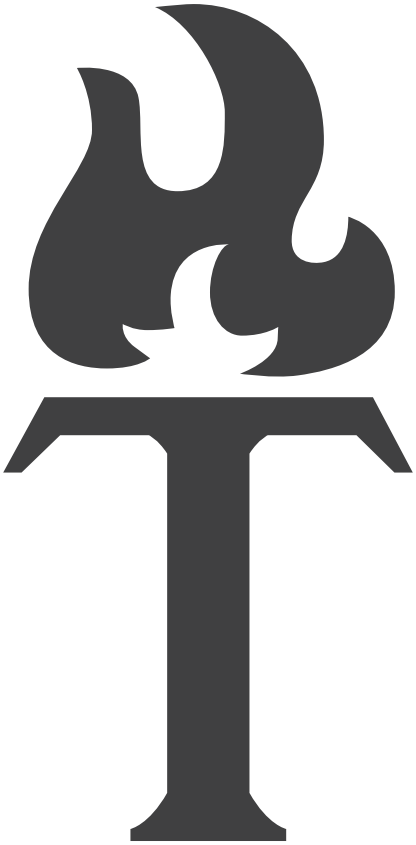

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WHICH LEADS US to the Terrible Beauty of midwestern ROAD RAGE[1]

LYRICAL ESSAY BY Michaella A. Thornton

1 Title after a line in Paul Kix's amazing *Thrillist* essay "Midwestern Nice: A Tribute to a Sincere and Suffocating Way of Life," which explores the nuanced role of Midwestern manners, cultural repression, and clever understatement in everyday life and pop culture.

I want to throw
out my back & not

complain about it.
I wanta drive

two blocks. Why walk–

from Kevin Young's poem, "Ode to the Midwest"

April 28, 2013: Like many great stories, this tale began in a Wal-Mart parking lot and continued onto Business Highway 67, where James A. Dorris' pick-up truck swerved in front of Kole Bond's vehicle. The men were driving in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, the "Gateway to the Ozarks" and the hometown of "Designing Women" TV series creator Linda Bloodworth-Thomason.

The town is also referenced in Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner's snappy duet entitled, "Forty Miles from Poplar Bluff" – *Forty miles back in Missouri there's a different way of life / Where a man thinks of his neighbor and not his neighbor's wife / Life is far from fancy sometimes mighty rough / But contentment makes it worth it forty miles from Poplar Bluff.*

On that late April day in 2013, when Bond was forced to stop his vehicle, Dorris was probably not thinking of his neighborly duties when he pulled a handgun and fired two shots in Bond's tailgate. Then again, Dorris, his wife, Heather, and their young daughter, were just passing through from South Carolina to Bunker, Missouri, a logging and lead-mine town of 407 souls. Two of those 407[2] souls now include Heather and the Dorris couple's ten-year-old daughter, who wait for their husband and father as he serves his time.

No one was hurt during the altercation, though James A. Dorris received 15 years in prison for unlawful use of a weapon and armed criminal action. If Dorris serves his full sentence at Missouri's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic, and Correctional Center, his daughter will be 25 years old when he gets out. Bonne Terre, the small town where the prison is located, literally translates to "good soil" in French. This unassuming, "Lead Belt" city in the heart of St. Francois County is probably best known for having had the world's largest lead mine from the 1860s to the early 1970s, the flooded mines Jacques Cousteau explored for five and half days in 1983, and the state's execution chamber.

For James A. Dorris, Bonne Terre has another claim to fame — the town is his modern-day setting of a cautionary tale where road rage, gun violence, and a stiff punishment converge to showcase what can happen when a Missourian let his momentary anger get the best of him.

Meanwhile, my Missouri born-and-raised husband Brandon is a clever, curious sort. His love of science and reason led us to put 2000 Hubble Space Telescope stamps on our wedding invitations, to investigate buying a bat house for our suburban home (a project on hold until he figures out the best location), and to patiently train our dog Nova, who was born deaf, with sign language and lots of positive reinforcement, namely bits of hot dog, cheese, and cuddles. On social media, Brandon's updates and up-votes range from learning more about how Arctic methane emissions affect climate change to a funny father on Imgur who fart-bombs family photos to philosophical discussions on the deeper meanings of the 2004-2009 TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. I, as someone trained as a journalist at the conclusion of the 20th Century, observe my late-30-something husband's media habits in the 21st Century in awe, and sometimes annoyance. He almost always 'scoops' mainstream news outlets and often detects trends and cultural shifts well before I do. Yet, while I appreciate knowing more about international politics or aww'ing a kindle of kittens on a Roomba, I often think his consumption of the news is incredible and, yes, in some instances, scary.

Earlier this year I found Brandon watching videos posted to a specialized user-generated online discussion forum, /r/RoadRage, a subreddit, where community users and rage-centric lurkers can read or post "all your road stories and share your favorite videos of idiot drivers." As a couple, we have a strong and loving common ground in terms of where we love to travel (Big Sur, Vancouver, and little Missouri towns where hole-in-the-wall cafes serve up incredible onion rings and pork tenderloin

1 According to the 2010 U.S. Census.

sandwiches) and what we value in our lives and professions (giving back to our communities through medicine and education), but behind the wheel my sweet and whip-smart husband sometimes morphs into a less benevolent person. On occasion, he becomes a vengeful driver who uses his car's wiper fluid to "piss" on other tailgaters' windshields. He disregards mandated car lengths between his vehicle and other drivers'. He tells me I drive too slowly. Having dodged one a serious car accident, I know what's at stake when I drive. There's never a big enough reason or deadline for me to put another driver in harm's way, so it concerns me when I find Brandon reading /r/RoadRage.

He doesn't need any ideas.

Not from these people, or, most of them. The usernames on the /r/RoadRage subreddit represent a range of human emotions, from the hilarious ("Crankatorium") to the enterprising ("donttellmetochill" appears as the username for Whitney Hawkins, a Certified Stress Management Coach) to the sinister ("naturalborn," alluding, as I read it, to *Natural Born Killers*). Sometimes the other links and videos posted on /r/RoadRage are pure, unadulterated schadenfreude:

- "Chinese Land Rover owner repeatedly slams into double-parked Jaguar."
- "Driver Runs over Navy Vet's Motorcycle after Spat."
- "Woman Throws Soda at Pedestrians after Being Asked Not to Text and Drive."

It's evident there's a collective cultural catharsis present in these users' postings (and my husband says as much when he watches these purportedly 'redemptive' videos, often after a trying drive home), yet I wonder how many other loved ones, neighbors, and strangers are silently plotting Internet-inspired revenge on the roadways? Or at the very least, how many of us are figuring out how to use a dash-cam to document drivers behaving badly? Ultimately, I want to know what happens when our impatience, anger, and rage go unchecked in a place where we're known to leave the last muffin on the plate or offer up an unsolicited "bless you" when someone sneezes. It's hard to reconcile the stereotypical values we're known for in Missouri — aka, Midwestern nice — with the grittier reality of how we treat one another on the roadways.

Someone who has consistently observed the reality of Midwestern nice and not-so-nice on Missouri roadways is Lieutenant Paul J. Reinsch, Assistant Director for the Public Information and Education Division of the Missouri State Highway Patrol. "There have always been aggressive drivers," Reinsch said. "Social media and cameras may make it seem more prevalent because people are documenting these things. It seems like it's more and more."

While the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) does not track "aggressive driving" per se, they do track crashes and fatalities involving high-risk behaviors such as driving too fast for road conditions, speeding, following too closely, and more, reports Kelly Jackson, Senior Communications Specialist for MoDOT.

By the Numbers: "Aggressive Driving" Fatalities and Injuries in Missouri

Year	Fatalities	Injuries
2015[3]	317	1502
2014	287	1638
2013	308	1742
2012	335	1886
2011	316	1988
2010	341	2273
2009	374	2362
2008	436	2641
2007	423	2971
2006	470	3053

In the past decade, Jackson notes, "The trend line for aggressive driving looks like Missouri has seen a significant reduction, but this is partly due to the [2012] revisions to the crash report." What those revisions look like to a lay person largely involve additional crash-report section options so that law enforcement can now track more specific contributing circumstances.

2 Please note: 2015 data is still preliminary and the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) will update these figures as additional crashes are entered into the system.


NGK


porter wagoner
& dolly parton
WE FOUND IT
RCA

Jackson shares the example of how the "distracted/inattention" section now allows officers to track what type of inattention was involved (e.g., texting, navigation device, hand held, etc.).

Numbers, of course, are only part of the story. In June 2016 when I wrote to James A. Dorris, the Bonne Terre inmate, he had a different story to tell from the news and police reports, one he insists was not the narrative that Bond told in court.

"I am sorry to inform you that I was not the one with road rage," Dorris wrote from prison in pencil on yellow legal paper. "When I pulled out of the Wal-Mart parking lot that day, I followed the rules of the road, and Mr. Bond says I cut him off! He started to dart into my truck several times; finally, I let him go ahead of me. He then pulled into the lane I was in, and started trying to make me run into the back of him. I guess he noticed that I had my wife and 10-year-old daughter in the truck with me. He fabricated this lie that I fired a gun at him with my left hand!"

Dorris explains his left hand only has a ring and pinky finger remaining after a sawmill accident that occurred after a workplace accident at the Mark Twain Forest Products company in Reynolds County, Missouri, when he was 16 years old. "My wife called and got the surgeon to send a statement that it was medically impossible for me to fire a handgun with my left hand, but my lawyer never brought that evidence up at the trial," Dorris writes. Furthermore, "...[T]he truck was a standard shift, we were going uphill, and [the] truck had a small engine, and was loaded down. . . . The police did not do any ballistics on the truck, they never did find a gun or do a gunshot residue test on me. I do have an appeal going on this matter."

I wrote Kole Bond as well in early July 2016, but at the time of publication, I had not yet heard from the young man who endured Dorris' aggression that fateful spring day.

Despite the reporting revisions to the 2012 MoDOT crash report, there is a real possibility that "road rage" as Missourians know it and experience it might not be as prevalent as some of us believe. The "culture of fear," as sociologist Barry Glassner wrote about in his 1999 classic book of the same name[4] and later updated in 2010, is a culture that typically hitches its wagon to the razzledazzle of relatively isolated instances of trauma and spectacle (i.e., "road rage," among other topics). Many times these media-saturated issues are not as representative of the more threatening everyday social issues that surround us.

For instance, in April 2015, Jesse Bogan of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that "Missouri is one of 17 states and the District of Columbia where more people die from shootings than motor vehicle crashes." Which is especially interesting when Bogan reports the Violence Policy Center's research that while more than 90 percent of American households own a vehicle, less than a third have a firearm. In fact, Missouri had the not-so-honorable distinction of being one of five states with the highest rate of gun deaths, including Alaska, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Wyoming.

The role of guns in road-rage incidents, in other words, is statistically more problematic, and more fatal, than drivers who follow too closely, consider the left lane their own personal thoroughfare, text, do their make-up, unwrap a sandwich, get the crying, screaming or yodeling child settled, or conduct monster drum solos on steering wheels. And, if most of us are being honest, we have indulged in one or more of these behaviors at least once.

Who we are driving with, how armed we and other drivers are, and who or what might trigger a driver's rage, or intermittent explosive disorder, seem to be questions we all need to ask ourselves before cutting someone off, flipping an errant driver the bird, not paying attention, or flashing high beams. I mean, really, how good of an idea is it to lose patience or focus while some of us are armed and so very angry?

Valerie Schremp Hahn of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported a "bizarre road rage incident" where Darvin R. Wallace, age 43, smashed a commercial driver's passenger-side window

1 *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things: Crime, Drugs, Minorities, Teen Moms, Killer Kids, Mutant Microbes, & So Much More,* Basic Books, 10th Anniversary Edition

in with a hammer near Union Boulevard and Interstate 70, not too far from the small, poor North County town of Pine Lawn, the family-owned and nationally recognized barbecue of Roper's Ribs, and the historical Bellefontaine Cemetery, where explorer William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame), Missouri-proud painter and muralist Thomas Hart Benton, and poet Sara Teasdale are all buried. It is here that a box-truck driver tried to shake the hammer-wielding Wallace from his vehicle. While successful in getting Wallace off his truck, the unidentified driver told police he accidentally ran Wallace over in the process. Wallace, a father of five and husband to Jay Wallace, died approximately five hours after the incident. No charges were filed against the box-truck driver.

The reason for the fatal exchange? Allegedly, according to St. Louis news and police reports, the box-truck driver cut Wallace off on Interstate 70.

"As far as the contributing factors of what would make someone an aggressive driver, it's really hard to point to just one factor," Lt. Paul J. Reinsch of the Missouri State Highway Patrol said. "It really depends on the individual person at that point in time. It could be a bad morning or they're upset. Aggressive driving really centers on one person's emotional state, so it's hard to predict."

Furthermore, Reinsch said, "When we see someone driving excessive speeds, weaving in and out, this behavior puts everyone at risk. Being a trooper and being an officer is a dangerous job, and you have to get [these dangerous drivers] stopped, so it puts us in harm's way unnecessarily, too. It's frustrating watching drivers operate a vehicle that way, especially since they really don't gain much time."

Is road rage really about a speedy arrival or more about enforcing an almost Old Testament-brand of justice? Driving conjures unspoken, cultural norms that a driver's personal, regional, and geographic identities influence and, yes, enforce.

"Please do not engage," I say, first to myself and then to my husband as he "imparts a lesson" to yet another nameless, faceless, and/or oblivious driver. When I ask Brandon why he does this, he says "the lessons"— using windshield wiper fluid to spray tailgaters' windows or brake-checking — merely reinforce the rules of the road, and his actions are a "justifiable correction." Hubris is a trait the Greeks knew a thing or two about, and I don't see my husband's brand of "teaching" as the most effective way to reform bad driving.

In a September 2015 *The Journal of Social Psychology* article,[5] researchers explore how perceived rule violations can affect emotional intensity in social settings, including driving on the highway. The article suggests, "One function of strong reactions may be to put those who violate fundamental rules of social exchange on notice to deter future violations." As Lt. Reinsch said, it is almost impossible to predict who or what puts a driver on edge:

> Indeed, assessing whether a reaction is reasonable and proportionate given the nature of a particular precipitating event is often impossible because people's emotions are influenced not only by the immediate situation but also by events unknown to the observer, real and imagined implications of the event that are not immediately obvious to others, and the degree to which the event portends future circumstances that are relevant to one's concerns (Frijda qtd. in Leary, 1986).

In other words, while most of us easily discern the disproportionate responses — for example, "physically attacking a driver who delayed for five seconds after a red light turned green," per the example Duke researchers gave in *The Journal of Social Psychology* — it's often harder to detect more subtle social exchange rule violations. This is where culture and geography come into play.

So much of how we drive and what we value as drivers is based on *where* we learned to drive, *who* taught us to drive, and *where* we're driving now. Chicago, for instance, is well known for its "Chicago left," where drivers turn left on yellow and oncoming drivers allow it because there's an unspoken cultural understanding while driving

1 "Why Seemingly Trivial Events Sometimes Evoke Strong Emotional Reactions: The Role of Social Exchange Rule Violations" by Mark R. Leary, Kate J. Diebels, Katrina P. Jongman-Sereno & Xuan Duong Fernandez, published on September 2, 2015.

“Please do not engage,” I say, first to myself and then to my husband as he “imparts a lesson” to yet another nameless, faceless, and/or oblivious driver.

in the city. It's not uncommon in my adopted hometown of St. Louis to kindly wave another person into a long traffic line. Or the gentle, acknowledging rise of a finger or hand from the steering wheel when passing a fellow driver in rural Missouri. The signals and ceremonies we perform behind the wheel are, to a large degree, a result of social conditioning.

Furthermore, Mark R. Leary, the Duke professor of psychology and neuroscience, and his fellow researchers also noted that the research on the "culture of honor" and how those who are "particularly sensitive to signs of disrespect, such as gang members and men in the American south," may be another theory for why some people are especially primed to interpret thoughtless and/or dangerous behaviors as "violations of interpersonal codes of conduct or 'psychological contracts.'"

Case in point: the "zipper merge." "Drivers who get angry when other motorists wait until the last possible moment to merge in construction zones need to reconsider their long-held notions of highway courtesy," reports an Associated Press news report on July 9, 2016. The Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) is publicizing how resisting the urge to merge early in construction zones and other designated areas. In one agency-produced YouTube video, grade-school children ask, "Why aren't they using the other lanes? Why aren't they taking turns?" For older drivers, this way of merging is not intuitive, and some may perceive the practice to be unfair, even though it can actually improve the ebb and flow of traffic. The zipper merge example coupled with the "culture of honor" hypothesis, or the rule-abiding Midwest, showcase how some instances of road rage are born out of misunderstanding and old, outdated habits. Leary and his colleagues also note that even if there is a "culture of honor" issue, "the general effect of disrespect on anger and aggression is widespread, if not universal."

In other words, while many Midwesterners value following the rules, we're not immune to succumbing to anger when someone cuts us off, weaves in and out of traffic, or brakes suddenly. Aggressive driving simply becomes more stark when paired against the backdrop of Midwestern culture, which tends to prize hard work, politeness, and being fair.

June 14, 2016: In December 2015, Valerie Schremp Hahn, of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* explained via email that she didn't have any other information about the Darvin Wallace case beyond what she reported three years ago. In mid-June 2016, Schremp Hahn reports on another strange road-rage case in the St. Louis area, this time a motorist with a gun who shoots twice into a family of three's vehicle. A bullet grazes a three-year-old girl's right calf as she rode in the backseat of her parents' car after stopping at a Subway for dinner.

The alleged reason the girl and family's car was shot? "The father honked his horn at a black Ford F-150 pickup truck that had swerved into his lane, police said."

Innocent enough, I think about Brandon's perusal of /r/RoadRage, until he says, motioning to his laptop's screen, "Hey! People are buying spark plugs to throw at the assholes who tail too closely. Interesting idea." The porcelain in a spark plug — broken shards of spark plugs are often called 'ninja rocks,' for those burglars who use them for breaking and entering — can shatter a windshield into a thousand little pieces when thrown just-so out the driver's window toward a tailgating car. I am stunned to realize that some people, albeit a very, very small percentage of people, think this is an appropriate solution for 'punishing' another driver.

"Why would drivers do this?" I ask Brandon as I imagine people on a morning commute flinging make-shift weapons out of car windows. The thought is both ridiculous and terrifying. My own morbid curiosity (versus my husband's dark satisfaction) toward this topic centers less on bad-driver redemption and more on figuring out how to feel safe in a world that seems to be angrier and more violent as the 21st Century takes flight. Brandon assures me he would never throw 'ninja rocks' out of his car window, but I still worry about how we can better express our humanity and our patience with one another on the road, especially when my home state of Missouri offers a perfect cocktail of driving culture vs. public transit, more drivers carrying guns (legally and illegally), and often undiagnosed mental illness. The cliched depictions of Missourians and Midwesterners as a whole as docile, corn-fed, passive-aggressive types

who kill with kindness and a hot dish is not the whole story. It never has been.

In talking with my husband Brandon about what puts him on edge while driving, zipper merges notwithstanding, he admits: "You feel like your life is in the hands of strangers. When you see other drivers doing things that make no sense at all, it heightens the anxiety because you can't predict what they're going to do when they're hanging out in the wrong lane, when they're not using signals, and when they're weaving in and out of multiple lanes. They're doing things that may be right by the letter of the law, but, more often than not, they're doing things that are inefficient and inconsiderate. Some drivers expect everyone else to accommodate them, but they're not abiding by their end of the social contract. That's the No. 1 issue."

And perhaps that is part of the problem — most of us need to revisit the rules of engagement and Hobbes' social contract for how we treat one another, while driving and elsewhere. As James Hamblin, MD, pointed out in his July 8, 2016 *The Atlantic* article, "It's Not Us vs. Them," "Seek help at the first impulse to harm another human, at the first instance of rage you cannot easily control, at the first sign of sadness that does not subside, or at the first notion of loneliness before it becomes any of these things." Cultivating interdependence, as Hamblin observes, is not a sign of weakness, but rather wisdom.

According to *Esquire Magazine's* and NBC News' January 2016 survey on 'American Rage,' the 3,000 Americans the news outlets surveyed, are angrier than last year. Half of those Americans said they were angrier than the year before, with white folks as the angriest subset of all groups. "...[W]e see the anger of *perceived disenfranchisement*—a sense that the majority has become a persecuted minority, the bitterness of a promise that didn't pan out—rather than actual hardship," the *Esquire* editors wrote. And just like the Duke neuroscience researchers' findings on social exchange rule violations or the recent rise in nationalism around the world (from Great Britain's "Brexit" to Donald Trump's ascension as the GOP's nominee for the 2016 Presidential election), the emphasis on why some of us are more prone to anger, be it on the highway or elsewhere, is centered squarely on perception — *perceived* disenfranchisement and *perceived* social rule violations. The trick, however, is to try and understand what C.G. Jung posited long ago: "Everything that irritates us about others can lead to an understanding of ourselves."

The Cherokee legend of the two wolves also offers another possible narrative for how we might respond to one another, both on and off the road.

In the well-known legend, often shared and retold by elders in Oklahoma, Missouri, and elsewhere, the Grandfather tells his grandson that there is a battle going on inside of him – a fight against a wolf full of anger and hate, wearing him down worse than any enemy could, and a wolf full of goodness and patience, who strives for harmony and only fights when it is right to do so.

The grandson asks, "Which one wins, Grandfather?"

The Grandfather smiles and responds quietly, "The one I feed."

When it comes to the Midwest, I want to imagine that the good wolf wins; that we, for the most part, are raised to feed our better natures. But in a culture that emphasizes "nice" above all else, we run the risk of leaving our doors open to the wolf that feeds on the "terrible beauty" of our rage, who grows fat in the night without our realizing it, and attacks when we're in the confines of our own vehicles. There are no easy solutions to the problem of road rage, or to the contradiction in terms that is the Midwest, but perhaps there is a place to start: by using our time on the rolling hills of Rolla and Tecumseh; in the rush-hour return on I-70 in Kansas City or St. Louis; or in the commuter student slog of Columbia, Springfield and Cape Girardeau, as an opportunity to ask ourselves and our loved ones — which wolf will we feed today?

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