

the SETTING of

# WINGS

by **Buddy Levy**

**WINTER HAD A GRIP ON THE VALLEY.** Ice cocoons encased the willow branches, and they bent over the creek from the weight. The wind blew so hard in the midmorning that snow-drifts blocked the road between the new cabin and the old Worthington place, and we had to cross-country ski between the two houses. Tumbleweeds left etchings on the surface of the windpack as they skipped along, hopping the barbed-wire fences and leaving lines like strange hieroglyphics or the confused footprints of chickadees. During the days it might warm enough for ice-blocks to dislodge and float down Loving Creek, but when night fell the chunks would slow and bind to larger ice-rafts and then freeze solid again as temperatures slid well below zero.

In the truncated light of those winter days I liked to recline in the reading chair of the solarium room, occasionally lifting my eyes from my book to look out the large picture windows that opened to the west and which would later, as they did every evening, let the brilliant skeins of sunset spill into the cabin like water through a culvert. I was looking for birds. During that caesura between late afternoon and early evening the skies would begin to fill, slowly at first, just dark flecks on the horizon, with the moving V's of migratory waterfowl. By twilight you could see black spirals in all directions, funnels of birds curling their way into the open water that remained in the spring-fed creeks and ponds. When the sky came alive I would grab the down parka from the mudroom, thrust on gloves and hat and go stand on the snow-covered deck to witness this evening ritual, the birds returning from the grain fields far to the south.

On the deck the spectacle intensified, because now you could hear the controlled cacophony of their voices, the reedy keening of thousands and thousands of ducks and geese. If you watched closely, and listened, you would discover other birds, too. A singular heron might croak past overhead, the wary flap of its wings slow and skeptical. Usually a small group of Sandhill Cranes would shoot straight for the large slough above the headgate, landing as one great bird somewhere out in the shadowy grain stubble. But always the condensed, distilled voices and shapes of ducks and geese dominated the skyscape those winter afternoons and evenings, and they stay with me now. There are essences one never tires of, and for me it is watching and listening to birds in flight. I am arrested by the tension just before they land, the compression of speed and elevation and instinct all hurled into one definitive act. So calculated and committed, the birds have circled and considered, have surveyed the ground from every conceivable angle and have decided to light, to cease flying. They have put trust in their instinct and in the depth of their knowledge and have chosen this place over that. Perhaps never completely certain, at this particular instant, anyway, they trust themselves. And they drop from the sky to land.

Anyone who has ever sat in a duck blind and watched birds fly knows the thrill of the setting of wings. It looks predictable, but each time a duck or goose sets its wings to land there exist subtle differences. Once it might be a steady, sure braking when the bird pulls up with full flaps, and it is on the ground or water so fast you want to see it again to try to understand how it happened. Often the wing set has an air of style to it; you see this in mallards. They will set their wings quite early, the slope of their trajectory decided far from the intended landing pad, and as they descend and the wind starts to part and give from the forces of bone and feather, the wing tips will vacillate, like the waving of a crop duster or a bush plane, and then there will be the cupped sound of wind in wings like exhalation, and the mallards land with a shudder on the water. But always, if you look closely, the setting of wings creates a distinct outline in the sky, the smooth soft curve in the bird's silhouette sloped downward like a frown.

On one such afternoon, before the frenzied flight happened, I was sitting on the deck, watching and waiting. The air was so cold you could hear it snap. I could nearly hear my breath crystallizing, and the feet of my deck chair squeaked in the dry snow at my slightest shifting. Then the outline of a singular Canada goose appeared on the horizon to the west, flapping in from some great distance beyond my ability to imagine. The goose flew too low for such a clear day, and I wondered about this. Hunting season was on, and at sunset the valley would be littered with the cough-reports of shotguns booming from river bend and slough. By late season the birds were usually quite wary, having been conditioned to come in higher on clear nights, but this bird seemed less concerned with the consequences of his flight than with the freedom and perfection of it. As I watched, the honker drew closer and grew larger until it was upon me, flying right over my head, directly above the cabin, then making one huge parabola and turning back across the barley stubble and setting its wings with confidence and panache, landing on Loving Creek at the big bend below the headgate.

The eldest of three sons, I was the most accomplished hunter, but I had never shot a goose, while each of my brothers had. Having no goose notched into my mythical belt was no great assault on my machismo, but my brothers, younger and competitive, liked to lord it over me as a kind of trump card. They did have that on me. Shooting a goose is, in some families and in some places, like shooting a deer, it is a rite of passage that catapults you from stripling to seasoned in the time it takes to pull a trigger. You must be strong to finish the life of a wounded goose. You must be strong to sling the goose over your shoulder and carry the great bird home by the neck, its weight slapping against your hip as you trudge across the snowfield.



It wasn't for lack of opportunity that I'd never shot a goose. On a few occasions clear, makeable shots presented themselves to me, but alone in the field or blind I had passed them up, whether by choice or something else I have yet been able to determine. Hunters sometimes describe "buck fever" – the inability to pull the trigger when they finally have their first buck in the cross hairs of their rifle – but what I experienced with geese was quite different, I think, in part because of the movement of the bird. You first make them out in the distance, the tell-tale V, and soon as your eyes strain they are growing in size, drawing nearer, moving toward your field, your set of decoys. As their image tightens, comes into focus, you become mesmerized, hypnotized by the slow, methodical, rhythmic cadence of their wing beats, and then they are upon you, the sharp sheen of black and white bursting forth from the sky, the wind screaming as it flees their wings. They sail over you, sail through your imagination as you lie stock-still in the snow, your mouth wide open, and they pass beyond you and are gone. When they disappear, you wonder what happened. Should you have shot? Why didn't you shoot? How did the mantra of their flight make watching them enough? Back at the cabin, the standard question would come. "How'd ya do?" You reply, honestly: "No shot."

**I AM NOT CERTAIN** whether these histories influenced my decision to enter the house and grab the Browning 12-gauge side-by-side, but something moved me that day. Something about the solitary quality of this bird, its aura of nonchalance. I wouldn't be lying in wait in the frozen palm of a grain field for this accidental bird, one of many in a group setting to land. I would be stalking this particular bird, just the two of us crystallized in time. Something stirred in me that day.

Before I knew it the shells were in my parka pocket and I had skis on and was skiffing my way along the irrigation ditch that ran parallel to Loving Creek. I had marked the bird's descent precisely, and as I strode along I transformed from birder to hunter, planning the stalk of my quarry. Where the irrigation canal angled up toward the big pond I would cut across the plowed field and head for the creek, my approach protected by the band of willows and cottonwoods that lined the stream. Then I would sneak in quietly and jumpshoot the goose.

I paused a few hundred yards from Loving Creek to ease my breathing and load the Browning. I broke the gun and looked through the barrels; they were clean and blue-black and shiny against the skyline. Then I moved, slowly, my steps and breathing rhythmic as false-casts. When I got to the willow belt I snapped the gun shut and moved in behind a dense bunch of thicket and paused again, now feeling the pulse of my blood in my chest and head. Then ever so slowly I leaned out and peeked around so I could see the bank of the creek, the rolling snow drifts unfurling themselves to the smooth water of the bend.

And there swam the goose.

The Canada goose paddled calmly in the slack water of the curve, facing away from me, its gallant head bowed slightly. I watched the way it held itself steady, the way its movements sent small ripples along the water, like recurring dimples. A slight wind began to tighten my cheeks. I slowly removed the glove from my shooting hand and readied the gun across my chest. Two quick ski-steps and I was free of the brush and willows, standing in the open, ready to fire when the goose lifted from the water.

Sensing danger, the big bird turned and saw me and flapped all at once, its great wings slapping the water in departure. The bird elevated with surprising quickness for its size, and I pulled up just as fast, swinging my head past the mottled, gray-white chest and back then along the craning black neck, finally settling my sights on the white necklace feathers slung across the bird's face like a chin strap. The goose was in perfect range and I had it dead to rights and I clenched my cheek down tight on the gun stock and felt the cold trigger on the underside of my index finger and I let the bird keep flying. No resonating click came from the action of my index finger compressing the trigger. The sky congealed into a beautiful perfection.

I watched the bird's flight through the lens of the gun barrel as if I were peering through field glasses, and I saw everything. The way the goose dropped scat in its leaving, how it gained altitude quickly and honked its frightened distress call, the awkward trailing of the feet. The goose headed straight for Sullivan's pond on Silver Creek, then banked hard downstream and turned east, staying low, in the direction of Purdy's place. I squinted to watch the flight, seeing the bird diminish in the fading light, its wings set, when it occurred.

One sharp shotgun blast echoed from the vicinity of Kilpatrick Bridge, barked and echoed and reverberated into my marrow, and the bird was yanked from the sky in a clumsy abridgment of flight and was gone. I heard a distant whistle and the muffled commands of a man to his dog. Then I, too, crumpled in the snow.

The sky began to fill with birds, and I observed them carefully, studying their dance. I listened to their cries, my head curled in the crook of my arm. Wind blew snow drifts around me and the sky went dark and I just lay there listening to the sounds of the evening calls, the wind shearing over and under the wings like sirens, the landing slaps as their feet broke the water of the pond and the big curve in the creek.

I remained there until all the birds had stopped talking, until a half moon rose up over Timmerman Hill and a coyote yelped from the barren, frozen fields, stayed until frost formed on my cheeks and earlobes. Then I gathered myself and slunk back silently to the cabin in the soft glow of the half moon light, knowing that now, when someone asked me if I had ever killed a goose, I could answer, would have to answer, yes. <HDI>