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Grandpa

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GRANDPA

From an old photograph
I remember him.
Slavic features reveal
his ancient heritage —
Descendent of farmers
with face broad and coarse,
and eyes that squint against
the glare of the sun
sporting an incomplete smile —
half-given,
like a private joke
only he enjoyed.

When I was five
I watched Grandfather
at a distance
full of curiosity and awe.
He removed his heavy work clothes;
hat, scarf and gloves,
rough woolen coat,
and finally
his tall leather boots
that stood like soldiers
when he pulled them from his feet.
I thought he knew
I had loved him.

When I was six
he played a trick on me
while the rest of my family watched
for they did not know
what he would do.
He told me to touch the frozen
metal doorknob with my tongue
and when it stuck fast
he laughed and laughed
at my ignorance,
at my expense.

Feeling ridicule
even at this young age and,
anxious to be free,
I ripped away
causing searing pain and
instant tears.
The old man laughed at my pain,
confusing me,
I thought Grandfathers
were made to love
little children.

After the trick
I had nightmares for years.
Wrapped in symbolism -
being chased, feeling terror,
a fear of the unknown.
When I turned to look
at my pursuer
it was forever an empty pair of boots.
The dream left me limp
with sweat.

The symbolism and fear vanished
when the past returned
in a moment of recall.
And I remembered my grandfather
who had laughed
at the pain of a child
and haunted my dreams
all because
I thought he loved me.

— *Robert L. Gockman*