

## The Gleaners

You're driving alone on a highway, on the edge of the edge of the earth. It's dark beyond the cast of your headlights, as black as it must be for an unconceived child. Starless and moonless, the trees on either of your sides lay flat against the sky, and you're sure as ever that there is nothing beyond the road—that should you veer too close to the shoulder, you might fall in like a ship on the western sea. There hasn't been oncoming traffic in miles so you pull the wheel with your thumb and move into the center of the road where it's safer.

The windshield is slaughtered with insects smeared along the track of your wipers, and ever growing darker as your headlamps draw in moths and dragonflies from the fields. Those caught in the blur of light but missing the glass whiz by your field of vision like stars might on a spaceship; with the dashboard lights turned all the way down you imagine it really is space travel, and the fantasy is good.

It—the fantasy—is broken by a splay of feathers that alights on the road in front of you. From the heavens, or somewhere adjacent, a great bird descends, taking position on the pavement in the deadly way of your tires and bends its neck in half. Preening itself with a sickle beak it mocks you, *dares* you to run it down. All the while those tires are screaming, responding to a white knuckled order of deceleration that is in itself out of character to you. You never stop for the wildlife on country roads.

Birds always fly away just in time, and to spare your brakes you've grown used to ignoring them. Tonight shouldn't have been different—and then, birds shouldn't drop down in front of speeding vehicles.

You come to a jarring halt and slam backward into your seat. The bird, with its stick legs, spreads its wings like an omen and settles again. You rub your face and glance at the fuel gauge.

You press the heel of your hand into the steering wheel where the horn should be, but nothing happens. You slam it again, just to be sure. Nothing. It's just you and the sound of your idling engine. The bird cocks its head.

There's no time for this, you reckon, although it's only fuel you're running short of. There's *always* time on the way home—too much in fact—to sit alone and drive.

Your heart softens to the bird and you lower your window. Pounding the outside of your car door through the opening, you call out begging it to fly away. It cocks its head the other way now, and spreads its wings again. You exhale, waiting for the ascent. Instead it approaches you. Bending and rocking, stiff and unbalanced, it comes to your window, cubit by cubit.

Your arm, still hanging outside, stretches out to meet the iridescent creature. You want so badly to feel it, to lay your fingers upon the green black body. With a powerful clap of its wings it rises from the earth to perch on your driver side mirror. Your greedy fingers tense up to its breast where you manage to just brush against it before it takes to the air.

Captivating. God if you could just cage it, you would never look away. And then, as if it desired such notice, it dives through your window like a kamikaze pilot to settle on the passenger seat, grazing your face with its shiny dark feathers.

It's majestic, sure, but what overwhelms you is how big it seems, up close. You stare for a minute as it presses that long curved beak into its breast like a dagger. You close your eyes and try to remember where you've seen that beak before.

"An ibis." You grin because you got it right. Didn't you read a story about an ibis in grammar school?

"You symbolize wisdom. Right?" You press the gas. Muggy air flows in across the sticky sweat of your skin, feigning some sort of cool.

It shivers, feathers standing like the hairs on the back of your neck. You reach across the center console and place your hand upon it.

For a moment you close your eyes again, and picture the ibis feeding. There it stands, in the mud, sweeping its beak through the brackish water, probing for leeches and insects and scraps. “Not really Thoth. Less of a god and more of a gleaner huh?”

It closes its eyes and nests into the seat humming gently.

“Am I also?”

The ibis says you’re more likely gleaned than the other way around. And that, you decide, seems reasonable. You continue down the highway without asking anything more, and wondering if the ibis really does symbolize wisdom.

Every so often as you drive, the smell of the motel handsoap finds its way up to your face, at which you crinkle your nose and wince. More than anything you hate the smell of unfamiliar soap. It’s strong and it lingers, and it’s never spring rain or jasmine or citrus, it’s always just soap. To avoid it you usually rinse off with just water, but tonight you absentmindedly grabbed the bar of soap from its tray after he left, and passed it from one hand to the other under the lukewarm water until it was the only smell left on your fingers.

What’s worse than the smell of soap is the gentle—and sometimes not so gentle—throb that settles in afterward to remind you of the penetration. The feeling is a guest so polite it doesn’t demand your attention, but just loud enough that you can’t ignore it. At least the throbbing, though unwelcome, also reminds you of the hundred and forty dollars in your pocket. Even you sometimes forget what an hour can yield.

Sliding your hand into your pocket, you finger the paper bills.

*Don't forget*, you tell yourself. And you don't forget, lest the smell of handsoap should consume you.

Unfortunately you did forget to stop for fuel, and when the gaslight chimes by the speedometer, you have no choice but to take the next exit, where a blue sign conveniently depicts a pump. You hold your breath as you pull off, half expecting to fall in after all, but soon you're safely speeding down a straight narrow road with a dotted yellow line.

The road is long with no bends or corners. The ibis cranes its neck to peer into the darkness. There are rows and rows of dead sunflowers to the left and right of your headlights. Their skeletal heads are all turned downwards, like a classical depiction of purgatory, or hell. You can't determine which as you near the poorly lit station promised in the road sign, but you're sure it's either one, or the other. The ibis says it doesn't look that way at all but then, you remember, it's just one of your gleaners. You don't have to agree with it.

Next to the uncovered pumps is a diner with a long wooden porch. Inside two women in yellow uniform dresses and aprons lean against the counter; you can see them through the wide windows. One is wiping the stainless steel with a rag while the other one watches, jaw smacking a piece of gum.

The gum chewer comes to the door and squints at you through the window. She taps on the glass. You raise your eyebrow, pointing at yourself to confirm she's really looking at you, and not the great glossy ibis sitting in your car. She nods and waves you on in.

"Ibis?" you ask, pumping your gas with one hand and opening the passenger door with the other. Its beak emerges, swaying gently, but it stays inside. "I'm going to eat something."

You replace the pump to its handle and screw on the gas cap. Staring at the bird you clear your throat. "I don't really want to leave this open, are you gonna stay?"

The bird says it isn't hungry.

"Suit yourself, I suppose." But as you move to shut the car door it hops down and stretches its wide wings, sauntering toward the diner. It says it'll get lonely, and of course you know how that feels. You must bring it with you now.

The gravel crunches under your shoes as you come to the porch. The nearer you get, the cooler it feels. A shiver crawls along your back with the sudden change of the air. It's as if the darkness that surrounds this constructed oasis has never felt the warmth of the sun, ever.

You hurry down the creaking porch boards, hugging yourself in the cold. A bell rings as you fight the heavy wooden door open, but the waitress from before blocks your entry.

"You can't bring your bird in the diner, sir," she says in a sort of Brooklyn way that sort of isn't a Brooklyn way. The other waitress doesn't look up from the register.

"Well, it isn't really my bird," you bite your lip for a second, then add with a smile, "it's an ibis."

She glances down at it, lips curling back to reveal the fat pink gum still squished between her teeth. "I'm sorry sir, but rules are rules you know."

"He's tame," you offer, "I think..."

"Oh would you please let the man in?" The waitress at the counter slams her palms down and rolls her eyes. "There ain't a soul in here. So what if he's got a damn bird?" She turns back down to the register and mumbles, "Hell I'll even serve it a burger."

The other waitress steps back to let you in, crossing her arms. The ibis says thank you as it walks past and takes a seat at one of the booths near the register. The one with the Brooklyn accent disappears into the kitchen so you look toward the other waitress. Her thick dark body sways a little, like the ibis as it sits at the table. Her name tag reads *Zinnia*.

“Can you pay up front? I’m tryna count this till up for the night,” she asks.

“Sure, that’s no problem.”

“Okay what do you want then? I’ll ring it up.”

“I’m sorry but, I don’t see a menu?” You catch a whiff of the handsoap. Clearing your throat, you hope she can’t smell it.

She narrows her gaze and says, “Use your imagination,” in a low voice.

You stammer. “You said a burger before, you serve burgers?”

“I said it didn’t I? You want fries?” she asks, furiously jamming the register with her ring finger.

“Yeah, a burger and fries would do it for me right now.” Your chuckle melts when she stops typing to look you up and down.

Placing one hand high up on her hip she says, “I think you’ve *done it* enough for one night.”

You feel a wave of sticky hot self consciousness swarm your body. Your underarms dampen as the throbbing you’ve nearly forgotten picks up, displeased at being neglected. Like a drunken burp, or rather, a cough, you feel the afterbirth come oozing out. It’s lube and cum and blood and shit and all the things you flush away before looking down. It comes dripping down your scrotum and soaks into your briefs where you can feel it smearing against your inner thigh. Those briefs aren’t so sexy now, although it doesn’t matter when he rips your pants and underwear off together.

You cup your back end with one hand and dig into your pocket with the other, where that hundred forty is still folded, whispering *don’t forget*, as a bundle of bills ought to whisper.

“How much is it?”

“Five,” she says plainly.

“That’s all? That’s a deal for sure!”

“You gonna let go of your ass or am I ever getting paid tonight?” Zinnia starts squeezing her own shoulder, arm bent across her face but not covering her eyes, dark narrow eyes that live somewhere between suspicion and resentment.

You place a twenty dollar bill on the counter—now there is only a hundred and twenty in your pocket. Andrew Jackson blinks up at you from the stainless steel, then he grins, remembering the eight and a half minutes you spent earning him.

Zinnia blinks back at the bill, making no motion to accept it.

“What the hell is that?” She asks.

“It’s a twenty,” your eyebrows clasp together while you try and make sure you heard her correctly. Then you add, “to be fair it doesn’t usually smirk like that.”

A cackling laugh breaks through the woman’s fat dry lips. It’s high pitched like an exotic bird, or something close. “We don’t take—” She gasps for air, “we don’t take paper money here child.”

“Well I have a debit card.” You snatch up the twenty and go for your wallet.

She looks you dead in the face, leaning against the counter on her elbow, “I don’t take cards neither, I take five.”

“Five what?” you beg.

“Fingers!” she says as if it were obvious.

“*Fingers?*” Your eyes fly wide, “You want *my* fingers?”

“Unless you see someone else’s lying around?” She reaches across the counter and pops you on the temple, “Of course I want *your* fingers!”

Mouth open, and blinking, you force the words to sit down in a row so you can say, “I think my fingers are worth more than a burger and fries *Zinnia*.” Immediately you regret saying it.

“And just why is that” she snaps back at you, crossing her arms across plump, heavy breasts.

“Well because,” you falter, “I use them for so many things, I—”

“I know exactly how you use ‘em,” she purses her lips, hands returning to her hips as she says “and if they were worth so much there’d be more than a twenty in your pocket.”

“There is!” You toss the bundle of bills onto the counter; sweat drips down your hairline like the slick wet between your legs.

“I don’t care if you gave me a five dollar gold piece that says ‘In Zinnia we trust!’ It’s five fingers or nothing.”

A twinge in your stomach heralds a low, hungry, groan. “How much is it if I just get fries?”

Apparently it’s only two fingers then, and you’re left trying to think of a task you couldn’t do with three fingers. The ibis offers finger knitting and piano, but since you don’t finger knit or play piano you decide it isn’t something you can’t live without. Coming up short otherwise, you nod your head.

“How do I get them off?” you ask, clasping the pinky and it’s neighbor on your left hand.

“Most people trim the dotted line,” she says, handing you a pair of scissors.

Looking down you find that there is indeed a dotted line tattooed around the base of each finger and thumb.



“I guess that makes sense,” you whisper, taking the scissors with your right hand and holding your left out in front of you. The cold metal blades rest lightly against the skin of your pinky as you align it with the tattoo. Just as you tense to snip it clean off you gasp. Suddenly your vision blurs; the scissors look crooked and no matter how you turn them they won’t behave. In fact, those hands don’t even feel like yours as they quiver in front of you, the way legs don’t feel like yours after getting off a bicycle. It’s around then you realize that you don’t really want to cut your fingers off—although you can’t place why exactly—and drop the scissors back onto the counter.

“What if it hurts?” you ask.

“What if it doesn’t?” The blond waitress calls in her sort-of-Brooklyn accent as she bursts through the swinging door to the kitchen. She’s still working that fat piece of pink chewing gum as you steady yourself against the counter.

“I’m not sure I can. What if we can’t get the bleeding to stop?”

“What if you stop wasting my time? Ever thought of that?” Zinnia slams the total button, which chimes in response like an old typewriter.

“I think I need to use the bathroom first.” The afterbirth comes sliding down your thigh. It tickles as it catches in your leg hair.

“For the love of *god!*” Zinnia’s hand flashes across your field of vision, distorted as it may be. Like a drunkard whose room spins beneath him you watch the waitress grasp her pinky and snap it off in one quick movement. It’s a sickening *snap-crackle-pop* followed by the metallic *cha-ching* of the drawer flying open in front her.

The till is alive with appendages, wriggling and writhing in a bloody orgy where the dollars and cents should be. She drops her finger into the mess and reaches for another.

“God don’t do it!” But your protest doesn’t stop her from taking hold of the ring finger and snap-crackle-popping it off.

She tosses the second finger into the drawer and jabs it shut with her hip. She wipes her hands across her pristine white apron, smearing one side of it. “The bathroom’s that way.” She points with her good hand. You stare at her, eyes wide. “Are you gonna shit on the floor? Let’s go!” She claps her hands out in front of her, casting little red droplets across the counter.

Stumbling through the haze to the bathroom, you half-fall into a green stall door. Whatever you’ve seen takes a backseat to the absolute priority of cleaning the afterbirth out of your briefs. You wad up the tissue and pull your pants down the knee, sitting on the toilet to get a closer look.

By a miracle without explanation, your briefs are completely dry. Hurriedly you shove the ball of toilet paper between your legs and give it a wipe, but it comes up clean. Wide eyed you reach down there with a bare hand. Nothing. Just you and the gentle—and indeed it has settled back into a gentle—throb.

The fog has lifted almost entirely by the time you return to the booth where the ibis has been sitting patiently over a glass of water, the lemon wedge carefully placed on a napkin to the side. Zinnia and the other waitress are somewhere behind the swinging kitchen door, so you lean over the table and whisper.

“Did she really break off her fingers, or am I imagining something?”

The bird preens for a moment, and then remarks that thanklessness is an unattractive quality. Again, you decide that what the bird has said seems reasonable, so you don’t press further.

After the hunger pains have grown to be almost unbearable, the sort-of-Brooklyn waitress emerges from the back. Held out in front of her on flat palms, like a small bird to be released, is a thick diner-plate upon which a burger and fries sit on display.

The grease lands on your tongue before the plate even meets the table; your mouth fills with saliva. The only thing stopping you from shoving your face into the burger is the waitress's name tag that crosses your line of vision while you try not to see her cleavage. It reads *Slut*.

Without thinking, the question half tumbles from your mouth on a drop of spit: “Why would you wear that?”

She looks down at her name tag, as if she forgot what it says, and laughs. “Well we all choose our labels, don’t we?” she asks, wiping her hands on a rag from her apron pocket. Only then do you notice the smears of blood. The haze rolls back in as you gaze at the sockets, all ten of them, void of fingers.

“Look at your hands, holy!”

She looks down at them, holding them out like a fresh set of nails. “Eh, I didn’t really like that pair anyway.”

“You’re bleeding though!”

“Don’t worry about it! I know what I’m doing back there.” She winks and grins, with that fat piece of gum still hanging from her molars. She asks the ibis if he’s doing alright and as she’s talking you notice the the gum is running back into her throat. In fact, it isn’t gum at all, but a long quivering tongue—her own tongue—that she can’t seem to stop chewing, naturally. Her teeth leave the pink flesh covered in red and purple bruises.

As she turns to leave, you realize there’s been a mistake so you call out to her, despite how fragmented your field of vision has become.

“I’m sorry, but didn’t order the burger.”

The ibis shakes its head and mumbles something about a gift horse.

“You know what, handsome, I put the order in on the house. If we’re giving parts of our bodies away, we might as well get some meat out of it huh?” She strides back into the kitchen, hips swaying over a blood-drop trail.

With your stomach folding in on itself, you can’t stand to wait any longer. You clasp your hands around the burger and take an ambitious bite. The flavors rub up against each other on your tongue, and something animalistic, something primal is released in you. You’re powerless against it as you shove mouthful after mouthful of food into your stomach, quenching an ancient and preeminent thirst: a need to be anything but empty.

Despite the throb against the booth cushion, and the money in your pocket, you’re sure that you’ve never not been empty.

You eat the entire sandwich, stopping to gasp for air now and then. When you’re finished you start in on the fries, suckling the salt and grease from each little wedge until there’s nothing left but a pickle spear on your plate. You hate pickles, but for some reason you can’t control the urge to shove it into your mouth. Now there are only crumbs on the plate, and juicy condiments running down your chin and arms.

For a moment you’re satisfied, more than you ever thought you could be. Leaning back in the booth you rest your hands upon your stomach and take a deep breath. The ibis watches you, cocking its head from side to side. Then, as always, the clarity sets in. It tastes a lot like guilt.

You go back to the bathroom, relieved that the haze has lifted once again. Perhaps you were just hungry. All the same you press the soap pump, releasing a drop or two of the thick pink stuff they use in gas station minimarts. As you scrub the grease from your hands and wipe your

face with a brown paper towel, you catch another horrible whiff of soap. You are tasked now with determining whether this is the soap from before, or the new stuff.

They smell the same.

At last, you return to the table. You've already paid, and you've already eaten—the memories of which make you cringe—so you decide there's nothing left but to head home.

Slut is in mopping up the trail of blood next to a sloppy yellow bucket, and Zinnia is wiping down the counter, passing over and over the same spot where her new pretty sockets are still bleeding.

“Ibis,” you say, “I think I'm going home now, are you coming?”

The bird soft-foots its way up to the counter and with a powerful spread of its wings, lands upon the stainless steel. You suppose the ibis means to say that it isn't leaving with you. It hands the loneliness back to you like a baton.

“Before you leave, hunny, grab yourself a name tag.” Zinnia throws a thumb over her shoulder to a cardboard box near the register.

Cautiously, you approach the box to find an assortment of blue and yellow name tags just like Zinnia's. There are many to choose from: *Whore*, *Fag*, *Sextoy*. You spend a long moment considering the tag that reads *Used* before turning around to ask.

“If we choose our own labels, why can't I have my name?”

Zinnia throws her head back in a nasty laugh. “Those are your names. Can you even think of a better one?”

You close your eyes, trying to find your true name, your given name, the name on your birth certificate. You can't even remember it.

Eyes wide, you whisper, “No.” But the heat of embarrassment in your cheeks flushes quickly into accusation: “Why do you get to wear *Zinnia* then? Where’s your slutty name tag?”

“I don’t measure myself by the number of times I can make a man say *fuck yeah*. Maybe *your* value comes from how far back his eyes roll in his head, but I’m my own woman.” She purses her lips.

“You mean to say you don’t have sex?”

“Hell no!” She twists her face in disgust. “I have plenty, I just don’t have it ‘cause I’m empty. I’m full, baby.”

A low groan from your belly reminds you how heavy your stomach is now that you’ve eaten. It is its own kind of throbbing.

“Well I don’t need your name tags, I’m full too.”

Zinnia laughs as you pull open the heavy door to dive into the chill of the darkness that surrounds the diner. Your car is waiting for you. It’s time to go home.

The lights above the gas pumps flicker. You turn the key and pull onto the road. For a moment you glance back at the diner, through those wide windows. Inside there are three glossy ibises sitting in a row upon the counter. The gleaners watch you drive away—they have some of you now like all your lovers past, a shared ownership of something you can’t name. Something lost slowly, bit by bit until the gleaning is over and you have nothing left to give.

As you drive, you notice the box of name tags is on the passenger seat where the ibis had been. The yellow letters taunt you. You can’t imagine where they came from, but you mull them over just the same, testing them on your lips. There are so many options. It would be easier to choose if each word didn’t suit you so well. On top of the rest, dead center, one of them reads *Empty*. Even now, despite your full stomach, you decide that is reasonable.

Perhaps you could choose something else; perhaps you can't change it. Either way you turn the radio on stop thinking for the night. There are still bugs on your windshield, there are still a hundred and forty dollars in your pocket, there are still ten fingers wrapped around the steering wheel as you tear down that freeway on the edge of the edge of the earth.