**Uncle Steve**

Vivian Montgomery

He had bright blue eyes buried under a low brow, a downward gaze. They would shoot out at you when he was acknowledging what you said, or he was asking a question to see whether he knew what you were talking about. He listened in a way we don’t experience much, and I liked to think that he took his listening home after his Thanksgiving visits and pondered it more, weaving it into his isolation and his rubble.

He held onto his art, through it all. Everything that went awry with him had his creations as company; he nearly drank himself to death in his SoHo studio, maybe he had to leave his works behind when he went home to dry out. Maybe he went back and got them, or the ones he could stand to keep. The sculptures moved into the garage at his parents’ house on Burrough’s Mountain overlooking the Hudson River, and there they stayed: growing, changing, thinning out, reaching more and more toward the sky and across the horizon. I think there was a fire once in that garage—hit by lightning. Some were damaged, some survived, he survived. He kept imagining the shapes larger, more solid, more real.

When his parents died, he bought land not far from there in Ulster County, erected something of an airplane hangar shelter as his abode and workspace. Never put a door on the alcove with the toilet but kept shaping and reshaping his designs so that they were built into the grassy field, heavy metal beams spanning its length, thinner upward poles penetrating the air. Sometimes there was a bench to lie across, so that a body could become the horizon, and occasional rings of steel mimicked the setting sun, or the rising moon.

He kept listening to the radio, kept venturing out to the library, to a mystifying love life, to the local homeless shelter to help serve a meal on Christmas day. His arteries were closing; his heart was tightening. The structures reached higher, farther, bolted and welded together to endure the upstate winters. The ground became filled with holes, hard to traverse. He still fed the birds, loved the chickadees, swore at the goldfinches who antagonized them.

Each year he made a card at New Years -- the same horizon, the moon or the sun making its appearance, a bulky little figure who he came to call Foo Person merging with the smudged landscape; Foo Person kept trying to build something, kept trying to clear out his veins, kept writing letters to the Times, kept saying “Have a Happy, Have a Merry,” and “all good in the year to come, must exercise on bike machine daily.” A heart pumping through the gravel of his voice, through the darkness of his memories, through the persistence of his structures. Heart stops. Voice quiets. Except for his answering machine message that says, “No in casa, leave message.” Structures remain, stretching from rugged soil to meet a sometimes-cloudless sky.