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## GUNLAND

**Inspired by his late father's antique pistol, author, urbanite, firearm novice (and skeptic) Eli Gottlieb traveled through Colorado to figure out why guns still hold such fascination.**

When last holiday season rolled around, my 12-year-old stepson had his gift wish list already prepared. Long in the making, it was enriched with lengthy footnotes and lovingly detailed illustrations. I was struck by the fact that he'd invest as much time and feeling in this list as in any school project of his I'd even seen. My stepson is a sensitive child who is deeply interested in animal rights and global justice. He fears loud noises and speaks lovingly to our dog in complete sentences. He is in nearly every way an age-appropriate 12-year-old American boy. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that all the items on his wish list were guns.

These weren't the colorful, cartoonish toy guns of my childhood, however. No, he was requesting an arsenal of something called "airsoft" guns. Apparently, in the last dozen or so years, pellet- and BB-gun manufacturers have cashed in on Americans' passion for guns by producing pellet versions of real weapons, just for kids. These companies market directly to your children by exploiting their developmental weaknesses; they've helped create a culture in which a six-year-old child covets a plastic Uzi submachine gun realistic down to the bolts and screws on the stock. An orange ring on the front of the gun barrel is all that distinguishes the weapon as a toy—and all that stands between children and their misidentification by police as gun-toting delinquents. Sales, insofar as they can be quantified, are strong. The question begs to be asked: How have we come to this pass, America?

In truth, our country was born to the sound of gunfire, and that original click of firing pin on explosive charge has been part of the intrinsic American soundtrack ever since. If we are today the most armed country on earth—with the poverty-stricken nation of Yemen running a distant second in per capita civilian gun ownership—it's partly because of how deeply we've internalized the frontier mythology. Looked at from Europe or Asia, our American obsession with weaponry and the free flow of it can seem passing strange, if not outright bizarre. "What do you guys want?" asks the average Italian or Japanese citizen, when reading of the latest congressional refusal to reinstate the assault weapons ban. Isn't it enough that your country is already armed to the teeth? That you have more prisoners per capita than anyone else? That the rate of homicides in your gun-choked nation is higher than most other industrialized democracies in the world, and is only surpassed by lovely havens of tranquility like Colombia and El Salvador?

Such discussions, if they involve American citizens, often quickly become shouting matches, because guns inflame passions with a vehemence unique to themselves—and for good reason: Unlike global warming or the flat tax, the repercussions of gun policy have distinct and dramatically individual consequences. By law, you're either able to hold a deadly weapon in your hand or not; you either can or cannot carry a gun in your purse, your car, or your luggage; and depending on a range of secondary circumstances, you either can or cannot legally use one to make somebody dead. A gun homicide occurs in America about every 20 minutes, and six out of 10 suicides are

committed with firearms. For too many people, in the words of former Denver Post columnist Jim Spencer, "Muzzle flash constitutes conflict resolution."

It's no accident that a Coloradan conceived that pithy formulation. Coloradans have a visceral, longstanding relationship with guns. Large parts of the country, of course, are filled with hunters eagerly firing away at flying, flapping, and sprinting things, but to that Colorado adds its pedigreed frontier heritage, on the one hand, and an event called Columbine, on the other. The result is a place that offers a unique—and uniquely revealing—window into the stormy, ever-raw battle over gun use and ownership.

By way of full disclosure, I should explain that, unusually for someone with my background (Jewish, New York), I grew up in a home with a firearm, principally because my father belonged to that generation of men for whom liberal social principles did not preclude the use of deadly force when necessary. His Beretta pistol, brought back after his discharge from the Army Air Corps in 1945, sat unshot in his dresser drawer throughout my childhood, broadcasting a thrilling, faintly dangerous adult music. Upon his death, I overcame my instinctual adult distaste for guns and decided that it was important that I learn to use and shoot his pistol as an homage to him, and because I was now living in Colorado. In the process, somewhat unwillingly, I began a long, loud voyage through our state's version of the place I call Gunland.

**"Up here," says my friend** Patrick Wroblewski, wrestling his Chevy 4x4 over a particularly large rock, "is where we're going." We've been on the road out of Boulder about a half hour and have been steadily climbing off-road for the last few minutes. We fishtail suddenly into a mountain clearing where several pickups are parked in scattered formation on the grass. The vibe is of a casual party, with people standing around in small groups chatting. Girls are sitting on lawn chairs sipping drinks, and there seems to be much laughter among this group of well-groomed twentysomethings. The wholesome atmosphere underlines the paradox: Every single person is here to shoot.

"What you using?" One of the guys has come over to our truck before we've even gotten out, curious about our weaponry. As a novice to firearms (it will be my very first day shooting), I am thereby introduced to a fundamental tenet of gun use: clubbiness. Possession of a firearm entitles you, apparently, to instant membership in a worldview whose politics may range right and left but whose fundamental outlook on guns is rock solid: We want more of them. We want to talk about them, ogle them, and heft them in our hands. We want to live in the dream of omnipotence their purchase confers on us. And leaving that dream for reality now and again, we want to buy bullets for them and shoot those bullets into targets a lot, and if necessary, when the occasion calls for it, into people.

Paradox abounds in Gunland, and my friend Patrick is a perfect example of how gun owners refuse to conform to type. He's a bodyworker specialized in the kind of deep-tissue massage called Rolfing, which requires a kind of Zenlike purity of mind to practice well. He hails from Boulder, whose denizens are typically more comfortable hugging trees than shredding them with firearms. And with his shades, d'Artagnan beard, and chiseled bones, Patrick owns the kind of patent visual cool you see on alt-rock front men. So why is this guy holding a death-dealing piece of machinery called a Glock .45?

Short answer: the better to worry less in life. While living in a trailer in New Mexico, he woke one night to a ransacking intruder. "There I am, sleeping buck naked, and the sum total of my personal protection is a water bottle on the night table," he recalls. Determined never to repeat the experience, he went to a gun shop, where a clerk pointed him toward something with "real stopping power."

But isn't there something else at work here, I ask, beyond personal protection?

"Of course," he says. "At a primal level, guys still measure themselves with physical power, right? And in that arena, let's face it, a gun is a trump card. Plus, learning about guns, how to be with them and use them, took a layer of anxiety out of me. Guns used to be an unknown. And so much emotional judgment is based in the unknown. I now feel safer as a person, on several levels."

We step onto the field—one of several such ranges near Boulder that have sprung up in semi-clandestine fashion due to the restriction of places to shoot along the Front Range. The blogosphere is filled with Colorado target shooters complaining about the lack of open space in which to practice their sport. The result is these somewhat makeshift venues, which open up and then, as often as not, are soon shut down by the Colorado or U.S. Forest Service. For those interested in legal "plinking," as target practice is known, the pickings are pretty slim. The Boulder Rifle Club typically has a waiting list of seven years.

As we begin walking to the range—a distant, high hill—I can already hear the gut-deep whomp of high-performance rifles. I'm nervous not only because I'm about to fire a handgun for the first time, but also because it's my beloved father's gun, and the fact seems suddenly significant. I heft the Beretta in my hand and follow Patrick up the trail to the range.

**If there's a single boy of historic myth** that's been used effectively to sell guns, to hush the fears of people on the coasts about the use of guns, and to elevate target practice into something more than humping bullets into a mountainside, it's that which has grown up around our dearest national icon, the High Plains cowboy. The enduring popularity of that gentleman, in turn, owes much of his status to the man who can truly be said to be one of the Founding Fathers of firearms in America: the buckskinned sharpshooter and showman known as Buffalo Bill Cody.

William F. Cody was probably America's first superstar. Coming of age in that moment when the frontier was fast disappearing, he cannily rode the confluence of nostalgia for a vanishing way of life, nascent mass culture, and the newfangled invention called the railroad into a touring pop phenomenon that would put Madonna in the shade. His Wild West shows, replete with expert shooting, horsemanship, and the staging of mock Indian attacks, galvanized a country needing distraction from the aftermath of the Civil War. At the height of his success, he was the most famous man in America. Because he was an American, however, he was other things as well: a relentless self-promoter, a fibber and teller of tall tales, and, most significantly for the purposes of understanding America's love of guns, one of the first commercially branded public icons in our country's history and the forerunner of every Nike athlete endorsement since. The Winchester Rifle Company saw money in Buffalo Bill, and Buffalo Bill saw the same in Winchester, and by fusing their identities they made piles of money together. To buy a Winchester or Remington rifle today is like buying a blue chip piece of the frontier itself, and much of the credit for that symbolism goes

back to that original understanding between the savvy, affable Mr. William F. Cody and the gunmakers of his time.

Cody's bones today rest in a peaceful spot in Golden called Lookout Mountain, on a hill overlooking Denver. A museum and gift shop have sprouted up nearby, and together make for one of the more popular tourist destinations in the area. The director of the museum, an ebullient man named Steve Friesen, cheerfully admits, "I've never fired a gun in my life." He shows me around the facility's carefully tended glass cases of rifles and artistic renderings of frontier life while explaining that, "For us, the Old West is what the Knights of the Round Table were for the English: a place of mythical origins. And in America, much of that can be traced to Buffalo Bill. As for Colorado, it seems to occupy the very center of that Old West mythology. Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma are equally part of the Old West, but for some reason Colorado gets pride of place."

Nearby, a paved path leads to Cody's tomb, which contains his mortal remains and, fittingly for a man who so fluently embroidered the truth, a lingering dispute. At the time of his death, his family was bitterly divided over where he should be buried. The feelings around the conflict still swirl so powerfully that there are those in Cody, Wyoming—a town founded by him, where the rival Buffalo Bill Historical Center resides—who believe the tomb in Golden contains the bones of an imposter. Whether that's true or not, one thing's beyond dispute: Lookout Mountain, which at the time of his burial was among the more pristine spots on Earth, is now disfigured by some of the largest microwave and radio towers I've ever seen. The shade of the great showman now wakes up each morning and looks out on a view cluttered by the very machinery of that modern world he so crucially helped bring into being.

**I heft my father's pistol** in my hand, insert small rubber earplugs, and warily load the clip with brand-new, shiny bullets. My hands are shaking, and I hope no one notices. To say that Gunland is long on testosterone would be a whopping understatement. Women gun buyers are a persistent, underreported slice of the market, but men—obviously—predominate. The target is a Nike box that Patrick has brought along and set up about 15 yards away.

Taking aim, I pull, and the crack is marvelously loud. It won't be mistaken for a backfire. It's the pop, perhaps, that the tip of an expertly handled bullwhip might make as it breaks the sound barrier. And with that crack, the gun jumps in my hand as if snakebit. I've read the sneering dismissals of my father's antique gun by hair-on-chest gun guys. They describe its ammunition as anemic. They deride it as "clearly not up to the task of a defensive weapon." I can't understand why something that just yanked my hand like a pit bull on a leash and sent a metal projectile into space at a thousand miles an hour is either of those things. But maybe I'm just naive.

Eager to put as much distance as possible between myself and the first pistol shot of my life, I quickly run through the clip, firing away, after which I reload and run through another. I then try Patrick's much larger caliber .45, with its deeper roar, harsher recoil, and a blast wave you can feel on your skin. All of these shots end up spraying dirt around the target as often as they hit it. It feels like trying to paint with a garden hose. But I've got beginner's license to be a bad shot. What happens as I continue to fire, however, is that, while I'm enjoying it after a fashion, part of my brain is continuing to marvel over the violence inherent in this little piece of metal in my hand. It feels like hate. It feels like judgment rendered with biblical thunder and fire. Simply put: It frightens me.

Later that day, I wander through my chores feeling light-headed, a bit disoriented. At the gym, I'm incapable of remembering the combination of my lock. Driving to a dinner party that night, my wife tells me I seem "spacey" and points out that I've just told the same story twice. I try to laugh it off, but suddenly the symptoms of lostness and of disorderly mental function are mounting. I pull over the car and tell her, "I think I may have had a stroke." We're sitting there in our evening clothes, mulling over whether to head to the emergency room, when I suddenly realize: It's the guns! It's the blast wave of that barking .45!

Embarrassing, but true: I was cognitively degraded by firing pistols. I was made stupid through firearms. The spaceyness would linger for another dozen or so hours while I handled myself with care, and eventually it would go away. Regulation-issue ear-protection for shooters probably would have helped. Likewise, a thicker skin.

**The very first gun** was probably fired sometime in 13th-century China, when an enterprising alchemist put charcoal-based powder down a tube, dropped a rock in, and then lit it with a burning stick. The very first argument about gun control almost certainly followed soon after that event. Eight centuries later, the argument continues unabated, and the two sides now face off with the weary jadedness of club fighters, bloodied but still swinging. On one side are the Tom Mausers of the world. Mauser, whose involvement in the debate was lent a defining pathos by the death of his son at Columbine, has become Colorado's most famous gun-control advocate, our very own Jim Brady, and a man whose elfin, quick-to-smile face can just as quickly veil over with pain. His position is simple: Comprehensive, strictly enforced gun laws save lives by keeping guns out of the hands of criminals, psychopaths, and children.

Against this apparently common-sense view are ranged the formidable forces of both the National Rifle Association (widely considered the most powerful lobby in America and, according to some, the single most responsible factor in the arming of our country) and people like Dave Kopel. Kopel is the research director for the Independence Institute, a "free-market think tank" in Golden, who speaks with the clarity and confidence of a lawyer and scholar who's published more than a dozen books:

"The First and Second Amendments to the Constitution both protect things that are not only rights but positive goods," he says. "A society that has more bookstores and libraries, churches and synagogues, more newspapers, and yes, more responsibly armed citizens is a healthier, freer, safer, and more self-governing society than one that has fewer of these things. That's one reason that the Second Amendment is described as necessary to the security of a free state."

I find this line of argument insane. But clearly I'm in the minority. Proof of this can be found in that uniquely American looking-glass logic, whereby most public gun-related tragedies produce an uptick in gun sales. People, not to put too fine a point on it, are running scared. And scared is not cognitive. Scared is not logical or analytic. Scared is the opposite of all that. Exhibit A: Though born in Manhattan, I grew up in a fairly rural part of New Jersey where crime, in my early childhood, was nonexistent. But this didn't stop my otherwise sophisticated parents from keeping the doors and windows double bolted at all times. Clearly, they believed a bad guy was crouched perpetually outside in the bushes, waiting to enter the house and loot our precious Sears appliances. When they finally sold the house and moved to Florida, I imagined the poor burglar, now grown gray-

haired and emaciated, falling from the bushes to the ground with his knees locked by 40 years of lying in wait for his main chance.

Advocates for and against gun control are thick on the ground in Colorado, and my whistle-stop tour included several of the more prominent. I drank tea with Arnie Grossman, the Denver author of *One Nation Under Guns*, a man pained and indignant at what he describes as the "lumbar problem" in Washington, D.C., whose politicians, he says, simply lack the spine to stand up to the NRA. I chatted with Bill Menezes, former editorial director for Colorado Media Matters, an avowedly left-wing media-monitoring service, who described the opinions of the Dave Kopels of the world as merely excerpts from the classic conservative playbook, nothing more, and added, "They have a universal solution to all social issues: more guns." Charlie Meyers, the longtime outdoors columnist for the *Denver Post*, brought in the sportsman's angle, saying, "Hunters and sportsmen tend to be conservative, but though they strongly support handguns in the bedside drawer for personal protection, they start diverging on the need for assault rifles and an Uzi in the closet."

These contrasting voices were important to shade the portrait of Colorado Gunland that was slowly emerging before my eyes. But it was also crucial, I thought, to see where Gunland met for fun, where Gunland went when it wanted to let down its hair, kick up its heels, and get a little crazy among its own kind. It was important, I decided, to go to the Tanner Gun Show.

**The Tanner Gun Show** has been held several times a year at the Denver Merchandise Mart since 1964. It's equal parts circus, memory fair (heavy on antique firearms and Wild West kitsch), and gunny fire sale of monster proportions. On the day I attended, the parking lot shimmered with enough pickup trucks to make it look like Contractor's Day at Home Depot, and as I entered the hall I was passed by a grim-faced elderly man in an electric wheelchair who sported an enormous Mohawk. Inside, the vibe was that of old-fashioned fish-fry America, enlivened by the proximity of all the guns and ammo. The buzz was palpable, as was that sense, skillfully stoked by the NRA and present all over Gunland, that the feds were waiting in the wings to crash the party and yank the guns from our hands. "Gun control to me means a tighter grip," read one bumper sticker for sale. "Ted Kennedy's car has killed more people than MY GUN," read another. People circulated excitedly among tables hawking not only firearms but also beef jerky, diet books, religious icons, soaps, knives, and tools.

Most people were there for the hardware, however, and on that front the show did not disappoint. In front of one table stood a machine gun-like monstrosity, the size of an I-beam. Overseeing the gun, which is so powerful it's often bolted to the floor when fired, was an equally gigantic fellow in his early 20s. "Firing this thing is addictive," he told me with a booming laugh. "In fact, I joined the Army so I could shoot it for free." At another table, swarthy, clearly foreign-looking twentysomethings ("We're Israeli," they confessed somewhat apologetically) sold the latest in high-performance sniper scopes. At yet another, a large banner posed the question, "Are you prepared for the dark days ahead?" Beneath it stood a working RPG—a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

I watched a gray-haired grandmotherly type purr over a .357 Magnum, and then, turning to the person next to her, bark in a very ungrandmotherly voice, "Thing'll kick like a sumbitch." I saw young boys fondling rifles with an ardor that, at their age, should have been reserved for girls, and

girls cooing over guns in a way that reminded me uncomfortably of young mothers chucking babies under the chin. After circulating for several hours, watching and listening, I left, filled with a feeling I remembered distinctly from the shy reaches of childhood: that if the people around me knew what I was thinking, they would have turned, massed as one, and killed me on the spot.

The next week, I took a "concealed carry" class, which is necessary to obtain a permit allowing you to carry your special friend, loaded, on your person or in your car. The class, held in a cheerless corporate meeting room in a traveler's motel off I-25, was less interesting for its content—the technique, safety, and history of firearms—than for what it told me about the people involved. Gun folk in Colorado may refuse to conform to type individually, but when seen en masse in large venues and classrooms, it's clear they have certain things in common. They're almost universally white, firstly, and the men tend to default to some Front Range version of the Kenny Rogers model, with proudly retro moustaches and beards, unashamed guts, and too-tight jeans. Typically conservative in politics, they're often conservative in dress as well, with the flinty, measuring faces of people long used to squinting at menace, real or imagined.

I had to wonder: These solid, law-abiding citizens, in their homes and apartments and ranches—what did they actually do with their gazillions of American guns? Hunting is on the wane—the percentage of American hunters has dropped by more than a third since 1975—and a large number of the guns owned in America have little to do with hunting sports, anyway. Target shooting has become more difficult due to the scarcity of ranges. Self-defense is a strong point, of course. And gun homicides have kept pace with the boom in crime that began with the racially stoked "long, hot summers" of the 1960s, plateaued and dropped, and recently has risen again. But here's another statistic to ponder: A significant percentage of guns are used to commit suicide. Older white men are the most vulnerable group. Women try to kill themselves three times more often than men, but men succeed four times more often than women because men—especially white men—own guns.

This still leaves unanswered the more basic question: Why? Beneath the cowboy heritage, why our national obsession with these deadly toys? Yes, guns are often beautifully crafted objects; I had come to a new appreciation of that. But my father's pistol had felt dangerous and somewhat clumsy, and hadn't been an especially pleasant thing to shoot, and my friend Patrick's .45 caliber cannon had simply frightened me. What was it about this passionate, enduring American hobby that was actually fun?

To answer that question, I finally got around to calling a man named Ron (not his real name). I called Ron because I'd been told he was a high priest of guns, a guru of high-performance ballistics, and that if anyone could give me a satisfying response to the question of how to have fun with guns, it was him. Not long after my call, Ron obligingly took me along for a ride in his Mercedes G-Class to that sanctum sanctorum of guns in the Front Range, the Boulder Rifle Club.

Over preceding days, I'd already learned a lot about my host. I'd learned that shooting for him is "a form of high-velocity golf," meditative and calming. I'd learned that he makes what he calls "roll-your-own ammo," assembling it in his pristine basement; that he doesn't go shooting, per se, but uses the range for "load development," testing various combinations of powders and casings for maximum accuracy; that his rifles have their barrels removed upon purchase and sent to a top-

flight gunsmith located, believe it or not, in Rifle, Colorado, to be rebarrelled, remachined, trued up, and reassembled.

I'm personally familiar with this type of commercial gigantism and refinement. As a boy, I found it important to have the very best, most esoteric bike parts, stereo components, and camera equipment, and believed this disembodied desire to be perfectly natural. I've since realized it was a sign of deep emotional estrangement.

But Ron isn't estranged. Hell no! Ron seems like one of the happiest men I know. Ron has hair down to his ass, little round glasses, and looks somewhat like a scholarly Duane Allman. Because of that, people tend to assume that Ron is a reformed rock and roller, but Ron is anything but. Ron is a specialized category unto himself, parking his car while talking a mile a minute about "human design," the pursuit of excellence in life, divination, evolution, and biology, and then removing from the backseat three wickedly beautiful rifles made by Sako, in Finland, and considered among the best of their kind. Along with these were several boxes of hand-assembled ammo whose contents—type of powder, casing, and bullet—he'd noted on the side in a precise script.

We were shooting outdoors, so we attached the targets to wooden posts at the far end of a narrow field and then drove a hundred yards back to the shooting booth, which was a table on which Ron mounted a felt-lined shooting stand. He lowered the rifle into the stand carefully, chattering away in a drawl whose origins I couldn't quite place.

"Are we having fun yet? I'd give that a yes. Now with this little sucker in hand, we'll be able to deliver a gnat's baby at 100 yards without hurting mama. It's all about steadiness, calm, and breath. Shooting is like qigong, the ability to transmit energy over a distance with a high degree of accuracy. Sniper-level, you ask? Yes, I'd say this rifle qualifies. Just watch."

Like many serious shooters, Ron is a stickler for safety, and below the animated patter he'd been watching me carefully to make sure I followed all the precautionary measures. These ranged from the commonsensical, such as never getting in front of a weapon, loaded or not, to instructions on exactly how to engage and disengage the gun's safety. We also were wearing the regulation, headphone-style ear protectors, and he'd already gone over the actual firing sequence with me several times.

Carefully and smoothly, sighting through the large scope, Ron squeezed the trigger; the rifle roared and slammed into his shoulder; and a hundred yards away he notched an exact bull's-eye. He then repeated the process two more times. Exactly. The circumference of the original hole remained the same; the other bullets passed directly through it. This seemed to me an astounding performance, but Ron, unimpressed by his own excellence, merely said, "The gun likes slow-burn powder." Then, after squeezing off a few more bull's-eyes with several different types of bullets, he uttered the words I'd been waiting to hear for a long time: "OK, now it's your turn."

I hadn't shot a rifle since I was a 12-year-old at summer camp. But the intervening years of technological development have made things easy. You place the bead at the center of the crosshairs on the target, you pull the trigger, and the combined forces of science and industry do the rest. What's interesting, however, was what happened next. Because what happened was that, after a few shots, I found that elusive thing, sometimes referred to as "the zone," where the bullets

one after the other flicked egg-size rocks off a shelf we'd set up 200 yards away, and suddenly, without quite understanding how, I was there, in that place of effortless, easy competence, extending the fingertip of my will across two football fields' length with the precision of a surgeon and thinking, "So this is what it is," and "I've figured it out at last," and "This feels great!"

It does in fact feel great; it feels fantastic, as does the sudden achievement of excellence in nearly any field. It lasted several minutes, this trance of accuracy, and then suddenly, with no warning, it went away. But I had tasted the pleasure and athletic thrill of marksmanship; I'd had my Aha! moment, and was able, however briefly, to grasp that thing called the joy of shooting.

With that understanding, my tour of Colorado Gunland was over, and now it was time to pull back and consider: What had I learned during my months of travel, of shooting, reading magazines, taking classes, and hanging out with these people? One thing I learned is that Gunland is a binary place, where, to quote Heidi Klum, "You're either in, or you're out." The debate and its ramifications are so charged and dangerous that it's impossible to take a neutral, fence-straddling position. Another thing I learned is that the warmth shown by gun enthusiasts toward one another is a powerful inducement to membership in their society. Everyone in life wants to belong to something, and the chumminess and bonhomie of the killing classes, as I began to call them to myself, is a wonderful thing, not to be ignored.

I also felt that it was more important than ever that I and everyone else I know think about these things a little, because liberals and progressives tend to remain squeamish and aloof about guns and come to the table with their minds already made up. Yet the questions that guns raise are bedrock-essential to our notions of who we are as Americans, and to our role as participants in a democratically open society, however imperfect that society may be. Of course, I'm also quite aware that, at this late date, whatever we think or do about the question of guns and their social impact is in a way irrelevant, because the die is already cast and guns have carried the day. Like cars or television, they're deeply, essentially woven into the fabric of American culture, and they're not going away. I'm also aware that the American gun debate will continue to rage on with its peculiar ferocity, while each month will continue to bring fresh outrages of gun violence to us. (In March, 31 people died in four separate mass killings; April brought the Binghamton massacre, which added another 14 dead to the total.)

If it's the job of each generation to mourn the passing of an innocence they believe unique to themselves, then ours, in part, will almost certainly be the loss—forever?—of the relatively violence-free life we remember as kids, when children went unescorted around the neighborhood at Halloween, newspapers were full of bland cultural happenings from around the world, and the neighbor who invited you over to carve wood in his basement workshop wasn't a potential sexual predator but merely a nice guy. It's impossible, it seems to me, not to link that coarsening of American life to the hundreds of millions of guns circulating through the body politic like so many angry little metallic cells.

Obviously, the world will make up its own mind about these things. The world always has. As has my stepson. I'm putting my hopes for his gun-free future in the passing nature of his enthusiasms, but for now, having received his desired airsoft pistols for the holidays, he's got his sights set on bigger game: an airsoft AK-47 submachine gun, which will spray a fine rain of pellet-mayhem for nearly 200 feet.

As for myself, I've decided that, however beautiful they may be as objects, guns are too loud, too unforgiving of tiny errors, too absolutist in their power over life to keep around the house as pets. My homage to my father is over. Having shot his gun, I now feel like selling it. Guns have their place in the foundational psychology of this country, particularly in the West. But as for me, thanks, no. I've decided to take my chances just as I was before my travels through Gunland, and though enriched by the experience in many ways, I intend to remain as I was: naively, proudly, and stubbornly undefended.

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