Though boys throw stones at frogs in sport, the frogs do not die in sport, but in earnest. —Bion

Am twenty birds back on the left side of the stream, looking over my shoulder at Malachi. He has taken many pellets in his easternmost corner and cannot pull it high enough for a full stroke. His light leg is dragging as we hurry our way south in the late afternoon. Two pieces of shot are embedded there, and they will cause him great difficulty when we land.

We stayed too long in the north. All of us knew that. But the sun went late and warm; we became fat, swam on still, invisible water, and delayed the leaving. Lobu had argued for days that it was time to go. But we whirled and laughed at him until he finally refused to rise when he urged us.

A cold night rain fell and turned to snow by morning. Some men take their places in long marsh grass when the rain was still far down the curve of Earth. At dawn, they began shooting while we were sleeping on the water.

Lobu sounded the lifting cry and was in the air at the first hint of a pronged light on the ground. The grass is blunted with knees pressing against it. He seemed to rise first over his warning still across the pond. And I remember marveling at the great power it must have taken to lift his body. It was a mystery to me, for I had looked at splendor in my second year. Others picked up the cry, and I knew their way was more than the simple act of getting us moving. Amalo, one of the youngest geese and me, at a trot for a song and a step smaller. He had sent my mind to a question of fear, and we began one tasked, struggling desperately for speed, for another day, for another moment.

I called upon myself for the strength I once was in the fight. I called upon myself for all that I had ever been. To my left, I could see a hunter swinging his dark rifle in a practiced, even way, following the wife of Malachi through early light.

Coming off the water she exploded in a sound of blood and feathers as the full load hit her. Jokulam trembled when he went over her floating body only a few feet below. The hunter lifted the fishing shell from shell to pump gun, and I could see pellets digging into the water ahead of him.

East we all were moving, penned parallel to the gun, strung into a curious mixture of breathing rain and rising sun. Birds were tumbling downward, some giving cries, others falling to silence. The gun kept firing as I reached climbing speed. Malachi had drawn almost even with me, coming up on my left as we passed directly in front of the roosters. Rolling upward to the right, Apricot flamed a storge of it. Buffing core of mountain thunder. At the same moment, I felt the impact on my leg. Malachi stumbled and began to fall, but caught himself and stayed low behind a stand of tall grass where the guns could not find him.

Sixty yards out. Almost safe. Coming around to follow Lobu, I could see a rush of water rushing through the water, a splash beside him. He was shooting a wild cry of exultation and waving his gun above his head. I did not understand the words he said.

Birds were struggling, others lay still. Some folded in and squawked. Floating randomly, a piece of shot in his brain, while the dog swam toward her. Zachary, the old one, was injured, but tried one more time to follow us. The gun, shot wildly near the edge of the pond, a man in camouflage shot him again, and he died there on the water. I hanked into a strong wind from the western lands and fell into place. The other birds were following the same path.

Two great rivers in the wide de of this land, We are flying forty miles east of the one that flows from the Montana highlands, three hundred miles north of the Missouri. We are flying through the rain of breasts, fields, and roads. And there is left for us.

Most of the remaining water is surrounded by gums, preserved only for the killing, not for the good. It is said the hunting is waiting, waiting in time to save the marshwalks, and, though we try, we find it difficult to be grateful. We do not understand the killing; we can only fly before it.

The young ones ask about the killing. "Why?" they ask. We have no answers, for there seem to be none. Once there were reasons, the very old ones say, but these reasons disappeared long before the marshes died.

"But," the young ones press us, "is it not for the news, then? Why? And why have they taken the marshes if they want out flesh? It makes no sense!"

In these moments, we would turn to Zachary. He had lived in terror from many ponds, had fought for the safety of albatross through a thousand magenta ponds, had shot with buckshot the red face of Mother sun, had seen the waterfowl, had watched the young ones. Floating on silent mornings, he counted in his years the disappearances of the places for flight, the news that he, alone, knew. He could not speak, but only the young ones could not be quieted with generalities and platitudes.

I have no way of understanding the thoughts of humans. I can only repeat that they are fine. And only given. Would repeat change. Those who profit now. Would profit less. Enlightenment.

The answers are few. So the questions are scolded. For the answers, if they are fine. And truly given. Would repeat change. Those who profit now. Would profit less. Enlightenment.

When wings are young, the long wind is stretching. There were many places to come down and rest at evening. Now the water has disappeared. From this height, we see vistas of prairie contours where once the marshes could be found. They are gone now. To other things the same. The grassy, and fields, and roads. And there is left for us.

By ROBERT J. WALLER