

# GUNS

JOHN STRULOEFF

Where I grew up, maybe the phrase *going off half-cocked* made so much sense to us because all of us owned guns, even those who were legally barred from possessing them. For those of you who don't understand what it's like to live in a gun community like mine in the coastal northwest tip of Oregon, I can tell you more than you need to know. I have been shot and shot at, have known others who were shot, who shot at, who went to prison for shooting, who were threatened by guns, who had their homes and vehicles shot, and I've owned guns, shot guns, thought of shooting guns, fantasized about shooting guns, once was even begging a friend to give me his gun so I could shoot someone who was trying to stab someone. I have heard thousands of gunshots in the distance in my lifetime. Once, when I was sixteen, I even spent a good part of an evening cutting shotgun pellets out of the back of a friend's father who was a felon and afraid he'd go back to prison for being shot if he went to a hospital to remove them. We celebrated New Year's Eve back home by shooting pistols and shotguns and rifles and automatic weapons at the pale moon without regard for where those rounds would land. Boys in high school would show up

after Christmas with their new rifles and shotguns  
in the backs of their cabs, and we'd gather around  
at lunchtime to admire them as we sipped  
our Mountain Dews from the vending machines.  
It was an excused absence in my grade school  
to miss a week each autumn so we could  
join our families in the hunt to shoot animals.  
I've seen birds shot, elk and deer, beaver,  
moles (by a 12-gauge shotgun at point blank),  
possum, nutria, bullfrogs, raccoon, rats, squirrels,  
cats, dogs, cows, calves, puppies, bear. In fact,  
I'm unsure I can think of an animal back home  
I haven't seen shot. I knew a thirteen-year-old boy  
who stole his grandfather's pistol so he could quick-draw  
at the gravel pit. The last round went through his leg.  
When I was twelve, I found a loaded revolver  
in a friend's front yard in the middle of a nearby town.  
No one was home. I held its weight in my hand and thought  
about bringing it home and hiding it under my bed.  
At this point, I bet you're unsure whether or not  
I'm going to tell you about shooting myself.  
You're beginning to see my point.  
That same year I was given my first rifle.  
Two years earlier, I was given a BB gun and shot  
five thousand BBs the first month because I was bored.  
If you think this is just an Oregon thing, you'd be wrong.  
I've shot thousands of rounds of ammunition.  
I've known men who've shot that many every year  
since before I was born. I'm forty-eight years old.  
I have one memory – the circumstances of which  
I will not describe – where I nearly had a rifle  
round go through my skull, and it's the most disturbing  
memory of my life. And I've seen some terrible shit.  
My earliest memory of guns was when I was seven  
and my father propped me up at the picnic table,

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where all us kids ate our barbecue burgers each summer,  
and had me hold a 30.06 to my shoulder.  
I still remember how it felt like a log in my hands.  
He pressed his palms against my ears, because  
he knew I was sensitive to loud noises, and told me,  
*Just press your finger against the trigger.*  
I did. The explosion and pain in my shoulder  
made me think I'd been shot. My dad lifted me  
from where I'd fallen, and he laughed.  
This was the same caliber of rifle he'd used  
as a Marine on the front lines of Korea, except  
in the war his was fully automatic. He was seventeen  
when he signed up and had been shooting that caliber  
every year until the year he died at age seventy-six.  
With all this said, I'm one of the least experienced  
with guns in my hometown, in part because I've spent  
the last two decades trying to avoid them. But they're there.  
Believe me. And I shouldn't be astonished when people say,  
*I've really been thinking of moving out of the city,  
out to somewhere quiet like this. Just too many gangs  
and shootings where I live. You see it all the time  
in the news.* And I nod, unsure how to tell them  
that in their part of the city the news reports are distant,  
but out here, you'll hear a gunshot so close to you,  
with all the other houses so far away, that  
it will seem impossible that that round was meant  
for anyone but you.