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House of Childhood, A Moment, Everything

Gregory Orr

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Three Poems

GREGORY ORR

House of Childhood

From her sewing nook, nothing finished
will ever emerge. Bolts of cloth,
 enough for a small shop;
and the tall green Singer
always between her and her kids:
small suitors sprawled
on the floor, bought off
with boxes of unmatched buttons
they study as if they were coins
from foreign realms.

Look
at this one—large and black
and carved with an anchor:
from the Navy, from the war
he left her for who leaves her now
each dawn with his doctor’s bag
and won’t return till way past dark.
Isn’t he still at sea, rising
and falling to his secret rhythm
of amphetamines and sleeping pills?
Has anyone seen him in years?

Telemachus, your father’s gone,
your mother’s cold and distant.
You must hurry and grow up!
You must leave this house
where those from whom you wanted love
live out their lives.

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A Moment

The field where my brother died—
I've walked there since.
Weeds and grasses, some chicory stalks; no trace of the scene
I still can see: a father
and his sons bent above
a deer they’d shot,
then screams and shouts.

Always I arrive too late
to take the rifle
from the boy I was,
too late to warn him
of what he can’t imagine:
how quickly people vanish;
how one moment you’re standing
shoulder to shoulder,
the next you’re alone in a field.
Everything
(for my mother)

Is this all life is then—
only the shallow breaths
I watch you struggle for?
That gasp right now—
if it was water
it would be such a small glass.

And I could lift your head
from the hospital pillow
and help you sip it
to comfort your parched
throat
into the ease of sleep.

Your agony makes no
sense when air
is everywhere, filling
this room where you lie
dying, where we move
as if in a trance, as if
everything were under water.