to be my mother? I have to tell myself stories about her: well, her father died when she was ten. Well, this happened. Well, this is what she was so fearful about. This is what it felt like to be her. That’s a kind of travel where, suddenly, what seemed far away, because it’s inside someone else’s head, you’re imaginatively trying to conjure. It’s not an unreachable galaxy, if you observe somebody deeply and listen to them, particularly if they want you to know them, particularly if there’s a rapport, somehow you manage to cross that infinite distance.

**B:** Yet you also talk about the human self being a kind of patchwork of areas that are alive, and some that have become deadened—either intentionally or not. [*The self is a patchwork of the felt and the unfelt, of presences and absences, of navigable channels around the walled-off numbnesses.*] You talk about the limits of empathy as well as moments where you yourself froze. Some of those moments were the result of experiences you had in childhood and other moments have more to do with having the right balance between feeling boundless compassion for the world but also knowing when to shut off. Can you talk about the journey that you've made in terms of opening yourself up empathetically, but also sometimes choosing to draw back?

**R:** We talk about people so much—what a beautiful sky! Sometimes I forget to migrate. In the morning I'm in the kitchen where the sun is, and sometimes I stay there, on the east side, and suddenly it's like, "Oh I forgot to come west, where the sky is, where the sky is beautiful now."

We talk so much as though people are autonomous, discrete, self-contained individuals. But trauma is intergenerational. In some sense—I didn't go into it much in the book, but there's a public trauma of pogroms and holocausts and things that affected my father's family that becomes the kind of mess that was my parents' marriage, that becomes the difficulty that's my childhood. And a deep lack of awareness.

One of the great projects of the second half of the twentieth century was becoming emotionally aware and maybe more emotionally articulate and literate—for people in the West. I only really know the United States version. What are the consequences of my acts? How do I really feel? What do I really mean? These questions weren't being asked much before the Fifties and the Sixties that are now very routine for us. So there's a funny way in which the whole country in some sense—I don't want to say the whole world because there are so many cultures that have other processes going on—but

maybe the West has been engaged in this process, and also engaging with Buddhism and spiritual questions, and meditation and rethinking human nature.

And, individually, I had a really difficult childhood. And I was very, very, very shutdown. I think when you're a kid, things are enormously traumatic. If you truly experience them, they would destroy you. You have no tools to deal with it and so you don't experience it because you're not there. Where was I? I was not in my body. I was not in my family. I was not in my city. I was not in my classroom. I was in Narnia, in fairytales, and of course endless horse books and all kinds of other marvelous, strange places.

I found the Snow White fairy tale really useful. It really did feel kind of like being frozen and then you thaw out. Also, one of the things we don't talk about that much, or not in ways that I've found useful for my own experience, is that as you acquire the tools to be able to deal with your own history, your own history begins to thaw out. And it comes to you. So the past gets relived and somehow addressed. There's a kind of empathy to yourself at that point.

Some people have these marvelous childhoods and they're fully deeply feeling creatures who never get shut down. Other people never reverse the process. They shut down and just stay closed. You know I was lucky enough that I'm a traveler by nature. I kept moving and things kept changing and I kept exploring and kept asking questions, and I had good fortune in who and what I met. Things continued to change.

**B:** You talk about joy and sorrow or happiness and sadness as perhaps inadequate concepts. You suggest that perhaps we should be talking about depth of feeling and shallowness of feeling.

**R:** That's something that came up very much in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, a book whose title came late in the game that I like completely. The title, that is, not the book. My books often spring from each other. Both *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and the book on Eadweard

Muybridge [*River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*] came out of *Wanderlust*. And *A Paradise Built in Hell* is also very much a book about empathy and human nature and calamity. And I was actually writing it while I was going through all these events here. And there's a funny way I could have written it as: oh my mother fell apart during the 1906 earthquake [in the book], and I went through a terrible break-up during the Halifax explosion, and into the Mexico City earthquake, during which my terrible diagnosis came about, and then I underwent medical treatment during 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, which was the actual trajectory, which was very, very interesting. And unsympathetic people made really bad jokes about it. You're looking at me and thinking, "Yeah, they must have been really bad!"

**B:** No! I'm sorry to hear that.

**R:** There's a language very much in the United States of wanting everything to be easy and comfortable. You know, nothing ruffles your feathers, nothing challenges you. And it's something I've said in *A Paradise Built in Hell* as well. There's a depth of emotion that most people don't live in all the time. And it's difficult and demanding and can be kind of harrowing. But it's also profound. One of my dear friends' mother died a week ago this midnight. And it was interesting to recognize what I knew from my mother's deathbed. You're wrung out, you're exhausted, but it's a little bit exalting too. The old spiritual language we had when we talked about saints and raptures and exaltation speaks to it. There was a willingness and a desire for profundity, which is very different than comfortableness. Often, profounder joy or happiness requires that vulnerability—that rawness—that exposure to go deep. And that's not what's being sold to us as happiness.

**B:** A lot of what I think about is: how do we in our post-religious or secular age still make room for a lot of those positive values that those old religions gave us? And I hadn't made that connection to emotion and depth of emotion. Where do you see some of the places in post-religious life where it's okay to embrace depth of feeling?

**R:** Well, it happens in disasters without people choosing it. Which is why disasters are so interesting to me. They can be like a crash course in Buddhism. Suddenly you have non-attachment to the past and the future, and to the material. You're absolutely present in the world around you. You have a deep sense of connectedness to the people around you. You have a certain kind of fearlessness that's not weakened but strengthened by awareness of death and mortality. And often a kind of heroic generosity. And it's fleeting. It's pretty amazing when it's given to you as a gift. Though disaster is not a gift. I'm not pro disaster. But that consciousness and the things that come out of that can be just remarkable. It always feels to me it's as though an earthquake shook you awake. If you normally want to stay awake you need some kind of practice of awareness, whether it's Buddhist or an overtly spiritual path, or just being somebody who's deeply conscious and deeply empathic. But I also think that what's interesting about religion is that it assumes that you are on a journey. And there are things that without that context might seem miserable or difficult. This is very Christian language. You know, this kind: Refinement of the soul. The crucible of suffering. To use very old Christian language. But there is something to that. I think the attempt to avoid all suffering—or to regard it simply as negative—doesn't look at the fact that a certain amount of suffering happens no matter how hard you try to avoid it. And that maybe if you're not just completely running scared with your eyes closed, it teaches you something. It's part of the process of becoming. Not that I'm pro suffering, or that I'm pro disaster. But there are disasters, and there is suffering. So what are you going to do about it?

**B:** Well, you talk about how Buddhism offers the coolness of distance from your emotions. One of the things I found really interesting is that at the beginning of your book, you talk about a gift, or inheritance, or windfall of apricots from your mother. And that kind of leads you down various fairy-tale threads. But then you come to this anti-fairy tale, which is the story of the Buddha.

**R:** It's both really isn't it? When I reread the miraculous birth of the Buddha, I was like, oh yeah, Jesus and Buddha are both great fairy tales. Or fairy tales are also stories of the miraculous. You know, the miraculous Parsival born to find the Holy Grail, or something like that. The miraculous person who solved the riddle. Buddhism is a fairy tale and it's also an anti-fairy tale. An anti-fairy tale in that it doesn't lead to happy endings and the completion of one's own pleasures and acquisitions. It's funny that you called it anti—because to me it was a fairy tale run backwards. There's this person and he already has jewels and palaces and luxuries and dancing girls and ornaments and carriages pulled by deer with golden harnesses. The luxuriousness of the *Buddhacarita* description is just somewhere between luscious and ridiculous. And his story starts where fairy tales end. He goes backwards into sorrow and old age, sickness, and death—and wrestles with them because a fairy-tale palace isn't really a solution to it. I find fairy tales really interesting for thinking about one's life—or at least the fairy tales interest me in their tasks and their propositions, but not their conclusions ... oh, let me find it in the book:

[Reads:] As I was approaching this chapter, I woke up in the middle of the night and thought something I should have written down at the time. The empty shell of it that washed up on the shores of morning was to the effect that sometimes an extraordinary or huge question comes along and we try to marry it off to a mediocre answer.

So I think fairy tales ask fantastic questions, but I don't love their

answers. It's funny that "happily ever after" feels like an inadequate answer. And a lot of memoir now is like that—"now my life is completely together, now my problems have been solved." And I'm not sure I trust those answers, or particularly like them ...

But you know, it's funny how much the apricots begat the book. And now it's a little shocking that it's coming out. Did I really write that book? Do I really have to talk about it in public? As I went through the explorations and literal journey that led to Iceland and beyond, but also the metaphysical journey, with my mother, at first the apricots felt like an allegory, and by the end they felt like an invitation to tell a story which I'd never been free to or able to tell before, in some sense. They were kind of an exhortation, or an invitation to tell a story that came in the form of a hundred pounds of apricots.

**B:** One of the things that feels spacious enough to hold together all of these different things we've been talking about it is the structure of your book. You talk about the Russian doll structure, and there's an element of the *1001 Nights*, as well as, maybe, *Frankenstein*?

**R:** I hope so. Well, *Frankenstein* is also a Russian doll of a book, which seldom gets commented on because the story is so compelling. People don't look at the formal structure necessarily. But I'm glad you think so. And then it has that thread holding it all together.

**B:** Yeah. Is that what you call it, the thread?

**R:** We called it a running footer in *Wanderlust*, because I did that with quotes in *Wanderlust* that ran across the bottom of every page, a second narrative line that moved at its own pace. But it felt more meaningful to have the single continuity that we do with this narrative thread that runs all the way through *The Faraway Nearby*. I always feel coincidences are auspicious—it's like you're attuned to the pattern. It was exactly the right length when the designer laid it

out. I was expecting her to say, oh it's five hundred words too long, it needs to lose seventeen lines—or something like that—and, you know, she just put it in there and it fit perfectly. So, it's a book with 13 chapters and a table of contents, and 14 chapters actually. Except the 14th chapter isn't in the table of contents because it doesn't have a sequence. It couldn't come before or after anything, it's just with.

**B:** How did the structure reveal itself to you?

**R:** It was really quite wonderful. I had originally thought I was going to have four sections—one about north, one about apricots or something. But I was watching a Kurosawa movie with somebody—it's actually in the acknowledgments—and something happened. He took the DVD out of the player and then it disappeared for months. So instead we started watching another video ... which was Pasolini's *Arabian Nights*. He didn't know much about *The Arabian Nights* so I started explaining the structure. You know, the story within the story. And suddenly I had this apprehension, while lounging around watching videos on a Saturday night, of what the structure of the book would be. I think this was only about three months before I started writing it. (I sat down June 1, 2010 to start writing it.) So I had the sense of these nesting—of the Russian dolls and the story within the story. Which is why the first and last chapter have the same name. The second and second-to-last have the same name, the third and third-to-last have the same name. There are six chapter titles that repeat and one that's unique. With the sense that there's a kind of mirroring. And it's also very much about mirrors and symmetries. I love the form of books, and I felt, as with the *Atlas* and some other things that I've done, that I wasn't just writing a book, but I was making a book. You know, there's a physical structure that you hold in your hands when you hold a book, and I wanted to play a little with the architecture of that structure.

**B:** You talk about how writing in a sense takes you away from the

here and now. As opposed to cooking or something like that. How did you approach the process of writing something that required a lot from you?

**R:** It's one of those things where I definitely wanted to write it. I wasn't so sure if I wanted to publish it, but this is what I do for a living, and that part is nice. And maybe people will enjoy it—oh my the sky is getting beautiful!—and maybe it will even be useful.... So, we'll see what happens when I put it out there in the world.

I wanted to think through those things. And it's funny because my relationship with my mother continued to change. She died June 7th.... At that point it felt like those difficulties were mostly over. It's how the second chapter opens—that pile of apricots contained unripe, ripe, and rotting apricots. And the stories I tell about my mother are in various stages of ripeness and they fall away. This one, it was just so hard to get it right. Finding the balance between being true to my own experience and how difficult she was for me without just being bitter or unaware of what she thought she was doing, and what was driving her. Because she was very much driven by these unseen forces, which were the stories she told herself. And that's part of why it seemed meaningful in the context of this book. It wasn't just that I had a difficult mother, but that my mother told herself stories that made herself unhappy—and unhappy specifically about me. And when the stories fall away, as they did, when her memory went—all the resentment, and bitterness, fell away too. And she apprehended me almost for the first time. At almost 80. Without that screen of stories between us. And so maybe the stories were a kind of distance, a far away, and it was only possible to be close to her when the stories stopped.

And it's a funny thing. We tend to think we really need our stories. Buddhism is skeptical about stories. And at least wants you to be able to notice you're telling them, and to pause them. But it's also interesting that Alzheimer's, which so many people are terrified by, strips you of your stories. But are these stories these wonderful

shelters and jewels you own, or are they our balls and chains and prisons? What does it mean to lose your stories? Is it always a bad thing? So, that all made perfect sense for a book about storytelling. And for thinking about the relationship between storytelling and empathy. On the one hand we tell ourselves stories to try and understand and connect to other people. Sometimes there's a more direct apprehension. On the other hand, we can alienate ourselves from people by the stories we tell about them. Whether we resent them or decide we have nothing in common with them because of their category—because of their color, or because they're immigrants, or gay, or because of resentments, or something. The use of stories is so central to my book. This thing with my mother was an interesting case history. Stories aren't necessarily wonderful, and they don't necessarily bring us closer. There are these other stories. And what do we do with them? What do we think about them?

**B:** You also use art as something that actually has the power to break old stories. And maybe tell a new story. You talk about your friend [Ana Teresa Fernandez]'s project with the shoes made of ice that melted when she stood in an inner-city gutter, and the labyrinth that you enter.

**R:** And Yoko Ono's all white chess set. Yeah, I was really fortunate. Look, the clouds are pink now.

**B:** This is such a beautiful place to sit.

**R:** I'm just wondering, if I build a window bench, will it face away? Or I'm wondering if it can be built so there will be two seats that face the window. It seems like a good idea. We could each sit and still be looking out.

**B:** It's a good place to try to make a panorama of this part of the city.

**B. BANERJEE**

**R:** Yeah. Where were we? Visual art. It's funny. Some people are cinema people, some people are literature people. And I've always been a writing person, but I've always been strongly visual. When I was young, I thought making books meant drawing as well as writing. Because that's what kid's books look like. When I decided I was going to be a writer, when I was six. Instead, I've been around visual artists my whole life. And it's been such a blessing and a gift. I feel like nobody asks bigger or more fundamental questions than artists. A lot of times in literature and MFA programs, there's so many assumptions about what writing is, how you do it. The medium—you're probably going to do it on your laptop. There's no physical questions. So you don't have to think about process and medium in the same way. Artists can conduct a kind of philosophical conversation through making mute objects speak. And this engagement with the material of the world, and finding the intellect and the spirit of the matter of this world. I've been so blessed! I've been around Ann Hamilton and Richard Misrach. And dozens of extraordinary artists. My friend Ann Chamberlain who was dying—

**B:** Whom you mention in the book.

**R:** Who made that amazing archipelago of white islands connected by red threads. It became such a beautiful metaphor that powers the book. My friend, Elín Hansdóttir, in Iceland. Well, she really lives in Berlin, but she is Icelandic and was in Iceland that summer, who made the labyrinth. Ana Teresa Fernandez who made the ice shoes. That was such a powerful way to break Cinderella's story: Put the glass slippers on. And melt the fuckers with your feet. With your body heat. Go to war with the story and win. And not to make it easy, but to put your feet in ice until the flesh won out over ice.

So, yeah, it's not necessarily narrative. And that's also interesting. Ana Teresa—there is kind of a simple narrative: "I've made high-heeled shoes out of ice. I will wear them until they melt. And thus I will win the battle of the story." But Ann's piece—the archipelago of

white islands connected by red threads—Yoko Ono’s all white chess set, Elin’s labyrinth—there’s narratives implicit in them. You can literally travel in the labyrinth. You can think about what games you can play on that chessboard where both sides are white. There’s a kind of openness that’s an invitation that I like. It’s a kind of non-story that invites all stories to arise. And maybe all stories to pause.

But it was nice to have, without trying, these visual masterpieces. They’re mostly by women, so maybe that’s not the right word. But these amazing works of art just kind of rise to become part of the narrative. As there were when I was living in Roni Horn’s Library of Water. There was an artist who got me to Iceland. And the person who was dying of breast cancer as I was being treated for it was an artist. My life is full of artists, and so it felt like they belonged in the book. There’s something so magical about it. All those works of art that I’ve just described. They’re like fairy tales for our time. Because they’re so strange and magical and enchanted. Without being silly and Hobbit-like and other-worldly, they’re fairy tales for the here and now.

**B:** So, if I understand it correctly, the Library of Water has these glass columns that are full of melt-water from different glaciers.

**R:** Yeah.

**B:** What was it like for you to see these columns of water and know that they were from individual, specific glaciers that were melting?

**R:** It was wonderful! Roni Horn’s Library of Water room was like a map of Iceland. Not a literal map because it wasn’t laid out to give you the precise geography of that heart-shaped island. But it was this wonderful—and I never worked hard at figuring out which one was which glacier. But to know that most of the glaciers were represented by these columns was to be in Iceland in miniature. And the strange thing was my little apartment was underneath it, underneath this

observatory-like space looking out over the Breidisfjordur archipelago in rural Iceland. So it was sort of under the glacier, like the title of Halldór Laxness's book. I've always lived up high, except then. And people would occasionally come and peer in the room. And it wasn't just ground level. It was a little below the earth on the top of the hill. So I felt like a zoo animal with people looking in, which was less wonderful. And they erected a little fence for my benefit just to try and encourage them to not look at me like a zoo animal. So, it was a little odd, there was a kind of exposure there. There was a sense that I was part of the Library of Water, and I was an exhibit in some ways.

**B:** It definitely seems like that whole period was a convalescence period.

**R:** It was kind of isolating, and incredibly peaceful. At times, I was like, why didn't I go to Mexico with all the warmth and the color and liveliness? But there can be a lot to contend with. And it was wonderful. It was a contemplative time. And I really did get to experience the white nights and the light in the Arctic. I only regret that I didn't spend more time exploring—that I didn't take more boats through the archipelagos and things like that. The quiescence of some of that time was great, in its own way.

**B:** One thing I was really struck by—you talk about visual art, you talk about Chinese art—but there's very little science fiction in your book. A book called *The Faraway Nearby* to me suggests the future. Except you talk about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

**R:** Who, of course, wrote science fiction. *The Last Man* is even more science fiction because it's set in the future. It's truly one of the very early science fiction novels. I love Ursula K. Leguin's *Earthsea* quintet, and the *Dune* books were a big influence on me, but I haven't really been a science fiction reader. Science fiction is often impersonal

in a way, and this was really personal. It doesn't necessarily address these really deep personal things that I wanted to address. I don't pay that much attention to it, and in this context, it didn't have any particular place.

**B:** It definitely feels like technology is changing our consciousness. And you've addressed that in your Muybridge book.

**R:** Yeah. And I'll address it again. I was actually talking at dinner last night with poets about will there still be children who fall in love with books the way that people before ... like you must have been one of those kids where books were these magic boxes you learned to open up and with which you learned to enter other worlds. When kids have all these digital video ways of doing that, are there going to be kids who fall in love with books in the same way? But also the kind of hive-mind of everybody being continuously connected feels like it's this funny middle zone we're stuck in. There's this technologically-mediated state that's neither the introspection of true solitude nor the exuberance or vulnerability of deep connection. But it's just lots of texts and tweets and posts.

**B:** The shallows, perhaps?

**R:** Yeah. And wonderful things happen with it. I don't mention it in the book, but I got on Facebook to follow the Burmese uprising in 2007. And I've stayed connected with old friends. But also with all kinds of movements. So I feel really positive about that aspect of the technology. Technology can be used for many things. But it's very hard not to use it for this kind of—it's like eating potato chips out of the bag continuously. There's a kind of distractedness that you just munch down on, absent-mindedly, with technology. And that, I think, is bad.

**B:** I wanted to ask you about how your new book relates to *A Field*

*Guide to Getting Lost*. Did it grow organically out of it? There's strands of this book that talk about the Burmese uprising, and David Graeber [the anthropologist and historian of debt, who helped birth the Occupy movement]. What was it like to bring all of those dimensions of your thought together?

**R:** You ask such good questions. There's two facets of that. One is, I would look at *Field Guide* and I would think, I want to be her again. That license to have an absolutely intuitive and associative trajectory rather than a linear narrative where you're on a didactic mission, the way that *A Paradise Built in Hell* does. It was something I longed for—to be free to be as lush and subjective and meandering as possible. And also, I felt a tremendous responsibility. *Field Guide* I think was mostly written by 2003. And that's when the war in Iraq started. I had five years in which I was very much a public citizen in a way I hadn't been before. I became a much more political writer through my fabulous relationship with Tom Engelhardt, the Fred to my Ginger of writing. It's more than any other editorial relationship. There's a real symbiosis and collaboration. And he's brought out possibilities for me that have been pretty amazing.

Look at that crescent moon through the warped glass! Can you see that?

**B:** I can't see it.

**R:** You might have to come forward.

**B:** [Kneels on the floor next to Rebecca and gazes up into the sky, where she is pointing at the moon.] Now I see it. Whoah!

**R:** I really knew as soon as—that the apricots were going to prompt a book. And I was itching to write it, but I was under contract to write *A Paradise Built in Hell*. And under contract to do the *Atlas*. So I had two huge projects in the way. But it was wonderful to feel

license to write as beautifully as possible. It's not up to me to decide whether the book is beautiful. But I know I was trying to write—not in the sense of frills—but this kind of lushness and sense of description. I'm friends with poets and I read poets. And I feel much closer to them than novelists in that freedom to have that kind of richness of associative power. It was such a pleasure to have again.

**B:** You hold up Scheherazade as a working class hero.

**R:** Yeah. Well, she's a maker. She saves her life by the stories she tells. Like somebody building a boat to sail off their desert island. The sultan's view of women and marriage is this murderous desert island, and her stories are more and more elaborate. She sends a whole fleet out from that island. Yeah, she's a working class hero. You know, make the means of your liberation. And make it beautiful.

**B:** The means of production in this case would be her stories?

**R:** Yeah. Which is also her survival. What do I call it exactly in there? *Scheherazade, like a working class hero, seized control of the means of production, and talked her way out.* So yes, the means of production is the story. Essentially, there was a battle of the stories. There was a story in which women were fickle and treacherous and had to be murdered after they slept with men. Her story was that there were stories within stories within stories. Which is also a kind of womblike thing. And the fact that she's actually apparently giving birth to sons while she's telling these stories. Every story is a vessel that contains other stories which could contain other stories. And there's also the sense of generations. That within the child is the seed of her child, who will have a child, who will have a child. Maybe.

**B:** Well, it definitely feels like you accomplished a Scheherazade-like task. It feels like you talked your way out of a complex and complicated

set of circumstances. But this book also addresses the reader very personally. You use the second person. It also feels like an invitation.

**R:** I hope so. Were you invited?

**B:** Definitely.

**R:** Good. One of the single essays that's been the biggest influence on me is ["A Scary Abundance of Water"]. Barry Lopez wrote a story about his childhood that was about the ecstasies of space and light and freedom and roaming around the San Fernando valley in the 1940s and '50s before it was really developed. But also about the intense sexual abuse he suffered. It was in the *L.A. Weekly* about a dozen years ago. And one thing that was really powerful about that story and impressive is that he made it clear that these things happened to him, but he didn't think he was special, or suffered uniquely.

There's a real tendency in the solipsism of memoir and first-person narrative which has been shaped by the way therapists have taught us to tell our stories. Which is supposed to be storytelling that brings us to solutions. But I think it's that very form of storytelling that's a problem. Because it's a story that, when you tell it, it's a kind of selfishness ... the me, me, me that's ultimately just isolated. Both in thinking you're so damn special because of your suffering. And not feeling deeply connected to other people's stories, and not telling your story as inextricable from the people you impact as you yourself are not innocent. You don't *see* yourself. You're not an island with all the red threads traveling to other islands. You're isolated. And Barry told his story in this very beautiful way so that you could see that this kind of thing happens to many people and everybody has this heroic struggle to become and to survive, and to make sense of it, and to not be destroyed by suffering. And that generosity was really profound.

And I wrote the book—you know, I had a really minor brush with cancer. And a mother who was difficult. But was clearly also in difficulty herself. But I've also had a very lucky life in some ways. People read my books and invite me to go live in Libraries of Water in Iceland. How charmed is that? And I'm corresponding with the friends in Iceland. We're still very connected. I may see all of them this year. And we're still in each other's lives. And that's always a question for me. How do I tell my story in a way that resonates with your story, and that invites your story to come out and bloom and be fully present for you? And invites you to question it and retell it, or distance yourself from it. How can I tell a story that's not just ... these things happened to Rebecca Solnit, but here's how things happened to us. Here's what perhaps we can make of them.

Here's what one particular set of circumstances was, and what I made of it. What's your story? And what will you make of it? And do you need to remake it? It's that sense that was so important to me. It's that invitation to everybody. Because we're all made out of stories. We all have this work to do. What is this story we're given? Is it a magic carpet or is it a prison? How do you break the story the way Ana Teresa melted those ice shoes and make other stories? How do you become fully aware that you're the storyteller rather than just feeling like: "Oh I'm unlucky. I've always been unfortunate, nobody loves me." How do you see yourself telling the stories? It's not like I've solved it and that I'm completely conscious, etc. My crummy old stories show up like uninvited guests, or rats, in the house, and nibble away at good things. But at least I'm like, "You're a rat, I know I invented you, but I'm going to tell a cat-shaped story and get rid of you."

**I decide that this is a good place to end, and turn off the recorder.**

Afterwards, Solnit and I continue our conversation, and circle back to her antipathy against the conventional memoir format, so narrowly focused on individual suffering and redemption. Locating her own self in the interplay between so many people, places, and stories,

Solnit says, allows her to explore “a more extravagant sense of self.” It’s a phrase I carry with me as I walk from Solnit’s balmy section of the city to my own cold and foggy district, along with the taste of her apricot liqueur and the memory of her finger pointing at the crescent moon through the warped glass of her window.