Aunts and Uncles (Menagerie)

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Robert De Smith

Here’s to an uncle
Who sat all day under a tree
Rather than go to the one-room school,
His siblings dropping him off
And picking him up
Like he was on their bus route.
He had his lunch pail and the whole day.

He’s an emblem of the reluctant learner:
I see him, his mind vacant—
Not bored but empty,
Relieved of learning.

He’s my antipode,
But one afternoon he showed
Me how to do what I couldn’t—
Muscle a brake spring into place
By using your shoulder and not your hands.

It’s not just that he was stronger than I,
Though, rough butcher’s assistant,
Familiar with beef carcasses,
He was—
But he was more adept,
Smarter, if you will,
Than his brainy nephew.

And to another, who was
At the wheel of the fastest car
I’ve been in,
A 1968 Ford Shelby GT 500.
That’s no metaphor:
It’s the real deal,
And my brush with automotive legend.

As I grabbed the roll bar
In the back seat,
All views restricted by a fastback rear
And acceleration’s lift,
I heard him proclaim,
“That’s 111 in third gear!”
He could have killed me,
I suppose, and I loved him for it.

And to
The aunt who, I’m told,
Did what a new mother couldn’t,
And stopped my bawling
By taking me in her lap
And facing me outward.
The large circle of family gatherings
Has been magic to me ever since.

And there’s a flyboy,
The calmest person I know,
Who flew missions over Europe,
The jaunty stereotype
Belied by the steady presence.

Hero? Of course!
I’ve seen Dutch survivors
Weep to thank him for deeds
Of mercy 50 years past.
He took it in stride,
Making him the perfect person
To visit in his neat
College business office
When home was far away.

And how ‘bout the uncle,
The missionary uncle, who
Abandoned his childhood faith
For adult baptism and South America.

They called me “Little Abe” after him—
I’d caught some of his eloquence—
But he taught me most

When he blustered in from
The winter outdoors into my
Grandmother’s overstuffed living room
On a rare visit north.

I was 10, in my best,
Nervous to greet
The one who had met Auca Indians,
Who had married the widow of a martyr.

“Well, Bobby, how is it with you and the Lord?”
He asked as if that were
(and I guess it was)
His usual form of “Hello!”

I’m sure I stammered;
Know I blushed,
Not very “Little Abe-like,”

But even now, I’m glad
For the question
Which has been with me ever since—

As have they all.