Their First Road Trip

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Fighting sleep on a drive through the Rockies,
my father gave my mother the wheel. She
loved the thought of steering through the mountains,
coasting through dips and sudden turns, in shade
and sunlight. Before he'd quite dozed off
she asked if the brakes were always so soft.
"They're fine," he said. He had just been driving,
and they seemed fine. But he had been climbing.
Now she began the mostly downhill run

along road cuts and under Douglas fir.
She glimpsed gushing water and standing rocks
jutting from chasms, but mainly she watched
the road, its lines and cracks, and listened to
the engine gearing up and down as she
worked the pedals. It took force to slow
the car. A hairpin turn came up before
she could easily break her quick descent,
but her husband's words kept her from doubting

that this is how things go, these roads so steep,
and cars designed for mostly flatter ways.
Warning signs showing trucks poised on steep grades
seemed evidence enough of the challenge.
Soon she had worn out her knee, and her calf
cramped, forcing her to adjust her posture.
She found that pumping the brakes helped matters.
A camper rounding past had swerved, and when
she'd punched the brakes the pedal felt firmer.

She tried this again on the next descent,
but feared the jolting would wake her husband.
But no, he snored on, a purring murmur
as soothing as a baby's breathing, full
of trust. Strange (she'd later say) how calmly
she worked to stay within the yellow lines,
risking turn after sharp turn, picking up
speed to crest the rises and finessing
the downward rush with cars pressing behind.

But then began the long straight ride down to
the prairies. Beyond, the farms extended
into low clouds—a bank of thunderheads
like a blackboard where chalked lines of lightning
flashed and faded. She rolled down her window
and drew in the moist air. The roaring wind
startled my father, who sat up, squinting,
astonished to be down from the mountains,
as if some spell had spared him all the work.

He must have felt then that he'd married well.
There was my mother, elated, having
delivered them safely through the passes,
slowing their Chevy on the windy plain.
She cut off the engine to trade places,
and that's how he discovered the brakes were
gone—starting it up again. Nothing there.
"Didn't it seem strange to you?" he asked. "You
told me it was fine," she said, "so it was."

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