THE COSTS OF ASSIMILATION

ANDRÉ ACIMAN & NICOLE KRAUSS

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Wachenheim Trustees Room

TONY MARX: Good evening, everyone. I'm Tony Marx, the president of the Library. It's great to have you in this humble little room. I love this room for many reasons, amongst them, take a look on your way out above the mantelpiece. There's an amazing Jefferson quote and above there it says, "The City of New York has built this building for the use of all the people." And that is what inspires us. It's good to have you all here. It's a particular honor to have my amazing predecessor, Paul LeClerc, former president of the Library, here with us tonight.

(applause)

So a quick update on how the Library is trying to serve all of the people. Our amazing branch system, the largest circulating library in America, in the last six months we've doubled the provision of English-language instruction and we aim to go tenfold increase. In the last six months, we've doubled, tripled actually, our computer skills training, and aim to go sixfold increase. Every day thirty thousand kids come into our branches after school because it's safe, and we aim to create the most innovative and largest after-school program in America. The New York Public Library now together with Brooklyn and Queens as of this year is the circulating library for the entire public school system in New York. One point one million school students will call upon seventeen million circulating books to be able to do their work better.

We are facing the digital era vigorously. Just last week, we announced that Simon & Schuster has joined so that now all of the Big Six publishers, which was not true before, are now providing books to be downloaded electronically for free through the New York Public Library. We have to ensure that what this library has provided for a hundred years—which is free access to books—will continue in an expanded way for those who choose to read digitally. The library, which some thought might be going out of business, is actually moving the world of information technology and access in a way that even my friends at Google failed to do so. I'm going to rub that in over the next few weeks.

And of course here in the Schwartzman Building, the most amazing, most used research library perhaps in the world, our plans are to—just on this floor, to open a dozen majestic rooms like this one that have been closed to the public, we're going to more than double, perhaps triple, the space for great scholars and writers to work and write over a period of up to a year. We're going to increase our staff. We're hiring a Middle East curator, a Latin America curator, a humanities curator, as well as new head librarians or senior librarians at the Schomburg and the Library for Performing Arts. We have to provide for the information needs of all New Yorkers and all comers. Because that's what we're in the business of doing. That's what Paul laid the foundation for, and what we continue to build on that foundation here.

So the Library is on the move, but for tonight we are honored to have a great session in the great LIVE at NYPL program. We have tonight two of America's great authors, memoirists, writers, in conversation with each other. That is a thrill for all of us—it is so New York and so Library. And to start that program off, please welcome the director of NYPL LIVE, Paul Holdengräber.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you, Tony, very much. And I also want to acknowledge Paul LeClerc, who hired me in this position. Thank you so much for coming tonight. It is a great pleasure to welcome both André Aciman and Nicole Krauss back for a LIVE program tonight, LIVE from the New York Public Library, André has

been LIVE from its very inception, and Nicole appeared in a remarkable conversation with David Grossman.

André Aciman was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and is an American essayist, novelist, and scholar. He's the author of a deeply moving memoir—if you haven't read it, please do, *Out of Egypt*. And brilliant collections of essays—*False Papers: Essays on Exile and Memory, Alibis*, and three novels, *Eight White Nights*, *Call Me By Your Name*, and now *Harvard Square*.

Nicole Krauss is the author of *Man Walks into Room*, *Great House*, and *The History of Love*. In 2007 she was selected as one of *Granta*'s best young American Novelists. In 2010 she was chosen by the *New Yorker* for their Twenty under Forty list. Prior to all that I seem to recall André telling me that I should look out for the work of a brilliant student of his named Nicole Krauss.

After tonight's conversation, The Costs of Assimilation, both Nicole Krauss and André Aciman will be happy to sign books. As always, thank you to 192 Books, our independent bookseller, for carrying a wide array of books of our featured guests.

I would like to quickly mention some of our upcoming events. Next week, on April 30th, I will be speaking to Junot Díaz. Although the event is sold out, if you're a fan, stand-by tickets are always an option. Daniel Dennett and Jim Holt will join us on May 8th. On May 14th, we'll celebrate the *National Geographic* magazine hundred and twenty-fifth

anniversary with an evening called Risk Takers and the New Age of Exploration, a conversation moderated by Ann Curry with Lynsey Addario, Dr. Kenny Broad, James Nachtwey, and Dr. Zoltan Takacs. On May 22nd, a culinary evening, Cook It Raw, with David Chang and friends. They will be joined by chefs Massio Bottura, Sean Brock, and the founder of Cook It Raw, Alessandro Porcelli. The conversation will be moderated by Lisa Abend. On June 4th, a celebration of Federico García Lorca, with Patti Smith, Paul Muldoon, and others. And our spring closing night is June 13th, a conversation with the Chinese dissident Liao Yiwu.

Over the past few years I have asked our various guests to provide me with a biography in seven words, seven words that would define them or not at all, a haiku of sorts, or a tweet. The variety has been extraordinary. These seven words reveal as much as they conceal. Nicole Krauss gave me this: "Give me a hundred thousand or give me none." André Aciman: "André Aciman is a naturalized American citizen." Please warmly welcome them both tonight to the New York Public Library.

(applause)

NICOLE KRAUSS: Was I ever your student?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: No.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Okay. **(laughter)** I thought maybe I forgot.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: But I did sing your praises.

NICOLE KRAUSS: You did, and I think you were maybe the first person to write in to the *New Yorker* after the excerpt of *The History of Love* was published there. I think you were the first person to write to Deborah. And that was maybe the first nice letter I'd ever gotten from a stranger about my work, although it was meant for Deborah, but it landed in my e-mail.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: That's a nice story, because what happened is that a student of mine who was reading, who reads the *New Yorker* regularly, said, "You should read this short story," and I went "yeah, yeah, yeah," suddenly and then I read it because he recommended it and I trusted him and I loved it and I loved it so much it was on a weekend, and I wrote to Deborah and I said, "What a wonderful trove this is, it's fantastic," and that's how it was so.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Well, I think I've known you longer than you've known me, because I've been reading you from far before that. I remember being in college when *Out of Egypt* came out and reading a review of it and going right—I just had you sign that hardcover that I got all those years ago. But I remember reading it and feeling that this was, even just from the description of it, and then let alone the book itself, that this was a writer for me that somehow spoke to so many of the things that I was just beginning to try to find words for.

One of the remarkable things that has happened to you I'd say in the last, what since, 2007? So you had *Out of Egypt* in 1995—is that right? And then *False Papers* I think in 2000. And then suddenly in 2007 you published a novel and then since then three novels altogether, and a collection of essays, but to me that's something really remarkable, not just the speed but the fact that suddenly the fiction started to bloom, and I'm curious about that and curious whether we can expect these Aciman books to continue at this rate or what?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I would hope not. No, basically, as I said, you know, I steal time. Whenever I have a minute, I'll write. If I have a few minutes, I'll write for those few minutes. If I don't, for a few days, I won't be able to write. I hope that stuff comes out, I hope not too much so as to deluge everybody like some other writers who will go nameless, **(laughter)** but we try to be sort of—at least we try to produce something that's good enough to appear.

NICOLE KRAUSS: But you don't think there was a shift—I mean, I've always wondered this with your work because I remember you saying somewhere. Maybe you wrote about it one of your essays in *Alibis*. You were talking about how when you went back to *Out of Egypt* you realized how much you had made up, so there was that walk, for example, your brother, the last walk you took in Alexandria, but other, many other things that you alluded to that you weren't sure whether were inventions or variations on reality or—so I had this sense that at times, your memoir, the voice of your essays,

particularly with *Harvard Square*, they're very close, their relationship to each other, and I always wondered whether, for you, you have the sense that you could come at it from either direction but you're going to end up in the middle, and you could call it memoir, you can call it fiction, but for you that it's the same.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Isn't it?

NICOLE KRAUSS: No, for me it's entirely different.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Is it really? No, for me they merge and I have no idea if the "I" character is really me or if it's a "he" character parading as an "I." I have no idea, but so I do think that once you write something, it sort of backfires on everything else that has happened in your life. In other words, there's a retrogressive way of establishing things that never happened, but once you've written them, they obscure what really happened, so that you only remember what you wrote, and that's the scary part about writing, is that if you want to write a memoir, just be prepared that anything you've changed in your memoir will become fact to you as well.

(laughter)

NICOLE KRAUSS: Yeah, it's a little bit like when you imagine a country that you've never been to, and then you go, and then the original version of that country disappears to

you forever, and you can never access that, so there's a way in which I suppose you can rewrite memory in that way as well.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Yeah, except that in the case of visiting the country you actually see the real country. In this case, anything you put to paper takes over, and maybe that's why we write, because we don't really like what really happened, and we want to alter it, or we want to live with it.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Yeah, I think that's certainly true but I know that for me if I even try to write anything closely resembling my life, I find myself totally paralyzed on the page, so just for example, when I was trying to write the young girl in *The History of Love*, Alma, who ostensibly could have been similar to me, I've been a fourteen-year-old young girl, so I found myself really stymied, I couldn't figure out to do it. And Leo came so easily, this old man, you know, from Poland, no problem with that, I could completely embody him, and feel absolutely at home, and in order to write Alma, this younger girl, I had to basically throw out all the stuff that I first wrote and I just saved these little sections that felt to me alive and I kind of gave them titles, and that's how the form of her part goes, and then suddenly she began to work because I was able to dislodge her from my own experiences, so for me there's always—my first instinct is to become something completely different than what I am, and I think that probably comes from something that maybe is not at the heart of writing for you, I think maybe we're different that way, but it is for me, which is that I have a chance to become other people, something I don't have a chance to become in life, so I'm mostly tired of being me and seeing it my way, and of

how mean an amount of time I've been given and every time I make a decision about my life there's all the consequences of that decision, and I can't go back and make a different decision, but in the novels I can, and I can be an old man, or I can be somebody somewhat similar to me, like Nadia in *Great House*, who she's an older writer but who doesn't have children and who decides to dedicate her life entirely to work, so I'm always attracted to that other possibility.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Aren't these sort of what I call shadow selves, in many ways? I mean they're like, they are not you, but they're like almost you or not quite you or might become you or could have been you.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I think insofar that I feel that I could become them and then they enlarge my sense of life, I feel that there's a kind of an expansion that takes place, and I'll never be the same as—without that wing of myself that is that Israeli father in *Great House* or something like that.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Well, there you have it. You're—basically you're agreeing with me.

(laughter)

NICOLE KRAUSS: Maybe, I don't know, maybe we come at it from different directions.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: No, it's just that once you've written—take for example the character of Leo, who is unforgettable. Clearly he's not you, but in order to get inside his head, you had to project something of yourself in it and now that you have created him, he is part of your life and he is real. Most people who have read *History of Love* will never forget him.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I think that whatever chance I was going to have to write something personal, I had to begin though with that farther part and when I was reading *Harvard Square* of course naturally—it always annoys me when people think things are autobiographical, so I don't want to poke you about that, **(laughter)** but I couldn't help but thinking what you'll roll your eyes at, which is like, "Damn, he has such a good memory." It just felt that it had to happened that way and Kalaj had to have existed like that, and you had to have been like that, even if you made yourself a little worse than you really were, and you made him to be a little better than he was.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: We alter things, that's why it's called a novel.

(laughter)

NICOLE KRAUSS: Well, that's what I wondered about, whether it's just the title, I mean, "a novel" or "a memoir," whether it's the same.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: There's always a kind of, I hate to use this word, but there's a slippage of the real identity into this other identity, into the one that morphs on paper, and the fact is that the one on paper is so far more persuasive and so catching than the real person who is, you know, like, is not as interesting as the characters in the book, even myself in the book as timid and as sort of how shall I say, he's so young and so innocent in many respects is more interesting than the person who created him or who lived his life twenty, thirty years ago.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I think there is something in there that you—that there's a line from the book that really stayed with me, which "What is someone else?" That is a devastating question, and it sort of—this speaks to what we're talking about because that's what made me think to ask you about being oneself or becoming someone else, because I thought that's the question for me, where my work begins, and I wondered if you could talk more about that moment in the book or what you meant by that?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: What is someone else?

NICOLE KRAUSS: Yeah.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Someone else is—For some people, I think, other people are a natural extension of their lives, and for other people, someone else, other people, are not natural extensions, you have to work at it, it's something that is learnt like learning to eat certain foods that you initially don't find palatable but you learn to love them once

you've grown into them, but for some people experiencing someone else is a foreign concept, and I think the character in the book, the narrator who has no name, is in fact having difficulty with other people, he reads all day, he's stuck in the terrace reading in the sun, and then he meets this other character, who is Kalaj, who is the most social person in the world, and for him being with other people is what you're supposed to do.

There's a sentence that I forget where I wrote it, but it's about going to the movies. When you go to the movies with someone, do you talk to them while you're at the movies with them? What do you do if you go with someone to the movies? What is the point of going to the movies with someone if you're not going to talk to them during the movie? **(laughter)** Why do you need them to be there? **(laughter)** So that what is someone else—what is a date to the movies for if we're not going to do anything? And so these are questions that I'm sure most people do not claim to ask themselves, but of course they all ask themselves that question.

NICOLE KRAUSS: It's interesting that you say that of course that the narrator is having trouble with other people, but at the same time this novel is, as far as I can tell, I mean one of the closest studies of a friendship that I can think of reading in recent memory and a beautiful one, and it's also very much about intimacy. Of course, it's about estrangement, too, it's about a kind of pendulum swing or a tension between those two things, getting closer, being drawn in, and then running away, and the narrator's always running away, but at the same time what's left from all of that, is I think—and I think what's most moving about the novel is that sense of intimacy that you manage to conjure

up, and it's not only in the portrait of the friendship, it's also—it's mirrored in the sort of tone of complicity between the narrator and the reader. So that we feel there's this almost conspiratorial sense. We're in that friendship with you that's echoed in the friendship with Kalaj.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I think that the idea of conspiracy or complicity is I think essential in that kind of a friendship. But I think it's true in most friendships. You may not like your friend very much. How many of you have had that experience? **(laughter)** Where you have a friend but you're not quite sure you *like* them, and you may not even be *loyal* to them and they annoy you sometimes, but on the other hand there is a sense between the two of you that is a complicity, and it's a form of intimacy. In other words, we know exactly what we're about. We have the same idea, we know where we're headed. Isn't it wonderful that you and I are thinking the same thing and we haven't said a word? And I think that's the kind of friendship that sort of erupts between those two individuals.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Maybe I should read a little from it. We thought maybe we would read a little bit from each other's books. Okay, so I'm reading from early on in *Harvard Square*.

"Americans loved all things jumbo and ersatz, he was saying. As long as it was artificial and double the value if you bought five times the size you'd ever need, no white American homemaker could resist. Their continental breakfasts are jumbo-ersatz, their extra-long cigarettes are jumbo-ersatz, their huge steak dinners with whopping all-you-

can-eat salads are jumbo-ersatz, their refilled mugs of all-you-can-drink coffee, their faux-mint mouthwash with triple-pack toothpaste and extra toothbrushes thrown in for the value, their cars, their malls, their universities, even their monster television sets and spectacular big-screen epics, all of it, jumbo-ersatz."

(applause)

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Well, that's a vision of America. **(laughter)** You know, basically, what is an American to somebody who was not born in America and has never seen an American before? What kind of weird people are these Americans? So I wanted to convey how he spoke about Americans, but he was able to totally integrate himself in the system, up to a point, but he was able to do that.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I felt that you had a lot of fun with his voice. Even though you chose to write it as maybe you only felt you could, from the position of the narrator, I felt that you took a lot of joy in embodying that position that I just read.

(laughter)

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: But that's the beauty of being a writer is that you can embody two opposing points of view, I can be Kalaj and write Kalaj's little sort of dithyrambic screed and at the same time I can say, "but he's totally crazy, I can't believe in this stuff, he's absolutely nuts." So one can do that.

NICOLE KRAUSS: That surprised me too that so much of at least maybe the first third of the novel is this beautifully slow progression of a conversation, it's not one single conversation, it happens at different times, but it has a feeling of we're just talking, we're going to talk and talk and talk and what's going to happen from all this talking? But it's absolutely necessary to set the tone of everything that will eventually happen in the novel and I thought you did that very, very well. I wondered if you, when you started the book did you know? Did you have the book in your mind already or did you just begin with remembering those conversations, if they existed at all?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: No, the book started because the Moth, thanks to Paul, called me up and said we want you to give a talk on a character that's unforgettable, and so I said, "Okay, fine," and I began to give them a little version of this on the phone and I realized that I didn't know how to tell a story. I can only write a story and I wanted to capture his essence as best as I could and so I decided I'm going to write an outline, and then the outline became the story, and all it was initially was a character study, a sort of portrait of this crazy man, but you also have to have a narrative behind it, and so a narrative eventually developed, but I had no plan.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Right. And did you have early on the idea of two people who were on the edge of two different societies that they might be accepted into or cast out of, that kind of mirroring, or did that also develop?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: No, that was part of the plan, because I was a grad student at Harvard and he was a cabdriver in Cambridge and so I had a ticket in already, although mine was very flimsy because I had failed my orals and I had to take them again, and if I'd failed them a second time, I was not going to pass, and they were going to kick me out, so I was just as subject to being evicted from Cambridge as he was. But he had no ticket in, he had no green card. But I think that to go back to a thing that is I think common to both of us there's a question of ultimately it's not whether you belong to a place or whether you're an outsider, whatever, although the subject tonight is assimilation, it was more like I began to realize this when I was reading your book, the idea that identity is in fact, it's a big question. We don't know what we are, and we are collection of fragmented narratives and in fact we don't know other people, much less ourselves, and we're sort of broken up, and you always write about this.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Well, I think—I can say lots of things about that. One is that I think that when I write I have a chance to decide for myself who I am and so I grab it and part of that deciding for myself is becoming these other people and then more fully becoming myself, but it's also, as you say, rewriting things to change them to better suit my taste and it is also I guess finally at the end a kind of chance to create a home and I think that idea has always been a little bit elusive to me, and now I'm talking more about a place rather than people, but and this is something that you know much better than I do. But I think I always felt from the time I was a child that it was something of an accident being born here or there, and it wasn't clear to me exactly where we were from, and there's something very evocative about these places that my grandparents were from but we

couldn't go back to, and there was also something evocative about the places that I was inhabiting more and more in books that I was reading.

And I think that when I'm writing—I know that when I'm writing that I'm particularly drawn to now these sort of polyphonic structures, in part because I feel like they give me a chance to do exactly what you're saying, to take these fragments, whether they be places, I mean I've had now two novels in a row that are set at least in part in London, New York, and Israel, which I think of as sort of the places of my life, and I have this chance to kind of draw them back together or remake them anew in a kind of whole that works for me, so it's the geography, the fractured geography, and then beneath that all of the meaning of what it is to live what feels like a life in pieces. Which it doesn't take a fractured geography to have that feeling, I suppose, it's natural to everyone, but it's incredibly satisfying to me to write in that way, of the sort of putting the pieces back together from the vessel that's broken although you never knew the shape of it to begin with.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: That's a metaphor in your last book, which is the idea of the broken vessel, and all you have is like the little part of it, the fragment, or the shard, and from that you're basically, your job as a writer is to create the whole beast or re-create the vessel if you can.

NICOLE KRAUSS: And the truth is that we wouldn't really want more than a shard, because we'd be out of a job if we had more than that. **(laughter)** It reminds me of

something else that I wrote down here, this is from I think one of the essays in *Alibis*, where you say, "a displaced person is not only in the wrong place but also feels he leads the wrong life," and you go on to say that doesn't mean that there is a real life or a real home someplace. And I was just—I always think that that is kind of a gift in a certain way. There is a gift in that there's an ambition to create that home or that life which feels more vivid, more convincing, more whatever, and I think that is the fire behind the novelist or at least probably behind these two.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I think both of us know exactly what we're talking about, and I think one of the words that needs to mentioned maybe is the idea of the Jew. I mean, it's all in that. Not only a traveling Jew, not only a Jew, but a Jew comes from many places. I mean, there's a kind of paradox. The Jew is the person who is constantly looking for traces of things that have, that are almost disappearing, but at the same time is a person who is also in the business of leaving traces, and I think, and when I was reading your book this is what came to my mind. And the metaphor that comes to my mind in this regard is the one of what happens when a Jewish man gets married, you're uniting with somebody else, and yet you're breaking something into smithereens. Everybody has a different interpretation for that, but ultimately it is that same thing. You're uniting on one hand on the condition that you break everything up.

In your book this is exactly what's happening. You have this image of the house, and the house becomes a metaphor for the temple, for identity, and at some point you have this wonderful metaphor of Freud's house where they transpose all this furniture into the

apartment in London in the same way so that he is actually not really displaced, but of course he is totally displaced and felt displaced even when he was in Vienna, since his parents came from somewhere else.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Actually, so that room. I used to live near Freud's house in London and I used to go visit all the time and just stand in his study. It somehow made me feel less lonely. I don't know why Freud should make anyone feel less lonely. **(laughter)** But I started to think about his room and that obsessive way or charitable way, I don't know how one would describe it that his daughter and his wife sort of lovingly put back together with all the little statuettes that he loved and that he spoke to, you know, in this study and then he was only there for a year and then he died. But then after he died, the glasses that were put down on the table, everything remained exactly the way that he left it, and you can still go there, and you still feel somehow that he just left the room.

And I also started to think about another example of that, similarly kind of obsessive preservation of a room, which is the painter Francis Bacon, who painted in the same studio in London for thirty years, and had this violently messy studio, you know, filled with trash and slashed canvases and there were apparently pathways sort of that he sort of tread through the garbage to get to the canvases, and then after he died, I guess, archaeologists sort of, art archaeologists, took it apart and took literally ten thousand pieces, shipped it to Dublin, and then put it back together, and I kept thinking, so is that the original room, is that a simulacrum of the room, what is that and what is the obsession

behind preserving it, but not where it was but over here, so I remember just thinking I kind of want a room like that for myself to experiment with—what would that be like?

That's where that idea that is in *Great House* of the Hungarian antiques dealer, who is trying to reconstruct, to draw back together all these disparate pieces of furniture and remake his father's study not in Budapest any longer, but in Jerusalem, but I think there is that—that is of course a model for the way that the book itself is put together. Although there's no original. I mean, I don't know what the original of a novel would be. We make it something that has never existed before.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: There is no original, and that brings me back to the idea of Judaism. A Jew—there is no such thing as a Hebrew. A Hebrew means "the person from across the river." In other words—

NICOLE KRAUSS: I learned that in your essay. I didn't know that. I love that.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Basically you don't have a home. You have a place from which you did derive. But that's not your home, so what is your home? I want to read something that you wrote, because I think it's a perfect sentence, and I like this sentence so much that I'm going to read the whole thing, forgive me. But it is on the subject of identity. What is a human being? Forget the other person, who are we? And so this is about a couple.

"I sat at the table staring into the greasy food and waited for the tears to come, even wishing them to come so that I might unburden myself of something, because as things stood I felt so heavy and tired that I couldn't see any way to move, but they didn't come, and so I continued to sit there, hour after hour, watching this unrelenting rain slosh against the glass, thinking of our life together, Lotte's and mine, how everything in it was designed to give a sense of permanence—the chair against the wall that was there when we went to sleep and there again when we awoke, the little habits that quoted from the day before and predicted the day to come—though in truth it was all just an illusion, just as solid matter is an illusion, just as our bodies are an illusion, pretending to be one thing when really they are millions upon millions of atoms, coming and going, some arriving while others are leaving us forever, as if each of us were only a great train station, only not even that, since at least in a train station, the stones and the tracks and the glass roof stay still while everything else rushes through it, no, it was worse than that, more like a giant empty field, where every day a circus erected and dismantled itself, the whole thing from top to bottom, but never the same circus, so what hope did we really have of ever making sense of ourselves, let alone one another?"

This is beautiful and it's all one sentence, by the way.

(laughter)

NICOLE KRAUSS: That couple, Arthur and Lotte, really surprised me. And I know that you'll understand this. They began simply because I wanted to go back to a place that I

missed, and so I just thought I wanted to write about Hampstead Heath and about the swimming holes there, near Freud's house where I had lived and had walked every single day for a year or more, I just wanted to be there again, so I started to write about the swimming holes, and I remembered that I had this—for about a week I interned at the BBC, at Radio 3, for this wonderful producer who lived in Hampstead. And I used to see him occasionally in the morning, with sort of like frozen hair and these big furry gloves, he went swimming every day in the swimming holes, if they would break the ice and he would go in, and I thought of when—I just thought of somebody, a husband watching his wife jump into this hole every day and sort of waiting for her to come up and somehow never knowing if she would, and so it started with that, just out of the idea of them, and slowly I began to understand, "Okay, so here is a man whose wife is a mystery to him, and here's a man who realizes that all his life maybe he collaborated in that mystery and keeping her a mystery," and then the whole story began to sort of—it began probably almost always as it does for me with a place that I simply wanted to occupy again and to kind of open the door and see what would come of it.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Now when you go to that place, what do you think of?

NICOLE KRAUSS: That's a good question. I don't know. I haven't—I don't know that I've been back to the swimming holes, I did go to the swimming holes after I wrote the beginning and then I went back, and I don't know that I've been back again. What I mostly think of is when I lived there. I don't think I would think of Arthur and Lotte, I don't know.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: You wouldn't? Okay. I'm trying to push the theory that—that now that they're overwritten on the actual experience.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Well, I think that certainly that would be the case with Freud's house, for example. But maybe they would be competing with everything that actually happened.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: That's good enough. Fiction is proud.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Could you ever write about a place that you're—seriously write about a place—that you haven't been intimate with, that hasn't been part of your life?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I could.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Have you, will you?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I can't confess that. **(laughter)** But I can say this. When I was contracted to go to Tuscany and Condé Nast was going to send me to Tuscany with my family and I was going to write the piece, and the editor said, "And, André, by the way, you have to go there." **(laughter)** Meaning that she already knew that I had written the piece already before even going, but I had to go. **(laughter)**

I've always made fun of this because I have a very good friend who's probably not speaking to me any longer, but she was going to write a book about the bridges of Paris, I wrote about this, about the bridges, people living in the bridges of Paris, and in order to do that she had to go and spend two weeks with them, you know, to write about them. I said, what do you need to do that for? Who would want to live with these people? **(laughter)** Why don't you just imagine what it is like? **(laughter)** And with a good imagination you'll figure it out. You'll figure it out, it's not that difficult. So she stopped speaking to me.

(laughter)

NICOLE KRAUSS: It's funny because *Condé Nast Traveler* wanted me to write about Turks & Caicos and they said, "Why do you have to go? It's so expensive. Can't you just imagine it?"

(laughter)

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: There you have it, you see? And they send a photographer and the whole thing is real.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Maybe something else—I know we're going to leave time for questions as well—but maybe something else I wanted to ask you about that was on my mind reading the book was about something that I heard Philip Roth once say, which is

that you have to be ruthless about taking from life, and this is something I'm not sure how I feel about, it's something, it's still emerging with me, because thus far I have invented so much, I mean, really invented, I mean, Leo wasn't my grandfather, etc. etc. but there are more and more, there are things from that I—have been quoted directly from my life and I wonder about that, I wonder if that's ruthless, and I wonder, I always think of writing as not an act of vampirism but really an act of empathy, a huge act of empathy, and I think we read because—partly because it gives us a chance to become other people and because probably it teaches us empathy. But at the same time the writer can't just sit around and empathize, he and she also has to borrow, and I wondered reading this, whether for example the character that Kalaj is based on, has he read it, what would happen if he read it, would you want him to read it?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: He'd kill me probably. No, actually, he would understand. But the ruthlessness in the book is not with Kalaj, because Kalaj is, he's a crazy character, you've heard how he speaks, he's just outrageous in every conceivable way, and I've rendered him that way. The person I was ruthless with was myself, because as he was my friend and as we were complicit in so many things, I was also getting tired of him and I felt I didn't want to be seen with him because he was kind of a vagrant sometimes, and he acted like a vagrant, he was rude to people in the street and the café houses so that I didn't always want to be seen with him and eventually I began to distance myself and it would have been so easy for me as a writer to camouflage the act of distancing whereas in fact I felt very bad that I had done this to him, and I felt guilty and I was uncomfortable with myself because I always used to leave my door unlocked because

there was nothing to rob anyway, so people—my friends would walk in and out and Kalaj would walk in and out, and eventually I put a lock, it was my way of saying there are thieves in the building and it was a sort of—a kind of indirect way of saying to him, "hands off, stop coming here all the time," and I felt terrible about this and I never said good-bye to him, because I was uncomfortable with a good-bye scene. And so I preferred for him to just *go*, and in that respect I was ruthless with myself.

NICOLE KRAUSS: That was the last time you ever saw him.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Yes.

NICOLE KRAUSS: I found the end of the novel—I told you this on our walk here—I found it very moving and it sort of shook me in a way, and I think it was because of that, the many things that build to that, but I think something about the not saying good-bye. There was something very sad about that, ultimately.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: But then I find that— I mean, how many of us avoid the good-bye scene if we can? I'm saying how many of us, because I'm sure you're all guilty. It's the thought that the good-bye is a very sincere and candid moment, it is necessary in any relationship, but at the same time if it's shortened, or if it's hastened, or if it's avoided, we'll jump on that chance. Having said good-bye to so many people in trains and boats and airports forever, it's the kind of scene you want to avoid.

NICOLE KRAUSS: We could probably keep going, but I know we're supposed to leave questions for the audience, time for questions. So. Is there a microphone, Paul, that people should use?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We're going to bring a mic here front and center. So we'll ask you to be bold and come up. And, as I often say, a question can be asked in about fifty-two seconds, so rather a question than a comment. So who will ask the first question? Come on up.

Q: Such a pleasure to meet you both in this way and to hear what you have to say. I've enjoyed this so much. I loved your two books and I look forward to reading all of yours. I wonder in talking about discovering yourself in this way that you write about, and then you find yourself. I'm curious, if I may ask, I believe you have children, young children, and do you foresee bringing them into your books, or you sort of lay off that, kind of protect them from—

NICOLE KRAUSS: Writing about them?

Q: In any way, bringing them in—

NICOLE KRAUSS: That's an interesting question. The last book was dedicated to them in part because they're very young, they're only seven and four, but I will always look at *Great House*, as much as this may not be obvious, it's certainly not a book about

motherhood. I'll always look at it as kind of the only mechanism I could have invented to capture all of the vulnerability and all of the feeling that came along with becoming a parent for the first time and then the second son was born while I was writing the book.

Q: I didn't know that when I was reading it.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Yeah. But there are already bits of them in there. There's this scene with Aaron, the Israeli father, and his son, Dov, when Dov is three and there's a conversation about when Dov discovers death for the first time and that conversation was taken verbatim from the one that I had with my older son and so I suppose whether they like it or not they've already seeped into the work. But we were talking about this backstage, we were saying, you know, I guess it's too late for you, André, because André's son is already a writer, but we always want to say in our house, "You can be anything you want except a writer."

(laughter)

Q: I remember that. I've heard that one. Thank you.

NICOLE KRAUSS: Thank you.

Q: Hello. It's a pleasure to see you. I have a question about the theme of the costs of assimilation and particularly because we've been hearing so much in the last few days

about Cambridge in particular and its welcoming environment toward new arrivals and immigrants. I was just wondering what your thoughts about the time in which the book is set, how Cambridge was toward immigrants, how you feel that the depiction of the narrator and Kalaj and their experiences sort of reveal assimilation in Cambridge and costs thereof.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: There is a cost to assimilation, and there's a moment, maybe I can—if you permit me for one second—Paul, do I have a second?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You have many seconds.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: I'm going to read one passage which will sort of begin to give you a sense, because I think it is relevant and it answers the question. Basically I'm thinking about what Kalaj is saying. Kalaj is from the Middle East, okay?

"What I heard instead was the raspy, wheezing, threatened voice of an older order of mankind, older ways of being human, raging, raging against the tide of something new that had the semblance and behavior of humanity but really wasn't. It was not a clash of civilizations or of values or of cultures. It was a question of which organ, which chamber of the heart, which one of its dear five senses, would humanity cut off to join modernity?"

This is a kind of metaphorical way of answering your question. But the real issue is a foreigner comes from, say, a third world country and comes to America, which is first world, and you're going to Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is the sort of the hub of the best that ever happened in America, if you believe that, **(laughter)** but here you are, you're an immigrant, you're in this place that is so weird as far as you're concerned. Americans are difficult, they're different, and if you remember what Tamerlan or Tamerlaine, it's the same word, by the way, said, he never had a single American friend and that would have been the case with Kalaj, he spoke to everybody, but he couldn't quite congeal or form a relationship with an American. He slept with different women almost every night, but he could not have a relationship with any. That tells you there's basically, it's not just different cultures, different values, it's really different orders of humanity, and the only way to do that is that you have to give something up.

You cannot stay who you are if you want to be an American and survive in America just by being who you brought with you. You have to give something up, and it's a very difficult decision. Usually integration means just that, you have to start speaking the way other people speak, you have to borrow their values, maybe dismiss some of yours, dismiss your way of hugging people and things of that order, that's what I was trying to say. There's no easy answer, to be honest.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One more good question?

NICOLE KRAUSS: We should count ourselves lucky that we had two.

Q: I probably misunderstood but you said, "If I could be dipped in acid and wash away all of that education, then I'd be just like him." Is that what you were saying?

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: Mmm-hmm.

Q: Okay, do you really think that? It just seems to me that you were who you were, no matter what you did you were not going to be like him.

ANDRÉ ACIMAN: No, I wasn't, but then you have to say. When he spoke outlandish things, he was sort of misogynistic to the core, and he was vituperative, and he hated everything, there were no values that he had any respect for, and obviously that's not me. But I heard something which was Old World, old humanity, something that brought me back to my own roots, as if I had outgrown all these things, but hearing the anger in his voice and the rage with which he spoke reminded me of something that was in me as well, but I couldn't find it, and I would never find it, but somehow if you could put me in a tank of some sort or an acid bath and remove all the finish and all the nice values and all the PC things that I've acquired all through my life, maybe, maybe I could be as blunt and as savage as he was, and as angry as he was, that would never happen, but one of the things that you do see happen is that in portraying him, I do become him. I hope I answered your question.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Nicole Krauss, André Aciman, thank you so much.