

GLENN BLAKE

SHOOTING STARS

SUMMER, PAST MIDNIGHT. The windows are open. A scratch at the screen.

"Listen," I whisper, shake her softly by the shoulder. "Sweetheart, it's time."

"Really?" she says. She's suddenly awake. She sits up in bed. "Well then, let's go!"

The scratching becomes a soft rapping on the wooden screen frame. I hurry over. Any second it will wake our mother. I can see him outside, standing there in his jeans, slumped, no shirt, holding a rifle. "We're coming," I whisper. It must be a clear night.

I help her on with her slippers. Little rabbits Mamma made of cloth. The head at her toes, a cotton nose. The long ears stick out on both sides of the shoe.

I unlatch the screen, lift and set her on the sill. He has already propped his rifle against the house, and when I push the bottom of the rusty screen out, he reaches in and takes her.

"Careful," I tell him.

She looks over her shoulder, frowning. She reaches back for me,

"MY...," she says too loudly, and they are gone hand-in-hand into the darkness.

I grab her sock filled with pennies from the nightstand and crawl backwards through the window, bumping the screen open with my bottom.

They are to the road by now, so I run after them, in my pajamas, barefooted through the night.

No one is awake at this hour. No porch lights. There is no moon.

Deep in the Thicket, there are few places, if any sometimes, to see the sky. The road is the only paved passageway through this wood. There are places where the trees grow together overhead to form a dark tunnel for miles.

But here, on both sides, there are loblolly pines, high, a good strip of sky. This is where I find them. He, with his back turned, loading the rifle. She, off to one side.

It has always amazed me how the blacktop holds its heat through the night. Impossible to cross barefooted at noon. It is warm now under my feet, soporific. On chilly nights, after heavy rains, the animals of the Thicket hop, slither, crawl out of the cold marshes onto this road, stretch out on it, dry, warm as a mother's side, and sleep until a car comes along.

She beckons with her hand. It means, "Hurry." Little prints of sleeping rabbits on her pajamas. Little sister.

She takes the sock of coins and hands it to the quiet one. She is wide-awake now, so proud of herself.

He tucks the rifle under his arm, empties the sock into his palm and shakes that hand up and down to hear the sound of the coins in the dark. He pours them into his pocket, lifts the rifle above his head and points it at the sky.

Will I have the
time to one day tell
her that this star, a
star we see one
night, went out, is
dead, died a long
time ago—there is
no more fire?

Now it is my turn as intermediary to pick her up and show her the stars.

She is to select one, not a big star because it would not be fair. I am to tell the quiet one which star she has chosen. He will aim his rifle, take time aiming, seconds, minutes, and then shoot that burning orb from the sky. It will fall, plummet, race straight down to the earth, Western Hemisphere, North America, East Texas, Big Thicket, strike the asphalt some half-mile away, explode (not loudly, for it is a tiny star) and then burn itself out in the darkness.

“Aww,” she will say. This is what pains me. She will look so sad. She will start running down the blacktop for the fallen star which is now just a tiny fire disappearing in the distance. She will not get there in time.

“Aww,” she will say like the day she held her Easter chick in her hands and watched it die.

HOW CAN I TELL HER ABOUT THESE THINGS? How can I tell her it is not true when she wants to believe so badly? How can I tell her that what he loads and fires, the projectile, is a wee wooden arrow, kitchen match, three inches long, propelled by a small metal sphere, pushed down the barrel high in the sky up to that point where something in the earth calls it back, that it then falls, plunges, red head first, white-eyed, quite a ways, so that when it strikes the pavement, it strikes and burns a dying fire down the dark road?

One of her slippers falls to the blacktop. “I’ll get it,” I tell her, stoop and grab the rabbit by the ears.

We are both staring straight up out of the Thicket. I raise my hand to show her... The night is a black beast, a winged thing, with a thousand eyes.

Will I have the time to one day tell her that this star, a star we see one night, went out, is dead, died a long time ago—there is no more fire? How does it go? That it has taken all this time for the light to get to us. Something like that. So that what we are seeing, little sister, is like a memory of someone who has passed away.

No, tonight she is mine. I reach and pick her up. I hold her to me closely.

The quiet one rests the rifle on his shoulder.

"Mmm," she says, indecisive. She is holding her forefinger to her lips. And then she sees it. "There," she says. She points between the peaks of pines.

"You sure?" I ask her. I want it to be perfect. I want her to be happy. It is a tiny star, not really red, not yellow, but pink, winking off and on.

"That's it," she whispers. She has her arm around my neck. She gently pulls my head to hers so I can look down her short finger to the sky. She whispers, "That's the one."