



THE MOTH, YADDO, AND LIVE FROM THE NYPL
CELEBRATE THE MOTH @ 10!
ART ATTACK: STORIES ABOUT WRESTLING THE MUSE
October 6, 2006
Celeste Bartos Forum
New York Public Library
WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE

(music)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Megan Weeder! **(applause)** Let me start by a confession which I wish to be secret. **(laughter)** I love the Moth! I love the Moth girls, this is the fourth event I do with them and it is always a great, great pleasure. Thank you very much for animating the Library with your presence. This is the last time I will say these words. By the way, my name is Paul Holdengräber. I'm the Director of Public Programs at the Library, known now, thankfully, as LIVE from the New York Public Library. It used to be called PEP—Public Education Programs **(laughter)**—which seemed like something you might take when you have stomach problems. **(laughter)** And so we decided to change it to LIVE from the New York Public Library. My goal here at the Library, and I will say it for the last time, because my wife said that if I said it one more time she would divorce, and so would my assistants. I'm here—what

am I here to do? I'm here to animate the Library, to oxygenate the Library, but really to make the lions roar. That is my goal. Make the lions roar. **(applause)** So let's hear a big roar. Roowwwrrr! Yeah! **(applause)**

And I'm here tonight also to talk to you a little bit about what it means to be inspired by the muse and I found an uplifting quotation because I'm a quote man. I can't stop quoting. I wish I had something original to say. **(laughter)** Well, let me digress for a moment, digression is the sunshine of narrative, and I said I wanted to make a *secret* confession, you know, the wonderful line by Thomas Jefferson that for two people to keep a secret, one has to be dead. **(laughter)** This has nothing to do, nothing to do with what I'm about to talk about, but I thought I would show you that I'm quite well-educated. **(laughter)** But I found this quotation about inspiration, and writing, which we're really here to talk about. Yaddo, and stories about Yaddo, and things that happen at Yaddo, and I've read some articles about things that happen at Yaddo that to *me* sound fairly anatomically impossible, but **(laughter)** I guess it's a question of flexibility. **(laughter)** This is a quotation, and I have many, I have about fifteen, you don't mind, right? This is a quotation: "Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead." **(laughter)** I thought this was a good way of beginning the evening. Another good way of beginning the evening is to talk about passion, since passions often inspire us. And Lessing, the great Romantic poet, said that "All passions, even unpleasant, are as passions pleasant." I thought that would make you think for a while. **(laughter)**

So, we are here to talk about Yaddo, and to talk about this wonderful retreat where I—I really—I don't know whether there are any people from Yaddo here, but I really would like to be invited. **(laughter)** I really—and I feel the service I'm paying to you tonight warrants an invitation. **(laughter)** I know you only give two months at Yaddo. I would like two years. I need it. **(laughter)** I've lived in New York for about five hundred days, and all I can say is one year in New York, having come from Los Angeles, is like seven years in Los Angeles, dog years. **(laughter)** But you might know, also, that we at the New York Public Library—I love saying that: "We at the New York Public Library." It makes me feel important. We at the New York Public Library now have the archives, Yaddo's archives, so in 2007 or eight, they will become available to the public, and you will be able to read about those things I was mentioning to you, but you also will be able to read about great writers, and great poets, and great musicians, and altogether great greats who were at Yaddo, so you should all come back in 2008. It takes

time to do exhibitions. You know, when you talk with colleagues here, or at the museum where I used to work, they tell you, “Well, if we do something in 2010 it might be a bit too early, but in 2011, but not the spring, in the fall.” **(laughter)** So it takes time to do exhibitions. But in 2008—and I mean this with all due respect, of course—in 2008 you will be able to come to the Library to see a wonderful exhibition of Yaddo.

In the meantime, we thought that we would make “Yaddo” a household word, and let people know, because, you know, when I arrived in New York, people were saying “Yaddo” and I thought it was a very strange name for *any* institution—Yaddo, Yaddo, Yaddo. But in the meantime, I have been reading a number of things about Yaddo. It’s hard to say “Yaddo” without smiling, I think. Yaddo. But I’ve read an article which probably most of you read in the *New York Review of Books*—the *New York Times Book Review*—that Rachel Donadio wrote where she speaks about the frolicking that went on in Yaddo, and she writes that the writer David Leavitt said that he struck up a friendship, an important friendship, with Jill Ciment at MacDowell, which was the other great retreat for writers, often compared and contrasted to Yaddo as being the more serious place, where less of those kinds of things happen but, even there, he says that he struck up a relationship with Jill Ciment at MacDowell in 1985: “We met because we were the only people there who weren’t having an affair.” **(laughter)**

In the meantime, I would like to thank the Moth girls, in particular, in particular Catherine Burns. I don’t know where you are, Catherine, please stand up. Catherine. Please stand up. **(applause)** That’s Catherine Burns. Without Catherine there would be no Moth tonight! I would also like to thank Elaina Richardson, who is the president of Yaddo. I would like to thank Lesley Leduc and also Joanne Heyman, who is no longer at Yaddo, but made this evening happen also. So thank you very much. **(applause)**

In parting, I would like to encourage you all to join our e-mail list. If you do—it grows by about three hundred people a week—you will get two free tickets to some of the events coming up. Next week I’ll be interviewing Adam Gopnik. We have Jan Morris, there will be David Rockwell. A number of people. You have the schedule on your chairs, so you’ll see the kinds of things we’re doing. I also want to put in another good word for the Moth. They are going on tour, they are going to Los Angeles, they’re about to fill up a hall in Los Angeles at UCLA, which has eighteen hundred seats, so I feel humble tonight with

our six hundred. And they have a Moth Ball coming up, I think it's on November fourteenth. The topic, theme, of that evening is the Rat Pack. It has Simon Doonan, who will be coming also to the Library, Malcolm Gladwell, Dominick Dunne. In parting and before bringing Jonathan Ames, I would like to leave you with this comment, this quotation of Leonard Cohen. Leonard Cohen said about inspiration that if he knew where it came from, he would go there more often. Thank you very much.

(applause)

JONATHAN AMES: Paul Holdengräber! The real Lion King of Forty-Second Street. **(applause)** Okay. I'm your host for the evening. My name is Jonathan Ames, and you're here for a presentation of the Moth and tonight's Moth show—I'm checking my notes because you know I could blank at any moment and be very embarrassing—there's only six hundred of you here. Only a fellow performer laughed. He understood. Okay. So tonight's show is called "Art Attack: Stories about Wrestling the Muse." Which is why Paul was talking about the muse. So tonight's stories will be attempting to tackle that theme. And tonight's kind of a special night of the Moth. It's the first evening of our tenth season and we're joining forces **(applause)** with Yaddo and the Public Library. I was asked to host. I often host the Moth, but I also have gone to Yaddo many times. I can attest to its splendor. I mean, many great artists have been there. Aaron Copland, Philip Guston, Philip Roth, Truman Capote, Carson McCullers. All—you know, it's an incredible legacy. It's been around over eighty years. I myself have gone there several times, and I've written the bulk of two novels there, and I've had about ten affairs, so I highly recommend going. **(laughter)** And it's so really, you know, a lovely place, and hopefully Paul will get a residency, and he can just, you know, have more children and just stay up there forever. **(laughter)**

Tonight we need to thank some more people in addition to the people Paul thanked. I think you'll really want to thank these two—well, not quite individuals, but Martin Miller's Gin and Cutty Sark, let's hear it for them **(applause)** providing the alcohol and making us all feel a little bit better, and I also want to thank our season's sponsor, the Moth's season sponsor, TNT, so let's hear it for TNT. **(applause)** I'm just going to briefly explain the Moth for those of you who have not been to a Moth show. The Moth is a not-for-profit organization. I guess it's also a nonprofit organization, but it says "not-for-profit." The writer named George Dawes Green grew up in Georgia, a small boy on this island, I think it was called St. Simon's Island, and all his friends and relatives would gather at night on the weekends drinking, you

know, bootleg liquor, something like that. And they would tell stories, and as a young boy he loved these stories, and he would look up into the lights and he would see all these moths flitting around in the porch. It was kind of like his Rosebud, these moths, and so when he came to New York he wanted to recreate this kind of old-fashioned storytelling, and that's how this came about, so it's kind of—what the Moth does is old-fashioned storytelling in very high-pressured situations like the New York Public Library. **(laughter)** So these aren't readings, there's no notes, people just come up here and tell stories from their life. In addition to putting on events like this, the Moth also has a Story Slam and an outreach program for adults in rehabilitation, and goes out to people in schools. So that's also quite wonderful. I mean, both Yaddo and the Moth, I mean, in a very insane, gloomy, self-destructive, melting, aggressive world—I can't think of some more negative adjectives, but you can come up with them—we have two very benevolent organizations joining forces tonight, so I think that's a beautiful thing.

Something else about the Moth. Now, just since I got into the state of the world. We've all experienced this tortuous thing—I imagine that the President might want to put this into his rewrite of the Geneva Convention, but—but this tortuous thing is the reading, you know at Barnes and Noble or something, and you go there and someone just at some point is going *too* long and then too long and you begin to die inside. It happens at Yaddo sometimes, there's readings at night and someone you had previously liked at dinner over two weeks suddenly reads for about forty-nine minutes which was about, you know, maybe thirty-nine minutes too long. You know, and you're just—all sorts of cancers start forming in your body, you go nuts. **(laughter)** But that does not happen at the Moth, because what we have—we have Megan Weeder here, and at the ten-minute mark, she draws her bow very gently across the strings, letting the storyteller know, you have a minute, and letting you know, “Okay, I can still like this person. They're going to end soon,” **(laughter)** you know what I mean, all your weird codependent negative feelings can go out, because she's going. And if they don't stop, then she really starts going on the bow, and they *know* they have to stop. It's basically a more effete vaudevillian hook. You know what I mean, it's a violin instead of a yank.

I was thinking of this nature of the vaudevillian hook, and thinking how we're on Forty-Second Street, and in 1987, I used to work on my first novel up in the Reading Room here, and I would get off the subway and I'd go, “I'm going to the Library. I'm going to work on my novel.” And then suddenly I'd be yanked into one of the 118 peepshows that lined Forty-Second Street. **(laughter)** I don't know how it

happened. Every day, it'd be like, "No!" and I'd be in there, and then, you know, and then you come out and then you try to merge into traffic, like you know, "I wasn't just in there." **(laughter)** I would try to like step out and look like, you know, I hadn't just been in there. It was very upsetting. And one time, just to save grace with some of the nicer people in the audience, I mention this. I went to Princeton. One time I got yanked in there, you know, it's all bright and horrible with crazy smells, mostly disinfectant, and I saw a fellow Princetonian, and I said, "I saw you go in here! What are you doing?" You know, I confronted him before he could confront me, **(laughter)** and then got out.

Okay. So that's what will happen. She'll play violin and yank the person off. Okay. So we're going to have three storytellers and an intermission and then two more storytellers. And I am the first storyteller. So now I'm actually going to tell a story. Let's take a break and pretend I just called myself up. Okay. Now I'm back, okay. **(laughter/applause)** Oh, thank you, thanks for coming to see me. You're a very nice crowd, and thank you, Cutty Sark, for making this a lot easier. Okay. **(laughter)** So, all right, my story about wrestling the muse. In 1996 I was living near the BQE Highway over in the Navy Yard in Brooklyn. I was completely broke. I was struggling to write my second novel. My first novel, which I'd worked on here, had come out in 1989, it was seven years now between novels. I couldn't write, I was living off credit cards, I was going crazy, and it was February of '96, there was huge snowdrifts, we'd had a gigantic storm, and I couldn't get any writing done, and I was procrastinating a lot, playing this game called "Yentas" with a friend of mine I had met at Yaddo. Who in the audience knows what the word "yenta" means? Could you raise your hand? Okay. Who in the audience is Jewish? **(laughter)** Okay, this is New York, okay we could do the rest of the show in Hebrew at this rate. A lot of you don't look Jewish, it's interesting.

So, anyway, we would call this game called Yenta, and what it involved was, Glenn was a Midwestern WASP, but he would do this incredible yenta accent, and I'm Jewish, and I had been raised by yentas, so I knew all about yentas. My great-aunt Doris who lived in Queens would call me every day, "What are you doing? Are you eating?" and always "Are you eating?" I would say, "No, I'm off food." "Go out, eat!" But so Glenn would call me up, "What's going on over there?" I'm like, "Nothing. I'm bored. What's happening with you?" And he would say, "Oh, I went to D'Agostino's, did a little shopping." And I would say, "Oh, D'Agostino's, very fancy!" "Oh, you're so rude! I can't stand you! I'm hanging up right away!" Always the yentas would, like, get annoyed with each other and say, "I'm hanging up!"

You know, I would call up and say, “What’s going on over there?” “Not much. You know, I have to tell you. The last time I was over, your breath was horrible. You’re brushing your teeth with garlic. I almost died!” “Oh, you’re so rude! You’re so selfish! I’m hanging up!” And we would just do this all the time, distracting each other like crazy. “I’m hanging up! I’m hanging up!” Calling each other, insulting each other, just doing this yenta voice. Couldn’t stop. It was very addictive. I loved doing it. **(laughter)** And when I would do the yenta voice it was like I would speak the truth. That was the other thing. It was like my id came out, or Yid in this case, **(laughter)** just like, I could speak the truth. And a friend of mine once called up and he wanted—he was having trouble in his marriage. And he said, “Jon, I’m struggling,” this is my friend Larry, “I’m struggling with my wife, you know, what do you think?” And I started giving him you know, these banal platitudes, “It’ll be okay. You’re a good person.” And he was like, “Talk to me in yenta, I want to hear the yenta.” Cause he knew the yenta would give him a zezt. And I said, “You’re horrible! You’re selfish! All you think is yourself! Why don’t you take her out for a nice dinner once in awhile? Buy her a steak! You know, you never make love to her anymore. I can’t stand it! I’m hanging up on you!” **(laughter)** You know what I mean? And so that, like, you know, he wanted the yenta.

So playing yenta all the time. Now, the other thing I did back then, also, instead of writing my novel, is I would do a lot of phone sex. This was before the Internet and, you know, all the men became addicted to pornography on the Internet, there was phone sex, and so I opened up the *Village Voice* one day and there was a picture of a woman in a bikini and then \$3.99 a minute, you could call *her*. And then at the second, the bottom part of the ad, there was a man in a pair of Speedos, and you could call *him* for fifteen cents a minute. **(laughter)** So it was like, gay line, \$3.99, I mean straight line \$3.99, gay line fifteen cents a minute, you know, no wonder so many people are homosexual. It’s a lot less expensive. **(laughter)** I mean, it was incredible. So I started calling the gay line. I couldn’t afford the straight line. And so I’m calling the gay line, you know, I’m on there, and always the first question would be, “What are you into?” And I wasn’t going to say, “Playing yenta,” you know what I mean, it was not very, you know, enticing. And I would always say, “I don’t know, what are you into?” I would try to muffle my voice or something. And then this one guy said, “Chicken fights.” And he was from Bay Ridge, and chicken fights? I said, “You mean, cockfighting?” ’Cause I thought maybe he was from Bay Ridge and he was into illegal cockfighting. And maybe he’d be into because of the word cock, you know, he would like it, And he goes, “No, no. Chicken fights.” He goes, “I could come over to your apartment and you

could put me on your shoulders and carry me around and we could practice, and then this summer we'd go to Jones Beach and challenge two other guys to chicken fights." And I was like "Wooah." **(laughter)** You know, I mean, like, "This is pretty good for fifteen cents a minute. This is good material." But I've done a lot of therapy, so I'm like, oh, I'm thinking, and I realized, you know, he must have had an incredible experience as a young boy, like, he had a chicken fight, probably with a neighbor or neighbors and he got an erection next to somebody's neck, and he'd been, like, trying to recreate that moment ever since and here he is on the phone line and I said, "Wow, you must have had a really good experience with, you know, chicken fights as a kid," you know, sort of giving him phone therapy. And he's like, "What are you talking about, man? It's nothing to do with my childhood! I'm hanging up!" And he hangs up. It's like he's suddenly playing yenta **(laughter)** and he didn't even know it and he hung up on me. He didn't want me, you know, like, putting him on the couch.

So another time I call the line and I meet a guy, and he wants to box. He wants to meet at the St. Mark's Hotel and box and I thought, you know, I could really now be a yenta, a matchmaker, you know, find the chicken fight guy, somehow the two could mix and match and work it out and I wasn't going to go box the guy, and we're talking, and then, like, we're talking for a while and then it came out that he was a writer and he had a book coming out with HarperCollins, and I was like, "Oh my God! A contact." **(laughter)** You know what I mean? I hadn't been published in seven years. So I'm like, "You know what? I'll meet you at the St. Mark's Hotel." He had an agent, and an editor, so he was going to like bring his manuscript, and I said I was a struggling writer. So I meet him at, like, the St. Mark's Hotel, around four p.m., in the middle of the day. You shouldn't do these things when it's light out. So anyway, we meet in front of the St. Mark's. He's wearing a leather coat, he's got a mustache. And I shake his hand. I let him pay for the room, you know, I figured it was his thing. You know what I mean? I kind of stood back while he went for the wallet. It was an awkward moment, but I didn't make a move. Kind of like many of you later when you go out for dinner or something. **(laughter)**

So we go up to the room, and he empties out this duffel bag. You know, boxing gloves, headgear, and he's like, "You know, take your clothes off, let's box." And I'm like, "Okay," so I get down to my underwear, and he gets completely naked. He's like, "Come on, let's box naked." And I'm like, "Oh, no!" you know what I mean, and I was like, "Oh, wait, I'm going to keep my boxer shorts on." I'm like, "They're boxer shorts, good for boxing," and I never until that moment realized the etymology of the

word, you know what I mean, I had always thought boxer shorts, I had never thought how they looked like boxing trunks, that's why they're called that. So it was a good excuse, he bought it. Meanwhile, he's naked, you know what I mean, it was like the thing of the Tower of London swinging, and, like, "Oh, no, how am I going to box?" **(laughter)** And so he's like, "Come on," and then he says, after he gets the gear, and he puts the gloves on me and goes, "All right. Whoever wins gets a blowjob." And I'm like, "You didn't mention that on the phone. Oh my God!" Suddenly the stakes are very high. Forget HarperCollins, right? **(laughter)** And he had this mustache. And sorry if I'm offending anyone, but these things happen in life. **(laughter)**

So we start boxing and like I'm completely intimidated. His penis is hitting me on the thighs, **(laughter)** and you know, I don't think Larry Holmes or Muhammad Ali had to deal with that, usually you've got these enormous trusses, chastity belts, boxers wear. Anyway, so he's coming at me, and in that moment, like someone insane, I, like, retreated internally into yenta mode, "Can't we go across the street, have a cup of coffee, a bagel, something nice? Let's talk about writing!" You know what I mean, so inside I'm like becoming, you know, the opposite of a fierce warrior, I'm like in yenta mode, who's upset, you know, I mean if the yenta was being honest right now, I'd be like, "It's sort of drafty in here, Paul, it's cold, I mean, what's going on?" You know, so I was like in yenta mode, completely fragile. He's pounding me, he's hitting me on the shoulders, he's hitting me on the side of the head, I'm going to get a concussion, I'll never write, pounding me, and then suddenly hits me a big blow right in the stomach, knocks the wind out of me, I'm like, "Oh, no, I'm going to be giving the first blowjob of my life," **(laughter)** but it knocked the yenta out of me, and I'm like, "Come on, Ames, get it together," so then, you know, we're moving, I'm starting to move now a little bit, and I threw a left jab puts his head back and I saw a light, and it was kind of a beautiful athletic moment, I mean Tiger Woods must have it all the time, everything just lined up perfectly, and I did like a right cross, hit him right in the jaw, his head snapped back, the headgear popped off, it was like a champagne cork, just popped off, and went flying back and then he gouged his hip in the dresser and he screamed like, "Aaaaahhh!" You know what I mean? I'm surprised the people smoking crack next door probably like called 911, **(laughter)** it went even beyond their paranoia, and it gouged his hip like crazy, you know that moment when you hit that, you're like, "I'm ready to die right now," when you stub your toe, and he falls back on the bed all naked and I'm like, "Who's going to get a blowjob *now*?" **(laughter)** You know what I mean, I'm over him like Ali over Sonny Liston, like that.

And so I'm standing over him, and then I'm like, "Are you all right?" and he said, "My hip! That dresser!" I was like, "What do you expect, it's not an official-sized ring. It's the St. Mark's Hotel, **(laughter)** you know, we have about five inches to move. And he's lying there, and I said, "Look, you know, maybe I'll get going." And he's like, "Yeah, we don't have good chemistry." Good chemistry? I knocked you out! **(laughter)** I overcame you. I'm the champion. But he's like, you know, "My manuscript's over there." I'm like, "Okay." I took the book, and I got dressed, and he's still lying on the bed, he's all covered up now. And he's like, "Well, good luck with your writing," and I'm like, "Good luck with your writing," and we parted very civilly, this totally insane moment. You know, "Good luck, see you later," you know, I read a review of his book a year later in the *New York Times*.

So anyway, I go home and I call Glenn, "Glenn! You're not going to believe what happened! I met a fellow. I was crazy! I went up in a hotel room and he got fresh and I hit him with my purse and I knocked him out!" And then Glenn was like, "You're horrible! You're a slut! But I don't believe you! I'm hanging up!" And I'm like, "No! No! Wait," you know, because I really want to tell him, and he hung up on me. And I'm like, "Aw." And then the phone rings. And it's my great-aunt Doris from Queens. She's like, "Jonathan," and I say, "Hello. What's going on?" She's like, "Oh, I must have the wrong number. I'm hanging up." I'm like, "No, Aunt Doris!" **(laughter)** 'cause I was still stuck in yenta mode, because I'd just hung up from Glenn, I'm stuck, "Aunt Doris come back!" And she hung up and I'm sitting there, and I'm all hung up. But then I got some writing done and it woke me up. It was wonderful. The muse had been woken up. And so that's the end of my story. I'm hanging up. So thank you for listening.

(applause)

All right. So at the Moth, we don't, by way of introduction, we don't bring people up by talking about their bios. You can read their bios in one of the pieces of paper you got, and what we do is we ask each storyteller a question relating to the theme. Tonight's theme is "wrestling the muse," so I asked each storyteller, "If you could be a professional wrestler, what would be your name?" And our next storyteller said "Johnny Handsome," which I think is an apt and perfect name, so please welcome to the stage Jonathan Santlofer.

(applause)

JONATHAN SANTLOFER: I only said “Johnny Handsome” because I’ve come to believe that if you tell people things, they will believe it. I was sitting there—this is not yet my story—but I was sitting there thinking, it’s the Public Library. Do I have a blowjob story? **(laughter)** I don’t know if it was the muse or what it was, but over a decade ago I lost about fifteen years of my work in a gallery fire. All of my artwork. The show opened on a Friday and burned down on a Saturday. I left New York. I dropped out of the art world for five years, and, during that time, I sort of reinvented my artwork, and I wrote a novel, and I’m making that sound a lot easier than it was. So I was coming back to Yaddo with a proposal for a new novel, one with pictures. I had decided to do something that I’d always wanted to do, which was a kind of illustrated novel, a partial graphic novel thriller. For those of you, by the way, who don’t know Yaddo, and don’t know what Yaddo looks like, you have to think of a place that’s very dark, somewhat Gothic. Think *The Addams Family* and you’re on the track. I will say though, that—by the way, it’s Yaddo, which rhymes with “shadow,” which is how the name came about, from the children of the original family that created this odd plantation.

So I arrived at Yaddo and I was put into the new renovated pigeon barn, which sounds awful, but is so fantastic and so beautiful, with an upstairs that is filled with light, and a downstairs studio. I was going to sleep upstairs and write upstairs and draw downstairs. And it was Eden, it was completely perfect. And it was like that for almost two weeks. You know, I divided my time very normally. I would write for a few hours, and then I’d take a little break, I’d eat my little bag lunch that you pick up, and I would then go down and draw some of the drawings for my book, and it was very civilized, and I was doing okay. I didn’t feel as if I was writing the great American Gothic sort of graphic novel. Oh, by the way, I should say that I felt a little odd coming to Yaddo as a crime fiction writer. I didn’t know if it was really worthy. And I had decided not to tell anyone what I was doing. The only solace I took for myself was knowing that Edgar Allan Poe, well, supposedly, Edgar Allan Poe wrote “The Raven” at Yaddo and for sure, Patricia Highsmith finished *Strangers on a Train* at Yaddo. So I don’t know how much shame they felt when they were there, but I felt a little. So I didn’t tell anyone what I—when people would say what I was doing I would sort of mumble that I was doing artwork.

Something happened a couple of weeks into my stay, and I started writing through the night. I would fall asleep at four in the morning. I'd wake up by a splash of cold water on my face. I'd go downstairs to my studio, I'd draw for three hours, I'd fall asleep with the drawings stuck to my face. And this went on for several days, where I would sleep for two hours, work for eight hours, nine hours, ten hours, and I kept saying to myself, "You cannot do this. This is very unhealthy. There is no structure. You really have to stop." So instead what I did was I called the grounds crew, and I asked them could they black plastic my windows and skylight and they did. James, who has been at Yaddo longer than almost anyone, arrived, and he was on a twelve-foot ladder putting black plastic over my skylight and I looked up at him and I said, "Do you think this is weird?" and he looked down, and he said, "I've seen weirder." **(laughter)** I'm sure that's true.

The minute that happened, I lost all sense of time. Day, night, didn't matter. It sort of gave me blanket permission to work whenever I wanted to. Needless to say, I started to miss meals. I *never* went to breakfast. Around four or five o'clock—by the way, I should say, I took off my watch. So at maybe four, five o'clock, I'd walk over and pick up my bag lunch, eat it at five, miss dinner, come back, work. I also think it's—probably I should tell you that the book I was working on, this novel with pictures, is about a Puerto Rican-Jewish sketch—police sketch artist, Nate Rodriguez, and Nate Rodriguez has been asked by the NYPD—stop laughing, it's totally serious—**(laughter)** Nate Rodriguez has been asked by the NYPD to draw the face of a killer he's never seen. And I was, of course, trying to do that for him. And I couldn't do it. I could draw everything else for the book. I could draw the scenes that I wanted, I could draw the dead bodies, I could draw all of it, but I could not find this face. In the book, Nate gets blocked, and he goes up to see his grandmother, his *abuela*, in Spanish Harlem, and she takes him to a *botanica*, and they go to the *botanica* and the *santera* performs a *limpia*, a cleansing ritual, and Nate is unblocked, and at one point, this must have been, I guess this is two weeks into my darkness period, I found the Saratoga Springs Yellow Pages and was looking under "santeras," so I knew I'd lost a little touch with—that was supposed to be funny, not the other part—**(laughter)** because it really happened, but Saratoga Springs is rather white bread. You don't find *botanicas* and *santeras* in Saratoga Springs and I did not.

So I continued to go like this, you know, like, just like work work work work work. One night—I think it was night—I had just finished a series of drawings that I was very happy with, and, as I finished them,

I knocked a bottle of red ink over all of them, and I had a complete meltdown in my studio. You know, like, almost crying, on the floor, screaming. And the good thing about Yaddo, and especially if you're in one of the separate components, is that nobody can hear you scream. There's like a horror movie out there called, right, nobody can hear you scream? People *have* died at Yaddo and they do eventually find them but I wondered about that. In any case after about an hour, I looked at the drawings, and I went, "Oh, no, they're completely perfect," you know, it was like blood. So I went around with an eyedropper of red ink dropping it on all of my drawings. And about, I would say, six weeks passed. At one point I walked outside and I bumped into another Yaddo artist and he said, "Oh, have you been away?" And I immediately lied, I said, yes, I *had* been away, because I was very self-conscious about it, and I knew that my lunch bag would be sitting up there with my name on it, you know, and people were wondering where I was.

Anyway, you just have to picture this separate structure where I would be upstairs writing until I fell asleep, waking up, downstairs, drawing every day. No sense of day or night or time and one day I realized that my hands were shaking and I had lost weight, which I thought were the first signs of something not—not great. I took a shower, and I put on clean clothes, and I ventured out into the world. Actually, when I opened the door, it was snowing, and there were six-foot-high snowdrifts, which was a shock to me, because I had no windows, and I didn't know it had been snowing. And it felt to me, as I walked across the grounds at Yaddo, that I had actually sort of slid into *The Shining*. You know, I was thinking about my work and there was nobody there. I had on a black pea coat and I put my hands in my pockets, and I ambled over to the Winter Dining Room Library. Now, this is the place where everyone eats in the winter. It's rather small. You sit around, twelve people sit around a table. I used to have "dinner dread," which is that five minutes before dinner, I thought, "I can't go, I can't talk to anyone," but I didn't have dinner dread at this time because I almost never went.

But this night I walked over, and it was very quiet, and I was feeling great that I had gotten out. And I still remember the accident in, like, vivid Technicolor detail. I was halfway up this very steep stone staircase, thinking about my book, my hands deep in my pockets, when I missed a step, and I went *down*. I mean, all I can say is the biggest thing on my face broke that fall. And my nose hit directly the edge of the stone staircase, and I bounced, and went down again, and I heard the crack deep inside my head twice, blood was pouring down my throat, and, as I stood up, and finally got my hands out of my

pockets, put my hands up, blood was spurting through my fingers, all over my coat, all over the ground, and I kind of staggered up, got inside, and I knew there would be somebody in there, I went into the kitchen. There were two people working in the kitchen. One of them immediately fainted. **(laughter)** You know, this guy, boom! Out. Which I realized I must have looked very bad. Diane, who works in the kitchen, said, “Oh my God,” put me in a chair, got ice on my nose.

The next thing I remember, I was in Saratoga Hospital, there was like a twelve-year-old doctor and I am not kidding. **(laughter)** She was on the north or south edge of puberty, I mean, I don't know what. But she was holding my x-ray, and she said, “You've broken your nose in three places.” Meanwhile, what I didn't know is back at the Yaddo ranch, all the inmates had come to dinner, you know, so the rest of—there were twelve of us there, the other eleven artists had arrived at dinner, and what they found was blood up and down the staircase and two bloody handprints literally on the door. **(laughter)** This is *absolutely* true. The other thing is that they didn't wash it off for a couple of weeks in honor of me. But what they then—everybody was like, sort of—I only heard this secondhand—but they were buzzing around, looking around, saying, “Well, who is it?” you know, “Who is missing?” And this is what was reported to me: that somebody said, “I know, it's that artist who's writing the murder mystery, Jonathan,” and I was like, I thought, “How did they know that?” I had been hiding it for weeks. The other thing is that the writer Rick Moody said, “I know why that happened to Santlofer, he walks with his hands in his pockets.” **(laughter)** Excuse me, Rick, it was ten below zero, he'd have been walking with his hands in his pockets, too.

In any case, so, back at the hospital, this twelve-year-old doctor said, “You are going to need serious plastic surgery.” And with that, she leaned forward, took hold of my nose between her thumb and forefinger, and cracked it into shape. Obviously, this was her idea of plastic surgery. **(laughter)** I don't know. And I blacked out. I blacked out. The next thing, I awaken to six Yaddo women at the hospital surrounding me. Interestingly, none of the men came. All of the women came and none of the men came. The women brought chicken soup and a piece of Yaddo's great chocolate cake, which I couldn't eat, but that was lovely anyway. What the other thing you should know is that everybody in town kind of has this, you know, thing, like “What's Yaddo? What's going on there? Who are the people?” So here's this scene of six women standing around a battered man, and one of the women is saying, “Doesn't he look sexy, oh my God, with that broken nose and the purple eyes,” and the whole staff is

like . . . **(laughter)** you know, we didn't disappoint them, really, I don't think so. The twelve-year-old doctor gave me two painkillers and sent me back to Yaddo.

I arrived, I'd say it was probably midnight, it was really beautiful, there was still snow everywhere. These six women said, "Are you going to be okay, we'll take care of—" I said, "No, I'm fine." I went back to my house **(violin)** and—oh God—and I went upstairs and I wrote a scene as to what it's like to break your nose. I had this guy break his nose in my novel and feel the crack and taste the blood, and then I went downstairs and I looked at my drawings, these unfinished faces that neither me or Nate could finish, and I just started drawing on them, and drawing on them, and time passed, and at a certain point, there was a face there, I wasn't sure about it, I sat back, and I evaluated the face, and I thought, there was something wrong, it needed just some sort of shadowing on the sides, and I sat there another minute, I was sniffing and I got up and I went to use my thumb to mottle the side of the face and I streaked the face with blood. It was perfect. It was *so* much better than red ink. It was darker. It was thicker. And I went upstairs with that face in my mind, took the painkillers, went to sleep, and the next day I *did* take the black plastic off my windows and off the skylight. Thank you.

(applause)

JONATHAN AMES: Jonathan Santlofer! So you could have just said to Rick Moody, "There was an *ice storm!* I slipped." **(laughter)** A few people got that joke. Just a quick Yaddo anecdote along the lines of Jonathan's story about physical problems up there. Not as serious as what Jonathan went through, but I went up to Yaddo one summer, and my heart had been broken, this was summer of 2001. It had been a very imbalanced relationship, I loved her, she didn't love me, it was like most of your marriages, **(laughter)** you know what I mean, so it hadn't worked out, but the problem—the heartbreak had caused for some reason, for about six months or so, irritable bowel syndrome. I'm the person that makes everyone uncomfortable—blowjobs in hotels, and I had irritable bowel syndrome, which is basically, you don't want to be more than a hundred yards from a toilet at any time, you really need to be near, you know, a facility. You know, you're just upset and you're just going crazy, and I had told a writer there, Donald Antrim, he's probably at the *New Yorker* Festival as we speak, I think this is the weekend. Every year they have the *New Yorker* Festival and I feel left out. You know, I'll never be published there. I've never *submitted* anything, but I'll never be published. Anyway, I said, "You know, I'm crazy about this

girl, but I have irritable bowel syndrome because of her. I'm going *nuts* but, you know, I still would like to marry her." And he said, "All right, marry her if you want to wear a diaper the rest of your life!" It was an incredible line, you know, I stole it immediately.

Anyway, so right around this time there was another artist there and she was recreating Dr. Mesmer's Society for Universal Harmony, some sort of a crazy art project, and she told me to come up with a cure for myself, and I told her about my irritable bowel syndrome and heartbreak. And so we went down to the Japanese fountain. They have this beautiful Japanese fountain at Yaddo. And I had my father's car, and I got naked and went into the pool to try to get this irritable bowel syndrome out of me and the heartbreak, and I put my funnel from my father's car, that he would put oil into the car, it was an old car, and I put it in front of my groin to take out all the pain and anguish and, you know, people were in the rose garden, tourists and everything, and we quickly shot this picture, and mosquitoes were attacking me like crazy. And anyways—the Moth girls—Paul kept referring to the Moth girls. The Moth is run by women. It's great. When you go to the office, you immediately start having your period, even if you're a man, **(laughter)** it's incredible, you get on the cycle right away, it's just so much estrogen there, my hair almost came back. So, anyway, so they wanted to put this picture of me on the program but Paul Holdengräber said he would be fired if it was put on, so they made copies of it and I'll pass it around, this is me at the Yaddo Japanese Garden trying to pull out this heartbreak, so I'll pass that around. **(applause)** And you can get a sense of how beautiful it is there from seeing the picture of the woods. There's only 250, so if you're with a friend, share, maybe split it in half or something. All right, so that's a little Yaddo anecdote.

All right, our next storyteller, if she was a professional wrestler—I'm going to elevate the mike—said that she would want to be called either Sassy Bride or Foxy Alice. She once worked at a track in California, and these were the names of two horses she was very fond of, so if she was a professional wrestler she would be Sassy Bride or Foxy Alice. Please welcome to the stage Anna Schuleit.

ANNA SCHULEIT: Wow. Liese, or Elizabeth, was the name of my German grandmother. A feisty mother of four with an earthy sense of spirituality, she had no patience for organized religion but preferred to be creating her own interpretations about this world, and her folk wisdoms and sayings would follow us children around like a swarm of bees, and we'd never forget them, they were always

there. One thing she used to say was: “*Wenn jemand stirbt muß man die Fenster aufmachen, denn die Seele hinausfliegen kann.*” “When someone dies, you have to open the window so that the soul can fly out.” But there’s that curious delay between listening to something and hearing it and then learning it for yourself all over again from scratch.

So one day I was walking up a hilltop in western Massachusetts, and I walked through a tall row of black pines, and I came up to a hilltop, and I found a brick structure that emerged against the rising—the setting sun, against the sky that was gray and November-like, and I walked around the structure, not knowing what it was, and I only saw windows, few doors, bars, rusty, railings, and I realized this was a mental hospital, a psychiatric hospital, that was abandoned and I walked around the structure, and I went to the front of the façade, and in order to see the entire façade on this hilltop, I had to step back hundreds of feet in order to see the whole thing, and I stepped back, and as I stepped back, I was able to see it, it was, I later found out, eight hundred feet wide, and I turned around and I felt it looming in my back and I felt this was something I wasn’t going to understand so soon.

I walked away from the hill, and years later, I became a student of art in a painting department, and I looked at the map of New England and I realized I was close to this place, I was close to this little town in western Massachusetts, and I borrowed a friend’s car and I drove out, and I said, “Okay, so let’s see if it’s still here,” and I walked up the same hill, and through the same pines, and I found the same structure, untouched, crumbling and rotting, but nobody there, just an eerie silence, and I decided, since I was a student of painting I would set up an observation post, a visual scientific observation post in the grass, to see if I could understand this building, to just spend time on this lawn overlooking this structure. And I would sit on this lawn with weeds all around me that had overgrown, and gotten taller than me, and there was a security car that would pass around in circles that I could estimate. I knew when this security guy was coming by, so I could duck, and he would pass, and I could continue painting. But because I had to be able to immediately pack up and leave when necessary my paintings were very small, and they were the size of my thumb, so I drew very small paintings. I could slip them anywhere. And I would draw these very little paintings and the security car would come by and sometimes they would get out and find me and they would come over and say, and take out these big flashlights that were eighteen inches long, and they would say, “Young lady. No picture-taking allowed on these grounds.” And I said, “I’m not taking pictures, I’m drawing.” And they said, “Hey, hey, no

picture-taking allowed on these grounds.” There was no discussion. So I would slide them somewhere, run around, go down the hill halfway, wait for him to pass, and come back and keep painting.

But I wanted to know what the structure was for. I wanted to know what the people knew about this building. And so, on my walks through town, I would try to find people who knew about this building, and yes, there were many, many stories to be found. One story that I found was Clothilde, a patient who had been there because she was a pregnant teenager who was committed by her family. She was committed, she gave birth, she stayed in the hospital, and her daughter was remembered, by the nurses, as driving around the campus on her bike, and then her daughter went to school, came back to the hospital, and stayed for her entire life. The other patient was Daniel, the autistic race car guy, who would make race car noises as he paced around in circles, and every now and then would burst into odd cries of “Shift, shift, shift!” Or Emma, the seamstress, who after cutting off the heads of tulips, very neatly, of her neighbors’ garden, was committed for a thirty-day observation period that became thirty years. And I didn’t know what to do with these stories. I knew there were many more, many more of many patients whose names I do not have for you.

And I realized that this hospital had absorbed many, many thousands of lives, and that there many more such hospitals around the country. Here is a setting of an illness that the location of which is not known, and by creating this location for its body, for the patient, the illness was thought to be found therein eventually. So psychiatry struggled to create these places of healing, and they were built so beautifully in the beginning, and were so haunting, and are so haunting now when you go to visit one. And I would sit in the grass, and I would absorb this building, and I would draw it and paint it, and I was frustrated because my paintings did not touch that scale, the scale that was so vast. I wanted to work on a one-to-one scale with the whole building. And I would sit there and draw it and paint it and then I had an idea. I said, “What if, on one day, and then never again, this building could be made, as we know the hollows and voids of an instrument to function, into an instrument by using the hollows and voids of this building to function like an instrument? What if the entire structure were made to sound?”

And this idea crossed my mind as a dream, just as a mere dream, and I said, “Well, what if I would just set out trying to do this?” And I went out and I proposed—well, I looked in the telephone book to see who was responsible for this building, and I wanted to propose an idea to that person, and the telephone

book didn't tell me, but the people who knew about the hospital told me, and I went back to them. I was told, "Well, there's state officials involved and local politicians," and I would meet with them all and in order to wish myself good luck, because I'm just as superstitious as my grandmother, I made myself an outfit that was hospital green. It was hospital green top to bottom, with a hospital green bandanna. And I would go into these meetings and present my project, and I would say to them, "What if, on one day and then never again, this building were made into an instrument in honor of its past? And what if on one day and then never again we were to play a piece that I thought, as a teenager, was so moving when I worked as an usher at a classical music festival, the *Magnificat* by Johann Sebastian Bach?" As an usher I would stand at the back of these sacred places, and I would think that this music was something that touched on the unspeakable. I didn't know what it was. He had discovered something in the writing of this music that spoke to me.

So I presented this project just like I did to you now, presented it to these communities and I watched them go from "uh-huh" to "huh" and they went, "We have to think about this," and just that moment, I was so, so nervous, I went to go pee, and when I came back one day in one of these meetings I found a whole group that had found a consensus. And the consensus was, "Honey, we really like your idea, but we're not the right group for you. You have to talk to state officials," and I said, "Well, if you like my idea, could you write me letters of support on your stationery?" And they did, because they felt bad, they knew this was never going to happen, **(laughter)** so they wrote me these letters, and I would put the letters in a folder, and put the folder under my arm, and then appear at the next meeting, and this went on and on. And I would have a deal with these people, I would say to them, "If you help me now," and this, for example, is a state politician, "If you help me now, I promise you I will never come back to your desk again." **(laughter)** And they said, "That's a great deal. I'll help you. I never want to see you again."

And so I got all these letters of support. I think it was in the end twenty-five different organizations that underwrote the project, but I always had one question that came up, and that was, "What are your reasons for doing this work? Why are you so drawn to this architecture? Why are you so drawn to mental illness?" And yes, what are my reasons for doing this? I never in those meetings dared to answer that "Yes, we're all drawn to this field because we were exposed to this sometimes early in our lives, in our families and surroundings," and I knew that if I had dared ever to say that I had a personal

experience with bipolar disorder as a teenager that I would have lost their support right away, so I didn't say that. I said, "I'm really drawn to architecture." **(laughter)** I was, because by then I woke up every morning pulling the sheets up to my face and said, "What am I doing? I should be doing still lifes of sunsets and pears and make a living. This is not working out." I didn't have any money. I had slowly gotten support but no permissions, and this went on for three years.

After three years, and I don't know how this really happened, really nobody knows, I got the permission from the State of Massachusetts to go ahead with the planning, and we started the planning process. I gathered a team of counselors and advisors, people who supported me in the beginning with half-heartedness, and now were very curious to see what would happen if I continued. And we had a wonderful team and they would never quite know how this would all play out, and I didn't know either, but they thought I did, so this was very scary to me in those times, and well, we had to find a quote, the quote for the actual costs for doing this, and I contacted Bose, because Bose is headquartered in Massachusetts, I thought "Perfect reason." They took a walk with me over the grounds, and they said, "Three hundred thousand for twenty-eight minutes," and I realized they thought I was either crazy, really crazy, for doing this, or I was living on a trust fund or both. And I had to tell them, "I'm not a trust fund, I'm not living on a trust fund, please reduce the price," and they *wouldn't* reduce the price, they wouldn't reduce the cost past 250,000 dollars. We got to 250,000 dollars, and I asked them again, I called them and I said, "Listen, we've gotten the permission, which is more or less impossible to get. Let's try to make this happen somehow. The structure measures 414,000 square feet, 414,000 square feet. It has an eight-hundred-foot-long façade." They said, "Can't make it cheaper than 250,000," and I fired them, and this was four months before the event actually happened. The date I had set, completely randomly, for November, and now this was my own countdown that was strangling me.

I got to August. I had no money. I had written sixty grants. Of those sixty grants I got *two*—two!—because I would call them up and I would say, "Could you help me, because I really need to know what I'm writing wrong about these grants," and they would say, "Oh, you're the one with the building, that wants to make the building into an instrument, that wants to make the structure sound," and I said, "Why do you remember me if you don't fund me?" And they said, "Because we really liked your project, but we couldn't fund you, because you're of course competing with inner-city youth at-risk programs," and I realized I'm not going to get money that way. I had to find funding otherwise. It was August, I had no

sound company and no funding. The press has started to write about this because they were curious as to what would happen to this European girl that traveled around trying to raise money for an instrument that was actually a building. And I'd gotten a lot of wonderful press, and I realized the only way to do this was actually by raising funds door to door. We started selling posters, and very slowly I had about five thousand dollars together. My quote, my last quote had been 300,000—250,000 dollars and I set myself a deadline for resigning from my own job and resuming still lives.

The deadline was in mid-August, the event was in November, and the day before the deadline occurred and me really committing to despair, and saying, "This is it, I've tried, I've tried, I have tried and failed," the phone rings and it's a woman from the West Coast who says, "I heard about your project from an arts journalist. I support the arts, I love the arts, I wanted to know how it's going." And at that time my neck felt like this because I couldn't speak to anyone about this, because I had instilled all this hope in people, and couldn't really admit that I didn't really know how to do this. And so I said to her, "Since you're a complete stranger, I will tell you the truth. The truth is I can't pull this project off, I don't have the money for this." And she said, "How much money would you need right now to save the project?" and I just went through my head really quickly having no relation to money. Of course I said twenty-five thousand dollars. I knew I had to make down payments for the electricity, the sound company that I didn't have—I needed to put that aside—permits, insurance, liability, and such, and she said, "I'd like to donate that to you," and I hung up the phone after a little more small talk, where I didn't know how to say and how to express my thanks. And I hung up the phone, and I thought I had gone insane, because there was no proof that she had really called, **(laughter)** and I spent the night saying, "Well, this is it. Of course, it all makes sense, you know, I'm twenty-five years old, I'm going down on my own project. This was just too big a thing." And the next morning a courier service came and brought a letter that was tiny with pressed flowers and a whole-grain-type envelope and inside was a checking account check for twenty-five thousand dollars and she saved the project.

I deposited the check and I made down payments that same day, and if I didn't have any relation to money *before* that I certainly had no relation to money after that, and now the next problem was to get the sound company to commit, or any sound company, and since there was a lot of press, *local* press, at least, there was a lot of interest expressed by people who wanted to work with the project, and the sound company that I found was a man who runs the New Orleans JazzFest, all thirty-two stages, and he loves

unusual projects, he took this project on. And he said to me when I met him, “I have a quote for you. It’s by Goethe. The quote goes, ‘Architecture is frozen music.’ That’s what you want to do, isn’t it?” And I said, “You’re hired. I want to work with you.” **(laughter)** And so I worked with him. We had a team of seventy-five people, we installed a sound system of forty-five thousand watts throughout the entire building, we strung five thousand feet of cable, we opened hundreds of windows, and we had one sound test, in which we tested the system, using the architecture to make the sound reverberate, so that it would sound to the outside, and as we turned the speakers, the sound would change in all of the wings.

So on the next day, we had a forum for former patients who had never told their own stories, and a whole community of people—650 seats there were, and I walked into the back of the auditorium, and I said, “If these 650 people come from the town to my installation up on the hill, then I’m very lucky.” And we went to the forum. It was extremely moving. These patients had never told their stories, and we walked up to the hill together, after the stories ended, and they were thousands of people, they were many, many more, and they had come from everywhere. And then the music started and people sat and walked and held each other and cried and laughed and were joyful and very sad, and as I walked among them, I thought of Clothilde and Daniel and Emma and the many more who had been there, and I thought that the most moving thing about this was *not* the music and Bach, in the distance, who I always thought was my collaborator in this, but that the people had come to this, because I had said I wanted to create a moment of buoyancy for this building, and it was created only for bringing these people together, and I was *hoping* that focusing them, *gathering* them in this sort of way, would make them look more kindly and gently and with more compassion upon the setting of suffering and mental illness. Thank you.

(applause)

(music)

JONATHAN AMES: Megan Weeder! **(applause)** Megan told me that if she was a professional wrestler, she would want to be called “Bowcrusher.” **(laughter)** That was her pun, not mine, but it was pretty good anyway. Okay. So welcome back to the second half of the show. We’ll get started almost immediately. I have a request from Paul Holdengräber. He was chastised, he said, by a librarian, he

seemed to enjoy it quite a lot. He was glowing. **(laughter)** Because what he forgot to mention was that the Yaddo archives are available *now* if you come to the Library. Now in 2006. And I guess the big grand display will be in 2008, but if you come to Yaddo now, you can see all the correspondence, and things that were written about Truman Capote on internal memoranda. And so please come to the Library now for the Yaddo archives.

Okay, to start the second half of the show, I'm going to tell another story. I apologize if it seems like I'm up here a lot, but the Yaddo women, you know, I do what they tell me. And so I'm going to tell you another story about a muse, and this one's also in honor of Paul Holdengräber. So, generally speaking, muses tend to be feminine presences and, that inspire artists, at least classically they were, before, well, you know, before political correctness or something like that. But anyway, so this is about a feminine muse that all my life has gotten me into incredible trouble. It started when I was five years old, and I was watching television, some cartoons, and Porky Pig was running. He was running across the top of a cliff—some of you may have heard this story. I apologize, but there will be some new elements.

(laughter) So he was running at the top of a cliff, something was chasing him, I don't know what, but then he went flying off the cliff, very, you know, incredibly high up in the air, went flying off, and for some reason, as he descended through the clouds, his little Porky Pig hooves became high heels. Suddenly his legs grew shapely. His weird little shorts that he wore bloomed out into a dress, and then he was wearing this blouse and little breasts bloomed under his shirt, and then his eyelashes curled upward, and then his one little curl became like a Marilyn Monroe thing of blond curls. And he was so beautiful. And then he *smiled* as he was floating through the air—he was loving being a girl, it was incredible. And I like, something, I didn't even, you know, have a penis at that point. I apologize—I had a little thumb which I would push in and go to Connecticut—I was living in New Jersey—and pop out, but I felt something down there, and it was incredible watching him transformed into a girl, it deeply touched me, then he smashed into the ground and was a boy again in this dust and I was very depressed and upset about it.

And then it went deep into my Jungian psyche and I forgot about it until I hit puberty, at eighteen—no, but I was older, I was fifteen, and I suddenly remembered that cartoon, and in some sort of weird hormonal daze, I went into my parents' bedroom while they were away, and I put on my mother's clothing, and I floated around the room, but that turned out to be a disaster, because I've never been

good at folding, and so she sensed that everything had been disturbed. **(laughter)** So then I again, you know, shoved it down, forgot about this whole problem or weirdness, and so then when I was twenty-six, I went to a dominatrix in Chelsea, at a dungeon, and, you know, I don't know what, I went in there crazy, at a compulsive moment, and I got this dominatrix and she put me in a pair of panties and attached me to a rack, you know, and then she got tired. I don't know, with the binding, she may have been a drug addict, she got tired, she sat down, and she said, "Do you mind if I smoke?" **(laughter)** and this was before Bloomberg had outlawed smoking in dungeons **(laughter)** so, you know, and I've smoked crack, but I don't like cigarette smoke, so I said, "Yes, I would appreciate it if you didn't smoke," and then she said, "Too bad!" and she lit up, **(laughter)** and I'm, like, I'm stuck on this rack in a pair of black panties and she's like chain-smoking about three cigarettes, and that was it. That was the whole session, then she let me down, for a hundred and twenty dollars, I was smoked at, it was incredible, **(laughter)** a complete waste.

And so then when I was twenty-seven, I went to a dinner party, and I got hit by an incredible bout of low self-esteem and insecure, I couldn't talk at the dinner party, I fled, and I found this transsexual bar, where transsexual prostitutes would go, anyway, we'll see some of you there later, **(laughter)** so I went in there and I met this beautiful twenty-one-year-old Sophia Loren look-alike, she was so gorgeous, olive skin, big eyes, completely looked like a girl, you never would think otherwise, a changeling from another universe. And so we went off together, and we drove to Queens, I had a car, and I thought, "Oh my God, Queens! My great-aunt is in Queens, you know, she's going to look out the window, 'What are you doing?'" You know what I mean. "I'm with a transsexual prostitute—I'm experimenting." **(laughter)** So we went up to her apartment, though I kept my clothes on, I was very concerned about disease and everything. And so then we were spooning, and it was very sublime, I don't know, it was a very tender moment, just spooning there, two lonely people in the middle of Queens. And then she said to me, "Do you want to be my husband, Papi?" And it was so sweet and tender and vulnerable, like, some women have a G-spot, I have a pathos spot, **(laughter)** and it just struck me and I had this incredible orgasm right in my pants, just from *spooning*, and then about thirty seconds later, typical male, I'm like, "I've got to get out of here! Oh my God! What am I doing?"

You know, I've had one other—I'm really going off the end here, I hope I'm not upsetting too many people. **(laughter)** Anyway, I had one other orgasm like that in my life, at Yaddo. **(laughter)** It was in

1991, I was twenty-eight years old, and I met this very beautiful painter, she was sixty-three, and we were back in my room one night and I was—I'll just say it—I was nursing, and she was stroking me at the same time, and it was so Oedipal and then she took her hand on the back of my head and brought me deeper into her very nice breast, and she said, "Oh, you dear boy," and when she said that, it connected in some deep way, **(laughter)** and the seed just flew out of me, just shot right over my head like a comet, Halley's Comet. That *never* happens to me, it usually just spills out guiltily like a biblical mistake. **(laughter)** This time it shot *right* out right over my head, and I'm, you know, I should have been blinded, I should have gotten my own syphilis in my eyes like Oedipus **(laughter)** and just been blinded at that moment, you know, thirty-five years my senior, but it was a beautiful moment, and then recently, what, fifteen years later, I was giving a reading this winter on the West Coast and she showed up and she said, and she still was lovely, and she said, "I'm a senior citizen now and you're middle-aged," and we had a very sensual hug. Anyway, very unusual. **(laughter)**

So I left the transsexual prostitute in Queens, and I'm driving, and I'm stuck underneath the elevated subway, I thought, "Oh my God, I'm lost deep in Queens, I'm going to get in trouble," I felt very confused, and my great-aunt, she's going to—I'm going to have to go crash with her, she'll end up, "What were you doing here?" And I'm driving along, and then suddenly—this is miraculous—a lion leaps at my car. A lion leaps right by the driver's-side window, I swerve, I almost drive into a telephone pole, I'm very into nature, I thought, "Oh my God! A lion has escaped from the Bronx Zoo, it's going to be hit by a car, but if I get out and make a phone call"—this is before cell phones—"I'm going to get attacked, what do I do? How does it get from the Bronx Zoo to the Queens?" **(laughter)** You know, I'm going nuts, and then I look in the side-view mirror, and this is in honor of Paul Holdenräber and the roaring lions, it wasn't a real lion, it was a *stuffed* lion. Some kids, some juvenile delinquents up there—I mean, I had been behaving much worse, with the prostitute **(laughter)**—but they were up on the elevated subway, and they had dropped a stuffed lion at my car, and about perfect timing, they were very athletic. **(laughter)** And so I ran out of my car and they're screaming at me, and I bagged the lion, threw it in the trunk of my car, and so in honor of Paul Holdenräber I have it here tonight. One second. **(laughter)** So this is a roaring lion! **(applause)** So I grabbed the lion, made it back to New Jersey, where I was living.

Okay now one other incident with this crazy cross-dressing muse that got into my system from Porky Pig. I was writing this novel, *The Extra Man*, the one that I was writing when I had the boxing match. And I was not a cross-dresser, but my character was. My teacher at Princeton, Joyce Carol Oates, told me you could take *one* odd aspect of yourself and make a whole character out of it, like cloning or something. My character was a cross-dresser, he needed to get professionally cross-dressed, and I found, again in the *Village Voice*, a great, you know, resource, I found a woman who would cross-dress men in Bay Ridge, and I went to her and she cross-dressed me. It was incredibly tedious. I was so bored, but I found her very attractive, and I was, you know, looking at her with moony eyes. It was incredibly boring, all her clothing had cat hair all over it, because she had all these cats and it was cat urine smell and she had Star Wars figurines. It was not a very feminine boudoir at all, **(laughter)** she was, you know, punk rock posters, it was very odd, but she was a make-up artist, I think from being in the Goth scene earlier in her life, so, you know, she does this whole thing, I look horrendous, and then we part, and she took pictures of me, and I have two Xeroxes of that, which I will—I didn't want to waste paper like the other thing, so I'll pass two of these around, if I could get them back, because I really don't want them circulating around New York, **(laughter)** and the other thing is I didn't want to get them copied at my copy shop, because the man's very Catholic, and if he kind of realized it was me, I could never Xerox there again. So if you could pass these two around.

So anyway, okay, I'm in the middle of the story, and the photographer's, "Hey, can you pose with the lion?" Sure, okay, natural, very nice of you. Okay, there you go. All right, so what happened? So I write the novel, the novel comes out, I put the cross-dressing scene almost verbatim in the book, the cat hair, the Star Wars figurines, the smell of urine, how boring it was, but I found her attractive, and the novel comes out, I give a reading at KGB Bar, and everyone's coming up to me, "That was wonderful! You read from *The Extra Man*." And then there's this woman stops me, very short little woman, and she goes, "You remember me?" and I go, "I think so," and I thought, had I slept with her? And I don't want to seem like I'm a total idiot, but I sensed that something intimate had once happened between us, and I said, "I think so," and she goes, "I cross-dressed you in Bay Ridge," and I went "Shhh." I had a lot of fans around, don't be like, broadcasting **(laughter)** —and she goes, "I'm going to sue you. My place doesn't smell like cat urine." That's what she was upset about, not I don't know what. **(laughter)** She goes, "I have a college degree, you know, there's no cat hair." There was all this cat stuff. And she goes, "That's my boyfriend," and he was like a big Harley-Davidson guy, a Hell's Angel figure standing in

the back, glowering at me, and I gave her my number, I said, “Call me, we can talk about this,” I thought, “Oh my God, I’ve upset her,” and I said, “My character liked your character.” But that didn’t assuage her at all.

So anyway, she called me, left a message, I called her back, left a message, we kept exchanging voice mail, so then I was having lunch with my literary agent, and I said, “I’m really upset about this woman, this cross-dressing person in Bay Ridge and she’s going to sue me, I’m going to get in trouble.” And then my agent said, cause my book was published by Scribner, which is part of Simon and Schuster, which is owned by Viacom, and she said, “Do you really think that little cross-dressing woman from Bay Ridge has lawyers that can take on Viacom?” **(laughter)** And suddenly, like rising out of my own spine, was like a black citadel called “Viacom,” going way up into the sky, **(laughter)** higher than Porky Pig had ever fallen, and I was like, “Oh my God! Viacom!” **(laughter)** And I just felt *so* powerful in that moment, I was like, “I have these evil lawyers at the top that will crush her,” because of the harassing voice mail I’d been getting. I was like, “Viacom!” it was like this black thing just shot out of me, and I was part of something great, a corporation, I felt wonderful in that moment, you know, forget the arts and muse and Yaddo and all this sweetness, it was like, “Viacom! This is power!” And she must have sensed something all the way across from Bay Ridge, because I never heard from her again. So thank you for listening to that story. **(applause)**

And you’ve been very generous with your applause, but let’s also hear it for Anna Schuleit, who had been our last storyteller in the first half. **(applause)** Okay, our next storyteller, if he was a professional wrestler, he would be called “Pancake Richland,” a lovely name. Pancake Richland. Please welcome to the stage David Peterson.

(applause)

DAVID PETERSON: That was the name of my cat and the first place where I lived. It’s also how you get the name of a porno star, Pancake Richland. Okay, for the last twelve years, my work as a writer and a filmmaker has largely been centered on people who have suffered institutional confinement, and this is one of the reasons why. Twelve years ago, I was a guest at Yaddo, which is the name they give for artists in residence, during the winter months, and it was a rumored tradition that former guests would

sneak into the Yaddo mansion, because they couldn't heat it, it was too cold to heat in the winter and so Riad Abdel-Gawad, a composer from Egypt, and myself, spent the entire month of December staring longingly at this Gothic Tudor mansion, imagining ourselves walking by candlelight, looking at the beautiful antiques and Gothic paintings and looking at the last hundred years of Yaddo in secret.

Well, New Year's Eve, three in the morning, we had spent the whole month there, and we'd had a little bit to drink, and Riad turns to me and he says, "Dave, this is the night. We gotta to do it. I mean, this is our last night." And I was saying, "Well, I don't want to break anything, okay? I've got some tools in my truck, I'll bring a bag of tools, we'll see what we can find, five minutes tops." So we go to the base of the mansion, we go to the cellar window, and I just push the cellar window open, *nothing*, I don't have to jimmy anything, and I say, "Riad, this has gotta be Providence." So we go down with candles, a bottle of Cognac, and it's like a fairyland, there's white dust everywhere, we go down into the cellar, quiet, walk up these little steps, and I put my hand on a doorknob, and I say to Riad, "If this is unlocked, we are *in*." I push the door open and an alarm (**laughter**) screams into the night like a bat outta hell and I turn to Riad and I say, "*Run away!*" (**laughter**) and we scramble out of the cellar window, down the rose garden of Yaddo, through the light dusting of snow along the periphery of the grounds, and deep into the woods, where Riad has his cabin where he composes, and we're breathing hard, and we're inside, and I say, "Don't worry. Don't worry. We're guests here, man. We're guests. We've been here a month." He said, "Yeah, yeah, we've been here a month." And I said, "And there's a little security guy, I mean, you know, it's not going to be a problem, they'll turn it off."

Well, this alarm is screaming, and what's unbeknownst to us is that Yaddo has set up an alarm that goes directly, calls to the Saratoga Police Department, and it must have been a slow New Year's Eve in Saratoga Springs, New York, because every squad car, *with* the K-9 Unit, responds to the call. (**laughter**) We're huddled in the cabin, and Riad's playing the violin, (**laughter**) and we hear radios, guard dogs, voices, and we hear them start at the cellar door, go down through the rose garden, along the periphery of Yaddo, deep into the woods, and surrounding the cabin. (**laughter**) And I said, "Riad, we don't have to worry. Just keep playing the violin. We're *working*. It's three in the morning. We are guests here. We have been here. Deny everything." (**laughter**)

Boom boom boom boom boom. There's a sergeant and his assistant. I say, "Yes?" and he says, "You guys been down to the Yaddo mansion?" And I said, "Earlier today, about four o'clock, we were both down there, up there, why, is there a problem? We *did* hear an alarm go off." And he said, "Why don't you come on out here?" and I said, "Okay," and the assistant goes in with Riad and interrogates him, and the guy says, "Look, we found your tracks, they led from the cellar door, right up to here. **(laughter)** Why don't you just confess and save yourself a month in jail?" And I'm thinking, "Riad is cracking." **(laughter)** I mean, he's an Egyptian composer, he doesn't *know* the laws in New York. And I say, "I gotta get in there and warn him." So I say, "It's cold out here, it's freezing, I've gotta get my jacket," and I go into the cabin, and I put on my pea coat, and the assistant says, "Well, that's a nice pea coat, but what kind of dust you got on that pea coat? Is that the same kind of dust that's on my trousers? Where'd we get that dust? Hey Sarge?" "The cellar." And I went, "All right, all right, all right, look, you know, there is a tradition, I mean it's a rumored tradition, that people sneak into the Yaddo mansion," and Riad is looking at me, horrorstruck, like "What are you doing?" but the guys, the two cops are nodding, and they seem to be fellowship and understanding it's a prank, and they go out to confer, and I said, "Riad, see, honesty's the best policy," and then they come back in and read us our rights, and the next thing that we know we're handcuffed in the back of a cruiser and we're driving *out* of the gates of Yaddo.

And there's no Acting Director, it's New Year's Eve, three in the morning, and the only person who is actually running the place at that time is the gardener, who comes at the gate, and he's responding to the call, and he says, "What's going on?" and the cops said, "We got 'em!" And he says, "Great!"

(laughter) At the police station, we're put into tiny little kennel cages where we can hardly stand up. Riad's on one end, I'm on the other, and then there's a six-foot-five-tall guy named Tiny who's in there for assault with a deadly weapon. And I say to the sergeant, I say, "Look! What are the charges? I mean, we're artists! This is ridiculous! I mean, and I need a phone call! That's what I need! A phone call! I need to call Yaddo! I need to call somebody!" And he says, "Look, I'll get your breakfast, when you get your breakfasts, you're going to get your charges. After breakfast, you get your phone call." And I said, "Oh my God, this is insane, this is absolutely insane," and the guy looks at me, he says, "Man, I can't help you, you're in the system now." **(laughter)**

And Tiny is laughing during all of this. He says, "Man! You guys are going to Ballston Spa!" And I said, "Ballston what?" "Ballston Spa! That's the county jail, man, the judge is going to set your bail at

nine o'clock for about what, a thousand dollars, and you're going handcuffed with me to Ballston Spa," and I said, "No, this can't be." The sergeant comes in with breakfast, hands me two slips of paper. The first one, a count of felony, breaking and entering into the Yaddo mansion. Second count of felony, use of burglary tools, the very tools that I have left by the cellar window with my name on it. **(laughter)** So he gives the breakfast to Riad, gives the breakfast to me, slams the door, and just as the door slams, Riad says, "I finished my breakfast! Can I make my phone call? I finished my breakfast! Can I make my phone call?"

Nine o'clock, as Tiny predicts, we see the judge. Thousand-dollar bail, and we're in the cruiser, handcuffed with Tiny, driving past the gates of Yaddo, and inside the cruiser, the cop says, "You guys are in for breaking and entering, huh?" He says, "Well, you know, even if *Yaddo* drops the charges, you could be prosecuted by the state," and I said, "Oh my God, this is unbelievable. Two counts of felony, we were guests, we *were* guests, we *are* guests." And he actually says to me at this point, he says, "And by the way you two oughtta watch your backsides, because you're going to be raped before the night is out." **(laughter)** At Ballston Spa, the county jail, I still haven't gotten my phone call, neither has Riad, and I go to the clerk and I say, "Look man, I haven't gotten my phone call, I'm a little worried about my backside, I need to get some response here. Give me the phone, please." And who do I call? I'm a twenty-eight-year-old artist, I'm, you know, a writer, what do I need to call? I call my *father* at eight in the morning, I said, "Happy New Year, dad!" He says, "Well, it's a little early in the morning to be calling. How is that place, the artists' camp or whatever you call it?" **(laughter)** I said, "It's pretty good, I got a lot of work done, except, well, let me cut to the chase, Dad, I'm in *jail* right now," and he said, "What?!?" I said, "I mean, um, it's just a little mishap at the Yaddo mansion, look, I gotta tell you, we're in trouble, there's a thousand dollars set for each one of us," "Each one of who?" I said, "Riad Abdel-Gawad, he's an Egyptian composer, he's here with me. **(laughter)** Look, can you just pull some rank here? You got a Ph.D., why don't you just say you're a doctor, and maybe you can get us out of here before nightfall, okay?" He says, "All right, let me talk to the clerk."

The clerk listens to him, nods his head quietly. He hangs up, turns to me and says, "Well, we're going to see how we treat the sons of doctors," and I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You're going into isolation." I said, "What?" He said, "Strip," and so I'm told to strip, I had to strip down, go to a shower, put on a white—an orange jumpsuit, and I'm put in this glass box, listening to him interrogate Riad, and

then we're taken to the jail proper, which is two mezzanines of cells, a triangular space, large, and there's a whole lovely bank of phones, completely occupied, there's no way we're going to get to them, and guys, half-dressed, playing ping-pong, displaying their tattoos (**ping-pong noises**) and other guys playing cards, you know, and I said, "Riad, we gotta mix, man, we've got to look like we're doing something, let's find a game or something." So we go over to the very far corner, and we find a shrink-wrapped box of Scrabble, (**laughter**) so, *geeks* that we are, we set it up, pull out our seven letters, and I'm just white and ashen, because I look, and I say, "Riad, I know this is a proper noun, it's not allowed under the rules of Scrabble, but I think I *have* to put this down as a first word," and I swear to you this happened, I put down five letters, Y-A-D-D-O. And he looks at me just equally as horror-struck and he says, "No, I'm going to cross it with this," B-A-I-L (**laughter**) and I say, "Okay that's enough of the board games, let's get to the phones."

And we're trying, we hear that there's a kind of assistant director named John Nelson, who's in Albany, he's on vacation, he's going to try to get down, we can't get the bail, my father's working on it, and the day draws on, and it's evening meal, and I'm thinking, "Okay, evening, lights are getting lower, I'm going to need a protector," so I take my meal, I sit next to the biggest guy in the room, my protector, I'm thinking, and I say, "Hey, you want my veal?" (**laughter**) And the guy says, "What, you don't want it?" And I said, "No, I don't really want it, I'll tell you what, you want my potatoes, too?" And he says, "Well, what's up, what do you want for it?" And I said, "Well, maybe you could do me a favor sometime, okay, you know, I'm not saying what, but just, you know, just remember me when I need it," and then we get the evening movie, and the evening movie, I don't know the name of it, but basically it's piped into all the cells, and it's a guy with seven-inch carving knives that come out of his hands, and he's disemboweling prostitutes, and when he's not doing that, he's gunning down cops, and I turn to Riad, and I say, "My God, is this some kind of way to instill retirement and keep the system running?" (**laughter**)

And so we get, the night draws on, and John Nelson, finally, says he's going to be coming closer, he's going to be coming, and so the men start to strip slowly. They unbutton their orange jumpsuits down to their waists, and I'm thinking "This is getting strange, the lights are going low, this is where it's going to happen," and they're displaying their tattoos, and they all go over to one side and they start smoking, and I'm thinking, "Riad, do you have any tattoos?" and Riad says, "No, I don't have any tattoos," "Well,

then, we better mix *now*,” so we go over to my protector, and he says, “What are you in for?” And I’m trying to look like the toughest henchman I can, and I say, “Breaking and entering.” And he says, “Where at?” “Yaddo mansion.” **(laughter)** And the guy looks us up and down, and he says, “No offense or nothing, but you guys just don’t look like a couple of criminals,” and I said, “You know what? No offense taken!” Five minutes before the curfew, John Nelson shows up, posts bail, lets us out, we go to trial, Yaddo drops the charges, and we are free.

But ten years later, I *finally* have the impulse to apply, as a filmmaker this time, not as a writer, and they let me in, and I think, “Well, they’re not going to remember me, right? Dave Peterson. Common name. I’m a filmmaker now. Different guy!” **(laughter)** and I go into the office for the initiation, and there’s Cathy Clarke, who’s been there, I know she’s been there, and she says, “Dave, how does it feel to be back at Yaddo?” **(laughter)** And I said, “Pretty good, you know, things haven’t really changed. The mansion looks great. Did they repaint it?” And then I get a fund-raising letter after I get back from my residency at Yaddo, and it says, “Among the improvements that we want to make is an upgrade of the alarm system,” **(laughter)** and I write back in red ink, “I’ll tell you what, I think the alarm system is working *just fine*. Here’s twenty bucks, and thank you, Yaddo, for at least giving me the next ten years of artistic inspiration.

(applause)

JONATHAN AMES: David Peterson! **(applause)** I don’t feel so bad now, there was rape and all sorts of stuff in that story. I feel less alone in being edgy, as it were. Okay, before we get to our last storyteller, there’s a number of thank-yous I have to make. The Moth Season Sponsor, TNT, Martin Miller’s Gin and Cutty Sark! **(applause)** The New York Public Library! Paul Holdengräber, Meg Stemmler, and Kim Irwin! **(applause)** Yaddo, especially Elaina Richardson, Lesley Leduc, from Yaddo and then Joanne Heyman. **(applause)** All our storytellers—Jonathan Santlofer, Anna Schuleit, David Peterson. **(applause)** The director of tonight’s show, Catherine Burns. **(applause)** Leah Tow, executive and creative director of the Moth, and then Sarah Austin Jenness, Jennifer Hixon, and Katie Miller, the Moth’s producers, **(applause)** and Megan Weeder! **(applause)** Okay, all right, please let your friends know about the Moth tour, go to www.themoth.org. Come to the Moth Ball—such a clever name—on November fourteenth. And so now our last storyteller, it’s rather fitting that after a breaking and entry

story that our next storyteller's wrestling name would be "Carl Bernstein," played by Carl Bernstein, so please welcome Carl Bernstein as Carl Bernstein!

(applause)

CARL BERNSTEIN: You mean I gotta follow these guys? Jesus. Since we're all telling stories on ourself, and this is not my formal presentation. The reason I decided to be a wrestler named Carl Bernstein is I think it's long overdue that Jewish wrestlers come out of the closet. **(laughter)** Hulk Hogan, you know, he was one of us, and Gorgeous George, so—I think it—the reason to keep one's own name for these things. I had an experience like this before. A guy came up to me, and he said, "Hey, I bet on your horse today." And I said, "What?" And he says, "Yeah, at Pimlico, there's a horse running named Carl Bernstein." I said, "Oh, that's very nice!" And the next few weeks I keep hearing about this horse. He's won at Hialeah, he's won here, he's won there, and I, gee, that's really nice, so I see a bookie and I put a little money down on this horse named Carl Bernstein. And this is really great—you know, with some people if you really do well in life you get a sandwich named after you at the Stage Delicatessen. But I got a horse! And he's running up and down the East Coast and he keeps *winning*. And so finally I decide to call the Racing Commission because I really want to get in touch with the owner and thank the guy for doing this great honor of naming a horse after me. So I call the Racing Commission and I say, I identify myself, and I say, "Can I get the name of the owner of this horse Carl Bernstein? I'd really like to thank him, and how can I get in touch with him?" And he says, "Just a minute," and he goes on his computer, I guess, and he says, "He's in Arlington, Virginia, he's a real estate developer, and his name is Carl Bernstein." **(laughter)** True story.

So it's very good that we get to tell these stories and puncture ourselves and the same is true of my muse. And incidentally, I'm really glad everybody's got a *good* picture—I'm on the board at Yaddo—and I'm really glad that you now have an accurate picture of what it's like up in Saratoga, **(laughter)** we have Jonathan Ames nights, and a lot of handcuffs around, and racks and thumbscrews and that kind of thing. It's a hell of a place. But my muse, a woman, women, and the reason was I decided—and how I got to be a writer, a journalist, is I took typing, with the girls, and this was in eleventh grade, and until then my muse had been a cue ball at the Silver Spring Recreation Center in Maryland, because I shot a lot of pool during school hours, and it kind of represented the kind of student that I was, which is to say

most of the day I was at the pool hall. But I was really tired of taking *shop*, which I had taken since the seventh grade, and every year you make another one of those trays for your mother that have little things for toothpicks in them in the shape of a fish (**laughter**) and I said, “Screw this, I’m not making another goddamn tray with a fish. I’m going to take typing with the girls.” So I took typing, I was the only guy in the class, and it was one of the few classes that I went to, and I quickly got up to eighty-five, ninety words a minute, and it has served me *very* well in life.

Because my father, recognizing that I was not likely to graduate from high school, had the good sense to say, “How would you like to go to work for a newspaper? Maybe I could get you a job as a copyboy there.” Because he had a friend at the *Evening Star*, the *Washington Evening Star* newspaper, who owed him a favor, because my father, in the McCarthy era, had been a source for some of this guy’s reporting on some of the excesses of the McCarthy era, and he said, “I think I can get you an interview for a job as a copyboy.” I didn’t know what a copyboy did but my father correctly perceived that I had some ability to pass a few tests because they were written exams, and I could kind of bullshit my way through the written exams, and those were the only courses that I could really pass.

So I had just turned sixteen, and I was about five-foot-two, so I went to the *Washington Star* by the freeway in southeast Washington, and I was escorted up to the office of a man named Rudolph Kauffman III, who was in charge of the copyboys. And he was the son of the owner, an old Washington family, and he had wanted to be a geologist and had gone to Princeton to be a geologist, but the family wanted him to be in the newspaper business, and so he was in charge of the copyboys. That was his newspapering career. And all over his office were symbols of his Princetonian years—you know, there were rocks split open, and all kinds of stuff like—you wouldn’t have known you were in a newspaper, you know, for the life of you, you would have thought you were in a geology school. So he said, “Well, why do you want to be a copyboy, son?” and I said, “Well, I’d like to get a job, and I think, you know, maybe sometime I’d like to write, and I once was a newspaper boy, in fact for this very newspaper.”

And he says, “Well, let me show you the newsroom,” and he opens up the door, and he takes me into this cavernous hall about—bigger than this place, and it was the most exciting thing I ever saw in my life. There must have been about three hundred people, among them names well known later, Mary McCrory, David Broder, Haynes Johnson, a lot of great, great reporters, but there was an excitement to

this place that was unlike anything I had ever seen in my life. And people were yelling “Copy!” and these kids would come running out of nowhere like little squirrels and they would grab the copy and they would squirrel up to the desk and give it to an editor up there, a guy with an eyeshade, and he would start looking at it. And this was an afternoon paper, with *five* editions in a six-hour period, and this place operated like this *all day*, and the sports department was in the rear, out that way, and so you had ball games going on and people yelling “Copy!” and ball scores would come in and there would be a shooting downtown and people would run outside and I’d never seen anything quite like it in my life, and I really wanted to go to work there, but I didn’t get hired. And I couldn’t quite figure out why, but I thought maybe because I was too short, because I was only five-foot-two at the time, and I was still growing, and I’d just turned sixteen, and most of the copyboys were, you know, they’d come out of the Marine Corps, or out of Yale, and they were twenty-two, and twenty-three, and twenty-four, but I kept coming back and knocking on the door and saying, “You know, I’d really like to go to work here,” and finally they gave me a typing test. Piece of cake, right? So I got hired as a copyboy.

Well, the copyboy doesn’t exist anymore, but a copyboy was really an office boy who did every manner of thing from running copy—a reporter would be on deadline, and he would finish one page of a story, and he would yell “Copy!” and you would run up and grab it from him, take it to the desk, and then he’d go back typing. And they had a room off to the side, that was for the—it was called the wireless room, which is where all the teletype stuff came in from all over the world, there were about fifteen of these machines going clack clack clack clack clack the whole time, now of course, you go into a newspaper office and it sounds like you’re in an insurance company, it’s got carpet and there are no typewriters anymore. But this place was just constant noise and motion and then the copyboys would run and they would go up to the mailroom and get the papers as they came down off the press, and put them on a cart, and bring them into the newsroom, and this was my first day at work and it was so exciting, and they were telling me, the senior copyboys, the names of all the editors around the desks, the national editor, the telegraph editor, the foreign editor. And the foreign editor also had a little eyeshade, which a lot of desk people wore in those days, and he was also the *stamp* editor. The copyboy said to me, “He’s very particular about separating the *foreign* news from the *stamp* news,” and I said, “Okay,” so he said, “You’ve got to mark it philately.” And I said, “I gotta what?” “Yeah, philately,” and he spelled it for me, so I wrote down philately, p-h-i-l and whatever the rest of it is.

And then it got to be two o'clock and the head copyboy, who was actually about thirty years old, and came up to me and said, "Bernstein?" and I said, "Yeah," and he said, "It's two o'clock," and I look and these big repeater clocks going from here all the way tot the back of the room and it was pretty easy to tell it was two o'clock and I said, yeah, it was two o'clock, and he said, "Well, you're working the eight-to-four shift, and whoever works the eight to four shift, has to wash the carbon paper." And I said, "What?" And he said, "Yeah, the eight-to-four shift, you wash the carbon paper at two o'clock every afternoon." **(laughter)** Well, the reporters would type their stories on six-ply paper. We called 'em books. And in between each of the sheets would be this hideous purple double-sided carbon paper that just to *type* on it would send a cloud of purple dust up into the air and what you did when you got a story from a reporter, you ran it up to the desk, pulled the carbon paper out, threw it into a basket, and this basket would start to build up like that, and by two in the afternoon there would be baskets kinda all over the place like that, and the head copyboy's saying, "Bernstein, it's 2:05, you better go wash that carbon paper, you're going to be in deep trouble here, it's your shift, you gotta do it," and I said, "Well, where do you wash the carbon paper?" He said, "Well, where do you think you wash the carbon paper? You go in a men's room and you wash the carbon paper."

So it's my first day at work, by now I'm five-foot-four, and I've been to No-Label Louie's on G Street and I bought myself this cream-colored suit, and it's the summer, and I'm looking like a million dollars at my \$44.25 a week job and I go to start to collect the carbon paper. Well, I take one of these baskets, that's about like this, and I try to hold it out like this because I don't want to get it on my suit from No-Label Louie's, and my grandfather, who was a tailor, he had very carefully cuffed it and everything and really made it look nice, and I held this damn thing out, and I went around and I got a few more pieces of carbon paper, and I put it in the top, and somebody said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Oh, I'm going to go and wash the carbon paper." "Okay." **(laughter)** And I'm thinking, "Jesus, wash the carbon paper?" and then the head copyboy comes up, "You'd better hurry up, Bernstein, you better get in there and wash that carbon paper!"

And I kind of back out of the newsroom like this, and there's a hallway and the men's room back here, and I kinda go like this, and back into the men's room, and there's a row of sinks. I look at the sinks, and I take one sink and I take this much carbon paper and I put it under there. Next sink, put a little carbon paper under there, third sink, carbon paper under there, and that's enough to go all the way up to the

faucet, and it was just—this was 1960, which was an era when plumbing was changing, because they had invented the *aerated faucet*, so it meant that instead of the faucet like you had in your kitchen, which just water came out, this stream, like from a *firehose*, would come out, so I kind of went back like this and I went **(noises like turning on faucets)** like that and all of a sudden there was like this Old Faithful. **(laughter)**

Well, my cream-colored suit from No-Label Louie's looked like I'd been on a safari—I looked like a leopard, and, at that moment, I noticed that behind me while I was kind of trying to dry off the carbon paper, that there was a gentleman who was pulling his fly up, and he turned around to me, and said, "Son! What *are* you doing?" **(laughter)** And I immediately recognized him because he'd been pointed out to me. It was Neubold Noyes, Jr., the editor of the paper. I was very happy to see Mr. Noyes, and I said, "Oh, Mr. Noyes, it's two o'clock, I'm just washing the carbon paper." **(laughter)** He was zipping up his fly and he said, "What's your name?" "Bernstein, sir." "Mr. Bernstein, I want you to go in that newsroom, and you go back there, and you tell whoever told you to do this, that if I ever find out *who* was responsible for this, or if this is ever done again in this newspaper that we are going to *clean house* in the copyboy department." I mean, you know, I had an inkling. So I went back to the copyboy who had told me to do this and I said, "You know, um, I could leave this business, but I think I'm going to stay, but I don't want to do this again," and that was my first day at work. Thank you.

(applause)

JONATHAN AMES: Carl Bernstein! **(applause)** You've been a wonderful audience. The Moth thanks you! Yaddo thanks you! The Public Library thanks you! And as a way of closing, as some of the Moth regulars know, I'm going to do this childhood sound called the Hairy Call to send you out into the evening. It's a sound that my friends and I would make on the playground when being attacked by more *normal* children **(laughter)** and I'll do three and so go off into the night finding your muses as it were. All right. Three Hairy Calls. **(noises) (laughter)** Thank you! Have a nice evening!

(applause)