

Kelly McQuain

Scrape the Velvet from Your Antlers

As you take the hill, the hill takes you—
raking you and your siblings into
a grassy sway of beetles and spiders moving,
and the day's hot ricochet of blue bottle flies
and bees gone crazy in their looping.
Your brother and sister run to catch the horizon.
You wade slowly through the lashing,
alive with combustion, eager for bursting.
This hill, once a forest, has long been cut low,
untilled, rock-strewn, stubbled
with stubborn flowers. Soapwort,
Queen Anne's lace, whorled loosestrife
seeded scattershot, while—downhill—

laundry bows a slender line and inside a house
men tune fiddles, a banjo strums—
melody in the making. But you have no time
for the old-timiness of old men, won't be quaintly
clothespinned. You are Joe-Pye weed and yarrow root,
resolute with purpose, pinioned for sky.
Why then is your skin nothing but cockleburbs?
Who fiddled with you—rewired *deference*
into *difference*? What if you never meet
the person you are meant to be? The future
is a cocked gun—pretty, but peacock mean—

and you are devil's paintbrush,
a blister of orange-red and velvet need.
You've yet to steady into friends
who will ride life's curves with you,
yet to meet men come to wreck you.
There is only the splintered heart of now:
this house, this hill—a horizon spurned
as you cast your gaze down-road, past trailers,
to a line of pines
gloating their evergreen promise of shade.
What kneels to drink in that dark?
What hooved thing—some player

of panpipes moving? A preacher
might call this moment choosing.
Only nine

and already you've packed up your belonging
—every out-of-bound path
boyhood's sweet undoing.
This hill beneath your feet is cracked,
as aching as an insect's rasp. When a tune
ignites from the house you feel its lull,
its *not quite yet*. Imagine a table
where comfort food lies spread.
But what if you'd rather be the hunger
than a child spoon-fed?
A lick of wind on nape of neck,
a secret transmission that coils and threads
as grasshoppers leap away like longing.
Some day soon you'll understand

how music marks a mating move,
how forewing against notched leg strums
the same tune teenage boys knead
into the pockets of fraying jeans
as they bum for smokes and try their luck
among trucks purring in parking lots.
Their plea? *Unravel me,*
snap me free of all ties. Show me answers
apart from lies. But where to learn
of this authentic self?
Not on this hill, not in that house.
Something calls you somewhere else.

