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Phantom Braking

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Phantom Braking

Bob De Smith

I have a hard time
Relaxing when some else
Is at the wheel.

It's especially bad when
My son, whom I trust
Implicitly—he's careful,
Has good instincts and
A reaction time that
Gets better as mine gets worse—

Drives my black, finned
Classic Chrysler.

I try to look relaxed—
Elbow on the window sill,
Hand atop the no-draught—
But I'm not.

The height
(pun coming)
Of my anxiety
Came when a pilot
Let him take the controls
Of a small plane aloft—

And me, helpless in the rear seat.

The feelings are leftovers, really,

Years of learner's permits—

I still give driving directions
From the right seat
And phantom brake as the traffic builds—

Years, too of guiding one
In the use of a Skill saw
Another in hammer or spade
One more in lawn mower.

Glad I don't hunt.

I've been watchful—
Not fateful, I hope—
For so long I can't stop.

I remember my Dad
Snoozing in the back seat
As I drove the family sedan,
Travel trailer hooked behind.

That was trust,
I see now.

But, boy, did he
Wake up fast when
On a long, persistent downward grade
An oncoming passing car
Hung and hung in my lane
In slow motion

And the brake pedal
Drifting to the floor,
The trailer brakes screeching
As I contemplated the gravel shoulder.

“Pump ‘em!” he urged,
And I did,
Sliding right to make
Room
Just as the grille of the on-comer
Veered away.

So that was me one afternoon
In the right seat
When the throttle iced open,
Meaning slow meant go,
And I helped my son
Work the brakes and downshift,
Easing her over to a skidding, racing
Stop.

That was kind of fun!