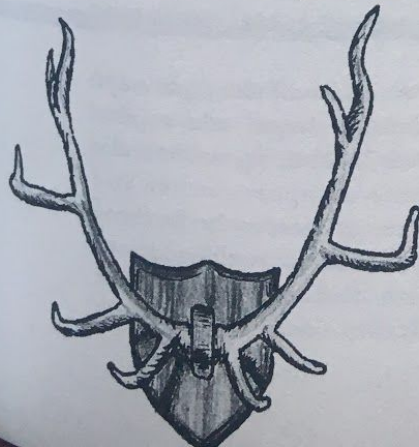


the lodgepoles are distant from each other, too

AMANDA STEELE

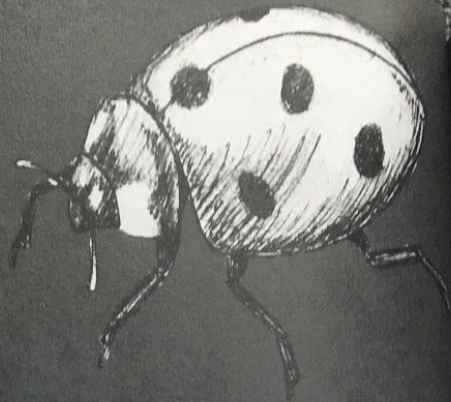
The ceramic black Labrador rests
by the electric fireplace—bone
perpetually placed between paws,
head cocked to the side. On cold nights
he would come alive and nuzzle under.
The perspiring windows contorted
the crisp cedar pines topped with whipped cream,
sour cream, vanilla frosting. I was
rearranging puzzle pieces of a red rock
canyon and forcing together
pieces of my own

because the smell of pine and elk meat
in the kitchen meant that my organs
were drifting apart. Maybe my insides
needed some distance, too. The antlers
on the wall were mottled, so was my skin.
The dog is staring half-hearted at my empty hands.



alturas lake

AMANDA STEELE



On days like these I ache for the soft, smooth strength of her to surround me. Sapphic love splayed open like the ripe, raw taste of huckleberries and raspberries we suck and munch in the heat. Red and purple juice dripping off my lip, my finger pressing into the warm indentation of the supple body after it has been plucked from the vine.

Your legs are the same as the silky water on the lake.
A ladybug crawls across your hip bone
and makes its way underneath your shirt
before I pluck it off. I am jealous of the trail she made.

I never appreciated the stifling sun in mid-July until I saw her in that string bikini. Her skin too much to look at. Like trying to stare into the sun. How easy it would be to undo her, to undo me. A quick pull of string...

Instead, she takes another sip of Coca-Cola, black aviators, a sun hat facing away. I gulp down my desire and turn away.

SUMMER 1999

Amanda Steele

I remember the sugar cookie, pink frosting melting on my fingers. The yellow paint, faded and chipped, covers the Phillips 66 off the county line road. A KISS CD plays in the background. The Chevy truck bounces over the dirt road along the river. Thick brush and pale weeds lead up to the water's edge. The area feels wild but my brother and I feel safe in this warm pickup cab. "I wanna rock and roll all night" and "Don't Stop Believing." My dad playing air guitar and telling us about his first job at Pizza Hut.

I take a long sip of my Dr. Pepper. I am happy. I am smiling. They are good moments. They are the soft jostle of the truck over barely-kept trails along the river, the carbonated taste of cherry and vanilla, the refrain of parental love. But they are fleeting in their comfort. If the truck were to careen off into the river, get stuck in the mud before being slammed onto its side, that would be the feeling of home. The dread of most evenings when dad comes home from work. The sound of a glass being thrown against the kitchen floor. A metal hanger jammed into the closet door.

After our off-road adventures, we would wash the truck in the driveway. Def Leppard is now playing, the mist from the hose sticking to my skin. Dad is drinking his Mountain Dew and teaches me how to make the "rock and roll" sign with my hand. I still take daily soda runs to the gas station, love rock 'n roll, and take drives to the river in the truck. I feel myself overrun with a similar anger, a disappointment, lashing out at those around me. Trying to lose myself, wanting to be more, more decadent, more important. Slowly trying to snuff out my own potential.

He died over three years ago. I think today I am sad about it.

excise

AMANDA STEELE

I cut you out,
like an untrained surgeon,
scalpel flays dermis unevenly.
This is no precise surgery.
There is not a hopeful prognosis.

No, this is a hack job.
How much of me will be left
when all the parts of you are gone?
Ripped away along with parts of my
arteries like red string trailing.

Small cells, iron-flavored memories,
cling to my ribcage.
My body will never be free of your fixed,
focused immersion into my
anatomy,
brain stem,
nuclei.

IRONPORT LOVER

Amanda Steele

I remember how you are the taste of wild cherry and
disappointment.

You went down so smoothly at first, a soft tingling in my mouth,
but never enough, always leaving me in a drought.

I remember how you laid your hands on me in ways
that were almost tender, tender, not tender, teasing.
Trailing fingertips over my collarbones and shoulder blades
as if to say, this is how it could be, like a bite
of red velvet cake, but just a nibble,
not enough to savor the memory of the flavor
that stays on my taste buds,
but I'm not allowed to partake again.

You smell of elderberries and apathy as
you tell me I should be happy with what
you gave me, should be happy that you pressed your
tongue between my thighs and left
me with that memory, my thoughts heavy,
your words seeped into my blood like wine
and whiskey and weed, leaving me an addict.

