



Amanda Ake

Vulnerability and the Page: Chloe Caldwell's *I'll Tell You In Person*

In the first pages of her newest essay collection, *I'll Tell You in Person*, Chloe Caldwell writes about scribbling “skip” on pink sticky-notes that she placed over parts of her first book before handing it to her dad. I drew huge brackets around that paragraph in my copy, because the thought of sharing my writing with family members has always caused me intense anxiety. At age twelve, I burned my first manuscript in my family’s wood fire. When I handed the loose pages to my older sister, whose additional two years allowed her to add wood to the 500 degree stove, all I felt was relief. I couldn’t bear the thought of anyone, especially my closest loved-ones, seeing a piece of my written work that I was not absolutely, one hundred percent proud of.

I'll Tell You in Person, published in October of 2016 by Coffee House Press, covers a vast array of subjects, including Caldwell’s addictive relationships with people and substances, survival in New York City, impactful friendships, and her journey to identifying herself as a writer. These subjects are old fodder for nonfiction writers, but Caldwell’s voice, which is simultaneously simple and uncomfortably blunt, allows for readers to connect with her narratives in a strikingly personal way. One of her strengths as a nonfiction writer is her ability to write compellingly about parts of her life that she clearly isn’t proud of and to create opportunities for readers to find their own stories within those narratives. Her essay “Soul Killer” begins, “I got a pedicure each time I promised myself I’d stop doing heroin,” and from that place of admission and self-knowledge she examines her habit of lying to herself and her attempts to change herself, two virtually universal experiences. Still, Caldwell struggles to maintain that level of transparency

with members of her family and she even admits, “For my nana’s copy, I straight up ripped out the essay about an orgy and the essay about masturbating.” What are we to make of Caldwell’s attempts to censor her writing, given the fact that she feels comfortable placing such vulnerable narratives on the internet? Though the inclination to shield one’s family from truths that might cause conflict or judgment is certainly natural, Caldwell’s decision to act on that inclination doesn’t entirely mesh with her identity as an author who writes so bravely and publicly about such sensitive subjects.

My first experience with Caldwell was a piece she wrote for *Catapult* in October 2016 entitled, “What I Think of the Fact That You Keep Asking Me What My Family Thinks of My Writing.” In the essay, Caldwell demonstrates that she has made peace with the fact that her family members, especially the ones who appear in her writing, will inevitably have an opinion about her work. However, she rails against the idea that her value as an essayist should be judged by her family’s reactions, instead of her craft and ability to connect with her readers. In this essay, Caldwell joins the abiding discussion of ethics within the nonfiction genre, adding her voice to the voices of countless other writers who have been criticized on the content of their nonfiction writing. Although Caldwell’s convictions don’t add anything groundbreaking to the conversation, the essay itself honors the many writers who continue to struggle with finding a balance between honoring family with their work and finding the words to express the things powerful and meaningful to their own narratives.

In her work, Caldwell demonstrates that she does consider the implications of allowing friends and family to show up in her writing. The way that she portrays her family within her essays indicates her willingness to examine the flaws in their relationships, but also her empathy in balancing their portrayal. In “The Music & the Boys,” she writes about her parents’ separation and about the first time her mom called her a bitch, about the sting of that moment that they would laugh about years later. At times we see her mother as the person who sometimes “borrows” money from her son’s savings; sometimes we glimpse her as the uncool mom who nags about her daughter’s smoking and partying habits. But we also see her as the

mom who never turns away her daughter's friends and who leaves a touching Bob Dylan quote in Caldwell's high school year book. Toward the end of her *Catapult* piece, Caldwell reminds us, "I don't think that family members and friends sometimes bleeding into your creative nonfiction work is a type of abuse, if it's done with love and compassion and creativity." Caldwell's purpose in addressing her family's narratives isn't to expose drama for its own sake. She writes about her family, as many writers do, in order to get to the core of her own narrative and, in making that exploration public, she enables her readers to codify their own experiences in a similar way.

Caldwell isn't the first writer to share private, sometimes shameful details about her life. I'm sure she's not the first writer to be accosted at a family wedding by a rude uncle who makes a pointedly judgmental comment about her published writing, in this case by saying, "I heard you wrote a nymphomaniac memoir." Caldwell's refusal to allow her shame to be the driving force or deciding factor in the art she decides to create is why I will continue to read her work over and over. Her words remind me that denying my fears of their all-consuming power may be the only way to save my writing from the crumbling ash of my parents' wood-burning stove.