

Sparrow Hunter

Douglas Thayer

AT FOURTEEN, when I could legally hunt game birds, I became a serious hunter. I hunted ducks and pheasants, but also rabbits, crows, rock chucks, hawks, owls, eagles, coyotes, rodents, and rattlesnakes. I never killed an eagle or a coyote, but I did kill hundreds of creatures in total. The animal I longed to kill when I finally became sixteen and could buy a license was a big mule deer buck. Mule deer, unlike the buffalo and grizzly bear, weren't dangerous, but they were the biggest, most beautiful animal I could kill. Elk were bigger, but you had to enter a drawing to get a permit, and I had no hope of that.

Hunting pleased me greatly and was the thing I liked best to do. It was incredibly intense at times, for it created great anticipation, satisfied my boy's blood lust, made my life adventurous and primitive, and filled me with an early sense of the beautiful. It pleased me to kill birds and animals. I was a hunter; I felt no regret. I did not believe that other creatures had a spiritual life or were necessarily entitled to live. I did not feel their deaths, as I would later, growing increasingly aware of my own mortality.

Tarzan helped get me started as a hunter. Sitting in the dark Uintah, Academy, or Paramount, I did not doubt Tarzan's life in the jungle. Tarzan was real, and I envied him his jungle. In the trees along Provo River I searched for vines to swing on, with lions and leopards waiting for me to fall. I envied Tarzan his loin cloth, his jungle, and his tree house. Mostly though I envied Tarzan his big knife and the animals he got to kill with it. I wanted to wrestle with a lion, a gorilla, or an alligator, and kill it with my big knife.

But Tarzan didn't hunt for food. He never brought back to Jane in the tree house a gazelle or a wildebeest to cook for supper. He always brought her fruit or coconuts, most of them picked by Cheeta, his faithful chimp. Tarzan never got blood on his hands. He stayed clean. Most of the animals he killed he killed to rescue Jane, and later Boy, who were always getting into dangerous situations. I, however, didn't kill to rescue anybody; no animal I hunted was big or dangerous enough to rescue anybody from.

I was a boy just before and during the Second World War, and I grew up in Provo, Utah, a small pioneer Mormon town. I longed for the old west of a hundred years earlier when buffalo existed in vast uncountable numbers and the magnificent, fierce grizzly bear made life dangerous and worthwhile. I regretted deeply not being an Indian, or at least a mountain man.

The first thing I hunted was sparrows with a Daisy BB rifle, my first gun. Before that I hunted with a flipper, a bow, a spear, or rocks, but I was not effective. To hunt I had to have a gun; my story of hunting is a chronology of guns—BB guns, .22s, shotguns, rifles. Part of the joy of hunting was the love of sheath knives, ammunition, and guns. Guns were particularly beautiful.

In the Sixth Ward a boy was known in part by the guns he owned or that his father owned. In grade school boys talked about the guns they owned, or their fathers or uncles owned, hunting being more important than money or girls. My father and mother were divorced. My father lived in an old uptown hotel and owned no guns; he didn't hunt.

My friend David Nelson, with whom I hunted most, was the best BB-gun shot in our whole neighborhood. His Grandmother Luke paid him a penny apiece to shoot flies off her front screen door. Sometimes two or three of us hunted sparrows together. It was not unusual to see boys hunting the trees with their BB guns. A tube of BBs cost five cents.

Intense, happy, Dave and I listened for chirping or watched for game flying between trees or across the open backyards to light on fences, the roofs of old outbuildings, clotheslines, or telephone wires. I liked telephone wires because they provided a clear shot and the sparrows fell a long way, like a downed Messerschmitt or Zero. No adult ever told us we shouldn't shoot sparrows. It wasn't wrong. It was wrong to shoot robins and other song birds, but not to shoot dusty, chirping sparrows.

Although I didn't have Tarzan's jungle, I did have places to hunt—Utah Lake, Provo River, the Wasatch Mountains, the Mud Lake sloughs, and a whole valley of farms, which all seemed made for boys. And all this was close, within the range of bicycles, which was very important. Without that proximity I would not have spent so much time as I did shooting animals and birds. They had to be handy. Provo before the war was only ninety years old. In some ways it was still a pioneer village.

The fields and the lake were so close to the south edge of the Sixth Ward that, going to and from school in the fall, I heard the duck and pheasant hunters shooting. But I had to be walking, not on my bike. I always stopped, turned to face south, listened, longed to be out hunting too.

The Wasatch Mountains were very close. I was always stopping to look at the mountains; they made me think of hunting deer, which filled

me with suspense. In *Outdoor Life, Field and Stream*, and *Sports Afield*, I read about wonderful deer hunts and saw pictures of the kind of huge bucks I wanted to shoot and bring home to my mother to eat. I regretted that all the Utah grizzly bears had already been killed. I believed I would find a secret canyon where grizzly bears lived. I wanted hunting to be dangerous. I wanted to hunt all my life.

The mountains, fields, sloughs were all open, free, vast, and beautiful—sunrises and sunsets, sky, clouds, storms, and mountain vistas, all filled with new textures, colors, sounds, and smells. No-trespassing signs didn't exist. With so much space and so few hunters, there was very little to protect; land was not particularly valuable. No one talked about managing wild life resources. The sole purpose of a game warden was to catch you taking more than a limit and to arrest you. As boys we feared and scorned them.

My friend Dave introduced me to real guns and helped make me a hunter. I went to Dave's house after school, and he brought out his father's guns for me to hold—cleaned, oiled, and smelling of Hoppes #9, a cleaning solvent. I liked to hold the guns as if my hands were made for that; I liked the heaviness, the smoothness, the lovely, dark, warm, oiled walnut and the cool, blued steel. I liked the names, too—Winchester, Remington, Ithaca, Colt, Browning; I repeated these names simply to hear them. These were the best makes, the guns that had helped tame the west; Stevens, Savage, and Marlin weren't as good as these.

We talked about what were the best kinds of guns and the best calibers, and what kinds of shells were best. We took shells to school in our pockets to show each other. Sometimes boys wore their hunting knives hidden under their coats, slipping them out of the scabbard secretly in class to show other boys and scare girls. Knives were important. With your knife you could kill a bear or a mountain lion if it attacked you and knocked your gun out of your hand.

Dave, who was a year older and lived in an old pioneer adobe house, had his own .22 and shotgun long before I did. His father took him hunting when Dave was very young. Dave sometimes gave me an empty shotgun shell to smell the open end and take home. I carried it in my pocket for days to take out and smell the burned powder, which stirred my blood.

Before the end of the war and the big influx of new people into Utah Valley, there was still game for a Provo boy to shoot. People had a pioneer attitude toward hunting. Some of the Mormon pioneers were still alive, although very old. Mr. Nelson, Dave's dad, and other men told stories of the wonderful hunting when they were boys and of the still more wonderful hunting their fathers and grandfathers had enjoyed. Birds and animals were not thought to be more beautiful alive than dead.

Boys grew up expecting to hunt and were only disappointed they couldn't have been mountain men or Indians and hunted everything. The last grizzly bear in Utah had been shot only twenty years before, in 1922. A splendid and terrifying animal, he had stood nine feet tall and weighed nearly a thousand pounds. You hunted to rid the country of dangerous beasts and to provide food for your family. I couldn't understand why every man in Provo didn't hunt. Hunting gave me something to be good at, something I could do although I was never a superior shot. I learned to call ducks, to set out decoys, build a blind, learned what kind of cover deer like, what passes they used, how to gut a buck, learned what pheasants fed on, where they would be at first light when the season opened, how to push them out of cover even if you didn't have a dog, learned all about the right kind of guns and shells to use. I could name the ducks, identify both male and female: mallards, widgeons, pintails, gadwalls, spoonbills, golden eye, and green-wing, blue-wing, and cinnamon teal.

Hunting also made equipment necessary, things for me to possess or to imagine possessing, filling me with desire: hip boots, hunting coat with game pockets, sheath knife, binoculars, tent, Coleman stove and lamp, shell vest, shells, and many guns. And all of these had to be of a certain quality and brand. Dave and I searched the Sears, Montgomery Ward, and Herter's catalogs for things to want; we read the advertisements in the hunting magazines. We went weekly to the Provo sporting goods stores to see and touch the things we could not buy. Hunting equipment was more complicated, bigger, heavier, more powerful, and more expensive than fishing equipment.

A little before I turned fourteen and could hunt ducks and pheasants legally and buy my first shotgun, I bought a .22. Dave had a Remington pump, and I wanted a Browning automatic, a perfect .22, but all I could afford was a Winchester Model 100, a single shot. We didn't have to wait for any seasons to hunt with a .22, and we didn't have to have a license for anything we killed.

A .22 was a mountain gun because a slug could carry for miles in open fields. We had to shoot against hills and sides of ravines or out in the unpopulated sagebrush flats west of Utah Lake. East of Provo we hunted Slate, Rock, and Little canyons, Camel Pass, Maple Flat, and the foothills. Boys carrying .22s, riding their bikes or walking, going east toward the mountains, were a common sight in Provo. If they could not find game, they shot bottles, cans, trees, and rocks. No adults went with us, except Mr. Nelson, but he didn't go very often because he had to work at Ironton. Free, we spent whole summer days hunting.

Our game was ground squirrels, chipmunks, rock chucks, lizards, rattlesnakes, rabbits, and hawks, eagles, and magpies. We wanted to kill coyotes, wildcats, mountain lions, wolves, and black bears, but we never

saw any, although we watched for their tracks ahead of us on the trail. We hoped, too, somehow, to find grizzlies or a small band of buffalo, or some sign they had once existed.

We always examined our game closely to see where the bullet had entered the body; we looked for blood. A little blood seemed necessary although we didn't like a lot of blood. Head and heart shots were the very best and proved your skill as a hunter. We did not take this game home for food. We set the bodies on big rocks, tried to make the birds and animals look alive.

We couldn't have any real fun in the mountains unless we carried .22s. We liked the heavy weight in our hands. The heavy rifle gave us something to do, a purpose, made us hunters at thirteen and capable of facing any danger. We had to have at least a box of shells apiece, fifty to a box, or, better still, two or three boxes or maybe a whole carton of ten boxes among two or three of us. We shot shorts, longs, long-rifle, but the best shells were the long-rifle hollow points. The long-rifle was the most powerful, and the hollow bullet exploded on impact.

Alone in our boy's world, we killed without regret. Killing was a competition; your reputation depended on making good shots. The best part was when the animal or bird fell. It was wonderful to see, thrilling. Everybody yelled, sometimes gave the Tarzan yell. We shot at the splendid soaring eagles and great hawks, but we never hit one. We never got close enough to the perched eagles and hawks to kill one on the set. They lit too high in the cliffs. For us their only value was that they could be killed; it did not enter our minds that these creatures were too beautiful to kill, might some day be endangered, or could have spirits although Mormon theology taught they did.

The best hunting with a .22 was for jackrabbits. To hunt jackrabbits successfully took at least seven or eight of us plus an older boy or somebody's dad who had a car. We had to travel out to the big sagebrush-covered valleys across Utah Lake west of Provo, which were too far for a bicycle. The hot summer air full of the smell of sage, we formed a line to drive the jackrabbits ahead of us. We shot them as they jumped out in front or tried to get back between us. Unless you made a head-shot or hit shoulder bone, it could take four or five shots to kill a big jack with a .22. We laughed if they squealed. We never took jackrabbits home to eat; people ate jackrabbits during the Depression, but not after the war started.

The most fun was to get a jack running across open patches in the sage, so you could see where your slugs kicked up dust. Sometimes three or four of us shot at the same running jack, hollering not to let him get away, shouting as we fired, claiming hits. We pretended sometimes the jacks were German or Japanese tanks. We killed sometimes fifty or sixty jackrabbits in a day. We didn't ever talk about the rabbits' right to live or

what good they were. Our only concern was if we had enough shells. Because of the war we couldn't buy all the shells we wanted. Mr. Nelson was the best shot with a .22 I ever saw.

I hunted because in my boy's heart I wanted to be an Indian, as well as Tarzan, and totally free. Younger, with my friends I'd played Indian, but had no Indian belief in the spirits of animals. We made our own bows and arrows and hunted with them, killed spring-spawning carp in the shallows of Utah Lake with our homemade spears, wearing our undershorts as loincloths, or we ran naked if we were far enough away from houses and roads. We looked for arrowheads on the lake shore and along the river, and, hunting and hiking in the mountains east of town, we looked for secret Indian caves and cliffs with pictographs although we found none. And we hoped to find in the mountains a band of Utes who still lived wild and free and who would adopt us.

Deer antlers, some white with age, hung in rows on garages and barns above the big doors, and sometimes on backyard telephone poles. The telephone company didn't care. Hunters smoked the venison in strips for winter meat; their wives bottled it; they had it cut up and put it into lockers at the ice plant to freeze. The hunters nailed the hides to outside walls. Dogs fought over the discarded heads of deer and dragged them across front lawns like dogs might have in an Indian village. The antlers filled me with desire to kill bucks with huge sets of sharp antlers. My only regret was that mule deer didn't charge the hunter like a grizzly bear or a wounded buffalo.

The opening days of duck, pheasant, and deer season were the most important days of the year, more important than even Christmas. I measured my life by these days, believed opening days would come every fall forever, the fall the very best time of the year. The hunting seasons helped very much to keep my life exciting, gave me something intensely emotional to look forward to, made my life worth living. Standing on a ridge the opening morning of the deer hunt, I waited for light, for the first shot, hoping it would be mine. My heart pounding so hard it took my breath away, I raised my rifle a dozen times to aim at bushes and rocks I thought were big bucks.

We did not harvest animals as hunters do today. We hunted, shot, and killed them. We did not deal in euphemisms; we knew none.

Already in August I began to watch the east mountains for the first patches of maples turning red. I watched the store windows for hunting displays and the *Daily Herald* for hunting articles and for advertisements filled with pictures of hunting coats and hats, boots, decoys, knives, shells, and guns. In early September men began to wear their red hunting hats and shirts to work. I waited for the first smell of fall, that wonderfully sharp, clean, cold smell you could smell some early mornings going to Dixon Junior High School the first weeks in September.

It was very difficult for Dave and me to wait for the opening days. We talked about it all the time, about where we would hunt, the guns we would have, how many birds and animals we would kill. We hurried home from school in the September afternoons to change our clothes and each get four or five of Dave's dad's hand-carved and painted decoys in a gunnysack. We rode our bikes down to the fields to set out the decoys on the edge of small ponds and then hid to watch the evening flight of local ducks come in.

The ducks were beautiful coming in from Utah Lake, their wings whistling, the setting sun silhouetting them against the lovely evening sky. We would jump up sometimes and pretend to shoot them, make the sound of the gun, bam, bam, bam, watch the ducks flare, our hearts pounding. Walking back through the evening fields toward our bikes, we stopped only to listen to whistling wings of ducks, the evening world soft and beautiful. It was the first time I knew ducks were beautiful, yet I still killed them.

The pheasants I killed were beautiful, too. All summer down in the fields, Dave and I watched the pheasants, counted the roosters, knew where they fed in the corn and wheat fields, knew the cover they liked best, the bulrushes and patches of heavy willows. Knowing these things, we planned how we would hunt and kill them. I liked to shoot pheasants. They didn't decoy like ducks nor fly in flocks; you couldn't watch them come in, circle, drop lower and lower. You had to jump them out of the weeds, high grass, and corn stubble. You never knew when one would flush, scaring you with its shrill cackle and loud beating wings so close, trying to get away. Excited, almost terrified, you shot and shot, trying not to let the rooster get away, to knock it down in a great puff of feathers, and then you started running, yelling to everybody, "My bird! My bird!" You held up the beautiful bird, smoothed the feathers, stroked the long tail, and held it up for the others to see before you put it in your game pocket, told them how the shot made you feel. The heaviness in your big, blood-stained game pocket was a comforting feeling.

Mr. Nelson was the best hunter I ever knew, even better than Dave. Other men were not like Mr. Nelson. He carved and painted his own duck decoys, and he also bred Labrador retrievers, built his own duck boats, painted hunting pictures, and called ducks with just his lips, didn't have to use a wooden duck call.

Mr. Nelson was the best wing shot I ever saw. With his double-barreled ten-gauge Ithaca shotgun, he could kill ducks at eighty and ninety yards. Shooting his twelve-gauge Remington automatic, he never missed ducks coming into decoys, sometimes killing three out of a flock with three separate shots. You had to plug your gun magazine hunting ducks if the gun held more than three shots; the federal government only

allowed three shots on ducks. I envied Mr. Nelson greatly. He was the first man ever to take me hunting. I wanted to be as good a hunter as he was and bring home a lot of food.

Shooting ducks over decoys brought one of the most intense emotions of my life before I was sixteen and old enough to hunt deer, although I liked also to jump-shoot the big, gaudy rooster pheasants in the fields below Provo. I hunted because of the feeling; nothing gave me so much feeling, not basketball, movies, money, girls, fishing—nothing. Just carrying my gun and wearing my hip boots and hunting clothes, my pockets and vest full of shells, was a good feeling, even if I didn't shoot even one duck. The limit was fifteen; a few years earlier it had been twenty-five.

But I liked most to see the ducks coming, to crouch in the blind waiting, looking out through the rushes. I watched the ducks circle, get lower, get closer, and closer, my heart pounding with the excitement, my hands gripping my shotgun tightly, my finger sliding down to slowly push off the safety.

I stood up fast with Dave and his dad to shoot, shot and shot, felt the kick, worked the action of my Winchester Model 12 pump, heard the sound, smelled the burned powder. I watched the flying ducks crumple, go all ragged in the air, fall, crash into the water like downed enemy fighter planes. It was as if the explosions were in my own body, a wonderful rich, sharp feeling, which I could repeat over and over again, and it would always be exciting and wonderful.

I did not feel the death of the birds as I would later, grown aware of human pain and death; I did not feel the lead shot going into their bodies. I did not at fourteen regret killing them. Unlike Tarzan, I did not make birds and animals my friends; I wasn't interested in talking to them. It seemed incredibly important to stop the ducks, not let them get away, to stop their flying, bring them back to earth. We tried to kill only the drakes. It was important to kill the drakes and not the hens, just as it was important to kill the big rooster pheasants. To kill hens (or does when later I hunted deer) was not what good hunters did. Females were not as beautiful, smart, strong, nor as dangerous as males.

If the ducks were not flying, I shot passing snipe, crows, and herons. I shot into the flocks of wheeling blackbirds to see how many I could knock down with one shell. But I did not take any of these birds home to eat.

I hunted because I liked to be outside and away from town, away from buildings and houses, alive in a boy's world. I had time to live in that world. The beautiful river, lake, fields, and mountains were a better world than town, freer with secret places to find which only the Indians had known about. I liked distance, space, the suggestion of wilderness. I

particularly liked hunting ducks in storms, which pushed the ducks off the open lake and up onto the sheltered ponds. A blizzard was the very best. I liked blizzards. They excited me, cut me off from the world, threatened me, convinced me I was in the wilderness, convinced me I could die tragically and bravely, but not for a long, long time. I liked the cold.

Even if it didn't storm, the evenings were beautiful, the red sun going down over the west mountains and the crimson lake, everything quiet except for the shooting and maybe a train whistle far away so that you felt alone on the earth. It was beautiful. I hunted because things were beautiful. As a boy of fifteen or sixteen, I recognized beauty, knew when something was beautiful. The birds and animals were still beautiful after I killed them. I liked to look at them, touch them. I had to kill them to own them. Once I'd killed them, they were mine.

The war helped make me a hunter. All the boys my age envied their older brothers and the other older neighborhood boys who got to fight in the war. We went to all the war movies and saw every Saturday the Movietone newsreels about the war. Going hunting was like going into a battle. But we wanted the war to be over, so we could buy a semi-automatic M-1 or a sniper's rifle with a scope to hunt deer. We wanted walkie-talkies, too, for talking from ridge to ridge, so we could surround the deer. But mostly we wanted a four-wheel-drive Jeep for hunting. A Jeep was the best vehicle in the world for hunting, we thought. We also would have liked to have bazookas and machine guns for hunting deer and jackrabbits, but we knew they would never be declared surplus.

We did not anticipate ATVs, the luxury four-wheel drives, the campers and house trailers, the slick hunting magazines, the commercial hunting clubs, game farms, no-trespassing signs hung every hundred yards along miles of fence, the managed wild life. That all lay in the future when life became crowded, dishonest, and less happy.

When Dave and I came back from duck hunting in the evening, we always went to his house. His father always asked us all about our hunt and what we had killed. His mother always had something good to eat and a hot drink to warm us up. Dave's family was the only family I knew that ate everything Dave or his dad killed. Mrs. Nelson knew how to cook game so it tasted good. She picked all the breast feathers off the ducks to use for pillows and ticks. Even his sisters liked to talk about hunting.

I liked being in the kitchen next to the hot coal stove. Mr. Nelson always talked to us and told us stories. Hunting gave me something to tell stories about, and I got to listen to the stories other hunters told. Hunters like to tell stories about their best hunts, their best shots, about the biggest buck they ever killed, about how much smarter they were than the deer or ducks. You went back to the same places hunting every season, so

you had more stories every year. You had friends like Dave who were with you and to whom you could tell the stories. Then they could tell you the stories back. Hunting was the only thing I had to tell stories about except fishing, but hunting stories were better than fishing stories. I knew I would hunt forever.

Telling stories meant you could relive everything and make it all wonderful or funny, which made memory and the past important so that my life took on another dimension. Mr. Nelson told stories about when he'd hunted as a boy and about when his father and grandfather had hunted in the same places Dave and I hunted. This connected me to the past. I liked that. It was wonderful to tell stories. Boys who didn't hunt didn't have stories to tell.

Although after my BB gun I owned a .22 and a shotgun, the gun I looked forward to owning was a deer rifle. The deer hunt was the best hunt, but you had to be sixteen, the same age as for getting your driver's license. Killing a big buck meant you were a man; or you thought it meant that. The bigger the spread of antlers, the more points, the more of a man you were. The sporting goods stores ran contests and gave prizes for the biggest spread of antlers. The winner got a prize and his picture in the *Herald* holding the buck's head and smiling.

A deer was a big animal, and a deer rifle was bigger, heavier, and more powerful than other guns. We filled our pockets and ammunition belts with the lovely, long, brass shells, the hundred-and-eighty-grain slug built to mushroom against heavy bone. I liked to wear a heavy ammunition belt and my red hat and sweatshirt. Carrying my 30-06 Winchester, I felt important, invincible, brave, capable of dealing with any danger I met in the mountains. With my 30-06 I could hunt tigers in India, lions in Africa, and grizzlies in Alaska, just like the hunters in the sporting magazine stories did.

Remington and Browning made the best shotguns, Dave said, but Winchester made the best rifles. For weeks before the hunt, men told their deer hunting stories. Waiting for the opening day was the hardest thing I ever did.

We had a two-day school holiday for the deer hunt. I first hunted deer with Dave and his dad and then later with Harold Jones, my former scoutmaster. We hunted the long draws in Hobble Creek, Lake Fork, Dairy Fork, and in Blind, Dry, and Diamond Fork canyons, some places only a half hour away from town by pickup truck, good places. And even better places were farther away—Blanding, Beaver Mountain, Fish Lake, Fillmore. One town even had an arch of antlers across its main street.

We left Provo on Friday afternoon and camped, or we drove up early Saturday morning in two-wheel-drive pickups and old cars. We had deer carts to bring the deer out on. I liked to camp, cook on the old Coleman

stoves, drink cocoa, talk, tell stories around the fire, everybody wearing a red hat and sweatshirt, and I liked to sleep in a tent on a mattress of fresh straw; I prayed for a good hunt. In the morning we had breakfast in the dark, then hiked to the tops of the ridges and basins to find our favorite spots and wait for first light.

Standing on a ridge, what I wanted most in life was to see a big four-point, my heart already pounding hard, my mouth dry. I wanted to shoot, hear the explosion, feel the kick, work the action fast to throw in another shell, aim again, shoot, do it all together, my whole body clean and hard and tight, doing what I'd waited all year to do, this feeling the best feeling I'd ever had.

We gang hunted, so one hunter could kill all the bucks if he saw a string of them moving out, could fill every permit in camp, which is what I wanted, to knock down four or five bucks, one right after the other. You could buy special permits and shoot two and three deer a season; these permits were usually for does.

I wanted to hit a buck running hard, not standing or walking, not bouncing, but running flat and low, wanted to see him somersault, pile up, roll. I wanted a fantastic shot right through the heart. Sometimes a buck was hit three or four times before he finally went down, gut shot or with a leg blown off. If a buck was shot in the back, he would rise up on his front legs, trying to get away, and he had to be shot in the neck at ten feet.

The first one to the downed buck cut his throat, spilling the bright blood on the dry, brown scrub oak leaves. To clean a buck you had to roll your red sleeves up past your elbows because you got blood that far. You reached up to grab the severed windpipe to pull out the lungs, heart, and guts. You cut out the penis and the testicles covered with soft brown hair. With sticks you propped open the rib cage that looked like your own. The eyes, bigger than yours, turned milky. You talked about the good eating and having your winter supply of meat. Mr. Nelson bought special deer permits to shoot plenty of meat for his family. Mr. Nelson would never quit hunting.

The three-day pheasant season and the best of the long duck season came after the deer season was over, so there was still plenty of hunting. And after duck season, we hunted crows. I liked to hunt crows in the late afternoon and early evening, find a roost and build a blind there under the cottonwood trees. The crows came in by the thousands, came in very high sometimes then swirled down to the roost, making a noise like a wind.

There was no season and no limit, and the day didn't close at sunset, so you could shoot black crows all night, if you wanted, against the win-

ter moon, keep them circling the roost. You could kill a thousand if you wanted to, shoot a case of shells, wear out your gun barrel. Crows, like the buffalo, were endless and forever.