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Adrian Consett Stephen Memorial Prize

All I could think about was the cold, the cold had come on too early this year; not even winter and it was in my bones, and I was thinking about the cold and the Gun. We were walking down the street at about midnight, and we were approaching the brightly lit square, and I could see a few people blurred against the light and I could see the piles of woodchip and garbage bags and milk-crates collapsing on the footpath and I could see my breath before me and I could see the neon cross hovering next to the moon and I was thinking about the cold and the Gun.

I thought:

- and why didn't he get rid of it sooner and why did he even bring it back, none of us were interested or ever interested and the stupid grin when he whipped 'er out and those other stupid fucks just couldn't help themselves, even now when they see the gun they think it's pretty good, pretty good and (don't you think you thought the gun was pretty good, pretty good: you did your best nonchalant holding of the gun, everyone liked the gun and we were all having fun trying to pretend to look stupid but eyes flicking to the glass for the reflection just hoping we'd look good with the gun by accident, just looking pretty good, pretty good) – (with the gun) – but maybe it was just you with the gun maybe nobody else was grinning about the gun just lazy resignation and maybe it was you that egged him on and liked the gun and maybe none of them liked the gun, the gnu, the nug – but you were smiling just like them and you weren't happy at all about the gun and you were pissed off, they shouldn't have egged him on with the gun –

The Gun.

It was some kind of symbol of brute, anachronistic power: never had the lineage between club and rifle been as pronounced as when I saw the Gun: its genealogy blistered from it, all threat and weight and blunt. Not so heavy, but weight. It's vacant hollow eye that seemed to tremble with promise, its first wink to me as X unwrapped the clothes he had swaddled around it. It took some time to see it, first unwrapping. First it was just a shape and nobody knew it was and then, "Heeeey – what that - "

"Wah, where'd come from?"

"Wha i' it?"

"...a Gun." And then I knew, and I twitched in my seat: "Ged't away from, don't point the gun at me. Where'dt come from?"

The others were all reaching for the Gun. I me had never seen a gun like this. I had seen the guns on the television and in the movies but they were Nothing against this: they were merely rancid, unconscious death, given to Nothing by Nothing. Sprays of bullets were nothing more than antiseptic. The Gun was brutal and club-like. The Gun could not kill with a hail of leaden fury or nonchalant one-liners but as a club only, even from a distance, the hot wet *thuk* of lead would be enough to posit He or She firing, standing over the corpse with animalistic back-splatter and abandon. When Victor was enlisted or conscripted or signed himself up (spurned on by the desire to be *tested*, to be *tested* [but at the same time *I don't wanna go I don't wanna go*] but that's the test) he stood and said: "I'll gi-back to this cunt-tree what this cunt-tree gave to me" – and a week later he had shot himself (passed the test): but yes, even then, Victor (I remember seeing Victor beneath the blue cross at the ecclesiastical markets examining, all anthropological-like, some rosaries, but he) didn't have a *Gun*, not a *Gun*; he just had the army in his hands, he was just holding himself like a soldier, he didn't have a Gun. Even the cops that are standing beneath the blue cross looking at their breath steaming towards the church, even they don't have Gun: their holsters are holding Nothing, just Cop, or Copper, dull holstered gun.

Only we got the Gun.

After we had all had a good hold of it and a good pose with it and a good look addit someone asked X where "Y' got it, the farm, yeah?" – X's old farm up Qld, where the guns all got

passed over in the amnesty (oh, they came outta the woodwork that day, X told us, he said: “It looked like a local militia turned up lining up outside the copshop. If ever theyda decided, that day, that they din wanna get ridda their guns, if the tide had just turned and some chewing squinting ingrate had just said ‘Waida minnit...’ – the Chinese Whispers woulda just taken it back the line of soon to be dispossessed gun-owners and by the time the last man heard about the dissent it’d be a call to rise up against the coppers and see what their Not-Gun could do against these Guns, so many Guns...but everyone handed them in.”

“So where’dt come from?”

“There was always gonna be some slipped through the net. The amnesty gave some people some money but it certainly didn’t give anyone any guns. We heard rifle cracks coming over the hills the next day but we didn’t keep our guns.

“We didn’t mean to keep this Gun I don’t think, not u(nless someone was hiding it? Maybe that was it – maybe the old boy was hiding it, but I don’t think so) because it was just lying in the field next to an old log, the kinda place you’d leave it maybe? But I dunno, would you leave it there, maybe? Maybe the old boy did wanna keep’t or maybe it wasn’t even ours, I don’t ever remember seeing it, seeing it when I was little. Before the amnesty, ah, no, I don’t know where it’s from, but I found it next to some old stump and the grass had grown over it but snot that old.”

I know I was thinking *Bullets?* but I was also thinking about why the hell he brought it back and *how* the hell he brought it back and whatshd we dowitht. And I could see some silent jerk, a silhouette of shadow creeping over some sleeping body or maybe training it through mosquito netting and holding the Gun up inth firing position and speering down the barrel and then (last minute) turning it around and *whack whack whack*, like an axe. And I knew I wanted the Gun outta the hous’an somewhere else, but; hey – I was holding the Gun while I thought it; one leg crossed on another and the barrel just twitching up and down as I twitched and my finger was even on the trigger as X said:

“Hey but careful it’s loaded.”

And I said “Jesus why didn’t you tell me,” lifting it down and slamming the butt on the floor in my haste: gritted teeth until it seems like it *won’t* fire (sorry to them sleeping upstairs cos those ceilings is awful mouldy an thin) / and X said: “Sorry. It probably won’t fire. It’s not that it’s loaded, there’s a bullet jammed. Have a look down - ” - he grabs the barrel and squints down it, the naked eye.

“You’re right”, and I click it open hoping it looks natural and cool and he’s right: there’s a bullet jammed. “It probably won’t fire”, he says again, (he was wrong). X shows us some other Gun-paraphernalia, first I think *Oh man he’s got more* but it’s just an empty box of blanks, but it’s an ancient product and compliments Gun well, a mean, Rat Poison look to it, chemicals dispensed then thought better of. X is clicking the trigger and trying to shift the hammer and someone’s laughing, *huh huh*, but he doesn’t quite want to make the joke, not while the barrel is winking at him and X is saying “I think I can almost budge’t”.

When they buried Victor under the blue cross I was speaking to his mother, who seemed dried up and unsure and told us what Victor had told her (and her dead the next year and that’s the end of that), but she told it how she had heard it and how we heard it: through a white hot lens and a thick, plated glass, with some unfocused conglomeration of *battle* behind it, somewhere – ten thousand slashing limbs, each of them Dirty Harry or Napoleon or Aeneas or any other old hack, but centre stage, coming into focus beneath the spotlight (amidst yer rivers of blood and guts and etc.) – some particulars of warfare, guns blazing in unity and amnesty, these wicked bullets of oppression and liberation; rifles reduced to mere fetish object. Some body is hit and from the little wound is a springloaded ribcage, curling out into nothing and tearing the torso open. And on they march, these soldiers with their guns. Mere, lifeless warfare!...just the puny throes of death and suffering and camaraderie

and triumph. I could barely see the screen for how the light bounced against it. I saw Victor almost ritualistic, sat up against a crumbling wall choking to death on his wound.

Thinking about that now it seems like Victor would have learnt a lot from examining the Gun. If only he had got to see the real thing. It went from hand to hand, resting a little while and motions getting exaggerated and then relaxing into a slim cold ice melancholia relaxed actions sneering sitting back with Gun. Every one of us was born holding the Gun. And now we've reached the end of the street and I can feel it against my leg, dead and lifeless, just some old gun. We had reached the end of the street before I had noticed anyone there. All I could think about was the Gun. It was hard when we realised that the Gun was going to die. It was one thing seeing it all old and rusted up because it was stately, it was dignified and powerful and the rust was nothing but battle-scars, crouched out in cold nights with the barrel tapping tapping against the ground, frost-bitten fingers primed to pull the trigger: but then that jammed bullet. The end of an era; still stately, powerful – but numbered days, no longer an endless potentiality of harsh cracking gunshots but a single sprung power, without even the shivering frost-bitten fingers to command it. It had hibernated beneath rain and frozen ground and sweating sun and now its power could no longer be contained, could no longer be stoppered; it was rising Vesuvius to meet the eye at the end of the barrel.

We'd been thinking:

- quick stop at the petrol station, try out some robbing maybe to the bank maybe just re-enact some kidnapping maybe we can do it right here maybe (“I think I got it gimme a bitta wire”, X) maybe give it to me to hold but “I gotta just jammit here” nah, give it to me to hold quick stop at the petrol station, and I'm thinking *Gun, Gun, Gun*, I wish we could get the gun outta here but not until we've held the Gun for a bit longer and

- “I think I've...”

- and there's a bit of a loud noise and some kind of flash, predictably. Now I'm saying *gimme't for a minute. Fuckin' thing* and X is saying “Oh” but someone else says “Nah gimme the Gun for a minute - ”

- and then we smell the smoke slightly too acrid and if I were to turn my heads there'd be someone slammed up against the wall going limp then stiff and trickling down their neck and down their chest and to their seat and arms still outstretched, and jaw: Jaw broken but still wrenched open and if only they could speak they'd say:

“Lemme hold the gun”.

But flicking eyes back and X holding it gingerly, altar-like, clear at last and still a slight curl of smoke: like the soul leaving or the Pope up the chimney or... (but Gun is just a gun, lying hollow and lifeless and all potential sent through its final salutation and) the smoke gone, leaving just the smell and the smell of blood and the smell of piss and X fiddling a little piece of wire (old coathanger) round the hammer and saying, “Wellllllll... – and a final gargle from the other side of the room, already fallen into a dim half light...

And I can't help but feel the gun against my leg and thinking oh Gun, oh Gun: and the tears start to roll down my eyes as I see it dead, lifeless, just another gun with another bloody head notched in between the rust and the grime and the stuck and the suck, thinking Gun, Gun, Gun.