The Sound of Shotguns

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She and her brother are silent like the air, waiting for their dad to kill something. Her name is Darci and she’s sitting under a mesquite tree and looking at mistletoe growing on the branch above her. When she’s thirty she will remember this day. Her younger brother is in front of her, sitting between a prickly pear and a large limestone rock. He picks a weed. The pond water is slick. Mosquitoes float on its surface. They are in Texas on her mom’s parents’ land. It is a warm fall. Dusk. Dove season.

She’s nine and her dad is able to ring the strongman bell at the carnival and his body is thin. His face has the deep pebbled appearance that an ex-boxer’s face should have. As far as she knows, she and her mom’s parents are the only three people in the world that aren’t afraid of her dad. Her brother, Tejas, is afraid. And Tejas should be afraid because he’s only six.

Her mother is afraid. Or at least seems to be. Sometimes her dad will be yelling at her mom. He’ll be standing back at the kitchen door and yelling loudly. Her brother will be trying to eat his spaghetti and cheese and her mom will be standing small and blond like she is and will be taking his words as if she deserves them. At other times her mom will take the words but looks like she doesn’t know she’s standing in the kitchen by the white porcelain sink or that she has a name like Anna or that she’s only twenty-seven years old and it’s 1962. When Darci is nine she will only think about the things she sees her mom do in front of the porcelain sink — the deviled eggs, the fried venison, the burnt toast. It will seem when she is nine that her mother never moves very far. But when she is thirty she will realize her mother handled the small house and her father and the two children and the little money that came in and all the requests very quietly, almost with fright, but that she handled them very well for such a young woman.

Tejas has stopped looking at the weed. He asks Darci which direction the birds will be coming from. She points to the west. Her dad hasn’t told her this, but she has sat under the mesquite tree enough to know. As she points three doves appear exactly where her extended finger touches the air. Her dad yells, ‘‘BIRDS!’’ then raises his gun. They watch the shotgun rise. The dusk is very quiet. He free swings the gun level with the birds. It is quiet. The gun follows the birds in. It is quiet. Her dad pulls the trigger. His shoulders jerk back. The sound destroys the silence and then ends, and then destroys the silence again, and then ends, always ends, again, eventually.

Darci doesn’t lower her head when her father shoots although he has told her she should. She doesn’t lower her head because she knows he will not become
angry. Her dad makes many rules and most of them must be obeyed. They must be obeyed or her dad will yell or sometimes he will take the palm of his hand and spank her on the side of the leg even though she is already nine years old.

Since it is the first flight of birds none are killed. Her father nearly always misses the first set. But he doesn’t get angry. He never yells about the first flight of birds. He breaks the breech of the shotgun and inserts two more shells. The empty ones are by his feet. She goes to her father and picks them up. She doesn’t speak to him. She puts the empty shells in a pile. The beginning of a pile. She moves back away from her dad but stands in front of her brother.

Her mother has told her that she is afraid her husband will die one day while he hunts. Especially when he night hunts. When her dad puts on his dark clothes and his heavy coat that has blood stains and goes hunting at night for illegal deer her mother believes he will die. And even after he comes home smelling of dirt and more blood, even after he unloads the deer from the trunk of the car, even then her mother is thinking of what her life will be like if he should die. Darci goes outside with her father. Her mother waits by the porcelain sink. Her dad opens the deer with his small pocket knife. To Darci it will look as if he opens the deer as effortlessly as if the knife were the handle of a zipper to the deer’s coat. He takes the coat off and underneath is the meat and the bone.

Her mother will cut up the meat as her father brings it in the house. She will cut up the meat so the blood can be wiped from the sink before morning and so she can stop thinking that he will die or be sent to jail until the next time he night hunts.

Darci watches the back of her dad’s head move forward. He spits the chewing tobacco water onto two rocks a few feet in front of him. She knows he will aim at those two rocks for the rest of the afternoon. She knows how the spit has bubbles in it. She is familiar with the smell. It reminds her of mint growing in spring. Mostly it isn’t unpleasant. Her dad is too much of a man for the smell of spittle to bother her. He also smells of cigar smoke and of the dried blood of illegally hunted deer. She believes he smells of a man who drinks beer when he night hunts, but later, when she is thirty, she will realize he never had that smell.

When the next set of birds comes over she is in front of her brother. Tejas is trying to get in front of her but she knows her father won’t miss this time and she wants to get to the bird first. She doesn’t watch her dad lift the gun, she only watches the birds. She strains her eyes so that she won’t blink when the shotgun is fired. She sees one of the bird’s wings drop and then the entire bird spins and falls. Her father doesn’t shoot again. She watches the spot of the bird until her father says, and then she runs. Her brother is yelling for her to slow down but she doesn’t listen to him.

The bird isn’t dead. One wing flaps violently as the bird moves along the high weeds. She is familiar with the way the bird will flap when her fingers grasp its wing. She knows how firmly she must grab so it won’t get away from her. Her father has always said to get the bird and kill it quickly. She does this well. Darci likes to feel the warmness of the dead bird’s breast and to see how dark the blood is. She has asked her father if perhaps blood is black on the inside of the bird. Her father said that before it touched the air it was blue. She is always surprised there isn’t more blood.
Darci carries the bird back behind her dad. He has already told Tejas to shut up and sit down. She moves quickly before the birds come. She doesn’t want her dad to miss a shot or yell because of her.

She has the bird in her hand. She rubs her finger over the gullet underneath the bird’s beak. She has felt enough gullets to know if there is corn or wheat or oats inside. She likes to open up the pouch and see how much is there. Once she brought a measuring cup and one bird had a full one-fourth cup of oats inside. Her grandfather had frowned when she told him. He knew the birds ate too much of his grain.

Her grandfather is five foot two. He owns the pond and the pastures around the pond and the land planted in oats and wheat beyond the pastures. Her mom’s parents live in a large house where wind blows through the windows on cool nights. She thinks they are very rich. Her own house is small. Her father works in a small office and draws with thin pencils on a drafting board. She knows he worries about being poor.

Her grandfather will take her with him sometimes when he goes to check the sheep in the far pastures. She will ride on top of the pickup cab. She will push her legs through the railings of the cage that’s attached to the back of the cab and she will lie forward and grab the spot light in front of her. Her grandfather will go slowly at first and then as he forgets she is up there he will speed up and she will feel the wind. It forces her back into the metal rails until her knees are through the bars.

One day when she is eating meatloaf her mother will tell her not to ride on top of the pickup anymore but her grandfather will still let her do it. He is a quiet man who has no color in his lips. He doesn’t seem to remember that there is anything to be afraid of. Her grandmother is too big to be afraid. She is five foot ten and can talk loudly and tells the wetbacks where and how long they are to work. Her grandmother will also let her ride on top of the pickup and has a twenty-two rifle with a small scope. Her grandmother can lean out the pickup window when it’s going forty-five miles an hour and pick off rabbits with her gun.

Darci is sitting under the mesquite tree again. Her brother sits in front of her. She begins pulling off the bird’s feathers. On other days she has tried to pull them off one by one so she can count them. But she always forgets before she is finished. She notices the little holes in the bird’s skin where the feathers used to be. Sometimes she doesn’t bother with pulling feathers but removes the head and the skin and the insides of the bird in one quick motion that she has watched her dad use. Whichever way she cleans the bird she ends up with small white feathers stuck to her hands with a clear liquid that comes from somewhere on the muscle of the bird.

When she finishes cleaning her bird she lays it on a stone. Another set of birds is flying over. Without realizing it she feels that she has covered her ears. Her father is already partly deaf from listening so often to the guns. He shoots them often. He practices on targets, he practices on clay pidgeons. Sometimes he takes Darci and Tejas with him to the shooting range. He sets up black and white targets at different distances from the shooting block. He even lets Darci pull the trigger sometimes. He lays his two-twenty-three rifle on sandbags and aims the gun himself at the target and then tells Darci to shoot. He tells her to look into the
scope and put the crosshairs of the scope onto the middle of the target. Darci tries to squint her eyes to see the target through the scope but it is difficult for her and mostly she only sees blackness. She just pulls the trigger without seeing anything. When Tejas has said he can’t see the target her dad has sometimes yelled at him. She is not afraid of her dad but sometimes she doesn’t even feel like shooting the gun at the targets anymore.

Her brother is running to get a dead bird. She takes her hands from her ears just in time to hear the sound of shot dribbling onto the pond, a sound like throwing a handful of dirt into the water. One bird her father has killed is floating in the middle of the water. She doesn’t move. The bird will float to the side of the pond in about half an hour and then she will go and get it. She will put her bare toes into the slime of the pond where the cows drink. The pond is about half the size of a football field, and is the only place her father has to hunt birds at. When she is thirty her father will have his own land and will no longer hunt at this pond.

Even though her father is very tall he is afraid of her grandfather and never yells when he is in her grandfather’s house. One of her uncles has told her that when her mother and father were first married her father complained to some men at the general store about his new wife’s cooking. He told them she burnt the toast every morning. The next Sunday her grandfather talked to her father about telling stories about wives in public. She wishes she could have seen her father’s face. Even now her dad will tell her mom that she doesn’t have to scrape the black parts. He’ll tell her he’s even getting used to eating it that way. He won’t even grin until he turns and winks at Tejas and then he really will eat it.

Darci is throwing stones into the edge of the pond. She has asked permission to do this on other days. Her brother is trying to take the feathers off of his bird. Her brother is afraid he won’t “peel” the birds right. She doesn’t have to worry about the way she does the birds. She knows how to do it. Tejas will learn before he’s nine. Darci watches how Tejas’ small fingers struggle with the bird. He is blond like her mother but Darci’s hair is too brown and waves around her ears like old corn silk.

Once in the boxing ring in their back yard her father had made Tejas fight her. Her father had been giving boxing lessons to high school boys. The boys didn’t have shirts on. She was nearly frightened when she looked at their naked bellybuttons. Her father would spend hours counting out combinations while the boys hit at his hands or at one of the punching bags. He would count out these combinations — right, right, left, left, left, left — and he wouldn’t ever yell at the boys.

The day he made her fight Tejas she told him she didn’t want to fight. She told him more than once but he strung a pair of gloves on her. Tejas was happy to put on the gloves. Her father’s friend said he’d give a dime to the winner. She and Tejas met in the middle of the ring and touched gloves. The highschool boys stood outside the ropes. She couldn’t see them from the waist down because the ring was high off the ground. Her father’s friend was bouncing around the ring like the referees did at the Golden Gloves meets in San Angelo. The highschool boys were quiet.

Her father told her not to be a sissy. Her brother was trying to hit her so she closed her eyes. Her father was yelling her name in a loud voice. She opened
her eyes. She put her hands over her face. Her father told her to hit him. She realized her brother’s arms weren’t long enough to hit her if she held out her arms. She started hitting him over the head. Her father yelled that she was hitting like a damn baby. She saw one high school boy grinning. Her dad yelled for her to hit him straight on. Tejas moved backwards. She never saw her dad. She started hitting Tejas on the head. Tejas moved back to the ropes. She aimed the heavy glove on her right hand for Tejas’ nose. Her brother ducked and as he did she hit him. He slipped and fell between the ropes and out of the ring. He was crying. He had blood on his face. Boys were picking him up. Darci was crying. She was alone in the ring. After they took off her gloves someone put a dime inside her fist. She saw her dad put a dime inside her brother’s hand.

In San Angelo they give an award for good sportsmanship in the name of her father at the regional Golden Gloves Meets. Darci doesn’t like to think of her father hitting anyone but even when she is older she’ll remember his voice counting out combinations to those high school boys.

Two birds have flown over and her dad has killed both of them. He tells her which one she should get. Her brother runs after the other. Her bird is over the rise of the tank, out of her dad’s sight. He tells her he will not shoot again until she returns. She goes over the rise and looks at the tall grass on the other side. She hopes the bird will be flapping so she can find it quickly. She is afraid of this grass. The sun has been warm and there might be rattlesnakes. It is getting darker and they will be hard to see.

Not far from this pond her grandfather and grandmother and her uncle and dad gassed out a den of rattlesnakes less than a year ago. She was inside the pickup. Her grandfather poured gasoline into the hole. The other three stood at another hole where they expected the snakes to crawl out. The men kept looking behind them. Darci decided to roll up the windows. She checked the floorboard for holes. She lifted her feet. She was almost too sick to look out the pickup window.

Her grandfather finished pouring the gasoline. Her grandmother told her father not to get excited and shoot a snake until it was completely out of the hole. She said this more than once. The first snake was coming out of the hole. Darci could see its head but then her uncle blocked her view.

All three grownups backed away from the hole. She saw her grandfather’s shoulders jerk. It seemed right that she would be the first to kill a snake. The men backed further away. Her uncle is always shouting in her memory that another is coming. Her father’s wrist seems to be shaking but she saw his finger pull at the trigger of his gun.

Darci finds the bird quite by accident. She looks down at the ground to avoid stepping into cow manure. In the middle of the large pile is the dead bird. It’s head is in the fresh mush. She thinks about telling her dad that she couldn’t find the bird but something makes her reach down and pull the bird out by the tail feathers.

Next year her uncle will catch some live rattlesnakes and will keep them in a concrete tank that is five feet tall and empty of everything but his snakes and the snakes’ toys: cloth balls, coiled wire, and rocks. After the snakes die and are taken away Darci and her cousins will dare each other to walk down into that tank. Before she goes she will check her hands and feet for cuts. She will check her shoes to make sure they don’t have holes. She’s afraid old poison will
seep into her body. When she’s sure she’s safe she’ll crawl into the tank and stand in the middle of it. She will stand there and practice not shuddering, of not being afraid, like her dad is not afraid.

She pulls off the head of the bird and then wipes the rest of the bird and her hands in the dry grass. She climbs up the rise of the pond and waves her hand in a big arc at her dad. He waves back. His body moves forward as he spits at the two rocks. She runs back behind him, sits down, and quickly pulls the breast away from the bird. She puts the naked breast on top of the others. She walks near her dad and quietly gathers up the last empty shells and puts them in the pile.

When the shooting is over she will pick up the empty shells and take them home. Then some night after her father has eaten all of his food, after he’s yelled at her or her brother for not eating or for not knowing how to wash their faces or for making so much noise, after he’s yelled at her mom by the porcelain sink, he will go outside and reload these shells. He is never happy when he goes to his loading room but when he is finished, when he comes back into the house, he is able to hug her and Tejas goodnight. He is able to tell them stories about rabbits and squirrels who can talk. Tejas is puzzled by the funny stories after the yelling. But Darci has seen her father push the piece of metal on the loader that allows just the right amount of shot to fall into the empty casing. She has sat with him for hours without talking, just watching him move everything in the same order, over and over, like boxing combinations. She knows her dad will be able to hug her goodnight after the loading room.

Before the hunting day is finished there are more birds and more shots. They go home late and Darci’s mother has peas and venison waiting for them. Her father kisses her mother on the mouth. Darci and Tejas laugh as they use hot water to wash the blood and feathers off of their cold hands. After they finish their supper her mother asks her if perhaps girls her age shouldn’t go hunting so often with their dads. Darci stares at the sink behind her mother and thinks that she will always want to go bird hunting with her dad.

She will remember all of this very clearly when she is thirty and she brings her own daughter over to her parents’ new house and as her father takes off his nice suit coat in order to play with his granddaughter. She will recall sitting under the mesquite tree and realizing there was a stillness that settled on the pond at dusk that even the sound of shotguns couldn’t disturb. And she’ll remember standing on the rise of the pond and waving at her father.