**Behind the Prose Transcript**

**Episode 29 – Essayist Sharisse Tracey reveals how she got bylines on The New York Times, Salon, Yahoo, and more**

Length: [01:26:40]

Host: Keysha Whitaker (KW)

Guest: Sharisse Tracey (ST)

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00:00 (Music)

00:10 (KW): Did you know you are my favorite Behind the Proser in the whole wide world? You are! It's true! It's your girl Keysha, I'm back rocking with you for another week with another writer who's gonna tell us how they're being successful in the writing world. Before we get to that I'm gonna tell you how I'm being successful, or close to it. I haven't did anything extra with my chunks of twenty. I still have nineteen to go, remember I told you I finished the last chunk. But I did get a really cool rejection letter from McSweeney's this week. And so, I'm like, pumped about that, like, you know I've been obsessed about them. I've been trying to get in McSweeney's since, like, 2011. But this time the editor said he liked it and he told me what he thought was wrong with it. So, I'm like, "Hmm, is that an invitation to resubmit it?" I'm not sure, might try it. Hmm, I don't know, but, you know, that was cool. So I hope you had some successes this week. You know, as writers we got to take these little things where we can get them because they're few and far between, and that's okay. The, today's guest actually knows about rejection and persistence and landing those coveted clips that to you, you know, whether it's mainstream or not, something that, a place where you want to be published in. Sharisse Tracey is an essayist. She's been in *The New York Times*, she's been on *Salon*, she's in *Yahoo*, she's in the *Los Angeles Review*. You're gonna hear all about that during this show, so sit back, relax, turn your earbuds up, and let's go behind the prose.

02:15 (Music)

02:17 (KW): Today on *Behind the Prose* we are talking to Sharisse Tracey, and I just want to read you Sharisse's bio from *Salon*. Like, usually I start with, "How did you know you wanted to be a writer?" but Sharisse is doing it right now and I'mma let her bio speak to that and then we're just gonna jump right in and figure out how she's doing it. Sharisse Tracey is an army wife, mother of four, writer, and educator. Her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, and at *The New York Times*, *Essence*, *Ebony*, *She Knows*, and *xoJane*, and is forthcoming which now is actually out at *Yahoo*, *The Washington Post*, and *Dame Magazine*. Okay, she's currently working on a memoir. So, applause for you, Sharisse, and congratulations on everything.

03:11 (ST): Thank you very much. That sounds kind of crazy, right?

03:17 (KW): The bio's a beast right now, I got to say.

03:24 (ST): I know. It's a little unbelievable.

03:28 (KW): And so what I'm really interested in talking with you about to start off with is I know you went to the New School as well. You have an MFA, your's is nonfiction too, right?

03:40 (ST): Yes, yes. Whoo, whoo.

03:44 (KW): That's not the official whoo, whoo, y'all. We just kind of made that up. But if they want to adopt it—

03:49 (ST): Whoo, whoo.

03:53 (KW): So, and actually, which we talked before the interview you brought to my attention that on the last day of—at the end of every year they do reading for the graduating—and some people in the graduating class can read. And I read a piece, and we met, actually, at that reading and that was gonna be, it was the semester before your first semester at the New School. I was leaving and you were coming in.

04:23 (ST): Right, right. And I remembered you from that, and I don't know it just, I like, I was thinking about it. I was like, *Oh my goodness,* and I remembered parts of your piece and I thought, *How ironic, to be doing this interview with you now.* 'Cause I remembered it and I couldn't recite, but I mean I remember how it spoke to me. And I thought to myself, *I'm never gonna do that.* You know, should I be lucky enough to finish this program I'm not gonna stand up there and read anything, you know? But I remembered the piece and I just thought, *How ironic, you know, to be having this interview and how lucky.* And hopefully I won't say anything stupid.

05:05 (KW): Well now, I say stupid things all the time. It's kind of a tradition here, so let's, feel free. But no, I think that's awesome, and I mean just in general it's, like, people's life task I guess. If you came to the New School obviously, well maybe I'm judging, I think you came to the New School with a mission. Like a reason why you went to be there, to better your writing skills. Why did you choose the New School, or choose, let's separate that. Why did you choose an MFA?

05:40 (ST): You know, because I really wanted to—I had been writing for a couple of years so let me just put that out there. I had attended Gotham, you know while I was attending Gotham's Writer's Workshop online for a number of years, and it was my mentor there who recommended that I pursue an MFA. And because we were stationed at West Point at the time it just made sense to apply for programs that were, you know, closer. I mean, it wasn't necessarily close, but it was closer to apply for a few programs in the city. And the New School at that time was ranked number three, I think, by *Poets and Writers* for nonfiction. So let me just be honest with you and say that I didn't know that I didn't think I really had much of a chance at getting, just with, you know, competition being what it is for MFAs. But it was just meant for me to get in, you know. I mean, I certainly, I mean, I wrote the best writing sample that I could and, I mean, I did have some strong work. It's not that I didn't put everything that I had in it, but I mean I had just been, I had it in my head that, you know, there's so many other talented writers out there in New York, I mean it's New York for goodness sake. But it was my time and I was admitted and it was just, I'm just still—I mean it's still hard for me to believe that I have an MFA from the New School, so. But it was really my mentor, Kyle Minor, at the time who was teaching at Gotham that encouraged that, and if it wasn't for him I probably wouldn't have pursued it.

07:20 (KW): And so prior to starting the New School You had been doing the Gotham Workshops, but had you published or pitched anything during that period?

07:31 (ST): No I had not, and I really started writing out of, I know a lot of people will say this but it's my truth, you know, I started writing out of being unemployed. And then just, you know, wanting a position, not getting a position, and then I had said, "You know what? If I don't get this full-time job I'm gonna write my story." And that came from being, you know, I had talked a little bit about different things that had happened to me as an undergrad doing, you know, little essays and what not and having people always just, "Man, you have a story. You should write it. Have you ever thought about writing it?" An always talking about my story in a fiction sense, never telling people what I was, you know, the story I was saying, was talking about was of myself, speaking of myself. And so I had it in me and I wanted to really write the story for my daughter, and because, she just doesn't know the me that I write about in my book, and I really thought that it was important for her to know that person because that's not the mommy that she knows. And that's really where the book came from and it was through wanting her to know about that person who ultimately became her mommy is where the book, you know, started. So, that's kind of where the journey began and that's what lead me to Gotham when I was no longer working. And that's kind of what birthed this whole thing. And most of the material, well, a lot of the material I've been fortunate enough to publish. She can read, she's nine, but the majority of the material in my books she would not be able to read until she's a little bit older, like the *Salon* piece for example. You know, she wouldn't be able to read that until she was older.

09:17 (KW): So, you're in the New School and I know that you studied as well with Susan Shapiro.

09:25 (ST): Yes, yes, yes, yes.

09:27 (KW): And, so was she the impetus for pushing you to pitch and submit or what? How did that happen?

09:38 (ST): Well, you know, I met Sue during one of the Saturday workshops. I don't know if they still have those, but I met her, you know, of course heard about Sue because she's so popular, and I was just, I didn't get into one of her workshops in the first semester, and I was just like, "There's no way in the world I'm not gonna get into this workshop during the second." And I got in, and I think it was during one of the humiliation essay that she's known for, she had given that assignment, and we were talking about something that I could write about. And I don't know what it is that I told her I wanted to write about, but she was just like, you know, "Do you have something else?" And I told her about this, you know, story about my father walking me down the aisle after he had raped me, or something to that effect, and she was just like, "What?" You know, I mean she just was floored by what I was saying to her. And she was like, "Well can you write about that?" And I was like, "I absolutely can." And so that's kind of how it started with Sue and I, and I continued in her classes and I just was fascinated by her, and her classes, and just what she was able to bring out her students when they were ready. She doesn't push you. She's just—you know, if you have it and you're ready then she's just able to bring it out of you in a way that I've never seen. And I'm just in awe of her. So that's kind of how I started with her and I continue to take her workshops, and just what she's able to do with you in, you know, in a three page essay and beyond is just unbelievable. So, going to the New School and meeting her has just really, it's really had a serious impact on my life, it really has.

11:30 (KW): And so when did you, I guess, start pitching? And when did you land your first clip?

11:37 (ST): I actually started pitching—my first piece was published, well I wrote a couple of things, I don't know that you'd really count those. . . . Okay, my first published piece was with *Babel*, and it was actually about doing my daughter's hair or the difficulty that I have in doing my daughter's hair, so it was kind of like a funny piece. And that was in 2012, late 2012. And I don't know if that was the first piece that I pitched but it was one of the earlier ones. I have been submitting to journals, I actually forgot about that. So I had been submitting to literary journals prior to going to the New School and not having any luck with those. And then, well actually I had the interested of an editor at one of the journals, but I had not yet been published, that took some years for that to finally happen with the *Los Angeles Review*. And I absolutely love that journal, but my first successful pitch, I'll say, was with *Babel* in 2012. So, after that the next one was a couple of months later and, you know, I can't really say, it just seems like once I got one then it just made it easier. Not necessarily to get a published piece, but to keep pitching. I just, I don't know, I get excited with pitching. And then there's just something about it I don't know what it is, but I really do like to pitch. And I also, I'm a big—I follow-up, you know, with the editors and to me that's been the key, I think. Because editors are busy and I just, I know this, so I'm just always want to follow-up. And then it just kind of depends on, you know, how long whether it's two weeks or a month or what have you, but I find that when I follow-up with an editor, whether they take my piece or not they always appreciate that. So, I think that's why I've had some of the luck that I've had with having my pieces published because I follow-up. And I'm mindful of what they're doing, and just, you know, don't take it personal when the piece doesn't work 'cause if the piece doesn't work this time for them it might the next time, you know, another piece or the same piece.

14:10 (KW): So let's make sure we're clarifying some littler terms for people who are listening. So—

14:18 (ST): Oh, sorry.

14:19 (KW): No, that's okay. You use the term pitch in a couple of ways, you know, when you're in the industry and can mean either you're sending an idea, you know, and maybe a paragraph or so. You know, pitching an idea for a magazine article or an essay. But then when we say I think we mean, essayists probably mean that we're sending an entire essay as a pitch, but, you know. So what do you mean when you say pitch?

14:46 (ST): Well for me I think when you're a younger writer, and younger meaning, you know, doesn't mean you're in a miracle age in the business, that you normally have to send an entire essay, you know, an entire piece of writing. When they don't know you or they don't know your work. I think once you've established yourself, you know, you might be able to send a pitch, which is an idea of what you might want to write. But in the beginning you normally have to show them a good sample of your work, if it's not the entire work then at least a portion of it so that they have, they know what it is that you're capable of. So, for me, I was sending the entire essay of, you know, what I wanted them to publish or potentially publish. So that's what I was referring to when I was talking about my pitch.

15:41 (KW): Now in your cover letter—

15:44 (ST): I'm sorry.

15:45 (KW): In your cover letters do you follow a specific form or, like, what's your general approach?

15:52 (ST): No, no, because I'm really, because one of the things that, you know, I learned in Sue's class is just, I would really, there's a lot of research to writing essays. I don't know if people understand that, you know? There's a lot of getting to know the publication that you want to write for. Getting to know the editor that you want to write for, that you want to pitch. It's not just this, you know, throwing it out there type of—it's really a lot of research, or at least it is, it has been for me. And so, you're reading their work, you know, if they're publishing, and you're getting to know, you know, you know a lot about them or not necessarily like you're stalking them, but I mean you're taking a general interest. This is some place maybe that you want to build a person, a person that you want to build a relationship with or a publication that you want to build a relationship with. So, you know, it's taking that time first and then, to me there's no one general pitch, cover letter, you know? Everything is tailored to whom you're sending it to, whomever you're sending it to. So for me personally, that takes some time as well. And then again, like I said, you know, you keep track and then you're following-up. So I've never written the same pitch letter or cover letter, you know, to—never, not even the same to the same editor. You know, because it's all tailored to that person. Hopefully that answers your question.

17:32 (KW): Yeah, and I mean I know I've heard Sue say that one of the things she recommends for people is to compliment the editor, you know, "I loved your piece in this or that," if you know the (Muffled Audio) blah blah blah, whatever. And I've always felt that—like I'll research a publication and I'll research like a column or, you know, research the style, "Okay, what type things do they publish?" and I might, you know, say something about the column. But I've always found it difficult to complement the editor unless it's something outside of what they're doing with the column 'cause I, for me, I feel like that they'll be like, "Oh, this person's just trying to butter me up."

18:09 (ST): Right.

18:10 (KW): How do you strike that balance?

18:13 (ST): Well, and see, I'm glad you said that because I'm going to be genuine, you know? And so, I don't know that I'm necessarily gonna say that I love something if I don't love it. I mean, people just overuse, just like the term amazing. You know, everything is amazing, and it not, you know what I mean? So, I think it's just like in life, you know, you can find a way to be honest, you know what I mean, or compliment without being, you know, without just being disingenuine. You know what I mean? Without being—I hope I didn't just make up a word there. You know, I mean, if you're trying to get published in a publication chances are you read the publication or you would hope, right? There's a reason that you're seeking out that particular publication. I would hope that you're not just trying to be published anywhere. So, there's a reason that you've sought that publication out, you've sought that editor out, or whatever. And so, there's—if you just read something then, you know, what was it about that piece that, you know, that made you want to submit to that particular literary journal or what about that particular essay, you know, still sits with you or something. There's something there that you can bring up in that cover letter, in that pitch. And so, I don't think that there's anything wrong with that, but again just speaking to the just the generic kind of cover letter where you're kind of saying the same thing to everyone, no, I don't think that's the way to go, and that's not something that I do. Like I just said, I don't send the same cover letter to everyone, you know? So, but I do think that there's a way that you can always find something positive in whoever you're talking to, or writing to, and in that way, you know, I think that the editors, or whomever, I think that they can sense that too, you know? So, I would never want anyone to get a email from and say, you know, "Oh, it's just her again. She's just saying the same thing again," you know what I mean? Or, "She said that last month." I would never want anyone to feel that way about anything that they receive from me. So, you know, but that's just my spin on it.

20:36 (KW): A few months ago I had talked to Cameron Conaway, he's a author, memoirist, poet. And he, we were talking about, I think, his piece that got on *The* *Huffington Post*, and they have a form submission sheet, you know, where you paste in your article. And so I was talking to him about how does he actually—I mean there's all different techniques for getting editor's email addresses, and stuff like that, or just sending to a generic one. And I know Sue recommends researching and trying to find the actual editor's email address, even though, you know, we might look at a submission guideline that says, "Oh, send to submissions at blah blah blah." What do you do?

21:23 (ST): You know, I think I've probably tried everything, you know, maybe a little bit of everything. I think in the beginning, let's see, I started like in the end of, I don't know, couple, I don't know how long it's been, but I think in the beginning I used to— Okay, for example, like in the beginning when I first would try to pitch, you know, *Ebony*, and I'm a subscriber to *Ebony* magazine, you know, so I would look in the back of *Ebony* magazine or in the front or whatever it was. And this was when you were still doing the snail mail, you know, type submissions, and send it that way. Or, of course, and nothing ever happened. Or, then I would Google, trying to get an address or trying to get a editor's email or something like that. But then this is when I think, you know, once you are, become a professional writer and then you start taking the classes then you join organizations like, you know, participate in organizations like Media Bistro, or different things like that. And then you learn and you find out, *Okay, what is the proper way to seek out editors? How to contact editors the proper way.* So, I have done, you know, I think I've `done it every kind of way, but I think that you're gonna get the best response when you're doing it the way that the editors actually suggest and that's when you attend the workshops, when you attend the conferences, when they put the information—some places, for example, *Yahoo*, I just published those pieces with *Yahoo* and someone emailed me and asked me how could they submit their work to *Yahoo*. *Yahoo* will put their email at the end of a lot of the pieces that they publish, you know? They're looking for ideas. They'll just put the email right there, and so to me, again, it goes back to really studying and being interested in the particular place that you want to be published at because a lot of times the information is there. So I mean I find that if you really, if you're in business you just kind of find it, you know what I mean? You just kind of find it. Maybe just not anyone off the street just deciding today, Well, okay, I want to write and submit it to whatever publication. But I think if you're serious and you're in the industry you're gonna figure it out.

24:07 (KW): So your first clip—yeah, it makes sense—so your first clip was in *Babel*, and *Babel* is entertainment, news, and lifestyle site for moms.

24:16 (ST): Yes.

24:17 (KW): What was the next clip that you landed, if you remember?

24:23 (ST): After, it's funny 'cause you think that this is the stuff that you'll never forget. You think you can just, you'll just remember it forever. I want, I know, I want to say after *Babel* that it was the *New York Times*, yeah.

24:41 (KW): Is that the one with the, wait I think I read that one. You wrote about your workshop experience. Yeah.

24:50 (ST): Yeah. I want to say that that was the next one. Yeah. Yeah, I'm just in my head now trying to think and maybe I shouldn't stay there too long, but I'm pretty sure it was "A Military Mom Goes Back to School," for the Motherlode.

25:09 (KW): Okay, actually I have that one up. It has a dateline for March 10th, 2013, at least for the web.

25:18 (ST): Okay, yes, that's it.

25:20 (KW): And it appeared in the Motherlode column and I love the opening of this piece. You write, "On my first day of school I cried, "Mommy, what if they're all smarter than me?" I wasn't a first grader. I was a 40-year-old Army wife, a mother of four and a new student."

25:41 (ST): Yup. Yeah.

25:45 (KW): Now tell me about pitching, researching Motherlode and pitching to the *New York Times* and, I guess even before that. What's the origin of this particular piece?

25:58 (ST): Well, you know, I think, okay, I had, I'm trying to think if I had already been pitching *New York Times* 'cause I think at that time we had had a few visitors in Sue's class. That's, I'm trying to think of the name of the column now, my brain is just not functioning. Well, what made me interested in the *New York Times'* Motherlode was another writer, Doreen Oliver, had written a story about, oh my gosh, I think it was called "What Color Is Your Princess?" or something to that effect. And she had published in the Motherlode and her piece was just, oh my gosh, it just was beautiful. And so that's really how I became familiar with the Motherlode. And I just, I had all of these experiences, you know, being a mom and then being a mom now of what I like to call two sets of children just because of the, you know, age difference and then having this experience of going back to school and having, being not the oldest but being one of the older students. And just feeling, I don't know, just feeling, you know, so out of place, and not really expecting that because I am also an educator. I had worked in student services for ten years, more than ten years and just having so many different feelings that I just did not expect, but being a new writer a young writer I just, I was just overwhelmed by a lot of different emotions and feelings and experiences that I just didn't see coming. So, when I had that particular experience in that class I didn't know what to do with it and the only thing I could do was write it, you know? That was the only thing I could do was write it.

28:18 (KW): Let's actually talk about the writing of it because I want to know how you approach drafting and revising and editing. And we talked a little bit before, this tapping, and I want to get back to some of those ideas, so let's at this time. . . . Mm-hmm?

28:41 (ST): No, I was saying go ahead. I'm sorry.

28:44 (KW): Oh, that's okay. We're not in the studio together, y'all. Like, she's at her house and I'm at mine so I can't see. Reminder, this is *Behind the Prose*, it's a virtual studio. Okay, so, what is your, what was your drafting and revising process like at that point in time? And this is around March 2013.

29:08 (ST): Well, so I was, it was a little like what I was doing right now when I was talking to you so I apologize to that. So what happens is I'm very emotional so I get all of that out first, you know, get all the emotions out or put them, you know, get them all down, and then decide, you know, after reading the Motherlode over and over and over, you know, how can I get this down to the amount of space that's allowed? So I don't remember how many drafts I did. I probably did maybe two or three, and then I think with that particular piece I worked with an editor because that was my issue. I think the piece was too long and I needed to cut it down and I was not at that particular time I could not be the writer and the editor on that piece.

30:02 (KW): Do you mean that prior to pitching it you hired a, like, we'll call it a, like, a ghost editor, someone who—

30:12 (ST): Right, I believe prior to pitching it that I, yes, I think I hired someone and worked with someone on getting down to half of what I originally had drafted because I think I tried to and I wasn't able to, if my memory serves. Yeah, and yeah, I'm sorry I'm just trying to think back to if that was the piece, I'm pretty sure that that's what I ultimately did with that piece because there was so much and there was so much raw emotion, and I, like, needed to get it down with the emotion, but to the, you know, to the bare necessities of what it was gonna take to convey what needed to be there and at the same time in the space. Because Motherlode a lot of the time you don't have a lot of wiggle room. You have to kind of get in, make your point, and get out. It's not like some other publications where you might have fifteen hundred words or, you know, that's, you don't have that there. So, yeah.

31:16 (KW): And so actually working with an editor is one of the things that Susan Shapiro suggests to people, and she'll pass along the information to people that she's worked with on her books and stuff. What was your experience like taking some of your drafts—was it over— Well, first of all, was it in-person, was it over email, what was that editing process like working with the person on the net?

31:44 (ST): It was all over email. I've never worked in-person with any editor. And, you know, I think that, if I'm calling it correctly, was the first time, and I just really lucked out because the person was able to, you know, because of their experience they knew what it was that I needed, and so they were able to pull that out and we were able to get it done pretty quickly. And I've been fortunate whether the editor's been someone that I've sought out, because I've only worked with a very few, and whether it's someone that I've sought out or whether it's been an editor at a particular publication. You know, I've had very good luck with editors and I've had some editors that have not touched, you know, my work at all. It's just been fine and it's been published, you know, as is. Because I was very naive when I first started writing to what an editor, to what they did because I thought going in that, you know, you basically submitted your work and that the editors kind of fixed it, you know, if you will. But then I learned Gothamor it might have been at the New School, you know, well, okay you really need to have, your work needs to be flawless and you can't really rely on editors, you know? And so, I've kind of had like a mixed kind of experience with editors because sometimes that is the case, sometimes, you know, you cannot submit something that's not absolutely perfect because they don't have the time to go in and quote unquote "fix your work." They don't have time to do the heavy lifting. They have so many writers submitting to them, they just don't, they can't. But then you might luck up and have a younger editor who really wants to get a piece and really work on a piece, and they might have a little bit of time and be willing to work with you. But that's not something that you can count on. So, I've just been really, really fortunate, but, that the few editors that I have worked with they've been able to work with me and maintain my voice, which is very important. But the pieces that I've had the most success with lately, those have been my voice and mostly not edited at all, you know? They've mainly been my voice, which is really comforting to me, that they've done so well.

34:24 (KW): And so during the last few years you have, you transitioned as you just said from working with a ghost editor to, you know, doing it as you said solely in your voice. Before we move on to the latter part of that which I shouted out in the Publication Shout-Out section of the first *Behind the Prose* email I want to talk to you a little bit more about the editor. In general, I think all writers need someone to look at something, right? Because you can't necessarily see what's happening, what's working, and whether that is a bunch of editors in the form of a writing group because that's what you're doing, right? You're bringing them your stuff and they tell you what they think. That's a form of editing.

35:14 (ST): Yes.

35:15 (KW): Whether it's like that or a formal relationship where you pay someone, and do you think that the formal relationship part where a writer seeks out someone to pay, you know, to look at their stuff is more stigmatized than per say taking your stuff to a writing group and why do think that is, if so?

35:58 (ST): You know what, I don't really think so. I think, I mean I think honestly anything that you can do—number one I think writing groups are essential and I think writers, you have to have, number one, you have to have support. And wherever you're gonna get that support, you know, wherever you can find that support I should say, you know, you need to. And writing groups are good. I would always want to be a part of a writing group and I had a lot of trouble, like when we moved for example, because I wasn't a part of a writing group and I really needed that, which is another reason why I was working more so with editors because I didn't have that. But I think an editor, when they're working solely with you on your piece alone, you know, as opposed to in a writing group you're offering feedback, you're getting feedback from your group and there's, you know, a lot of different pieces going around. It's just a different kind of, it's just different. But when you're working fully with an editor on a specific piece, maybe for a certain publication or what have you, and it's you have this professional relationship, you have this goal in mind, and it's just, to me it's very productive that way. And I just, I don't know, for me personally I mean I was really glad that it was something, I'm really glad that Sue, you know, taught us that and introduced us to that in her class because I don't know that it's something I would have come up with on my own and something, you know, people, I would have sought out editors in that way. Because they, that's, you know, a lot of 'em if they're writing or they've written or they've worked at publications they kind of know and they kind of have that clear vision that you might not have because you are the author of the piece. And they can just come in with a different perspective, so and a lot of times they know what it is that you're trying to say and they can just get to it, you know? I don't really how else to articulate it but there should not be a stigma if there is, for either. You know, whatever it is that you need to get that out, you know, do it. You know, it's just kind of that simple.

38:13 (KW): And to get it out do you set a certain number, 'cause again and I mean I just read a few of the pieces that you've published but we'll put the link to your site that has all of your publications and links to them. So I think you have, it says here, thirty-one stories that are linked just on this site alone, to yours. So that's like fifteen a year. Are you, and so by my math, which is always suspect but I think that you probably have to have sent out about at least a hundred a fifty pitches over the last two or three years to get, to land that, maybe. In my math, based on the ratios that I've been tracking with my own kind of, I figure, it's a ten percent acceptance rate. So, what is your process of getting it out? Do you have a set submission schedule? I refer to Chelsea, the Submission Queen, Clammer and she sent out like a hundred things a month. So, what is your schedule like in terms of getting it out?

39:24 (ST): Wow, I have no clue. That is an awesome question, Keysha. I have no idea. I've never thought about it like that, and your numbers right now just scared me. I've never thought about it like that! I don't know because I'm never not writing, it's scary, I'm never not writing in my head. I'm never not thinking about essays. I'm never not pitching in my head, you know what I mean? It's just like, it's like this constant cycle. So, I don't know. I mean, like I said pitching is exciting to me. I mean, obviously, landing a piece is better, but the process of pitching is exciting. It's just, I love it. And so, I've never really sat down and thought, like, how many pitches I wanted to do in a certain day, week, or how many I've actually done. And, like I said, you just gave me a number that's kind of crazy. So I don't know. I can't really answer that question because I don't know. I just, wow, I can't. And let me just say this too, with the number of publications that you mentioned, you know, it's probably more like twenty that are with publications that people are mostly, you know, more familiar with, I should say. You know, there might be a few there that, you know, they might not recognize, but still. Just throwing that out there. But it is an awesome number, and I'm, I feel very, very fortunate, I feel very fortunate because I am still considered a young writer, you know, I really am. And I'm very, very fortunate, very grateful, so thank you.

41:24 (KW): So, I, let's transition. Some of your latest publications, again, I shouted you out in the inaugural *Behind the Prose* newsletter.

41:37 (ST): Yes you did. Yes you did.

41:41 (KW): I shared a portion of our email conversation that we had, and if you didn't get that email you should go to behindtheprose.com and sign up for the email list because there're gonna be a lot of cool things coming on it. No spam, I promise. But in this publication shout-out I took a clip of our email conversation that we had, and you say, “Last week was the best week of my writing career. I published four pieces back to back starting with the Salon piece. Over the next three days Yahoo Parenting ran three pieces of mine for their #NoShameParenting series. Then, on Friday while I was happily fooling around on Twitter I see my own words. The New York Times had posted my piece from July, An Adult Stepson Moves Back In. And then I get a mention later that night that The NY Times editor has shared my Ebony.com piece from January, Don’t Read The Comments". So congrats on that great week. What does it feel like to be, you know, to have just wake up every day, "Oh, I got a piece! Oh, I got a piece today! Oh, I got piece today! Oh, there's my words!"

42:48 (ST): You know, I'm still trying to figure that out because it was so, like, okay, so okay let me just say this, sometimes you have a piece that's gonna come out and you know, okay, the piece is gonna come out this day, right? So you know it. If you're, like I said I'm very emotional, if you're like me and you have the calendar, you have twenty-seven million calendars like I am 'cause I'm very OCD and you have it circled, right? So you know, you've fixated on that date. And then sometimes you have it where you don't know, you just have a general idea and then maybe the editor will tell you, "Okay, I'll email you when it's live," and then they forget and then you don't actually know. So, I did not know any of those pieces were coming out like that, not even, not one of them. So it was a very bizarre kind of a Sunday night finding out about the *Salon* piece and then Monday morning, because I read, you know, *Yahoo Parenting*— Every day I found out by reading the, you know, the being on the site. And so, by I think by Wednesday I was like, "Okay, this is really, this crazy." It was awesome, but it was like oh my gosh, and then of course so then I'm tweeting it and I'm posting it on my Facebook and whatnot. So by Friday I thought, *Okay, this has just been wonderful. Let me see if I can bottle this feeling, but kind of almost like,* "Okay, I'm gonna take a breath." So when KJ, that's the editor of, she's the editor of the Motherlode, you know, posted my piece from July, I just thought, *My gosh! This has to be a sign. This has to mean something, right? Like, this is great, you know?* Because how does that just happen? And so, of course I tweeted about that. And then later on it's like, did she just find my piece from *Ebony,* like what, like what, you know? So it just—and I felt strange because I'm like do I tweet this because in no way do I want to sound like I'm bragging because there's always that line when you're sharing good news that you don't want to cross. Like, you're sharing it but you don't want to sound like you're bragging, but yet it's such a wonderful thing you do want to share. And you have all these wonderful people who support you, your followers on Twitter. You know, you want, and the people who've supported you since you first started. There's just a fine—like I don't know, so I just was like, "Oh my gosh." So on Saturday I almost when I woke up I almost kind of like, "Okay what's gonna happen today?" You know, on one hand I'm thinking, *What's gonna happen today?* 'cause and then on the other hand I'm like, "Well, should I be expecting something to happen today? But something's happened every other day." You know, so it was kind of like a weird kind of a feeling, but at the same time a relief. So, I guess I just said all that to say that it was amazing, and I'm kind of making a joke because earlier I said that word was overused.

45:57 (KW): That's a callback, people. That's a callback.

46:01 (ST): But I mean just wonderful. Just, like, I said I couldn't pay for that. I could not have asked anyone. I couldn't have planned, you know, like, yeah. I've never updated my bio in my life like I had to update it recently, you know what I mean? Like, just, uhh! I love it.

46:24 (KW): You know, if this were a different show I would ask you about the idea of not feeling like you're bragging, and that is that something that maybe women have trouble with? Is it something that maybe even more so women of color have trouble with, that why do we feel this notion that, "Uh-oh, you shouldn't promote yourself. Or you shouldn't say, 'Oh I had this, I worked hard and this is the result,' " but this is not that show.

46:54 (ST): Okay, it's not that show. You should get another show.

46:59 (KW): I'mma move on from that, I guess, unless you feel particularly compelled to respond.

47:06 (ST): Yeah, no, I mean but I'm—well I'll just say because I did kind of feel that way, you know? I did kind of feel that way, like, how would I feel if I were someone else looking at this? Would I be like, "Okay, enough already, Sharisse." Like, you know, after Wednesday, but at the same time how, I don't know how often does that happen. Has that happened before? Like, you know, should—but I'm not gonna not post it. I mean, this is a big deal, like, you know what I mean? It's a big deal to me. Shoot, I'm still paying for my education at the New School.

47:41 (KW): Mm-hmm.

47:42 (ST): I don't know how long I'm gonna be paying for that, you know? I'm just saying. So like yeah, I'm gonna take this and when they tweet I'm gonna retweet it and keep retweeting it. Like, what? It's not every day that the *New York Times* editor, you know, just happens upon your stuff and give you a shout-out, and it's not something that you even posted with them. Like, this is not normal, and it's not normal for me so I'm gonna do it. You know what I mean? Then I get like that. So yeah. I'm still kind of on that high. I get very excited about my work, and then I get, again, I get emotional about it because, you know, it goes back to kind of like that military mom piece, not just being in a place where I feel a little bit like still kind of should I be here? Goes back to that high school dropout in me, you know? All of that stuff is still very, very much right there. You know, just right there. So, that self-doubt and that can I do that? Did I do that? How am I doing that? It's always right there for me. So, yeah, there you go. (Muffled Audio).

48:56 (KW): I've actually been thinking about it, and like, "Don't you have enough to do?" So I'll invite you for the other show.

49:10 (ST): But that's why I write these pieces. That's why a piece like the No Shame Parenting piece about being on welfare, you know what I mean? And some of the stuff that I write that people write to me about and say, "You're so brave, and you're so brave." It's like, I don't know if I'm brave. I just know that I've been through some stuff, and there are people out there that can relate, and that there are people that are still out there struggling and that they need to know there's another side or that there's just people that have been through it, you know? And it's okay, you know? That's why I write.

49:44 (KW): In the piece that you're—you mentioned the first piece that was in the Motherlode section of the *New York Times*, "A Military Mom Goes Back to School" and then your second one that went out in this July that you were talking about that just went, was retweeted is "An Adult Stepson Moves In, and a Solid Family Wobbles." And I read those two and then I read this recent one from *Salon*, "My mother let him rape me — then stayed married to my dad" and the difference that I noticed in these two pieces as far as the prose and I think you touched on it a little bit earlier, the Motherlode ones definitely seem shorter than the *Salon* one and the Motherlode ones seem like they're more in scene, in and out of scene, and less sort of exposition, where as the *Salon* one it feels like there's like a little bit of scene but then more exposition and reflection. And so, can you explain for us, I guess, why that distinction is? If it's due to the style of the column. And how you approached, I guess, matching the style of the column, or craft, you know drafting and revising so it fit for each.

51:03 (ST): Well, yeah, I mean you just hit it, I mean basically like I said with the Motherlode pieces you have a smaller, you know, you just have a smaller amount of time. You really have to get in and get out. So, they are really set around a specific—like for me that's what I've done, and that's, if you read the column you kind of see they're set around a specific scene or I like to set mine around a specific scene. And with *Salon* you do have more wiggle room, and the *Salon* piece is—that particular piece is not, but it's more like an excerpt, you know, from the book.

51:42 (KW): Your book, mm-hmm.  
   
51:43 (ST): It's not an excerpt, but I'm just saying it's, that the *Salon* piece is impossible because it's like trying to take a life and condense it, you know, in a short space. Which really you can't do, but that's kind of what you're trying to do. You're trying to give a lot of information with some kind of summary at the end, like you said, with some, well, with some reflection and the overall theme was supposed to be, you know, forgiveness, right? So you're trying to do a lot. Fill with a short amount of space, but with more than what you're allowed to do in the Motherlode. So, the Motherlode is just, you know, here's this scene, this is what happened, and kind of almost this is where you're hoping to go, whereas with a piece like *Salon* it's like you're giving these details, and a small amount of details, and kind of what your hope might be, you know, or what your hope is, if that makes sense. So, yeah, I mean well I shouldn't say that, but I mean I would love to have more time to go into more detail in some of the other publications, but like I said your really have to write for, you have to give them what it is that they're column allows for. And so, the piece for *Salon,* and you read the *Salon* essays you know, you're just allowed that time and space. I don't know that a scene would work, there's no one scene or even several scenes that I could do to give, kind of, information that I was trying to convey in the *Salon* piece. You know, it has to be done in exposition. With just the one scene or maybe the, you know the one that we chose for the top, you know what I mean, just to kind of give that background and then go into the story a little bit more. So, yeah, I think that's the best way to try to answer that question.

53:56 (KW): And so I did pick up on that when I was reading the *Salon* piece, and what you said the opening sentence or the opening line, which I think in general, at least in the few pieces that I've read of your so far, you tend to sort of start in scene. Whether it's at a grocery counter or at the, "Mom can I go out? Can I have twenty dollars," or whatever. You start in scene. You start in dialogue. And so I guess the question is how intentional is that in general, on your part, you know what I mean? Are you doing that on revision or is it just something naturally that happens?

54:43 (ST): Normally, 'scuse me, normally yes because, you know, for me personally that's how I like to start because to me when I read something that's normally what grabs my attention, you know? Like, what's going on here? That's what gets me into it. And so, it's just a way of grabbing, I think, grabbing the reader's attention. They know, without giving them a whole, whole lot, what's about to happen or what is happening. You're bringing them right into it and then giving them the story. Or giving them the background or whatever. So, I mean it's not, I don't always do it, but especially when there's a shorter amount of time I think it's effective, you know? And so, in particular with the Motherlode, you know, when you have that shorter window I think it can be very effective because you're setting it right off the bat and they know what's expected or what's coming. You know, kind of. . . . But I like to start in scene, you know?. I know, I remember, I think it was at Gotham, I'm not sure, I remember hearing somewhere that that was not the way to go, you know, that you don't want to start where people don't know who you're talking about and what's going on. But, you know, for me personally I like it, you know? And I like to read pieces that way. So it's just like, "Ooh," you know? Maybe, I don't know, maybe it's because I like drama, you know, it's like, "Ooh, this is juicy," you know, "What's going on here?" But that's just me.

56:30 (KW): I think that might speak to a little bit, you know, how maybe people in general do read something. Like when we read something that's dialogue we're automatically assigning characteristics or faces or, you know, places in our head to what is happening.

56:47 (ST): Yeah. Yeah.

56:48 (KW): So you said that for the *Salon* piece you, and it's talking obviously, you know, extreme, heavy, tragic topic that you're talking about and then you reference people who, you know, email you and tell you, you know, you're so brave for bringing this forward. In the *Salon* piece you start like right in the middle of this heavy topic, and you just said earlier that the you guys kind of decided that this is where you would start. So I'm gonna read it and then tell me a little bit about how you guys chose—how much I guess in the editing process of this piece did you go back and forth with the editor and what advice did she give you for crafting, saying, "Oh, start here."? So the first line is, " 'Daddy said we needed to take more pictures for my photo shoot in your bedroom last week and then he got on top of me,' I told my mother on the bus ride home from the mall, breaking into tears. I was 13."

57:49 (ST): Okay, well, I can tell you that for that again that is, there wasn't a lot of back and forth on that piece. The editor from *Salon* really, really liked that piece. She, I believe when she first read it she thought that it was a beautiful story and she didn't have a whole lot of, she didn't really have a whole lot. There was not a lot of back and forth. Yeah, there really wasn't. I've been working on that for a long time, years. And it's because it's very tough topic it, and doesn't matter how many times I edit it it's always gonna be tough. And so, you know, I think she just the only advice, if you will, was, you know, ending it where we did. In a forgiving, you know, kind of gracious place because that's always where I wanted the piece to end. And it's difficult because people take what they want from that piece, but the piece really is about forgiveness. And so, it's one of the reasons why I chose the picture that I submitted to go along with it and, you know, some of the other things. So, the byline is difficult but there was not a lot of back and forth. The editor is wonderful and she was very, very gracious, but there was not a lot of back and forth. She really took the piece that I submitted and published it, you know? So, yeah, go ahead, I'm sorry.

59:57 (KW): No, go ahead. Go ahead.

59:59 (ST): I'm kind of just thinking but if you had another question about it I can probably answer while I'm gathering my thoughts here.

1:00:08 (KW): I was and then I lost it as I was listening to you. I was trying to hold it and I lost it. Oh, I know. When you said that you had been working on this piece for years how did you know that it was done and, I guess one question at a time. How did you know it was done?

1:00:34 (ST): I didn't and I don't. Yeah, I don't really ever feel like a piece is done, especially something like that where I'm still living it. You know, I'm still living that piece. I'm still living some of those moments, and especially with something so personal, you know, with my mother, you know? So, yeah, it's not a matter of it being done as it is just I'm ready for it to be released.

1:01:11 (KW): So how did you know that it was ready to, time to start pitching it then? When did you get to that point where you were like, "All right, I need to start sending this out," and how did you pick *Salon* then?

1:01:23 (ST): That's a good question, how did I pick *Salon*? I think being in Sue's class and I think at the time, I'm trying to remember if it was a visit or if it was another student who published there, and. . . I'm not exactly sure. I think it might have been another piece that was published there and my thinking that it would be a good home for the essay. Trusting the editor, you know, but just in terms of it being ready, you know, once I decided that I was, you know, that I had healed, felt like I had healed and that the story, that my book was ready to be, you know, out there or I was ready to start pitching the book then the individual pieces that I wanted to write or had started to write, I knew I was ready for that. You know, if that makes— And there was another piece that I published a couple years ago that went viral and I didn't even know it, with *Ebony*. You know, once I started writing and releasing those kinds of pieces I knew, and that was some years ago. And I had been working on this piece since then. So, I knew, but when I say that, you know, when I just said a moment ago that I never know or that I'm not I know that sounds like I'm talking out of both sides, but it's just because like I say it's not like, you know, some people write pieces after their parents, you know, have passed or a situation is resolved and that's just not what I'm living. But at the same time I feel so strongly about my story and about the healing that I know it is doing, already, that it needs to be out there and it can't do the things that it's supposed to do if it's not.

1:03:30 (KW): When, in terms of I guess *Salon* and *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, I know you said that you'll follow-up with the editor were those instances where you had to follow-up or was it just like the standard, I don't want to say standard were those instances where you had to follow-up with them?

1:03:54 (ST): I'm sorry, can you repeat the question?

1:03:59 (KW): For *Salon* and, like, the *New York Times* were those instances where you had to follow-up with the editors after you pitched your article?

1:04:08 (ST): You said were there instances?

1:04:11 (KW): Yeah, were those examples of times? Like, did you have to go back to the *New York Times* editor and say, "Hey, I sent this piece just checking in," you know, and for *Salon* as well.

1:04:20 (ST): For *Salon*, for this piece no. For *New York Times* the first time, yes. And the with *New York Times* the first time I thought it was a great story. I think Sue used to like to tell the story in her class because she used to use it as an example of following-up. I think when I first pitched them I had just assumed that they weren't interested because it had been months before, you know, months I hadn't heard from them. And then I followed-up, I think twice, and on the second follow-up I finally heard back and it was just one of those things where, you know, she had not forgotten but, you know, was just bombarded and it was that third follow-up that she got back to me and told me she wanted to run my piece, and that was that third piece, I mean that first piece.

1:05:12 (KW): Wow.

1:05:13 (ST): On the third follow-up. So, you know, it just taught me that, you know, because I take things so personally sometimes that, you know, you really can't take things personally and the editors are just so busy and, you know, they might not see it the first time. Or, you know, there's just so many reasons that your work might not get to them or it might slip by them or it whatever, you can't even imagine what the reasons might be. But you really do have to follow-up, and it might be more than once. I have a lot of people contacting me, asking me how to follow-up, when should they follow-up? You know, all kinds of different questions. And there's no formula to it, you know, if you really want to publish, especially at a specific place or with a specific editor, you know, you kind of have to make that decision for yourself, you know? How much do you want to do it? And kind of just go from there. So, I wouldn't have thought that third time would've done it, but it did. And it turns out that she was really interested, you know, and it got me my first clip in the *New York Times*. So, I follow-up.

1:06:25 (KW): I think that's encouraging because I think many people, you know, myself included I interpret no response as no. And many times through the years it probably has been the case, but on some other occasions maybe on things that I really care about or, you know, I think, *Oh, maybe you feel that, oh, this is really a good match.*

1:06:48 (ST): Right.

1:06:49 (KW): The person should kind of, you know, the writer should take the initiative to follow-up with the editor.

1:06:54 (ST): Yeah, I just, yeah I think it's just, you know, it's just one of those things you just don't know because it could just be a no, it could just be that simple. You know what I mean? But I just think that, you know, what's really the harm? Because even if, because to me it's about building relationships, you know what I mean? Because the piece, it might not be that piece that time, but what's the harm in trying to build the relationship? You know, if it's a publication. Or, sometimes, you're building a relationship with the editor. You know, 'cause they move. So, I just don't see what's the harm, you know, but I mean I know a lot of people who feel or have felt the way that you do in terms of, you know, if someone doesn't respond then that's your answer type-thing. You know? But for me, I just don't see the harm in following-up. If it's a piece that you feel strongly about or a place that you really want to see your work, and that's really what I tell people when they—and the ironic thing is people that have come to me for advice about that I always see their work and where they want it, so. . . . Try it.

1:08:11 (KW): So, *Salon*, which is a place that you wanted to be in, the new editor of the life section, Kim Brooks, she has a novel coming out, "The Houseguest." And I actually reached out to her, she's gonna talk to me later in November and we're gonna talk about, like, her work at *Salon* and we're gonna talk about your piece, but what was it like when you got the acceptance email from Kim, for you?

1:08:40 (ST): You know, it was almost like, I don't, because she, it was, I was almost, like, you know, waiting for so long for something and then it happens and then you almost kind of don't believe it. You know what I mean? Definitely exciting, but it was almost like, until I see it on the site, you know what I mean, kind of like I can't even believe this. But she was so, she is such a nice person, and she was so, she just seemed to be so moved by my piece, you know? And just so, I don't even know what the word is, I was very excited, I was very excited and very willing to work with her. And, you know, I'm open to suggestions and comments and whatever, but like I said she really didn't have, she really didn't have a whole lot. So, I was like, "Okay, I think that's a good thing," you know what I mean? But it was just like, "Wow, this is something that I've really wanted. I really wanted to be published here, you know? And now it looks like that's gonna happen." So, I was very excited.

1:10:06 (KW) Sorry. I get so excited when people are talking, I just want to say, "Wait!"

1:10:11 (ST): No, it's fine.

1:10:12 (KW): You know, you, there's something in the *Salon* piece in particular and I think maybe I noticed it because, like we talked about, you know, you really had to do a lot of exposition in this and it's like a life you're trying to condense into whatever this is, fifteen hundred words or what have you. And there were moments that I feel like somewhere inside of you there's like a literary writer, like, so there were like, there's one point, one sentence you say, "Our two bedroom house in Northwest Pasadena had become too small with only a pink and burgundy bathroom separating us. It was summertime." And that sentence, for some reason, just like slowed down everything. And there's a couple other times where that happens and I feel like—here's, "She had thick, curly beauty salon hair and wore colorful size 12 dresses that cinched at the waist. My mom was a natural entertainer." Like, there's something in this that if this were a book I feel like, okay, I guess maybe the question is—nope. How 'bout what do think of those lines that I just read to you? How do they speak to you in terms of your voice and craft?

1:11:32 (ST): Well, I'm trying think if those lines were directly from the book. You know, that's an interesting question. I mean, you feel like they're different from the majority of the piece. Is that what you're saying or. . . ?

1:11:49 (KW): I feel like that those lines, if I were gonna read like, I feel like— So, when you're not, like, doing the exposition which you were doing to try to get to, you know, to get through the piece, like I feel like you, there, when you're doing—how do I say this? That, the details that you chose and the way you presented them, like, even though it was a piece where you had to, like, get through exposition it just kind of like stopped everything and made the reader, like, take in that moment and that detail. And like, I could just see, like, the bedroom or the bathroom separating them and feel like what it was, what it meant, like what that was trying to convey to the reader.

1:12:35 (ST): Right.

1:12:36 (KW): And it was very rich, so, I wondered if you felt going in that direction in a longer work. Like, are you more literary? Do you see yourself doing, like, and I guess why I say literary, you know, I mean like, 'cause I just interviewed Scott Hess and he writes literary fiction. And it's really, you know, more, you know, about language and detail and scene and, I don't know, that just struck me so much I just wondered if you see that as something that you'd do more of or not.

1:13:09 (ST): You know, it's kind of funny. I remember when I was at Gotham,you know, and some of my critiques, you know, I would get that, "We need to see this more," you know, "We need more detail. We need to see. We need to hear. We need to—" And so I would add, and then when I would add then I would get, you know, "Oh, that was beautiful," you know, "do more of that." So what happens is sometimes I forget that people wan that kind of detail, you know? And so, I kind of, it's almost like I have to remember to put it there, you know? And I think that what, I think that's kind of what you're speaking to. It's like I have it in my head and I forget that the reader doesn't know. I assume that the reader knows sometimes, and of course how could the reader know. You know, the reader has not experienced this. So sometimes when I am, like in the book, when I have more space then I'm more conscious of it, but when I'm writing a condensed piece then, you know, I don't think I have that room, that time to go into that because then if I start going into that then what I'm thinking are those pertinent, like, it has to be there. You know, that information that just, that's gonna this, this, and this is not gonna make it, you know? So I'll just put, well, okay, people need to have a visual of what she looks like. They need to have the location, the location needs to be, you know, something needs to let them know what this room looked like. Or not the room necessarily, but the house or something, you know, and just throw that in there, couple of places, boom, boom, boom, okay, that's enough, and then get back to the telling, yo know, in a sense. So I do think that given more time there would be more of that, but when I'm trying to do something as ambitious as what I was trying to do in that, yeah, then some of it gets lost. And so I think that's a real, it's challenging, it's challenging.

1:15:25 (KW): And I mean, I don't know if I would say that, 'cause like you're saying, you know, each piece had a different purpose. I just think that it's so awesome, like, I can, just the way you, "The house became too small," you know, "only a pink and burgundy bathroom separating us." Like, choosing those we tell, it tells us time, the color of the bathroom because we can know, *Oh, well bathrooms are, this is a certain generation bathroom.* And what the feeling has become, you know, the house has now become too small, right?

1:15:55 (ST): Right.

1:15:56 (KW): It's just the way you, it's something really, really awesome there so I was just curious if, you know, you felt that that was, like, you know, a part of your voice and stuff, but, so. . . .

1:16:05 (ST): Yeah, it's one of those things that I'm constantly trying to balance, but I'm not overly, and you'll probably, I'm never overly descriptive. Like, I don't just throw in stuff to be throwing it in, you know what I mean? 'Cause sometimes I'll just read things that are just, it's so descriptive that I can't, like I'm lost in that. You know what I mean, it's just too much. To me, for my personal taste. So I'm more to the nitty-gritty type of person in terms of what I like to read. But, you know, hearing you say that, you know, I mean I can appreciate that because I did put that in there for that purpose because I wanted someone to read that and have a sense. You know, just a general sense of where they were, you know, that's why I give the physical location so you know where you are, and then a few details, you know, but that was it. I didn't feel like much more was needed other than that because I didn't want the readers lost in that. I wanted them to just be in, you know, in the essay. In the telling of this story of what happened. And then the voice too is in-between a younger person and, you know, an adult, you know? Because when I'm telling my mother what happened, you know, I'm young, you know? The scene at the beginning is a young person telling, and then it goes into an older person describing the life, if you will. So there's a lot in there. There's a lot in that essay.

1:17:49 (KW): And in terms of your writing process I know that you said you're always writing in your head and kind of observing and thinking. Do you have a set schedule when you actually sit down to physically write?

1:18:03 (ST): Most of the time I'm a morning person so I'm best in the morning. So, typically, sometimes I'll write a little bit before I get my kids up it just kind of depends, but most of the time once I get them off to school, you know, my writing day is typically from eight thirty till, definitely until they get home around threeish. And then I pick it back up again, you know, sometime after that, it just really depends on them. But definitely during those hours and then again, you know, like after diner or whatever, where I'm actually at the computer, you know, writing. But, I mean, it gets so bad sometimes where writing will wake me up. I don't need an alarm 'cause something will just be in my head. It's like I have to get this down whether I put it on my phone or my fifty million Post-it notes, you know? Every time I see *Being Mary Jane* I laugh because I have Post-it notes like that. You know, it's like I can't lose this. I can't rely on my memory, my short-term memory. Long-term memory is awesome, but I need to write this down whether it's a title, and essays sometimes to me come by titles. You know, I'll come up with this title and then I'll write the essay around it. So, yeah, but the physical sitting down normally happens, you know, in a five to six hour stretch during the day. And then after that—now, when I was at the New School I did most of my writing—I would come home so jazzed, like from Sue's class. Like, oh my gosh, I didn't go to bed till like four or five o'clock in the morning 'cause I had that crazy three hour commute coming home. But I could never write on the train so once I would get home it would be like one o'clock in the morning, or whatever, and then I could not get stuff out of my head so I would write then, you know? So, you know, it kind of depends on what's going on with my life, but definitely in the daytime. Definitely when the kids are—and I get so annoyed when it's holidays, like, I was tweeting about that I think on Monday. I need for people to be gone, out of the house so I can work. So yeah.

1:20:17 (KW): Do you—what's your editing process like now? Do you have to put a piece away before you can go back to it or what?

1:20:26 (ST): I'm trying to get better at that. I get so frustrated because I try to do it all in one sitting and it just doesn't work, like, and I need to just stop. 'Cause I'm like, "No, no, I can do it. I can wear both hats," and I can't. So I'm trying to start to do that now, you know? Like, I think people that write that have been, like, reporters and stuff before I think they have such an advantage because they know how to write, number one, much faster and then be their own editors. Whereas, like, me it's much harder first of all to be objective about my own work, and then, and to write, and then put something, I mean, you know, write on the fly. Sometimes, like, when I'm trying to like, you know, if I get an assignment or something like that I have to do that. I have to be able to write and edit. I don't have that luxury of being able to put something down and go back to it. So, it's kind of, I'm kind of doing both things right now, but when I'm just crafting pieces that I want to write then yeah, I'll write and then put it down for a day or two, you know, go back to it and I'm much better.

1:21:40 (KW): I want to ask you as one of my last questions, if you were a superhero what would your writing superpower be? Well, let's say— Yes, if you're a superhero what would your writing superpower be?

1:21:59 (ST): Aw man, I thought you were gonna give me something easy like who would I be. You want to know what my writing superpower would be.

1:22:06 (KW): Oh, nobody care about that!

1:22:08 (ST): Oh, that's too easy. Okay, what would my writing superpower be?

1:22:14 (KW): Yeah, what's your writing superpower? Would do you feel you do really—yeah, right now, in your work what do you feel you do really well. What's your superpower like? What's your superpower?

1:22:25 (ST): Well, then that's, no, not what do I feel I do really well. If I want a superpower then it's something I need to improve on, right?

1:22:32 (KW): No! It's like, you right now, you're a superhero. You are a superhero. Like, literally to many people with your publications. What's your writing power? This, okay, so this probably goes back to the other show that I don't have time to do about the bragging 'cause I see some resistance from you. You're a superhero now (Muffled Audio).

1:22:53 (ST): Okay. Okay.

1:22:55 (KW): You have these great clips.

1:22:57 (ST): Right.

1:22:58 (KW): *New York Times*, *Salon*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Washington Post.* That's a superhero. What is your superpower?

1:23:09 (ST): Gosh. All right, let me think about this. What is my superpower? Writing my truth. There you go ladies and gentlemen.

1:23:28 (KW): Drop the mic and walk away.

1:23:31 (ST): 'Cause I wanted, yeah 'cause I wanted to be, like, I wanted to be Wonder Woman with my invisible jet and you asked me something else. Like— Yes, writing my truth.

1:23:48 (KW): Thank you, Sharisse Tracey, for joining me on *Behind the Prose* today.

1:23:53 (ST): Thank you for having me. This has been so much fun. Can we do that other show now?

1:23:59 (KW): Yeah. Have your people call my people. No, but I'm serious, I should get that going. I'll invite you back for it.

1:24:08 (ST): So this has been awesome. Thank you so much.

1:24:12 (KW): Best of luck to you and you're welcome back when you get that deal for that memoir.

1:24:17 (ST): When I get it, it will be all over Twitter-land, trust me.

1:24:22 (KW): Yes, yes.

1:24:23 (Music)

1:24:24 (KW): I absolutely believe she's gonna get that deal for that memoir. Don't you? Make sure that you're following her @sharissetracey on Twitter. I have got her link to her Twitter account on the show page as well as links to some of her essays. You can go back and read them and then go back and listen to some of the things that we talked about. And, Sharisse, again, you are welcome back when you get that deal. Coming up in a few weeks on *Behind the Prose* I have an interview with Dinty W. Moore about his memoir, "Between Panic and Desire." I have an interview that was recorded live with students in my article writing class with Jessica Contrera, who's a writer at *The Washington Post*. I do have an interview potentially scheduled with an editor of one of the pieces of Shariesse's that we just talked about, so, *Hmm, who could that be* you're wondering. Plus, I still got this exclusive stuff from the Creative Nonfiction Conference in May. I have panel discussions, I'm gonna bring you a compilation episode, and we've got Dinty Moore's exclusive presentation, so that's the word of the day: exclusive. I'm gonna hook you up, *Behind the Prose.* Make sure you're following me on Twitter, @behindtheprose and subscribing on iTunes as well.

1:26:03 (KW): Well that brings us to another episode of *Behind the Prose*, the close of another episode. *Behind the Prose's* musci is by UK artist Redvers West-Boyle, you can find him, you know where, SoundCloud. The show is hosted and produced by me, Keysha Whitaker, from a maroon recliner that used to belong to an old lady, but she's dead now. Until next time listen, learn, and write.

1:26:34 (Music)

* Ever thought about pursuing an MFA? Sharisse Tracey did. Hear why at [5:40].
* How much research goes into writing an essay? A lot according to Sharisse at [15:52].
* Does every writer need readers and editors? Yes, according to Sharisse at [35:58].
* Ever had a piece published? Try four in one week. Listen to a fellow writer recount "the best week of [her] writing career" at [42:48].