

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Brief: Tiana Clark

Jenn Habel: This week's guest is Tiana Clark. She and I talked about breaking rules, sharing delights, and granting oneself the permission to take up space.

Clark is the author of the poetry collection, *I Can't Talk About the Trees Without the Blood*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, as well as the chapbook *Equilibrium*. She is the Grace Hazard Conkling Writer-in-Residence at Smith College.

This is The Brief. I'm Jenn Habel.

Tiana Clark: Hello?

JH: Tiana?

TC: Yes, hey.

JH: Hey, so happy to talk to you. Thank you for doing this.

TC: Yes, of course. I'm happy to talk to you. How's your day going?

JH: Oh, so far so good. It's been rainy all day and now it's cleared. Am I reaching you at home right now?

TC: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm, yes.

JH: What's out your window, if you're near a window?

TC: Out my window, I've got some trees. They're not out there right now, but usually I have a couple of bunny rabbits that are out there, and some wild mushrooms.

JH: You've been having an okay day so far?

TC: Yes, it's been really good. I had an interview earlier at 11:00. I had a training session—I'm on the faculty for the Indiana University Writers' Conference in Bloomington that they're having. It's all going to be virtual, so they were giving us some training on this new virtual platform, and then I took a walk at the greenway where I walk by my house pretty much every day. It's been my pandemic routine, and then I did a workout. I just had some lunch. Watched *Shrill*. I don't know...Do you watch *Shrill* on Hulu?

JH: No, but my daughter, just last night, was saying to me, "I really want to watch this show." I think we'll have to check it out. It's Aidy Bryant, right?

TC: Mm-hmm.

JH: Yes, I love her.

TC: Yes, it's really good. It's good.

JH: Well, I want to ask you about a line from your incredible poem that's in this week's *New Yorker*, "First Date During Social Distance."

TC: Oh, yes.

JH: Yes, and the line is "The difficult gift and guilt of loneliness." I was curious about your thoughts on when loneliness is a gift, and how does it cause guilt?

TC: It's so interesting that you bring up that line because I actually went back and forth with *The New Yorker* about the parenthetical because the original draft of the poem didn't have it in there, and then somehow during revision I wanted to implicate the self a little bit more. It's something I have been thinking about in my work. I kept on doing this nudge because I'm working with parentheticals throughout the poem to have this interior monologue or breaking the fourth wall. It's like eavesdropping on the writer. I had gone back and forth. I've sent so many emails like, "Put it back in. No, take it out. Put that again. No, take it out." A month before publication, I was like, "No, it needs to go in." I felt like this resolution: I was like, "No, it needs to stay." I'm actually really happy that you brought that up because that toggle between it being a gift and feeling guilty is important to me.

I think for me, the pandemic and I think going through a divorce during the pandemic, I've been thinking a lot about loneliness and solitude, the difference between them. I read Olivia Laing's *The Lonely City*. I reread *Bluets* from Maggie Nelson where, "Loneliness is solitude with a problem." I was trying to think about the distinction between them. I even did my own little season of solitude and I learned so many gifts from this time in my life.

I grew up as an only child with a single mother who worked a lot, so I grew up alone and the pandemic has really made me think about my childhood a lot. I feel like I'm in these two bookended moments of being like I'm back in the house with myself and having to entertain myself or just be with my own thoughts all the time.

People always ask me like, "Where did you start to be a writer?" and I always say, "Actually, it was with the solitude of my childhood," because I had to use fantasy and use my imagination to fill the house up with some noise and space. It's so interesting about... I see that as the genesis of a lot of my creative mind. It self-soothes, and so using those same tactics now as a 37-year-old is really interesting. I think there's a gift to that. And I think the guilt part in particular with that poem, I think the speaker is doing the things that loneliness can sometimes make you do, because I think in the poem what I'm trying to explore in this time is desire. It's such a touch-

hungry time and that what does it mean to be touched during a time when there's social distancing and extreme isolation. You know the rules of social distancing and you're on this date, and then there's this idea of breaking the rules, and I think that's where the guilt comes in for me in that poem. The speaker's invested in this idea of the essence of recklessness, where often I want to push my poems to the point of failure or a point of recklessness, but I think in that moment, the speaker's exploring this idea that loneliness can make us do also really reckless things. It can teach us something about ourselves, but it can also push us to reckless places. And there is a recklessness in the poem, and I was trying to implicate more of the self by, like, the speaker calls herself a bitch in the poem because I was wanting to... That wasn't in the original draft of it. It was more in the lusty, kind of juicy, libidinous moment and I was like, "No..." Ethically for me, I wanted to also weigh this kind of consciousness, so it's also on the speaker as well. Again, toggling the beautiful, difficult moments that loneliness and solitude can give you, and then the reckless lessons as well.

JH: Yes. I was wondering if you were thinking a little bit about if we should feel guilty in some way for feeling lonely. If it's like indicative of a lack of inner resources or something. A line that I've carried with me a long time is Marianne Moore said, "The cure for loneliness is solitude." As if we should be able to fix our loneliness by ourselves. And if you can't, it's in some way something to feel guilty about.

TC: Hmm, I love that.

JH: That's why I'm wondering...

TC: What Marianne Moore again?

JH: The cure for loneliness is solitude.

TC: Oh, I'm FaceTiming you. I didn't mean to do that. Oh, Lord.

JH: Oh [laughs]

TC: [inaudible] I was like...

JH: [laughs]

TC: You would see me in my sports bra. [laughter]

JH: Oh, that's funny.

TC: Yes.

JH: [laughs] Well, I mean, we probably touched on this with saying you're doing walks and stuff. I was just wondering who or what has been a comfort to you during the loneliness of the last year?

TC: Oh, that's such a good question. Yes, I think definitely nature has been a huge comfort for me. Which is so interesting because I used to beat myself up in my early days of poetry because I never really drew from the pastoral world. I would look at poets like Wendell Berry or Mary Oliver, and I'd often feel a sense that I wasn't like, "Oh, why don't I pull from that landscape," or "Why don't I feel inspired by that landscape." I've been reading a lot of Mary Oliver lately. I've been going through her collected devotions every morning. Now, I'm on my walks and I'm like, "Oh, I get it. I get it, Mary. I get it." [laughs]

JH: [laughs]

TC: I'm in a different place in my life. I think walking and observing have definitely been a comfort for me. I've grown deeper in my friendships. I call my Core 4, my four friends that are really important to me. Especially with my divorce, I think deepening those relationships has been really vital as well.

I do this new morning routine called, Meditation, Morning Pages and Movement. That's kind of how I ground my mornings. Rituals have been a new way for me to have comfort in my life because before the pandemic, I definitely was like, "Go, go, go." Traveling to different cities all the time, teaching, just running around like a wild person without any sense of center, so getting a routine and sticking to some rituals has been vital for me.

JH: Are you worried about things, I mean, are you worried you won't be able to keep that grounding, or do you feel confident in where you've gotten? I mean, I worry about myself in that respect, which is why I am asking that question.

TC: Yes. No, I think there is some sense...The world is starting to open up a little bit, and even recently, my schedule's been a little bit busier because now people are doing things. I had a weekend where it's like a graduation party, and then a friend's birthday, and it kind of felt like the old world coming back. I got home and I was like, "Oh my God." I felt exhausted in a different way that I hadn't been in a while because there were plans during the day.

The other day I was asked a similar question, and I had a portmanteau, like a word I made up. I didn't know, I was making a mistake, but I called it a hopening.

JH: [laughs]

TC: Someone was like, "I like that," and I was like, I think I'll have a hopening for the post-pandemic world that I can hold on to some of these really grounding, anchoring routines that have meant so much to me. Because of my first book tour I actually ended up in the ER from this extreme dehydration and stomach ulcers from not taking care of myself. That was already

pre-pandemic. I was starting to have this conversation with myself. I'm like, "Okay, something has to change here. This is not sustainable."

I always say poems are bodies that remind us of our bodies and so for me, taking care of my body has been essential, not only to my personal life, but my professional life. I've been really thinking about the boundaries that I've held onto and developed during this time that I want to maintain, and so I think that I'll have a practice in that flexible method as we open up.

For example, sometimes, to do my full routine, it takes about two hours, but sometimes I have shoved that down to an hour, or 30 minutes, or maybe I don't do 20 minutes of meditation, I do a quick five, or my movement might be I put on a fun song and I just dance it out really hardcore for four minutes and that's my movement, and that being okay with myself and having the grace to be like, "That was your movement. Now, keep it going."

JH: In some article I read that you wrote, you were talking about teaching virtually at Sewanee, and how well that workshop went that you did remotely, and you talked about how you started each day with a delight, by sharing a delight. I was just curious how that worked. What does that mean, sharing a delight?

TC: Well, I had read Ross Gay's *Book of Delights* and was inspired....He catalogued that for a year. Sometimes, as you know, when you enter the classroom space, it can be like... that first 10 minutes. I think it's the classic camp counselor in me, like an icebreaker, just like having, again, a ritual to start the class. I think, for me, gratitude has been a really grounding practice as well in the past couple of years, especially with the sickness of the pandemic.

Also, several of my students were going through some major personal crises. And I was as well with my divorce, but someone had experienced a really close personal death. Another person was going through a divorce. There was just lots of grief and loss on top of the global collective trauma that was happening with the pandemic. There was like a sickness, I feel like even in the fiber-optic space, that was just heavy with our class, and so I think starting the class with positioning a delight would add a small smile that was this little rivulet that became this good energy vibes in the space.

I was really anxious to see how the workshop would go because I've been teaching undergrad but that was my first graduate class, where you have that intense workshop experience where you're relying on the intimacy of a workshop. I was actually so shocked to see how the community just took care of each other. I think that people were... I had been working with some of the students—this was my second year with them—and they just broke through some major, vulnerable, raw spaces, and were able to needle and pinpoint some essential truths that I don't think they would have had if we were in class, and they even said so. I think that there was this safety for being at home and having the artifice of the window that they were able to really reveal themselves. I was astonished, but there was some sense of safety they felt I think from just being at home.

JH: That makes sense. I was thinking about your use of the word “joyfully” in another one of your pretty recent poems where you say, “I am joyfully trying to break every rule about poem-making that I know.” I think in talking about the poem that’s in *The New Yorker*, I feel like you were already touching on some of the rules that maybe you’re breaking, but I’m just curious about which rules you see yourself as breaking, but most especially the joy in that.

TC: Hmm. I think I do an exercise in some workshops and my students are like, “What are all the poetry rules you’ve been told?” I was told in high school like, “Don’t use too many adverbs,” or “Don’t be sentimental.” We’re given these dictums and we weirdly hold on to them without investigating them. I know that when you’re a student, you’re in that people-pleasing, “please Professor,” which is really like, “please Mommy, Daddy” role inside your heart.”

And then in graduate school, I definitely had all this impostor syndrome that I [inaudible] an English major, and there were all these books that I hadn’t read. For me, the real break happened when I started messing with received forms, because I have never really written in form. My high school teacher was like a hippie, Ginsberg dude, so the free-verse, muscular lyric was kind of my main jam. And so when I got to Vanderbilt, and I was with professors who were like, “You need to write a sestina, and a pantoum, and you can’t break it. You got to be strict.” The fear was that if I couldn’t write a strict Petrarchan sonnet, that I was a failure as a poet. You know those jazz musicians that can play off by ear, but they can’t read the sheet music? That’s how I felt in grad school. If I couldn’t read the sheet music, then I would be a failure as a poet.

And then when I started messing with form, I realized, “Oh. Oh.” Where I saw fear, I actually found freedom in making and breaking forms and subverting them in this idea of using the master’s tools and breaking the master’s house. A little bit of a different take from Audre Lorde’s essay, of “Oh, actually, I’m going to go in your house, and then I’m going to destroy it.” That’s where the joyfulness comes of looking at these forms that were never meant for me, and not only mastering them, but also actively subverting them. That gave me a sense of glee. And going back to getting reckless, also a sense of rebellion in tracing my literary ancestry all the way back to Phillis Wheatley, the first Black African-American poet, who’s also working in these forms. She’s even letting out subversive messages using Christian rhetoric to prove her humanity. Even that subversive take of what that looks now for me in 2021 of having a broken ghazal, or having a broken sestina, or having a broken villanelle, or using all the epigraphs that I want, and actually reveling in irreverence and promoting excess and indulgence and a work to be a Black woman and do that, that’s absolutely radical. [inaudible] That for me is a type of joyfulness that I’m really taking active pleasure in. Because I think there’s this way that I’m taught to be small in the world and to not take up space. There’s times I’m still hyper-visible and there’s times I’m very, very visible, and so I’m always counteracting my distance to that or my relationship to that. And so I think in my work, there’s times where I joyfully want to be reckless, and say like... In a newer poem that hasn’t been published, I say something like, “I don’t care if I’m being didactic, for once, I want to do whatever the hell I want in a poem.” Secretly, one of my friends, Jen, we talk about the audacity that some white poets or white male writers have. We give ourselves white male writer personas like, “What would Chad do here? Or what would Oliver?” He would say whatever he would want to say because the world

has taught him he could say it. Sometimes, I want to conjure that and I also want to subvert that or disrupt it in some way.

JH: In a lot of your newer poems I've been reading, especially those poems that are long, I've been feeling a freedom and have just gotten a vicarious thrill out of following you through the poem. I'm curious, are first drafts actually written in a rush for you often or does the poem just give the impression of that?

TC: Thank you for seeing that in my work. Yes, I've been writing these long poems up to 2016. It was after the election. It was actually an interview that I heard with Roger Reeves, where he talked about he would find himself subconsciously moving out of the way of white women in his life, and he asked himself where was he doing that in his work. And when he said that I literally had to pull the car over, and I think I cussed, and I just said, "Where am I doing that in my work?" I had been feeling this pull against concision. Again, it was about the permission and the sense of like, "Am I allowed to take up this much, to have the audacity to take up this much space," and "Will I just give myself the permission of like, go for it?" I think it was my Rime of Nina Simone poem. It's in my first full-length book. Nina was never going to be contained in a short poem. When I took off those borders and I just let myself shape a type of borderlessness and shape a type of breathlessness, and I'm just going and going and going, that did feel like a deluge. It did just feel like a galloping sense was happening through me, and if anything, I was trying to rush and catch up with everything that was happening. Now, the revision took 2 years. But I would say the bulk of the poem came out really quickly in a feverish weekend session. A lot of my long poems happen like that. They just pour out of me, and then I whittle and tweak for a long time, but the initial rush is like a waterfall effect.

A lot of that is in the music. Even when I'm reading them, sometimes I can always conjure that. You always want that tornado to come and hope it comes. Sometimes, that mysterious force comes in and I feel like that drum in my body or like that metronome or that click, and I'm chasing that speed in my work. Oftentimes in revision, I'm trying to still maintain that, but also still reading my syntax or looking at my grammar, looking at the aesthetics and making sure everything is clicking into place.

What I've been doing in my revision is thinking about the politics and the craft or what it means to be messy in a poem and keep some of that recklessness because I'm wanting the poem to feel like... I want the reader to feel the throttle that was in me as well. Some of that speed can't be polished. Sometimes when I'm looking at my syntax, looking at my grammar or thinking about how I'm going to lineate or my line breaks, I'm like, "How do I maintain the speed or maintain that acceleration? What keeps the engines inside of a long poem?" I've been wrestling with that question because I'm trying... Oh, I think I might write an essay about it.

I think one way I do that is through intertextuality. That's a way that I'm leaping or... I think Nickole Brown talked about this the other day. We were having a discussion and she said, "A long poem is like an...I always mess this word up, archipelago? How do you say it?"

JH: Oh, I don't know how to say that either. That's one of those words I read, but never say out loud.

TC: Archipelago. I feel like I'm missing a syllable in there. [Inaudible] like a collection of islands. [laughs]

JH: Yes.

TC: Archipelago. Oh, there we go. Archipelago.

JH: Okay, yes.

TC: A long poem feels like that way. To me, it's also like I'm leapfrogging off of these lily pads and I'm just trying to chase my associations. But I'm finding that my brain really works that way and it's as if, again, the long poem is another form that's been waiting for me, just as much as the essay. I'm just chasing it and just seeing where it's taking me.

JH: From "Broken Ode for the Epigraph," I love that place where you said you wished people came with little epigraph tacked on their foreheads, [laughter] so I want to ask you if you know what epigraph you would tack on your forehead?

TC: Oh, gosh. [laughter] I say this every day, I say, "I wish people came with Yelp reviews, too." [laughter] I think on my forehead, it would maybe say "generously wild."

JH: Ah, I love that. That describes some of these new poems you are writing. They're really great. I can't wait for your next book.

TC: Thank you.

JH: My pleasure.

TC: Thank you. I have the book currently on my dining room table right now. I'm hoping we're getting closer.

JH: Oh, exciting. Well, thanks, Tiana.

TC: Thank you, Jenn. I really appreciate just you're really thoughtful questions and your tenderness and time. Thank you so much for this opportunity to talk about my work. I really appreciate it.

JH: Oh, thanks for your openness and thoughtfulness. I hope to see you in person one of these days.

TC: I know. Thank you. I really appreciate it. Have a great rest of your day.

JH: Thanks, Tiana. Bye bye.

TC: Okay, bye.

JH: The Brief is affiliated with the Elliston Poetry Room and the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati. It's produced by Michael C. Peterson. You can find the whole season at soundcloud.com/ellistonpoetryroom. Thanks for listening.