

COLIN IS CHANGING HIS NAME: A COLLECTION  
OF POEMS WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate College of the  
Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
Spring, 2021

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OF POEMS WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the editors and staff of the following publications in which many of these poems first appeared.

Many thanks to Bryan Borland, Seth Pennington, and all of Sibling Rivalry Press for publishing a version of this manuscript in 2017.

All of the love to my husband, John Randall Kitchens, for first giving me the idea of the character “Colin” and to all the “Colins” who wove their way into this work through their friendship, support, and pure existence.

Lastly, all the gratitude to my teachers, friends, and family, and a special thanks to the members of my committee—Dr. Lisa Lewis, Dr. Janine Joseph, Prof. Sarah Beth Childers, and Dr. Christopher Haygood—for their help, support, and guidance along the way.

Name: JOHN ROBERT ANDREWS

Date of Degree: MAY, 2021

Title of Study: COLIN IS CHANGING HIS NAME: A COLLECTION OF POEMS  
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: ENGLISH

Abstract: *Colin Is Changing His Name* is a collection of poetry that explores issues of identity and self-acceptance through the journey of coming out as gay in the rural south. Working through multiple characters named “Colin” the collection works to illuminate the complicated process of self-discovery and definition LGBTQ people experience. Localized to the rural south, the work of the book aims to further LGBTQ representation in rural spaces and complicate the idea that queer people can only find acceptance, safety, and happiness in major cities.

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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *The Queer South: LGBTQ Writers on the American South*, editor Douglas Ray muses on the queer South writing, “I suppose a region cannot be sexed or gendered, but if we apply this definition of queer to the South’s character, I think it fits the dissonances that are so prevalent in dear Dixie” (13). The South itself is ultimately a mash up of cultures, religions, cuisines, and ideas in a confusing way that confounds the heterosexual matrix itself, and with this, queer individuals often have an even harder time navigating and defining their own identities. My book of poetry, *Colin Is Changing His Name*, attempts to address gay male identity construction in the American South by pushing against the heterosexual matrix and questioning what it means to be intelligible in the social and geographical landscape of rural America. Exploring everyday domestic life, public school, and Christian-religious traditions, my work tells the story of a young gay male as he tries to find his identity in a place that often attempts to cover up and push out homosexuality. As a gay male, poet, and southerner, I’ve always been interested in the way the three identities clash and overlap in

the context of creating poetry, and my book, *Colin is Changing His Name*, blends the three. Calling on the tradition of gay male poets, such as Jack Spicer and Frank O'Hara, who lived in major cities, and paying special attention to contemporary gay poets in the South, such as Bryan Borland and Stephen Mills, my book speaks to both queer and straight people in an attempt to illustrate the confusion queer people today often face. *Colin Is Changing His Name* serves as poetic site for pushing back on the heterosexual matrix by creating an easily intelligible identity with the name "Colin" and then repeating images and identities of gay men imperfectly through kinship ties and tradition to illustrate the lack of a single queer southern identity.

*Being Named: Intelligibility and Repetition*

In 2017, when a version of this book first came out, I was simultaneously excited and horribly nervous because I knew that I was going to have to talk to people about my experiences and how "Colin" came to be. In line with the messy multiverse of Colin, my choice of the name comes from multiple people I've known and loved who are named Colin. My first day of fifth grade I met Collin, and yes, his version is spelled with two "L"s. A week into school we realized we were both southern transplants; our parents moved us from California to Arkansas for a better life, though he did so far later than my beginning kindergarten at Sheridan Elementary School. We became best friends, always interested in the same things, such as Pokémon and Dragon Ball Z. But when puberty hit, our interests went elsewhere. I knew something was off when I went to a 7th grade sleepover and all our friends were ogling over Collin's new Laura Croft poster, while I was looking at him. I tried my best to never "show" any interest in him or any boys, but it was there. So much inner turmoil came after that realization. No one called me a fag; no

one knew what I was thinking; the guilt of looking at a clothed man instead of a naked woman and feeling desire crushed me. It's this pain, the internal self-loathing fear that I've asked Colin to convey in this book.

My earliest introduction to poetry resembles that of many teenagers with feelings. Starting in lyrics from what now could be called "emo" bands, I was drawn in by the metaphors for pain that bands like Bright Eyes and AFI constructed, which seemed to be more honest renderings of love than the standard pop love affairs spelled out plainly in concrete language. By no means would I call this poetry, but it was a jumping off point, and I found myself filling journals with teenage angst. Of course, I didn't read poetry, not because the Grant County library only had poetry by Whitman and Dickinson and the fact that we only had dialup internet well into my later high school years, but mostly my own false assumptions that there wasn't any poetry doing what I wanted poetry to do. At the end of my Junior year of High School, I was selected to attend Arkansas Governor's School, a summer camp for students across the state to spend the whole summer living at a private college campus and studying disciplines not covered in high school classrooms. I attended for English Language Arts and finally studied poetry that wasn't Dickinson or muddled emo band lyrics. While we covered many contemporary poems and poets I'd never encountered, this is when I fell in love with Carl Sandburg. Sandburg took emotions and made them palpable scenes: love became a tree; pain became a woman beating her head against the prison bars of her small-town life. From Sandburg I moved on to other standards of the cannon like Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, and T.S. Elliot before being introduced to Frank Stanford in college. Stanford was the first poet I'd encountered who was unabashedly of the rural South, and an Arkansas native. I poured



over his book length poem, *The Battlefield Where The Moon Says I Love You*, and reveled in a work that was full of the landscapes and scenes that were so familiar to me, rendered in verse. As beautiful as his work was, it was not queer and ultimately left me wanting to fill in that space myself, which ultimately led to me applying for MFA programs and ending up attending Texas State University.

Having fully come out my junior year of undergrad, I moved to the program at Texas State for the first time as openly gay. Unlike having to come out and tell friends and family that I wasn't straight, I was finally given the chance to be me the moment I met people, which ultimately was scary given the context of moving completely alone to a new state. My first time meeting other people in the program I got a Facebook message from a third-year student, Andi, who told me that a group of MFA poets get together every Wednesday at a bar called "The Restless Wind." Naturally I was nervous about meeting new people, but I was more so nervous about being completely open and honest about myself. When I got to the bar the place was empty except for a man in a baseball cap reading a book at a table in the corner. Not assuming he was in the program I waited at the bar with my drink for the one face I recognized to arrive. Before they could show up, the man in the baseball cap came over and struck up a conversation with me while he ordered another drink. Small talk finally turned into recognition and he said "oh you're John! Andi mentioned you'd be here tonight, I am Colin." After Andi and a few more new friends arrived, Colin and I had been deep in conversation about who we liked to read and what kind of work we were doing before I revealed wanting to write about my experience of being gay in the South. I was open and honest about who I was to Colin and met with the immediate support of being offered, for the first time in my life, the

poetry of Frank O'Hara. Like many gay writers I became enamored with O'Hara's unabashedly queer work that was bold and beautiful in the way it addressed queer romance, and it was all thanks to the second, straight, Colin of my life. Meeting him and receiving his recommendations for reading, his friendship, and his guidance felt like my life had come full circle, finally able to be open and out with my friends from the start. So, when I chose the name Colin, I wanted to honor my personal journey from worrying if Collin would accept and support me if he really knew, to finally knowing that there are people in the South who accept me for me.

The first major theme/technique of *Colin Is Changing His Name* focuses on naming and marking individuals. In the gay world, pronouns and proper names often lead to confusing understandings and misunderstandings of relationships. Specifically, pronouns have always given me trouble in writing poetry and even talking about my relationships and desires, and I've always been interested in the way language becomes confusing when trying to describe gay relationships. In 2013, I met John Randall Kitchens, who luckily goes by Randy, and found an even more inspiring confusion: two people with the same name, in love. As our relationship continued, daily life slowly revealed how confusing language can often be through simple tasks such as signing for a package and the delivery person asking, "are you John?" There is a strange erasure of individuality that happens in gay relationships that can be a jarring experience. With this I return to Jack Spicer, known for confusing and confounding language, and his poem "Homosexuality." The poem works with the conceit of roses to illuminate the confusion of names and genders in gay relationships. Spicer begins the poem "roses that wear roses enjoy mirrors. Roses that wear roses must enjoy the flowers they are worn by" (6). In this

mode, roses work the same way “Colin” functions in my work. The roses get repetitive and hard to follow, as to which rose is which and who is who.

Like Spicer’s Roses, “Colin” works to intentionally confuse the reader, falling in love with other “Colins” as a way to illustrate the multitude of identities gay men have despite societal construction of gay male identity. One poem from my collection in particular, “Approaching Infinity,” explores the confusion of similarity. The poem is set in 6 scenes where “Colin” interacts romantically with other “Colins,” ending with the act of putting one “Colin” in the well and taking one out, playing on the concept of infinity, where hypothetically you could place two things in a bucket and take one out for ever and supposedly would end up with half of infinity, illustrating the same timeless alienation that Spicer’s “Homosexuality” enacts. Here, though, the larger scope of the poem attempts to encapsulate the multitude of gay male experiences. In one scene, two “Colin’s” meet in a bar like a couple who might catch each other’s eyes and find love at first sight, running off together at the end of the night. In the next scene, “Colin” is cruising a park for sex in the same way that many gay men have done throughout recent history. Returning to the same bar, the next “Colin” looks to be a rebel the way movies often portray teenagers running off with the “bad” crowd in an attempt to fit in. Moving out of contemporary places of sex and romance, “Colin” visits a grocery store, as both a nod to Allen Ginsberg’s “Supermarket in California” and expression of the often-cold sterile nature of sex as consumption many gay men choose to pursue. From here “Colin” enters a dance club where he is a wall flower falling for a guy who “doesn’t know he is Colin” in the way that people often fall for individuals who aren’t oriented the same way (gay or straight), illustrating yet another confusing facet of gay life. Finally, the poem

finds “Colin” in middle school where he’s been beaten up and had his teeth chipped for being “Colin” toward a schoolmate, calling attention to often-unsafe nature of revealing one’s homosexuality to peers. With the poem relying on infinity and the solitary character name of “Colin”, the poem works in the same way Spicer’s “Homosexuality” does in the sense that it pairs down identity into one object or “the Roses.” In her essay “Gender is Burning,” Judith Butler explains how bodies are made intelligible. Beginning with Althusser’s notion of interpellation, which uses a policeman as an example, Butler explains that the act of “hailing” creates an intelligible subject, ultimately calling a body into the social realm of subjection. Butler explains, “the call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject” (82). In other words, the act of being deemed as a subject carries the responsibilities and expectations of the subjecthood. Instead of simply letting everything be one singular thing, “Approaching Infinity” pokes holes in the notion of a single identity by revealing distinct actions and events through a perceived intelligibly gay individual that complicates a monolithic understanding of gay experience. Each scene reveals a new “Colin”, a different experience or approach to searching for love and romance and pushes on social perceptions and stereotypes about gay men to illustrate that there is no true singular experience.

One of the most prominent gay male poets, and one of the biggest inspirations and influences on my work, Frank O’Hara, was known for addressing readers directly in his work to not only connect with the reader, but to create a sense of urgency. Often, O’Hara’s focus on the second person stemmed from writing directly to his friends and loved ones. O’Hara explains how he came to the notion of “Personism” after being in

love. He states, “I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it, I was realizing that if I wanted to, I could use the telephone instead” (499). In his work, he constantly is communicating with a specific individual, an intended audience that isn’t necessarily the reader, and yet O’Hara appears to address the reader to create intimacy. One of his most famous poems “Having A Coke with You,” illustrates this perfectly. In the poem, O’Hara is speaking to the lover he mentions in his essay. He is telling the reader how and why he loves them, making statements such as “partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian,” (360). Obviously, O’Hara doesn’t know any of today’s readers and thus the poem isn’t for us, but more so his lover, yet the effect of second person remains, pulling them into the story at hand and making them a subject in the poem. The reader thus becomes part of the intimacy, as if it were overheard. The love here is illuminated without being destroyed by the story. If the poem read as “I love him because in his orange shirt he looks...” then the address to the reader would be lost. The poem would become an artificial ode to an obscure person that the reader may or may not even care about. Instead, the poem becomes urgent because the actual reader is interpolated and thus asked to feel connection and celebrate love because of the second person mode. O’Hara is able to do exactly what he argues by putting the poem between two people and not just on a dry page, implicating the reader as an active force in the work.

Inspired by O’Hara’s use of second person, my book often addresses the second person in order to create sympathy and connection with the reader. Part *Ars poetica*, part example of how my imagination makes something tangible out of the muddy trauma that is being both gay and southern, this poem embodies what I want, what I believe, poetry to

do. In my case, one hand holds the fear of being gay, more so, the fear of being caught being gay and that by its nature inviting damnation, or violence, or more localized to me: disappointment. In the other hand there are the horror stories that are not mine, the cinematic tales of being cast out of the house, or scenes as fantastical as “the shining” reference the poem invokes. Growing up in the South, I was terrified by the prospect of being gay. I saw how gay people were treated and talked about, I grew up watching the discussions around Matthew Shepard and AIDS and DOMA and “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” while sitting among the choir that cheered it on. I am lucky in the sense that the brunt of this physical violence never came upon me. I came out towards the end of my undergraduate career to my family who still loved and accepted me in the wake of exiting the closet. They had all along. And in some sense seemed to have known all along. They never tried to correct any supposedly telling signs like the fact that I played barbies with my sisters or was really into drama for 4 years before finally being obsessed with being the drum major in the band. They weren’t the monsters coming to destroy me, like so many LGBTQ people physically experience. Instead, I made the monsters.

When I say “I made the monsters” I mean it in the same context of the opening poem, “Sleepover.” The real monsters are the people, the social rules, the laws all trying to cause LGBTQ people harm. They are sometimes intangible when they don’t live in your house, but still are legally trying to tear you down. They aren’t physical, but imagined, in the same way that an angry father busts through the bedroom door with an axe announcing, “here’s Johnny!” The trick of this whole book, though, is that I am, in part, Johnny. It’s very easy to dismiss so many others’ fears as “monsters under the bed”, not real, aka not being real when they are unintelligible for the viewer. I had peers in this

program tell me to my face, “I support you, but I think your lifestyle is a sin” and yet they still believe there is nothing for me to be afraid of being gay and living openly in Oklahoma, let alone the real South. The line between real and imagined is always blurred for me in poetry, which is why I am drawn to it.

When I went to undergrad, I thought I’d major in music but ended up majoring in writing within the first year. I loved, and still love, the way music creates meaning beyond words, constantly asking listeners to feel and experience a multitude of emotions and memories all at once. In writing though, I studied rhetoric, which isn’t the most artistic, but in one of my capstone courses, “Evolution of Rhetorical Theory,” I found Kierkegaard, who roughly argues that writing is “the collision of ideality and reality.” There is always the world we imagine, and the way things actually happen. In my case of growing up in the South, there was the internal struggle of imagining the horrors of how this world will destroy me for being who I was the second I came out, and the actual experience of coming out only to be loved by the people that mattered to me. While this story of acceptance is sadly not common, I wanted to create a work that validates the internal fear so many LGBTQ people carry. I aim to make our internal fear, as Judith Butler explains, intelligible.

Moving further toward the darker side of interpellation and intelligibility in my book and returning to Butler, repetition of an individual identity or performance often exposes the seams of gender when radical or failed performances of gender take place. While Butler points out that repetition of gendered performances often reveals the instability of gender, Mary Gray, whom we will return to later, argues that it is dangerous to reduce gay identity to single standard troupes; both seem to reach toward opening up

channels of representation. Like Spicer's poem "Homosexuality", my work builds on characters with the same name running into one another and illustrating simultaneously a shared sense of identity but with clearly different personalities, beliefs, and perceptions of the world.

In this sense, all gay men are hailed "Colin" to make them intelligible to the reader and to each other, yet each performed "Colin" illustrates different facets of queer identity. In my poem, "Pyschopathia Sexualis," identities become especially blurred. Using Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Pyschopathia Sexualis*, the poem is a redaction of individual accounts of male homosexuality. The original text, written in German in 1886, was the first text to fully define and attempt to "diagnose" homosexuality. While there are several partial modern translations of the text, I choose to work with the original German to find the complete descriptions and then translate them myself. Similar in structure to "Approaching Infinity," each section of the poem corresponds directly to Krafft-Ebing's numerical coding of the subjects, the individual gay men he studied, and uses only text found in each account to create a portrait of a "Colin". Totaling 6 individuals, each section lifts parts of their "diagnosis" descriptions from Krafft-Ebing's text to create character sketches and sexual histories for each individual. Some individuals show an affinity for drag, some describe being attracted to beards, some for anal sex, all pointing to different moments in their lives when they found their desires. The effect here illustrates a wide variety of experience through the single lens of "Colin" in an attempt to illustrate homosexuality not as a monolith, but a spectrum, in spite of the lumping of identities often used in stereotyping homosexuals. While this stereotyping isn't confined to the South, "Pyschopathia Sexualis" points to one of the major themes of



the book: variance in homosexual experience. By charting out experiences through the use of a clinical text, the book works to queer a now defunct cornerstone of homosexual studies and further fracture common conceptions of homosexual identities.

### *Kinship and Tradition*

One of the most prominent themes in Southern literature and sociological studies of the South is the importance of kinship and the importance of familial structures and ties in Southern culture. As Alexis Annes and Meredith Redlin argue in their essay, “The Careful Balance of Gender and Sexuality: Rural Gay Men, the Heterosexual Matrix, and Effeminophobia,” while men in rural areas often point to heterosexual relationships as their ideal lifestyle, almost all the rural men they interviewed in their study described their ideal partner as traditionally masculine (265). This duality pushes back on traditional family ties in the sense that two “masculine” men run the household, calling into question traditional family structure itself. Just as the drag queens in *Paris is Burning* find new modes of family through their houses, the men in Annes and Redlin’s research illustrate a reconstitution of kinship that relies on preexisting heteronormative culture. While replacing a matriarch with a second patriarch may or may not be as subversive as reconstructing the entire family unit, this act is partially intelligible within the heterosexual matrix. Partially intelligible genders ultimately press on the nature of what one can be, such as a “tomboy” or a “sissy,” and as Butler explains, these constructions are failures to repeat prescribed genders, an ambivalence, that illustrates the failure of concrete gender roles. Butler argues, “this is doubtless a cultural re-elaboration of kinship that anyone outside of the privilege of heterosexual family (and those within those “privileges” who suffer there) needs to see, to know, and to learn from” (95). It is this

reconstruction of family that serves as a powerful site for questioning the assumedly fixed positions within the heterosexual matrix. Stephen S. Mills, a contemporary gay male poet and winner of the Lambda Literary Award, renegotiates kinship throughout his book *A History of the Unmarried*.

Particular to this conversation about traditional kinship roles, “A Stranger Asks: Who’s the Man and Who’s the Woman” from Mills’s book explores the way in which LGBTQ relationships are often forced into heteronormative roles. The poem begins “she wants to know how to see us” calling in the perceived necessity for people to see queer relationships through hetero roles, as we’ll discuss further with Carol Mason (33). From here the poem moves through the conventions you’d expect, asking who does the housework and would wear a dress. Taking it to a heteronormative extreme, Mills writes, “she wants to know if we were ‘normal’ who would carry the children,” further emphasizing the importance of kinship ties and how they define individuals within the heterosexual matrix (33). The poem moves through Halloween and child rearing and sexual positions the two take on as an indication of who would be whom through the straight gaze. Mimicking the woman’s logic, the speaker of the poem comes to point out that the woman “wants the answer to the equation: one man + one man =,” which he answers, “what if part A goes into part B and sometimes C and vice versa” (33). Here the logic of the woman is compared to mathematical facts, illustrating that there isn’t a concrete answer to her attempt to un-queer their relationship. The poem ends “she doesn’t understand” and Mills clearly points out the flaw in comparing straight and gay relationships, thus resisting the un-queering gaze of the imagined woman. Much of Mills’s work approaches social attempts to un-queer individuals and moves in this similar

fashion, repeating the expected or normal social roles back in a way that makes them queer. As Butler would point out, this repetition breaks down, revealing the not so concrete status of supposedly stone cut roles of gender relations. Like presenting logic to a logic-based computer in a sci-fi film, Mills spins the heteronormative back on itself to overload the system until it doesn't compute.

As with Mills' book, the poems in my collection work to queer the straight gaze by revealing the seams in presumed stable gender roles. To queer the book itself, there are two title poems, meaning that two poems in the collection are titled "Colin is Changing His Name." The first title poem comes at the beginning existing in 5 sections/scenes that tell the story of a young man in the South not wanting to be gay. Because the name "Colin" stands in for the word "gay" throughout the book, the initial title poem works to not only jar the reader, but to teach them how to read the work through the queer lens illustrating the instability of names and definitions while trying to hold on to traditional roles. In the first section "Colin" is heading to church camp and encouraged by his mother to "try on a new name" at church camp because "these things aren't stone, but water." As many Christians believe homosexuality to be a choice, this initial idea works to confuse what it means to be gay or straight as a parallel to being given a name. Just as Butler argues for the performative nature of gender and that it is a set up and assigned performance, the name "Colin" pokes at the complexities of being asked to perform, pointing out that there isn't a true sexual identity pre-hardwired. The next section of the poem moves into a mode of fear, and "Colin" selects clothes and the way he carries himself as a means to blend in instead of standing out, which ultimately ends in someone shouting "Colin" at him from a passing truck, indicating a failed

performance. The third section moves to the doctor's office where "Colin" debates whether he should share his name. At first, something as mundane as sharing a name doesn't seem to make sense. Yet, in thinking about sexual identity and societal assumption that all gay men have AIDS, something as simple as filling out a form becomes a negotiation of identity. Even the simple task of saying who you are and what you enjoy becomes a larger event that many individuals might not bat an eye over. Moving to section 4, the poem turns toward the derogatory way in which terms like "faggot" and "gay" are appropriated, "Colin says only other Colins can call him Colin," pointing out the strangeness of self-degradation and revealing how queering the abuse of such terms can feel a bit ridiculous. Finally, the poem ends with "Colin" in prayer asking God for a new name. In this scene God is asked to change "Colin", poking at the seams between what is biological, divine, and socially constructed.

The second of the two title poems arrives as the penultimate poem in the book and begins by working toward building a new family unit in the way that men in Annes and Redlin's study wanted to achieve a heteronormative portrait of family. In the first section "Colin" acknowledges the societal obstacles that stand in the way. The poem begins with standard concerns LGBTQ individuals in the South might face. "There's the way it will never work. The boots to the chest, the crosses, park benches, cross roads where no one is meant to meet, only go" (53). From here the poem moves through even more complicated questions, such as who will propose to whom and if someone should ask permission from the other's parents for marriage like many heteronormative couples still do today, illustrating that the only frame of reference for marriage lies within the heterosexual matrix and questioning the importance of such antiquated structures. The second section

continues with this thought, instructing the reader to “figure out who goes first” before deciding how exactly to propose. Here the scene folds in on itself, both “Colins” could feasibly propose, could follow cliché boat rides and candle lit dinners that suddenly seem strange when two identical people with identical names are performing. Working within the heterosexual matrix and the traditions of marriage the image becomes surreal, a fun house mirror of the prescribed romantic actions that seem familiar and yet strange. This distance ultimately works to not only question tradition but, moving into the final section, asks the reader to boil down the important parts of romantic attraction. Offering up a multitude of traditional, strange, and specific modes for the proposal, the third and final scene of the poem asks in all the important memories, places, and moments that are the meat of any relationship. Some images like “the mad butcher” or “Fourth and Hester” are intended to ground the reader in the scene while “French” or “dinner” are broadly romantic so that in the end the pieces are inconsequential. With this move towards obscurity, the poem and moment unravel, boiling down to everything and nothing, asking both “Colin” and the reader to see the world for the parts that matter instead of the gender roles and traditions that constrain the moment. The poem queers the tradition of marriage by asking in a multitude of experiences and illuminates the inconsistencies and incompatibilities between tradition and real life.

Many contemporary poets in the South often work to queer traditional stories and institutions, and the work of Colin aligns with this queering. As Carol Mason argues in her book “Oklahoma: Lessons in Un-queering America”, the South is often painted as a place where gay people simply don’t exist or belong, and many social forces are at work attempting to “un-queer” rural spaces. Just as Annes and Redlin’s study found many rural

gay men wanting to be in “traditional” monogamous relationships, many queer people in the south may fall victim to un-queering themselves in an attempt to be accepted by their community and remain an intelligible individual. As pointed out earlier in Mills’ work, people often attempt to un-queer relationships by applying heteronormative structures and create “good” upstanding gay subjects that fit in with traditional society. But what happens when religious values are added to this mix? The gay male in the white Christian South lives a confusing life full of religious and social rules that often contradict one another. Often queer Southerners who have grown up in religious environments and biblical stories and lessons are not seen as fantastic, weird, or magical, but simply truth, ultimately removing the queer and transformative power these stories hold. Many southern writers, LGBTQ or not, often work with their mythology to remake and ultimately queer these stories into art that resists fitting into traditional narratives.

The title poem of Borland’s book “My Life as Adam” subverts the biblical story of Adam, taking a familiar figure revered by Southerners and queering it into a gay everyman. Adam being the assumed patriarch of the human race, according to Christianity, carries deep religious feelings for many Southern Christians. In the poem, Adam is “hungry for graven images of [himself],” ultimately wanting to understand his bodily form in a strange place (21). The line also subverts Christianity in the choice of “graven,” making this Adam unholy and primal, unlike the divine creation of God. While Adam is like the original, biblical Adam, Borland subverts Adam to point out the similarity to gay men in the South who ultimately find it hard to see themselves in a rigid moral system. From here Adam is “awakening from shameful dreams/ ripping bone from [his] new body,” (21). Not yet tainted with sin, Adam shouldn’t be having

“shameful dreams,” and yet this Adam is afraid and aware of his perceived moral inadequacies, something unexpected for a divine creation. Borland again is paralleling the awkwardness of coming into masculine queerness to being the first human on a new planet. The biblical Adam steps in to serve as a metaphor for newness and in return becomes subverted by homosexuality. Finally, the end of the poem pushes past the biblical Adam and towards the phallus, queering Adam’s desire for Eve by turning toward the phallus. The final line of the poem “it is not good for man/ to be alone/ when he discovers his soul/ is between his legs,” (21). By turning Adam’s attention to his own manhood, the story of Eden becomes a queered representation of gay men. Borland, through the Christian story, asserts his own queer history in the south in order to understand and express his masculinity. Adam is not feminized, and Borland does not see his queerness as feminizing. Instead, the two are simultaneous facets of one’s self, both queer and masculine, thus revealing the unstable nature of gender and working to queer a religious story held in high regard among Christians.

Like Borland’s work *Colin Is Changing His Name* pulls from numerous common religious and secular southern tropes in order to connect the reader to the south in a queer way. The poem most overtly Christianity-related poem, “The Book of Colin,” opens the second half of the book and works to blend and queer the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah and the Book of Revelation while pulling from the histories of Alexander the Great and the homo-Zion movement in the Coral Islands. Borrowing and blending actual texts from these stories, the poem moves through five scenes. The first scene, taken from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, begins with two “Colins” meeting another “Colin” in a city noting the number of other “Colins” in the city and the amount of hospitality they

receive. In this retelling scene, everyone is hospitable unlike the actual story, and yet there is a sense that everyone is damned with the last line asking “Colin, what is left of the night?” The story points to the true problem with the lack of hospitality that ultimately damned the city. The next section moves through the Book of Revelation with “Colins” “burn[ing] what they do not understand,” living as they want in the open and in the end paying for it. While this section doesn’t stray far from the original story, the work here is to queer a parable for the believers. The punishment comes from living for one and for not bearing children or marrying. Since “Colin” cannot do these things in a traditional world, he is defaulted to punishment, queering the notion of choice and free will. The third section moves toward a more contemporary world where “Colin” dreams about the islands off the coast of Australia that seceded when they didn’t receive marriage equality and named themselves the first gay nation state. This nation is paired with Alexandria to illustrate thriving meccas that ultimately fell, making a new queer myth out of traditional and historical accounts of metropolises. Returning to Revelation, “Colin” waits at the gates to heaven, another “Colin’s” house, knocking and waiting for a reply that never comes. In this moment God becomes “Colin”, never answering the door for himself and thus making the narrative point out the way in which Christianity attempts to speak for the whole of humanity yet leaves out so many. The final section ends in a queer apocalypse, “Colin” running off into the desert in the same way Christian warriors head off to war, recasting the divine battle not between good and evil, but “Colin” and “Colin”. By putting “Colin” at the center of these myths the poem as a whole works to illustrate the inconsistencies of logic at work in Christian doctrine the same way Borland’s “Adam” makes a new myth. Instead of directly addressing the myths clearly,



though, the poem alludes and borrows similar language to give the impression of these texts that end up feeling strangely familiar to Christian readers and in turn queering the tradition till it works for “Colin”.

### *Conclusion*

Mary Gray’s *Out In the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility* offers an anthropological/sociological look into the lives of queer youth in rural America. In her work, Gray argues “that rural youth do the collective labor of identity work differently than their urban counterparts not because rural queer youth have it inherently harder, but because they confront different heteronormative/homophobic burdens” (21). Far too often young gay men and women are expected to run off to cities to find acceptance because, as Gray points out, media often focus on cities as the place for LGBTQ people. While Gray’s argument is valid in the sense that many LGBTQ individuals do collaborative work to find identities and chosen families in rural areas, very few works of poetry focus on their experiences. Today we are seeing more and more LGBTQ poetry come out of the South with work by Bryan Borland and Stephen Mills, whom I discussed in this essay, but many of these emerging poets have moved to larger cities, often refocusing their work on the more commonplace metronormative bent popular in poetry. As a gay male who has spent most of my life in the South, living in various places in Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma, I have been painfully aware of the LGBTQ struggle in the rural South and understand why many poets move to the larger metropolitan areas. My book, and my work, seeks to capture the smaller, often overlooked moments LGBTQ people experience, turning the lens away from the big cities of the East and West Coasts to give

a voice to those of us in the rest of America, still struggling with acceptance and representation, and say: I don't plan on leaving.

Much of my youth was spent resisting the landscape and presumed backwards nature of the South, specifically south-central Arkansas where I grew up, and I assumed that there was no place for a queer boy like me out in the country. However, my experience with people, both good and bad, and learning to look at the South with an unbiased view, opened my mind. So, my work is a love letter to both the South, and to LGBTQ people who feel landlocked in flyover country. Despite "traditional" values, poverty, and the perceived ignorance of all people in the South, I want my work to unfold the beautiful landscapes, lift up the truly compassionate people, and help other LGBTQ people find the courage to say: the South is my home, and even though I am gay, I belong here.

## CHAPTER II

### COLIN IS CHANGING HIS NAME

I

## Sleepover

Rush to the part where we fear again  
between footsteps and hall light switches,

force hush in our veins busy  
to reverse hands on thighs.

Say the pledge of allegiance,  
least sexy words you know:

collateral damage, atrophy,  
terminal, any way to distract.

Movies about ghosts, room  
after room of dark soup dust air.

Tuck our boners back between  
legs. Make shadows on the walls

into men with knives for eyes, melon-baller  
fingers that can scoop pulp faster

than a jack-o-lantern carving contest,  
and a father at the door with an axe

ready to chop light across our bodies.

## Colin is Changing His Name

\*

You don't have to be Colin,  
Colin's mother says, there are  
ways to erase things. Try on  
a new name at camp.

There are so many better names  
like Matthew, Logan, maybe  
Richard. These things aren't  
stone, but water. God can  
wash you clean.

\*

Sometimes, Colin fears  
dying for being Colin.  
So he wears the right shoes,  
reconsiders his tie.

Sometimes the people  
he passes on the street  
know his name,  
shout out the window,

Hey, Colin!

\*

In a new place people always  
ask what you want  
to be called, if you have a  
preferred name for paperwork.

In the doctor's office,  
blue ink pools on the form.  
Colin hesitates, there is so much  
in what we let

others call us.



\*

Colin says only other Colins  
can call him Colin. Somehow  
it hurts less coming from  
a Colin, because Colins

took it back, wrote it between  
“Hello, my name is”  
and “how are you?”  
in blue marker, wore it

beyond the meet and greet.

\*

Colin kneels beside his bed,  
asks every night for a new  
name, says he's earned it,  
says he's sorry for being

Colin. And the morning cracks  
his window in half with light.  
His room, always the same. His skin  
still the suit he wore last night,

his letters, his name tag, his name.

## Zone of Silence

Last night, I made a map of my bed,  
sandbar where everything ends up  
without cellphone reception.  
I can hear you now,  
crying in the bathroom.  
The tile breaking against –  
I kissed you.  
I am sorry, I'll say it again.  
St. Elmo's fire: sailors' swear  
comes all at once, the sky  
burning for something that isn't  
there. I wanted to find something  
at the end of the world. We lie,  
strangers floating on soft  
water stuck inside the bed.  
The ocean is mostly made up of ash:  
my grandmother, your uncle,  
it doesn't matter who.

## Looking for Constellations

trying to find  
the one

where two brothers  
wrapped

each other  
like water moccasins

it is the only way  
we could

see ourselves  
in heaven

Little Rock Rain

The moment he says  
*I am sorry.*

We'll never get a high school  
prom, first kiss.  
I bought that boutonniere  
for you, but gave it to—  
Flowers die everyday.  
So do young boys who fall  
for wrists,  
the way you held a trumpet.

I want to love you,  
but the city is on fire.  
Everyone, including me  
looked away, each time a boy  
had his chest checked like a truck tire.  
No one is meant to live  
like this: afraid to kiss. This is it.  
Everyone turns their back  
in the parking lot. Your chest holds more air,  
a man with a billy club wants  
to be sure,  
*I love you,*  
*but I can't—*

## Approaching Infinity

Walk into a bar, any bar  
you like. Tonight,  
say it's the one  
with broken neon  
olive squinting in a martini glass.  
You are Colin.

You meet Colin.  
Say: *Hi Colin, I am Colin.*  
Drink, dance, do all the things  
that begin with the letter D.  
Take Colin home.  
Put two Colins in the well, take one out.

\*

Try the park, a shaded park,  
the one with graffiti and high  
school kids after dark  
with their fortys and smoke.  
Ignore everyone as best you can  
till you find Colin behind a bush.

Take Colin against a tree, carve your initials.  
Say something from a movie  
or don't, the outcome is the same;  
there aren't forking paths to pick from  
in these woods. There are two Colins,  
put them in the well, take one out.

\*

Go back to the same bar.  
Meet another Colin, Colin  
in a leather jacket. The kind of Colin  
your father wouldn't like:  
tattooed, tight jeaned,  
and all Colin.

Take this Colin and make a map  
of the known universe with your tongue.  
Count the toes, fingers, match  
the forms limb to limb, it's only rational  
to see two without counting. Put the Colins in  
the well, take one out.



\*

Tired of bars and parks, you go grocery shopping.  
Pause in the meat section. There isn't  
a butcher anymore, just Colins.  
Colin stocks the steaks  
and you are sure he is  
Colin from his name tag.

Follow Colin to the freezer.  
We know where this goes,  
Colin and Colin on a pile of meat.  
Colin and Colin on a pile of Colin.  
Colin and Colin at the edge of a well.  
Colin and Colin and—

\*

Tonight we'll try the college bar:  
Colin in his tight shirt,  
Colin with love dangling  
from his mouth,  
the Colin who doesn't  
know he is Colin.

Standing in the middle  
of the room as if buds bound  
so tightly they could burst  
into irises, tulips that command  
attention. The well is full, but you can't help  
but think of all the other Colins.

\*

Let's remember middle  
school where everything is sour  
or sugar, it all depends  
on the first Colin.  
Kiss the right Colin  
and you'll be invited to sleep over.

Kiss the wrong Colin  
you'll lose your front teeth in the bathroom,  
your dentist says this happens all the time:  
young men break teeth.  
Go back to the well,  
look down at the Colins.

## Four Colins Share a Burrito

Colin is Colin-fat,  
which means his jeans  
fit, but *should* be smaller.

There are too many calories for one  
person to carry alone. Colin  
offers to share everything

he eats with Twink Colin,  
Colin who can eat and wash  
his shirt on his chest.

It's harder to share with bear-  
Colin, who doesn't count  
content, bites off all

he likes while Colin-fat Colin talks  
to his stomach about absence  
and beauty. Twink-Colin knows pills

to forget hunger, sometimes  
a pipe he calls the Crystal  
Light diet. Colin

never knows what to call  
himself, left alone  
in front of a mirror.

Song

between lungs  
it's the  
    same  
and not

like relearning to two step  
    with a man  
when eyes close at  
    separate speeds

your mouth is wine  
    there isn't enough

    there is never enough

    someone will have to take  
                    us home

your mouth is poison

    all the trees have to give  
        up eventually

## Psychopathia Sexualis

*Colin 138:*

Never took slightest notice  
of opposite sex. At 24,  
first time in a brothel,

took flight from  
a nude female figure.  
At 25, intercourse with men

of his own stamp.  
For business reasons, married  
a lady. By imagination

managed being potent  
with his wife, who, at heart  
he loved passionately.

When a child was born,  
he withdrew out of fear  
of procreating offspring

with his name.

*Colin 147:*

At the age of six, he began to feel  
happy. In company of men,  
blushed at the sight of beards,

dared not look at handsome  
for fear of turning red  
that would not fade.

Liked to go to balls,  
not for the girls,  
but fine gentlemen

thinking always he was  
in their embrace.  
At seventeen, seduced:

mutual masturbation,  
delight, shame,  
he recognized

the abnormality.

*Colin 148:*

First drawn to male persons,  
then puberty set in, he fell  
for his school teachers.

His dreams: pollutions,  
always about men, shy  
and confused like a maiden.

Even with an abundant  
beard, decided masculinity,  
he had the illusion

everyone noticed his want.  
Music brought heavy  
perspiration over his body.

Upon closer acquaintance  
he showed. Without a vestige  
of independence, gave

himself over.



*Colin 149:*

Preferring those in their 30s  
with moustaches, his sexual needs  
were extraordinary, erections frequent.

At the age of 12, began to fall  
for men; but only 12 times  
had he been successful

in this. Active as well  
as passive pederasty disgusted  
him. He never accepted

such offers. His love  
for sympathetic men  
was boundless. Coitus

did not please. Only  
at the moment  
of ejaculation

did he experience.

*Colin 150:*

Colleen on occasion,  
24 and discovered.  
The form of his face

was feminine, but  
otherwise male.  
Wore female

clothing since 14.  
Long hair after  
the manner of women,

parted in the middle.  
Passed as an actress.  
Beard carefully

pulled out, genitals  
tucked back  
artfully

bandaged.

*Colin 151:*

An official of middle  
age, for some years  
had been happy

in family life. Married  
to a virtuous woman. Presented  
manifestations of anti-pathic

sexual feeling. Through indiscretion,  
a prostitute made public:  
once a week,

would appear in a house  
of false names, prancing  
in silk skirts or dresses.

After his toilet completed,  
he'd lie down on the bed,  
ask to be penetrated, only

if there were a man in the house.

Past Lives While Taking Selfies for Grindr

At the mirror, I am Anastasia,  
unable  
to hold the phone  
steady.

In another life,  
letters took  
weeks to reach,  
envelopes  
and pants waited  
to be opened.

It's not that I don't admire  
myself,  
more so, will he  
admire me?

These sunken cheeks,  
my average dick?  
I have to ask  
these questions  
in between  
pretending to be  
the last *true* queen.

The resemblance is uncanny:  
the blank stare,  
the ice seeping up  
through fogged lens,  
who I say I am.

## Tallahassee Rain

There's a moment you can't escape: the water  
filling up streets, the men in the back bar, needing water.

He's taking a piss next to me. *Stare at the ceiling.*  
*You want to kiss it. Don't look. Just listen to the water.*

I'll find this flood folded into a junk drawer, dance  
feeling myself up with leftover bath water.

A kiss. Just once on the lips, when we were drunk. Things I remember:  
hand wrapped hips, the kitchen slow dance, the boiling water.

I wish I could kaleidoscope his face. A thousand facets staring back,  
cinderblocks around his feet, my hands holding him under water.

Colin always watched from the bathroom doorway. My pants  
halfway down my legs, arm outstretched to test the water.

## Colin Becomes a Stag

\*

some nights he would wear  
a pair of antlers

do a little dance

over the bed  
his ass

hanging out  
of his underwear

\*

tins on string

someone's mother said

keep the

deer from eating

all the beets

\*

but the deer had spread

trash across the lawn

the pie plates

danced all over



\*

last time he was a man  
he leapt from bed

before dawn

the flash of white  
tail off

through the dark

## Soft Mouth

My mouth wet with dreams of cantaloupe  
stacks at the supermarket.

Where he bit between my ribs, pressed  
the bottom to check ripeness.

A hunting dog drags ducks,  
fresh dead, from the swamp.

Somewhere a man crushed a man.  
Pebbles no bigger than a tongue

traced the weakest spot, bowed  
legs with sweetness.

Sheridan Rain

We don't know  
the touch of light  
breaking through blinds.  
It isn't morning, you can't walk  
away. The choirs in my head sing,  
*No.*

We know what Mozart said:  
*1451.*

A tire swing, it comes back around  
faster, faster,  
*you need another master.*

Write down all the songs you know by  
heart. Invisible fishing string  
breaks the White River  
before you're through the door,  
coffee steam filling the house.

Yes, it's time to get up.  
Sure, I'll walk your car to the end  
of the driveway. Pebbles stuck  
in bare feet. All the things  
I couldn't—

I haven't been barefoot  
on gravel road since that summer  
my hands found your hips.

All the bandages I would need,  
just to watch you go.

Colin on I-35

Colin forces himself into  
the backseat of another Jeep,  
like the cattle Colins pass on the way

to The City. Tonight it's Pheonix  
where everyone is new,  
has another name,

forget ear tag number,  
just kiss it, there will be breakfast  
in bed, or a note that *says it was great*

*have a good time in the city* or  
a moment after the little death  
that says *leave*, or maybe

Colin gets lassoed at Round Up,  
the cowboy type who wants  
a wife. Statistically,

everyone bases love  
off of their first.  
This is true if you close one

eye and say all Colins loud  
enough that everyone forgets  
who sings the song and thinks

Colin sang it first.  
If Colin considers absolutes,  
data excesses equal loneliness.

There are only so many cattle  
that fit into a truck,  
only so much weight can be

dragged off to slaughter.

II

## The Book of Colin

\*

Two Colins arrived in the evening,  
and Colin waited in the gateway.

When he saw them, he got up,  
bowed his face to the ground.

Colin can wash his feet here,  
Colin can go on his way in the morning.

Colin can find Colin leaning out  
the window without shirt sleeves.

Colin, what is left  
of the night?

\*

These Colins burn whatever  
they do not understand.

Destroyed, like ash  
knows gravity, abandon

themselves to error  
for the sake of sex.

They feast without fear, waterless  
clouds carried along

the winds; become fall trees falling  
without fruit, twice dead, uprooted.

\*

Colin dreams of coral  
islands. The breath between

stone walls is restless  
wind around his throat

and Alexandria is always  
on fire. Choke out all

the unsayable  
syllables. Like Greek,

Colin loves anywhere  
there is not a name for Colin.



\*

Because he is neither warm  
nor cold, Colin must leave

Colin's house, stand outside,  
knock till someone opens

a door in heaven.  
The first voice Colin heard

was Colin. As if it were  
a trumpet saying, *come*

*I will show things which must be  
hereafter.*

\*

Colin set the tables,  
Colin spread the rugs.

Colin eat, Colin drink.  
Get up, oil the fields!

When Colin sees chariots  
with teams of horses, riders

on donkeys, or riders  
on camels, let him be

fire, alert,  
fully Colin.

Song

To give up means kiss.  
    There isn't  
        a garden, just a street  
lined with Bradford Pears  
    that don't yield pears,  
        just flowers. It's deceiving.  
Flowers on flowers on flowers,  
    you said *love looks like this*.  
        *What we pile on graves*  
*means everything*. Repetition,  
        like supermarket mirrors,  
infinite temporality. I want  
    a real pear, 2 for a dollar  
    and tender, gritty against  
        teeth, space between  
wake and sleep.

## The Heart is a Shotgun House

\*

no hall

three rooms  
rubbing up against  
each other

a house without  
a backdoor

in the living room  
smell every spice

the pots  
boiling over

the wind  
through the bedroom  
window

\*

we made moonshine  
in the bath

put all the bottles  
on the front lawn

to bathe them  
in moonlight

left the tap  
running

kissed

on the porch

\*

I caught him eating  
leftover spiced apples  
in the midnight kitchen

after sleeping  
with a shotgun

you'll pull the trigger

aim for anything  
in the dark

Hook Echo

wherever hand meets  
you arch away  
say *build a bridge*

here is a bridge

I know the curve,  
your back in sleep  
a dry creek  
you say *find a new stream*

here is a stream

if you wait  
that means something

if you cast pebbles  
that means something

I know the weight of glass  
your hand weeping  
in Texas heat

they say *send*  
*him a drink*

here is your drink

if I open the cellar door  
that means something

if the sky looks like split soup  
that means something

if a tornado touches town  
you can hide

here

## School for the Blind

Everyone learns to kiss  
in a high  
    school parking lot.  
It's hard to practice, dropping  
    you off to teach,  
among people.  
    Boys and men  
wandering with white  
    sticks.

Once, in a bar a man found my chest with a bat.

When the blind pass, gravity  
    still pulls.  
    My neck  
rising toward them  
    black-cat angry, like hot asphalt.

I know they can't see us,  
their eyes: tinted  
    windows. I know  
I have nothing  
    to fear, but still—



## Maps

\*

Hallways demand running  
the tiles spaced out step

length. If only love  
were easy, follow you

down three feet till  
a doctor says *you can't*

*be here*. As if anyone  
could explain why

you were falling, like  
anyone would fall apart,

as if anyone would acknowledge  
the one person asking

for you.

\*

Mercator making-out with Atlas  
means one of two things:

1. This is Colin Halloween
2. This is Halloween

Everything depends on decades,  
whether the ocean is flat

or crossable. Run around  
a circle, you'll end up here.

Run around the inevitable  
and you'll end up with shotgun

regret. Run around singing love  
and you'll fall off the face

of the Earth.

\*

Country song: all the roads  
you took lead back to abandon,

the moment I miss  
biting your bicep flesh.

This is sweet meat no one  
can find without my taste,

sense of the sheets  
and how they pile in rivers

made for tracing. North  
says right. Estuary says

love; the source of all  
understanding is wet

with manifest want.

\*

Someone says something about a city  
where I can love you. Mirrored

streets always wet with rain.  
Where everything is beautiful

and nothing hurts. Where everything  
is, nothing hurts. Like over

the river, some one always  
screams. If there is any forgiveness

I'll walk Virginia. Memphis, give me  
stones, Louisville give me

love, Stone Mountain let me  
look out beyond, Little Rock

let me speak.

## New Recipe

You wanted tomatoes, red.  
Caprese salad, mozzarella

firm yet tender. To divide  
basil into sections, you

need a chef's knife.  
The only thing you know

about cutting:  
you can't return to

new. Like flesh and blood,  
over the kitchen sink,

petaling down your thumb.

## Etymology of Colin

\*

In a new office, Colin can't  
say his name, pulls his socks up too far,  
says nothing. What anyone cares  
about Colin is the job  
that gets the job done.

\*

Some things can't be undone:  
crack in the dam,  
jump from the side  
of the pool.  
You can't take back.

\*

Everyone wants similarity, symmetry,  
two trees at the end of the drive  
like home. Colin's father is named Colin,  
his grandfather is named Colin,  
but they are not—



\*

Hands up  
and down every inch,  
there are too many stairs  
to say something,  
you can't reverse.

\*

The park where Colin's  
step-dad says *tell me you are not Colin!*  
Swing chains shaking,  
Colin is thirteen.  
Someone should love Colin for being

Colin.

\*

Colin tells his grandfather about Colin  
and finds his baby pictures  
in the burn barrel before  
he heads back to the sticks:  
you can't unburn.

The Story Retold With All the Right Players

To be on fire,  
to be forever,

means to burn.

Chest deep in river  
we were made  
of stars, July dancing  
across your skin.

The things we'd give up:  
picket fence, doctor visits,  
sitting next to each other  
in church.

The water fills my mouth  
to wash the whispers out.  
There isn't enough soap  
for silence.

We could have lived without –  
but chose alchemy.

What you want must be  
equal to what you give.  
In German the words for love and life  
differ by one vowel  
Lieben und leben.

I've seen it in the flights of birds  
I've seen it in you, the upturned  
bellies of fish along the river.  
Nothing can last in its natural state, except a story  
where we meet in the morning.

Two boys  
walk with pockets full of stones  
through the town square,  
down to the river.

III

On Meeting You

bodies in motion

and then you

I didn't believe in  
music of the spheres

way

my body sank  
into surrounding space

how I was  
heavier toward you

## Colin is Changing His Name

\*

There's the way it will never  
work. The boots

to the chest,  
the crosses, park benches,  
cross roads, where no one is  
meant to meet,

only go. On Sunday  
Colin can't love another Colin. Don't hold hands  
except in prayer.  
Colin's family might be okay with another Colin,  
It all depends.

Ask Colin's parents if  
they trust you with Colin,  
if Colin is a prize,  
if you can just take Colin,  
if Colin wants to be taken. It's better to just take him and run,  
but sometimes Colins feel the need to ask.  
So much depends  
upon Colin.

\*

Figure out who goes

first:

everyone says to not

take Colin out on the river

at moonlight,

sing songs that beg for kisses

and clichés. Everyone knows

to not knock him up

unless they want Smith

and Wesson escort.

Everyone knows

rings should be worth

so many months

it hurts.

Only Colin knows

when you ask what to do on your knees,

it must mean

something.



\*

Do it in a forest,  
a gay bar,  
after class when no one  
can hear you say *love*.

To two boys  
who just want  
to hold hands,

there are too many maps  
to be made.

Kiss his neck at the Restless Wind.  
Clutch the curve of his back  
in the parking lot of the Mad  
Butcher. Sway back and forth on the south green  
of his college,  
the trees made fire in spring,  
Christmas lights forgotten for this night.

Say something  
French. Maybe a film,  
better yet, dinner. Lobster  
or red, anything  
you want to tell everyone most. The corner  
of Fourth and Hester  
where you met, meant  
everything.

Slow Testament

*June, 26<sup>th</sup> 2015*

How cliché to say *Cicada*  
*song* and mean White river  
where summer air breathes  
like roux, every note echoes off

Jon boats. I want to say your name  
like it's mine, familiar and bitter  
as chicory, no toothbrush can  
brush out, carry the taste like  
secret in my mouth all day.

Say *honey* and mean *vertebrae*

gilded in sunshine and scalloped  
like a tissue paper paged book  
meant for finding where I left  
off quick, when the song kicks

back in after the silence that being  
watched brings. We've lived  
too long among roots to not  
sing the hymn of surviving  
the work of breaking

out of your own flesh

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