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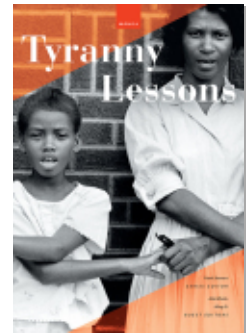
Epidemic

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Epidemic

At ten o'clock on a thick July night you pull into what you still call home even though you're thirty-eight years old and own a house yourself. Turn in the dark road and straddle the ruts, because you were passing within seventy-five miles and haven't seen your parents since Christmas. And because you know, or at least you've heard, that your drug-thralled brother won't be slinking around because he's found another fool to take him in this month. You greet your mother, holed up in the TV room with her crafts and her gory police shows, and you know your father tottered off to bed an hour ago. And you're very, very tired, so you pick up your bag and climb the stairs with their faint odor of long-dead animals in the walls.

You walk by the open door of your brother's childhood room. That bed is empty. You move on through to your own old room. It's your mother's sewing room now, but your past still sits off to the side: *Misty of Chincoteague* books, 4-H blue ribbons, high school graduation photo, the artificial flower arrangement you carried in your best friend's wedding. You slip your bag onto your childhood bed. It might be called an antique by an outsider, but for your family, it's simply something that's been around a long time. Only after you grew up and moved away did you realize the mattress was an antique, too. A striped pallet stuffed with cotton batting no thicker than your thumb and first finger held some ways apart.

You change into a T-shirt to sleep in. Moths paddle the overhead light. Since you've come upstairs, you've been touching towards the other darkened rooms, just in case your brother might be sleeping someplace else. No presence touches back. You crawl under the dusty bedspread into unchanged sheets. Preparations for your visits stopped years ago, but the bed is familiar, even a comfort. You pull the covers to your chin. You roll over on your side. And feel under your hip and thigh something long and very hard.

Your body—punch to your solar plexus, gorge in your throat—knows instantly. The body knows, but the mind has to see. You flip on the light, drop your feet to the floor, and peel that mattress back.

A small dark hole (funny how you see it as a hole before you see what makes that hole). The matte steel of barrel, lengthening, lengthening, as that mattress

unfolds. The swell of chamber. The notched sight. The trigger poised in its ring. Until the walnut stock comes as a reprieve.

And you can't remember charging down the stairs, but then you're back in the TV room, blurting and sputtering, stupidly waving your arms to show the size of the gun. And your mother looks at you, then replies, as mildly as though you're complaining about the dirty sheets: "Oh, honey. I'm sorry. He hid them around the house before we went on our trip in March. He must have forgotten that one." But as she says this, you're already in the middle of understanding, it's suddenly inevitable, quickly of course. Your father stashed his not-yet-stolen hunting rifles before his vacation to foil your brother's constant thefts. Five minutes after your discovery, none of this, including your mother's indifference, surprises you, and twenty years later, it still doesn't, but twenty years later, this still does:

The disk that birthed into my body as I watched that gun unfold. A hot-sided disk the size of a dime, but heavy, heavy, weightier than I'd imagined a thing that size could be. Birthed into a spot between my navel and my groin, a place inside me I'd never known I had, deeper down than I thought I went. And the sensation the disk carried I'd never imagined either: something flatly sexual crossed with something flatly death.

Don't get me wrong. Not threat of murder, of rape, of wounding, not fear of being shot.

It was the sensation: Sterile sex. Inert violence. Spent death.

Once when I was very little, asleep in a hotel bed, I woke to the sound of the headboard in the adjoining room beating against mine. I caught my breath in the dark. Flinched back into myself, but instead of safety, hit ancient recognition running down me in a sickening line. The knocking stopped and voices followed, sly sickles, scorched laughs. And for the first time of many in this life, I had the sense of remembering what I didn't yet want to know.

I know sleeping with heroin isn't anything like that. I know sleeping beside it is.