THE RED TAIL HAWK

Douglas Thayer

I remember how icy the alarm clock was that morning when I grabbed it and fumbled under the covers for the button. I didn't want my mother to hear it and get up too, because she would make me eat a cooked breakfast, fix me a big lunch. She would tell me again I shouldn't kill birds, insist how dangerous the river was for me alone, especially in winter, even if I was fifteen. I listened. Then, glad when I couldn't hear her door down the hall, I put the clock back and pulled my Levis and shirt under the covers to warm. I was going after geese, ducks too, but mostly geese, Canada geese. Standing in the south field after chores, I had seen them twice that week coming up off the lake to feed in the fields. The great grey Canada birds were fantastic, huge almost, wild and free, with a clamorous gabbling that made me shiver. Yet I had never killed one.

"Let me go with you."

I turned to face Glade, the oldest of my three younger brothers, his head just raised off his pillow. How I hated to sleep with him, feel his warmth beside me in the bed, hear him breathe, wake in the night to find him touching me. "No, you can't go. I told you last night."

"Please. I've got some shells."

"No. Shut up and go back to sleep."

His face pale in the dim light from the frosted windows, he stared at me, then lowered his head and turned to the wall. Glade followed me everywhere, swimming in the summer, fishing, hunting, on hikes. My mother made me let him go, said I should want him to go, that we were brothers. We fought at night. Straddling him I held my pillow over his face, him bucking and twisting, sucking for air; or I jabbed him savagely under the covers until he cried, when my two youngest brothers would holler from their bed that we were fighting. I could hear my father coming. He cuffed me, threatened to lick me, said, "You're not too big yet for a damned good licking." And I hated him for that, for grabbing me by the collar, for kicking me in the butt hard, for always shouting I was a fool. But I never cried. He couldn't make me.

I wanted to be left alone, wanted that fiercely, didn't want anybody around me, touching me. I wanted to be alone like the birds. Birds were alone. I loved birds. I took a taxidermy course, two dollars for each mailed

lesson, my haying money, and out in the barn I skinned the birds I killed and made their cotton bodies. I hung them from the barn rafters on long wires, suspended them in flight, meadow larks, robins, magpies, crows, ducks, hawks, and hanging from the ceiling in my room on a wire, a large redtail hawk, wings spread, soaring. Birds could fly wherever they wanted, could be alone. Nothing touched them but the air.

At night, Glade asleep, I would sneak off my pajamas and curl tight under the blankets but not really feel them in the darkness because they were warm like my skin, like air. And that summer often I lay on top of the covers spread out, stared up at the hawk, lifted my naked arms. I fell asleep like that once, and Glade woke before I did. "You're going to go crazy with that stuff!" my father yelled at me. "What the hell's got into you lately anyway?" But it wasn't sex, not that kind. I wasn't innocent, for no farm boy could be. But I didn't know girls then, not at fifteen and away from town, and my loins and heart would not freeze then as they would two years later, although even at fifteen I dreamed and woke in the darkness, my sleep become frantic with a boy's passion. But mostly I dreamed other dreams, dreams of flying, soaring, lifting away from the earth, being an eagle or a hawk, vanishing into the yellow sun.

My Levis and shirt got warm. Feet curled against the cold linoleum, I dressed. Kneeling to feel for my heavy wool boot-socks, I looked up at the redtail. "The Albatross — Six Foot Wing Span," a sailplane I built, had hung there first. Proud of me for once, my father said I should enter it in the county fair. But I didn't. Carrying the five-foot wings, Glade the body because I couldn't carry both, I climbed into the hot summer cliffs, where I sailed it into the afternoon thermals, watched it soar to disappear into the sun. Then I stepped to the very edge, raised my arms. Glade screamed. "You trying to kill yourself, you little fool?" my father yelled at me that night, called me a fool again for losing the plane. Younger, I let my kites go, held them until the ten-cent ball of string ended, then let them go, watched the wind carry them.

Careful not to let my drawer squeak, I got my shotgun shells. More than anything else I wanted a room of my own where I could lock the door, be alone, sleep alone, not hear anybody at night, be touched. And I would have my birds in my room, the soaring hawks and eagles, and the giant grey-white Canada geese. Hanging above me, it would be as if they were flying, and I could lie there looking up at them in the moonlight from the windows or use my flashlight, and perhaps the summer breeze through the open windows would stir them. I would be in a flock of birds.

I remember how I crept down the dark hall, my hand flat against the wall. I closed the hall door and walked through the cold front room past the Christmas tree and into the kitchen. After I ate a bowl of cornflakes I fixed me a sandwich and got my shotgun and other gear. It was three days before Christmas. I hated that too, hated the glittering tree, the music, everybody laughing. But most I hated the presents, getting them, people handing me things, putting their arms around me, patting me on the back,

wanting something in return. I cringed, wanted to jerk away, run. I wanted the tree down, the ornaments, lights and Christmas music put away in the cupboard. I wanted the house silent.

I did not dress warm against the cold, although the evening paper had said a storm was due that afternoon. I wasn't afraid of the cold. I pulled on my hip boots, put my brown canvas hunting coat on over my sweater, fitted my scarf. I didn't build the kitchen fire or turn up the oil heater in the front room. My mother might wake up and change her mind about me going alone, make me take Glade. Through my cotton gloves I felt the cold metal of my shotgun, a double-barrel. I didn't care if they all woke up to a cold house. My father was on graveyard shift at the dairy, but my mother would be up long before he got home a little after 8 o'clock.

Closing the back door, I walked down the porch steps, my breath rising in plumes in the icy air. Over the west mountains the moon was a yellow glow behind the clouds. To the east the sky grew white over the mountains. I stopped at the fence at the end of the second field, the crusted snow a foot deep where I stood. My father's small farm was on a bench. Below me were the river bottoms, narrow, then wider where the river neared the lake five miles to the west. Black against the snow, a wide band of cottonwood trees lined the river, a high clump at the swimming hole a mile above Spring Creek. In the summer the bottoms were all planted to wheat, oats, sugar beets, and hay, the houses and barns all a mile or two back from the river because of the spring high water. It was another ten years before they built the dam in the canyon.

I loved that belt of trees and willows, the river. The school, church, my father's house were all alien to me, prisons. I lived my real life there in the bottoms, fished, swam, climbed in the high trees, embraced limbs, sometimes ran naked and alone through the green willows, lay spread-eagled under the sun, soared on the great rope swing, hunted the birds, killed them. I was always hiding from Glade and the others, the sheriff when he came down to see if we wore swimsuits, always driven, reaching out for something infinite, not knowing what it was, but feeling myself drawn to it, some final feeling beyond the earth in the yellow sun.

One set of car lights moved along the bottom road, but I knew I would be the only hunter so late in the season. Those who still hunted had boats and decoys and hunted the open holes on the lake. I climbed between the frosted fence wires and started down the slope. The cattle gathered into the feed lots near the road; all day I would see only the few starved-out horses left in the fields to winter. Sometimes the horses died, froze icy, the legs sticking straight out as if the horses were dusting. When the snow melted, the magpies flocked out of the willows to feed on them.

I would jumpshoot Spring Creek to the river and then blind up on a sandbar and wait for the storm to push the geese and big ducks off the lake. Strung out for a mile in the new light, a flock of crows was already coming off the roost. Cawing, black against the snow when they dipped down, a thousand of them maybe, they headed for the corn fields on the bench.

Already my hands were cold in the thin gloves, but I shoved only my right hand under my coat. I liked the cold. It was clean and kept people inside. In April and May I swam in the cold river. I liked storms.

I climbed through the last fence and came around a clump of willows. A blue Ford pick-up was parked off the lane near the wooden tractor bridge over Spring Creek. I cursed, the words steady and half silent, like a hiss. A flat sneak boat with two men in it drifted into the first bend as I stepped on the bridge. I watched it vanish into the vapor, the creek just wide enough for it, the voices coming back to me on the water. I cursed them again, loud now, cursed them for the ducks, for being there, for not letting me have it alone, cursed them for their voices and their noise. Then I heard shooting, and I cursed them for that too, even as I loaded my own gun.

I hoped for stragglers out of the small flocks of ducks I saw rise over the willows just ahead of where the boat must have been. But none came. One or two would fall out of the flock, I would hear the dull boom of the shotgun, but no ducks flew close enough for me. I saw no geese. A mile from the tractor bridge I stopped to warm my hands. Too high for a shot, a magpie flew over me and dropped in with a dozen others and some crows across the creek near the partially covered skeletons of three cows killed by lightning that summer. Because it was swampy the farmer hadn't been able to drag them out. We walked up from the swimming hole to see them the day after. For a month, if the wind was right, you could smell the heavy watery stink a mile off. What little flesh was left was frozen hard or covered with snow. The magpies and crows watched me pass.

I hunted on down the creek. Magpies were smart. I killed very few of them with my shotgun. I killed them in the early summer with my .22 rifle when, just out of the nest, the young birds couldn't fly far. Tired of swimming, the extra shells brassy in my mouth, I sneaked from tree to tree, shot the young birds, watched them fall in puffs of feathers from the high limbs, the screeching old birds too smart to light. Then, because I knew what my mother would say if I brought too many birds home, I tied them with pieces of wire to the fences or climbed to wedge them back in the trees.

The sneak boat was tied up where Spring Creek joined the river. The two men sat drinking coffee, the ducks piled on the bow. I sneaked closer through the willows. "How about that triple, Fred, wasn't that great," one said, "three mallards dead before they hit the water." I aimed first at him, centering the bead on his head. A little closer, I could have blown big holes in the boat the same way I blew holes in sheds and wooden fences. "Best shooting I ever saw you do," the other one answered. I clicked my safety back on, turned and started down the river. Later I heard their motor and knew they had gone back up Spring Creek, knew they had limited out, knew then too I was on the river alone.

There was no trail in the snow. I broke my own, cut in and out to the river bank, but jumped nothing close enough for a shot. Nothing was flying. The wind hadn't really started, wasn't strong enough yet to force the ducks off the lake, keep them low. I stopped often to look for geese against the

black mountains and dark clouds, watched until my eyes watered, listened, strained for a sound I could not hear. I knew the storm would bring them. A few crows flew and solitary hawks. Sandbars fed out into the river from the steep banks, but the channel was still full. I had been first across the swimming hole that April, Glade shouting for me to come back, not to try it, that it was too cold, too swift. They had to lift me out, build a fire for me. I vomited, blacked out, but I had been first across. I told Glade what I would do to him if he said anything.

I shot a crow that flew over and it fell into the river. It beat its water-heavy wings and kept lifting its head, but the slow current took it. I liked to touch the birds I killed. A marsh hawk flew by but not close enough. I watched for the wind in the tops of the trees. Finally, stomping my feet against the numbness, I turned back up the river and built a blind on a sandbar where earlier I had seen goose tracks and droppings on the edge ice. Warming one hand at a time in my crotch, I ate my lunch and watched the river. A few yellow willow leaves drifted slowly by. In the summer, hiding, my suit hidden under a rock, I liked to stand in the willows and let the fluttering green leaves touch me. Rifle in hand, I hunted for hours unseen, alone, naked, sometimes shouts drifting to me from the swimming hole. When a thunderstorm came over the west mountains and the farmers, afraid, left the fields, I sneaked out to stand in the belly-high green wheat, watch the lightning, hear the roar and rumble of thunder, feel the wind. Or I climbed high in the bending trees, wrapped my arms and legs around the limbs, squeezed until the rough bark hurt, rode them. I loved trees.

And if I tired of hunting birds I shot the surfacing carp, watched them fade into the deep grey water, followed them, walked slowly into the river from the sandbars until the water was over my head and the slow summer current carried me. I spread my arms and legs to touch the flesh-warm water, became nothing, only part of the water. Eyes open I sank down from the grey-blue to the green and then the black, the light disappearing above me, completely alone, touched the cold bottom mud, then rose back again into the light. And I kept doing that until the vomit stung in my throat and I got dizzy. Then I lay in the yellow sun, looked at it through the cracks between my fingers, tried to see what it was. When Glade hollered that he had my clothes, that it was time for chores, I wouldn't answer. Days later I saw the carp near the edge of the water, bleached yellow-white and pecked by magpies.

Small flocks of teal kept flying up-river, but I didn't shoot, didn't want the small ducks. A lone greenhead mallard came up. Watching it through the piled brush, I stood, shot, dropping it dead, ragged, where I could drag it out with a stick, glad it didn't float away out of reach. Sitting again, I arranged the feathers, stroked them, touched the velvet green head. It was a big Northern with bright orange feet. The winter before I had killed a mallard banded in Alaska. I made a ring out of the aluminum band, which I touched in school, in church, took off, read. Ducks could fly wherever they wanted to, up above everything, just in the air with nothing else around

them, never touched by anything except water and air.

It was colder. Blowing across the river from the northeast, the beginning wind scattered a few leaves out of the willows and onto the rippled water. I stomped my feet, rubbed my numb fingers, remembered the story of the hunter who tried to kill his dog, put his hands in the warm guts to keep them from freezing; but the dog wouldn't come close enough and the hunter had lost his rifle. Finally I decided to move farther up-river, run part of the way, get warm and blind up again. The wind hit me when I left the willows and I heard shooting from toward the lake. A few ducks flew against the black clouds; the growing wind would force them down. I heard geese once, pushed back into the willows, saw them off to the south, big, black, five of them, high, their gabbling faint. I remember how I spoke to them, "Turn, turn," I said, but, heart slamming, had to watch them vanish, just stand there.

I already knew I would stay until dark, knew it before I left the house that morning. I didn't care about my father; maybe he would be asleep, wouldn't be waiting for me. My mother would just worry, not cuff me, not shout, just look at me, shake her head, talk, her eyes maybe filling up with slow tears, tell me it was Christmas time. The geese would come if I waited long enough. In my mind I saw them, five or six maybe, coming up the river, the great moving wings, necks out, the gabbling louder and louder. And I would kill one, maybe two, bring them crashing down with perfect head shots, the great wings all ragged in the air.

I crossed Spring Creek where a wax sandwich paper from the sneak boat had blown up the creek and caught in the weeds. Three times I cut back in to check the river but jumped nothing, the last time walked through the little stand of six-foot blue spruce. Twice my father had asked me, "Can't you get us a Christmas tree down on the river this year, save me buying one."

"No," I said, "there aren't any."

"You sure? There used to be a few in the willows if you kept your eyes open."

"No," I said, all the time staring at Glade.

I didn't want to cut a tree, drag it up to the house, hang it with tinsel and lights, didn't want the smell of it in the house away from the river, didn't want to watch it turn brown. A hundred yards back from the spruces, under the snow, were the bones of a little spike buck I had killed a year earlier in August. He had followed the river out of the canyon. I shot him through the eye, watched him until he was quiet, and then turned him over so he didn't look hurt. I went back three times that day, squatted down by him, brushed off the ants. The second day the magpies were on him.

Except for a few horse tracks the snow was clean and I broke my own trail. Way ahead where the river curved I saw the high cottonwoods at the swimming hole. It took five boys just to reach around the biggest tree, the rope tree. It was an old rope, two inches thick and frayed. We had boards nailed in the other trees to swing from, but I liked to climb higher, up into the green leaves. The others watched me, faces up-turned, Glade shouting

for me not to go any higher, maybe bawling. Sometimes, standing on a limb, I let go and stood just on one foot to have the feeling, then grabbed the overhead branch again when I tipped. I liked the feeling, the shiver.

Holding the rope, chest tight, I lifted up, and it was like in my dreams when I flew over houses and trees with just my arms outspread. The warm air rushing against me, the trees blurred, I waited until just before I hit the top of the sweep before I let go. And for that one moment I flew, saw everything below me, soared, hovered. Then I dropped, felt the tingling in my crotch, felt the air, the rushing heavier water. And I stayed under until they all thought I had drowned. I was both bird and fish. If anybody climbed as high as I had, I climbed higher, swinging again and again, falling until my nose bled, and I let the blood fall on my naked chest and stomach so that I looked wounded. The letting go, the soaring, was the very best part. I wanted to feel like that forever.

I built another blind halfway between the swimming hole and Spring Creek. The wind made the cold worse. I couldn't see my breath anymore. I kept my hands under my armpits, stamped my feet on the packed snow. Walking home I would be facing into the wind all of the way. I knew that it was nearly four o'clock, that I should have been at least back to the tractor bridge. The steady shooting from toward the lake meant more birds were flying. Teal kept slipping up the river in easy range, but I didn't shoot. I dropped a hen mallard out of a flock of five on the second shot. She was easy to reach. She was big, an orange-footed Northerner, and I decided I would mount her too when I did the goose, put her near a big greenhead I had hanging in the barn, make a pair. I liked the wind. I liked to go out in the barn on windy days, leave the door open and watch the birds move.

Later I climbed the bank to look for geese. Under the low heavy clouds everything was almost black, even the snow. Willows clicked. Lower now, the ducks came in against the wind in singles and doubles and small flocks. Dipping down, wings whistling when they flew over, they came on, the wind forcing them lower. I saw two small flocks of geese, strained to hear them above the wind, stared them out of sight, hoping all the time they would turn, come my way, talked to them. But they kept on, drawn to some other place, left me empty. And below them, white points of light burned in the houses along the bench. My mother would be pushing back the curtain at the kitchen window to look out. But I didn't care. In front of me, black against the grey snow, stood a starved-out old horse, head down, tail to the wind. Beyond the horse, only a black dot, was the big haystack at the end of Miller's lane. The horse was the only thing in the fields I could see alive. Swaying the tops of the trees, the wind brought the first scattered flakes of snow.

Just after I got back in my blind two big greenhead mallards flew by in easy range, but I didn't shoot. More big ducks came. But I was waiting for geese, only geese. They liked to rest in the shallows along the sandbars, leave their sign. But they came late, and I, afraid of my father, had never dared stay. They would come though, I knew, if only I waited long enough.

I listened against the wind, strained my watery eyes to watch down the river, watched, stomped my feet only when I couldn't stand the numbness, pounded my gloved hands against my knees, sure the geese would come, absolutely sure.

The big haystack at the end of Miller's lane was where we left our bicycles when we went down to swim. August was very hot, and I remember one night how I got up, dressed and climbed out the window. I intended only to ride my bicycle up and down the road in front of the house to get cool, but I turned off on the bottom road and then onto Miller's lane, parked my bicycle. At first I took off only my shirt, but then my shoes and socks, and then I was running stark naked down the sandy path, leaping, watching my legs flash in the moonlight. I wanted to scream and yell, run through the fields of ripe August wheat, but I didn't because I knew a farmer might have a late water turn or I might cut my feet. The cows and horses did not shy as I ran past them.

The cottonwood trees shaded the moonlight from the swimming hole. The joined, dark air and water suspended, enveloped me, and I floated, tried not to move, be water, air and darkness. When I climbed the trees the leaves were like hands. One night in a wind I rode the trees, the high limbs, heard a million leaves, screamed into the sound. And when I swung on the rope it was fantastic because I couldn't see where the water started. The tingling went clear to my skull, and I reached out to a world I had never known, something inviting me, as in my dreams.

I left the house four times at night, until on the fourth morning at three o'clock my father was waiting for me in the yard. "What the hell you doing out at this hour," he said, spun me around, felt my damp hair. "You young fool, you trying to commit suicide down there swimming alone at night?" I didn't answer. He back-handed me, told me what it was like to drown, shouted, said he'd beat me next time. I had to stay on the place for a week. "Fool," he said. "I'll send the sheriff after you if you try it again." At breakfast Glade kept snickering.

More ducks flew up the river, flocks. I knew it would soon be dark. And then I heard them, that gabbling, the sound at first like the wind. I listened, already reaching for my shotgun, as if by instinct I knew the sound was geese. They were on the river. My breath caught. Heavy loads already chambered, I crouched on the snow, pushed the safety off, smothered the sound with my glove, tightened my legs. Low, gabbling, three great Canada geese flew out of the greyness below me, shadows, but then blacker, coming right at me in good range. Big, bigger than I had ever thought, beautiful, somebody pounding me over the heart. I watched through a hole in the blind. "Wait, wait," whispering, "not too soon, not too soon. Big. Wait, wait." The gabbling grew louder – marvelous the wings, the long necks, the rhythmic birds.

Just as they came abreast I stood up. Flaring, they lifted with the wind, moving away. I shot, missed, shot again and the lead goose turned completely over and fell, broken-winged, crashing into the water. Even as he hit I was

out of the blind, mindless of the other geese, ready to dance and scream. Uprighted, trailing the wing, the goose swam toward the far side. Cramming in a shell, I aimed carefully on the head and fired. The long neck collapsed and the head pushed forward into the water under the force of the shot. The pounding in my chest died. The wind and the slow current moved him. He was too far out.

I didn't hesitate. I set my gun on my coat. When I pulled off my Levis the cold wind stung my bare legs. Puffs of mud rose around my feet when I stepped into the river past the edge ice, the water colder than the wind. I swam sidestroke, the goose bobbing ahead of me on the waves I made. I wasn't afraid, though I knew I could cramp, sink, fade down into the grey water and yellow leaves. It didn't seem strange, not unreal, not dangerous. I reached out and took the goose by the neck, glad, wanting to shout, the feathers warm. And then, not feeling my body under the water, paralytic, I turned back. When I touched the mud under me, I stumbled out and dropped the goose. Yellow, the broken wing bone stuck out through the feathers. I picked up the goose again and hugged it to me, felt the still warm body against my numb skin.

The wind had blown my shirt and left glove into the water. My body was white. My head buzzed. I kept gasping for breath, and acid vomit rose in my throat as I tried to dry myself with my undershirt. When I tried to pull on my Levis I stumbled, covering my feet with the white snow. Dressed, I put the stiffening wet clothes into the rear game pocket with the ducks, picked up the heavy goose, my shotgun, and struggled up the bank. The wind hit me square, blew the snow straight into my eyes, took my breath.

After ten minutes, fumbling, I stopped to wrap my scarf around my face. Still my face slowly stiffened and it was hard to open my mouth. My forehead ached. I carried the goose over my shoulder, my left hand metal. Everything was black, even the sky, the only light coming from the grey snow under me. At first when I stumbled the snow was colder than the wind, but only at first. When I came to Spring Creek I didn't try to cross but turned up along it. Many ducks were flying; once I heard geese. The cold was like pressing naked against ice. Startled, a magpie rose screeching from a bush. I remember how the wind whipped it away.

I pushed on and on against the wind and snow until I could not feel myself walking. I seemed not even to breathe. After another half a mile I seemed to float, leave the ground, rise, hover, and it was a sensation I had never known before. I expected to see the fences, willows and trees vanish under me. I was becoming something beyond myself. I felt no limits, nothing stopping, nothing touching me, as if I were rising alone into light, rising, never falling back, the sensation never dying.

I stumbled a last time, fell forward into the soft snow, where I lay on my side not caring, the snow not cold anymore. Relaxed, sleepy almost, I stared at the white snow falling on my coat, saw then the horn and half head of one of the summer lightning-killed cows. I raised my head, saw behind me the mound I had stumbled over. I crawled. Mechanically with my lower

arm and dead hand I pushed back the snow from the horn, saw the black empty eye socket, the bone skull. I lay back. Catching in the wrinkles of my coat, the snow was turning me white. All summer the cows had been vanishing, the hanging birds too, the carp, the little buck. And I had no name for it, only vanishing, knew only that it was not swimming, not running naked in the moonlight, not embracing trees, not soaring. It was not feeling. I grew whiter, saw myself vanishing. Then slowly, like beginning pain, the terror seeped into me, the knowing. I struggled up, abandoned my shotgun, the goose, fled.

But I could not run, could not feel the ground through my feet to balance myself. When I fell I got up, pushed with my elbows, feeling no pain, only the numbness in my arms and legs. I found low places in the fences and fell forward, the wire tearing my clothes. I thought the posts and bushes were people rushing up to help me. When I got to the tractor bridge I could only see, not smell, hear, even my tongue cold in my mouth. And I wanted to raise my arms around my head to keep it warm so I could go on seeing, for I was afraid my eyes would freeze and I would just stand there until I fell down to be covered with snow. But I couldn't raise my arms.

When I first saw the lights flashing through the falling snow I thought the car was on the main bottom road, but when they flashed again I knew the car was coming down the lane. I waited. They came slowly, dipping, vanishing, a spotlight sweeping the fields. When the spotlight hit me a red light started blinking; the car came ahead faster and then stopped. The falling snow flashed through the shafts of light. Pulling his broad-brimmed hat tight against the wind, the sheriff got out. His open sheepskin coat flapped.

He stopped. He asked me my name. "Judas, kid, you've got your mother all upset. Your old man's out tromping the fields with a neighbor, madder than blazes too, I can tell you that."

The sheriff blocked out the lights.

Again he asked me my name. "What's wrong with you, kid, can't you talk?" He played the flashlight up and down me. "Where's your gun?" He stepped closer. "Where's your glove?" He shined the light into my eyes, and I couldn't close them. "Good hell, kid, we better get you in where it's warm." I felt him take my arm, grip it tight.

I was in the hospital three weeks. The surgeon cut off all of the fingers on my left hand, my hand a white ball raised on a wire frame, and I had pneumonia. The oxygen tent was like being under water. When I rose up out of the blackness those first nights, I saw my mother or my father, sometimes both. My father sat in a chair and slept with his forehead resting on my bed. Then I would sink back down into the blackness again, spiral down into the not-knowing, vanish. I was terrified of sleep. When I was out of the oxygen tent and could talk again, I told the doctor my hand didn't hurt so he would stop the shots for that. At first he said no, but later he told the nurse. The pain wouldn't let me sleep too long. I cried sometimes at night because of the pain, but it was better than sleep. Across from me

was an old man with yellow skin who slept all of the time. At night I listened to him breathe, his mouth a black hole in the dim light. The nurses kept putting his thin yellow arms and legs back under the covers. The nurse hurried to put a screen around my bed the night he died, but through the cracks I saw what they did. Later after the nurse took the screen away I watched the women turn over the mattress and put on all fresh bedding. They whispered back and forth across the bed and looked at me. The nurse made me take a sleeping pill.

When the doctor released me my father wrapped me in a blanket and carried me from the door to the car in his arms, the corner of the blanket over my face. It was late afternoon when we got home. The whole family came out as we pulled in: my brothers were dressed in their Sunday clothes; my mother wiped her eyes with the bottom edge of her apron. My father carried me into the warm house that smelled of roast turkey and put me on the couch in the front room. Blazing in the corner was the Christmas tree with everybody's presents under it. They had saved Christmas for me, which I hadn't known. I bit my lip and turned away. Glade wanted to know what was wrong. "Nothing," I said. It was a different tree.

Several neighbors came by, then we had supper, and after that, Christmas. My little brothers brought me my presents, helped me with the ribbons, stacked them for me. Later my mother said that I'd had enough excitement and needed to rest, so my father carried me down the hall to the bedroom. The bedroom was warm from a new oil heater. Warm under the covers in my heavy flannel pajamas, I lay and listened to my brothers playing in the front room. Above me the redtail hawk still hovered, the tail fanned, the wings spread to hold the air, beak wide for screaming. The yellow glass eyes looked down, the bird motionless, suspended from a wire, dusty. Out in the barn the hanging birds were dusty too, some of them splotched with pigeon droppings.

That night Glade was supposed to sleep on the couch in the front room, where I would be during the day, but I didn't want him to. I told my mother he wouldn't hurt my hand, that we could change sides, so she let him. Later, just before he went on graveyard shift, my father came and stood in the doorway, the hall light behind him. He could see I was still awake, everybody else asleep.

"You all right, son?" he asked, quietly.

"I guess so," I said.

That was all he said. He stood there for a moment then, leaving the door half open, turned and walked down the hall. He didn't turn the hall light off.

My presents were stacked on the dresser in front of the mirror. Over the sound of the heater I heard the wind outside. It was snowing. I raised my arm to turn the white ball of my blunt hand in the light from the hall. I hadn't seen my hand yet. When I did I cried like a baby in the doctor's office. At school I kept my hand hidden in my pocket, wore the same sweater every day because it had front pockets, and I quit gym. I couldn't

stand being dressed in a gym uniform, my arms bare, couldn't stand it in the showers naked, without even a towel to cover my hand, couldn't stand the other boys seeing me. Clutching my hand I prayed at night, even out loud, promised God everything, then woke in the early morning afraid to look. But my father made me start gym again. "You can't hide; you have to live with it," he said. "That's life." And he made me do my chores, no matter how hard, no matter how many things I broke or spilled, and although he shouted at me sometimes, swore, he never again hit me.

Green, blue, white, red — the colored Christmas boxes and wrappings glinted on the dresser in the shaft of light from the half-open door. I stared up at the hawk. It was indistinct now, black, a hovering silhouette, a dark still shadow above me. I moved closer to Glade, touched him. The dresser mirror reflected the boxes and packages. I had received the most presents.