

Michael John O'Donnell

Rifleboy

When I was nine years old, my father bought me a Daisy BB gun for Christmas. It quickly replaced my bow and arrow set from the previous Christmas. I tore into the holiday wrapping, flung the box open, held the gun in my hands. It smelled of fresh oil, plastic, and metal. It was light, but I knew it was powerful.

While the rest of the family continued unwrapping the holiday gifts, I recoiled to a corner as a carnivore would do with its fresh kill. I gently unscrewed the barrel cap, removed the metal tube that ran its length, and poured the copper-colored BBs down the gun's throat. I replaced the cap and tipped the gun back and forth, allowing the "insta-loader" mechanism to engage the BBs. I listened to the BBs race from one end of the gun to the other and imagined myself inside the barrel of the gun being pulled along with the other BBs into its internal mechanisms, each of us lining up, waiting our turn, then being shot out. I tipped the gun again. It felt heavier, alive. The sound of the BBs reminded me of the rainstick my parents bought for me during a south-of-the-border vacation, and the sound of the tiny beans traversing within.

Still in my pajamas, I raced outside and located my first target: a giant cactus, which stood like a sentry guarding the front driveway. With its extended cactus "arms," "head," and "waist," it looked human. I raised the gun, fired, and watched as the first BB hit one of the green fleshy leaves, penetrating the fibrous plant meat with a faint slap. A slow drip of cactus juice worked its way from the tiny hole, balled up, and descended over the smooth surface of the plant, negotiating the many spines in its path. The streak of juice appeared as a wavering dark line against the pale green of the plant. I shot again. This time, an edge was clipped

off the leaf. I wondered what it must be like to have a part of your ear shot off. A small wedge of the cactus hung off the plant, barely supported by its translucent outer skin. I shot the dangling piece and congratulated myself.

I became proficient at calculating the arc of the BBs, while factoring in the slight crosswind. I felt a connection with the BB gun as if it were an outcropping of my body—a newer, deadly appendage.

I made a game out of shooting the cactus. I pretended the plant was a burglar who had broken into the house to steal my army men. One of the cactus pears would be the burglar's head. I aimed for one of the pears that stood at the apex of the giant plant's leaves. They were burnt-orange in color and looked like the Christmas ornaments on our tree. I shot wildly, until the pear was shredded away. More juice streaked the length of the leaves. I shot again, this time pretending it was Mark Molera, the school bully. I saw Mark's grinning face plainly outlined against one of the pan-shaped leaves. First, I aimed and shot at his eye, nose, then his cheek. The BBs tore away the left side of his face and I envisioned Mark Molera begging for me to stop as the BBs hit in rapid succession. I practiced a few shots from my hip like I had seen Chuck Connors perform on *The Rifleman*. I punched so many holes into Mark Molera's face he became permanently scarred. Chuck Connors would have been proud.

I hit every leaf on the cactus, sinking it full of dripping holes, dangling cactus meat, shorn spines, ruined pears. I shot until the gun was empty, then walked back to the house, keeping my eye out for other targets. I felt reassured, confident. I was an expert marksman and I knew that my Daisy BB gun and I would continue our assault on the evils that surrounded our property and beyond. No one would dare venture too close. I would move beyond cactus, to cans, to glass jars, nearby neighborhood signs, to small birds. I picked out potential targets and affixed to them the names and faces of the people I hated, the people I knew would have to be punished. I put the gun away in its box and hid it beneath my bed.

The next morning I again raced out to the giant cactus, my Daisy BB gun drunk full with the coppery BBs just as Berta, our maid, pulled into the driveway. Her light blue Chevrolet Impala was missing a side panel, and had a huge tear in its vinyl top. She had to push the door with her foot to open it, then thrust her tiny frame back into the door to close it. She looked at me, smiled, looked at the gun, then looked at the giant

cactus. She looked back at me, in my nine-year-old body, with my Daisy BB gun, my Major Matt Mason pajamas, orange punch stain framing my lips, and leaned back against the hood of the car. She looked at the cactus: “El nopalàesta llorando,” then walked to the house to begin cleaning up the aftermath of the holiday season.

Michael John O'Donnell is completing his MFA degree at San Diego State University, where he is at work on a novel that takes place in Shanghai, China prior to the outbreak of WWII.