David Keplinger: Good evening everyone. I just wanted to offer a brief welcome to the crowd tonight for the PEN/Malamud Award in the short story. My name is David Keplinger. I am the director of the NFA program here at American University, and we are the proud sponsors of this event tonight. I merely came up here to introduce Tope Folarin. Tope is a Nigerian-American writer based in Washington DC. He won the Caine Prize for African writing in 2013 and was shortlisted once again in 2016.

He was educated at the University of Oxford, where he earned two masters as a Rhodes Scholar, and his debut novel, *A Particular Kind of Black Man*, was published by Simon and Schuster in 2019. Tope is the vice president of PEN/Faulkner board, and he was on this year's PEN/Malamud selection committee. Let's welcome Tope.

Tope Folarin: Such a pleasure to be with all of you today. As David said, my name is Tope Folarin and I'm a board member of the Pen Faulkner Foundation and I also serve on the Pen Malamud Committee. It's my honor to introduce one of the great writers of our age, the wonderful Edwidge Danticat. I first encountered her work in the opening days of my first job after graduate school. I had just started working at Google, and I was based in London. I'd somehow fallen in with a group of literary colleagues. I had a sense that I wanted to become a writer, but I had no idea how to proceed.

I had never taken a creative writing course, and though I read a great deal, I knew I had much to learn about contemporary literature. I asked one of my colleagues who had seemingly read every book that had been published in the prior decade where I should start, and he asked me if I'd read *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat. I told him I hadn't, and the next day he offered me his dog, **[unintelligible 00:03:32]**. I started reading it that night, and I haven't stopped reading *Krik? Krak!* since then. I would be remiss if I didn't pause to apologize to John, my friend at Google, who learned me *Krik? Krak!* 17 years ago. Sorry, I haven't given it back yet.

Danticat introduced me to the wonders and formal requirements of short fiction. Her work felt so familiar to me and so vital because I instantly registered the connections between the Haitian and Haitian American characters in the work and the Nigerian and Nigerian American characters in my life. I also marveled at how she manipulated the conventions of short fiction to serve her purposes. I had read and loved short fiction by many other writers, but what I remember about my initial engagement with Danticat's work is placing *Krik? Krak!* aside every so often and saying out loud, under my breath to no one in particular. You can do that?

Danticat has made a career free-fashioning our conception of what fiction can accomplish. She has also crucially been a key architect of a new dispensation in literature, an era in which a rising generation of writers feel empowered to write honestly, unapologetically, and boldly about the communities from which we emerge. He's garnered just about every major award that a writer can hope to receive, including the National Book Critic Circle Award, two times, the Hurston Wright Foundation Legacy Award, and the Pen Oakland Josephine Miles literary award.

At the beginning of her career, she was featured in *Grant Magazine's*, Best of Young American Novelist List, and she was also featured in the Infamous 1999 Edition of the New Yorkers *20 Under 40* list, which included many other leading literary writes. Since then, she's won the New Stat International Christ Literature, widely known as

the American Nobel, and the MacArthur Genius Grant. In other words, she has more than lived up to the promise she showed as a young writer. She is an institution, yet the reason I'm so happy to be introducing Edwidge Danticat today is because I happen to think that this is truly one of the great literary awards.

The first Pen Bernard and Anna Malamud Award for excellence in the short story was given to John Updike in 1988. Since then, a murderers row of writers have been honored, including titans like Alice Monroe, Edward P. Jones, Deborah Eisenberg, John Edgar Wideman, and Edith Perlman. This is an award that is dedicated to acknowledging and preserving the special status of the short story in our literary culture. I can think of no one who is currently publishing who deserves this honor as much as Danticat. Allow me to finish with one final quick story.

I woke up on the morning of August 6th, 2019, one of the most important days of my life to two pieces of unexpected news. My debut novel was published that day, and yes, I'll admit it. I picked up my phone the moment I woke up to see if anyone was talking about it.

[laughter]

Tope: That's how I learned that Tony Morrison had died the night before while I was sleeping. I was utterly devastated. I continue to scroll on my social media feeds, and I read so many messages of sadness and loss when unexpectedly, I came upon the news that Edwidge Danticat's second collection of stories, *Everything Inside*, would be published in three weeks. I was instantly elated, and I held those two feelings inside me, utter sadness and pure elation as I launched my book that day.

I purchased a copy of *Everything Inside* before getting on an airplane three weeks later. It was better than I could have hoped. It is my distinct honor to introduce the 2023 recipient of the Pen Bernard and Anna Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, Edwidge Danticat.

Edwidge Danticat: Oh my goodness. What a beautiful introduction. Thank you so much, Tope, for those extremely kind words. There'll be more things later, but thank you, Jena. Thank you, **[unintelligible 00:07:40]**, Susan, everybody. [laughs] Rather than read a whole story, I'll read two short excerpts from *Everything Inside* and the epigraphs from *Everything Inside*. One epigraph I came about on an airplane. When I'm somewhere and somebody glares at me, I always say to them, "No, you are a reader because you recognised a writer." I'm sitting on this and this woman is like she walks past me and then she walks back, she's glaring, and I say, "You're a reader." She says, "No, I'm a poet, and here's my book."

[laughter]

Edwidge: She gave me this poetry collection and the first one was a letter to if your plane is crashing, this is a letter. I took a screenshot and sent that to my husband. Then I kept reading, and this epigraph was in there being born is the first exile to walk the earth, an eternal diaspora. I was just putting everything inside together and I thought, "This will be my epigraph." That's how that came to be. That also captures the essence of this book. This first piece that I'll read is from a story called *In the Old*

Days. There was a 30-year dictatorship in Haiti that ended in 1986. A lot of our families had this dilemma of whether to stay or go.

In my household, we were all like, "when the dictatorship ends, we'll go," but in the meantime, you have children, you have grandchildren. This story, our family made different choices. Their mother stayed, and the father left, but there was a child involved that the father didn't know about until this child gets a call and has to see her father who's ailing. This is when this child arrives to see her father for the first and last time.

It starts with the song because there's some rituals for the person, it's-- [sings]

[music]

Shall we gather at the river

The beautiful

beautiful river.

Edwidge: The room was dimly lit safe for a desk lamp on a nightstand filled with gauze in ornaments and other medical supplies. There was a hospital bed smack in the middle, and on the side against the wall was a cot covered with an eyelid-embroidered white sheet. The bed was directly beneath a ceiling fan, which was circulating the cool air from a standalone unit on a side window. I followed my father's wife to his bed. My mother had no pictures of my father, and he was not online either, so I had no image to compare with that skeletal man lying in the hospital bed except my own.

From the outline of his stiff pajama-clad body under the thin blanket, I could see that he was shorter than me. Though the illness might have shrunk him. If there was any territory for me to claim, it had to be on his face. I had to find myself in his drawn-out coppery skin and the uneven rise of his forehead and the tightly sealed eyes, the eyebrows that had nearly disappeared. The deep pockets beneath the hollow cheeks, the clenched jaw in gray fuzz on his chin. I let my hands travel up the frigid railing of the hospital bed towards my father's face, which when my fingertips grazed it, felt just as prickly and haggard as it looked and just as dead.

I pressed my palm down on his forehead, and it was slippery like a well-polished mask. I turned to my father's wife for an explanation. She began quietly sobbing. Her sobs reminded me of my mother's tears, even though they were crying over two different men, neither of whom I knew. "He's gone now," she said, "He's free. We rejoice for his freedom." As she said this, her face became distorted as much with agony as horror. "He died right before your plane landed," she finally admitted. In her flushed and distressed face, I saw the void my father had left as clearly as if it were a gash, a wound, a scar.

I was desperate to feel what she was feeling. I envied it, I covered it. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I asked. "There is no rush. No emergencies," she said. She was composed once again, as though she had not been crying at all. "The doctor will pronounce him dead when you tell her to whenever you are ready. He's been out of

it for the past day or so, but we were told he could still hear us until the moment he stopped breathing." Officially, at least on paper, since the doctor had not yet called it, my father was still not dead. "If you have a child of your own," my father's wife said, "At least you can tell your child that you saw your father even like this. How would I describe this to my own child if I had one?

My father's wife had her own version of the old days. In the old days, she was telling me conch shells would have blared when your father died because, in the old days, conch shells blared for each person who died. In the old days, when a baby was born, the midwife would put the baby on the ground, and it was up to the father to pick up the child and claim it. "In the old days, the dead were initially kept at home. Farewell prayers were chanted, and morning dances were performed at their joy-filled wakes.

When it was time to take the dead out of the house, they would be carried out feet first to the back door and not the front, so they would know not to return. Their babies and young children would be passed over their coffins, so they would shake off their spirits and wouldn't be haunted for the rest of their lives. Then a village elder would pour rum on the grave as a final farewell."

"In the old days," my father's wife said, "I would have pronounced my father dead with my bereavement wales to our fellow villagers, both the ones crowding the house and others far beyond." Looking at my father's dead face in which I saw no trace of my own, I wanted to grab him and shake him, force him to wake up, and explain to me his version of the old days. "He was a good man, a very good man," my father's wife continued. "I know he would have wanted you to be part of his final rights." "How could he have wanted me to be part of his final rights when he'd been absent from my first." "Please forgive him," she said, "Please forgive us. There is no rush now. You can take your time here. Then our young doctor friend will pronounce him."

My father's wife's voice trailed off then she walked out of the room, which became brighter when she opened the door, allowing some of the hallway light in. I sat down on what must have been her cot, where she must have spent days and nights on both a vigil and a death watch. The cold air from the air conditioning unit hit me, and I shivered. I leaned back and press my spine against the eyelid sheet. I wanted to close my eyes, but I couldn't take them off the fan twirling over my head. It reminded me of wanting to put my hands into another type of fan in my mother's restaurant when I was little and seeing if it would really cut my fingers off as my mother had warned me it would.

It also reminded me of being hushed by my mother whenever I asked her about my father, until one day when I was 12, she blurted out that he had left her before I was born, and wanted nothing to do with us. This is what kept me from looking for him. This is what made me wish he would die. Out in the hall, I heard my father's wife and her friends talking. Perhaps they thought they were whispering, but they were not.

Pastor Serral, my father's minister said, "Surely a simple service would do. Then the cremation just as he had asked." Pastor Serral said he wants his ashes spread on the school grounds in Port-au-Prince. Soon, my father's wife was speaking again. She was speaking about my father in the present as though he was still alive. Led by Pastor Serral, they all begin singing once more about gathering at a river where

angels tread on crystal tides. They sing of laying their burdens down at this river and receiving a hard-earned robe and a crown from God.

[music]

Yes, we'll get there at the river

The beautiful, beautiful river

[silence]

I will close with another short reading. After the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, I was wondering-- I had not written about the earthquake in fiction until the short story and everything inside called *The Gift* because I really was wrestling with how one captures that kind of lost in art. This is an artist in this story called *The Gift*, Anika wrestles with that question in this passage. We started if I were you for those who are not here.

Anika started sketching million-year-old birds because she couldn't imagine how to paint what she really wanted to, earthquakes. Her sketches were meant to be studies for paintings, but she got no further than that. When you paint an earthquake, do you paint soil monsters devouring the Earth? Shattered houses, bloody lifeless bodies, random personal items, T-shirts, dresses, shoes, air combs, and toothbrushes scattered over the rubble, or do you paint cemeteries and grave markers and distraught mourners weeping over them?

Do you paint crosses, wilted dust-covered flowers or vibrant red ones for hope? Do you write messages on your canvases in case anyone misses the point or do you sketch your lover, his dead wife, and their dead baby daughter derivative photorealistic work based on an online image, something so faithful to the original that it could be easily mistaken for it? Except in your sketches, their high-end vinyl glows become feathers, and apart from their legs in their faces, they become birds.

The night of the earthquake at the College Hall where she and a group of her friends were meeting, a singer Roro asked if anyone happened to have a rope. No one did so some men offered their neckties and a few women their scarves. Roro ask for help in tying the ties and few scarves together until they formed a table-size

cloth circle in the middle of the room. This is now the epicenter of the earthquake Roro had said, and we are going to fill it with our love.

This was not exactly what she had wanted or needed, and nearly everyone seemed just as disappointed as she was that Roro had not provided them with a more meaningful ritual, with unique and specific prayers, hymns, or psalms to the side, or soothing refrains to chant. This was supposed to be their spontaneous **[unintelligible 00:20:35]**, their transient door of faith, their sudden sanctuary. This thing with the epicenter ties and scarves felt right to her empty and untrue, but it was their only incantation of the moment until some more ancient ceremonies could be recalled in detail or newer ones revised.

Another type of priest, cantor, vicar, or layperson might have performed a different ritual, but the basic idea would've been the same. To try with will and desire alone to

influence something one could not. Roro then brought out a bottle of Haitian rum and while pouring it in the middle of the circle made everyone recite over and over who sang **[unintelligible 00:21:28]** for those we do not see, for those who are no longer here. Anika too had joined in mouthing, though not really wanting to who sang **[unintelligible 00:21:40]** for those we do not see, for those who are no longer here. Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for that reading. That was amazing. Even in that short reading, we can feel the power of your fiction. It was wonderful.

Edwidge: Thank you.

Interviewer: I want to just dive right in because of what you read, and I only have 15 minutes, so I don't have time for my southern windup.

[laughter]

Interviewer: It was really quite stunning to think about your work. This is an award for the genre of short fiction. As I was thinking about all of your short fiction, I was thinking about how poetically you render the politically charged story. Of course, we got a little bit of that from your reading today, but in your fiction, you've written about the massacre of Haitians by the Dominican Dictator, Trujillo. You've written about the 1915 occupation of Haiti. You've written about Tonton Macoute. You've written about all of these real-life events.

I want to ask you in this time of great global turmoil. I know in the past and you mentioned it a little bit about how you struggled to write about the earthquake. I know you struggled with fiction as a mode of talking about these important things, but I do want to ask you this question. What thoughts do you have regarding the work that the short story can do in the world?

Edwidge: I think of the short story as something between poetry and the novel. I've always loved short stories in a way for their clarity, their economy. The model, for me, a lot of the stories I heard when I was growing up, the folk tales that were told, where there can be music, there can be song, there's suspense, and then at the end, you're really satisfied. You've gotten a full story.

I think that there's a way that a short story just shoves an individual or different characters into your life, and there's a way that you can dive into the urgency of a situation because they're very long short stories like Alice Monroe, a previous winner, writes these short stories that are like epic novels but I think also the range of that short story. For example, the short stories in *Krik? Krak!*

I remember writing those almost in real-time in the 1990s after the coup in Haiti and people were coming by boat and I was at Brown. There were people who had been on those boats and they came to the campus and they were looking for students to translate. I met this family and they had a small child, and I would ask them what was it like on the boat. Literally, *Children of the Sea* is from these conversations.

There's a way that I think you can also have reportage in the short stories and in the moments where there's an urgency of thought for or an urgency of feeling. I think we

first go perhaps to the journalism and the poetry, and then you process the layers into fiction, but the short story, you can get to that processing and recreating sooner. You think your southern windup is bad? I'm going to try to control my Haitian wind-down.

Interviewer: That's so funny. Please feel free to just be yourself because we're going to stretch this 15 minutes as long as we can. You create these interconnected stories, and I think this is a good follow-up, I hope to what we're talking about here. In my memory and I could be wrong, but my memory is that your stories were coming along just to the time that we were talking about short story novels. We were talking about interconnected stories and the short story novel was becoming a genre, which also probably coincided with the rise of MFA program, y'all, to be honest with you.

I've always been astonished by your ability to weave together stories. There's a character in one of your stories that says, "All Haitians know each other." In some ways, your stories make me question whether or not we can even write a standalone story because we are also connected. Can you talk about putting together a collection and how you think about it?

Edwidge: I'm usually just writing the stories, and then at some point, I think because they're coming from the same person, they're coming probably from the same era in one's life, there's some connections that maybe you don't even see. I never start out thinking I'm writing a collection. I usually write a story. For *The Dew Breaker*, for example, which was that they were calling a story cycle. I wrote that first story and then where the daughter thought the father was a victim of the dictatorship, but he was actually a perpetrator, and that comes out. He said something and I'm like, "Oh, I wonder what he's talking about. Let me write a story to find out." That one was like trailing the different points of stories.

I love what you just said about no story stands alone because I think in a sense, the work leading up to writing the story is so-- Really, it's the whole Hemmingway thing. You're getting the tip of the iceberg. There is a lot already that's not on the page, so I love that notion of the stories being interconnected, whether the stories they're connected with are in the same book or whether they're yet to be written or they were the scraps that you discarded to get to what's on the page.

Interviewer: None of us lives on an island. I also think about just the history of diasporic Black people has been so connected to global events. That's why I said reading your work, I think we would be fooling ourselves to think that a story can ever be standalone. Is that--

Edwidge: I absolutely agree. Actually, I was like, **[unintelligible 00:29:03]** mind-blowing. It's true. What you just said, it's going to affect every other story. If I was to write a new story, I'm like, "Oh, it's not standing alone." I think it's like us, like a human being. We have ancestors, and if we're blessed, we have descendants. We stand in a middle place.

Interviewer: For continuity.

Edwidge: Yes. For example, in *Krik? Krak!*, I wrote the story 1937 about the massacre, and that was my first exploration of that. I had been to the border, and I wasn't sure what to do with everything that I had learned about the massacre, about this relationship on the island. I wrote this story, which really didn't go into the massacre. It was like an aftermath. Then when I was done, it was again that curiosity. It was like, "Oh, I want to know more

about it, so let me write to find out. That's the other thing, too.

I think that's beautiful about stories, even journalism or the other kind of essay writing we do. We write to find out. I always think it's magical when you start out with what is this amorphous idea of something. Then you write and it comes and they're writers who-- There's some stories that I'd be curious how you write. Sometimes you have that thing where you do what **[unintelligible 00:30:26]** calls a shady first draft. Then there are stories that you literally, they're like the demand to be written sentence by sentence. You're like, "Let me write this word, so I can see what follows."

Interviewer: I always feel like every now and then I have a story that comes out really lovely, and I don't think I'll ever be able to do that again. It isn't like you do better the next time. Sometimes the next one's worse.

Edwidge: You have to be patient with yourself for it to be like, "Okay, I've done it before. It can happen again, but I just have to give it time."

Interviewer: When Tope talked about his first connection to your work, I remember seeing your picture for the first time when you first came out. I was just graduating college, and I thought there was something so beautiful about the picture but also just thoughtful and pensive. It was arresting. I wanted to read your work just based on that photo on the back of the book. You feel like you are witnessing to me when you write. What were you like as a child? Do you consider yourself a witness? How do you think of bearing witness to the stories that you write?

Edwidge: It's interesting because I've read an essay collection coming next year and there's a section on James Baldwin that's born out of an introduction I wrote to *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. In 1984, there's an interviewer, Julius Lester asking him, "You talk about witnessing a lot, what does that mean?" Then he said and I've always clung to that definition of witnessing from once I came but also how I'd like the world to be. Just the idea of being a bearing witness for sure, which sounds really lofty. When I was a child, people always said and they say, "Don't say this around her." I was called in **[unintelligible 00:32:32]** the name, Juda. I don't know how to translate Juda, but it was basically a baby gossip.

[laughter]

Edwidge: I don't know, but I was also shy at the same time. I can't even reconcile. I was like, "I didn't speak to anybody, so why did they think I was Juda?" Then later, in my family, they would be like, "Don't write this." Before they would say their things. I had this task that I think was very helpful to me, where people-- If folks wanted to write a letter and it's really compelling how much if you in a society were at that time, literacy among poor people, my people were very low.

People would come to a child and literally ask you to write the raunchiest love letter. They would just say what they wanted. It's like, "I want to say this to this lady. Can you write it in your best French?" I would write those types of letters, or I would write letters for people to their relatives abroad asking for money. Even though they thought I was Juda, that gave me a very deep connection to adults problems.

I remember thinking writing those letters. I was like, "I never want to grow up," because the problems I'm going to have. I'm going to have to keep writing letters to people to love me. I'm going to have to keep begging for money. I'm going to have to ask the landlord to let me stay longer. All this in a letter. People wanted this in a letter. I think that was probably great training for writing short stories.

Interviewer: Did they pay you for that?

Edwidge: No, they did not pay me. The reward was not being beaten probably. [laughter]

Interviewer: Remember this great essay, Tony K. Babar has an essay where she talks about-- She was the writing girl, and she would write for people, too. She said that was when she learned that you could make money at writing because people would give her $1 and ask her, "Go write this contract for me to sell my car." They called her the writing girl.

Edwidge: I think they gave me food things. I think they would give candy, something like that.

Interviewer: You learn that writing mattered.

Edwidge: Yes. The functionality of it to me was powerful. Also, part of it, love letters were a big thing. People would like love letters, but they were these functional, "I need this letter for the bank." Also, I think it exposed me to the loops also poor people were made to go through for certain things. There were these official channels that you had to go through for certain things that involved letters. That could have been done in a more casual way.

Interviewer: I love that. It's so community, too. This was in the introduction, and I know some people know this, but I feel like one thing that's under-celebrated about you is how prolific you've been in so many genres. You have written a memoir, you've written novels, you've written story collections, you've written children's books, you've written YA novels, you've contributed as a co-writer to films. I don't even want to understate it here. You've done literary translation, which we have here at AU. You've edited anthologies. I guess what I want to ask is what particular love do you have for the short story after having done all of that?

Edwidge: Actually, most of the short stories in *Krik? Krak!* were written when I was in college the night before I had finals. I always say, when I say--

Interviewer: Wait, what? Did I hear that right?

Edwidge: Yes, I would have an economics final and I would be like, "Oh, I have an idea for a short story."

Interviewer: A form of procrastination?

Edwidge: Yes, exactly. I have teenagers and I say to them, "I'm really a big procrastinator, but I'm a productive procrastinator." That's my mothering, they hate it. I was like, "If you're going to procrastinate, do it productively." That was my form of procrastination. I would always get these ideas. It was also a way to release the tension and maybe a sign that I was doing not what I was meant to do.

Also, the range of the short story, the short stories in *Krik? Krak!* were very different than these short stories. These short stories are more lived in. The short stories in *Krik? Krak!,* I felt were poured out of my soul. I was doing that purely for me. I was doing that purely as a way to process things that were happening in Haiti at that time. They felt also that there's a kind of safety in those stories that I had no idea anybody would ultimately see them, and I was writing them for themselves.

I think that the short story still has that feeling for me. I think that's why I ended up writing so many of those story cycles because it was a way for me of guiding through a story. I also had this thing about boredom. I feel like, "Oh, I want to just jump to the next thing." I don't want to write through. I feel like the short story allows you to get to the heart of it faster.

Interviewer: I don't know what we're doing on time here. Are we okay? Okay. Let me ask you about where you are now. You have won everything almost, it feels like. I think we need to nominate you for the Nobel with all of this work that you've done, really. I really do think that because you have really been the voice of your generation. I wonder just when you look back at that picture that I looked at 30 years ago and that young writer in that picture, what do you see in her or how are you different now than you were when you look at that picture? Where are you now in your intellectual life?

Edwidge: I think back. We had a party for when I was touring for *Krik? Krak!* and sleeping in the homes of reps. I think we had a party for me at his house. My friend, **[unintelligible 00:39:36]**, is here who's with his lovely wife, and they've always been there. I think of the friends who've been with me on the journey and the nurturing that I've had. I was like, "Sonia Sanchez, sometimes who would come to the free library and bring me-- She'd be like, "Take care of yourself, my sister," and bring me snacks when I was on these tours. Back then, they had to do 22 cities.

Interviewer: They would actually send a car for you and **[inaudible 00:40:09]** send cars anymore.

Edwidge: No, now you Uber.

Interviewer: You don't.

Edwidge: In the trade, there would be these-- and they were often women, these very lovely ladies who would pick you up at the airport-

Interviewer: The escorts

Edwidge: -the escorts, and drive you around. I look back at all that and I was in awe all of it because I didn't know that that was what meant to be a writer. Still, for me, I

write for the love of it, and that's never changed. I still feel like I would write if nobody was reading. It's a passion for me. I just feel blessed that I've had that. My book was published when I was 24. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is going to be 30 years old. I remember people would say, "When you start young and then people talk about you, you lose your head and you crash." I was always told that either you could crash.

I remember my editor, Laura Hruska, at Soho Press, I was working for Jonathan Demme and he did *Silence of the Lambs* film that was my first full-time job out of school. Laura, this was on Broadway, Soho was maybe a few blocks away. When the book got the paperback deal, which was a good indication, Laura rocked over to my cubicle in Jonathan's office and she said, "Edwidge, you're going to have to think about a career." She said, "The single biggest piece of advice I can give you is that before you have something out, you start something else." You always have something going before that other thing is published.

She says, "Then whether that thing is received well or whether it's received badly, at least you've started something. You have the next thing in progress." I've always kept to that advice. For me, that's really what's helped me continue in the sense that I feel like if I have something in the works when my other thing is out in the world, at which point I have no control when it's out in the world, what I have control is what I'm producing at that time. That's really kept me sailing, that's really kept me focused.

Interviewer: I've got that advice too, but I've never been able to follow it. I guess one last question before we open it up to the audience. Recently, we celebrated Dr. Claudine Gay, the first Black woman president of Harvard. As you know, she's Haitian-American, and we're all just so proud of her. I co-hosted an event for her with some Haitian-American friends of mine, and they gave her a plaque that had a quote from the Haitian flag that said, "L'union fait la force." In unity, there is strength, which made her cry. It was just such a beautiful moment.

I wanted to ask you, how do you feel about that quote? What do you think when you think of what you have done to tell the story of your people? Does that make you feel like, "I did my best to try to repre--" Again, this is anecdotal, but you said just a moment ago that my people are poor people. When the short story rose as a form in this country, rarely, did we even see poor people in those stories. They were all classed in some ways was invisible. I feel the force of that when I read your stories that you're writing from the earth.

That's why I think Topay and I and others of us read your work and we see our people. We see our aunties and our cousins, and we see ourselves in your work. I'm just wondering, when you think of that quote and when you think of Haiti, what do you think?

Edwidge: I think I said my people in that instance, I meant I come from a rural family that went to the city, but my people overall, I think it's extraordinarily culturally rich. There's so much more about Haiti than is shown in the news, and of course, lately, we're on the news a lot. Haiti has such a powerful history like this revolutionary start, the first place in the world where enslaved people overcome the people who owned them and created their own republic. There's this beautiful connection too with the African-American story. I've been so moved.

When I've gone around the United States, sometimes there are these formerly old Black towns that's called, Haitii that were named after the way Haiti was spelled at that time. I do the translations of **[unintelligible 00:45:27]** and I've done the anthologies, is a way to show that. I think none of us, especially if we're in these spaces, I never want to be the only one of anything. I think bringing some of that, even selfishly so that my nephews who don't read Creole or French can read the Haitian literature because we have a very rich literature.

I think "L'union fait la force" is both a reality because in the countryside, the way the Haitian state is absent in so many places, if people didn't have unity, they wouldn't be alive. We have that unity. It's both a reality, but it's also aspirational as we go through these struggles that requires even more unity so that we're not invaded next month or as is planned for us.

We can find ways that we can build each other up, we can save our country, really, because the country is going through very difficult times right now. From the time of these writers who protested the US occupation, who protested dictatorship, culture has always been a really big part of that. Stories, music, painting, the arts have always been a way of both expressing Haitian unity but also resistance.

Interviewer: I love that. Audience Q&A. Do we have mics? How are we going to do it? Just yell and mouth? Okay, let's do it. [laughs]

Male Participant 1: I think there's a new anthology coming out. I haven't seen it yet, but you wrote the introduction to it. It's a collection of poetry. I was wondering whether you have written any poetry.

Edwidge: I've written corny poetry. [laughs] Not like your poetry. I started out actually trying to write a little bit of poetry. Then I think the early stories in *Krik? Krak!* like the vignettes had that feel, especially *Night Women*, for example. I thought I wanted to write as a poem and I thought, "Oh, you could write as a prose poem." No, not officially. There's a really wonderful trilingual collection of poetry coming out with some wonderful Haitian poets, both in Haiti and the diaspora, and French, Creole, and English. Thank you for that.

Female Participant 1: I am such a fan, so I'm having a fan girl moment, and I'm loving it. I wrote you a letter probably 30 years ago, and you wrote me back.

Edwidge: Good.

Female Participant 1: It wasn't a postcard or a paragraph. It was a real letter. I just want to thank you because I've written other artists and of course, not heard back. I just remember that you wrote me back, so I'm loyal. Just thank you. My mom introduced me-

Edwidge: Thank you.

Female Participant 1: -to your work, and it's such beautiful work. I can't believe it's been three decades. You talked about Haiti being more than what we see on the news. What do you recommend are some of the best ways to learn really the truth

about Haitian culture and its expansiveness for those of us who don't even pay attention to the news?

Edwidge: Thank you for those kinds of words. I'm so glad I wrote back. I thought you were going to say, "You never--" [laughs] Thank you. It just came out, I think with Duke University Press, it's a book called *The Haiti Reader*. It's a good beginning because it starts with, for example, I didn't even realize how poetic and aspirational the Haitian Declaration of Independence is. Immediately, it gives rights to everybody. Black is-- which was not the case in the rest of the world, neg or neg is human being. Anybody who was enslaved anywhere else who landed in Haiti was

freed and granted citizenship and space. It starts there through literary excerpts and poetry. I'd recommend the Duke University post *The Haiti reader*. It's really comprehensive and gives you a whole sense of the background, a reference point, a framing of Haiti.

Female Participant 1: Thank you.

Edwidge: Thank you.

Interviewer: Don't be shy students.

[laughter]

Female Participant 2: Thank you for your reading. It's beautiful. As Haitian American, do you ever feel a hybridity? How do you navigate being both? For example, I don't speak Creole. My father was Haitian. I grew up here. I have relatives there. I'm just wondering how you navigate that in your writing or as you look out at the diaspora of Haitian Americans. I went into my student's house and her mother had a Haitian friend, and he started to speak in Creole, and I said, "Oh, no, no, no." He goes, "Oh, we don't know what to do with you people." I was like, "Wow" Where are you in terms of identity? I just want to know how you would respond to that kind of reality where you're not here, not there, but in the middle.

Edwidge: When I came at 12, it was a little bit more drastic. I think at that point, people were talking more culture clash. I think part of that is because you had to sever more. There was a dictatorship. My parents would always say, "We're going next year," and then I realized after a while, "No, we're not going." I'm going to have to go when I have some money. We didn't go until I was an adult, and I could go back with friends, or I could go back for my work. I think there was that decalage.

You have a range of people who are traumatized by the dictatorship, who never want to talk about it. There's a dilemma of young people who are college age or younger, who their parents are at the same time telling them [Creole language] The greatest country in the world, they're wonderful memories, and then the kid wants to go, and they're like, "Not now." I'm sometimes in Haiti and I see the children of friends on spring break and I'm like, "Does your mom know you're here?" They're like, "No." They want to go. They'll go when it was still possible to the Decameron or this one resort place.

I think there's great curiosity, and I've seen it in my own family. My nephews who resist certain things. Then they go to college, and suddenly, they're calling me for the Mayi Moulen recipe. "How do you make Mayi Moulen? How do you make soup joumou?" They're seeing it through a different lens, and people are talking about Haiti differently to them. A lot of them will come to **[unintelligible 00:53:29]** their Haitianess when they're in school, when they're reading about the revolution. With my own kids, who are 14 and 18, my husband and I made this choice that we're going to take them to Haiti so they see for themselves. We took them very early so that they can have their own vision of Haiti. It's harder to go back now.

People who said those things, you're not helpful because that's not really inclusive. We do have this habit of making fun of people who speak Creole badly. I think that's not a way to keep folks interested, but I think we all have to have a relationship with Haiti for ourselves. Often it's for the younger people. They find it in each other, they find it in the culture. Again, the culture is usually an entry point.

Male Participant 2: I don't know how quite to phrase this question, but I'll try. As an immigrant, if you have been here for a very long time, you keep this melancholy, this nostalgia, this sense of attachment, and so on. I've been going back once or twice a year, and I've read that you also return very often. Having been here for a long time, you have frozen snapshots in your head of how it was. As you return, you notice that the beaches are not as pristine. The water is not as pure. The air is not the same. How do you process a situation where you're in love? You continue to be in love, but who you're in love with is no longer your lover.

Edwidge: I think that's the dilemma of the exile, especially and the immigrant, for sure. It's interesting that you said that because again in these essays that I was writing, I also wrote about beaches. [chuckles] The last time we were there was there was this red algae, and the beaches were just complete. This is a combined thing but this issue of trash but trash from plastic trash, foam trash, and then there was a case some years ago where Philadelphia dumped its toxic trash in Gonaives. One of the ways that I think about it is that nothing stays.

Since we're doing this analogy of love and I've been married now 20 years. The person we married is not the person. In the love relationship, just remember you vowed to love for [French language] For better or for worse. [chuckles] I think there's still that love remains. You're absolutely right. I think when you're there, if you're there longer, you realize you weren't in love with the snapshots, necessarily. You're in love with the place, and in our case, the place is ailing. For me, that inspires even more love and a desire to see things change and a desire to contribute. James Baldwin says love is war, love is a growing up. I think that's that kind of love that Haiti deserves and demands.

Interviewer: I love that question. I love that.

Female Participant 3: You talked about your process when you were in college. I love that vignette. It's a great image. Could you talk a little bit about your process today, especially in relationship to writing short stories?

Edwidge: I always say this to writing students. You have to write around the life you have. Sometimes we ask writers, how do you write and reimagine they have a Mont

Blanc, they're sitting on their beach, they have a wine, they have a candle lit. Some people have all that, but if you have some kids, you're usually writing on the way to school or between school. I try to write around the life I have. When I'm just writing, I'm a binge-writer. If I have two weeks with nothing planned, I just binge-write. I try to just use those weeks that way. If it's a school thing and I have to do things with my kids, I'll drop them off. My process is just around what's going on in my life.

Right now, I'm teaching again. I'm back in the academy. I'm just going to plan to write during the break. The process is based on what's going on with my life. Most of my life, I've always been having to care for an elder and a child at the same time. Now I have teenagers, but I have an elder. There's always all these things in life. I think writing around the life you had also feeds the writing.

I remember what someone once asked Jhumpa Lahiri what it's like for mother writers being a mother and a writer, and she said, "Being a mother gives you more to write about, but also, you have less time to write about." I think that's true of a lot of other things like external things besides writing your life. The life you're living feeds the writing, and the writing is enriched by that life.

Interviewer: They're telling me one more question, y'all.

Female Participant 4: I met you years ago when I first published my first book. You were so kind because you were walking with me in Miami Book Festival. You were talking about teaching and how teaching was really important to you and how much you learned from being in the classroom with young people. I'm just curious whether that still feeds you and more importantly, what you're seeing today with younger writers and this generation is very different from the generation I imagine you began teaching with.

Edwidge: I think that younger writers certainly have more models. You have people like Dolen, you have the whole range of her. We have our Jasmine, we have our Tiari. We have all these wonderful models, and they're more connected because I think with being online, you have more access to the thoughts of the writers who are out there, what they're doing. I think there's a sense that they're more human and that what they're doing is more possible.

I see less of folks feeling like, "Oh, I need permission to do this." I feel like they come in. It's like, "Okay, I already have permission, but I'm also struggling with what to say, how to say the same concerns." Then, of course, we're all trying to figure out AI. [laughs] What does that mean as in teaching? What does that mean in terms of creativity? What will it mean? I think we've all fed it, is that people have told me, "We all fed that beast." [chuckles]

I think there's more community probably than there was. There's a way that back then and now and I'm reminded again how teaching can be a calling. Everybody who teaches, you're still balancing whatever your life and then writing your own writing and then also just trying to nurture other people's writing. I teach at an elite institution. Even that, I was at one, and it made such a difference to have-- especially Black women who nurtured me at those institutions. Also, there's that role that you're teaching people who are not in your class too because they find you, they come to

you. I did that when I was a student, I sought out everybody who looked like me on that campus.

Interviewer: Thank you.

[applause]

Edwidge: Thank you.

Janna Malamud Smith: Hi, I'm Janna Malamud Smith. I want to thank you all for coming this evening and American University for hosting the award and PEN/Faulkner for supporting it for decades now. I warmly also want to thank Jung Yun and the members of the PEN/Malamud Committee for their diligent work every year, which is just out of their hearts and their goodwill, so I'm really grateful for it.

We started the award in 1988, 37 years ago. As mentioned, if you look back over the list of winners, you'll see that from its beginning to today, the committee has picked outstanding short story writers. I imagine my father would feel proud to have his name associated with this occasion, and he likely would've felt both avuncular and competitive with the recipients. He enthusiastically mentored students. He was a teacher also in young writers, and he admired many of his contemporaries keenly appreciating gifts they possessed that he lacked. All the same, he could be thin-skinned if I praised arrival over breakfast.

[laughter]

Janna: As a boy growing up in his struggling immigrant family, and for several decades into his adulthood, Bernard Malamud was poor. His father, Max, a storekeeper, and perhaps, too generous man, often offered groceries on credit to neighbors so that they could eat. When times were hard, these debts were rarely repaid. As a kid in Brooklyn, dad became a bit of a scam, stealing apples, sneaking into movies without a ticket, riding the subway the same way.

Later, in college, he wrote in his journal that he sometimes had to scramble to find a nickel for the subway to get to his classes at City College, a school that blessedly charged no tuition in those days. While my father wanted badly to succeed, he, like his father, was not particularly interested in money. He had a notion of literature as transcendent, and he cared surprisingly little about anything material. Yes, he was proud when in his early 50s. His success delivered some wealth, but he never went out of his way to gain more.

After he died, people wrote to tell me how he quietly handed them cash and checks when they were down on their luck. I mention his generosity not only because it's my job here to talk about him, which I enjoy each year, and let me know a little about him as a person, but because seemingly, this generosity has traveled from my grandfather, Max, to my father, to my brother, Paul, who died a year ago.

My brother was a solitary creature. He worked in government. He didn't have a partner or children or a pet or many friends. He didn't own a home or a car. Apart from dining some evenings in restaurants near where he lived, he lived very modestly. He enjoyed writing poetry and translating poetry. He saved his money. As

the executor of his will, I was asked to give much of it away. He particularly wanted gifts made to honor both of our parents. Starting this year, as you may have heard, this award carries our mother, Ann Malamud's name, along with Bernard's.

A lot of time has passed, I continue to cherish this award as a space for appreciating those who are fellow travelers in the journey that enthralled and consumed my father. I admire the daily labor of fiction writers. I have seen up close the rigor it takes. Short stories for me are not unlike sonnets. They are sharply incised, skillfully condensed, and their perceptions illuminate experience like matches flaring. So much is amiss in our world. The ineffable beauty of the best short prose offers us a precious counterweight. It gives me great pleasure this evening to give the 2023 PEN/Malamud Award for Bernard and Ann Malamud for her excellence in the short story to Edwidge Danticat.

[applause]

Edwidge: Thank you. I want to thank PEN/Faulkner, the Malamud family, particularly, Janna Malamud Smith, for being here, and for those wonderful remarks. Thank you so much. Thank you, Susan **[unintelligible 01:08:31]** for seeing to all the details of my getting here. Thank you, Dolen Perkins Valdez and all the judges and the committee. It was wonderful chatting with you. Our conversation continues. My thanks to the university and all of those of you who are here who read short stories and keep the genre alive.

I have always loved stories as you might have gotten a sense from our conversation. I grew up in a family in Haiti of very lively storytellers, who recounted their days encounter by encounter and even voiced people they'd met as though they were characters in a play. The elders in my life were also very fond of folktales, myths, and fables, which were perfect narrative models for abiding writer.

In addition to growing up in Brooklyn, as I was telling Janna, I almost went to Erasmus High School where Bernard Malamud and Barbra Streisand went, [chuckles] and so my dad switched me to another high school for nurses. Teaching now at Columbia University where Bernard Malamud received his master's in English literature, these are some of the things that he and I have in common. Like him, my writing is also a quote, it's a quote drawn out of a reluctant soul, a measure of astonishment at the nature of life.

I have been living with so many Malibu stories of late that last night, when a young man on a scooter was struck and thankfully only bruised and I didn't run on Riverside Drive near where I now live, I thought of the Malibu story *Spring Rain*. *Spring Rain* begins with an accident, but most notably, the main character, George Fisher, often lies awake imagining what happens in the novels he reads happening to him. This is the power of stories. I am here on the magnificent wings of stories. My gratitude is immense.

Working along to create stories is not a bad way to live out our loneliness. Malibu has written, tonight makes this work a little less lonely. Along with my gratitude to all of you, I will carry with me these lines from a Malibu short story called *A Pimp's Revenge*. Art is long inspiration short, luck is fine, but don't stop breathing.

[applause]

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello, everyone.

Participant 5: Hello.

Gwydion: I am Gwydion Suilebhan. Yes, hello back. I am Gwydion Suilebhan. I'm the executive director of PEN/Faulkner. I'm going to add my thanks for Edwidge, Hope, Jolin, Jana David, and American University for making tonight possible. It has me thinking, I know that for a lot of us, at this time of year, we take stock of what we're grateful for, and personally, for a couple of months now, I have been full of immense gratitude for the enormous generosity of the Malamud family, especially the late Paul Malamud, whose presence is sorely missed tonight. I have had a chance to spend time with Paul, and I liked him quite a bit.

Of course, to Janna Malamud Smith, who means so much to PEN/Faulkner and has done so for, as she said, decades. Together, they have really established the enduring legacy of excellence and artistry, represented by the PEN/Malamud Award for the excellence in the short story. It's just such a debt that we have to them for doing that, so thank you so much. We at PEN/Faulkner intend to make that legacy last forever. The Malamud family has made that actually possible with a $100,000 matching grant that will help endow a permanent fund to support the award.

I know that many of you in this room have already contributed to the matching campaign, and I'm thankful for what you've done, too. It means a ton to PEN/Faulkner, and for those who haven't, it is not too late. Now is your time to double your impact and actually play a part in cementing the future of evenings like this, cementing this important part of American literary history. You can help.

With that, I want to thank you all for being here tonight. I sincerely hope we will see all of you again on May 2nd for the PEN/Faulkner Award celebration at the MLK Memorial Library. I hope you'll stick around after we leave this room to mix and mingle out there and pick up a copy of Edwidge's powerful and profound work from our friends at Politics and Pros. If you add, I bet she will sign it for you.

[laughter]

Thank you, all.