

## Attending the Ortolan

You are already in the space. There is a floor but no walls and probably no ceiling. The edges stretch out in all directions, fading into darkness. The only light source glows cold in the distance, and you begin to walk towards it. The floor is sand. With so little light it is not visible but you are familiar with the way that it moves underneath your feet. Giving in to the weight of your body, sliding and shifting against you.

It has maybe been five minutes and the light seems no closer. Your limbs are heavy, sapped of energy with each step driven into the sand. You stop and turn to look behind you but there is nothing, and when you turn back you see that you have arrived. A threshold on the edge of darkness, you linger back, observe. A light bulb hangs at the end of a long cord which disappears up into nowhere. Underneath is an oval dining table seated with guests. Dinner has already begun.

Their heads are covered with white towels and they move in sync, six bodies feeding as one. With the left hand they hold the towel and with the other they gulp back hungrily. You cannot see their faces or their mouths but you can hear them as they eat. The frantic sound of slurping as rich meat is pushed into swollen throats. Rips, gulps, bones, beaks crack between teeth. Salivate. Ashamed, they bow their heads, exposing the skin on the backs of their necks. You walk around them, peering closer, taking care to stay in shadow. From here thick beads of sweat secrete and congeal under the white light. Hundreds of moths swarm above. You continue to circle, the sand absorbing your movements. They do not know that you are there.

The sound of eating, which is somehow detached from what you see, comes at you from all sides. Amplified from every direction out of darkness, hundreds of mouths suck meat from tiny bones. It is noticeable maybe because it begins to slip out of sync. But against the racket of chews and swallows the six bodies still move in meticulous time. Uneasy. There is a loud splutter as one of the dinner guests begins to choke. Bones or gristle lodged fast, violent convulsion, gasping for air. Draped heads and synchronised bodies make it impossible to tell who. You circle quicker now, watching for an indication of who might be suffering. Six hands are lifted to six mouths for one unanimous bite. No way to distinguish between the guests, keep moving, keep quiet. Bow your head, retreat further into shadow.