

Kelly McQuain, *Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers* (Texas Review Press, 2023)

Reviewed by Courtney Bambrick

In his full-length poetry collection *Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers*, Kelly McQuain presents an identity shaped by the flora and fauna of West Virginia and the dreams and responsibilities of family and community. Organized into four parts: i: ex nihilo, ii: in the grieving bone, iii: bite and balm, and iv: tin hearts, this collection works through a variety of locations and relationships, allowing the reader to reflect with McQuain on the ways place and people affect our growth and our values. Throughout, the collection uses images of deer at different stages of growth and development – and in different relation to human hunters and observers. A deer is sometimes seen and appreciated – a natural metaphor for stages of maturity – but may also be endangered by too much attention, or attention that is a trap or a threat. So, the speaker in these poems must remain wary and observant, noting his differences and similarities in every situation and calculating a shifting ratio of safety to vulnerability.

Themes recur of childhood and coming of age, exploration and transgression, the ways we see ourselves reflected in the natural world; later poems question one's role in relation to responsibility and community – who we care for and how we might *be there* for people we know and love as well as for strangers. All of these ideas interact and ricochet throughout the collection, reinforcing the idea that childhood joys and dangers may recede as life becomes fuller, but they never quite disappear.

The first poem, “Camping as Boys in the Cow Field” neatly introduces many of these themes, linking the pain of growing up to all the pains that continue to develop in life: “...everything in the world / is connected, like the wounds of Christ eternally exposed[.] / And you with a finger in the wound. And you with salt” (1). The poem even includes a reference to

“...hearts radiant and red / as stamped tin trinkets in some future Mexico” (1), linking it to the final section of the collection titled “tin hearts” and the broadened world and expanded love known and felt by the poems’ speaker. The final poems express a comfort and maturity that is hard-won and rightfully celebrated. The domestic bliss of “Strawberries, Limoncello, Water Ice, Passing Time” feels necessarily in conversation with poems from earlier sections that depict a house eternally under construction, a father’s dream of fussy blueprints. The poems in the final section have not forgotten the precarity and vulnerability of youth, in fact, that vulnerability is restated and recontextualized: the hunted buck of the early poems is recast as a red snapper to be savored on vacation, an owl spinning a head to take in its surroundings, the nonhuman furred being at our core in moments of awe or abandon.

Several early poems enact a mirroring or reflection of the self in the natural world. The repetitions of certain phrases make that especially clear: “Our minds were the sky and the sky was our minds” (1); and in the title poem, “Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers,” that reflection becomes more menacing: “As you take the hill, the hill takes you” (2). Nature is a comforting and inspiring source of energy, but it can consume or suffocate. There are references to plants and the speaker identifies with these flowers, shrubs, and trees, but they are “stubborn flowers” that fight or resist the attention or touch of human hands.

Many poems in the first section, “ex nihilo,” create a foundation for the poet to build from: poems like “My Father’s Shop,” “Architect,” and even “Dolly” present a family life balanced between sibling roughhousing and silliness and parental focus, care, and creative sublimation: painting, sewing, designing, and building in practical contexts. In the poem “Creation Myth,” the speaker considers the shelved dreams of his parents:

...and the way a boy grows slowly curious enough
to wonder
what his world really rests upon.

.....

Do our parents' dreams hide inside us? (16)

This section plants seeds of curiosity and difference and transgression that develop over the remaining sections of the collection. Emphasis in early poems falls on family of origin, of loss, dreams, and the difficulties of connecting with the people nearest to you.

In "Southern Heat," the focused and laconic father is contrasted with the speaker's "step-grandfather," a blustery, "lousy preacher" whose casual use of a racial slur resonates with the poet and solidifies the threat inherent in bigoted language, reminding the speaker of their own precarious position in the family: "He didn't understand: *words hurt*. I did" (10). A child, the speaker here is realizing the limits of his family's care:

What I didn't understand was how
putting down a person could prop another up.
No one to ask, so instead
I begged Mama for a grape pop. (11)

And this concern with the limits of what the speaker can learn from his family of origin echoes the lines in "Scrape the Velvet from your Antlers":

Only nine
and already you've packed up your belonging
--every out-of-bound path
boyhood's sweet undoing.

.....

...where can you learn
of [the] authentic self?
Not on this hill, not in that house.
Something calls you somewhere else. (3)

Community presents challenges in the West Virginia home of the poems about childhood – and we see community fail tragically in “The Lost Boy,” “Annabelle,” and “Mercy.” *Away* seems to be the most reasonable direction for the speaker to move in, but there also seems a sense of loss and guilt over leaving the other vulnerable members of his home community.

Later poems such as “Uncle” and “Nobody’s Savior” pick up these questions of how we relate to family and community and what responsibility we have for one another: the urge to help, the history that makes helping difficult. New connections and community are built in Philadelphia: the man coaxed from the edge of the bridge in “Nobody’s Savior” and the “glitter-bomb” queen, Ruby of “Ruby on Fire,” are survivors of pain and hurt that resonates with the speaker, creating a new family in this new environment.

Still other poems such as “Thirst” reflect the broadening of the world known by the speaker. Suddenly, the flora that reflects the speaker is not just “Joe-Pye weed and yarrow root,” but in “Monkey Orchid”:

We blend into one ecstasy,
 an orgy of blossoms[.] (63)

The fumbling, perhaps self-destructive sensuality in early poems like “Train Bridge” and “Neighbor Boy” refines as the speaker grows into an adult body and develops an appreciation for his sexuality. Poems like “Jam,” “Tongue,” “Monkey Orchid,” and “Thirst” share an evolving sense of the body’s power and desire as the speaker grows more independent and aware of his own appetites.

Kelly McQuain’s *Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers* asks the reader to identify with the hunter and the prey in different poems. As the collection develops, we come to see the thorny vines interdependent even as they grow apart from their shared roots. This collection celebrates

and mourns at the same time – encouraging a careful reader to find new tracks and tendrils to trace with repeated reading.