**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 3: Location, voice, and tone in creative nonfiction**

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Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Soo Na Pak

Note: [italicized words in brackets were added in for clarification]

[KW] = Host Initials

[SP] = Interviewer Initials

0:18 [KW] Hi. It's behind the prose radio, Sunday, Feb. 1, 2015. How you doing today? I'm so happy to be with you. I'm glad you're back. I know the SuperBowl is tonight, but I got your pre-pre-game right here. Today, we're going to talk to writer Soo Na Pak who is going to be with us discussing two of her pieces, "Woman" and "Osiris." Right now, I'm going to step aside, get Soo Na on the line and we'll be right back.

0:58 COMMERCIAL - IRS FREE FILE

1:57 You're back on Behind the Prose Radio. Soo Na are you with me?

2:05 [SP] Yes. Hi

2:10 [KW] Listeners, listen. We just had a major technical malfunction [laughter] so let me get a minute and compose myself, but she's with us now, and I can hear her and she can hear me. We're gonna -today, we're going to jump into what's on the best sellers list this week. In particular, the independent bookstores best sellers. I notice that Anne Lamott has a book out. Soo Na? Did you see anything on the list that interested you?

2:42 [SP]I saw that "The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings" was number four in the top fantasy. It's a classic favorite, so I saw that.

[laughter]

2:59 What else is on your nightstand right now, to read?

3:03 You know, I am reading The Chicago Manual of Style right now.

3:10 [Really?

3:14 [SP] I am. I am. I'm helping with copyediting a technical publication, so I'm reading that and in terms of things that I have reading on my list or the list that is on Publisher's Weekly or NPR?

3:31 [KW] On yours.

3:33 I'm a big fan of Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy, When You Could Be Normal.* I love that. It's creative nonfiction. It says its memoir on the spine of the book but it's a really beautiful pieces. She's also the author of Oranges are Not the Only Fruit and Sexing the Cherry, and she also wrote Written on the Body. She wrote about meeting her birth mother in England.

4:04 [KW] Do you use an e-reader when you read?

4:08 [SP] I am old-school. I don't use an e-reader. I have read things on my screen, on my computer, but I don't use an e-reader, no. I prefer hard-copy books usually.

[KW] 4:25 There is . . . A few people have written articles - Francine Prose and I think his name, someone from the Eclectic, recently KOBO which is an reader, they did this survey, basically checking on the people who are using their readers to see if they're finishing their books or not. So now they have what's called a "Most completed list" and Francine Prose wrote an interesting article in the New York Review of Books, wondering what does this mean? What are they trying to say if someone doesn't finish a book. I feel besides the fact that - It's like someone coming into your nightstand and flipping through your pages: 'Oh, why haven't you finished this book yet?' I just think that's a horrible measure.

5:13 [SP] Yeah, that makes sense to me. I mean, sometimes for me as a reader, sometimes I just read one chapter over and over again, or I might read non-linearly so maybe that's not that linear model of have they finished the book or not, it might not be very accurate.

5:37 [KW] It's interesting you say you read like that, because I feel at least from the two pieces that we're going to discuss today, you're writing is non-linear as well. It has that sort of -where someone would be going over it and over again like you do with that one chapter.

5:53 [SP] Yes, you're a very close reader and that is also an accurate observation.  [Laughter]

6:01 [KW] - Listeners, I'm sorry I didn't properly yet introduce Soo Na. As I said, she's a writer and artist living in the San Francisco Bay area. I met her a few years ago at VONA voices in San Francisco. Her essays and prose appear in The Butter, The Rumpus.net, Alternet.org, and a book, Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption, Hamilton Stone Review, and Digital Artifact Magazine. So I'd like to formally welcome Ms. Soo Na Pak to the show.

6:36 [SP] Thank you so much for having me.

6:43 Let's talk about your writing life. When did you realize that you wanted to be a writer?

[SP] 6:53 I think that writing is my first language. English is not my first language, so Korean is my first language, and then of course I migrated here to the states via adoption and it was the first country in which I was formally educated and I fell in love with language. I always wanted my older sister to read me books and she felt very bothered by that so writing is my first language. It was the first language in which I was able to fully express myself and feel that, I just feel in love with words really. I think I would have fallen in love with any language where I was formally trained or educated. When I was around 11 or 12, I started writing a bit more. My mother got me an electronic dictionary, so I would always look up words there so I was always finding new words. I just started writing poetry. There was a sixth grade - not a poetry contest - but we had to write a response to deforestation of the rain forest back in the 90s when that was a big deal when that was a big deal and there was the last rain forest or something like that so, everybody had those really elaborate Save the Whale t-shirts that were really popular at the time. So I started writing then and I remember my sixth grade English teacher was very excited about this poem I had written in response to this depressing video in response to this depressing video about deforestation in the rain forest and then I remember him showing it around to the other teachers. I think I've always been sort of internal. I think in terms of what writing did for me as a child is that it allowed me to really be able to express myself as an immigrant child via adoption and then also just having access to my own interiority. That was the place where I was able to commune with myself in a way.

[KW] 9:18 Did you study writing in any formal capacity?

[SP] 9:25 No. Not really. I was 15 the summer I went to Young Writers at Kenyon. They have a summer workshop; I think it was for two weeks at Kenyon College and it's a little offshoot of the Kenyon Review. They have writing workshops for adults and they also have a summer program for high school students who express an interest in writing and getting nerdy over the summer with text. I went to Gambier, Ohio and did that for two weeks and that was a really wonderful space. We just did free writing; sometimes we would have guided free writing and we just had our notebooks. We would go look at books like Jorge Louis Borges. It was a really wonderful experience for me. In terms of writing classes in high school, I don't think we really had any writing classes. I did take some creative writing classes at Mount Holyoke College. I went to Hampshire College but because it's a five-college consortium, you're able to take classes in other schools. Of course there is wonderful VONA, the Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation, but yeah, in general, I think I've just written on my own.

[KW] 10:49 How often do you write?

[SP] 10:52 This past November, last year now, I participated in National Novel Writing Month. Actually, OSIRIS was a product of NanoWriMo. I wrote a 25,000 word document into November 2010, after that I whittled down a manuscript that became "Osiris" that was picked up by The Rumpus. This past year, I actually made it to beyond the 50K, so this is the first time I've actually finished a novel - quote unquote - if you can call it that.  [Laughter]

[KW] 11:42 Because you're writing nonfiction during that month?

[SP] 11:45 You know I was writing a mix of both. I tend to kind of go back and forth. Obviously the stuff that people read that is public of mine is creative nonfiction, but I really love fiction as well. I think it gives you a little bit more freedom. It's a little bit more liberator in terms of imagination and practice in terms of the writing.

[KW] 12:07  How did you release yourself to do NANOWRIMO as far as the process? I've signed up for NaNoWriMo before and I've done probably a week of NaNoWrimo so how did you do it?

[SP] 12:29 Well, first of all this was my third or fourth attempt and this is the first time that I finished it so that should give you an idea. [Laughter] I think the big thing was just not judging myself. This year, that was my early birthday present to myself: I'm going to finish writing this novel or at least a 50,000 word document before my birthday this year.  That was one impetus, but then also just getting the words on the page. Sometimes when people are free writing they go for quality; I don't.  I just go for quantity, and I hope that something sticks and if not, oh well and just move on. I take a lot of inspiration and sort of just general comfort in Roxane Gay, she used to have a tagline on her old website for RoxaneGay.com and it said, "I'm accustomed to rejection." So it's just very freeing to be rejected when you send your stuff out into the world so collect those rejections because you know you're getting closer to the acceptance maybe? But also just in terms of NaNoWriMo, I, the first day I had a really strong start. It sounds like a game, but it's really a marathon actually.  It's like a marathon in terms of sports language, speaking of SuperBowl Sunday today but yea, I have a 3000 word lead the first day. I just made it my commitment to myself and it felt really good. It felt like I accomplished something big every day that I was able to add to that. So that's how I was able to do it this year [I thought] I don't want to end at 25K words; this year, I would like to finish. So I made it happen. [Laughter]

[KW] 14:18 I like what you said about writing a 50,000 word document as opposed to calling it, per say a novel or a book because that puts so much extra pressure on yourself for it to have a beginning and a middle and a end and a through line. But if it's a "document"

[SP] 14:38 Exactly. And for us non-linear people out there in the universe of which there are I'm sure many, I think that it's useful for me to frame the writing, because sometimes you might be able to lift the piece from a 50,000 word document for instance, that is, it might just stand alone by itself. It might just be a two-page essay or something. I think the good thing about writing is that you can put a lot of things down on paper and then you can glean later. It's a very rich place for gleaning.

[KW15:15  Where do you write at

15:22 I write at home alone. No music.

[KW] - Do you have a special chair? Is there a special room?

[SP] 15:29 You know, I sit on the edge of my bed, and I prop my computer against my legs, yeah, I have a very weird style of writing. I make sure that - I write on my laptop. So I'm typing. I have my laptop in my lap, then I just go into this little trance when I write.

[KW] 16:00 Are you in comfy clothes, like pjs or do you feel like you have to get up and get dressed? Because some people, it's a psychological thing.

[SP] 16:08 Keysha, I wake up like this everyday. [Laughter]

[KW] 16:13 Okay Beyonce. [Laughter]

[SP] 16:16  Seriously though. It is nice - there is this poem, this one line, Vera Pavlova has this very, very, micro short poem and its like: "Today, I brushed my teeth. The day and I are even." But it's not like that for me; I have brushed my teeth; I'm dressed; I am proper; however, I'm not trying to impress anybody, but yes. [Laughter]

[KW] 16:44 How often do you submit? Do you have a submission process that you adhere to?

[SP] 16:48 The most recent piece that was published was run by The Butter which is an offshoot of The Toast, and that was last month in January. So I submitted three things to The Butter. Two of them were rejected because I am accustomed to rejection. [Laughter] And then the third piece, which was "Woman," that actually ran. But I really, every so often it's really nice to have deadlines, especially as a writer; deadlines are very important and useful and helpful just to give yourself some sort of external metric, but I don't have a schedule. I know there are some people who are very organized and they have Excel sheets of journals and places to which they would like to submit their writing and then do, and then they track it - did I submit it? When did I submit it? Did I hear back? - I don't do that. I don't really need to know when I was rejected. In fact, Submittable is a website where you can track your online literary submissions to the various sites so I actually delete all the ones that are rejected and I just keep the ones that are accepted and then it inspires me to keep going. I don't have a schedule; I don't put pressure on myself in that regard, but if I've done some sort of big writing process like NaNoWrimo or I just know that I have an old manuscript that I want to revisit then I might just submit and see what happens. Test the temperature as it were.

[KW] 18:36 You said that you sent two to The Rumpus that were rejected and the one was accepted. Was that in succession?

[SP] 18:58 I think I sent three different things. They were all through The Butter and I sent a fiction piece because I'm trying to move into fiction but we shall see. Then I sent two subsequent pieces that were creative nonfiction. So they were somewhat simultaneous submissions in the since that they were maybe a week - I sent the latter two like one week after the fiction piece. So I didn't wait for the rejection and then send another one.

[KW] 19:38 Did they give you editorial feedback when you got your rejection letters or is it a form letter?

[SP] 19:45 For the fiction piece, I think it was very formy. [Laughter] No shade. And the second piece, and the second piece, it was a sort of much longer, unwieldy nonfiction piece, and that one I did get a line or two which was an editorial response which I very much appreciated. Then, the acceptance for the third one, that was a form acceptance. I am not complaining.

[KW] 20:17 So what is your - who is in your writing inner-circle? If we were to consider, the executive board, who's your editorial board? Who do you go to first with a draft of something?

[SP] 20:38 Interesting. Well, you know my friends are sort of the unfortunate, and maybe unwitting, maybe unwilling recipients of just random emails. For example, my first published piece in Outsiders Within, that was in 2005. It was accepted in 2003 but the book actually ran with the galley copies, editorial, and publishing process in 2005 so that piece actually it's an essay. That piece was originally an email to a friend from college. And she actually wrote back and said, you should publish this. I was like, what are you talking about? And then another friend, I had an internship in Washington D.C. that summer, and she told me about this anthology by and for adopted people of color. So I submitted it to that, and it just so happened that I had written my friend that email and she said you need to publish this. I was 19 at the time and this most recent published piece that was also an email to a friend. So you know if you're my friend, I might write you an email and it might get published.

[SP] 22:26 I think in terms of the emails, with writing, I think that it's sort of like a circuit. You have this idea, this originating impulse, and then the words happen - typing or writing or longhand or however that happens for people. I think the circuit closes when you share the idea outside, when it gets externalized in some way.

[SP] 22:26 I think in terms of the emails, with writing, I think that it's sort of like a circuit. You have this idea, this originating impulse, and then the words happen - typing or writing or longhand or however that happens for people. I think the circuit closes when you share the idea outside, when it gets externalized in some way. It doesn't always happen; I don't write to be published, but I write because I write. For example, when I write emails to my friends, and I subject them to my life, I have been told that I'm doing stream of consciousness writing, so that might happen. And I'm like, oh you know what I really like this piece. I find that I'm a lot more honest. It sort of motivates me to write sometimes when I know that I have a reader out there in the world. It's almost like I go into this - not a trance - I'm conscious obviously - I'm not in a different state per say, but I'm definitely able to feel I'm more able to access that interiority, that writing sense, that voice. If I'm writing to myself, and I'm writing in a Word document, it just feels a little different. Some writing it has to be internal and I have to just write it to myself; it really just depends on the content of the writing and the form, but, some writing it is something that I write to an audience - which is to say to a friend. So I guess that's sort of my inner writing circle: people whom I've ascertained that it's okay to write these sorts of emails to them and I'll just keep doing it.

[KW] 24:35 Do you go to a writer's workshop or anything?

[SP]24:41  No, I was very resistant to going to a writer's workshop. So, Elizabeth Strout the writer of Olive Kittredge fame, she I remember watching this YouTube interview with her in like 2012, and in it she was said, "I'm not a group person because" - the interviewer was asking her about writing groups and what function if any they served in her writing life, - I generally tend not to do writing workshops but VONA is an exception and a very wonderful exception. I encourage any writer of color to check them out.

[KW] 25:49 What are your writing goals? I know you say 'I don't write to be published,' and we get that since you're just kicking things around and sharing this for a small audience, but then there is a point in which you do decide, I want to have this published. The impetus might not be there at the beginning, but that comes into play. How do you set your goals then and what are your goals?

[SP] 26:22 In terms of publication or in terms of writing?

[KW] 26:23 Well, I guess some might say are they different? Both. Do you see a difference?

[SP] 26:35 I think writers, above all, want to communicate something, whether it is an emotional feeling in a motive, felt sense or some sort of experience, but ultimately communication is about connection. I really do feel that, if I'm writing I would like to be able to - there is a need for me to connect - a need to communicate by extension of that communication I'm connecting with other people in some way. That's very important to me in terms of the writing that I do. Again, writing is about communication. I think that's ultimately what we're trying to do - I'm trying to put something out there into the world that's saying something about an experience or reality or about women, femininity, survival, surviving the 20s, just what it's like to grow up in the world with various subjectivities and experiences. I think that's the highest sort of octave for writing. You're communicating something; there's an artistry to it if it's done right and done in a way that you're able to connect. I think when the connection is made than you know that you have - in some ways - I don't like to use such dichotomous thinking in terms of success or failure in terms a writing piece that I might write, and at the same time if it does connect with somebody there's a really wonderful feeling that I get from that.

[KW] 28:29 We're talking to Soo Na Pak, she's a writer from the San Francisco Bay area. In the second half of the show we are going to get into her craft, specifically focusing on two essays: "Osiris" which appeared in The Rumpus and then "Woman" which appeared in "The Butter" which is an offshoot of the Toast. We're gonna take a break. We'll be back with Soo Na and I encourage you to do two things if you want to call in and ask her questions about craft or writing life. You can call us at 347-857-2225 or you can log on to Blogtalkradio.com/behindtheprose and there is a chat box at the bottom and you can send a question. So its Behind the Prose, and I will be right back.

29:40 COMMERCIAL - ST. JUDE'S; FOUNDATION FOR A BETTER LIFE / KWAN

[KW] 30:42 Well deflate my football and call me Brady. It's the Behind the Prose Radio Show. We're back; we're back with Soo Na Pak, and she is going to now begin the second half of our great interview, talking about her writing craft now: how she approaches drafting, revision, and editing. We will start with asking Soo Na to read an excerpt from one of her pieces.

[SP

31:21 I will start with Osiris.

Osiris is a long-form essay that was published by The Rumpus where I've already met my birth mother and we're preparing to meet my older brother and father.

[READS AN EXCERPT]

[KW] 34:10  It's an interesting part you chose to read because the first line of the essay is "My Korean mother leaves in the fall of the 1980s." And through these vignettes - would you call them vignettes - it is divided into sections and the sections are separated into asterisks and it seems that with each separation it seems that we are moving through time, not necessarily always forward. Is that correct?

[SP] 34:53 Yes, definitely.

[KW] 35:16 When you're constructing a non-linear narrative, is there a formula for that, that you follow?

[SP] 35:28 There's no formula. I would say that - so this particular piece was from a very nonlinear manuscript that was NaNoWrimo 2010. I really did skip around in that because it was very sort of recent that experience. 2009 was when I met my Korean family members again. So it had been a year, and in the whole realm of time that's a drop in the ocean. Any sort of emotional experience particularly around family and self it takes time. In terms of how I arrange vignettes, a lot of it has to do with memory. When I talk about my family, much of my family is purely based on encoding in my brain in terms of those early experiences with them and sort of extrapolating from there. But a lot the writing comes to me in those sensate memories and body memories, and they're not linear because the body's not linear. We are finite; we are mortal, as far as living creatures but beyond that I think that - specific to writing and the kind I do - memory is much maligned. There's a lot of misconception around its veracity and its accuracy. In terms of memory in time and linearity, in terms of structuring a written piece, I would say this piece is as linear as it could be given the circumstances, let's say.

[KW] 37:36  What you say about memory actually calls to mind the last line in the piece, because a remembered mother is no mother at all.

[SP] 37:51 That's right. I think - for people who have experienced migration - it's somewhat dislocating. There are lots of memories; there's a lot of adaptation that occurs by necessity and also by design because we're human and being alive is to adapt. But one also, I could not build my life off of a memory of a mother. I was coming from the Buddhist monastery and so I wanted to be a nun and I received a letter from my Korean mother, and I didn't become a nun because one thing is if you are ordained - my understanding is that you are not allowed to travel alone. So I went to Korea. I thought, if they wanted to be found they would be, and they did so that was helpful for me they didn't have to want to be found. In terms of the migration and a remembered mother is no mother at all - Buddhism says that to be present is to be loved and to be present for another person is to love them. What we call attention is another way to describe what is commonly known as love. I'm sort of paraphrasing something that a Buddhist practitioner and teacher [name] would say. She gave a dharma talk once. I remember sort of filing that thought away, that when we're fully present with another person, it's love. That's how we experience love and it's true. If someone's not there, if we think about earlier childhood development or we just talk about what it means to be close to someone, to have intimacy with someone, we think about physical presence - being there.  So in some ways this essay is about love, or how love goes arriy or various iterations of love, or how love falls short in some ways.

[KW] 40:18 Let me just correct myself, it's not the last line, it's the last line of the end of the section.

Let's draw your attention to page four of the printout I have here. It's in the section where you're in the apartment with your family and you write about you and your brother. "We draw elaborate circles around each other, unsure how to relate. He standing at the hotel business desk, flipping through shopping catalogs, and I seated on the hotel room bed, sometimes taking photographs of his back with a digital SLR because I'm too shy to take his picture while he's facing me. The first part of that sentence "we draw elaborate circles around each other" just kind of drew me in. I know we think of the euphemism - oh you're running circles around someone but drawing around each other takes it to a whole different place. Is that something you thought about crafting? Did it just kind of fall out? Where did that come from?

[SP] 41:50 It just kind of fell out. [Laughter] I'm not very conniving or deliberate . . . it was the best way to describe how it felt because we didn't know how to relate. He hadn't seen me since he was a little boy. Actually my Korean father never told him where I went until he was in his mid-20s. One, I don't understand how a father could not tell his son where his younger sister has gone; but two, we loved each other. We grew up with each other. He's one of the very few people in this world who shares particular memories with me and shares certain parts of my childhood with me, and so, we were very shy.

[KW] 42:57 There's also- several times in the essay when I'm moved to - not sympathy or empathy - I'll give you an example. It's when you are at the adoption agency with the translator and then you guys get on the train with you and your mom. You write "My mother stands uncomfortably on the train and holds onto the railing nearest here, stabilizes her feet on which she wears black wedge-heeled shoes that zip at the heels." And then later you're looking down for her hand, you ask her if it's okay, she says yes, And then you write, "Eventually it feels awkward, so I let go and stand in my own space as though she were just another woman in the car with me. To my surprise, I see my mother begin to cry, and she turns away from me, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. I was just like "Oh man." I really felt it.

[SP] 43:58 Thank you.

[KW] 44:01 I think one of the things that you do - so every writer has their trait, I guess, you use commas in a way to continue and add on more details and it's very - but it's not jumbled, if you know what I mean; it's very deliberate. How do you find the balance between when its too much or just right, in terms of adding on.

[SP] 44:40 I've noticed that my writing style has changed; I mean obviously it will change over time, but I've noticed that I'm a little more terse. I will leave incomplete dangling out there as if they were full sentences, like "A love that infuriates me." It's not a complete sentence grammatically, but it's there and I like it. I guess that's what I mean when I become more terse or more laconic in terms of my writing style. Maybe my writing when you say that I add things or add to a detail or moment in description, those commas you're just seeing my terseness. It's a staccato; it feels a little more staccato - the style in which I'm writing.

[KW] 45:34 You actually see a lot of that in "Woman" which ran in The Butter.

[SP] -45:50  [BEGINS EXCERPT] By the way, I'm sorry not to set it up earlier, this is just a love-song to surviving girlhood to womanhood and somehow surviving the 20s as a woman moving through the world. It's a love song to Amy Winehouse as well.

[CONTINUES EXCERPT]

[KW] 47:22 One of the interesting things about this essay - and I think I asked you this on the email "Would you consider 'Woman' creative nonfiction?"  - because, it has this feel where it goes in and out of voice between first and second because by the time you get to that paragraph where you're at, I don't know if I'm the narrator or not. IT draws you in, in such a way that you begin - you take on the thinking of this narrator.

[SP] 48:14 You do. I'm glad that that happened for you. You get to embody her subjectivity for however long it took you to read the piece. Then you get to back to you; it's like time traveling a little bit.

[KW] 48:17 So within it though - it opens with "Woman was a story I told myself," and then that paragraph, I feel, makes the reader feel that either womanhood is an illusion and the writer will reveal how she learned it was an illusion or we begin to see the stories of that illusion in that first paragraph - the image of wild and loneliness coming up, girl vs. woman. Girl was mentioned in that paragraph more times than woman. Woman was mentioned once. I think the second paragraph which is two sentences; you got some good comments on The Toast. One of the readers said that this was one of the best lines, "Loneliness can temper a girl but sometimes it just makes her feral."

[SP] 49:29 Part of this piece is about a profound loneliness. I think it's a universal experience; I don't think it's specific to girls or women or feral people [laughter] or Amy Winehouse. I don't know what she was going through; this piece is about an imaginal process. It's about being very vulnerable. Our loneliness makes us extremely vulnerable to both good and bad. I will keep it very black and white in those terms here, but it's a very sort of - if a writer wants to connect, then what does it mean when a writer writes on loneliness. You know when we talk about addiction, for example, Amy Winehouse, or there's an addition of some kind so there's a lot of subtext; there's a lot that's not said in this piece. It's very short; it points various spotlights at maybe a pop-cultural person - Amy Winehouse was a singer. She very much exists in the pop culture still and will persist I think. It's sort of a lens from which we an examine loneliness. What are we missing; what happens when we feel that alone and what happens when we try to connect when we're feeling extremely lonely and feral. And what does it mean when an artist like Amy Winehouse who's able to create these beautiful songs - her voice was so full and so rich; it has such depth - so these are concurrent; these can co-exist. That there's this suffering, this deep loneliness, but there's also something amiss, this incredible ability to create through that sadness or suffering. You know one of the lines from "Rehab" is "I don't care if I ever drink again; I just need a friend."  I think everybody can relate to that. Perhaps we would be well served to talk about loneliness a little more, in the same way that we would be well served to talk about grief, in more context and in more public ways or more pop culture ways.

[KW] 53:01 If you would like to call in and ask a question, please call us at 347-857-2225.  We've got a few more minutes with her. Soo Na, when you wrote "Woman" was that part of a larger piece?

[SP] 53:30 This was an email to my friend. My friend is transgender, so he was writing to me how he is read in the world, about transitioning and how he's read in the world, and I was thinking about how I came to identify as a woman. I'm a sis-gendered woman. It took me time to sort of accept feminine. There are as many iterations of masculine and feminine as there are people alive embodying those things. So in fact, my friend kind of got me thinking woman and what that means. It was me sort of doing my homework; how did woman become shaped in my imagination and how did I experience it, practice it, or embody it. It's partly about that. It was also just about - when we're performing woman - I don't think certain things are performance; you can't just take off your race, for example and decide I'm not going to be Asian today, so I don't mean it in that superficial or sort of po-mo way; I think that's silly and a little bit problematic. But in terms of how do I identify this; how do I embody it for myself; how does it drop down to meaningful and relevant to my subjectivity. So it's a complicated thing. Even when I think about what woman is - it's all these things - it's vulnerability; it's loneliness; there's this sexuality; there's this heat, this movement, this bodily sort of movement to it, then there's a loneliness to it in some way.

[KW] 55:47 In what you say about coming to terms with the womanhood of it - In the third paragraph [reads excerpt], I read that as that a writer has a disdain for that idea that all these shoes have heels on them and I don't want one. You go on and say, "I found a pair with the lowest heel." So it does seem the writer is making some kind of claim.

[SP] 56:40 Well, I think there's that sort of compulsory woman, in terms of what is available for sale, in terms of sartorial, what we can buy, like sartorial fashion. I don't say this explicit but in that particular section, I'm in Korea as a woman, as an adult versus a child or girl, and being a woman is proscribed based on whatever country you might find yourself at a given time. If you travel or access to an instant magical teleporting machine, when I was Korea, I noticed that there were certain proscribed ways to be a woman or to be feminine that were different that I noticed in the States, besides the fact that the clothing fit me particularly a little bit better in Korea, but it was also there were heels, at least a little tiny hint of a heel, also it was just proper in Korea to have your shoulders covered. It was sort of imposed on my and I wasn't sure how I felt about it.

[KW] 57:58 So, we've got a minute and a half left. What advice would you give to yourself as a writer five years ago?

[SP] 58:10  I would tell her to be nice to herself and keep writing. Failure is just another word for nothing left to lose. Freedom is just another word for nothing left to use. Failure is the way that we learn. That's what I would say to her, and also, eat your vegetables.  [Laughter]

[KW] 58:47 Thank you for joining us Soo Na.