Behind the Prose Transcript

Episode 12: Chelsey Clammer

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Host: Keysha Whitaker

Guest: Chelsey Clammer

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

[KW] = Host Initials

[CC] = Interviewee Initials

 [Opening Music by Redvers West Boyle]

0:03 Hey, this is Chelsey Clammer, and you're listening to Behind the Prose with Keysha Whitaker.

0:12 Hey, hey it's another edition of Behind the Prose, the show that gets all up and close and personal with the text of writers just like you. Today's show features The Submission Queen, Chelsey Clammer, plus a short Q&A with the author of Wired for Story, Lisa Cron. We'll find out what happens when an impromptu goes not as I expected. But first, let's check in.

0:48 So what's going on with you this week? Have you been writing? Have you been submitting anything? I hope so because I didn't submit anything. I'm still on 16 submissions to go and it's really annoying me. I'm blaming it on the fact that I'm editing audio at night and it takes a very long time, and I'm reading books for upcoming guests like Rachel Toor whose new novel On the Road to Find Out - it's a young adult novel that's out now - so I realize that if I stay up reading until midnight, it's hard to get up at 5 a.m. So I'm down to 6:30 a.m. now and I do an hour, an hour and a half, and I'm okay with that. That's good right? Do you manage about an hour in the morning? Email me at info @ behindtheprose and let me know what you're doing in your writing process. So even though I didn't get anything out this week. I was happy to see something come back in the form of a publication on Full Grown People. IT's that essay I told you about a few weeks ago that I got accepted. It's called "Two Weddings and a Friendship Funeral" and it's on Fullgrownpeople.com. In a few weeks, I will talk to Jennifer Niesslein who is the founder of Full Grown People, also the co-founder of Brain Child Magazine. We'll find out how it seems that everything she touches turns to gold.

[Music]

Last week I took Behind the Prose on the road. Something I will do more frequently in the future. On March 26, Lisa Cron, author of Wired for Story, spoke at Penn State Berks, and I accosted her after her talk for an interview. I asked her a question, and she gave me, boy did she give me an answer.

[KW] 2:45 What do you prefer drafting or revising?

[LC] 2:49 Uh, I don't even understand the question only because the way that I write is that I sit down and I really deeply go into exactly what I want to say. I nail through from the very beginning, so there's nothing ever that is, um, I don't even know what the word is - I know what I'm going to say before I sit down - I don't think I can answer that question. Really, honestly, my process is so different than that, that I don't do either one.  So I'm not really sure how to answer it. I just - I don't even know how to answer that honestly.

[KW] 3:29 Um, so tying in with the talk, you talked about the story and protagonist, how would someone apply that if they were writing memoir.

[LC] 3:41 If you're writing a memoir, since you are the protagonist, the goal is really to figure out what's the story in your story. What's your point? People talk about theme; I do not believe in theme. What's your point? What are you going to teach us that we don't know in terms of whatever difficult situation you went through? A lot of people want to write memoir because they went through something really difficult, and they just write about that and it's kind of heartbreaking to have to tell them, 'I know you went through a really hard thing but nobody's going to care. The only reason we're going to care is if you went through something and it cost you something and you had some sort of a realization, something you had to come to grips with so you come out a different person at the end. So if you're going to write memoir, you need to know what is that thing that's going to change. What did you go in believing? What are you trying to say? What do you want people to come away with? But you have to be willing to be vulnerable because since story is about change, that means in the beginning there was something that wasn't working, and you have to be willing to go to that vulnerable place and to say what that was and to really let us see it change based on what's going to happen to you based on the order of the situation [] plot but obviously plot is on one level more to fiction, but memoirs have a plot. Memoirs have to be as well written as a novel, the truth is. The other thing you have to do is really realize that you have to nail what you were thinking on the page as it was happening. The internal struggle that you went through. It's really hard writing memoir. The great part is you know everything that happened; the worst part is you know everything that happened so you have to really have that yardstick of this is my point and this is the part that I'm telling and really adhere to that.

[KW] 5:23 I want to go back to that process question a little bit.

[LC] 5:22 I know. I'm totally happy to

[KW] 5:33 So what is your - You say you know what you want to say when you sit down. You said you don't draft; you don't revise -

[LC] 5:40 I do revise. I don't know what you mean by draft. Of course everybody revises. There's no writing; there's only rewriting.

[KW] 5:43 I guess when I say draft - I mean you get something down first on the page

[LC} 5:51 Yeah but I work really hard at it, because I'm writing nonfiction. Honestly when I'm writing, every word matters. If I get one word wrong it's all going to fall apart. It'd be like if you were building a staircase and you put, suddenly it's supposed to be a 2x4 going one way, and it's going the other way, now everything is going to fall apart if it isn't exactly parsed out right. So I sit there and work to parse it out right as best I can. Everybody revises. But what I'm saying is I don't wing it ever. I don't go in and have no idea where I'm going. I know what it is, and then it's a matter of nailing it. It's really easy to know something in your head, as all writers know. Putting it into words is something entirely different. That's the hardest part, if I had to say. It's kind of knowing it all in a big jumble in my head and then how am I going to bring it out in a linear way because thoughts are not linear but writing is, just by definition, you start here you end there. So I don't know if that helps, but that would be my process.

[KW] 6:54 Aren't you intrigued? I am so curious. I want to, I want to be in her house, I want to stand over her shoulder and watch her and see, how this actually, that's not going to happen, so she has agreed to come back to the Behind the Prose virtual studio and talk to us more about writing and her process. I'll look forward to that, I'm sure you will look forward to it as well. One thing we can say is that there are as many approaches to the writing process as there are writers and Behind the Prose is about illuminating them all.

[MUSIC]

[KW] 7:40 Today, I shine the light on Chelsey Clammer in this interview that was recorded last month. We talk about her new essay collection, *BodyHome*. We talk about her writing process, and I get to the bottom of how she managed to 100 publications in two years. What happened?

[CC] 8:08 What happened? Yes, well, I've always been a writer, I mean like I had my diaries since I was nine. I still have them actually. And then 2010 hit and I got sober, which I'm sure we'll talk about, as a wretched alcoholic. When I got sober, I was like you know I'm going to pursue writing. It's what I always wanted to do. I used to sit at a bar really drunk and write and I could never read my handwriting the next day, so I kind of just threw myself into writing and in January of 2011, Marya Hornbacher (maryahornbacher.com) who was my favorite writer, happened to be teaching in Chicago where I was living. Somehow I met up with her and started doing weekly one-on-one lessons. We got really close and became really good friends, eventually lived together. From that, I got to see how a writer did writing full-time. She's a wonderful author full time, has five books out. Being able to see that and live with somebody like that and then replicate my life after that. I was like writing is what I do, regardless if it pays or not. I'm a writer first before I'm anything else out there. So I just kind of went with that and took off and wrote as much as could and submit as much as I could.

[KW] 9:26 So take us into that submission process because to get 100 publications, I would think you'd have to be submitting on some type of very, very rigorous, two hundred submissions out a month. I

[CC] 9:46 I should actually share with you, I have a Google doc that shows all my submissions that I keep track of. I haven't looked at it lately but it's over 1000. My acceptance rate is like 10% so if I have 100 publications, it's over 1000 submissions. How I got started is that I just started submitting to - I look on Newpages.com or PW.org and looking to see what was out there. When I finished an essay and I was happy with where it was at, I'd submit it anywhere from like 10 - 20 journals and just put it out there and blanket the world with my submissions. I just kept doing that and eventually started getting some acceptances and got some publications so then my bio got a little bit thicker and a little bit more substantial. Usually, yeah, I probably make about like 50 submissions a month now. Although it's slowed down because the essays that I'm writing now, they're a little bit more complex. I don't write them in one or two days like some of my older essays. These take about a couple months to write. The submission process has slowed down now, but at the beginning, I was submitting everyday.

[KW] 10:55 You said that you do 50 a month now, do you mean you have 50 different - no - it's all simultaneous. I think right now, I probably have about 12 different essays out. Of those 12, they've probably been submitted at least twelve times each throughout the past couple of months. So it's always like take one essay and submit it to 10 - 20 places.

[KW] 11:30 What is your writing schedule like?

11:34 Basically if I'm not sleeping or running, I'm writing or editing. I wake up in the morning probably around six and I go running and then the whole day I'm either - I at least like free flow write on my own about an hour a day. Just handwriting whatever comes to me and choose my own exercises that I do. For the rest of the time, I'm either editing my stuff, doing my grad schoolwork or I just started doing freelance editing, so I'm doing editing for other people. I also teach workshops online with The Doctor T.J. Eckleburg Review so I'm doing stuff for that or editing for the journals that I edit for. Usually by about seven o'clock at night, I'm completely brain dead. Then I just kind of hang out, read some, try and get some sleep. I recently stopped working a job that I had so that I could edit full-time and write full-time so that's been a nice shift for me.

[KW] 12:31 Do you see yourself making a distinction in your time between your own writing and the editing for other people?

[CC] 12:41 Yeah, sometimes, I'm doing the same work the whole day, it's just who I'm doing it for. Sometimes my writing gets set aside so I can do other people's because I have deadlines for them not necessarily for myself. So each day I make it point to carve out that time for me and then by the end of the day if I've got all my stuff done before I'm too brain dead I'll work on editing my stuff. It's interesting though because when I'm editing somebody else's stuff, I'm learning the skills and continuing to practice editing skills that I apply to my own work. I'm also always thinking about my stuff in relation to what I'm reading from other people's stuff. I feel like I'm working on it throughout the day even if I'm not actually touching the document and going into it.

[KW] 13:27 You're in an MFA program now?

[CC] 13:30 Yes.

13:31 Which program are you in and what are you learning from it?

[CC] 13:36 I'm in, it's from Pacific Lutheran University. It's called the Rainier Writing Workshop. It's an MFA program, and this one, I decided to apply to because it's low-residency. I never really wanted to be in an MFA program because I kind of had this attitude towards it: you don't have to have an MFA to be a writer and all of my favorite writers; I don't think any of them have MFAs. So I didn't want to do that. I wanted to prove that I could do something without an MFA. Then I got to the point though, where I wanted feedback so I decided to do a low residency MFA so I wouldn't have to go sit in a classroom. I could work one-on-one with an author that I really admired and work on my stuff that way. Then I wouldn't have to move for a program. I found the Ranier Writing Workshop Program through **Leah Porporpa** one of my favorite authors. She taught with that - so I was like well, I like her. Maybe I could work with her, and I applied. I got in and it's a wonderful program. I can't speak highly enough of it. What I do each year, for two weeks, we go to Tacoma Washington and everyone kind of groups together for two weeks. We do workshops and talk and get to know each other and we go our separate ways for the years. Then I work with one of the faculty members each year. Last year, I worked with Leah Porpora and this year I work with Barry Jean Bjork - she's in Chicago. I just go back and forth with them every month with packets. I'll write essays, read a couple books, write some critical papers, and then they look at everything and give me feedback on it and I continue to work on all of that. Mostly what I'm learning is just really great. IT's like different perspectives of how to look at my work and also the genre of creative nonfiction as a whole. I can try and do more of the complex and interesting things with my work, rather than just a straight essay, but how I can make it a little bit more deeper and go further with the genre and with my own work.

[KW] 15:35 During the program, when you're not on the two weeks, you're primary feedback is from the instructor.

[CC] 15:43 Also the people that I'm in the program with, while we only see each other two weeks of the year, we're all really close and we're emailing and Facebooking and looking at each other's stuff throughout the entire year which is really nice. Most of my feedback, yes, is from the professor that I'm working with but I also have my little tribe of writers and we're like 'Hey, read this paragraph for me. Does this work? What's going on here?' It's nice because it's not one genre so I have a lot of poet friends and fiction and we all have different perspectives on the work that we're doing so it's really nice to get that feedback.

16:20 Be it from your tribe of writers, how do you discern between feedback that you will allow to alter your work and feedback that you'll ignore?

[CC] 16:30 Yea, most of the time, there's only been a few occasions where I'm like 'No, I don't like that suggestion.' [Laughter] Most of the time, I am pretty open to what the feedback is and I usually go with the feedback that just kind of opens my eyes, and I'm like 'Oh, that's a really good point. Excellent point.' So I'll go with that or I'll at least take it and change it to fit that feedback and read it aloud. Reading out loud is a huge part of my editing process. I read everything out loud. I'll hear like what they're saying and if it's fitting in with what I want the piece to do and where I want it to go. Sometimes that feedback brings me to a whole different area that I never really thought that's where I wanted that essay to go. And sometimes I'll try it and I'm like 'No, it just doesn't sound - like literally sound right to me' so I'll keep going with what I thought. But even if somebody is like I don't think this is working, and I think it's working, it's really helpful to see how somebody else is thinking so I can re-approach it in a different way. A very small amount of the time will I completely just disregard what someone says but even when I do that I still get to see where they're coming from and that's actually one of the most helpful things I think, when editing.

[KW] 17:44 What else is helpful to you when editing besides reading aloud?

[CC] 17:52 I think having a lot of patience. I know when I first started writing, I hated editing. I was like; I don't want to do this. It's written. It's done. That's what it is. And now, I actually love editing, more than I do writing. The writing process is really organic and special to me but the editing is where the actual writing occurs. It's how I piece everything together; it's how I break it apart and pull more scenes out of it, so yes definitely the reading out loud but just being willing to sit there and I've literally looked at a sentence for about a half hour and tried to figure out what exactly is the best way to say what I'm trying to say. So I think instead of feeling like editing is just this process that you have to go through, it seems that editing is where the actual writing is and really honoring it for that and just kind of loving having the patience to sit there for an hour and only edit a page. But then when you have that page done, it's just fantastic. That to me is where the real work comes out. I love that part of the process of just sitting there with it.

[KW] 18:55 Do you have any writer's quirks that you know you do, so that's something that you have cut out through the years or you know that's what you're looking for when you're editing?

[CC] 19:09 Like my own like own phrases or things that I say?

[KW] 19:14 Phrases or um, you know just a habit of maybe adding extra details or some little, like a writer's tic, like 'Oh, I always do this' but it doesn't necessarily need to be done and you have to go back and edit it.

[CC] 19:31 Gotcha. Actually, I'm gonna take a little sidestep. What you said reminded me of something. This is a writer's quirk. I have a specific pen. It's not one pen; it's a type of pen that I have to write with. It's like a gel ink blue .07 tip or something. To the point that for any sort of present that anybody ever gets me, it's always a pack of these pens. One time I gave - the youth that I used to work with - I gave them all my pens, and the next day we were talking about friends, and whatever's going on I'm like oh, yeah, you guys have met my pens, and I'm like I just referred to my pens as my friends. So that's a quirk that I have. But as far as actual in the writing, sometimes I'll just use way too many words than is necessary. Sometimes I think it's funny to make a description of one certain thing using like five different words. I think I had an essay that just got published about kissing butterflies or something, about like plush stuffed animals, and I started to refer to the animals as like 'pastel purple plusher stuffed things' or I could just say stuffed animals and that works the same. Sometimes I use too many words when it's not necessary. So I always kind of look for that and sometimes I think I get a little too heavy on the alliteration and I have to go there and be like this sound is in here way to much; how can I separate that sound so it's just not overwhelming.  I think those are the two main things: the sound and overwriting something. One of the things I really love to do, regardless if it ends up the final piece is take something that is 1000 words and sit down with it and cut it in half and see what comes of it, regardless if I use it or not. It's - what am I really trying to say here? And I can cut it down and cut it down and then when I have half of what it was, be like okay - now what's missing, and then add some of the stuff back into it if I need to. Or sometimes I'm like, 'Oh yeah' that was 500 words that I didn't need to say so they're gone now, so now here's what the actual essay is.

[KW] 21:40 How do you manage your files on your computer? Or do you write longhand?

[CC] 21:50 I actually do all of my writing by hand first. It's just the way that I feel connected to it. Writing for me is more spiritual than it is a career or something that I just do. It's the way that I connect with the world and stay connected with myself to it's through writing. So if I'm not writing some sort of article for somebody or if I'm not writing a critical paper or review I'm starting by hand. I'll just sit down and I'll have six different prompts and exercises that I choose for myself to do and I write on each of them for ten minutes. At the end of it, if there's one sentence that's good, or an entire thing that's good, I'll mark it and I'll go to my computer and I'll just start typing it out, which to me that's kind of like my fun relaxation time. I turn on some rap music and I type of whatever I have that I wanted to type up. Right now, all of my files are saved through my MFA program. When I was working with Marya, I had like Marya-Work, then after her it was Post Marya-Work. Then I had like new bits that I'm working on now, summer new bits, it's just - I have all these files. To me, they make sense in my head so it really helps out. Most of the time it's all organized by - I don't date anything, but in my head, I'm like this is the timeline of my life when I was writing so I know which part came in when. There's a couple times when I have no idea what I named that file, but for the most part I can remember it. I'm not quite sure how but I do.

[KW] 23:22 You mentioned that feel that writing is a spiritual process for you and I get that from your book *BodyHome*. I think in the actual essay BodyHome, you write about lighting the candle when you sit down at the desk in the morning.

[CC] 23:41 That's where that essay came from in the book too. I didn't feel a connection to the world. Then when I was living and writing with Marya, she wakes up at 1, 2 a.m. to write because that's when the world is quiet. I started to kind of pick up on that. The first line from that essay is '4 a.m. is my favorite color.' That's how I saw it. I'd wake up at 3, 4 a.m. and the world is this pretty shade of quiet, I guess you could say. I'd light a candle and I would sit there for an hour and I'd write, then I'd go back to sleep for an hour or two, and then I'd wake up and go about my day. But it really is my spiritual practice, knowing that for me there's something that's larger than me that's out in the world. For me, that's the way that we connect with each other. I see writing is like - I put the effort into it and what comes of it is not anything that I have control over, so I just write and write and write and I'll connect with somebody. I won't get something published but it will lead to a different friendship with somebody through a journal, whatever it is. That's my spirituality is just knowing that I put something out in the world and whatever happens with it, it's not of my control. I find a lot of peace knowing that, that I just do my thing and then what happens, happens. I have to let go of that.

[KW] 25:02 Let's get into BodyHome, the essay, which is in your new book, BodyHome of the same title published by Hopewell publications. They're an independent publisher out of New Jersey. Tell us how did this book originate.

[CC] 25:23 Yeah. When I was writing first with Marya, I was going through a lot of stuff personally with my body and how it's shifting from recovery, from self harm, an eating disorder and alcoholism, and all the fun illnesses you can just put on a person. I was recovering from that and trying to find my body as a space that I wanted to be in. Because the writing felt spiritual to me, my body started to feel really connected to it. I wanted something to read that was just like hard but meditative, sometimes funny, whatever, on our bodies and how we relate to them and I couldn't find anything. I was like I'll just start writing and see if I can come up with something that I'd want to read that would help me, kind of guide me through this time. So I just started writing essays. I saw that all of them were body focused. Whatever it is, in every single essay in that book, whatever topic that I'm discussing, they're all seen through a different part of the body. Whether that's like skin or I think I have some stuff about feet in there, or I have an entire essay about sex and masturbation. So that's out there in the world now but that's how I was getting through different parts of understanding my body was to just write about the body and they soon just started collecting into an actual collection of essays.

26:46 Will you read us an excerpt from BodyHome

[CC] 26:56 This is two different pages from two different sections. The first one, I couldn't decide which I wanted to do and I kind of shortened them up so I'm doing both. The first one, it's a graphic one. You know it's hard to read but the whole book is very out there and puts a lot of my body into it. This is from the Body Home essay and it says, "It is night . . .

[reads excerpt]

and I don't want it."

So that's that section. And after that, thank God I went to the hospital. I started to recover both from the eating disorder and the self-harm, so I have a page of the aftermath of that I'd like to read. Is that okay?

[KW] 29:22 Of course.

[CC] 29:26 This is from the Body Making section.

"It has been a month since the hospital . . .

[reads excerpt]

 . . . when I do no buzzers ring in my head."

[KW] 31:11 Actually the part you chose to read are some of the parts that I marked. The first one was the "Thank You" bag. I wrote on the side of this, details like this, were you aware of this at that moment, or did you arrive at that detail on revision. I think that Thank You bag works so well, and I've said this to other guests; it's a detail we can really see. Everybody's seen that bag.

[CC] 31:51 "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."  Yes.

31:55 How did you get that

[CC]  31:56 I think - that's a hard question - I feel like I do notice details like that. I have to notice them or I wouldn't remember them. Even though while in the actual moments that essay is describing I'm drunk and a complete hot mess, I think that somewhere in me the sight of that stayed. Honestly to get real therapy about it, if you're binging and purging and dumpster diving, there's a lot of plastic bags that you hold. So I feel like plastic bags in some way became a part of my life in that moment so the image kept coming back to me.

But it wasn't until I started writing about it that I was like wow all those bags said thank you and here I am giving something to bags in some really weird grotesque way. I feel like it's a culmination of being aware of what you're seeing as you're seeing it, even if you're completely drunk out of your mind. You're still seeing these things and they are going somewhere in your body or brain and being held. When you go back to write, at least for me, it's like excavating all those memories and seeing how they can connect together in order to try to say something about that moment which can then say something else about subsequent moments after that.

[KW] 33:16 Another point that I had that same engagement of I've been there is the turnstile. The way that section is written, it kind of feels like - even though we know you're only going through the turnstile once, it feels like you're going through it more than once in a way. You know what I mean?

[CC] 33:47 It's kind of like - yeah in the scene I'm going through it once, but it's like a repeated, I'm going through this turnstile everyday both to and from work, it's how two moments every day I will have these judgments. These are the moments that a lot of people can remember as well or go through these simple little things, like 'Oh wow the turnstile didn't hit me today. That means I must be smaller or I'm carrying less stuff.' I think it's these little moments that we don't necessarily recognize and connect us to our bodies and our relationships to them.

[KW] 34:33 There are some repeated images that happen throughout this essay and then through the book. I'll call off a few of them and if you can talk a little bit about - how intentional that imagery was for it to be on the page. I noticed skin, the space between skin and bones, bed, body, color, 4 a.m.

[CC] 35:10 I think the skin, the space between skin and bones, that was what I felt and I couldn't figure out any other way to talk about it. It's kind of intentional because I really felt that there was some space that I felt empty and hollow and that there was something missing between skin and the bones - muscles of who I was. So that comes up a lot but in a few essays that talk more about the body image eating disorder side or the self-harm side. Even in some of my later essays that I've written since this book, I still come back to that because it's still a feeling that no matter how much I write it out of me, I can still remember how that felt, and at times, still feel it. So I feel like that is always a repeated sort of imagery in a bunch of the essays that I write. 4 a.m. is my favorite color - It's that quiet. If I'm trying to feel that sort of settledness and feel that yellow warm glow inside of me, seeing all of that then that I can be surrounded by and how it can be quiet at 4 a.m. in the morning. That to me is sort of a feeling I want to go after in some of these essays. I really wanted and needed to read something at the time that was meditative on the body and how the body can recover from all this trauma and abuse that we put it through whether at the hands of others or ourselves. I wanted something that had that meditative quality that made me feel like I was sitting in the glow of a candle at 4 a.m. and I wasn't necessarily finding it in what I read. I really wanted to try and have an essay that goes back and forth between those hard moments and that moment of 4 a.m. and just sitting there and being quiet and I wanted a meditative thing. Part of that was the bed in that essay. I didn't mean for this to happen, as I started writing each section that I came to the end of. I was like oh this is a way that I can frame it, what happens at the end of these days and these different moments in my life in which I'm like here's a bed, here's me lying in it. And sleep is supposed to be something that is very relaxing and calm hopefully, so what do we do with ourselves when we don't like our bodies or we don't feel connected to them or we feel triggered or traumatized by them. We still have t get into a bed at the end of the day with those bodies so I was trying to figure out the trajectory of that in my own life, from when that was a really welcoming, I love going to sleep at night to the moments during my mid twenties where I didn't want to do that and I hated my body, to where I am now, that I am in my body and I like to go to sleep with her and have a peaceful sort of rest for the rest of the night.

[KW] 38:17 4 a.m. opens the essay BodyHome; it closes the essay as well. If we look at BodyHome the manuscript, the beginning of the book  - the next essay expands with 4 a.m.

38:45 There's the - first essay is the short little one about book and bodies, eh second one is "Diving In" which is reading, more or less.

[KW} 38:58 So, 4 a.m. -what I'm saying is -

[CC] 39:02 Oh you're right. 4 a.m. is in that essay! I was like what is she talking about? You're totally right. 4 a.m. starts that essay.  Wow.

[Laughter]

[KW] 39:11 The question is - the book opens with 4 a.m. at the end we return, the question was going to be is that intentional. [Laughter]

[CC] 39:28 Oh obviously, yes. [Laughter] No. It's funny because when I think about it, the Diving In essay is about me going outside at 4 a.m. smoking a cigarette, thinking about an essay in which the narrator does that. I want to replicate that narrator, and then to feel closer to the words. Through that essay, then I see like a reader reading from a manuscript at a bookstore for a reading and wanting to feel that body connection with the words, and then we have, at the end of it, as we have now pointed out, BodyHome begins with 4 a.m. is my favorite color, and what's interesting for me is those two things are connected through Marya Hornbacher, because in the first essay, when I go have a cigarette at 4 a.m., it's an essay by her that I'm feeling like I want to be connected to. Then the reader in that essay, is also her reading [at] Women and Children First in Chicago and wanting to be connected to that. You don't have to know that to enjoy those essays, but knowing that, and you go through the whole book, and the very last essay is me at 4 a.m. and that's when I was living in Minneapolis and when I was living with Marya and learning I guess, you could say, how to become a writer. For me, that's what connects those two things: becoming a writer and becoming connected to the words, to the body, Marya was a huge part of that, and at the very end, becoming settled with that. So that's how I connect them in my head. But again, I don't think you get that through the manuscript.

[KW] 41:03 The voice in Diving In - would you consider this a lyric essay.

[CC] 41:16 Yeah, it's not any sort of a straight narrative. It's just like flashes of different things with more of a lyrical meditative feel to them.

[KW] 41:25 I think that the voice in this one feels different from BodyHome. Which one was written first?

[CC] 41:38 That's a good question. I don't know. I wanna say BodyHome was written first. I know BodyHome was published first. But this is what's really interesting to me. I started that essay in 2011, I think -oh no, "Diving In" was written first now that I think about it. Diving IN I wrote in 2011 like maybe March? That essay wasn't published for like two years and I kept working on it. It's one of the ones I kept working on because I really liked it, and I really believed in the essay. It was published in the Spring of 2013. The BodyHome essay, I wrote it sometime I think in the later part of 2011 and that one was accepted actually first place for a contest - a little one for **Revolution Magazine** - and it was published.  So it's interesting to see which ones - you know the BodyHome essay I just wrote and it got published and it won an award where Diving In, the one that I start the book with, it took two years to keep working with it and stick with it and then it finally got published and starts a book.

[KW] 42:50 In "Diving In" you have - one of the numbers, number five, is a scene of you as a little girl trying to get into her book. Talk about adding that into the essay.

[CC] 43:12 It's one of those things that where as far as I know that really happened because it's a memory that I just can't let go of. I don't know if I made this memory up, but I can see me sitting there, just like how I described in the scene, wanting to jump into that book. Actually the essay kind of came from that memory, just the way as I started writing and reading more, I wanted to be a part of a book. It was really, as mentioned in that essay, a book called The Thirteenth Tale that I really just started to feel connected with. I love reading books about books and thinking that I can be a part of a book, so that image of me being four and trying to jump into a picture book represented everything I wanted and still want out of a book, is to be able to feel a part of it, and just be surrounded by those words in a way. So that became like the key image for me, for that essay.

[KW] 44:07 Do you think that it also might relate to this idea of a little girl who really wants to find a home?  She feels like her home is in those words and she has to get there.

[CC] 44:20 Oh that's amazing. Yes, definitely. That's great. Yeah I see that. Wanting to be surrounding by stories and words, yeah, that's kind of get to how we're finding our homes in our bodies through stories and through words. If you can't find safety necessarily or be soothed in our bodies and skins, if we can find reading that puts us at ease and words that we can surround ourselves by, that's how I can feel meditative around literature. And yeah, that represents it for sure.

[KW] 44:56 You primarily write nonfiction, but you do a variety of approaches within that. I looked at one of your essays, "Dear You" which was published on

[CC] 45:14 Atticus Review. It published this past Valentine's Day actually.

[KW] 45:19 Explain to us and if you are listening to the podcast which you are because you hear my voice, pause it, go to BehindtheProse.com and click on Chelsey's episode page and click on the link for her essay "Dear You" because you have to see this. You have to see this in order to understand it. I think it's a perfect essay to touch on for a few minutes because it exemplifies really what Behind the Prose is about. I think this is one of the most creative things I've ever seen.

[CC] 46:01 Thank you. It was really fun to write actually. It's interesting because you had emailed me, 'Describe to me. What exactly is this piece? Is it an essay? A piece of fiction?" I think my response was like well, it's kind of like a fake thing about this fake thing with this sort of fake edit on it but it could have happened, I'm not quite sure. So "Dear You" is one of those pieces where I'm like I have no idea actually what this is, other than it was really fun to write. That actually to me is the important part of it. I just had a blast writing this piece.

[KW] 46:35 Let's imagine that we are in a virtual classroom and you teach courses online and in person. So let's imagine we're in a virtual classroom and everyone has "Dear You" pulled up on their screen. Tell us about this essay, Professor Clammer.

[CC] 46:51 [Laughter] Okay. I think part of it I have to give a little bit of history with my relationship with the Lil' Wayne music. I love his music. He's offensive. I have a Master's in Women's Studies. I'm fully aware of how offensive rap music is but there' something about his lyricism and his wit that I really appreciate it. He's a good writer, basically. No matter how offensive he is. So I just - had been listening to Lil Wayne a lot. I'm actually working on an essay now, possibly a book about how my writing has improved by listening to rap and the different sentence structures and like narrative arc within a rap song. That's a different point, but I have started listening to rap a lot. I was like this would be really funny to write a love letter to somebody that's basically, not really a love letter, but kind of like an FU I don't like you sort of letter. I don't know how I came up with this but I wrote that, then I was like 'What would it be like to take out all the Lil Wayne lyrics and put in Bette Midler "Wind Beneath my Wings?" Why not? So then I went through and edited that letter with Bette Midler lyrics to put another layer on top of this "love letter' I was giving to somebody and then at the end of it all, decided to write at the top of it, "Chelsey, what a powerful" - that's actually my handwriting, from a fake Ms. Fisher teacher I called her. So, I'm not quite sure how you would classify it. I know it was really fun to write.

[KW] 48:23 Can you read Ms. Fisher's comments to you.

[CC] 48:28 'Chelsey what powerful writing. I can really feel you trying to get your points across to your ex. I've made a few changes to make the tone more approachable. I also suggest a different song to use. Great job. Ms. Fisher' So it's that - I don't know how much I can read of the Lil' Wayne because every other word is a cuss word because it's Lil Wayne but so then taking all that out and putting it in with Bette Midler, you are the wind beneath my wings, it puts a different tone to it definitely. For me, it's just funny to read how this supposed teacher would have edited it.

[KW] 49:11 I agree with you. I think Lil' Wayne is a clever lyricist. Some of the things she's crossed out, in the top part it's references to his songs. And that's the narrator telling her own personal problems that she's had with this person and the teacher crosses all of that out.

[CC] 49:41 [Laughter] There's one part in it where I think that's actually - yeah, the end of it says "I write this letter as an amends. I'm sober now" and she crosses everything out and then goes to I do regret some of my past actions. What's sad is I was actually thinking of a person when I was writing this. Somebody that just stopped talking to me and I haven't talked to this person in like five years and I have no idea what happened. So I actually had somebody in mind while I was writing this, but I don't actually feel any anger towards that person. So sometimes it's kind of fun to be like what if I were to feel angry? What would I do? Then edit that out, to be like, no I don't feel angry. Sometimes it's therapeutic to let yourself be like, "I'm going to be really bitchy right now and I'm going to write everything about this person that really pissed me off, and then go back through and edit it and be like that's not necessarily how I feel but it was really therapeutic to write in that sort of a way which is, I don't know, some of the beauty of writing is that you can get out all those really raw emotions and be like what am I really trying to say here, now that I've gotten all this mean stuff out of me. I think that's part of what this essay was trying to point to is that you can say really mean things and you can go back and edit them.

[KW] 51:18 I feel like the piece touches on several different elements, so on one - you have commentary - teacher to student, that's one relationship, then it's from reader to writer, someone telling you how your work should be, and underneath that layer it's more than how your work should be, it's how you should be, how you should express yourself or what you should express yourself about.

[CC] 52:03 I think for me it's just - I don't know if anybody gets it from it, is to see how we can take Lil' Wayne and we can take Bette Midler and says the same thing in a Bette Midler way. It's interesting for me that whatever we present - as the writer who writes the first draft is having that still in there - so that's why I like the cross out, you can see this is what I was really feeling, but look we can present this polished thing to the world. It's Bette Midler saying "You are the wind beneath my wings," not Lil' Wayne saying "Fuck you bitch, I'm acting brand new." For me, this is what that piece was about to see the different layers. So it's all fiction, but to me, I feel like it's a very true representation of how we go through different drafts of writing. Plus I really love Lil Wayne and felt like I had to write an essay with him in it.

[KW]  53:29 If you could back five years in time, what advice would you give yourself?

[CC] 53:34 Keep writing. Just keep writing. I feel like I've said, I've always been a writer but I never took that seriously. I say that with some of the people I know now, whether they're people I work with through the Eckleburg workshops or writers that I just randomly know or who are in my program, they write but they don't necessarily take themselves seriously, so that's a huge shift. Chelsey five years ago was still drunk and writing at a bar and not remembering what she wrote and I think I would tell that person, take your writing seriously and know that this is who you are and have that be the most important thing in your life. Obviously you're alive and your health is most important but right behind that it's the writing. So just keep writing and keep editing. Keep going after it. Your writing career is only gonna happen if you show up for it. So, keep writing.

[Music]

[KW] 54:32 So doesn't her Lil' Wayne book idea sound like major best-seller material. Agent, you better get up on that, if you know what I'm saying. That's what we do at Behind the Prose. That's what we do at Behind the Prose. I hook you up with the good stuff. Next week's good stuff is brought to you by Soraya Nadia McDonald. She's a reporter at The Washington Post. She covers art, culture, and entertainment. She's my new BFF in my head. And I need one; you'll know why when you read my essay "Two Weddings and a Friendship Funeral on FullGrownPeople.com.

 Behind the Prose music is by UK Artist, Redvers West Boyle found on Soundcloud. The show is produced and hosted by Keysha Whitaker from a closet that is a little hot today in Pennsylvania. Until next time, listen, learn, and write.