



I Broke a Bird

All that matters is dust in the wind, so to speak.

by Austen Kassinger

If you stare down the barrel of my gun, it stares right back at you. Put one eye next to it; you'll see. The cylinder is so smooth and shiny that small rainbows slide around its curves, slipping in and out of focus. A series of concentric circles floats away from you, shimmering shades of slate and charcoal that create an illusion of a never-ending hallway. Now open both eyes. Put your eyeballs so close to the rim that the flecks of gunpowder and melted plastic stuck to the inside of the barrel tell you how long it's been since the gun was cleaned. You can see nothing but the firing pin, an Egyptian-eye stone carving that floats before you. Black pupil. Shadowy iris. And then an illuminated halo of pale metallic gray reflecting the light pocketed in the open receiver.

into each shooter's subconscious. Load, call, shoot, repeat. Load, call, shoot, repeat. As the *boom-crack* marches steadily toward me, I stop watching the targets to prevent my body from expecting a hard left or a straightaway, a quarter-second of surprise and adjustment that could cost me a target. *Boom-crack*. Three shooters before me, I try to drown the thump of my heart in the blast of the gun. *Boom-crack*. Two shooters before me, I stare at my shoes and finger the brass-capped shell in the palm of my hand. *Boom-crack*. One shooter before me, my taut body swings into action. *Boom-crack*.

I drop a shell into the receiver, grip the fore end, and slide it forward. *Tshhhheeeen*—it's the sound of a cash register without the cheery ring at the end.

Below the barrel is another, shorter tube: the magazine, encased by the wooden fornd. The magazine of a Remington 870 like mine, a classic duck-hunting gun that was recently celebrated in *Field & Stream* as the gun that "always goes bang," can hold up to seven shells, although it's usually plugged to hold only three (to keep things "fair" for the birds). I've never been duck hunting. Not out of principle, but from indifference: clay, not feathered birds are my quarry. Coated in toxic tar, the neon-orange ridged discs are 4.25 inches in diameter, 1.125 inches in height, and are still called *pigeons*, though the use of live pigeons in my best event—trap—ended with the species' extinction after the Civil War in the 19th century.

A round of trap, in which the birds are launched from 16 yards away and fly well beyond, consists of five stations with five targets each, and as soon as one shooter fires, the next loads. The rhythm of a round is established almost immediately, settling

With my right hand near—but not on—the trigger and my left hand at the tip of the fore end, I place the butt firmly in the pocket of my shoulder and nestle the stock so close to my cheekbone that the pudge squeezes into a sausage below my eye. This is beginning shooters' most common mistake: They don't burrow the gun deeply enough, fearful of being kicked. In fact, the opposite is true. It took me a year to find the shoulder pocket, a year of spiraling anxiety as my scores plummeted and I bobbled shells, forgot to unload my gun, pointed it in dangerous directions. Now I know better: If I make the gun a part of my body, if I make a seamless transition from humerus to ulna to action to muzzle, then my body rocks painlessly backwards with the gun. If, however, I distance myself from the gun, if I focus on the cold kiss upon my cheek and the hot smell of gunpowder in my nose, then it will hurt. The butt will smack me, perhaps leaving a bruise, a black and angry hickey on my clavicle.

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I rest my finger on the trigger. Once I call for the bird, I will have fewer than three seconds before the target is out of range, so in that last moment of preparation, I allow the strip of sky or hills or trees above the traphouse to soak my vision. I try not to blink. Many shooters repeat a line from a song or a simple instruction to themselves: *head on the gun, head on the gun, head on the gun*. Trap requires you to shut down your brain and trust your body, and my desire for perfection haunts me: *You almost missed that one*, I berate myself. *Focus, Austen. Stop thinking. Damn it to hell, FOCUS*. Sometimes the only way I can numb my agitation is to repeat a meaningless word or phrase to the rhythm of the round: *orange, orange, orange, bang*.

Head on the Gun; Eyes on the Target. I hear the voice of my friend Donny booming in my ear as loud as the gun's report, a voice amplified by years in a steel mill and on the range. He claims that any shooter who quits overthinking and follows these two simple rules will shoot a straight—25: 25 birds, 25 breaks. There is no space for fear, no time for anger. We expect gun owners to be as violent as the weapons they wield, but any serious shooter leaves emotions behind at the clubhouse; the best shooters always remain calm. This doesn't mean, though, that I'm not aggressive. I make my stance into a crouch, bending my knees and leaning at the waist as though I will sprint after the target and break it with my bare hands. The adrenaline tingles in my chest. My reflexes crackle.

I put my right index finger on the trigger and call "Pull!" for the target. My yelp registers several notches higher than the grunts and bellows that surround me, a clear reminder that in a sport whose participants are 84 percent male, I'm a rare bird. Sometimes competitors are lulled by my fitted navy vest with hot pink piping or my petite stature. I encourage this, letting my long blond hair fall around my shoulders before sweeping it up into a ponytail that bounces with every shot—winning is much more fun when it's unexpected. For at heart, I am caustically competitive, and being good makes me gleeful. In a sport with unavoidably phallic imagery and an event, skeet, whose name epitomizes its hypermasculinity, I enjoy both beating and being one of the boys.

I point, not aim, at the target as it floats across my vision. Unlike rifles, which release one bullet,

shotguns spray pellets in an expanding beam, like a beacon with flecks of lead instead of light. Tiny dots pepper the sky, and, if you're good or lucky, the target. The better I get, the slower the target seems to move; now, I can pick out the shadows created by its three ridges and aim for the nose or the tail. My first year shooting, I hadn't learned to channel my intensity down the barrel of a gun, and I felt so frazzled, I couldn't shoot worth a damn. I wavered, watching the target race away from me as I wondered if I had it locked in, if I had enough lead, if I should aim for the top of the target or the bottom, if I was ahead or behind my teammates, and then it was too late and I knew it and the target was splitting against a tree or shattering on the ground and I had missed it, I had missed it, I had missed it once again. Lost bird.

I pull the trigger and swing the gun. The firing pin strikes the shell's brass cap, setting off the gunpowder in a small burst that reduces the interior air pressure and sends the shot flying out the barrel. These days, I'm no longer anxious, and I broke enough birds at Nationals to finish sixth in women's trap. I shot my first straight, a run so beautiful and dizzying that I promptly missed the first two targets in the following round. To handle my gun with confidence, to sense my muscles jumping at the briefest flicker of orange, to feel the fluid grace of my body as I lean into the gun—I am a well-oiled machine, and it is intoxicating.

I pump the gun by sliding back its fore end; the empty shell pops out as I watch the target. Maybe it will shatter into dozens of clay shards. Maybe a single lead ball will hit, cleaving it in two. Technically, there's no difference between nicking a target and obliterating it, and they will be marked with the same indifferent slash on the score sheet. But a target well smashed brings an added joy, an unbidden grin and an exhilaration that reeks of power and powder: *I did that*.

Best of all, though, are the stations where the birds fly right over my head, and I hit the target so dead-on that it evaporates. *Poof*. All that remains is a cloud of dark gray smoke and, a moment later, a sprinkling of orange dust. ■

Austen Kassinger graduated last spring from Yale University, where she served as co-captain of the Skeet and Trap team. She is currently doing Teach for America in the Mississippi Delta.