Old Car, New Joy

In another universe, I am 21 and browsing
cars on Craigslist, writing a check for a
Plymouth Sundance Duster my mechanic will
call a unicorn. We cannot know this yet.

We cannot know that her alternator will give
out on the way to my first date with a man who
will dump me on a late April evening in the
front seat of that same car. We cannot know
that I'll learn more about love from
the Plymouth than the way the man says,
I would've married you, like he's laying
concrete or something that tastes too much
like blame.

Every below freezing morning the Duster's
engine turns over is a church choir
warming up, the miracle of someone's
new lung. We cannot know that I will drive
20,000 miles between Lincoln and Omaha those
grad school years, where every meal away from
my mother's table is an overturned hourglass.

That the old dog I call my father will
learn new habits, will look for my car,
that perfect green gem, as it crests over
Chicago Street. That he'll beg my
forgiveness in one hundred imperfect ways:

an original hubcap to complete the Plymouth's set,
oil changes, quietly paid invoices that read
brake pads, heater, FM radio dial. We cannot know
that the Plymouth will gift him his voice. That he'll break
a decade of silence to ask how we are and I'll know he
doesn't always mean the car.

I'll grow to love the smell of just pumped
gasoline in my old working machine. The way
men stop me to ask about her, the Plymouth, and my
factory setting response: *she's a '93, I'm a '95.*

And the laughter! The guarantee of it! The rust falling
away from their throats like old leaves. The bare branch of

what remains. We remind them of their childhood,
the stains on their fathers' hands, the long trips down
I-80 that ended in Zesto's if they were good enough.
If they were enough.

In this car, I am the keeper of red light secrets and
misty-eyed men who just need someone to be soft.
The Plymouth, a perfectly engineered excuse that
will bring a daughter back to her father, at least
for a summer, and bring men back to their memories.

We cannot know that Dan, the mechanic who
calls the car a unicorn, will fall beneath the fist
of Alzheimer's. That his memory will be clean and
clean and clean and that this car will delight him
each time he takes the keys. Old car. New joy.

Neil will take over the mechanic shop and we'll talk
about his sons and his new love and I'll offer him
the Plymouth when all she's worth is scrap.
He'll sign the bill of sale. Promise to fix her and
use her to teach his sons to drive. No salvage,
no chainsaw symphony.

I'll get sober and I'll stop wanting to die and
I'll live long enough to turn 30 and get engaged
and drive a Toyota. I'll spend my nights scouring
car auctions for the perfect Duster until my love
helps me turn out the lights.

I think I'm looking for my father. For your father, too.
For the way strangers can still talk to each other
like family under the right conditions.

The ink of my signature on that car title is
long dry. And my name has only recently become
a souvenir, something I'm proud to carry. In this universe,
the one in which my curls are graying like exhaust fumes,
I am a Plymouth of my own making. Catalytic converter of
good times and gummy worms. Esteemed antique and
gaining value every day.

When you see me filling up at the UStop on 13th Street,
you'll ask me if I'm leaving. You'll mean town, but
I'll think you mean this life, and I'll tell you about
the Duster and all the emerald ways I choose to stay.