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A Story of Fathers and Cars

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A STORY OF FATHERS AND CARS

When I was sixteen you thought of my life
as a horn that wouldn't sound, a brake that didn't
grab, a red light you hoped was about to change,
a car always sliding toward a ditch.

You never trusted me behind the
wheel, my shirt pocket stuffed
with all the tickets you never got.

All through childhood, I had that recurring nightmare:
Sitting in the back seat of our '48 Plymouth, I'd panic,
seeing that the car was speeding down a hill, no one driving.

One morning you accused me, claiming you knew how fast
I drove your Chrysler
by the length of the bug streaks on the windshield.

Enough, Dad, enough.
I admit I turned sloppy
corners, tainted the interior with smoke and splattered beer,
split the upholstery with a radio turned up too loud.
Though sometimes I felt your hands
tight on the wheel, steadying it, I admit
I aimed for insects, loved
the illusion of speed, because it left you so far behind.

Last night I woke again in the back seat
see darkness, like oil, coating the windows,
see that lost and nervous wheel
jittering left, then right.

Father, I'm sorry. Older now, I drive
without grace in unwaxed cars,
dust blurring the windshield.

But Jesus, Dad, how long can you polish that Chrysler,
fenders rusting beneath your touch?

And how long can I idle here at the stoplight,
toe balanced on the accelerator,
no one to rescue me,
my eyes seeing neither red nor green,
my fingers following the map until they blister?

An excerpt from *The Mapmaker's Dream*
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