

## Armed

by James McKean

“I love guns, especially well-made pistols and revolvers,”

Andre Dubus—“Giving Up the Gun”

The blast struck me instantly stupid, ears ringing. My cheeks stung from powder burns and microscopic bits of lead. Why did I need to peer down the bright rifling? *Stupid*. My friend Terry, who had wanted to show me his new pistol—worried as he was about prowlers—stuck his head out from the kitchen, a half-made sandwich in hand. “Didn’t I tell you it was loaded?”

I couldn’t talk, haunted by the image of a .22 slug traveling through my eye. At least I’d turned the barrel up before I touched the trigger. I shook my head and pointed at his knotty pine ceiling. When I think back, the muzzle blast slaps my face again. Listen up, listen up, it says, you’re still capable of thought and by the way, what were you thinking?

Dumb luck convinced me to rethink my relationship to guns. I’m still convinced it was a good idea to disarm my mother-in-law, for example, sequestering her .38 Smith and Wesson snub-nosed revolver and the far more dangerous .32 Browning automatic that her grandson thought she needed for self-protection. He gave it to her a few years after she had been widowed and was living alone. She was eighty-six. As instructed, she kept her guns under the vacant pillow next to her at night. I’m not sure her grandson, well-meaning perhaps and enthusiastic certainly, had thought this self-defense reasoning all the way through.

“I stored your guns in a safe place.” I told her. “We can go shoot stuff any time you’d like.” What I didn’t mention is that given her macular degeneration she had a better chance of shooting her own foot hiding beneath the sheets or me late one morning or one of her grandkids, who in their most inquisitive moments just might discover the means to shoot themselves.

At the time, my arguments seemed sound but they're not the whole story. My mother-in-law has been gone for many years, having lived seven more years after her disarming, first with us, then in an assisted living apartment, and at the end in a nursing/hospice care facility, which indeed posted a no firearms policy at the front door.

Now, I realize that I coveted those weapons. I could build a case for taking them, but her snub-nosed .38 in my left hand and six corroded shells in my right charmed me by their legacy as well as their heft. Licensed to carry this gun, my father-in-law thought he needed to protect himself, a businessman who fought against unions striking the newspaper he ran during the 1950s and 1960s, who suffered from hostile opinions aimed at him and on occasion, real death threats.

My fascination has to be more than simply acculturation. Scott Sanders says that “wherever it comes from—genes or movies, phallic fixation or the breeze—this hankering for guns seems to be as potent in young boys as the hankering for sex will be later on.” I grew up with guns. Not real guns, for my father had none, but toys, an arsenal of facsimiles: lever action popguns and wooden, rubber band pistols. Plastic revolvers with spring-loaded authentic looking bullets. Cap pistols in all degrees of realism, loaded with roll caps, single caps, or black cats stuck in the barrels around the 4th of July. I poured powder into a pipe, hit caps with a hammer or a rock, and when all else was lost or confiscated or run over in the driveway, a pointed finger and mouth noises had to do. Once, from Mickey Scott's cousin, I borrowed a BB gun with which I killed a robin with a blind shot between its eyes. Holding the warm, limp bird in my hand felt horrible. Another time Bruce Sarri and I found a real pistol stuffed between the couch cushions in his basement. It was magic even though someone had nipped the firing pin off. We knew plenty about guns and Gene Autry and John Wayne and Jim Arness, those heroes on T.V. and in the movies who carried Peacemakers in holsters, the bullets lined up like commandments in their belts.

I remember the carnival that set up one night in the vacant lot near the edge of North City. The next morning I stood next to the shooting gallery tent, where they used live ammo, .22 shorts, five shots at the metal ducks for a quarter. I looked all day along 15th Avenue for empty Coke and RC Cola bottles, redeemable for five cents apiece. When I found enough, I cashed them in at Ruland's store and paid my twenty-five cents

to shoot a rifle for real, heavy and oil-covered and smelling powder-acrid. The report rang in my ears. I'm not sure how many metal ducks I hit or if I knocked over the round spoon targets but I kept the brass casings, each with a nick in its rim.

If only I had as much enthusiasm for school. I knew about Colt 45s and the Buntline special, made famous by Wyatt Earp. I sent away for a life-size plastic Buntline replica model, waited forever, and glued the pieces together when the kit finally came and mounted it on my dresser disappointed only in its lack of heft. I studied a range of calibers from Howitzers to rim fire .22s, and noted rifling turns, powder types, magazine capability, and velocity. What I didn't understand was the devastation such weaponry could cause. Instead, I collected stories, mythological and local, awed by the danger and power inherent in lead and gunpowder. The gunfight at OK Corral defined cool headedness and heroics, and Natty Bumppo stood for great marksmanship, but my friend Skip's mishap with his dad's shotgun defined sheer power.

Maybe he still counts his blessings. Eleven at the time, with his parents out for the afternoon, Skip and a friend found his dad's pump 12-gauge shotgun in a closet. They took it to Skip's bedroom in case someone came home suddenly. They decided to hold it at the hip ready to fire like in the movies, first Skip and then his friend who pointed the shotgun toward Skip and said, "It's not loaded, right," just before it went off. Neither could hear after the blast nor see for the smoke and the atomized mattress stuffing and plaster from the wall behind the bed, sifting down now like snow from the ceiling. Skip had moved just in time.

They had a few hours before Skip's parents came home, so they mustered as much eleven-year-old industry and haste as possible: They propped up the bed's corner on pieces of two by four they found in the garage, sewed a towel around the end of the mattress, fixed the broken wall with wadded sheets of typing paper and a mixture of cream of wheat, emptying the box they found in the kitchen, swept up good, and returned the shotgun to the closet after ejecting the empty shell. So far so good. The next time Skip's mom tried to make the bed, however, the towel fell off and the wall slumped into a pile. Thus the occasion for a story. "And it better be good," she said.

What is it about such power that hypnotizes and impresses? When my friends in college covered their ears and shot a .32 revolver into the ceiling beam in their rented

bachelor pad and stood on a chair and dug out the slug to see the rifling and how the lead had been distorted, it was an amusing anecdote. So that's what happens, they seemed to conclude, as if the invisibly fast and powerful could be stopped and held. But when one of those guys fired his 300 magnum hunting rifle into the beam without thinking far enough ahead, the slug traveling through the beam, the floor in the bedroom above, the exterior wall and more than likely through the house next door into anybody's guess-where next, then we have the possibility of story, albeit a potentially tragic one.

I'm sure such stories are my vicarious forays into danger and power. Maybe the weapon itself, held in hand, serves as an artifact and prompt. You never have to fire a pistol to use it, but "if you feel the need to carry a gun, you need one everywhere," Andre Dubus says. And then of himself, "the territory of violence was in my imagination."

I do wonder, however, why such stories of guns and my imagination weren't enough for me. Why did I feel the need to buy a gun? As Sanders says, I traded in "the toys for the real things." My first was a Ruger .22 single six I bought in a sporting goods store in Moscow, Idaho. In 1964, I was going to school at Washington State University, and a friend drove me across the line to Moscow. The display case held Colt automatics, a variety of revolvers including the Ruger, with two cylinders, one for standard long rifle .22 shells and the other for magnums. No one asked any questions. I paid \$65 dollars and the vendor handed over the Ruger. Once home, I varnished its wooden grips, cocking the hammer over and over to hear that metallic ratchet click and watch the cylinder turn.

Perhaps the Ruger helped me feel more connected to my friend Aaron, back only a year from Vietnam. I remember he asked me to call him "Sarge," but I felt uncomfortable with that, though that had been his rank. We sat in Aaron's apartment in Pullman, WA, Aaron snipping a few leaves from the cannabis plant growing behind a curtain on his windowsill. "I've already dried a few," he said, pasting together two Zig-Zag papers and rolling us a joint. "I used to ship weed home from Nam in film canisters," he said. "Grew this plant from some of the seeds."

Both Aaron and I enrolled at Washington State in 1964, but I lost track of him after he had dropped out to enlist for Vietnam. Now he was back in school, healed up he said, at least physically. He'd been a great athlete, but that was out, given the mobility problem with his right arm. "I'd never been in better shape," he said, "than when I was in Vietnam,"

and showed me a picture of himself with his helmet on, cocked to one side, staring at the camera, sleeves rolled, M-16 set on one hip.

Not long after our reunion, I bought another Ruger single six, this time a .357 magnum, power enough, I thought, to help me feel worthy to hear his stories, to sympathize, to comprehend, to get even the faintest idea. That weapon put me in harm's way by accident. Aaron loved to go shooting, and one day at the dump, we loaded the big Ruger with .357 wadcutters and took aim at a junked washing machine for no other reason than to hear the rounds go off and to feel the recoil up through our arms and into our shoulders and watch the sheet metal pock with holes. He and I took turns, standing side by side, two shots apiece. For the final two, I aimed for a grey spot at the back of the machine and pulled the trigger. As if no time elapsed after the report, an angry supersonic hornet snapped by my ear, inches from Aaron's head and mine. "What was that," I said, lowering the revolver.

"That was you," he said.

We walked over to the washing machine and could see that the gray spot was a half-round metal plug, maybe an inch and half in diameter and dish shaped, perfect for a 180-degree ricochet.

"That could have killed us," I said, grasping the obvious, shaken, my ears still ringing.

"Let me tell you about misses," Aaron said later when I brought up the errant wadcutter, and he proceeded to explain how he had been humping on a jungle trail and his squad had come across fresh dirt that led to a side trail. One of his men said "Hey, Sarge, I'm going to take a look," but Aaron said no too late. The soldier hadn't walked ten paces before someone shot him. He was yelling which meant the squad had to go get him. Then the air exploded. Aaron tried to hide behind a rock no bigger than a volleyball. The noise was awful. He lifted his rifle with both arms over his head and fired bursts into the jungle. Until something blew his helmet off, and the blood filled his eyes. Aaron said he reached up to find a hole in his forehead. Sure he was going to die, he waited to find out what was coming next, the firefight still hot. But nothing happened. Get the hell out of there was his next thought and he started crawling backwards down the shallow incline

as low as he could until something kicked him in the right shoulder and he plopped flat, all feeling in his right arm gone.

“Did someone drag you out?” I asked.

“No, I was just scooting back as far as I could, dragging my arm. By that time someone had called support and the VC took off. They had been bunkered at the end of that little trail and shot my guy to get us to come down there and we did.”

“What hit you?”

“A grenade first, I assume. Blew a hole in my skull. They had to put a plate in, but that took some time so I had a soft spot in my forehead like a baby for a while. Had to be careful. My arm was probably an AK-47 round. Someone missed.”

“Missed?” He had shown me pictures of the splint and bandaging of his arm, explaining how the bullet had entered the front of his right shoulder and exited the back of his arm, breaking the bone cleanly.

“Think about it. The VC were directly in front of us. I was backing out rear end first. What they would see is the top of my head getting smaller, and I’m sure that was the target. Whoever fired aimed a little left; nicked my ear maybe, and the slug went through my arm. Missed my head. Something like the dump?”

“Not sure about that,” I said.

We had many conversations. We played the blues and Neal Young on the reel to reel he brought home from Japan; we smoked dope. I listened mostly.

“It’s hard to fathom what you went through,” I’d tell him. He moved to Australia to teach and to be close to his girlfriend whom he had met in Australia on one of his R and R leaves from Vietnam. When they married and moved back to Washington, both to teach in middle school, Aaron took up target shooting as a hobby, using special single-shot handguns designed to fire rifle rounds. He reloaded his own shells, tracked competitions, and started woodworking because they had three kids in quick succession. He wanted to make them toys.

Maybe kids do the disarming. I’m not sure Aaron kept up his gun hobby. I have heard he is the librarian at a middle school, a place where guns are safe between the pages and shelved. When my wife and I had a baby girl, a .357 magnum Ruger in the house felt like an intruder, bad company. Maybe I was just growing older or up, a course

having children expedites. Maybe the fate of the bartender at the Ranch bar in Kennewick, WA, convinced me. He knew me and laughed at my lame jokes. Stopping by one Wednesday afternoon, I was surprised he wasn't there because he usually worked weekdays. I asked the woman behind the bar, his sub I presumed, "Where's Matt today?"

"Haven't you heard?" the woman said. "Hunting accident. Shot by his son. His own damn fault, I'd say"

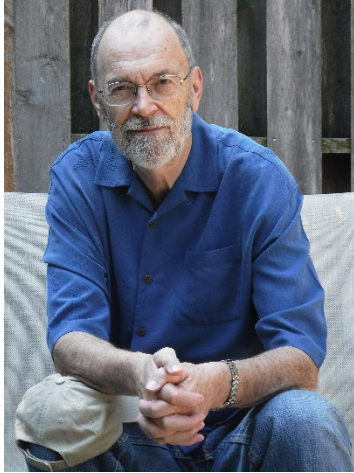
She was angry, and when I asked around, I heard that Matt had taken his twelve-year-old son duck hunting, a blind on the Snake River. Maybe the twelve-gauge semi-automatic was too much to handle because the recoil knocked the kid back, and he brought the shotgun down as he fell and squeezed off another shot by accident into the side of his dad's head.

How does a twelve-year-old replay that story the rest of his life?

I don't know. I chose not to go back to the Ranch bar, having no answers. I stopped riding motorcycles because my own imagination began to frighten me. We moved to Iowa to go to school and find employment. I worked harder at being reasonable and raising a family. Still, the Glocks, the .40 caliber Berettas, the Colts lined up in the display case at Fin and Feather, the local sporting goods store in Iowa City, drew my attraction. Did my daughter growing up and getting married change my concern for safety? My need to indulge? Or did these weapons represent an oversimplified answer to a complicated and ambiguous and sometimes threatening world? After a dustup when he aimed his gun at a young man, Andre Dubus said, "I had no conflict, because I had only one choice. Now I wanted more choices." Choices take time, thought, and faith in a future, and come to think of it, "gun play" seems like a contradiction in terms.

I still own my first Ruger .22 single six and my father-in-law's snub-nosed .38, though they have been locked in a friend's gun safe in Kennewick, WA, for thirty years. On several occasions, he offered to send them to me after we moved to Iowa, a state that has since greatly relaxed its restrictions for toting a gun. But even years ago, all I needed for an Iowa concealed-carry permit was to apply at the Sheriff's office. The application form asked for my name, where I lived, if I had a criminal record, if I'd had firearm training, and whether or not I considered myself a sane person. I felt safe with those questions.

The problem lay with the form's space for "Reason for Application." The more I thought about it, nothing seemed to fit.



**James McKean** has published three books of poems, *Headlong*, *Tree of Heaven*, and *We Are the Bus*; and two book of essays, *Home Stand: Growing Up in Sports* and *Bound*. His prizes include a Great Lakes Colleges Association's New Writer Award in Poetry, an Iowa Poetry Prize, The X.J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, and essays reprinted in issues of *Best American Sports Writing* and the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*. A Professor Emeritus at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, IA, he still teaches for the low residency M.F.A. program at Queens University in Charlotte, NC, The Tinker Mountain Writers' Workshop at Hollins University in Roanoke, VA, and The Iowa Summer Writing Festival in Iowa City.