

Because Poems

Teaching Ross Gay's "The Truth" to Middle and High School Students

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AT THE AGE OF 14 my first “real” job was at Wendy’s. I worked the potato ovens for several weeks until I burned my hand badly. I was then switched over to cashier, but when my drawer was forty bucks short one day, I was demoted to sweeping up the dining area. This presented another problem in the form of a school nemesis who’d come into the restaurant, order French fries, sit in the dining room, and toss her fries one-by-one onto the floor so she could watch me sweep each one with a broom into a long-handled dustpan that I could never seem to hold right.

At the same time I worked at Wendy’s, my family was about nine years into a desperate attempt to patch itself together after my mother’s death. The patching process is still underway these thirty-odd years later, because recovery is slow when no one talks about loss. We prefer to mime our way through innuendo and pain, making our non-actions as weighted and impor-

tant as anything we might actually say or do.

Perhaps it’s my personal background, then, that first drew me to Ross Gay’s poem “The Truth”, which appears in his first collection, called *Against Which*:

The Truth¹

ROSS GAY

Because he was 38, because this
 was his second job, because
 he had two daughters, because his hands
 looked like my father’s, because at 7
 he would walk to the furniture warehouse,
 unload trucks ‘til 3 AM, because I
 was fourteen and training him, because he made
 \$3.75 an hour, because he had a wife
 to look in the face, because
 he acted like he respected me,
 because he was sick and would not call out
 I didn’t blink when the water
 dropped from his nose
 into the onion’s perfectly circular
 mouth of the Whopper Jr.
 I coached him through preparing.
 I did not blink.
 Tell me this didn’t happen.
 I dare you.

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¹From *Against Which* by Ross Gay (CavanKerry Press, Ltd. 2006). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Like all poems we choose to teach, Gay's poem moved me. It moved me not because of what the narrator chooses to do, but because of what he chooses not to do. I liked that it is a humble reflection, and that the narrator made a choice that others may not approve of. And I liked the repetition of the word "because," how it lilted me along until I came to a full-stop of truth. Naturally I also liked that the narrator is fourteen years old, working at a fast food restaurant just like I once did—only this narrator is the better version of me, the less narcissistic one capable of thinking beyond his own discomforts while he works at a job he probably doesn't love.

The youngest age group I've taught "The Truth" to is eighth grade. Children are often asked to reflect upon what they did over the summer, but rarely are they able to write their way to a truth that may cast them in an unfavorable light. So often I overhear angry and self-righteous people talking to their

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friends and loved ones on city streets and in subway cars, telling everyone how they sure did show that guy or how it's the last time that sucker will mess with them. That kind of thing. Sometimes I feel like I'm walking through a world in which everyone—myself included—is feeling awfully proud for being such a tough guy.

When I teach this poem, I want my students to think deeply about a time when they were *not* the tough guy. I want them to focus humbly not upon what they said or did, but instead on what they didn't say or do. What's more, I want them to narrow this non-action down to a gesture, to something that may

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not have been noticeable to an onlooker. I want them to think of a time they showed deep compassion for another, or maybe like me in the case of my mother's death, they chose not to speak about something very important because they felt afraid. I want their poems to be quiet.

I ask my students what word is used most frequently in "The Truth." I then ask them why it is a person would keep repeating himself: Because he wasn't heard the first time around? Because what he's saying is important? Because he's trying to explain himself clearly? What does the repetition of the word "because" have to do with the title of the poem? How did he come to the truth? I tell students to mimic Gay's structure if they like—to repeat the word "because" in order to lilt yourself downward toward your truth, using it as a means to peel back the translucent, barely detectable reasons amassed to justify a non-action. At the end of these layers I ask students to reveal the core of their Because Poem, their truth. (It should be noted that Because Poems could also work as an excellent starter for asking students to write a reflective essay.)

After the first read, "The Truth" speaks only to a few teenagers. Some students can't get past how gross it is that the narrator said nothing about the man's "water" dripping from his nose into the burger. They say the narrator should've been fired and somebody should've called the health officials. I agree that a guy's dripping "water" is unsanitary, but why'd the narrator not even blink when it happened? What do we know about the two characters in the poem? Why does Gay choose language like "he had a wife to look in the face"? I mean, why not just say the guy had a wife who expected him to support the family? High

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school kids know very well the difference between a 14-year-old fast food manager and a 38-year-old man who’s got real responsibilities like a wife and two kids and two jobs. They know what it means to have to look somebody in the face. They know it cuts deeper.

“The Truth” can cut deep. When I ask students to think humbly about their own lives, there are often only a few takers. Many students can’t help but make their poems into another opportunity to list this reason they did that thing and that reason they didn’t do this other thing, until they’ve written themselves into a tizzy with no real end. But some students are able to use this writing as a way to come to a quiet truth. When these students write, they are writing about the most interior parts of their lives, the parts they’d prefer, maybe, to hide even from themselves. They write about not passing important tests, disappointing others, breaking up with lovers, fighting with friends, and not always coming out the winner. In short, they write about real life. 🍷

Untitled

TRAVIS J.

Because he had a beef with my friends
 Because he had a fight with my friend
 Because he chose me out of everyone to
 pull a knife on
 Because I woke up the next day not in a
 good mood
 Because when I approached him in
 breakfast to speak about the situation,
 he disrespected me
 Because even though I left him alone, he
 had the nerve to still talk about me
 Because I got tired of hearing his mouth
 run on and on
 Because he was trynna humiliate me in
 public
 Because I snapped and made his mouth
 stop
 running for a while to come
 Because I should have just went to class
 instead of making my biggest mistake
 ever
 Because I turned into a person completely
 out of character
 Because the shy and quiet shell that
 covered me for so long finally cracked
 Because he continued to embarrass me and
 broke the shell completely
 Because my friends were there and I felt as
 if I had to prove myself
 Because I stopped and tipped my peak
 Because he swung and tried to hit me
 Because I swung back and actually hit him
 and my anger was being unfair and wouldn't
 let me stop
 Because of all that...
 I ended up in hell for three months.

Tragedy

BEN P.

Because when I saw her on the street with
 another guy
 she looked like she wasn't doing anything
 wrong
 maybe she thought she could fool me with
 anything
 because she thought it was okay to go out
 with another guy
 because she actually looked happy when
 she was with the guy
 I could only stand under the streetlight
 with my broken heart
 looking at her from far away.

Why I Wanted to Cry

ROSEMARY O.

Because you were seven years old
 and couldn't do subtraction
 Because I was failing you
 and letting you fail
 second grade
 Because I took every mistake personally
 Because I had number lines,
 buttons,
 and flashcards
 and I let you count on your fingers
 Because there are only
 so many ways to explain
 that subtraction
 means getting smaller.
 I asked you what
 four minus two
 was
 You looked at me
 like I had kicked a puppy
 And answered,
 "Seven?"