

VERNON R.L. HEAD

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Bird*

IN

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The Search for the *Nechisar Nightjar*



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• The wing of the *Nechisar Nightjar* •

Dedicated to
Ian Sinclair, Gerry Nicholls, Dennis Weir
and
The Cambridge University Expedition Team of 1990
(Will Duckworth, Mike Evans, Roger Safford,
Mark Telfer, Rob Timmins and Chemere Zewdie)

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CHAPTER ONE
EMBOSSSED AND SINGING

EYES ARE FOR SEARCHING, and sometimes the search is for eyes in the night. I blinked, turning my cheeks to the dusty mud. Shapes slid before me, slicing like the shadows from a tent, stealing bits of shine.

It was an elemental evening in Ethiopia. We were following a map, and it was my turn to aim the spotlight as we drove, looking for a bird of the night. Mammal eyes shine silvery, but night-bird eyes shine in warmer colours. Swollen with dreams, we were journeying enquiringly along a bumpy, beautiful track on a path through time. Stars became scribbles of direction and instruction. Time wobbled in the spot-lit air, and all was an ebony mist on the flat plain.

The sparkle from my bulb attracted all manner of flying things, except for the nightjar we had come to see. Quiet bats dodged my head predictably. Insects attacked and zapped, wedging incessantly into the recesses between my teeth. Their taste cracked, tangy and fruity in sweet, slippery movement. I spat incandescent strands that tied me fleetingly to the earth. All about me the grass was bleached in light. My stare was fixed on the moving spot that bobbed in front of our four-wheel drive, probing the dark. Not even the wiggling of flying ants and moth-like things trapped in my pants and vibrating in my groin could distract me.

This was no ordinary place. It was an in-between place; the mountains on both sides were the fresh blue of night, distant yet also close by. Named Nechisar, or ‘white grass’ in Amharic, the old language of the place, it was full of the vulnerable whiteness of the young, the new and the untouched. It smelt and felt of colours that were new. And it promised to change my life.

Ethiopia smiles and cries at once. Its landscape talks of primordial light and primordial movement. It has low, hot areas and incredibly cold, high areas. It is lush in some places and stark in others; it is plentiful in the birth of things, yet barren in the stillbirth of others. Here the tame and the feral mingle. There is feasting but also starvation. Some languages here sing happily while others scream in anger. Yet I found Ethiopia to be a kind host, patient and wise, although filled with many, many moods: my own and those of others and also of the landscape – even the rocks had moods.

At 1100 to 1650 metres above mean sea level, time floated like a bird, changing yet still, and always born new. Here the meaning of ‘mean sea level’ came into its own, speaking of the connection to the distant sea, the movements of continents and oceans, the vast scale of planetary proportion and perspective – and our smallness, our ultimate significance and insignificance. We were far beyond the reach of the tame, among undiscovered Darwinian secrets, beautifully old and African.

‘Eyes!’ I said.

The eyeshine came from near the ground, a uniquely paired glow of golden copper-red, bright little balls hovering side by side in the air. We were on the edge of a famous, primitive plain, at the edge of its shape, and a strange bird was sitting motionless before us like a teardrop, unsettled and temporary, not far from a large bush, all verged and edgy.



Twenty-two years earlier, on 6 July 1990, an expedition of scientists from Cambridge University had arrived on these plains, tucked between the hills of the Great Rift Valley. The team – Duckworth, Evans, Safford, Telfer, Timmins and Zewdie – had come to Ethiopia to find answers in and of its wilderness, and to share the mistakes of their own trammelled world so that Nechisar could remain untrammelled. They understood the meaning of the pristine in a global landscape, where ice from a peak waters flowers in the valley, where rivers become the sea, butterflies become pollen, trees become air, and a foaling zebra feeds the soil with its afterbirth juice and the cheetah with its flesh.

These long lines of interconnectedness meant that the discovery of a dragonfly in Africa was important for the sunshine in London, and so a bird's wing found by chance in the sand was a treasured object to them, a moment of celebration, and even a declaration of hope for people.

These scientists were modern in their approach to Nechisar and nature. Yet their gaze had originated in the Victorian Age, the Age of Discovery, a time of naturalist explorers whose mission it was to seek out and catalogue life in colonial adventure.

In 1836, the British survey ship *HMS Beagle* returned to England after five years circumnavigating the Southern Hemisphere, having stopped at many, many places, many seas and many islands. It had harboured a paying guest named Charles Darwin, a man of wild schemes and careful thoughts who became, over the course of the journey, the ship's naturalist. Floating up and down on the tide in the port of Falmouth, the *HMS Beagle* was aglow with his curious cargo: a vast collection of vertebrates, invertebrates, marine organisms, insects, fossils, rocks, plants, birds, and many, many new names, all richly illuminated by his thorough, careful notes and recollections of sightings, habitats, distributions, colours and sounds. On this long and important journey, Darwin had come to a new understanding of the intense variety in the natural world, and the mystery of natural selection began to evolve into answers on his quiet tongue.

On the Ross Expedition to the South Magnetic Pole between 1839 and 1843, the assistant surgeon on *HMS Erebus*, Joseph Dalton Hooker, collected and labelled for Kew, finding new flowering plants, mosses, liverworts, lichens and algae. He named creatures and places, and found answers to island mysteries through island ecology. His profound ordering of the natural world became a part of the journey of the new scientists of Nechisar. On the *HMS Rattlesnake* en route to New Guinea and Australia from 1846 to 1850, the young assistant surgeon Thomas Henry Huxley had netted, dissected and studied the ocean creatures, describing new marine invertebrates. The oceans began to live in tiny and translucent species, wobbling like jellyfish, linking different peoples in aboriginal truths at the edges of new lands. His careful watching, drawing and noting also became part of the journey of the new scientists of Nechisar. And on the 1848 voyage of the small trading barque *HMS Mischief*, its high sails filled with strong winds and hopes, Alfred Russel Wallace and his friend William Henry Bates had sailed modestly and unofficially from Liverpool to Brazil, to its great sea of trees and new creatures and specimens.

This was a time of capturing and killing, of skinning, preserving and displaying;

appropriate for that time and for that way of seeing. It brought a whole new understanding: that an uninterrupted forest of species becomes a sea of species that leads to diversity and new life. And so emerged the greatest idea in the history of human thought. It was a long journey through forests all over the world, a journey of many ships – often lonely ships, dangerous ships, burning ships and sinking ships – always collecting, always filled with forests of specimens and oceans of thoughts.

But now, to the call for knowledge through discovery and collection, the new scientists of Nechisar added the call for conservation. The tradition of unlocking the evolutionary truths of our past was overshadowed by the urgency to protect the evolutionary truths of our future. The new scientists strove to protect and preserve. They did not take needlessly from Africa, but gave instead, in the hope that tomorrow might at least be like today and perhaps even like yesterday.

These were my kind of birdwatchers: daring, gentle, empiric voyagers, emotional and intellectual explorers linked through a shared love of wilderness. They were salted in biodiversity and pushed by foreign winds, purposeful drifters on new currents; Arcadian hunter-collectors. Hunting was the act of searching rather than stalking. Theirs was a zoological farrago; they were sailors on the picturesque landscapes of Wordsworth and Coleridge, on the untamed and the beautiful. They were not just scientists but also aesthetes and poets infused with naivety; dreamers but also doers. They were painters of a picture of the whole of nature; they were Darwinii on a great sea.

The Cambridge University Expedition of 1990 lasted three months, and through day and night observations – spot-counts, transects, habitat surveys, netting, trapping, collecting and sampling, as well as caring and thoughtful writing – Nechisar became known to science.

The engagement of these scientific eyes with the wilderness was fertile in ideas yet disciplined in the gathering of facts. Just as a seed pushes a flower searchingly towards the sun, so these enquiring minds unravelled storylines from their discoveries, so that untold secrets buried in mud could emerge into the light to bloom bright and new.

They found 38 large mammal species including 9 leopard sightings and an important population of Swayne's hartebeest under threat of extinction; 23 small mammal species including a rodent and a bat new to Ethiopia; 315 species of birds, 69 butterfly species, 20 dragonfly and damselfly species, 17 reptile species, 3 frog species, and numerous plants.

They also found the wing of a bird – a small, solitary wing – which they packed into a brown bag, little guessing that this lone wing was to become bigger than any other: the most famous wing in the world! It was a wing that bridged science and birdwatching, the past and the present. It gathered people and debate, sparked imagination and dreams, and became a map to explorers, like sails to a wooden ship, setting a route for those who search out the past. This small wing was to become my own personal story of birdwatching.

On the evening of 3 September, the Cambridge team had been crossing the plain looking for nightjars. Their driver was Hans Bayer, a German expat in his Mercedes Gelundewagen, an old car left behind in Ethiopia by a traveller. This was no new big-budget expeditionary car like those seen on flashy television channels, but rather the authentic kind, appropriate for the new scientists, the kind that is happened upon

during an expedition, that is part of the place, like the wood gathered for a campfire. They had spontaneously befriended Hans in Arba Minch, a little town near the Nechisar National Park, and then suddenly decided that this was a good evening to explore the deepness of this special place, because the weather called for it. It was a place with unknown recesses that held questions and much excitement. On an expedition, the night holds secrets, and scientists are drawn to its blackness like the suck of warm air in the summer dusk rising softly along a slope, talking into the evening, rustling leaves and light as it sings and murmurs inquisitively to the dark.

It was 'nightjar weather'. In their abundance, the night birds hid the starlight intermittently, making the sky twinkle like shutters on a trillion cameras. The Cambridge scientists were driving slowly down an old smugglers' track when they stopped dead. Squashed into the dry mud was a nightjar. 'Flat-life' they called it flippantly, joking being a way for concerned conservationists to make road kill feel less wasteful and pathetic, especially on the quiet roads of wild Africa. Someone jumped out and pulled the bird from the ground, leaving its shape stamped in the sand as a memory. Its body disintegrated, the feathers lifting and blowing away, lost to the warm breeze. But one wing remained intact.

The team had a policy of collecting road kills as voucher specimens to help expand their species list and confirm the identification of living night birds, which were often difficult to resolve and therefore difficult to prove. Then the eyes of a distant mammal shone up front and the group continued forward. The wing lay in a bag, untagged and gently tossed by the bouncing of the vehicle.

The next morning they examined the wing. In the dawn light it looked foreign, detached. It was beautiful, as all wings are, perfect and streamlined, clearly made for air, not for mud. Its dark browns of the night were now a softer auburn and the blurred patterns had become emarginations, patterns that spoke like words on a page. But they could match it to nothing in the documentation on nightjars, and it was nowhere described in the literature of ornithology. The wing was strangely new and foreign.

Distraction and puzzlement held the group in discussion in the morning heat. The camp table was soon scattered with papers and notes, overlapping and sliding like scales on a fish out of water. There were no decent field guides to reference, but they had Jackson's new key to Afrotropical nightjars, which should have solved the little problem immediately. But no. Coffees got cold, a sparrow sang outside annoyingly and a Marabou Stork made a shadow jump on the wall of the tent, irritating the conversation.

Roger Safford scratched his head. 'I can't make the large wing-detail fit anything. And it's bigger than any species we see here.' The question hung in space.

'This happens all the time when you visit odd places,' someone replied. 'Perhaps Jackson's key has a mistake or we're misunderstanding it.'

The marabou lifted its shadow from the tent. The group scribbled 'pending' in their logbook, put the wing in a bag labelled 'Giant Nightjar' and went to eat breakfast.

The expedition continued into more days, stretching to weeks and then months as time laboured on. Days in Africa are wide under a high, slow sun. To live under that sun is to be eternally hot, and to work under it is heavy. When eventually the day arrived of their return to England, the wing lay silently among their luggage, forgotten safely in a bag, protected quietly by indifference. Rob Timmins had preserved it on

that very first morning with all the skill of a gold sarcophagus maker.

When the team left Ethiopia, however, no export permits were granted, and a pile of specimens – many small mammals, a lark and some wings – remained behind in a dark room, claimed by the city of Addis Ababa. It was a busy and confused city of many people and many lost things. This was the era of the Mengistu regime, an oppressive time: borders were tight; everything was shut like a breathless lung, like a body alive in a coffin. The innocent wing lay jailed in a room of forgotten things, trapped like time itself. Documents were copied and copied again; white paper turned yellow and time got stamped officially on forms like coffee stains. For almost a year the travel rules held and Ethiopian time stood still.

Finally Chris (Jesse) Hillman of the Wildlife Conservation Society was cleared to carry the package to London by hand. His journey was long and selfless, but at last the specimens reached the British Natural History Museum at Tring.

A natural history museum is a special place. This is where science meets the people of the streets; where a schoolchild might stare at a life-sized plastic dinosaur and imagine the past, or see stuffed birds from all over the world and dream of watching them in the air. It is an island of wilderness enclosed by a city, like a shoal of fish herded and captured by dolphins – reshaped and transformed for convenience. It is nature artificially paused, posing quietly on display to make dreams, a place of rare encounters with rare things, a celebration of diversity, a meeting of the feral with the tame. It is a monument to the age of Hooker, Huxley, Wallace and Darwin, but also to our new age, because it can be added to; it can grow like a city and expand through modern mutations, retaining its history yet gaining a new history. It can be filled with new specimens, new stuffed species, new feathers and wings. It is a monument to collection and classification; a powerful cultural cathedral of logic interpreted both physically and tangibly. It is a lavish place of displays and dioramas and dead birds in glass boxes. It is an ornate icon, a beautiful educational view of the wilderness, talking of wild mystery, telling of a way of seeing nature by naming things. It shows a way through the once forbidden woods and misunderstood denseness towards new trees and new forests at the edge of all known places – those that waited for the ships of discovery long ago and those that continue to wait.

Today's natural history museums – often physical additions to the museums of yesterday – are new exhibitions where scientific excellence radiates through new types of microscopes, where spreadsheets spew facts and data light up on screens. The new halls and wings help us to identify our place in time and in nature and our interconnectedness with the millions of other species, while also reminding us of new species. In the public areas television sets burst with accessible interaction, and wild stories are told creatively to reach the people of today – people of emails, internet and social media, of quick things and quick facts. But at the back of these museums, behind the displays, the drawers and glass boxes of birds, beyond the stuffed, dried or pickled creatures, new science is taking place.

Museums still catalogue and name; they still serve as repositories of science, but fundamentally they are home to the pioneers who search the wilderness for our lost past and our lost future, reminding us of the importance of the pristine. The museums of today share a message of preservation as we watch wild forests become suburban gardens and towns become cities. They have become conservation tools; they talk of

the resilience of wilderness. These museums have become my notebooks, my bird books, my field guides, my travel guides, my maps to birds.

In the museum at Tring in Hertfordshire that morning, the wing was placed at last in front of John Ash, an independent expert on Ethiopian birds. He was mystified. Not having been on the expedition, he called Mike Evans, a team member who had just recovered from malaria and hepatitis – proud, exotic souvenirs of Africa.

‘I think this could be big,’ he told Mike. ‘And I’m not talking about size.’

The expedition team gathered once more and stood looking down at the wing. Its tangibility was a powerful call to the heart, a revelation to the mind. The coffee suddenly tasted Ethiopian, brewed like a tribal trick, the old rooms of learning brightened, the red brick walls looked like fresh, untamed soil and the warmth felt strangely sub-Saharan. They were transported in that moment into a night on the Nechisar Plain as they imagined the glide and lift of the bird that belonged to this mysterious wing.

Questions formed, knowledge was stirred, and a task spontaneously ignited and began licking through the shelves of facts. Drawers of information crackled; responses were gathered. Excitement fuelled debate and a thorough search for numbers, sizes and empirical truths – a meticulous journey temporarily detached from all emotion, art or poetry. Roger, John and Will measured nightjar wings: every single nightjar wing they could find everywhere in the world. They measured patterns. They measured marks, blotches, strips, stripes and dots. They measured feathers and wing-patches. And then they measured and re-measured again.

Mark Telfer looked at the wing again. Then the leading British nightjar authority, Nigel Cleere, looked. New Zealand expert extraordinaire on African nightjars, Des Jackson, checked and rechecked his nightjar datasets collected over many years from museum birds across the world.

The wing was unique.

A new question emerged. Could a new species be named based on a single wing? Roger’s question filtered through walls and halls, through the old wings and new wings of museums.

Worldwide, experts responded. François Vuilleumier and Mary LeCroy, eminent taxonomists from the American Museum of Natural History, were loud in affirmation and support. The editor of the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists’ Club*, David Snow, raised his thumb to the sky. High above the museum, where roofs gave way to courtyards, gardens, fields and trees, a skein of geese cut a V in the cold sky of an arriving winter. It was a change of season, a change of mood, a new state of things. Was the V for Victorian?

Within the museum, the talk was vigorous and the analysis intense. Excitement oozed from near and far; telephones rang and emails flew. Here in the past, bird species had been described from ancient remnants. In other museums, species had been described from sub-fossil remains of birds never seen, birds that had lived in a different time. A well-preserved wing from a year-old expedition presented no problem to science. A decision was made by the expedition team. Scholarly confirmation resounded in the halls and wings, and international science unanimously endorsed the claim.

A scientific paper was prepared. The expedition team of 1990 named the bird the

Nechisar Nightjar, *Caprimulgus solala*: *solus* meaning only, *ala* meaning wing. The paper was submitted to *Ibis*, the journal of the British Ornithologist's Union, and the discovery accepted.¹

The new species was announced, and birdwatchers like me began to dream.

¹ R.J. Safford, J.S. Ash, J.W. Duckworth, M.G. Telfer & C. Zewdie, Nechisar Nightjar, *Caprimulgus solala*. Ethiopia: Nechisar Plains, Gamo Gofa Province. *Ibis*, 1995, 137 (3), pp. 301-307.

CHAPTER TWO
AMESEGHINALEHU ADDIS

AS I STEPPED FRESHLY OUT into Addis Ababa, the stairs from the airplane swayed and the East African air whooshed up like water. I moved on a tide of humanity through queues linking people as hyphens link words, customs counters ushering us along for passport approvals, security booms lifting like gates. Months of preparation and study lay squashed inside my bags, along with my ever-present field guides, reference books and notebooks.

Birdwatchers embrace cities because they are, necessarily, where most birdwatching expeditions begin. Cities themselves hold birds only in parks, gardens and sidewalk trees, in building recesses and rooftops, on dams, concrete canals and drainage lines. City birds exist only as memories of wilderness; they are remnants, vestiges as obsolete as the human appendix. But for long-distance travellers, most expeditions begin on the runways of city airports, in international terminal halls and airport wings. Airports are like cultural cathedrals where we gather on the road to discovery, and so airport cities become symbols of commencement where we start to watch the sky.

As we set out for the city in a taxi to pick up our waiting vehicle, the Ethiopian capital hung like a great banner across the road ahead, greeting us with an Amharigna smile, strangely tantalising and protean. A high Coptic cross glistened like a ship's mast, golden green against a spicy grey sky. The air was chalked in clouds like waving white flags as if a phantom crowd was cheering. It was a special time.

We were the Sinclair Expedition of 2009: Gerry from New York, Dennis from Belfast, and Ian and I from Cape Town. Under the leadership of Ian Sinclair, the most famous birdwatcher in Africa and author of over twenty books, we had come to find the other wing of the Nechisar Nightjar, or perhaps a pair of living wings...

Everywhere people were selling fruit and talking. 'Ishee faranji,' they welcomed us. The Amharic language was rich and pulpy, like the juice of a foreign fruit plucked fresh from a tree in a wild place – sticky to the tongue and oddly delicious. It played in twists and gushes of air, and we gulped as we tried to mimic it. The sounds were zesty and athletic, sucking but not spitting, recognisable only in a lip dance of fellowship and tangy grins.

A vast billboard of Haile Gebrselassie exploded in bright red, green and yellow, framing half our view. This was the land of the greatest runners on earth, and the scent of competition lingered seductively; all was curved like muscles and fruit. Adidas, Nike, Puma – universal words of sport, western, foreign but also local – pounded the skyline rhythmically. All around us the heady cram and push of people goaded the traffic; cars hooted in cheeky taunts and we felt the challenge rise. We had a great distance to cover and a bird to find. We had been only a few hours in this new land and already I felt I was running on an Olympic track. I was thrilled, but I could not hide a distant dread. A boyhood image of a Sports Day warm-up came to mind, the most exciting and scary day of my life till then, with sharp-smelling Deep Heat burning my muscles, and a thrush screeching across the freshly mowed field, all sticky with dew and lawn-chalk in the early summer light.

Addis Ababa is new and renewing all the time. The name Addis means 'new' in the tongue of the Shewan kings, the founding kings of the place. The city had only

emerged in recent times, blossoming on this escarpment of African hills. Just over a hundred years had passed since the legendary, proud and unconquerable Emperor Menelik II descended from the Entoto Hills and built a Great House on a nation of hills layered above hills. And so a gathering and a togetherness of culture resonated among the hills in that landscape amid the murmur of people and the stirrings of city-making. There was a communal licking of the fresh earth, a penetration of people into the pristine, a branding of civilisation on wilderness. It was a place where Africa was at once wild and tame.

Ababa means flower. Here, where the hot springs of Filwoha bubbled beneath flowering mimosa trees, Empress Taitu once bathed, and a city slid from her like a wet newborn child. It was a city of deceiving titillation and the bloom of growth: colours and aromas flowered in abundance in a new landscape. But cities are not flowers that open naturally and live within nature; instead they displace, pushing nature to their outer edges. There is no give and take with their natural surroundings, instead they expand like foreign, parasitic things that continue to take, banishing the wilderness as once they banished lepers.

It was still early dawn when we reached the Ghion Hotel, set in a green garden in the middle of the city, where our vehicle awaited us, shivering like a naked boy about to step into a bath. The dawn light felt like an opening, like the turning of a page. Leaning over the hotel entrance way was the green-black silhouette of a large tree alive with birds. It was a complex cut-out of a tree against the sky, a lonely symbol like a road sign. I lingered. Little city birds bounced fluffily through the leaves, all calling, disorganised and almost free, making city music: the music of the wilderness of long ago. Then, on a low, heavy limb, three large bumps moved. I had mistaken them for wood in the dark.

‘An incantation of ibises!’ I announced proudly, the spontaneous invention of collective nouns for birds being a new hobby of mine.

Three Wattled Ibises sat perched in the tree. For all of us but Ian, this species was a ‘lifer’: a bird we had never seen before, only dreamed about and studied; a number on our list, a name to be collected as a precious memory. Lifer is a big word for us. It sits alongside words like rarity, extinction, even love. Seeing a lifer is a special moment, an accomplishment, the end of a particular journey and the beginning of the next, a pause in time to wonder and celebrate the diversity and fecundity of life. It is a profound moment, but fleeting.

Hunched in the warmth of their huddle, the ibises watched us as we finally climbed into the car. And a climb it was: this was one of the old, high models, practical, spacious and heavy. It dated to a time before off-roading was easy, before clever aerodynamics and lightweight designs. Appropriately, it was from the same time as the scientists of Nechisar. It was a strong box and I liked it. The seats looked clean and felt like leather, yet warm as if someone had slept on them overnight. I was excited.

Arriving in a new city and then leaving it right away is like leaving an unfinished plate of food, a story partly untold. It was a Sunday and a public holiday, a religious day, a fasting day, and the early streets were unusually empty, except for the trees.

Addis Ababa is a eucalyptopolis, I decided as we drove along. Australian eucalyptus trees squeezed through holes in the concrete pavements and frilled on the urban outskirts until they slowly gave way to the dust of the surrounding countryside.

King Menelik had planted these straight, fast-growing trees when he descended from the forested plateaus to colonise the city. They make the city softer and more comfortable; they make low things seem lower as they define routes in swathes, shadows and vertical shafts of light. The hard, tired buildings and the trees seem to sway hand in hand like ancient couples, the living and the dead together. In the morning shadows they waved and clapped in applause as we drove out of Addis Ababa into the dust.

The sounds of the city birds were soon lost to our ears as we headed south. The landscape warmed. Ahead lay a two-day drive to Arba Minch, a small town in Ethiopia's far south-west, our base from which to enter the Nechisar National Park and search out the Nechisar Nightjar. Such was our plan. From our research, we expected a safe and trouble-free journey.

The descent from Addis was subtle; my ears popped as we entered East Africa's Great Rift Valley, and then there was a slow levelling of the road. Birds – the watching of birds – always connects me with ancient things: the ancient land, the pristine past of living things, the past of people, our origins, the meaning of sentience and sapience. As we descended into the valley, a black-and-white Pied Crow glided ahead of us, following the road. Against a white cloud its white breast disappeared, detaching the wings and head from the body to drift independently like bits and pieces, like evolutionary parts, reminders of the bones and fossils scattered along the Rift Valley, memories of us, links in our story of dinosaurs and birds, and reminders of constant onward change.

This southward-winding valley of old rivers and old lakeside sediments has offered up great discoveries to humanity, gifts that reveal the history of our species and unwrap the knowledge of our departure as vigorous Africans a hundred thousand years ago, out across Africa and beyond. In time this valley became the route out of Africa, a route north into Eurasia, the Far East, thence into Australia and eventually all around the world. Now we were heading southwards towards the past, hopefully towards new questions and new answers, and birdwatching was part of our journey to understanding. As we headed down along the valley, other roads fed into ours like tributaries and all became indissoluble like veins leading to a heart.

That first morning was exhilarating. The horizon began to crackle with light. The morning sun lay like a bright, crumpled ball of wrapping paper peeled by a child from a new toy, bumpy lines of pink and orange vibrating with colour. On the opposite side of the road the sky tore long, flat lines in purples, blues and blacks. And above us hung a pure white cloud in a wall of ripples.

Unusual trees poked up out of the plain like party-favours. Deformed branches reached out, contorted with pinioned ends and pruned leaves. Boughs were hobbled and tips cut. Fields were oddly geometric, squashed rhombic boxes and scatterings of clipped grass. Ponds contained only the stains of water once held; nothing left to feed the thirst of the trees and grass. It was a fallow time, and the discipline of agriculture showed itself: low stone walls and dusty brush-framed rooms; ancient farming methods shaped by understanding and patience.

Farmscapes sit on fences of compromise between city and wilderness, between the tame and the wild. Farms are fake nature, entirely dependent on us for their greenness. Trees are constrained in lines; rivers stopped by concrete to form dams; lands quilted

into pastures, meadows and crops. The living systems are dismembered like the Pied Crow against the cloud, extracted from their interconnectedness and interdependence. The planted harvest may be necessary, but it is a sad abstraction of the pristine. If you linger long enough in a quiet corner of an orchard you can hear a distant longing, a cry for the irregular, the random, the untrammelled freedom.

Yet it was on a farm that birdwatching first came to me. My grandfather's small farm on the edge of Johannesburg was a place of vegetables, flowers, ponds, avenues and orchards, of manicured life and outside dining. In the giddy time of toddlerhood when stepping and walking is difficult and everything seems very tall, my grandfather and I made our way towards the sound of a bird in the mist of an afternoon. It was the beginning of evening, the time when the air becomes crisp and the leaves on great bushes become wet and cold and slippery. The mist made me only half see the bushes, so I listened more than usual, was more obedient. The birdcall came to me on the mysterious wet mist. It was a simple, long hooting sound, stretched and repetitive like the sound of a steam engine in one of my cartoon films, making it easy to remember. My grandfather's hand rested on my head as he steered me gently through the wetness to where a giant black-and-copper bird leaned forward, bending a giant wet bush. The bird and its eyes were a fantasy of red, and it smiled at me with the crack on the side of its mouth as only a bird can smile at a child.

'Rainbird,' said my grandfather. 'Now the rain will come; the garden and the fields will be greener.'

As we left Addis further and further behind us, the in-between world of farms began to fade into a world beyond people. And along the way, as always, sometimes high in the sky above, sometimes on the roadside, there were birds. The morning light made wonderful gestures and movements, and our car-view framed a moving picture. Before noon could hide the shade, the cool blues and bucolic pastels played and pushed a pastoral bird across the road. We moved over to the side and used birdwatching as an excuse for Gerry to relieve himself. Ian, Dennis and I walked off to look for the bird. It had landed in a stunted fig tree on the verge of the fields not far from the car. Rural birds are friendly; they have forgotten much of their wildness, particularly in Ethiopia where eating wild birds is frowned upon. We walked closer to the fig tree, beating the dust from our faces, beating it out of the air before it could settle on us like mist.

'Barbet,' said Dennis.

'Black-Billed Barbet,' said Ian.

'Lifer,' said I. And I grinned.

As I watched the bird disappear, the dust undulated around me and the Great Rift Valley became for me a sea of new things, wildly tangible and wildly physical. I was on it and in it, driving along this geographic trough of new worlds and places of discovery: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique. Many millions of steps have plodded this ancient peopled passage, this deep, tectonic north-south slash extending through patient aeons as the land moves in incremental certainty. The slow movement of this place has sculpted the face of Africa with all the power and violence of a decorative tribal scar, a warrior scar. Yet on a map this proud African landmark takes on a graphic elegance, meandering indolently like a colossal, lazy serpent stretched out and sunning itself in the primordial heat. I thought

of the giant ancient map of southern Africa, now famous among birdwatchers, created by the French explorer and naturalist François Le Vaillant for Louis XVI, and of its many rivers leading to the sea, its hundreds of place names, and its miniature paintings of the exotic plants, creatures and birds he encountered. And I felt the full meaning of his words. 'I breathed,' he wrote, 'for the first time in my life, the pure and delicious air of freedom.'

We proceeded along the wide, winding serpent ever southwards towards Nechisar, contained on either side by the purple shiver of distant mountains. Midday made them rock like boats on the sky. Everything was washed in dust, dreaming of water. Only lonely fig trees flushed the vistas with spots of green. And the heat began to lift eagles from trees and cliffs, until five of them were climbing and soaring above us.

I marvelled at the forces that were moving stealthily inside our earth, and contemplated the landscape in its newness and its oldness. There, written in words of stretched stone in front of us, were answers to questions about the land and its ways. Birdwatching is always about the land; it is a holistic endeavour. Finding a bird involves learning everything about its constantly changing world. The invigorating gathering of facts and clues about a bird and its place in the natural system of things helps to describe it before one finally sees it. A bird's place tells much about how it will look, how it might sleep, how it might wake. It can tell us where and when it might wake; how, where and when it might mate; where and how it might look after its young; what, where and how it might eat; what it might sound like and why; and how it might move and to where. Like the five eagles wrangling above us that day, my questions soared high and answers tumbled about.

A row of trees (planted, or merely following an unseen waterline?) shuffled in the breeze, teasing the birds that wanted to land on them. These were the only trees about. There is convenience in high trees for birds; the air is probably bouncier there, more aerodynamic. Birdwatchers are always inspecting the landscape for clues. A habitable wild place resounds in stories of life. Those new to birdwatching often speak of habitat as a concept tumbled from a book, detached and factual; a descriptive paragraph squashed beside a map or a picture of a bird. But this is only the beginning. To see a bird we must enter its habitat completely; we must connect emotionally.

Now, like the charts of the earlier explorers, habitat was the matrix. The wild world of birds led us along through Ethiopia in wing-beats of unison and debate along a plotted course that transected the new and the pristine. To find our bird, we had to find its tree. To find its tree, we had to find the land of the tree. To understand the earth, we had to learn to read the shapes of mountains and valleys, the shapes that had shaped the bird, that spoke to us of rejuvenation and constant change.

There is great romance in this journeying and finding and sharing. I thought with admiration of the great explorers of the past, and of the Cambridge Expedition Team of 1990 – of their naming, describing and unlocking of secrets. There are also the aberrant explorers: the extreme sports people raising money for charity by climbing high mountains, kayaking around continents or running coast to coast, with all their merchandising, T-shirts and motivational speaking. I thought of the first person to 'walk the Amazon', his 860 days of not looking, not seeing the trees above him or the forest floor below, not watching the ants. For me the hero was his guide, who dreamt of seeing the sea for the first time, seeing what was at the far end of the river, seeking