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Uncle Al

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UNCLE AL

by Eric Whiteside



Uncle Al's blue healer had a litter of puppies,
and only one survived.
That's the way it was with dogs.
People woke up and found them bleeding from the mouth
full of shot for chasing chickens,
stiff on the doorstep.
One pup was carried away by an owl,
and Al ran outside with a shotgun,
his boots unlaced, but all he could do was sit
and hold his head and the mother's chain
until the noise settled in a ditch.
He gave the remaining pup to my father.
He had a picture and said
guess who that boy is there.
That's your dad.

I see this picture,
but Al keeps it to himself.
It's his camera,
and he is the only one allowed to use it,
the only one who isn't flattened
upside down against the window,
against the image already fixed there,
looking up at him as a young man
with a tweed cap,
squinting, holding everyone at arms length.

The healer pup didn't last long.
It disappeared for a few days and was pulled by the tail
from a hole it had crawled into.
It was named Blacky or Buddy.
The only survivor of a small litter
born under the porch in the snow.

The forest service tore Al's cabin down
when the cobalt mines closed,
and he moved into a trailer.
Before Al's stroke, I asked my father
why everyone called him Uncle.
So the whole family came to ask Al what relation he was.
He held out his hand from the dark trailer
when he saw us coming,
and I could see something there.
The picture will be monochrome, wait and see,
I'll open my eyes, and it will be blurry and monochrome,
more blurry and monochrome
than I could have ever hoped for.