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Need

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Need

Robert J. De Smith

(for my parents on their 50th anniversary)

I'm just getting comfortable
On Dad's tall stepladder
When he asks it—
“Do you need me for anything?”

I look down—I smile
(I think I did)
Paint brush poised
Like I'm going to
Do his portrait
(He's in a white T-shirt and blue shorts)
Instead of finishing the top two
Courses of the oversized
Garage doors.

“No, I'm all right.”

It's true, it's what you say;
It's true.

But,
“Do you need me for anything?”

Not ten minutes later,
There's Mom at the base of the ladder—
She didn't sneak up on me,
Not like the summer when
My brother and I
Succeeded in taking all season
To paint these same doors
Tom Sawyer white.

“Do you need me for anything?”

“No—I'm fine.”

But,
“Do you need me for anything?”

When I'm alone,
I want to scream,
"Yes—I need you for everything!"

I know the score:
In your mid-seventies
Dad can't breathe
Mom can't move
As you'd like.

I'm not independent—
Donne's "No man is an island."

I need you because you are my memory:

Of beaches and motorcycles
And Cokes with peanuts and McDonald's
Served on cake pans in wide back seats
And noon whistles
And the Heidelberg Catechism and fire trucks
And lawn mowers and an old aunt
Climbing the stairway, her glasses steaming up
From a gift of pigs-in-the-blanket.

I need you because you are my wisdom:

Of car brakes and college careers
Of funerals and even my wife of just 22 years
(To your 50).

Atop the ladder, I have two thoughts:

I know—thinking of my own—
How hard it is
To relent being needed
("I can do it, Dad")
To relent protecting,
To relent being strong.

And this:
While I said I don't need you,
I hope you need me,
But it's small payment on a large debt.