



Stacey Waite

## Coming Out with the Truth

*Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she doesn't know whether they know or not.*  
—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

*The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.*  
—James Baldwin

In 2020, troubling the truth is unsettling—especially in the age of alternative facts, in a country where things that are right in front of us are said *not* to be right in front of us. Yet, as a poet, I have never much concerned myself with facts, never much cared for an affirmed “reality.” And as a queer person, I have spent far too much time debating the “facts” that my people are diseased, that there are two and only two genders, that a person owes it to others to be legible, readable, or loyal to the “facts” of abusive and constructed biologies. Roxane Gay writes, in *Bad Feminist*, “We should be able to say, ‘This is my truth,’ and have that truth stand without a hundred clamoring voices shouting, giving the impression that multiple truths cannot coexist.” In this particular passage, Gay refers to the ways we think about difference, privilege and identity, but I don’t think it’s a stretch to say her statement also speaks to writing itself, to the ways truth is, indeed, multiple or exists in more than one register as we try to tell it from our various genders/genres.

For some reason, my particular poems seem to invite people to ask “truth questions.” People ask: *are all your poems true?* or *did that really happen to you?* or the even more specific and assumptive type questions *is your mother more accepting now?* *did you really \*insert queer act of resistance and/or shame here\*?* Often writers are taught to fight the public assumption that our poems or stories are “true” or “confessional” in the

conventional sense. This is why we all refer to the voice of each other's writing in a workshop as "the speaker" or "the narrator." But we are all thinking it, aren't we? We are all thinking: *is this true? was your mother killed by your father? were you hit? did this happen to you in high school? what events lead you to become who we see in front of us?* We're obsessed, at times, with the events of a life. In this sense, every reader, every encounter about our writing is a possible coming out—the person doing the wondering and asking being the very "interlocutor" about whom Sedgwick writes in the first epigraph to this essay. And of course there are problems, risks with this coming out. There is the risk of giving in to the notion that you could tell the truth about yourself to begin with. For example, I sometimes say I am a lesbian, though I am not exactly a "woman" who loves/has sex with "women." The truth is closer to: I am maybe some percentage of woman, some percentage of man, some percentage of refusal, and I often find myself attracted to persons who are some percentage of woman with a slight (or more than slight) percentage of boy-edge, and some percentage of refusal—this, a closer "truth" about the things we call gender or sexuality.

But what kind of truth is this? Accuracy, facts, names, categories? We know truth is more complicated than that, something harder to grasp, something always just out of reach, just out of the grip of our understanding as we write. But perhaps it's too risky to do what I am about to do. Perhaps I shouldn't mess with the truth at this fragile moment. Perhaps I'll regret this all-too-honest essay about the truth and poetry. Take, for instance, this poem that follows. I wrote this poem; it's from a book I published in 2013. It is called "Coming Out in Porch Light."

When I tell my mother I am in love  
with a woman, the kitchen turns  
into a waiting room, and she opens  
the newspaper to learn a local man  
has committed suicide—the refrigerator  
hums. She doesn't speak or cry.  
I do not look at her. In this family,  
we pretend not to notice change  
in the eyes, or a warm rush  
of feeling in the face. I focus on the window,

on the neighbor who turns on her porch light,  
shaking out her quilt on the railing,  
settling in to a lawn chair—the quilt  
draped over her lap, her thin ankles.

My mother gives up reading.  
She moves the silverware  
from sink to dishwasher,  
first knives, then spoons, then staring  
at the sponge floating in the sauce pan.  
She says how late it's getting, how tired  
she has been. She turns the lock  
on the front door, the sound of her steps  
heavy to her room where she does not sleep,  
her mind flush full with pastors  
who pray hate for the damned,  
who hold protest signs at funerals.  
She thinks of men who shove bodies  
against walls at gas stations. She hears  
slurs shouted from car windows.  
She thinks of men who breathe  
intimidation, men like my father,  
by now, long gone. She imagines  
a busted lip on my boyish face.

Through the window, I watch the neighbor  
folding up the quilt in the porch light.  
For a moment, I think she is my mother,  
folding up my life into equal parts.  
I fold the newspaper, on one side,  
*there was no note.* On the other,  
*survived by his family.*

That's the poem in full. But now, I will return to the poem with "truth annotations." I will *come out* with the truth about the coming out poem. Just as an experiment, I want to do the thing I never do when I am asked if a particular poem is "true." Most poets I've seen answer such questions do so with the same evasions I do. We say "well, not everything in the poems happened exactly as described, but the poem is *true*." Affectively true. Spiritually true. Politically true. Aesthetically true. Factually true. But no poet really wants to talk about it; we don't want to talk about the truth experienced by the imagination, the insides turned outward without regard for the details of the details.

So here it is. A poem unraveled, a truth dilated. What does it change? Is the poem a series of lies?

Interpretations? Stretched facts? Is it true? Perhaps as true as what it was possible for me to say about my gender or sexuality, about my mother, about myself?

### **Coming out in Porch Light**

When I tell my mother I am in love  
with a woman, the kitchen turns  
into a waiting room, and she opens  
the newspaper to learn a local man  
has committed suicide

**The truth is when I came out to my mother, it was winter. It's a blur really. I was upset, a college girlfriend had broken up with me. She said I needed to learn how to stop trying to fix everything. She was right. I am certain I was crying. I am certain I told my mother out of necessity—there being no other explanation for my generally poor mood. There were newspapers strewn across the eighties glass kitchen table. There was no suicide in those newspapers that I know of. But I did want to die.**

—the refrigerator  
hums. She doesn't speak or cry.

**I don't remember what my mother did. But she's not a talker.**

I do not look at her.

**It's true, I would have been ashamed.**

In this family,  
we pretend not to notice change  
in the eyes, or a warm rush  
of feeling in the face.

**I'm from an alcoholic-shaped family, the kind that speaks of nothing uncomfortable, the kind that doesn't say "I'm queer" or "Mom is a drunk" or "Grandpa went crazy after Normandy." Let's not talk about that, says my grandmother if you try to get a word of truth out.**

I focus on the window,  
on the neighbor who turns on her porch light,

I don't remember my parent's neighbors. And I certainly could barely see a porch light from my parents' Long Island kitchen. They live in a suburb. No one much crosses the lines of their properties. But I suppose at the moment I am trying to capture in this poem, I would have wanted someone else to look at. I would have wanted to see someone besides my mother. I would have looked out the window as a way of looking at the question of a future or a failure.

shaking out her quilt on the railing,  
settling in to a lawn chair—the quilt  
draped over her lap, her thin ankles.

I have no idea why I said this, why this neighbor I invented is doing these things. But I am interested in them. I'm curious about what they mean in relation. I'm curious about why I invented this neighbor. What do I want from her? Is this neighbor the truest thing in this poem? Is she more true than the truest thing? Is she a way of finding those seeds of truth Virginia Woolf says it is my responsibility as a writer to find?

My mother gives up reading.  
She moves the silverware  
from sink to dishwasher,  
first knives, then spoons, then staring  
at the sponge floating in the sauce pan.

**Just the kind of thing my mother would do.** *Keep on keeping on.* But I don't know if she did it or not.

She says how late it's getting, how tired  
she has been. She turns the lock  
on the front door

**My parents never lock their doors.**

the sound of her steps  
heavy to her room where she does not sleep,

**It is true that my mother has a really hard time sleeping.**

her mind flush full with pastors  
who pray hate for the damned,  
who hold protest signs at funerals.

**This, of course, is a lie of impossibility: how would I know what my mother is thinking?**

She thinks of men who shove bodies  
against walls at gas stations

Here I write a violence I suffered as if my mother knows it will happen, the violence an echo of another poem in the book I am writing about being butch/queer/whatever in a world that mostly wishes you didn't exist/persist. Of course, this can't be true—my mother being a kind of omniscient character who knows the future of what will happen in my life. But I put the image of

that other true and violent poem in my mother's mind because it is in *my* mind—because it never leaves our minds if there are times in our lives when we cannot breathe.

She hears  
slurs shouted from car windows.  
She thinks of men who breathe  
intimidation, men like my father,  
by now, long gone.

**It's true, he was intimidating, and now he's dead.**

She imagines  
a busted lip on my boyish face.

The truth is my mother isn't likely to admit she thinks of me in danger. She's more the kind who works hard to tell herself there is no danger, no danger at all. What kind of truth does that make this? Sometimes, from a hotel after a reading, I'll get a phone call from my mother. She does not say she is checking to make sure a homophobic undergraduate hasn't bloodied my face after all that queer poetry, but as a parent I wonder if that's why she has called at this particular moment.

Through the window, I watch the neighbor

**There's that fake neighbor again.**

folding up the quilt in the porch light.  
For a moment, I think she is my mother,  
folding up my life into equal parts.

**It's true, my mother wants my life to be easier, more symmetrical, more like a fold. Or maybe not true; maybe I can't know what she wants. Maybe that's the truth—that in the end, we cannot know what others want, what they think, how they cope. All out of our control.**

I fold the newspaper, on one side,  
*there was no note.* On the other,  
*survived by his family.*

**So there was no suicide, but there's something here, some truth about family and survival. And my mother. And me. And something about gender, about the "his" in *survived by his family*. I am also him, a young man who has given up himself. The suicide is a complex and intricate part of the "truth" of the writing here, but it isn't true.**

The French Novelist, Émile Zola writes, "If you shut up truth and bury it under the ground, it will but grow, and gather to itself such explosive power that the day it bursts through it will blow up everything in its way." I don't think Zola is talking about whether or not I saw a neighbor when I came out to my

mother or whether or not she read the newspaper or if the newspaper documented a suicide. There's something bigger than that.

I think a lot of writers (even fiction writers) have a sense of guilt about the imagination, and it is partly this sense of guilt that I want to, even if temporarily, let go of. In a culture where creative imagination is undercut at every turn (in our education standards in schools, in our uninventive romantic comedies), it is sometimes difficult to argue for or make others understand the imagination's truth—the kind of truth that is just beyond articulation. This truth is not only intuitive and queer in nature; it's also not something writers know beforehand. We often just begin with a sound, a phrase, an idea, a story—and some kind of truth emerges out of it. Anyone who has ever sat down to write a poem or story ABOUT something will know, the factual truth of that something—what happened, when, how, who was there—actually gets in the way of truth itself, an obstacle to the kind of questioning, doubt, and inquiry that leads to truth in the first place.

Unfortunately, so much around us tries to convince is that the truth is only some kind of accuracy about events, details, or information. But as Oscar Wilde put it: *The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple*. Think about how many movies you've seen that seem to suggest that telling the truth, telling the actual facts, is morally good. *Honesty is the best policy*. But what if it isn't? Or what if honesty isn't what we think it is? What if to be honest is nearly impossible because it would require knowing what the truth is before I speak, or before I write. And it would require truth to be sayable, to be simple enough to be boiled down into the language that, in the end, we know fails us. In the end, of course, James Baldwin is right: *The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in*. And after all, isn't the truth really about transformation—about what we can *make* of what's in front of us, about re-making a world in order to see it clearly, about changing the world from the seeming stability of *one* truth to something more uncertain, something *more* true.