The Waterfowl Tree

William Kittredge
They ran into snow almost two hours before reaching the valley, the snow at twilight whipping in gusts across the narrow asphalt. The station wagon moved slowly through the oncoming darkness.

"A long haul," his father said. "Eva will be wondering."

The boy, tall and seventeen, his hands behind his neck, watched out the glazed and crusted side windows at the indeterminate light. This mention of the woman could be a signal, some special beginning.

"Is she pretty?" he asked.

"Pretty enough for me. And that's pretty enough."

The man laughed and kept his eyes on the road. He was massive, a widower in his late fifties. "I've got too old for worrying about pretty," he said. "All I want is gentle. When that's all you want, you got to be getting old."

In a little while, the man said, "I remember hunting when I was a kid. It was different then, more birds for one thing, and you had to kill something with every shot."

"How do you mean?" the boy asked.

"We were meat hunters. You spent money for shells, you brought home meat. I saw Teddy Spandau die on that account. Went off into open water chest deep, just trying to get some birds he shot. cramped up and drowned. We hauled a boat down and fished him out that afternoon."

The snow began to thin and the man pushed the car faster and concentrated on his driving.

"It was like this then," he said. "Snowing, and ice a foot thick and below zero all day."

The boy wished his father would go on talking about these faraway and unsuspected things. But the man, long estranged from this remote and misted valley of his childhood, sat hunched over the wheel, ab-
sorbed in the road and grimacing.

"I guess it was different in those days," the boy said, wanting his father to keep talking.

"Quite a bit different," the man answered. "A different life altogether."

It was completely dark when they came out of the storm, driving through the last drifting flakes into the light of a full moon and an intense and still cold that made the new snow crystallize and occasionally sparkle in the headlights.

"Freeze solid by morning," the man said. "Be some new birds coming in."

He stopped the car and switched off the headlights.

"Look there," he said, pointing.

The boy cranked down his window and looked across the distorted landscape of snow, blue and subdued in the moonlight. Far away he saw a high ridge shadowed in darkness.

"That's the rim," his father said. "We'll be home directly."

The boy looked again at the black fault. How could this be home, this place under that looming wall?

"All my life," the man said, "in strange places, I've caught myself looking up and expecting to see that rim."

The long attic room, unfinished, raftered under the peak roof was illuminated by blue softness where moonlight shone through windows on either end. On the floor and inward sloping east wall he could see light reflected up from downstairs. The boy lay in the warmth of a down sleeping bag on an iron cot and watched the light, imagined that he could see it slowly climb the wall as the moon dropped. The cold in this shedlike room above the barn was complete and still and frosted his breath when he moved.

"You're young and tough," his father had said. "You draw the outdoor room."

They'd unloaded the boy's suitcase and the new gear quickly in the darkness, tried to be quiet because the house across the road was completely dark. Then his father went ahead with a flashlight, and they carried the gear up an old flight of stairs at the side of the barn and pushed through the ancient hanging door that opened into this long, barren room. After unrolling the sleeping bag on the cot, his father gripped him by the shoulder and shone the light in his face.

"You'll be warm inside the bag," the man said. "Take your coat in with you and sleep with your clothes on. That way they won't be frozen in the morning. Stick the boots under you. We'll get you up for breakfast."

Then he turned and took the light and left the boy standing in the cold. What would greet his father in that dark house across the road? They'd come upon the place after rounding a curve in the gravel road that crossed the upper part of the valley. A bunch of trees and a house and a barn and some corrals; just that in the midst of unending fields of fenced snow.

The boots made a comforting hump and the boy curled around them and tried to warm himself. Suddenly he was frantic and wished he were back in his bed at school, enduring the vacation, trying to guess tomorrow's movie.
"Goddamn," he said, clenched and shaking. "Damn, dirty son of a bitch."

But the warmth came and with it a quiet numbness. He felt himself drift and then he slept, surprised that he was not going to lie awake and search for a sense of how it would be in the morning.

And now, just as quickly, he was awake and watching the slow light on the far wall. Then he recognized, almost unnoticed among his thoughts, an ancient crying. Coyotes. He smiled and huddled deep in his warmth, secure against the night. The calls came fine and clear, and he struggled to get an arm out of the warmth. He looked at the illuminated face of his watch. It was almost three o'clock.

The wailing stopped and there was silence.

Geese were flying. He could hear, far away, but still clear and distinct, their wandering call. He felt himself slipping again into peaceful sleep. Then the coyotes began a long undulating wail and small yipping. He rested his head on his arm and slept, lulled by their noise and a small rhythm of his own.

A hand shook him, gently and firmly, and for a moment he was elsewhere and lost, then he was awake and remembering. He pushed up from the warmth of the sleeping bag and looked out at the morning, at the smile of this strange woman and the frosted windows, and the rough shingle and rafter roof. His breath swirled softly in the cold morning air. He smiled at the woman and stretched his arms. The woman stood next to his bed.

"Welcome," she said. "On the coldest day in a thousand years."

Really nothing but a fuzzy-headed woman. She was bundled in hunting clothes and wore a down cap tied under her chin with fringes and curls of hair protruding. Not the woman he'd expected. The face was heavier and older than he would have imagined, and he suddenly understood that his father was almost an old man.

"You must be Eva."

"The same," she said. "The famous Eva. Come on, breakfast is almost ready."

"I can't." He grinned, surprised at her easiness, taken in in spite of himself. "I don't have any pants on."

"Come on. I won't look if I can help myself." She pulled on his arm and grinned.

He scrambled out of bed and was shocked at the cold. He jumped in dismay when she grabbed one of his bare ankles with her cold hands. He escaped and she dropped the mittens she had tucked under one arm and began rummaging in the sleeping bag, fishing in the warm darkness, finally pulling out his pants and coat while he wrapped his arms around himself and watched. "Get 'em on," she said.

The area between the house and the barn was ankle-deep in new snow and marked only by the boot tracks of the night before and her footprints of this morning. The trees around the house were heaped with ice and snow. He had to squint against the glare.

The house was rough and worn and old, without any rugs to cover the plank floor and with homemade wooden chairs and a long table with benches on either side. The boy stood in the doorway and felt with pleasure the shock of warm air that softened his face. In one corner of this main room was a big wood stove with chopped wood and
kindling in a box beside it. His father sat on a stool beside the stove, filling shell belts. Open shell boxes were scattered around him on the floor.

"Come on in," the man said. "Close the door. Charlie will have breakfast on in a minute."

Through an open doorway on the far side of the room came the reflection of morning sunlight. Through the doorway he could see another, smaller man working over a wood-burning cook stove. The woman began pulling off her cap and coat. No one, not even the woman, paid attention to the water and melting ice on the floor.

"Holy smokes," the woman said, brushing her hair back and tucking her shirt in her pants. "It's so damned cold out there he could have froze."

"Make you tough, won't it boy." His father looked up at him. "It wasn't bad," the boy said. "I stayed warm."

"That's the spirit." The man stood up, dropping the finished shell belts from his lap to the floor. "Come on."

The boy followed him into the next room where the other man was tending a frying pan full of eggs and another pan with bacon. "This is Charlie Anderson," his father said. "Me and Charlie are hunting partners. From the old days."

Charlie turned and shook hands with the boy. "Glad to have you, son," he said. "Eat in a minute." Charlie nodded and went back to his cooking.

"Come here." His father, massive in boots and khaki hunting gear, walked to the far end of the kitchen and opened a door to the outside. The boy followed him out, and the cold was at him again, hard and stiff.

"Look at that," his father said. Behind the house was a small orchard of six or seven trees. The tree nearest the house, gnarled and holding stiff winter limbs toward the thin sky, was hung with dead geese and ducks. They were in bunches of a dozen or more, strung together on short pieces of rope and suspended from heavy nails driven into the limbs, crusted with ice and frozen and absolutely still, frosted and sparkling in the light.

"Deep freeze," the man said. "We hung them like that when we were kids."

The boy supposed that he should say something to please his father but was not sure what that would be. He turned away from the tree and looked to the west where the winter rim he had seen in the moonlight rose high over the far edge of the valley. Through the still air he could define individual trees among the groves of juniper along its upper edge. He heard the geese calling again and looked to see them flying, distant and wavering, and remembered the night before. "They sound so far away," he said.

"We'll get after them," his father said. "As soon as we eat."

The boy turned and looked again at the tree, hung with dead birds. He was unable to feel anything beyond his own chill.

"We hung them there when I was a kid," his father said. "A man named Basston owned this place, and my old man would bring me down here to help out on the weekends. There'd be a crowd all season. Guys from the city. Basston died. The guys stopped coming. Let's eat."

The boy watched his father turn and go in, surprised at the life that had been his father's. Maybe that's why he brought me here, he
thought. To let me see what he was.

"Coming," he said.

The boy huddled lower in the blind of tules and reeds and wished the birds would hurry and come again. He and his father sat hidden only a few yards from a small patch of open water, on a neck of land in the tule swamps of the valley. They were alone and a long way from the warmth of the station wagon.

"I'll take you with me," the man said when they first spotted the birds with field glasses. He pointed far off from where they were parked above the frozen swamp, and the boy saw them, milling and keeping a stirred bit of water open and free of ice. A fantastic sight through the glasses—thousands of ducks crowding in the water and great bunches of Canada geese walking the ice around them.

"Eva and Charlie can go over and wait at the decoys," his father said. "Give us two shots at them."

No one said anything, and after straightening the tangled gear in the back of the station wagon, the four of them walked off, two in each direction. The boy and his father walked in a long arc around the birds in order to come up on them from the sheltered land side and get as close as possible before the birds flushed. "Lots of time," his father said, after they'd walked a half mile or so. He was panting and sweating in the heavy gear. "Give Eva and Charlie time to get over to the decoys."

And their stalk was a good one. Between them, they had five greenhead mallard drakes and two hens. "Pick the greenheads," his father whispered before they came up shooting. "Pick one each time before you shoot."

The geese had been wise and flushed early, taking a few ducks with them, but the main flock of ducks was almost too easy, standing nearly still in the air during the long and suddenly clamorous second as they flushed, rising in waves, time to reload and shoot again before they were gone. The boy's first two shots had simply been pulled off into the rising mass. Then he remembered his father's words and aimed carefully and selectively.

After the first flush, the man and the boy dropped into the tules near the water's edge, leaving the dead birds on the ice. The thousands of ducks grouped and then turned in the distance and came back at them in long whirring masses, sensing something and veering off before getting into shooting range, but filling the air with the mounting rush of their wings. The boy, awed nearly to tears by the sight above him, and the sound of the wings, sat concealed by his father and was unable and unready to shoot again.

"Charlie and I used to hunt here when we were kids," the man said after a time, during a lull. "This is the real coming back. I remember waking in the spring when the birds were flying north. I could hear them from my bed, and I'd go out and stand on the knoll behind the house and watch them leave and hear them calling and smell the corrals and just look at the valley where it had turned green and then over at the rim where a little snow lay near the top. I guess those were the best days I ever lived." The man spoke softly, and the boy half-listened to him and sucked in his breath, waiting for the birds to come wheel-
ing at them again, thinking the sound of their flight the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

Then the birds stopped coming, and he and his father went out on the ice and gathered the dead ones, five beautiful greenheads and the two hens and carried them back to the hiding place. "The dead ones scared them off," his father said. "Now we'll have to wait awhile on the honkers."

And so they waited, the boy trying to be comfortable in his heavy clothing as he listened to his father. "We used to haul the birds back to the house in a wagon. There was ten times as many in those days and lots of canvasbacks and redheads. You don't see those birds any more." The man moved quietly and easily around their nest, pulling reeds together over them until they were completely hidden.

"I remember one afternoon when the wind was blowing and the clouds were below the rim and we sat in one place, Charlie and me, fourteen years old I guess, and we shot up over a case of old man Basston's 12-gauge shells. The birds kept coming and we just kept shooting. We killed a hundred and fifty birds that one afternoon. It was almost night when we got back to camp and we hung those birds in the dark and old man Basston came out and we stood under that tree and he gave each of us a couple of drinks of the best bourbon whiskey on earth and sent us to bed like men. I guess that was the best day, the tops in my life."

Had everything been downhill since? The boy understood, or hoped that he did, why he was here, that his father was trying to make up, to present a view of life before the time had completely passed. Was this only for himself he wondered? He listened to his father and thought of this woman, Eva, and the others and the different man his father had become to him in this place.

Eventually the geese came, very high, and veered out in their great formations. They dropped and started to wheel when they saw the water.

The flocks seemed endless, long flights coming one before the next, circling and wheeling and dropping. "I'll tell you when," the man said. "Just lay quiet."

The first flight had landed and was calming itself in the water and on the edge of the ice when the next, under a larger flight of ducks, came directly over them, settled on stiff wings, and fell directly toward the water, unconscious and intent. "Now," the man said, and they rose, waist-deep in the tules, and shot three times each and dropped six birds easily, the huge black and white geese thudding on the ice. "That's it," his father said. "Beautiful shooting. Enough for this day. Let's go. They'll be back."

The geese scattered and wheeled above them while they went out on the ice again and began to pick up the dead birds. They were heavy and beautiful birds and the boy twisted their necks the way his father did and felt sorry that they could not have lived and yet was glad that they were dead. They were trophies of this world, soft and heavy and dead.

"We'll sit around this afternoon and play some four-handed gin," his father said, after they had gathered the birds. "You ever play gin?"
“Sure,” the boy said. “For pennies and buttons.” They strung the ducks on a short piece of rope and the geese on another. “You carry the ducks,” his father said. “I’ll bring the geese. We’ll go back across the ice.”

It was a mile across to where the station wagon sat on a knoll. The going was slick and tricky with the new snow on the ice. The boy walked gingerly at first, then faster. Soon he was well out ahead of his father. The man came slowly and solidly, breathing heavily.

Far away the rim was a sharply defined edge. Between him and that high point, the boy watched the flocks of birds, some clearly visible against the flat sky, others almost indistinguishable against the snow-covered slopes.

From behind him he heard a distant, muffled cry.

He turned and saw that his father was gone, vanished from sight. Then the man reappeared on the surface of the snow, floundering in the water. The boy dropped the shotgun and the birds and ran toward his father.

He saw the man raise himself violently and wave, shout, then fall back again.

The cry, the boy understood, was a command to stay back; but he ran on, slipping and falling toward the hole in the ice. The man floundered through the chest-deep water, while the geese on their little rope floated beside him. The water steamed. The ice, incredibly, was soft and only a few inches thick.

The man waved him back and the boy stopped, yards short of the edge. He watched his father for some sign of what had happened, what to do.

The man stood quietly in the steaming and putrid water, gasping. He had been completely submerged and now the water was under his armpits. “Stay there,” his father said, beginning to shake. “There’s a hot spring and the ice is rotten.”

“Let me rest a little,” he said. “Then I’ll try to work my way over to the solid ice.”

The boy stood helpless. The edges of the broken and jagged water had begun to freeze again, solidifying as he watched. “Can you stand it?”

“It’s not so bad here,” the man said, composed now and shaking less, speaking quietly. “But it’ll be cold out there.”

Then the man began to move again, working slowly, pulling each leg out of the deep bottom mud and then moving forward another step. He made it almost to the edge of the ice and then stopped. “God Almighty,” he said. “It’s so goddamned cold.”

And then the boy heard his father mutter something else, something subdued and private, saw his face begin to collapse and draw into itself and grow distant. The man began to thrash and move forward in lunges, reaching toward the edge of the ice, fighting and gasping, moving toward the boy.

Then, his eyes on the boy, the man simply turned onto his back, eyes rolling in and becoming blank. Then he sank, the birds entangled in the rope going down with him. Then there was nothing but the water and some bubbling.

And then there were no bubbles, nothing but the dead geese floating quietly, their heads pulled under the surface by the rope that still en-
circled his father’s body.

The boy heard again the distant honking of the geese and the whirring of wings as a pair of ducks came directly at him and suddenly swung away.

The boy turned and began to rush across the ice, scrambling and slipping, sometimes falling as he ran across the open ice toward the station wagon.

Back in the station wagon with the engine going and the heater turned on, he began to shake. He stretched out on the seat and fell out of himself like a stone into what might have been taken for sleep.

He awoke fully in the warm darkness of a completely strange and unknown room, wondering what place this was. And then, with terrible swiftness, he was again in the moment of the inexplicable thing that had happened—he saw his father’s eyes rolling backward. He knew that it had happened, understood that this was one of the bedrooms in the strange house. He put his feet on the floor and was surprised to find himself in his underwear. A door slammed in another part of the house and he heard a voice, Eva’s voice.

“I wonder if he’s still sleeping?”

She appeared in the dim doorway.

“He’s awake,” she said over her shoulder.

She came into the room and turned on the light. Her hair was brushed away from her face and fell in waves to her shoulders. She looked younger, he thought, and somehow out of place here. He pulled the sheets over his bare legs.

“I’m all right now,” he said. “Did they get him out?”

“He is out.” The woman spoke formally and slowly, showing, the boy thought, that they were still really strangers, after all. “And now it is night. You slept a long time.”

The boy turned away, beginning to cry, dissolving into the terror once more. The woman snapped off the light and came across the room to him. “Try to rest,” she said, “I’m going to bed now.

“Your father loved this place,” the woman said. “He told me it was the only surely happy place in his life. I’ll be back in a minute,” Eva said, and left the room.

The only surely happy place.

Presently the woman returned, wearing a brocade robe that reached the floor and with her hair pulled back and knotted behind her head. The boy turned and looked at her in the dim light, saw her drop the robe and pull back the covers on the other side of the bed and get under the covers, flinching when she touched the sheets. The boy started to get up.

“Stay and we’ll talk,” she said. She took him by the arm and pulled him toward her, and he was again surprised at the coldness of her hands.

“Why?” he said. “Why did it happen?” He began to cry again.

“His heart,” she said. “He had been having trouble.” The woman moved closer to him and put her arms around his shoulders. “I’m sorry,” she said. “God,” she said.

Presently he slept again, exhausted and calmed, slowly moving to huddle against the warmth of the woman. In the middle of the night he woke and felt the woman shuddering and crying beside him.

He woke to warmth and sunlight coming through the open doorway.
of the room. He was alone in the bed.

In the outer room the woman and Charlie Anderson were sitting quietly at the table. "Sit down," Charlie said. "I'll get you some food."

"Charlie doesn't trust my cooking," the woman said. She went into the kitchen and returned with a mug of coffee. She seemed self-conscious and almost shy.

Charlie Anderson came from the kitchen with eggs and a thick slice of fried ham. "Eat good," he said to the boy.

"He will," the woman said.

The boy wondered where the grief had gone and if his father had been so easily dismissed.

"We seen the end of a fine man," Charlie Anderson said and began to remove the dishes.

So the boy ate and watched them, these strangers. And then he walked through the house uneasily and went out through the kitchen door and stood beneath the heavily laden tree and shuffled in the snow and fingered the frozen bark while looking again to the far-off rim.

Eva came outside. The boy was conscious of her standing silently behind him. He blinked in the radiance and watched the high-flying birds, geese moving to feed and water. He heard the woman make a sound behind him, and he turned to see her face crumpling. She gasped slightly. She moved to him and pressed herself against him while she shook and wept. He stood with his arms at his sides and felt the softness of her breasts behind the sweater, and then nothing but the cold in her hair which was loose and open against his face.

Then she was quiet.

"Let's go in," she said. "I'm cold."

She moved away and he followed her, oblivious to everything and completely drawn into himself.

"It will make you tough," his father had said.

"Goddamn you for this," the boy thought.

He slammed the door behind him and went to stand before the fire. The woman stood at the window with her hands behind her while Charlie Anderson busied himself with the dishes. The house seemed filled with the musk of the dead birds. The boy's numb fingers throbbed and ached as he held them open to the radiant warmth of the fire.

"Goddamn everything," the boy said.