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WALKING PAST ABANDONED HOUSES, I THINK OF ERIC

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(PORTSMOUTH)

This poem wanted to start in a condemned house, so I took
a walk to show the poem this town and asked: which one?

The poem shrugged. Shattered windows rendered black,
no flicker of blue aquarium television light. Fast food wrappers

an altar, piled on the porch. A small pink running shoe
hole worn in the sole stuck in a chain link fence.

Fifteen years ago, while I was drinking flat beer in a dive bar,
my friend Eric died after getting high from a transdermal

oxycodone patch. He wrote poems I will never
forget: he found his mother dead, her fingers

gnawed to bone by rats. His glasses always broken, crooked,
taped, his cheeks and arms scabbed.

This poem can't imagine. It wasn't this house but probably
one like it, peeling clapboard,

busted plumbing. This town smells burned out
and the burning no longer comes from the foundry

or the coke plant or steel mill. We are falling in
on ourselves, shooting heroin into our veins.

These houses—empty of furniture, food, clean clothes,
laughter, shampoo—are helpless, their dirty glass eyes

begging to see something other than broken smokestacks,
shoes strung on powerlines.

The ears that heard hooves on the brick that sleeps
under pavement are long gone.

There was no Narcan for Eric, and no Narcan
for wrecked Greek Revivals.

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