

## **Gutted**

*I miss you.*

I drive, curving the back mountain roads, letting gravity pull me back and forth at each bend until I reach an intersection: An Exxon and a small chapel. My brakes squeak to a halt.

A squirrel carcass rests on the shoulder of the road. It's bushy tail toward the Exxon, closed eyes toward the chapel. Red crawls from its mouth into the clay. Soon it'll be gutted by the vultures looming overhead.

I linger, look both ways, let off the breaks, and push forward towards the woods.

The trees are not dead, but dormant which pretty much looks the same: cold, dry, gray. The bends are now shifting into rolling hills. My stomach rises and falls with them as I move closer and closer to the farm.

*I miss you.*

I can't handle the thought of them backing away from me like a rattlesnake.

I can't handle the thought of them backing away from me like that rattlesnake at Easter several years back. Everyone rallied to trap it, papa chopped it with an ax, and after the body was certainly limp, mama slit its belly with a pocket knife to see the insides.

I stay silent.

My tires beat against the weathered planks of a narrow bridge. The gravel of the driveway rumbles beneath me.

I hear gunshots and I know. It's probably my uncle posted at my dad's old treestand: The Taj.

*I miss you.*

I don't want to think about what they'd do if they knew me.

At the top of the driveway I pull next to a baby blue pick up, a cluster of camo, and a river of red. My brother's skinning a buck he shot earlier and they all watch.

My car is still. My stomach is sick.