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Road Kill

These long and restless road trips create something winding and lonesome inside you. You passed what once was a rattlesnake somewhere in the panhandle of Florida right before a guard rail, an Eastern Diamondback you’re pretty sure. It looked to you like he was after the same thing as everyone else that takes to the highway: the pursuit of placement, chasing down something symbolized by a reflective green interstate sign.

He hadn’t been a rattlesnake for at least an hour when you passed his little mounds, flattened out in two places. A pair of turkey vultures jerk their necks left and right, shredding the little bits of pink snake guts all over the shoulder of I-10.

The note you left your roommate says Canada. The email you sent your boss says a family emergency. You told your neighbors a cruise. In reality, you are headed I-10 Westbound towards “home,” although you’ve never seen the word in white block letters above an exit.

It’s been several hours since the sun set behind the rows of anorexic pine trees that line either side of the turnpike. A thick, skunky smoke is twisting out of your ashtray—giving further depth to the darkness closing in around the cab of your pickup truck. The smoke settles like fog across your dashboard, you cough and it sounds like Silly Putty is tangled in your ribs.

You pass a decapitated coyote and a shattered gopher tortoise; you feel a pang of sympathy.

Your parents suggested you see a professional about the smoking and the coughing and the things you tell them over the phone about the things you’ve been feeling since you left Louisiana.

Your parents suggested a doctor; the doctor suggested sunflower seeds.

Hank the Third is riding shotgun.

You imagine how you must look like a very trampy girl from a country music video. Your exposed lower back is tanned and sticking to the torn leather driver’s seat by a thin layer of sweat. The air conditioner in your truck has never worked, but rolling down the windows would set free all of your built-up smoke, and it’s gettin' thick.

Your long blonde hair is tied in a sloppy bun with some ribbon on the top of your head; the heat has caused your makeup to run.

It’s very still in the cab of the truck. You wish there was more movement than the blur of the many thousands of Florida pines that, at 80 miles an hour after sunset, become one continuous tree.

You see a smashed bloodhound a few feet off the road appear, then in a moment, disintegrate into the night. You light a Swisher Sweet and choke on the first slow drag. You consider the irony of that poor bloodied hound.

You’ll take anything that can make the oxygen you’re breathing thicker. Regular air doesn’t seem to stick; the little cigars, the joints, they’re bad medicine.

In the dark of an unlit highway in the summer, dead animals leap into and out of your headlights in a fraction of a second. They flash, graphic and offensive. Then abruptly they beg of you forgiveness and disappear, ashamed into the past. Your rearview mirror is empty and endless; a vacuum collecting the mangled, stray souls off the asphalt.

It’s getting late and every mile favors the last three hundred. Black trash bags full of your clothes shiver against the speakers behind your F-150’s bench seat. If your vehicle is supposed to say something about you, a tune-up is in order.

A graveyard of all your vices riddles the floorboards: trampled beer cans, cigarette butts, a stray Cheese Puff, a Tic Tac, a toothpick. It could be inferred from your cultural fossils that you are an addict, and orally fixated at that.

A southern Baptist preacher man competes with Hank the Third as you lose reception of the last station. You scan the channels until David Allen Coe takes the passenger’s seat.

You sympathize with I-10. All her skid marks and roadside crosses, twisted squirrels and guardrails alike.

You are the bloodhound onto a scent, following a trail. Something instinctual tells you to veer right and head north out of Florida.

You’re suddenly accosted by the remnants of an armadillo that now more closely resemble a cantaloupe melon dropped from a roof top. Shiny, juicy pink organs spill out of a tan shell. Seeds and sticky meat liquefied by a careless Honda.

It took seventeen minutes to throw anything of importance into your Ford. You tossed into the bed an acoustic guitar, a book of poems, some blue jeans. You left the milk in the fridge. It will expire in three days on January 12th, the same day you turn 20. You feel guilty about the milk but can’t explain why. Everything is irony when a soul is in transit.

You tongue at a flap of skin hanging on the inside of your cheek. The pain is the small kind that you can play with.

Your fingernail polish is chipped and ugly. Your cuticles are covered in dried blood.

You go back in time. You think that although he would never admit it, you may have been your father’s favorite. You were the picture of a girl in a blue cap and gown on his desk at the office. You got a scholarship to a private school. You were what he bragged about during golf games.

It’s midnight now, and that is all gone.

It has been ten hours and three hundred fourteen miles since two o’clock this afternoon, when you sat in a metal desk attached to its own chair under fluorescent lights. You think that is probably when you bit through the skin on your cheek.

You have the face of a girl that people would like to trust.

You jam your tongue hard into the cut in your mouth. It’s funny how you feel it, but you don’t.

Mostly you think it is funny how quickly things have changed since 17 minutes after two p.m. this afternoon.

By the time you cross the Florida state lines into Alabama you think that you have lost your faith and the reception of another radio station.

Your heart rate rises for a moment as you scramble the AM/FM dial far left and then right. Searching for a familiar voice, Jimi Hendrix emerges, a lighthouse in the night telling you to smoke his herb and drink his wine, you relax.

Everybody is on drugs these days, everybody. Your roommate takes Xanax for her boredom. Your boss takes bourbon to treat his rage. You try to validate the empty baggy in the passenger seat. Three hundred miles ago it was packed with 7.3 grams of the stickiest bud Jimi Hendrix has ever sung about. You try convincing yourself you don’t *need*, it just helps you relax.

Your dog is on K9 Prozac. The cat won’t eat without her nip.

Corruption of the natural state, you imagine the pitch of the pavement lining the walls of your lungs. The destruction of paradise, the Garden of Eden in flames. In your head you imagine the varicose veins of the interstate system, ugly and unnatural, cutting through forests and countrysides.

These things do not occur in the animal kingdom. There is no special on the Discovery Channel where tigers do lines of uncut Bolivian cocaine off one another’s massive paws. There is no discontentment of the soul in Indian elephants; they must know something you don’t.

There’s something like the headless coyote from mile marker 215 that is trapped in the spot where your chest meets your throat. The same spot you first start to feel tightness when you are trying not to cry. Something sentimental and honest in you lets out a high wavering howl right there in the driver’s seat.

The course of the day had not been artful like fly fishing, no gentle movements or careful placement. Your afternoon was a toy sailboat in a hurricane.

You were sitting in class at two o’clock that day when you snapped. You imagined that’s what all the kids in your class would say, that you had a breakdown, you lost it, went postal. You noticed the professor staring at you. He seemed distracted and a bit concerned; he held eye contact longer than usual. You were trying to focus on the cellular respiration of heterotrophic organisms, but you couldn’t hear the lecture over your own pulse. Your heartbeat was tribal like African drums resonating through the dark twisted corridors of your inner ear towards your brain. You could not make your feet stop shuffling and the sweat on your forehead was visible from the farthest corners of the classroom.

You begged your mind to stop, to please be quiet. Names and numbers, deadlines and dates added bass to the arsenal of drummers pounding your cochlea, beating their fists on your cerebellum.

Your biology professor is emitting a warm light, “If you don’t understand, tell me.” You fight back tears.

“If you’re lost, let me help you.” It is much more than you can take.

You didn’t realize until the metallic flavor of your own blood filled your mouth, that you had gnawed through the skin inside your cheek.

Your nail beds, at this point, are beginning to drip.

Your doctor calls this a panic attack; they are the product of your anxieties. You tried your breathing exercise, you’ve counted backwards.

The entire class has turned to watch you rocking in your desk, hands clasped over your ears, eyes smashed shut.

You don’t remember if you even grabbed your books. Maybe you walked or maybe you ran out of the classroom.

Seventeen minutes and eleven hours later you have passed the exit that would have taken you to your hometown. One merge to the right and two left-hand turns shy of the driveway lined with azalea bushes, where you played hide-and-go-seek when you were young. Where an old dog is buried under a tire swing that hangs from an oak with you and your big brother’s name carved into the trunk. A hidden key is beneath a flower pot to the right of the front porch swing.

You pass it all up and drive on into the night. There haven’t been street lights illuminating the shoulders of the highway since you turned onto State Road 288 in Alabama.

In the natural world everything has a niche, a role, a purpose for existing.

You have been so domesticated.

You have a coffee machine that starts itself; you are a member at a gym. You match your shoes to your belt and your life has been haphazard and meaningless. Your blood pressure is building.

You start considering your place in the world as closely as you examined the unfortunate beasts who, just like you, had dared the highway—from the inside out.

In a flash, a form appears on the right side of the hood of your truck. Your headlights scale the length of a figure.

Like a dancer in the spotlight, you see a man throwing himself skyward; arms up above his head like he is a spark igniting gasoline. You imagine flames bursting upwards and out of him. There was a real fire; you saw it in his eyes.

You scream, or maybe you howl, and jerk the wheel hard left. The headlights turning towards the tree line as you go from 89 miles per hour to a dead stop in four seconds and several yards of fuming rubber. A black-on-black trail that smells like burnt plastic leads from where the man was standing to the back tires of your trembling Ford. The hair on the back of your neck stands at attention. You’re panting.

You throw your head left and right, catching a glimpse of the crescent moon out of your driver’s side window; you beg it for guidance. Time is thickening like blood on blacktop.

Instinct meets experience in the form of chemical reactions. Further coagulation takes place as only a second passes. Fight or flight. Your adrenal gland is pumping adrenaline to your every pore.

You feel encased, hollow, like the armadillo from the overpass of exit 36B before its encounter with the bottom of a Firestone tire. You are mindless and insensitive. You unclench your white-knuckled fingers from the steering wheel. You turn in your seat to look behind you and see nothing but the bed of your truck and the pitch blackness of your own dime-sized pupils; staring back at you in the reflection of the glass.

Your beady armadillo eyes are searching the door all over for the handle. You find it and stumble from the cab—dazed in the darkness. The walls of the thin pine trees hold back all signs of life from the highway like a dam. Time is running parallel to I-10, dropping off into space a mile in either direction.

Your eyes begin to adjust, giving definition to the man standing before you in the middle of the passing lane.

Something is wrong with him. Something is wrong with you.

He is rabid. You want to throw rocks at him, to clap your hands together and howl to make him run away, but he is not right. You stand in awe of each other. He is shivering. You are still panting.

“What are you doing here?!” You scream, the fear in your stomach turning to rage. Your endocrine system is on autopilot, orchestrating your body; you are a puppet to your instincts and chemicals.

“What the fuck are you doing here? I almost killed you!”

The words are not what you would have written into a script. They are not poetic or clever, but you mean them more than anything you have ever said.

The man is just standing there, a deer more so before a firing squad than a pair of headlights.

“You don’t belong here!” You say almost in tears, stepping forward aggressively. This sudden motion brings the man to life, “N-Neither do you!” He cries.

You both seem to be considering those three words when the man starts to cautiously back away from you. He does not turn away. He does not break eye contact. You feel very dangerous. The man melts away into the dark of the night. You stand in the road until you no longer hear his careful footsteps. You sniff the air.

There are some things that don’t belong on the highway. Not rattlesnakes, hunting dogs, armadillos or 20-year-old girls with freckles.