

The beauty of men never disappears
But drives a blue car through the stars.

– John Weiners

My father was idling at a red light once, then decided it was a good time to go ahead and light his smoke. In those days both my parents were loyal to minty cigarettes so foul and distasteful I won't name them. They got me started, though, those cool smokes. As a kid they resembled dessert, the cigarettes, but that's probably because Ma froze all the smokes in empty Lighthouse salad dressing jars, the glass ones. Our house always had a fridge freezer stacked with jars of fresh cigarettes next to the ice cream and Eggos. And that's how I started. They looked tasty, all white and frozen and minty fresh. That summer, my first job was stuffing flyers for the *Langley Advance*. I felt ahead of my time, the only fourteen-year-old I knew who worked graveyard shifts. Pretty cool, eh? Dad had worked graveyards, too, so it seemed logical I likewise take up smoking. I was going to be just like him before anybody else. Every day I'd smuggle three cigarettes in an empty Billy Idol cassette case – one for each break. Work was next to King Tut's Tavern, so you could anticipate gassed-up plumbers harassing you for free morning papers around 2 AM. They could act pretty strange, but I didn't let it startle me. I'd stand there giving them an Easter Island stone face, coolly smoking my minty smoke, just like my dad would have. Anyway, the light is still red and he's still idling. His dashboard lighter pops out ready to go. He casually presses the gas, starting through the intersection, thinking he's just heard it go green. I've listened many times, but I've never heard a traffic light change colour. Apparently it sounds something like an anticipated cigarette lighter.

In the winter of 1955 a bunch of us were driving west on Highway 2 in a 1951 Monarch and boy was it cold. That's the one that went in the ditch in Minnesota, but I'll be telling that story another time. When we stopped for gas in Fargo the young gas jockey looked hard at the hood ornament and the name in chrome. They didn't have Monarchs in the USA, and he thought it was a customized Mercury. In the fifties young guys like us were always customizing their cars. I think he wanted to buy this car. In the summer of 1956, my roommate Fred Bing and I were driving west on Highway 2 in his 1954 Meteor, and when we stopped for gas in Fargo this gas guy didn't know what to make of it, because they didn't have Meteors in the USA either. Those USAmericans don't know about anything if it isn't from the USA. He thought it was a customized Ford, I think. I don't remember whether it was the same gas guy, probably not. Now I have just recently been reading *Mauve Desert* by Nicole Brossard. In *Mauve Desert* the teenage girl is always driving her mother's old Meteor into the desert. Now I don't know whether Nicole Brossard knows that the USAmericans didn't have Meteors. Maybe she just liked the name. If the novel took place in Anglo Ontario instead of Arizona, maybe that girl would have driven a Monarch.

A firetruck reversed into my mother's car once and screwed it all up. The transmission was fucked, the engine was gibbled, the nose and grill were crumpled – it was a mess. We're going back a ways before I was around. Ma was a short woman in a small sports car. She went to work each morning, a psychiatric nurse in a convertible Triumph so low to the ground you could reach out and touch the pavement from inside. From inside the car, that is. At any rate, the settlement went ahead without a hitch. Those kind taxpayers in Maple Ridge unknowingly agreed to pay for whatever the parts and labour. Now enter Ma's brothers. These two coaxed the mechanic to throw in some unnecessary custom work on their tab. Thrown in on the taxpayers' tab, that is. They – her goofy brothers – reasoned it would be some fun if their mechanic buddy crossed the car's overdrive to Ma's reverse gear. The story ends with the brothers picking her up at work outside Riverview Psychiatric Hospital to deliver her Triumph. What else could have happened but they scared her stupid driving ahead in reverse away from the so-called loony bin.

*A*s the mercury climbs in the South Okanagan these days, such as August 11, 2001, people are awfully glad they can take their air conditioning for granted, though of course I haven't had air conditioning in my 1990 Volvo for three summers. What does it matter? In 1959 there wasn't any air conditioning in the South Okanagan, but there were Fahrenheit degrees, lots of them. What you wished for was a convertible, and while you were at it, why not a Cadillac convertible? My buddy Willy would say to a girl from Osoyoos, maybe, 'Want to go for a spin in my snappy red convertible?' and what he had was a 1954 Morris Minor with the top sawed off. This was the best joke going in the South Okanagan that summer, and to tell the truth, I was envious. A year later his stepfather had some more sawing done – well, he used to have a machine shop – and it became the smallest pickup truck in that part of the valley, and Willy used it for everything. Imagine, sitting in a red Morris Minor pickup truck, ogling girls we knew.

When it comes to taxis we all know you're as phony as a wicker pisspot if you say you can go without watching the meter and its growing demands. This is for many our most common experience of the old challenge not to think of a pink polar bear for the next thirty seconds.

Insert pink polar bear here:_____.

Essentially, taxis are an uncomfortable hybrid of the car and that infernal clock. Measure your passage, that's what they do. But any ride starts at about two dollars and fifty cents. What I want to know is how we missed all that go by. As our Ethel Wilson writes, just once I would like the driver to stop the clock for ten cents' worth of view. But that's not their business, the taxis. It's not even the job of a pink polar bear.

Insert view here:_____.

In the central Okanagan Valley we lived not that far from the lake, in Peachland – all the names in that part of the country were like that. For instance, the next town over was Summerland. What year was it exactly, maybe 1939, but of course this was a little before I took heed of years and their numbers. One time down at the lake, where the clear water waved over pebbles in the sunlight, my father was showing me how to skip stones. Here were some numbers worth learning, and now for the first time in my life I realize that he was teaching me to count. He skipped his best one eleven times, long flight of stone, eastward. It went halfway across Lake Okanagan. Go and have a look. Another time I was standing alone in our front yard where the little leafy arch was over the front gate and that always seemed to come into one's memory along with the song 'Stardust' and watching a Model A Ford, black or dark green like them all, rolling by eastward with no one in it, rolling with moderate speed down toward the lake. The Model A Ford had the nicest shape ever given to an automobile.

I have heard it quoted on several occasions that the poet George Stanley is rumoured to drive the wind. Or maybe it's 'like the wind.'

One hot summer day in 1958 I boiled fish in the radiator of a little square Land Rover. We were having the worst forest-fire season in history, and all the Forest Service vehicles were busy, so we rented whatever we could get. I got the smallest Land Rover going, cute little jeep thing. It was painted bright yellow and had McCulloch chainsaw pictures all over it. So, as I drove the logging roads of the Merritt forest district, I belted out the McCulloch Chainsaw song:

You're in luck when you've got a McCulloch Chainsaw
You've got power by the hour in your hand
With McCulloch you're the master
'Cause you keep on cuttin' faster
You're in luck when you've got a McCulloch Chainsaw

My job for the while was driving groceries up to a firefighting camp and picking up their order for the next day. Sometimes when you are driving up a dirt logging road you meet a loaded million-tonne logging truck on its terrifying way down, and you learn how to jam the gearshift and drive in reverse very fast down the twisting mountainside road until you find a place to get off the road without going off a cliff. Well, the fish. After a while the radiator sprung a leak and I had to carry several pails of water along with the groceries. At the camp I filled the pails with water dipped from the lake. You know the rest. Partway down the hill I opened the hot hot ouch radiator and looked inside, and there they were, floating. I don't remember whether they were still there when we returned the little yellow Land Rover to the chainsaw dealer.

In his superfantastic autobiography William Carlos Williams taunted us wannabe poets with God's hand. He proposed that the one thing God can't do is raise and lower her hand at the same time. Only art tries her luck at this, he manoeuvred. I don't know about that, but if you look at your driver's feet you'll see why I think this is true of smoke shows. In a Langley Esso station, the gas-pump oasis where my high school buddy Jason worked in a backwards baseball cap, I learned how to burn rubber the Williams way. Jason showed me in his parents' vw Rabbit how to lay into the contradictory brake and gas pedals at the same time. If you could get it just right, your dad's station wagon could produce a wicked cloud of blue smoke behind you. I tried it on my dad's Acadian but only succeeded in jerking the car over a speed bump and dislodging the stupid muffler. Later I blamed the chugging noises on a sharp speed bump in the McDonald's drive-thru. Brand names always seemed to lend credibility to such stories. Now I suspect the other thing God can't do is drive a Model A Ford around BC's interior without a soul steadying the wheel.

Those were the days when all the poets attended pub night at the Cecil, and we lived, Angela and I and baby Thea, with George Stanley, at 2249 York Avenue in Kitsilano. It was not a long way from the Cecil to York Avenue, and the sixties were not quite over in 1971, but there were some Vancouver aldermen with long sideburns. Because it was not all that far from the Cecil to York Avenue, we went there and back in my maroon 1965 Chevrolet Bel Air, which I had driven from Montreal with two chihuahuas. George Stanley took his chances. He is an unpretentious scholarly man who likes to go to the bar, in this case the Cecil Pub, which was really a beer parlour in the old western Canadian sense, terry cloth, even, elasticized around the tops of the round tables. We poets went to the Cecil around 10 PM, after the college boys had got lucky or drunk and gone home or elsewhere. When the pub closed, if we were not going to the Arts Club or the Luv-A-Fair, we would drive home, or I would, over the Burrard Street bridge, and now George Stanley was pretty drunk but his tie was still not loosened much, and he took his chances. I would pretend to be drunk but I really was drunk, and trying to disconcert George Stanley I would boast in a loud voice, 'I can drive like the wind!' That usually did the trick. Sometimes I said, 'I can drive when I can't walk!' Sometimes, if I felt that the occasion required it, I would announce, 'I know where every fender is on this car!' I had learned that one from my old buddy Willy Trump, who could not drive a car any more because he was blind even when he was sober.