MICHAEL CUTLIP

The Playground, 2012
Mixed Media on Panel, 36 x 36 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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Last Meal

Our Obsession with Rare Birds

There's a seagull most birders jones to see from the far northern ice pack: the Ivory Gull. It feeds by scavenging polar bear kills. Some years back, a stray Ivory Gull turned up in Orange County for one day only—the only California record, then or since.

How far north do these things usually stay? Nome, Alaska, normally would be thought of as too far south to expect to find the Ivory Gull—it lives way, *way* up there. Yet, birds wander, and this particular seagull wandered one January to Doheny State Beach, on land named for the Daniel Day-Lewis character in *There Will be Blood*. Some astute beachcomber noticed it, phone calls were made, other people saw it, the sun went down, everybody went home. By dawn it was gone, never seen again. Who was the last person to see this mega-rare, fond-of-icebergs seagull? Answer: a late-arriving fellow who went out at midnight with a flashlight, and who checked every roosting seagull on the beach, maybe 2,000 individual birds—Western Gulls, Heermann's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls.

But he got it. He got the Ivory Gull. He ticked it off his list. Question is, was he a savant or a murderer, our flashlight man? Should he brag about it, or never, ever bring it up? The bird in question (according to the records) "appeared ill when found midmorning." It was harassed all day, then finally, relief: it was dark, the birders went home. What next? Then this final guy showed up, started it all over again. The bird could have flown off to Hawaii—there's no way to know—or, more likely, it passed away in the night, killed by one stress too many. If so, coyotes cleaned up the evidence. All we know is, when the sun rose, the bird was gone.

Birding has a code of ethics, along the lines of "first, do no harm;" but in reality, to chase birds seriously means buying $2000 binoculars and $5000 cameras, using up absurd amounts of gasoline, and once at a rare bird site, tromping over meadow and berm like a drunken orc. This is not benign, as hobbies go, no matter how much one donates to Greenpeace afterwards.

A normal person thinks, okay, there are like fifty kinds or whatever: pigeon, hummingbird, duck hawk, mockingjay. See them and be done. Ah, but no. According to the record keepers, the California list glows with an incandescent 657 species. Even the Texas list looks paltry in comparison. Numbers accrete because vagrants arrive

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annually. Let some shorebird from Siberia be found at the Salinas sewage ponds at closing time, and by morning, three hundred people will be there, telescopes ready, each one coveting the chance to edge her or his tally one smudge higher.

Wait long enough and it will happen close to you: a bird gets Frisbeed a thousand miles off true by the spiral arms of a storm, or its internal compass needles spin the wrong way, or the cold ocean currents push aside the warm ones and the whole pelagic opera shifts north or south a province or two. From albatrosses to puffins to snowy owls to sparrows, strange things turn up in strange places—one reason the hardcore birders in Houston or the Outer Banks or Monterey go out seven days a week, looking, looking.

In dreams begin responsibilities, or so poets claim. One category to dream about might be the buntings. Not our buntings—the New World ones, like Indigo Bunting or Lazuli Bunting—though those are fine too. There's a different lineage entirely: the Old World buntings; and in mainland America, those are rare beasts indeed. If one is found, everybody rushes to see it.

Yet rare and getting rarer, the European buntings, since they have the unfortunate secondary attribute of being good to eat. Not that I know from personal experience. True, I have eaten warthogs and seals and live ants, and caterpillars fried in oil until they were as light and crispy as popcorn, but I have not eaten any species of bunting, common or uncommon. That is because I am not the least bit French. It is a very, very French thing, to eat *Emberiza hortulana*, the Ortolan Bunting. The name comes from the word for garden. As food it seems an odd choice, given that compared to a turkey or even a squab, Ortolan Bunting ranks pretty much down in the size basement. It's basically just a pink and grey sparrow. In the wild, before it is caught and fattened like a foie gras goose, a bunting only weighs about the same as twenty-five paper clips.

Apparently it was this specialty that was the crowning moment of President Mitterrand's last meal, despite the fact that even in France most songbirds are protected, so it wasn't even legal. He had other things through the courses, oysters and wine and capon, but his final meal culminated in scalding-hot buntings—two of them—and after that, nothing more. Worn down by cancer, Mitterrand ate his last meal, fasted, and died.

Bunting preparation requires an unusual number of steps, and just to name one, the chef takes the captive, fattened, and sometimes-blinded bird, and to kill it, drowns it in Armagnac. This fills the bird's lungs with brandy and hence creates a treat to be savored later, as flavors burst in your mouth. One eats the cooked bird whole, bones and all, and—this is the part we need to be most attentive to—one does so with a large linen napkin draped over the head.

Let us pause to linger over the perfect imagery of that.

The napkin does four things. First, it concentrates the experience. Alone in the dark, macerating the bones and liquefied entrails, a zillion flavors burst out, as do swirling tornados of aroma. One must capture those fully, hence hooded eating, so that no sensations escape.

Second, some people doing the bunting supper lose their nerve. Rather than go all-in, they bite the head off and spit that part out. Privacy's best in any instance of grimace-and-spit. Frankly, I think some people should always eat with napkins covering their faces, even when just doing hot dogs or mac and cheese.

Third reason, theology. According to a book about birds and people and also according to NPR (which got it from an *Esquire* article), there is the problem of God seeing you, as you devour a fellow spirit's corpse. Apparently the Holy Trinity can't see you if you're under good linen. Shame hovers just out of sight, somewhere above the chandelier.

Last, the napkin over the head creates a confessional space. This may seem contra item three, but it's actually an extension of it. You are doing something private, even shameful; yet as you do so, exempted from normal social intercourse, you may contemplate your actions and commune with the Divine in repentance, even as the event carries forward to conclusion.

Which brings us back to Orange County and the rare seagull on the midnight beach. Who was it that saw it last? I don't know his name, but whoever it was, it wasn't me. What was I doing that evening? Grading papers maybe. Watching a movie. Eating a sandwich. Whatever it was, it could have waited.

I envy that flashlight person his California bird list. Of course we could also turn around and condemn this same late-night beach stalker. The bird did die, after all, or at least disappear without a trace. Should we make the last person who saw the gull go sit in the Box of Shame?

No. The opposite, in fact. I propose we expand the eating-of-buntings ritual. Not the eating part, just the napkin draped over the head, when one hides from God. Fifty birders lined up in the pickleweed, looking down into the right-angle oculars of their Swarovksi telescopes? White napkins for the lot of them. On the redeye to Boston, reading soft-core porn on your Kindle? Napkin over the head. One holdout omnivore gone out to dinner with three long-term vegans? Yes, please, and keep your horrid meat breath to yourself. People writing suicide notes. Jewelers working on mending the clasp from the necklace of the adulterous woman. Or what about Washington D.C., as the senior senator—pressured by lobbyists—tries to decide how to cast his vote? The camera pans the chamber, large white napkins covering the heads of half the members.

Stale as week-old cookies is the idea that we are most alone when with a crowd, while a corollary posits that it is our separation from the godhead that allows us to fully sense absence and, hence, ready ourselves for the redemption of fulfillment. Inside the tent of our own appetites we can let the bird feet stick out of our mouths and chew up the rest of the body in a delirium of greed and sensation. In the dim, tamped-down light, we are alone in our pleasures, *at last*. We are alone in our dialogue with the universe, dark matter included, and if something answers us back, we are alone too with whatever blend of fire and wind that sounds like. There, what's that—did you hear that? It sounded like a voice, far off, asking somebody if they could see anything. What is that? A flashlight beam perhaps. The napkin has grown so very large. Are those stars sewn into small points all across it? Who is that coming?

It is so dark, yet there seems to be somebody coming.

I feel cold and small. The napkin is so far away now.

There's the beam of a spotlight working the crowd, getting closer.

Perhaps it is best just to leave, to keep going, to try a bit further down the coast. I am not ready yet. There is so much more to explain. It will be easy to know which way to point. So long as I keep the land on one side and the surf on the other, I will know which way to go.

Yes, it is time. The size of everything has changed, and what once fit so tidily and well now feels large, strange, cold. It is time.

By the time the beam of light reaches over here, I will be gone.

Charles Hood is a Research Fellow with the Center for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art and teaches photography and writing at Antelope Valley College in the Mojave Desert, California. His most recent new birds for his list were in Tibet and Panama, respectively. His book *South x South* won the Hollis Summer Poetry Prize and came out recently from Ohio University Press.