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*the* PARIS REVIEW

## Gone in Sixty Sentences

By Rachel Kushner 18 April 2019



Every time I've attempted to start this side-winding meditation on Matthew Porter's airborne muscle cars, cars that are things and also backlit silhouettes of things, I end up scrolling the new version of the old Autotrader, online, and looking at models of cars I've always wanted and haven't yet owned, and also their silhouettes.

If I had a hundred grand to drop right now, this morning, which I don't, I could buy a 1969 GTO Judge, mint. But really it's not my style. A '67 GTO and its classy cigar-box lines is what I always wanted. The '69 is a novelty item, like roller skates or a leather shirt, and anyhow I get bored of the color orange. I'd love a GTO but I don't need a Judge, even if there are certain days—Tuesdays?—when I feel like I need a Judge.

For a Sunday drive I want a Stutz Blackhawk; doesn't even have to be the one Elvis owned. I'll humbly accept some other Stutz, but the more I research who owned Stutzes—Dean Martin, Wilson Pickett, George Foreman, Muhammad Ali, Willie Nelson, and Barry White, just to cherry-pick from the longer list of celebrity owners—I get mad that I haven't yet myself acquired the pink slip for a Stutz. Even if I could afford one, there aren't very many, and today none are listed for sale.

There's a 1965 Mercury Marauder, I always liked those. Even if the lines are a little square, the fastback makes up for it, although it's a car that has to have sport rims or forget it.

Why is 1965 the chicane through which all American car design went from curved to boxy?

Nineteen sixty-eight was another chicane, which led to puffy quarter panels, and even outright blimpage.

Sometimes I start to believe I want a Rolls-Royce, like a model from the 1980s. Today you can buy a 1985 Rolls-Royce Silver Spur for ten grand on Autotrader. I know nothing about Rolls models but if it doesn't come with pull-down teakwood dinner trays in the back seat the deal is off. Extras are important to me. The idea of a General Motors Lanvin Arpège perfume atomizer offered stock with the 1958 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham spritzes my spirit with something American that I can actually, for a moment, believe in.

I often want a 1961 Ford Starliner. That's something special to me, and it harkens back to one I saw for

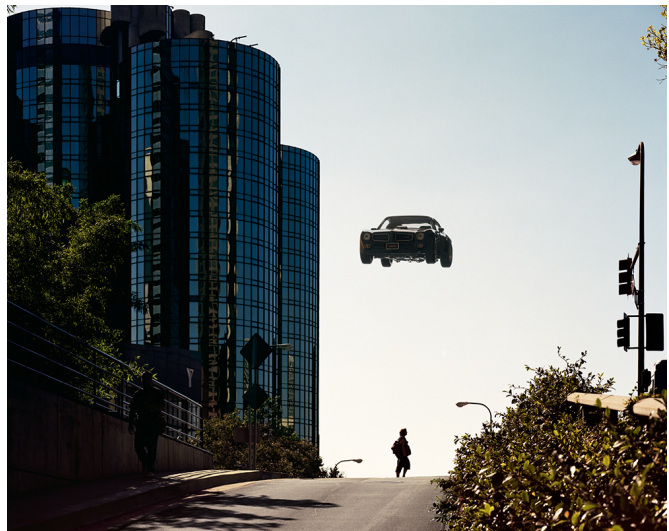
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sale in Napa, California, in 1992. It was Wimbledon White, a stock Ford color I'm partial to. I didn't buy it. Say it: Starliner. Wimbledon White. That was the year I spent every weekend looking at cars. I ended up buying a 1964 Ford Galaxie, which I still own, but even after I bought my Galaxie I continued combing *PennySaver* and Autotrader and Hemmings and called numbers and dreamed of other cars. In 1997 I bought a 1963 Chevrolet Impala in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The night I bought it, a friend and I motored out to a drive-in movie theater in Waynesville. We could hear cows lowing as we waited for the film to begin. Wish I still had that car. Had to sell it to pay for school, made a very large profit since it's a coveted year of a coveted model. The night before I sold it someone attempted to steal it from my parents' driveway in San Francisco. My neighbors saw my car in the middle of the street and knocked on our door. A guy had hot-wired it and was planning to drive away with the anti-theft club still attached to the wheel. He flooded the engine trying to give it gas and had to abandon it on foot.

It's September as I write this, and the 2018 calendar my son got at the Pomona car show is turned to a 1971 Mustang Boss 351. I've seen every muscle car a hundred times over. That was youth. This is now (middle age). I've given my copy of the *Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1946–1975* to my son, who can pore over specs like I once did. The '71 Mustang is shown parked in front of a tacky Italianate villa. The parked car versus the midair car is object instead of subject. A car flying through an intersection is the protagonist; that's clear. It knows the story and it is the story, even if the casual grace of electric wires, light poles, and traffic signals plays its part. Nothing like late-day light to put the city-sky infrastructure into relief: the light is half the charm of these magical images. The locations that Porter has chosen, too, are sweet, but maybe in part because they're familiar: some of them are in my neighborhood, or near it. He doesn't photograph famously steep Baxter Street in Echo Park, but his images conjure it. Cresting Baxter to get air is something LAPD motorcycle cops do at five A.M., when they figure no one is paying attention. They hit Baxter Street and court broken axles.

There are many iconic cinema stills of flying muscle cars, but the mother lode of the genre is from H. B. Halicki's 1974 film *Gone in 60 Seconds*, in which a Mustang Mach I hovers midair in a Los Angeles intersection after launching off a crash-pile it has used as a jump ramp.

The film's super-flimsy plotline involves the theft of forty-eight cars in forty-eight hours, each coded with a woman's name. The Mach I, called Eleanor, is the indisputable star and credited as such. Halicki financed, produced, directed, wrote, starred in, and did all of the stunt driving for the film. He was known as the Car Crash King, and he was also the Junkyard King, who owned all ninety-three of the cars that were totaled in his movie, including multiple police cars, fire trucks, and even the garbage truck that drives right over a Dodge Charger. In my favorite scene, Eleanor the Mach I plows into a large sofa that's sitting in the middle of an alleyway, the sofa compressed and pulverized as the car commits to dragging the ruined frame of the couch from its undercarriage for several hundred feet.



There are other comic touches. Halicki evades police in a tow truck with a rear-facing Dodge Challenger, a mint car that later gets shoved in a compactor at a wrecking yard. Cornered at one point after a high-speed pursuit in the Mach I, Halicki seems to assent to the police, as if the game is over. He puts his

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hands up at officers' commands, multiple guns drawn on him from various angles. He keeps his hands up, but mashes the gas with his driving foot, complying and not complying, hands kept up as he blazes west on Ocean Boulevard and cops dive out of the way.

In other highlights, Eleanor the Mach 1 runs over a shopping cart full of groceries. A night scene at the long-gone Ascot Park speedway reveals the inspiration for the film's title, a message for speedway guests to lock their vehicles or they'll be "gone in sixty seconds." A high-speed chase interrupts the Carson City Council's dedication of a new sheriff's department, a scene I favor because Carson is where, coincidentally, the best go-karting in Los Angeles can be had—or rather, the most scrappy and sketchy go-karting in Los Angeles. Another highlight is when Eleanor drives right into a Cadillac dealership, escaping through the service department.

But the heart of the film is a long and static sequence in a huge garage, as the camera slow-pans past every one of the forty-eight stolen vehicles, Rolls-Royces and Cadillacs and Lincolns, a Plymouth Barracuda, a Corvette Stingray, a Manta Mirage, car after car, some rare, some not, all gleaming and still. They are part of the plot, but real—actual cars that Halicki owned (and which, in real life, he'd acquired dubiously). A woman named Pumpkin sits behind a desk, the superego in the room, leaning back. She has big hair, I mean really big—amazing hair, and long nails. The studs on the collar of her denim shirt wink at the camera, her Malibu-tan hands tented in rumination, although maybe she's thinking only of money, or of nothing at all. Either way, I love her. Her name is Marion Busia and apparently she is now, as you read this, a real estate agent in Rancho Palos Verdes. This is not disappointing. I'd settle for nothing less.



Joined to the theme of destroying cars is a fetish for cars, but also other stuff. Halicki's belt buckles are different in every scene, and never subtle. He's got a lot of sunglasses, bell-bottoms, and briefcases. Several wigs and an artificial mustache. Various styles of slim jim, for opening car doors. An array of hats and deerskin driving gloves. He was a collector. I heard he later acquired his own Goodyear Blimp but I'm having trouble verifying that.

H. B. Halicki died while filming a sequel to *Gone in 60 Seconds*. A telephone pole was clipped by a wire meant to pull a water tower into a parking lot full of cars, and the telephone pole hit Halicki and killed him.

Time passes. People die. They become real estate agents. Car collections get auctioned.

Classics become more valuable, and rarer, and also forgotten, and thus, to some, less valuable, and that's good, and also sad. The light stays the same. Or rather, it is always changing.

*Rachel Kushner's novel The Mars Room was shortlisted for the 2018 Man Booker Prize, won the Prix Médicis étranger, was a New York Times best seller, and is being translated into more than twenty languages. Her previous novels, The Flamethrowers (2013) and Telex from Cuba (2008), were both finalists for the National Book Award. Kushner lives in Los Angeles.*

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