

My Father Teaches Me How to Handle a Pistol

By Joy Priest

Twin Rugers resting side-by-side
on the emerald felt. *For the Good Times*
playing low through evening's kitchen

as he takes them apart & puts them back
together. How can I know what he is
remembering as he shoves one, grip-first,

into my hesitant hand & swallows
the last of the Malbec, his stained lips
cracking into a rare authentic smile.

He cannot imagine the first gun
I held belonged to a boy who loved me
too much when he pointed it my way,

cannot know I'm still holding it's
contents back with the force
of my eyes, where my father says

his grandmother, Elsie, lives now
to terrorize him. I think about her,
working in those Moulton fields,

13-hour days. How tough she must
have been living alone with two
of the meanest men in our family

of mean men. When I learn
how tough it is to pull back
on the slide, I think of her:

pretty yellow negro, the men say,
so poor her mule had no name.
It's ribs visible across the field

where she stood watching
her father-in-law, Spence,
beat blood & foam from it.

When I learn to lock the lever
& look down the chamber,
I think of her: oiled pistol

exhausted at her dirt-stained thigh,
hand on her hip. Insouciant
& tired. Just tired. *Don't ever*

put your finger on the trigger
unless you're ready to pull it . . .
my father says, so I keep it straight . . .

unless you're ready to know
the power a propelled bullet
leaves in your hand . . .

I learn what she was tested by
to get eyes like this—old
enough to hold a bullet still.

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