

Kraft cruises down the Golden State: would it were so. "Cruise" is a generous figure of speech at best, label from another time and biome still imbued with quaint, midcentury vigor, the incurably sanguine suggestion of motion more forward than lateral. "Cruise" is for the *Autobahn*, the Jet Stream, Club Med. What's the real word, local parlance? Shoosh. Shunt. Slalom.

Freeways, like rivers, age and meander. Lane lines, at this hour, are just a manufacturer's suggested retail, more of an honor system than anything worth bothering with. Relics, mementos, the tourist scratches on the pavement marking the sites of annihilated Spanish missions.

Up ahead, the Blue Angels run interference for an Esther Williams aqua ballet. A lazy, Quaalude cross-drift of traffic skims across Kraft's viewing screen, flow and counterflow canceling out in diffraction pattern to form a standing wave. Several hoods in front of him, sleek little fuel-injected Alpha particle manned by sandalwood-haired guy hugging cellular phone swaps places with convertible Stuttgart-apparatus piloted by blond bombshell lip-syncing to the same song Kraft himself has tuned in on the radio. Eight seconds later, for no reason in creation, the two swap back. The exchange is duplicated all across the event horizon, a synchronized, pointless, mass red shift.

Fortunately, most everyone is a diploma holder here. Driver's Ed: the backbone of the high school certificate. One might emerge from the system unable to add, predicate, or point to Canada on a map, but thanks to rigorous requirements would still be able to Aim High in Steering, Leave Oneself an Out, Second-guess the Other Guy.

Casting his vision into the advance shoals, getting what his Driver's Ed teacher almost two decades ago affectionately if firmly referred to as The Big Picture, Kraft catches the total, pointillist effect: cars flaking off each other in the steady current, making a shimmering moire, like sheer curtains swaying in front of a screen. He takes his hands from the steering wheel, passes his extended fingers in front of one another in unconscious imitation. Time (in this country of ever-expanding unusable free time) for an experiment: infinitesimal easing up on the throttle produces a gap between his grille and the nether parts of the Marquis in front of him. The instant this following distance exceeds a car length, the two vehicles on either side both try to slither in.