

**“Gender’s Tidy Little Story”: On Stacey Waite’s
“The Kind of Man I Am at the DMV”**

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On July 1, 2016, Mississippi HB 1523 was signed into law. One of its provisions states, “Male (man) or female (woman) refer to an individual’s immutable biological sex as objectively determined by anatomy and genetics at time of birth.” This bill codifies discrimination toward anyone whose gender does not fit the sex they were assigned at birth. How can a poem best speak to HB 1523, and to our daily lives as gendered beings?

Stacey Waite’s “The Kind of Man I Am at the DMV” (*Butch Geography*, Tupelo Press, 2013) dives headfirst into this question as the speaker encounters a boy in a Midwestern DMV:

*Mommy, that man is a girl, says the boy
pointing his finger, like a narrow spotlight,
targeting the center of my back, his kid-hand
learning to assert what he sees, his kid-hand
learning the failure of gender’s tidy little story
about itself.*

Sharp and energetic, this voice confesses, complicates, and asserts. Waite’s conversational narrative rolls forward with repetition, assonance, consonance, and neologisms like “kid-hand” and “boy-voice.” The boy in the poem, self-appointed gender truth-teller, targets the speaker’s body with his finger as he “learn[s] the failure of gender’s tidy little story / about itself.” This line about gender’s story makes gender into an untrustworthy narrator, and by personifying gender the poem succinctly challenges us to reconsider something many of us were raised to believe is fixed as the North Star.

The poem’s action is rooted in one of the most public American spaces, the sticky, dim-gray DMV. In the epigraph to Waite’s book, Judith Butler speaks to the stakes of being a queer body in this kind of space:

The body has its invariably public dimension: constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, the body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own.

Waite's poem enacts lyrically the experience that "the body is and is not mine"—and we witness the speaker grappling with this contradiction. This poem considers one of the most fundamental questions of the 21st century: who defines the body, its powers and its limitations?

In the second stanza, the speaker's response further complicates the picture: "I, man, am a girl. / I am the kind of man who is a girl, and because / the kind of man I am is patient with children, / I try not to hear the meanness in his voice." That twist—"I, man, am a girl"—draws attention to the way "man" is also used as a seemingly neutral filler word. And, as the speaker struggles with gender's too-tidy story, she also lets us see that the boy's words affect her. She *tries* not to notice the meanness in his voice, but we understand that she does as she hears

His boy-voice that sounds like a girl-voice
because his boy-voice is young and pitched high
like the tent in his pants that will be years later
because he will grow to be the kind of man
who is a man, or so his mother thinks.

One of the biggest achievements of this poem is that the speaker is not only vulnerable and sympathetic, but also upset and indicting. The balance between sympathy and indictment hinges on the uncertainty of the boy's own gender identity. The boy with his "girl-voice" may turn out to be "the kind of man / who is a man," and he may not. But for me, with its repetition of "man," this line also raises the question, How do we define "a man" exactly?

When the mother corrects the boy, the reader understands why the boy is so frustrated. In a way, the boy is right! But the mother responds, "*Of course he's not*," she says, pulling him back / to his seat. *What number does it say we are?* / she says to her boy, bringing his attention / to numbers, to counting and its solid sense." Our binary number system measures and orders based on agreed-upon rules not so different from those proposed by the authors of HB 1523 to prescribe gender, or those enacted at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The DMV is a place where private bodies become public bodies, become citizens. An awful photograph of one's face is taken, and one's eye color and sex are inscribed on

a plastic card that gets tucked into a wallet. This is how the state sees us, makes us see ourselves, and while the process limits all of us, for some that limiting is more loaded. It is no mistake that the poem is set here, and the further our gender or sexual identity is from “M” or “F,” the more limited we are by claiming one or the other.

No doubt each of us remembers an early experience when we learned what it meant to be a boy or a girl, and the consequences of transgressing those lines. Kids understand early that the lines are more fluid than adults have explained, but they can also become enforcers of gender’s rules. When I became a parent a few years ago, I listened to many people tell me some version of this narrative: *I didn’t think there was anything to gender differences either until I had a son and saw how he naturally just wanted to play with cars* (or, insert “daughter” and “dolls”). To me, it’s a failure of imagination to think anyone’s interests should be limited to a particular subset of things based on their gender, but, of course, those cultural forces are incredibly strong.

My godson prefers American Girl dolls to sports or cars. A few months into kindergarten, he confided to me, while wearing a pink princess dress and tiara, “I can’t wear this around all my friends. Some are okay with it. Some aren’t.” There was no sadness or anger in his voice, just a knowing pragmatism. Already, at age six, he’s learned that gender identity is fraught—something to be negotiated continually in different contexts.

And the boy in Waite’s poem? He won’t give up, and the poem ramps up with his response: “*But he has earrings*, the boy complains.” The boy “knows he is oh-so-right.” This line shifts the speaker into further self-definition:

The kind
of man I am is a girl, the kind of man
I am is pushups-on-the-basement-floor,
is chest-bound-tight-against-himself,
is thick-gripping-hands-to-the-wheel

when the kind of man I am drives away
from the boy who will become a boy,
except for now, while he’s still a girl-voice,
a girl-face, a hairless arm, a powerless hand.

Waite’s artful play with syntax, pronouns, and staccato-punctuated rhythms reaches a crescendo as the speaker talks back, in her own head, to the boy. We see how the boy is still fluid, developing, and “powerless,” though we also know that his words have had the power to make the speaker define herself.

In the same way that the boy is a mouthpiece for the resistance to “gender’s tidy little story,” he is also one of the many limiting voices to be resisted. And even as our pronouns and social policies adjust slowly to mirror the complex truths of gender, we’re still limited by our childish sureness and our conventional words, which Waite makes us feel in our mouths: girl/boy/man/woman.

At this point, it might be useful to bring another 21st century poem on identity into the conversation, Donika Kelly’s “Out West.” If Waite’s poem considers what gender means in the public sphere, Kelly’s poem speaks to what gender means in private. The poem begins:

Refuse the old means of measurement.
Rely instead on the thrumming
wilderness of self. Listen.

Here, “the thrumming wilderness of self” is the source of knowledge, as the speaker issues commands with a Lao Tzu-like authority. But the poem teaches us that our response should not simply be a Romantic turning inward to locate the true self.

In *Bestiary* (Graywolf Press, 2016), Kelly plays with categories of all kinds, and “Out West” argues that our bodies contain a kind of epic openness to the natural world—to animals in particular:

You have been lost for some time,
taking comfort in being home
to any wandering thing. Sheep and brown cows

graze your heart pocket. Antelope and bison
lap the great lake of your eye. And in your ear
the black bear winters.

The speaker intimately addresses the “you,” asking the reader to consider that one’s body might contain a great lake, or harbor animals. I understand these “wandering thing[s]” to stand for the unmoored, uncertain parts of our identities. Eve Sedgwick wrote that “‘queer’ can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.” Here, the body is a “wilderness” that contains multitudes, just as the self is.

What would it mean to accept that we are more than we’ve been told we are? Waite’s poem asks us this question, and Kelly’s poem, in its own way, answers: “If you could bear / being a person, you would no longer be / an iron bluff. //

Do not wander. We are all apportioned / a certain measure of stillness.” Yes, I say aloud as the poem ends, there *is* something unbearable about being a person in our ordinary, binary world, a body standing in line at the DMV, a boy unable to wear a dress wherever he likes. Waite and Kelly both imagine new ways of being for those who have been measured, targeted, or lost. As Audre Lorde tells us, “Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.” Waite and Kelly are a few of our vital poet-architects, and generations of readers will look back on them as poets who wrote the future.

Witness how Waite’s poem imagines a new world as it addresses contemporary notions of what it means to live in a queer body, but also as it illuminates timeless issues of what it means to live in any body that operates outside our narrow social norms. A small, mostly harmless interaction suggests other harmful, often violent experiences that queer people encounter, but the poem ends ambivalently, perhaps even upliftingly: “That boy is a girl, that man who is a girl / thinks to himself as he pulls out of the lot, / his girl eyes shining in the Midwest sun.” The speaker might be tearing up a bit, or might have that glassy-eyed look after an epiphany; we don’t know. But Waite leaves us with the sense of recognition found in all great literature—something essential about human experience has been brought out of the ether. Drawing miraculously from the dingy, humble space of the DMV, the poet has laid “a bridge across our fears.”