

Duck Variations

There are many different types of ducks, each with its own unique characteristics. Some are known for their ability to fly long distances, while others are more adapted to life in water. The diversity of duck species is a testament to the adaptability of these birds.

One of the most common types of ducks is the mallard. They are known for their bright green heads and orange-brown bodies. Mallards are found in a wide range of habitats, from urban parks to remote wetlands. Another popular species is the Muscovy duck, which is characterized by its dark feathers and distinctive red facial skin.

Ducks are also known for their unique behaviors. For example, some species have the ability to walk on water, a skill that is often used in traditional performances. Additionally, ducks are social animals and often form large flocks. This social structure helps them find food and protect themselves from predators.

The diversity of duck species is a result of their ability to adapt to different environments. From the cold, snowy regions of the Arctic to the warm, tropical climates of the South, ducks have found a way to thrive. This adaptability has allowed them to become one of the most successful groups of birds on the planet.

The Characters:

Emil Varec and **George S Aronovitz** *Two gentlemen in their sixties*

The Scene:

A park on the edge of a big city on a lake.

An afternoon around Easter.

This is a very simple play.

The set should consist only of a park bench and perhaps a wire garbage can.

The actors can be discovered seated on the bench at rise, or they can come on together, or separately and meet.

Any blocking or business is at the discretion of individual actors and directors. There should be, though, an interval between each variation – it doesn't need to be a long one – to allow the actors to rest and prepare for the new variation. This interval is analogous to the space between movements in a musical presentation.

The Duck Variations was first produced by The St. Nicholas Theatre Company, at Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont, in 1972, with the following cast:

Emil Varec

Pablo Vela

George S Aronovitz

Peter Vincent

Directed by David Mamet

It was first produced off-off Broadway at St. Clement's Theatre, New York City, in 1975, with the following cast:

Emil Varec

Paul Sparer

George S Aronovitz

Michael Egan

Directed by Albert Takazauckas

It was produced off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre, New York City, with *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, in June 1976, with the following cast:

Emil Varec

Mike Kellin

George S Aronovitz

Michael Egan

Directed by Albert Takazauckas

As *Duck Variations*, the play's British première was at the Regent Theatre, London, in December 1977, with the following cast:

Emil Varec

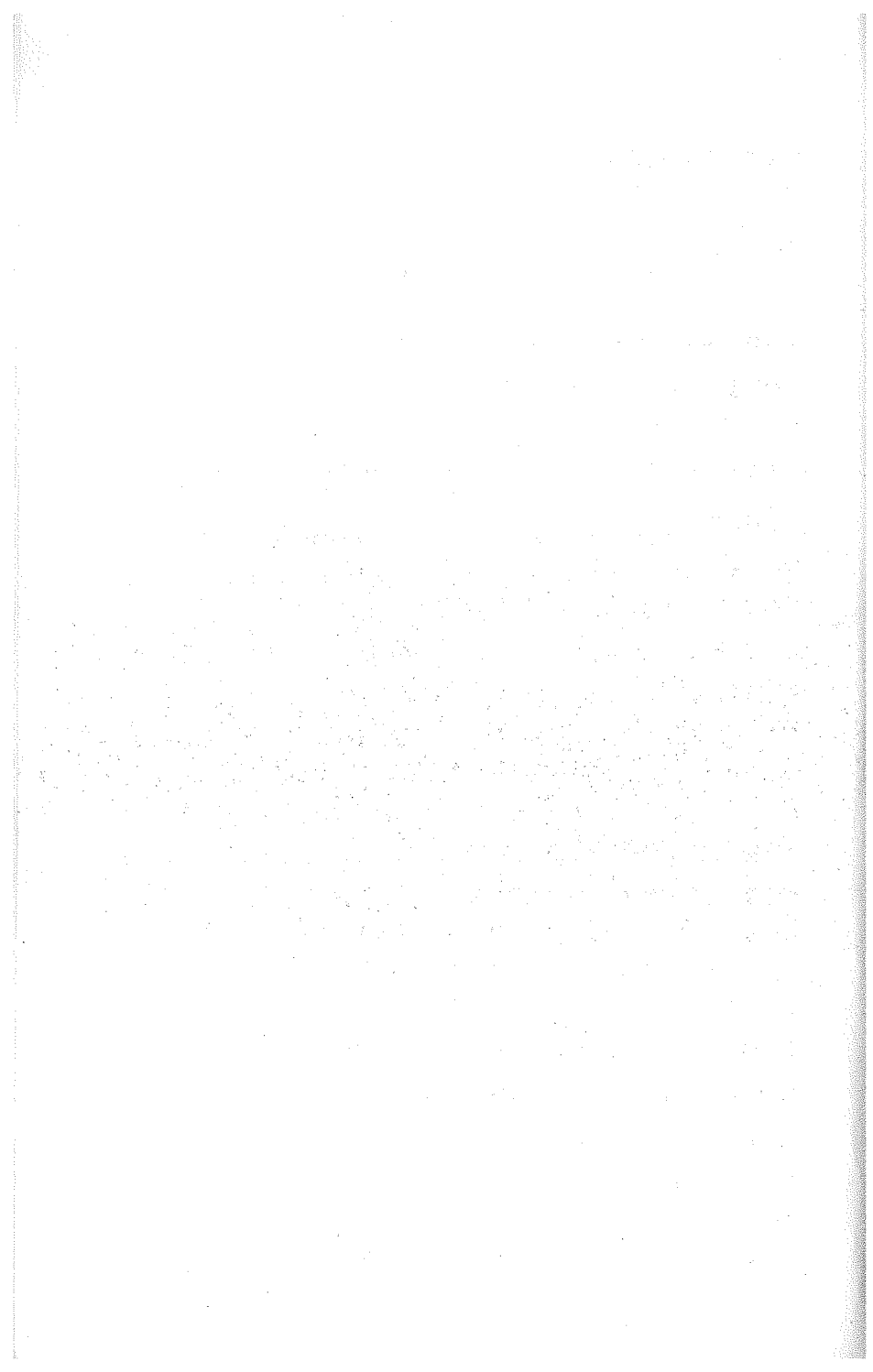
Bernard Spear

George S Aronovitz

Gordon Sterne

Directed by Albert Takazauckas

FIRST VARIATION	It's nice, the park is nice
SECOND VARIATION	The duck's life
THIRD VARIATION	Also they got barnyard ducks
FOURTH VARIATION	The duck is not like us
FIFTH VARIATION	Did you know what I was reading?
SIXTH VARIATION	What kind of a world is it?
SEVENTH VARIATION	Yes, in many ways
EIGHTH VARIATION	Ahh, I don't know
NINTH VARIATION	At the Zoo they got ducks
TENTH VARIATION	It's a crying shame
ELEVENTH VARIATION	You know, I remember
TWELFTH VARIATION	Whenever I think of wild flying things
THIRTEENTH VARIATION	They stuff them
FOURTEENTH VARIATION	For centuries prior to this time



FIRST VARIATION

It's nice, the park is nice

Emil It's nice.

George The park is nice.

Emil You forget.

George . . . you remember.

Emil I don't know . . .

George What's to know? There's a boat!

Emil So early?

George I suppose so . . . because there it is.

Emil I wonder if it's cold out there.

George There, here, it's like it is today. How it is *today*, that's how it is.

Emil But the boat is moving . . .

George So it's colder in relation how fast the boat is going.

Emil The water is colder than the land.

George So it's cold in relation to the water.

Emil So it's a different temperature on the boat than on a bench.

George They probably got sweaters.

Emil There's more than one in the boat?

George Wait till they come round again.

Emil Where did they go?

George Over there, behind the pier, where could they go?

Emil Not far . . . it's expensive a boat.

6 Duck Variations

George They care?

Emil No.

George If they got the money for a *boat*, they can afford it.

Emil It's not cheap.

George I said it was cheap?

Emil Even a small boat.

George I know it's not cheap.

Emil Even a very small boat is expensive.

George Many times a small boat is even *more* expensive.

Emil Ah.

George Depending . . .

Emil Mmm.

George On many factors.

Emil Mmm.

George . . . the size of the boat . . .

Emil Yes.

George . . . the engine.

Emil Yes. The *size* of the engine.

George Certainly, certainly.

Emil The speed of the engine.

George Many factors.

Emil The speed of the *boat*.

George That. None of it's cheap. It's all very intricate.

Emil Cars.

George Boats, cars . . . air travel. The military. It was never cheap.

Emil Housing.

George (*looks*) There's two of them in the boat.

Emil It's the same boat?

George How many boats have we seen today?

Emil That's what I'm asking.

George One.

Emil (*looks*) Another boat!

George One, two . . .

Emil A real clipper, too.

George Where?

Emil Look at *her* will ya!

George That?

Emil What else? Go, sister!

George That?

Emil Sure as shootin'.

George That's the water pump.

Emil That?

George Yes.

Emil That?

George Yes.

Emil The pump house?

George Yes.

Emil She's the water pump?

George Yes.

Emil . . . look at her float.

George Mmm.

8 Duck Variations

Emil Look at her . . . just sit there.

George Mmm.

Emil All year 'round.

George I'll give you that.

Emil What a life.

George Ducks!

Emil Where?

George Where I'm pointing.

Emil Ahh.

George A sure sign of spring.

Emil Autumn, too.

George Uh huh.

Emil . . . you see them . . .

George Yes.

Emil They go south . . .

George Um.

Emil They come back . . .

George Ummm.

Emil They live . . .

George They go . . .

Emil Ahhh.

George Ducks like to go . . .

Emil . . . yes?

George Where it's *nice* . . .

Emil Ehhh?

George *At that time!*

Emil Of course.

George And they're made so they just go. Something inside says it's getting a little cold . . . a little too cold . . .

Emil Like humans, they don't like cold.

George And there they go.

Emil There they go.

George And the same when it's warm.

Emil They come back.

George They got a leader. A lead duck. He starts . . . he's a duck. But he stays with the pack. Many times. He comes, he goes. He learns the route. Maybe he's got a little more on the ball.

Emil All this time there is another lead duck.

George Of course. But *he*, he goes, he lives, maybe he finds a mate . . .

Emil Yes.

George And he *waits* . . . The *lead* duck . . . who knows?

Emil He dies.

George One day, yes. He dies. He gets lost . . .

Emil And our duck moves up.

George *He* is now the leader. It is *he* who guides them from one home to the next. They all know the way. Each of them has it in him to know when the time is to move . . . But *he* . . . He will be in charge until . . .

Emil Yes.

George Just like the other one . . .

Emil There's no shame in that.

George Just like the previous duck . . .

Emil It happened to *him*, it's got to happen to *him*.

10 Duck Variations

George The time comes to step down.

Emil He dies.

George He dies, he leaves . . . something. And another duck moves on up.

Emil And *someday*.

George Yes.

Emil Someone will take *his* place.

George Until . . .

Emil It's boring just to think about it.

SECOND VARIATION

The duck's life

George You know, the duck's life is not all hearts and flowers. He's got his worries, too. He's got fleas and lice and diseases of the body. Delusions. Wing problems. Sexual difficulties. Many things.

Emil It's not an easy life.

George Only the beginning. The duck is at the mercy of any elements in the vicinity. Sunspots. Miscarriage. Inappropriate changes in the weather.

Emil Yes.

George Hunters. Blight. Tornadoes. Traps. Any number of airplanes.

Emil Small vicious children.

George Chainstores. And, of course, the Blue Heron.

Emil Blue Heron?

George The hereditary Enemy of the Duck.

Emil Yeah?

George It's what they call symbiosis. They both live to insure the happiness of each other. The Blue Herons eat ducks, and the duck . . .

Emil Yes?

George The duck's part of the bargain . . .

Emil Is to be eaten by the Heron?

George Is to . . . Well it slips me for the moment, but it's not as one-sided as it might appear. Nature has given the duck speed and endurance and the art of concealment. She has made the Heron large and unwieldy and *blue* to be able to spot at a distance. On the other hand he has the benefits of size and occasional camouflage should he come up against something blue.

Emil And shaped like a bird.

George Not always necessary. The battle between the two is as old as time. The ducks propagating, the Herons eating them. The Herons multiplying and losing great numbers to exhaustion in the never-ending chase of the duck. Each keeping the other in check, down through history, until a bond of unspoken friendship and respect unites them, even in the embrace of death.

Emil So why do they continue to fight?

George Survival of the fittest. The never-ending struggle between heredity and environment. The urge to combat. Old as the oceans. Instilled in us all: Who can say to what purpose?

Emil Who?

George We do not know. But this much we *do* know. As long as the duck exists, he will battle day and night, sick and well with the Heron, for so is it writ. And as long as the sky is made dark with the wing of the Monster Bird, the Heron will feast on duck.

THIRD VARIATION

Also they got barnyard ducks

Emil Also they got barnyard ducks.

George Yeah. I know.

Emil That they raise for Easter and Thanksgiving.

George You're thinking of Turkeys.

Emil Also ducks.

George They keep 'em? In captivity?

Emil Yeah. In the Barnyard. They clip their wings.

George Uh.

Emil Yeah. What? You can't put 'em on their honour?!

George Times have changed.

Emil Vandalism . . . they fat 'em up. They feed 'em, the farmers, on special mixtures. Corn, and maybe an oat. And they got special injections they give 'em. To keep 'em happy.

George And they can't fly.

Emil No.

George All with wildness is gone.

Emil Just walking around the farm all day. Eating.

George They're allowed to mate?

Emil This we do not know.

George Eh?

Emil Only a few farmers know this.

George Yeah?

Emil The mating of ducks is a private matter between the duck in question and his mate.

George Yeah?

Emil It is a thing which few White men have witnessed . . . And those who claim to have seen it . . . strangely do not wish to speak.

George There are things we're better off not to know.

Emil If you don't know, you never can be forced to tell.

George They don't got those beaks for nothing.

Emil *Nothing* is for Nothing.

George Too true.

Emil Everything has got a purpose.

George True . . .

Emil Every blessed thing . . .

George Oh yes.

Emil . . . that lives has got a purpose.

George Ducks . . .

Emil Sweat glands . . .

George Yeah.

Emil We don't sweat for nothing, you know.

George I know it.

Emil Everything that lives must sweat.

George It's all got a purpose.

Emil It's all got a rhyme *and* a reason.

George The purpose of sweat is, in itself, not clear.

Emil Yes . . .

George But . . . there it is.

Emil A purpose and a reason. Even those we, at this time, do not clearly understand.

14 Duck Variations

George Sure as shootin'.

Emil The yearly migration of the duck, to mate and take a little rest . . .

George Purpose.

Emil Sweat . . .

George Purpose.

Emil There's nothing you could possibly name that doesn't have a purpose. Don't even bother to try. Don't waste your time.

George I'm in no hurry.

Emil It's all got a purpose. The very fact that you are sitting here right now on this bench has got a purpose.

George And so, by process of elimination, does the bench.

Emil Now you're talking sense.

George Darn Tootin'.

Emil The law of the universe is a law unto itself.

George Yes. Yes.

Emil And woe be to the man who fools around.

George You can't get away with *nothing*.

Emil And if you *could* it would have a purpose.

George Nobody knows that better than me.

Emil . . . Well put.

FOURTH VARIATION

The duck is not like us

Emil The duck is not like us, you know.

George How so?

Emil The duck is an egg-bearing creature.

George And we're not, I suppose?

Emil I didn't say that. The young of the duck at birth are already trained to do things most humans learn only much later. Swim. Follow their mother.

George Fly.

Emil No. I don't believe they can fly until later life.

George But it's possible.

Emil It's possible, but you're wrong.

George . . . As a matter of fact I do remember reading somewhere that many small ducks *do* possess the ability to fly at birth.

Emil I do think you are mistaken.

George No. It could be . . . But no.

Emil Yes. I believe you're sadly wrong.

George No. I wouldn't *swear* to it . . .

Emil No.

George But I'd almost *swear* I've read that *somewhere* . . .

Emil Yes, I'm fairly sure you're wrong on that one point.

George Some little-known group of ducks.

Emil No. All my knowledge of nature tells me I must say no.

George A very small group of ducks.

Emil I cannot let that by.

16 Duck Variations

George But I think . . .

Emil It's possible you *misread* the . . .

George Possibly, but . . .

Emil No, no. No. I must still stick to my saying no. No.

George . . . Perhaps I misread it. What a thing, however. To be able to fly. In later life.

Emil Swimming ain't so bad either.

George But any fool who knows how to swim can swim. It takes a *bird* to Fly.

Emil Insects also fly.

George But not in the same category.

Emil Insects . . . birds and insects and . . . I *could* be wrong but . . .

George You *are* wrong. Nothing else flies.

FIFTH VARIATION

Did you know what I was reading?

George Did you know what I was reading somewhere?

Emil Don't start.

George About the stratosphere. The stratosphere, particularly the lower stratosphere, is becoming messy with gook.

Emil Eh?

George According to the weatherman.

Emil *Our* stratosphere?

George Everybody's. Because it's all the same thing.

Emil Eh?

George As if you drop a pebble in a pond and the ripples spread you-know-not-where . . .

Emil Yes?

George So, when you stick shit up in the Stratosphere . . .

Emil Yes?

George You got the same problem.

Emil What kind of gook?

George All kinds. Dirt . . .

Emil Yes.

George Gook . . .

Emil No good.

George Automotive . . .

Emil Yeah.

George Cigarette smoke. It's all up there. It's not going anywhere.

Emil Yeah.

George They're finding out many things about the world we live in from the air.

Emil Yes.

George For, in many ways . . . the air is more a part of our world than we would like to admit. Think about it.

Emil I will.

George Planes that come down, they got to wash 'em right away. They go up clean, they come down filthy.

Emil Yes.

George But the creatures with no choice: Insects, ducks.

Emil Gliders.

18 Duck Variations

George It's a shame. They should be shot.

Emil Some of them are shot.

George No, *them*, the ones responsible. Ducks! They're finding ducks with lung cancer. I was reading about this hunter in the forest and he shot a bunch of ducks that were laying down . . .

Emil Yes.

George And he missed. *But!* As he was walking away he heard this hacking, and he went back to investigate. And there were these five or six stunted ducks sitting in a clearing, hacking their guts out.

Emil No!

George Coughing and sneezing. Runny noses . . . and they'd flap their wings and go maybe two flaps and fall down coughing.

Emil It's no good for you.

George And he says instead of running off they came up and huddled around his feet with these rheumy, runny eyes. Looking quite pathetic. And he says he couldn't get it out of his mind . . .

Emil What?

George I'd feel silly to say it.

Emil Tell me.

George That they looked like they were trying to bum a smoke.

Emil . . . That's ridiculous.

George I know it.

Emil I think someone is putting you on.

George Very likely.

Emil You aren't even *supposed* to smoke in a forest.

George Go fight City Hall.

SIXTH VARIATION

What kind of a world is it?

George What kind of a world is it that can't even keep its streets clean?

Emil A self-destructive world.

George You said it.

Emil A cruel world.

George A dirty world. Feh. I'm getting old.

Emil Nobody's getting any younger.

George Almost makes a feller want to stop trying.

Emil Stop trying what?

George You know, life is a lot simpler than many people would like us to believe.

Emil How so?

George Take the duck.

Emil All right.

George Of what does his life consist?

Emil Well, flying . . .

George Yes.

Emil Eating.

George Yes.

Emil Sleeping.

George Yes.

Emil Washing himself

George Yes.

Emil Mating.

George Yes.

Emil And perhaps getting himself shot by some jerk in a red hat.

George Or 'Death.'

Emil Should we include that as one of the activities of life?

George Well, you can't die in a vacuum.

Emil That's true.

George So there we have it: the duck, too, is doomed to death . . .

Emil As are we all.

George But his life prior to that point is so much more simple. He is born. He learns his trade: to fly. He flies, he eats, he finds a mate, he has young, he flies some more, he dies. A simple, straight-forward easy-to-handle life.

Emil So what's your point?

George Well, lookit:

Emil Okay.

George On his deathbed what does the duck say if only he could speak?

Emil He wants to live some more.

George Right. But remorse? Guilt? Other bad feelings? No. No. He is in tune with nature.

Emil He is part of nature. He is a duck.

George Yes, but so is man a part of nature.

Emil Speak for yourself.

George I am speaking for myself.

Emil Then speak to yourself.

George Who asked you to listen?

Emil Who asked you to talk?

George Why are you getting upset?

Emil You upset me.

George Yeah?

Emil With your talk of nature and the duck and death. Morbid useless talk. You know, it is a good thing to be perceptive, but you shouldn't let it get in the way.

George And that is the point I was trying to make.

SEVENTH VARIATION

Yes, in many ways

George Yes, in many ways Nature is our window to the world.

Emil Nature is the world.

George Which shows you how easy it is to take a good idea and glop it up.

Emil So who do you complain to.

George Well, you complain to me.

Emil Do you mind?

George I'm glad I got the time to listen.

Emil A man needs a friend in this life.

George In this or any other life.

Emil You said it. Without a friend, life is not . . .

George Worth living?

Emil No it's still worth living. I mean, what is worth living if not life? No. But life without a friend is . . .

22 Duck Variations

George It's lonely.

Emil It sure is. You said it. It's good to have a friend.

George It's good to be a friend.

Emil It's good to have a friend to talk to.

George It's good to talk to a friend.

Emil To complain to a friend . . .

George It's good to listen . . .

Emil Is good.

George To a friend.

Emil To make life a little less full of pain . . .

George I'd try anything.

Emil Is good.

George For you, or for a friend. Because it's good to help.

Emil To help a friend in need is the most that any man can want to do.

George And you couldn't ask for more than that.

Emil I wouldn't.

George Good.

Emil Being a loner in this world . . .

George Is not my bag of tea.

Emil Is no good. No man is an Island to himself.

George Or to anyone else.

Emil You can't live alone forever. You can't live forever anyway. But you can't live alone. Nothing that lives can live alone. Flowers. You never find just one flower. Trees. Ducks.

George Cactus.

Emil Lives alone?

George Well, you take the cactus in the waste. It stands alone as far as the eye can tell.

Emil But there are other cacti.

George Not in that immediate area, no.

Emil What are you trying to say?

George That the *cactus*, unlike everything else that cannot live alone, *thrives* . . .

Emil I don't want to hear it.

George But it's true, the cactus.

Emil I don't want to hear it. If it's false, don't waste my time and if it is true I don't want to know.

George It's a proven fact.

Emil I can't hear you.

George Even the duck sometimes.

Emil (*looks*) . . . Nothing that lives can live alone.

EIGHTH VARIATION

Ahh, I don't know

Emil Ahh, I don't know.

George So what?

Emil You gotta point . . . Sometimes I think the park is more trouble than it's worth.

George How so?

Emil To come and look at the lake and the trees and animals and sun just once in a while and traipse back. Back to . . .

George Your apartment.

24 Duck Variations

Emil Joyless. Cold concrete. Apartment. Stuff. Linoleum. Imitation.

George The park is more real?

Emil The Park? Yes.

George Sitting on benches.

Emil Yes.

George Visiting tame animals?

Emil Taken from wildest captivity.

George Watching a lake that's a sewer?

Emil At least it's water.

George You wanna drink it?

Emil I drink it every day.

George Yeah. After it's been pured and filtered.

Emil A lake just the same. My inland sea.

George Fulla inland shit.

Emil It's better than nothing. Well, it's a close second.

George But why does it hurt you to come to the park?

Emil I sit home, I can come to the park. At the park the only place I have to go is home.

George Better not to have a park?

Emil I don't know.

George Better not to have a Zoo? We should forget what a turtle is?

Emil Aaaaah.

George Our children should never know the joy of watching some animal . . . behaving?

Emil I don't know.

George They should stay home and know only guppies eating their young.

Emil

Let 'em go to the country.

Nature's playground.

The country.

The land that time forgot.

Mallards in formation.

Individual barnyard noises.

Horses.

Rusty gates.

An ancient tractor.

Hay, barley.

Mushrooms.

Rye.

Stuffed full of abundance.

Enough to feed the nations of the

World.

George We'll have 'em over. We don't get enough riff-raff.

Emil Enough to gorge the countless cows of South America.

George Did you make that up?

Emil Yes.

George I take my hat off to you.

Emil Thank you.

George 'Feed the many' . . . how does it go?

Emil Um. Stuff the nameless . . . It'll come to me.

George When you get it, tell me.

NINTH VARIATION

At the Zoo they got ducks

Emil At the Zoo they got ducks. They got. What do you call it? . . . A Mallard. They got a mallard and a . . . what is it? A cantaloupe.

George You mean an antelope.

Emil No . . . no, it's not cantaloupe. But it's *like* cantaloupe. Uh . . .

George Antelope?

Emil No! *Antelope* is like an elk. What *I'm* thinking is like a duck.

George Goose?

Emil No. But it's . . . What sounds like *cantaloupe*, but it isn't.

George . . . Antelope. I'm sorry, but that's it.

Emil No. Wait! Wait. Ca . . . cala . . . camma . . . grantal . . .

George Canadian ducks?

Emil No! I've *seen* 'em, the ones I mean. I've seen 'em in the Zoo.

George Ducks?

Emil Yes! Ducks that I'm talking about. By God, I know what I mean . . . They're called . . . The only thing that comes up is canta. Pantel. Pandel. Panda . . . Candarolpe . . .

George They ain't got no panda.

Emil I know it . . . Panna . . .

George They *had* a panda at the *other* Zoo but it died.

Emil Yeah. Nanna . . .

George There were two of 'em. Or three. But they were all men and when they died . . . they couldn't have any babies, of course . . .

Emil Randspan?

George . . . so the Pandas . . .

Emil . . . lope . . .

George Died.

Emil Lo . . . lopa? Loola . . .

George Not Swans?

Emil No. Please. I know Swans. I'm talking about ducks.

George I know it.

Emil Can . . .

George Those Pandas were something.

Emil Yeah.

George Giant Pandas.

Emil Yeah.

George *Big* things.

Emil I've seen 'em.

George Not lately you haven't.

Emil No.

George Cause they been dead.

Emil I know it.

George From the Orient. Pandas from the Far East. There for all to see.

Emil Mantalope?

George Black and White.

Emil Palapope . . .

28 Duck Variations

George Together.

Emil Maaaa . . .

George The Giant Panda.

Emil Fanna . . .

George Over two stories tall.

Emil Raaa?

George It got too expensive to feed it. They had to put 'em to sleep.

TENTH VARIATION

It's a crying shame

Emil It's a crying shame.

George Eh?

Emil A crying piss-laden shame. A blot on our time.
Gook on the scutcheon. Oil slicks from here to Africa.

George Huh?

Emil They don't allow no smoking on ocean liners. One spark overboard and the whole ocean goes.

George Yeah?

Emil Oil-bearing ducks floating up dead on the beaches. Beaches closing. No place to swim. The surface of the sea is solid dying wildlife. In Australia . . . they're finding fish, they're going blind from lack of sun. New scary species are developing. They eat nothing but dead birds.

George Yeah?

Emil Catfish.

George . . . I think that's something different.

Emil Nevermore. Thrushes. No more the duck. Blue-jays. Cardinals. Making the dead ocean their last home.

George When I was young . . .

Emil Floating up dead on the beaches.

George Around my house . . .

Emil Their lungs a sodden pulp of gasoline. They're made for something better than that.

George In the springtime we used to . . .

Emil Can't even burn leaves in the fall. We have to wrap them in Plastic. Next we'll have to wrap each leaf individually. Little envelopes for each leaf, it shouldn't contaminate us with the vapours. Little numbered packets.

George Our lawn was.

Emil What?

George Eh?

Emil What was your lawn?

George I forget.

Emil Can you imagine, being the last man alive to have seen a blue heron? Or a wild buffalo?

George No man can live in the path of a wild buffalo.

Emil All right. A regular buffalo, then.

George They got 'em at the zoo.

Emil Buffaloes?

George Yeah, they got plenty of 'em.

Emil But that's in captivity.

George I should hope so.

Emil Well, in any case, you see my point.

George Yes . . .

Emil Well, that's the point I was trying to make.

ELEVENTH VARIATION

You know, I remember

George You know, I remember reading somewhere . . .

Emil Please.

George All right.

Emil I hurt your feelings.

George Yes.

Emil I'm sorry.

George I know.

Emil There is no excuse for that.

George It's all right.

Emil What were you gonna say?

George About the balance of nature.

Emil Yes?

George Being dependent on one of the Professional Spectator Sports.

Emil You're fulla shit.

George For its continuation.

Emil What made you think of that?

George I'm not sure.

Emil Some sport?

George I don't know.

Emil Nature?

George Perhaps.

Emil Do you remember which sport?

George I . . . no, I wouldn't want to go on record as remembering. One of the Major League sports.

Emil Where did you read it?

George I don't know. *The Readers' Digest* . . .

Emil Eh?

George Also they've found a use for cancer.

Emil Knock wood.

George It's about time. All the millions we spend on research, cigarettes . . .

Emil Wildlife.

George Nothing wrong with spending money on Wildlife.

Emil It's all take, take, take.

George Nature gives it back many times over.

Emil Yeah?

George A blue heron at sunset.

Emil They're all dead . . .

George A whiff of breeze from the lake . . .

Emil . . . or hiding.

George A flight of Ducks.

Emil The duck is, after all, only a bird.

George But what a bird.

Emil A pigeon, too, is a bird.

George There's no comparison.

Emil What is the difference between a duck and a pigeon?

George Basically, a lack of comparison.

Emil Aside from that?

George It is a difference of . . . self-respect. You can't argue with that.

32 Duck Variations

Emil I won't begin.

George It wouldn't get you anywhere.

Emil Ha. Ha.

George Big talk.

Emil I'm ready to back it up.

George Oh yeah?

Emil Yeah.

George All right.

Emil . . . anytime you're ready.

George I'm ready.

Emil All right, then.

George Are you ready?

Emil You betcha, Red Ryder.

George Good.

Emil . . . Hey! What? Grownups squabbling about birds?

George You started it.

Emil I beg to differ.

George Go right ahead.

Emil All right, I *do* differ.

George It makes no difference. I was holding an intelligent conversation and then you came along . . .

Emil And simply pointed out that you were turning something into a thing which it is not.

George What is more noble than a duck.

Emil Depends on the duck.

George Is a pigeon more noble than a duck.

Emil Are you saying that just because the duck is wild and has no rules . . .

George No rules? No rules? No rules but the sun and the moon! No rules but the law of the seasons and when to go where at what specific time? No rules but to find a mate and cleave into her until death does him part?

Emil Is that true?

George It surely is.

Emil That I didn't know.

George Well, learn from your mistakes.

Emil I will.

George No rules!

Emil All right.

George One of the most rigid creatures.

Emil I'm sorry.

George Did you know that many human societies are modelled on those of our animal friends?

Emil Pish.

George I beg to differ about it.

Emil Pish foo.

George The French, for example.

Emil Are modelled on animals?

George Historically, yes.

Emil Where did you get that?

George Some guide to France.

Emil I don't believe it.

George I got it somewhere, I'll show you.

Emil You do that.

34 Duck Variations

George I will.

Emil You just do that.

George Don't push me.

Emil I won't.

George All right.

Emil Darn tootin'.

TWELFTH VARIATION

Whenever I think of wild flying things

Emil Whenever I think of wild flying things I wonder.

George Yes?

Emil If, in the City, as we are . . .

George Yes?

Emil We maybe . . .

George Yes?

Emil Forget it.

George Ducks.

Emil Ducks.

George Ducks. Flying wild.

Emil Wild over boundaries.

George Lakes, rivers.

Emil Imaginary lines . . .

George The Equator.

Emil Never minding . . . Never stopping . . .

George Stopping for no man.

Emil High above unmanned terrain.

George Barren.

Emil Unexplored North Country.

George Naked. Strange.

Emil Here and there a Mountie.

George Cold.

Emil Nowhere to rest.

George What a life.

Emil Sleeping on the fly.

George Blown by storms.

Emil You know, that is not a laughing matter . . .

George Who's laughing?

Emil Much wildlife is, I am about to tell you, killed each year in storms and similar . . . things where they have a lot of wind.

George Don't I know it.

Emil Another countless danger for the duck.

George Frost, too.

Emil Hail.

George Uh.

Emil Can you imagine it?

George . . . Hail . . .

Emil Pelting the poor creature. Alone in the sky. Many feet in the air. He can't go right, he can't go left . . .

George Nowhere to go.

Emil Hail all over. Hitting him. Pelting him. Making ribbons of his wings. Creaming him out of the sky.

George The Law of Life.

Emil That's what you say *now*.

George Some must die so others can live.

Emil But they must die, too.

George So some must die so others can live a little longer. That's implied.

Emil And then *they* die.

George Of course. So that others can live. It makes sense if you think about it.

THIRTEENTH VARIATION

They stuff them.

Emil They stuff them.

George Eh?

Emil They stuff them. They shoot them and they stuff them.

George So long as they're dead.

Emil Sawdust. And they tack 'em on the wall.

George Also they stuff 'em for the oven.

Emil That too.

George Yeah.

Emil But to kill for no reason . . . without rhyme or reason . . . to shoot them. What a waste.

George Yes.

Emil What a waste in the life of a duck. To be shot. And not even eaten. Shot. Shot down like some animal.

George At least they shoot 'em in the air.

Emil Huh?

George Yeah! What do you think? You can't shoot 'em on foot? What!?

Emil Yeah?

George They got *laws*. Seasons. Didn't you ever hear of Duck Season?

Emil Of course.

George Well, duck season is when you can kill 'em. Legally.

Emil And when is it?

George Duck season?

Emil Yeah.

George Uh, the spring. Several weeks . . . The fall several weeks.

Emil . . . whenever the duck is *around*!

George No, it's . . .

Emil Eh?

George No, I . . .

Emil Eh?

George Well . . . ?

Emil EH?

George . . . yeah!

Emil They got the season so the only time it's not legal to shoot 'em is when they *ain't here*. . . . yeah.

Emil They're no dummies.

George Yeah.

Emil Influence . . . strings.

George It ain't cheap to hunt ducks.

Emil Are you kidding me?

38 Duck Variations

George No. You need land.

Emil You need a *lot* of land.

George At least a mile. And you need . . .

Emil Guns.

George One gun only.

Emil And a spare.

George And some ammo to put *in* the gun.

Emil Telescope.

George And those hats.

Emil A blatter to call them.

George Not always necessary.

Emil But good to have in an emergency. . . . A bag to put them in.

George Big boots.

Emil A raincoat.

George A radio.

Emil You gotta take lunch.

George You need a lotta things.

Emil A licence.

George And a *lot* of luck.

Emil Oh, yes.

George It's easy to pick out a little wobbling duck from miles in a clear blue sky?

Emil No.

George A *LOT* of luck.

Emil And practice.

George Who's got the time?

Emil Every day. A half hour anyway. Practising . . .

George . . . is where they separate the men from the boys. At that moment there is no turning back. You're committed. You've been blatting around and searching the sky and crouching 'till your back hurts. From dawn on.

Emil Yes.

George Lying on the cold Earth, trying not to look like anything. Hoping. Praying for that ONE DUCK . . .

Emil A low flying duck . . .

George That one chance to show what *dreams* are made of. Until . . .

Emil Yes?

George Until . . . off in the distance. *Beyond* the horizon 'til you don't even know what it is, is a honking. The honking comes closer. Closer and louder. You see a far-off blur. The blur becomes a speck. The speck gets bigger. It's a big speck. It's a dot. The dot is advancing and it's honking and the honking is louder and becomes clear and precise. You can just make it out. Flapping. Flying straight in a line to join its comrades. Frantic. Lost. Dangerous. Vicious: A DUCK. . . . and on he comes. You quietly raise from the ground. One knee . . . two knees. You lift the gun, you put the gun on your shoulder and point it at the duck. It's you and him. You and the duck on the marsh. He wants to go home and you want to kill him for it. So you fire the gun. Once, again. Again. Again. Your ears are ringing. Your eyes are covered in spots. You cannot see. You are quivering and you gotta sit down. Your heart is going fast . . .

Emil Where's the duck?

George . . . slowly. Slowly you lower yourself to the Earth. Your joints creak . . .

Emil Where's the duck?

40 Duck Variations

George . . . slowly. Slowly you lower yourself to the Earth. Your joints creak . . .

Emil *Where's the duck?*

George . . . with the weight of your body. Your shoulder aches from pounding, and your . . .

Emil *WHERE'S THE DUCK?*

George The duck is dying.

Emil Out in the marsh.

George Out in the marsh.

Emil Oh no.

George In a flock of feathers and blood. Full of bullets. Quiet, so as not to make a sound. Dying.

Emil Living his last.

George Dying.

Emil Leaving the Earth and sky.

George Dying.

Emil Lying on the ground.

George Dying.

Emil Fluttering.

George Dying.

Emil Sobbing.

George Dying.

Emil Quietly bleeding.

George Thinking.

Emil Dying.

George Dying, dying.

Emil But wait! This here! He summons his strength for one last time.

George No.

Emil Maybe he beats around and tries to make it . . .

George No.

Emil Back in the air?

George No.

Emil One last . . .

George No.

Emil A flutter of . . .

George No.

Emil A little . . .

George No.

Emil He's dead, isn't he?

George *nods.*

Emil I knew it.

George The Law of Life.

FOURTEENTH VARIATION

For centuries prior to this time

Emil You know, for centuries prior to this time man has watched birds.

George I still watch 'em.

Emil To obtain the secret of Flight.

George We're better off without it.

Emil Yeah.

George They'll go to their graves with it.

42 Duck Variations

Emil The Ancient Greeks used to sit around all day looking at birds.

George Yeah?

Emil Oh yes. They'd take a chair and go sit and look at 'em. Just watch them all day long and wonder.

George I, too, would wonder. A crumbling civilization and they're out in the Park looking at birds.

Emil

There were the Ancient Greeks.

Old. Old men.

Incapable of working.

Of no use to their society.

Just used to watch the birds all day

First Light to Last Light.

First Light: Go watch birds.

Last Light: Stop watching birds. Go Home.

Swallows. Falcons.

Forerunners of our modern birds.

And the forerunners of our modern States.

Greeks. Birds.

Used to sit out all day long. Sit on a bench and feed them . . .

Give them little bits of . . .

George . . . rice?

Emil Rice, yes. History is not completely clear on that point, but we can imagine rice. For the sake of argument. Rich, sleek birds of prey.

George And fat old men.

Emil

Watching each other.

Each with something to contribute.

That the world might turn another day.

A Fitting end.

To some very noble creatures of the
sky.

And a lotta Greeks.