

## Gay Poems for Red States

**Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr.**

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Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr.'s poetry collection is a celebration of the awkwardness of growing up queer and poor.

These autobiographical, narrative poems focus on Carver's coming-of-age in rural Kentucky. They track his religious anxieties, the area's homophobia, and acts toward finding acceptance wherever he could, often from teachers. Some poems also depict Carver's relationships with important people in his life, including his brother, his father, and the man who became his husband.

Although the content of the collection is often grim, it is treated with beauty and humor. "Cornmeal and Water Pancakes" is about a family too poor to afford pancake ingredients, whose mother decides to recreate the dish with the titular ingredients: "[Mother] loved the cornmeal and water / with her hands until / it agreed to stay together.... / [it] agreed against all laws of physics / to softly brown." Rejoicing in the moment, the poem switches to a lyrical register with the unexpected redefinition of "love"; its tone becomes lighthearted as it addresses the impossibility of the dish.

The collection makes effective use of formal poetic devices, and its entries reward close reading. In "Creek," a poem about living in a trailer, Carver writes, "hog bacon was the kind we killed ourselves. / I killed myself / to leave the holler / and bought pink store pork." The repeated "killed" juxtaposition makes the second use surprising and dangerous. This emotion is compounded by the enjambment, which turns the phrase "I killed myself" claustrophobic compared to the long line that preceded it. By choosing store-bought pork, Carver is conforming to society, thereby "killing" his self-identity.

The poems collected in *Gay Poems for Red States* center a poor, queer Southern youth who's struggling to survive; they seek moments of solace.

GEORGE HAJJAR (May / June 2023)

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