

# A Bird's Life

by

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## Vignettes

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## **Birdman**

I used to be a man but am now a bird. I'm that bird crouching in a freezing posture on a two centimeter thick branch three meters above the ground in a spotted gum. I was that man in the bushhat squatting under the ironbark watching me. We used to search for the same thing, to understand our beingness, birdness and manness. But in time we grew apart. My life now is full of sky and trees and eggs and images of beetles and huddle displays and warm, crowded roosts...and a great, great fear of loneliness. His life is still one of searching, searching for meaning in a life full of loss and conflict and scars and rejection and loneliness...and a great, great fear of failure. But I'm not here to tell his story, except for an observation here and there, being as we were of the same flesh. Like all animals, I'm interested in my own life.

JJ calls me YB because of my yellow and blue leg bands. But in my world I have no name: I am what I am, the bird that looks the way I look, that sounds the way I sound, and does what I do. I'm an adult male weighing eighty-three grams, with bright yellow eyes; a long, princely bill;... But I won't continue because JJ must have described a babbler by now, and a single description will do since none of you can distinguish one of us from another in the field. Consider an analogy. Compared with Westerners, Chinese show almost no variation in the color of their hair or eyes; the men vary less in amount of facial and head hair; and both sexes vary less in height, weight, and perhaps many other physical characteristics. And behavior as well: that of twenty million Chinese would certainly be less than that of all Australians. Yet there is clearly enough variability for everything, as JJ saw as he walked the streets of Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other Chinese cities uninhabited by clones. I live in a uniform subset of Chinese-like birds in feathered Mao suits, and still there is enough variation among us because our real faces are our voices.

As you have probably guessed, my story is not another *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Bah! That dummy was a bird in a human pursuit, to be exceptional, unique, the best at something, anything, while remaining ignorant of the very life that would have freed him more assuredly than a triple loop or whatever absurdity he chased. I'm a fading human pursuing in my growing birdness a unity of physical, mental, and emotional selves that I may have had as a fetus but didn't have as a boy or man. The seagull got one thing right: flying is essence of bird. So tell you something new? How about what flying is not?

For one thing flying is not like swimming, being immersed in a single medium. Rather we live in two greatly different milieus, one intensely hard and the other immeasurably soft; and for them we are both hard and soft, like the ground and trees in firmness and like the air in suppleness, with our tough, strong feet and bills and light, fragile wings and tails---have you ever found a bird with a broken bill? For another, flying is not like walking. We are much older than you humans, and our anatomy unlike yours is wholly subservient to what we are now,

not largely what we used to be, physically and behaviorally. Tease apart the DNA of a human and find the code for an ape. Tease it a bit further and find the code of a rodent. Dig deep, deep into a bird and find another bird. You can barely walk, toddler. We can't walk at all, and even our hopping is reined by an urge to fly that grows almost vertically after a short time or distance. But to fly, to jump off this mean earth to where I'm safe, at least safer, and using everything time and natural selection gave me is my real birdness. We can't fly faster than the wind, as the peregrine; underwater, as the common puffin; from pole to pole, as the arctic tern; or forwards, backwards, and in place, as the ruby-throated hummingbird. Yes, we pale in comparison to these lords of the wing, with our flights measured in meters and seconds. Still, our hundreds of little flights a day bind us to the sky just as enduringly.

If not swimming, not walking, not many things, what is flying? Soaring, diving, flapping, kiting, hovering, fluttering, darting, swooping, gliding, drifting, winging, planing, flitting, skimming, plunging, circling, hedge-hopping...? No, because these are the merest of abbreviations for segments of the flights by some birds. Imagine describing the flight of a hummingbird in detail and see how useless these words would be. Any description of more than the vaguest sort must include numbers, many numbers: how far? how often? when? where? why? with whom? And must include these queries for every age and sex class, every month, every region, every... If you wish to see us as more than animated blobs moving randomly across the landscape, you must ingest a massive dose of facts, must take potent medicine for your enfeebled knowledge. So if you came to me and asked, "YB, teach me about flying," I would laugh in your unfeathered face and ask, "Do you really mean this?"

- Our basic flight equipment consists of rounded wings with 10 primaries and 9 secondaries, with the longest about 110 millimeters from wrist to tip, and of rounded tails with 12 rectrices, with the longest also about 110 millimeters from base to tip.
- Our average number of flights per hour throughout the year is about 16, which makes it our second most frequent activity after foraging.
- We fly for an average of 4.4 seconds and 32 meters throughout the year, though for shorter times and distances in the spring and summer when food is more abundant.
- Flight accounts for about 1% to 2.5% of our waking time throughout the year.
- I, as the oldest male in my group, lead most long flights.
- Flight distance varies with group size, with larger groups flying longer distances, on average.
- Because we travel as a group, our various age and sex classes differ little in frequency or distance of flights. The exception is the breeding female who flies long distance between the nest and the group when alternating between incubating and foraging.
- A typical pattern of flight for us consists of climbing a tree, flying one at a time, landing a meter or so above the ground in a nearby tree, and then foraging down the trunk, or dropping to the ground if it is bare or covered with short grass. We forage there for awhile, fly up into the lower part of the tree, forage towards the middle or top and then fly again to another tree.

I thought not. You'd appreciate these data more if you had lived them or had even just observed them. Here at least is your chance to live vicariously. Isn't that why you read almost anything about other people and about animals? But which human story gives a character with enough clarity, in enough detail, to identify his body and actions as yours? Which animal story presents the creatures as more than men in fur, feathers, or scales? I am suggesting to you a way of writing that goes beyond endless, phony metaphors, artistic allusions, to a small place in fiction where the reader can live second-hand with a big window into another person's or animal's life, not a pitiful peek that would fit any of a million other beings. Here the reader can identify the character's mortality with a chronicle of the ordinary in preparation for the extraordinary. Here the reader can find love stories with palpable depictions of the loving ones, not for pornography's sake, but for love's sake, the love that someone else lived or imagined. And in this, JJ believes as I do. He has long wanted to draw a comprehensive portrait of a woman, with words for the lines and coloration on her feet as well as her face, for the smell of her skin as well as her hair, for the light shining off her nose as well as in her eyes. But most certainly that of the man would be a failure.

One fact that is easy to remember is that our flights occur within groups, and that necessitates flight manners. These civilities belong to the babbler code of *best* actions, not actions for which one is punished by other group members for not performing. Because we are like a gang of rich, nearly defenseless, old people living on the streets of a big city where we are prey in a three dimensional world of exterminators, our first code is to use the family. Neither fly ahead nor lag behind because in either case you become a lone bird, the bird that dies soonest. Remember the killers? You soon will, instinctively by the urge to fly if not by the sight of a live death-dealer. With few exceptions our individuality is damned: flight is one of those few, when during takeoff, flapping, and landing, each of us needs his own space. Forgive me for mocking the seagull one more time. Fly for joy? Here is why we fly:

- to forage
- to avoid predators
- to roost
- to nest
- to feed fledglings
- to build dormitories (roosts) and nests
- to defend our borders
- to shelter from wind, rain, and hail
- to flee non-predators that startle us
- to sneak off to a dense bush to mate
- to flee competitors and those berserkers, the noisy miners

Do you see joy anywhere? Perhaps we don't need joy since we don't need the *Yi Jing* or meditation or drugs or blues or beer or excessive sex or money or glory or even dreams.

### **Work and Home**

When I first became a babbler, the intensity of being another being almost overwhelmed me. And yet I could somehow fly without knowing how, could somehow orchestrate all my flight feathers with precision to go here and there. I could “hoor” robustly to rally my family to a fight. I could freeze like a meditating monk. I could do many things when needed and with the appropriate facility: for foraging, vague messages would guide my probings into blind crevices; for fleeing ground-dwelling predators, a strong impulse would grip my body and pitch me into the air; for defending my family's territory, an instantaneous enmity would develop at the sight of non-kin. And more. It was as if some unnamed master did not want me hungry, cold, mateless, eggless, youngless, or dead. It was as if some ghost within me gave me a sense of who, what, and where I was so I would not be, could never be, a “beast astray, with no sense of its environment,” a Steppenwolf.

Some of my babbler's senses were and still are like clusters of images in the mind. One set is a genetically etched gallery of potential killers. The likenesses are poor to be sure but then monsters come in types: all hawks, all falcons, all owls, all snakes are odious to us, and no mug shots are needed when simple racism will do. Other images are more like snapshots. While foraging, I quickly develop photos of the most energy providing, common prey of the moment. These mind-pictures do not force me to reject other foods, but simply narrow the places searched and heighten my ability to spot the hypothetical morsel. You shop with a list and so do I. With them, we both pick up unlisted items, but without them we look longer and less successfully for the available things we want most. And both lists are continually adjusted to the cheapest desirable items, the sales. Then there are the faint, memory-like guides. Babblers mate with their own species of course; but more than that, we choose partners of the same mould as our parents. And here I have the imprint of YB's mother, if not her advice, to direct me.

More than any images, my sense of self is governed by my fit to the environment, by the way my wings and feet and bill and foraging skills and alarm calls and everything I am intermeshes with the sky and trees and food and predators and everything that is my home. I'm a medium-sized bird of the bush. The slimy water of Dyer's

Lagoon (Queensland) does not belong to me, as it does to the lotusbird; nor does the unending sky, as that does to the wedge-tailed eagle; or the drenching rainforest, as that does to the cassowary; or many other places, as they do to so many other birds. To you, my bush home is a dry woodland of dead grass and randomly strewn trees; but to me it is an admixture of sanctum and stockade, paradise and prison. The good stuff is all related to food and to safety and I guess you could say subsequently to sex:

- most insects and spiders---food!
- live trees
- bushes
- cow pats

[The remainder include such things as ground litter, dead trees, dormitories, nests, and eggs.]

And the dangerous or hindering stuff is mostly related to bad animals and bad weather:

- noisy miners---boo! hiss!
- birds of prey
- goannas, those huge lizards that eat our eggs and sometimes us
- snakes---tremble and shudder!
- heavy or prolonged rains

[The rest is a long list that includes extreme heat and cold, cuckoos, other babbler groups, stray males trying to steal a group's females, and man (formerly Aborigines for food but now white boys who destroyed nests and dormitories and sometimes babblers for pleasure).]

Most of my time is spent using the good bits of home, and not remarkably they have shaped my appearance and skills. Look at my bill. To most other species of my size, it is horrendously long, narrow, pointed, and excessively bent; and because of it I can forage very well in some ways, moderately well in others, and not at all in most. I can't collect meat, fish, nectar, eggs, nuts, fruit, or shelled animals; just insects and spiders, small and alive. Imagine a gizzard full of insect bits with some still moving, for beetles and bugs don't die quickly when swallowed whole. I specialize of course. I can pick insects off the ground or a termite mound or from my favorite sites, overturned cow pats; but in these places a straight bill would be more useful. For my real job, my curved bill delves bark crevices as I bend over part way for angled openings or all the way for parallel openings and jab down in front or between my legs. The curve helps my bill enter cracks at the widest entrance to extract hidden or partially hidden insects and spiders. It's the flamingo principle---sort of. My ability to hop, or inability to walk, however you look at it, assists by keeping my feet more or less together as I crouch and bend.

Yes, I am a predator. I suppose that it makes me a hypocrite with my damning of raptorial killers, berserkers who seek my end, while every day I suck down hundreds of hapless game. But I'm a hunter not of raw, red flesh but rather of crunchy, gooey meat that comes in many flavors. That is how I view my victims, through a taste sense that differs from yours, a taste with feel and delayed assessment, by which I mean that my body distinguishes between prey that are easy or tough to digest and between prey that have good or bad chemicals. Arthropods are covered with glands to help them operate their shells and communicate with the world through their tin can bodies. Some glands add spice, some salt, some sweetener, and some powerful aches in the gizzard when they burst. Moths are bombs of delicious fat but reek on the outside all over the scales. Spiders are protein whacks that reek on the inside. You see? I smell/taste with my guts.

It isn't just my physical traits and behaviors that have come to circumscribe my life; it is those of other species and other babblers. The infamous noisy miner's diving attacks force me and my family to forage lower in trees than we otherwise would and thus in effect constrict the living space within our territories. And the nearby presence of aggressively territorial babblers compels us also to be aggressively territorial, to be that or scattered, starved, and at great risk of being eaten, for no territory means no familiar food patches, no familiar refuges, and no dormitories or nests. Like food and other animals, the territory defines much of what I have become, what a babbler is. It is both more and less than a human home. It is the place where I do not have the ever present desire to be elsewhere, which was my state as a boy and man, and almost certainly remains JJ's to this day. It is where

usually everything I need exists. But it is no possession of mine or my family's because like a collapsed nest it may be abandoned without remorse. Neither is it a country estate. Rather my home is my subsistence farm on which every lush corner and barren patch is well known and whose borders grow and shrink with the waves of insects and spiders that roll slowly over this land under the direction of the weather and climate. Here I know where the waves roll, in good times and bad. Here I know where to hide when I am the hunted. Here I know where to build. And here I know always where to find my kin.

## Evil Birds

Except for prey-catching, most of my interactions with other species are bad for my health. Zoologists say that these encounters have no evil intent, but I say "So what?" While it is true that I feel no emotion when pursuing and eating my prey, intentions whether depraved or not have no consequence to the victim---danger is evil enough. Let me describe my first freezing bout for you to judge. I was scared shitless (a measure of terror not reserved for humans), because I hadn't yet learned to focus on what I was doing while being alert, a bird's equivalent to walking and chewing gum at the same time, only for a bird it's foraging and being alert, preening and being alert, flying and being alert... My body heard the miners' news of a flying predator, but my still largely human brain gated their alarms in favor of the empty sound in my stomach. When the message finally broke through, the fierce impulse that had already frozen me outside froze me inside as well. I was afraid to move for two hours. It was not relaxing, believe me; or, if you wish, try standing still but alert---and you will certainly be alert---in a dark Detroit alley for two hours. It was then that I first understood that my life was to be lived every day among beings that wished me dead. And that it didn't matter whether my death here or your death in the alley was the killer's food or his income or his degenerate joy. Dead was dead.

Like humans, we have a fascination for killers because of their terrifying power. Imagine the satanic charisma to mesmerize another being into immobility for hours. I suppose that is what's attractive about violence, what creates inner city predators, dumb, strong, mean raiders of other lives and property. I would say the same for the dumb, strong, mean goanna except that it has no other choices: killing is the only thing it can do. It is a lizard as long as a long snake and as thick as many together.

As dangerous as predators are, our nemesis is the noisy miner, an animal whose intentions are more depraved than the consequences of its actions---or so I believe. Perhaps you feel that I should be thankful for its life-saving warnings? And that I have shown enough ingratitude with my earlier damnations of this obvious benefactor? Then know first that they don't scream to the skies for our benefit, but for their own and their vile young's. Know also that they are the archvillians of the babbler's world; that they are miscreants that exercise gratuitous violence as a social strategy; that they are predators in a prey's body. I exaggerate, you say? Just look at that unimposing appearance: weight about sixty-five grams; bill short, straight, and not particularly pointed; face with black mask and yellow skin patches behind the eyes; body plumage mostly bland grays and whites; wings and tail mostly brown; claws sharp but small.

Nonetheless, "J'accuse," as the famous condemnation goes (by Churchy LaFemme of Pogo, not Emile Zola). Yes, I accuse this soldier-bird, this snake-bird, this squeaker, this garrulous honeyeater with these facts:

- Miners attack each of us about ten times an hour every single day of the year.
- Their assaults account for over two-thirds of all our encounters with non-food species and over ninety-five percent of all physical strikes against us.
- We return their hostilities at a ratio of about one to two hundred, and ours are always in self-defense.
- Although most attacks are by single birds and last only a few seconds, some involve groups of miners and last for several minutes.
- We don't prey on miners, nest in the same places, or are common enough to significantly occupy their territories, and we probably eat few of the same foods---miners in fact never go after specific food items that we have captured.

And more. I think that the most damning evidence of their monstrosity is their occasional killing of trespassers and the variety of other animals they sometimes attack (in fits of madness?). What in God's name would induce a small bird to attack horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, goannas, snakes, magpies, owls, kookaburras, and people? Not many potential predators or competitors here. But I care little for these species' problems. What I want to know is why us? What do they want from us?

## Babbling

I'm a babbler and JJ's a raver. The difference couldn't be greater. He struggled early in his adult life for independence and unfortunately found it. I learned early in my babbler's life about interdependence and have happily lived it. The irony is that babblerness is based on such extraordinary co-operation and mutual care that a babbler group is more like a human family than a bird flock, and in a very meaningful sense JJ is the lone bird and I'm the member of a Happy Family.

My comparison of babblers and men is not a silly one. My family consists of a father, mother, and offspring of several ages, and so do many of yours. My family vigorously defends a territory, rarely accepts outsiders, has numerous vocal signals and has little internal conflict or competition, and so do many of yours. In total my family achieves a unity and harmony found in few temporary collections of unrelated individuals belonging to any species, and so do many of yours. Look how we spend the night. Birds of most species roost alone or with large numbers of their kind in nearly constant turmoil as each strives for the warmest, driest, and safest spot. We roost in domed, twigged structures with a chamber barely large enough to hold an open human hand, and for eight, nine, or more birds that makes for cozy sleeping. A similar building is used for nesting, but then only the breeding female spends the night inside because no eggs or nestlings could survive with a whole family on top of them. I wonder how I do.

Because we are together all day, our daytime activities are also strikingly gregarious. I can't think of a single thing I do completely on my own, except defecate. We preen ourselves but also each other meticulously. We collect food for ourselves of course but also for young babblers still in or already out of the nest, for females with eggs or nestlings, and even sometimes for the old folks; and all of us forage at the same time over a limited area. We are usually attacked individually by noisy miners but form defensive huddles when the assaults are numerous or vicious (that is, when anyone cries for help). And although we sometimes die alone at the teeth or bill of a predator, more often the whole group mobs the assailant, nearly always when a distress call, that cry for help, is given. It is true that we all die alone when old---but then so do many of you.

About two-thirds of our day is spent foraging, flying from likely site to likely site, searching ground and trees and eating whatever is manageable and good. Our movements are not the synchronized flights of budgerigars, galahs, or starlings, which rock and roll through the air in three dimensional matrices of tempo and distance. Our flights are too short, too close to the ground, and too direct for that kind of co-ordination. But we have other ways of keeping together, including frequent, soft "yoik" calls, familiarity with the look and behavior of kin, and even recognition of those small movements signaling another babbler's intention to fly. If these fail, if one of us strays beyond our comfort zone, I climb to a high, exposed perch and bellow my "hoo" to assemble the clan. My mate follows suit by darting up the nearest tree while giving "ya" as she goes, and our children answer with their "uiks," "uik-weeuiks," and "uik-uks." We then quickly gather in a frenzy of calling and cuddling like a war torn family being reunited. Or I could say for my mate and me that we come together like long parted lovers, since these reunions are sometimes so intense that I try to hump her in front of God, the children, and everyone. It's a weakness, I admit.

But my family is no superorganism in which every member has the same self-interests. Just as we stay out of each other's way when flying, we don't crowd one another when hunting. We may squabble at times, especially hard times, over a large, desirable bug or roach or whatever has had the foolishness to compound an already tough existence by getting caught. And there are those rare occasions when one of the youngsters figures its time for

the old man to travel. But mostly we eat from shortened menus in peace, and the impatient boys wait their turns or strike out on their own, as do the girls, to search for another family to join as a parent or to set up their own territories if food is unusually abundant. Even in normal years and in large families like mine, the success of our nests is so poor that most young stay for at least several years helping kin and learning the ways of the babblerhood. When times are really rough, no one wants to leave. So you could say that at the bottom of all our behavior is selfishness, regardless of its appearance as helping or co-operation or harmony. But then to be fair you would also have to say that there is no babbler spite or murder or rape or abuse and so on. We possess neither the transcendent motives to act altruistically nor the debased mentality to act immorally. I suppose the same is true of noisy miners, though that's hard to accept in the face of their fanatical belligerence, and you'll never hear it from me in front of my kin because I know the value of a common, common-enemy.

When I said earlier that I was nearly defenseless, I meant towards predators. Towards other babblers I radiate verbal power. Does that still sound weak to you? Then consider how many human arguments you have witnessed and how many have resulted in violence. We are also all talk, or nearly so, because talk is cheap and safe. Here's a sample dispute with a neighboring group JJ calls red. This is the sequence of my actions, though other members (except a fledgling) did more or less the same things:

- alert
- flying
- alert
- flying
- huddling with family
- attacked by noisy miner
- climbing and calling
- call
- flying
- calling
- flying
- calling
- huddling with family
- calling
- climbing and calling
- calling
- foraging
- freezing
- tail-flicking and calling
- alert
- chasing members of red
- alert
- tail-flicking and calling
- foraging
- chasing a members of red
- foraging
- calling
- chasing members of red
- huddling with family
- calling
- alert
- chasing members of red
- alert

- flying
- calling
- foraging
- climbing
- freezing
- flying
- freezing

It looks more like a contest than a fight, doesn't it? This one lasted only seventeen minutes, less than half as long as most and far short of the three hour encounter we once had with group orange. But whether short or long, most consist of much calling, some chasing, and frequent breaks for regrouping, freezing, foraging, and resting, all while the families stay within sight and sound of one another. Few meetings have actual combat with birds flying up into the air, grabbing one another, and falling to the ground to tussle and peck each other there. These rare events are mostly limited to young, quick tempered males who lose their wits during the wild chaos of three or four families clashing together. Such melees are possible because our territories are bordered with wide bands of overlapping claims and the thrill of bickering sometimes draws a babbler family way out of bounds. It's glorious. Everyone goes home unhurt, exhausted, self-righteous (and ready to continue again another day), and full of some unidentifiable meaning to otherwise humdrum lives. Just like good Italian families, or so it has often been said.

In all of this and most else we do, sound is the glue that binds mother to father and children to both. Our showpiece display is the huddle in which we point towards one another, crouch, bend forward, raise and spread our tails, and flutter partly open wings. It is less like a gridiron huddle than the rallying display formed by players of team sports before play begins. Everyone is screaming "uiks," "yoiks," and "uik-uks;" and my mate and I are trumpeting "ya" and "hoo" or "uik" and "oow" in antiphonal synchrony. We don't sing melodiously like the gray butcherbird or the magpie, but we effervesce with quantity and volume, and sometimes even rhythm.

### Alone

I've been watching all evening. No family will come this late, but I must be careful of what may already be inside or may come later. Snakes. Goannas. And even rats because the station buildings and dump are not far off. And that bloody thing is so conspicuous on its thinly leafed branch overhanging the paddock southeast of the shade strip. It is frighteningly obvious in moonlight. The sheep shuffling about below would comfort me except that they're useless as watchdogs---would an animal who refuses to cry out when being slaughtered be bothered to yell at a snake? Out in the paddock ducks swim in their personal ponds made from water-filled "melonholes" and quack only at their ducklings, their own predators, and possibly at swarms of "scotch greys" that must be probing every unfeathered crevice. Northwest of the strip, the land has been so brutally overgrazed that it is patched with bare soil and clumps of lime bushes that nothing can use but arthropods and thornbirds. No comfort there either. It doesn't matter. My killer will come up or down the long, thin corridor that is richly stocked with prey compared to the paddock or with the pure stand of brigalows at the northern end of the strip.

Time to move closer. In this soft light and hard darkness it's difficult to see, difficult to breathe. How did I sleep outside last night? Wait. Any noise from inside? Closer. The hole is blocked; no, just a twig across the entrance, a snug spout that permits no backing out once entered. Go. Inside I'm still alive and quickly turn around. I breathe fully again and then see what I've seen on so many nights, criss-crossed shreds of sky through the roof and shadowy bits of grass and feathers protruding over the edge of the blackened bottom, and what I've never seen for more than a few seconds, an empty roost. God, it's lonely without being jostled and trampled and jabbed, and remembering warm bodies pressed against me so hard, so often, and so long that their presence became as natural as flying and their absence as unnatural as walking.

It will be dawn soon and the coming day will be hot, wet, and full of heat-numbed prey. Today my former family will have long bouts of resting and allopreening between bouts of foraging for themselves and for my son's new

mate as she sits on her new eggs. And there will be time to huddle with the new mistress when she is off the eggs and time to squabble with neighbors drawn out of their territories by the huddles. Today will be a good day for family things. But I have no family now, no territory, and only this borrowed roost. I will no longer do such things on such days, like sitting in warm, dripping trees preening my mate and being preened by her like an old man rocking on his porch with his wife beside him. That is not regret you hear just memories. But when she was taken, like the others, while sitting on our nest at night, I gave up---with the help of our son---and left. It was time, after so many children and four wives, which was really not many considering the great risks they took in doing all the incubating and all the brooding night and day. Each was as different as the bark of a brigalow and spotted gum, with different tints to their feathers and different ya's and uik's and different foods they could catch and different attentiveness to our young and different attachment to me, and different in sexiness you could say. My second mate and I raised two broods in each of two successive seasons. It was quite a feat and one not solely the result of lush conditions then. She was strong; and she was fierce, once rashly chasing a miner who dived on her near the entrance of our nest. Half blinded she would have survived with our help but only by sacrificing the nestlings. If I could, I would ask the black men to create a legend about her, a timeless dream of a crazy bird goddess who took revenge on evil djangara, spirits, whose threats to her children could not be endured.

What did she see in me? Did my large bill tell her I was good at collecting large prey? Certainly my yellow eyes showed my age, and an old babbler is plainly one that has survived and probably one that has bred many times before. Or was it the size of my family? Or of my territory? Or the vigor of my hooing? I saw her for days, hanging around, listening and looking. Here was no fool, so I hoo'ed more strongly each day until she finally dared to fill in the other half of my love song and sneak off with me to the thickest part of an acacia. Although it was not much of a courtship by human standards---and even that the miners tried to stop---it was enough. And although I never learned why she let me court her, I can guess why she stayed. Almost every nesting season is a season of sorrow, but our first nest produced a fledgling and thereafter we raised many more. By babbler standards, we did well. Since our time together I have often wondered what separated my family from others, any family from any other, within this world so filled with fortuitous judges: chance predation, unpredictable food, accidental thunderstorms, random droughts, and more. Some obscure measure of fitness, I suppose. It certainly wasn't my human intellect because the path through the mountains of genetic damnation was too narrow for my experiments. I was top babbler for sex and leading flights away from predators, for running away, and little else. I could neither impose my authority on my family nor pass on my human schemes genetically or through what I call babbler culture, the continuity of knowledge that each family possesses about their home and kin. It was impossible to be superfit without first being ordinarily fit.

Yet my life was fit, however restricted by intellect or genes. I was intense without weariness, energetic without dissipation, duty bound without thought of rebellion, purposeful without reasoning, free without imagination, co-operative without calculation; and I was fearful, cowardly, brave, angry, peaceful, and all the other things that babblers are at the right times. And all of this came through my animal mindfulness, the concentration that human observers think only exists during hunting but in fact exists in everything we do. Only man has yet to learn that today, this morning, this minute, this second, and his current activity and thoughts and feelings are the only reality. There isn't, never has been, and never will be a yesterday or tomorrow. In total I was as elegantly fit as only an affluent, healthy, and educated being can be.

There isn't much time. Or it's the crepuscular stirrings of the wind as it prepares to sweep over vast denuded areas of the outback, or a sheep scratching his newly clipped hide against the tree. I once said that old babblers die alone, but that was misleading in several senses. Death is the ultimate non-social action, and thus we all die alone whether anyone is beside us. And I did not distinguish between being alone physically or emotionally. For a babbler, the closest human situation is that of someone who having already lost all of his loved ones has a wonderful lack of regret about leaving this world because of the hope of joining them in another. That sound again. And again it doesn't matter. This is the way I was meant to have lived and to die.