

## Slow down please

I despise cars. I am planning to write a book called 'Why Cars Suck'. In it, I hope to make the case that cars and the infrastructure they demand have destroyed our health, our cities, our democracies and our environments. If man's history has been but a series of falls, the car is our latest, and I fear our last. We have never fully reckoned with what it means to see one another hurtling past behind glass, encased in metal, at speeds that kill. It is not good for us, and we would, I submit, be better off without them. The book is not my current project, though. My project at the moment is figuring out ways to stop cars speeding on the road in front of my apartment building. This road is, day and night, awash with cars, the echoing rush of tyres, crashing so steadily that pedestrians are all but hushed to silence. At night I lay there trying to trick my brain into thinking I reside by an ocean. Complaints to the council having been exhausted, I have landed on the idea of throwing stones at these cars, in the hope that causing sufficient damage to enough of them will precipitate their owners' slowing down. The precise cause and effect between the throwing and the reductions in speed is vague to me, but it makes some intuitive sense: I am raising the cost of driving fast by creating and enforcing the possibility, for drivers, that their cars will be damaged by their so doing. In any event, the more expensive the car and the faster the car is going – these two things are invariably connected I have found – and the more damage I am able to bring about, the happier I will be.

The project has not yet started in earnest. An important part of my story is that I have a job. I would like to keep my job. If I were to be caught throwing stones at speeding cars this would cause me to lose my job. My job involves writing things, things like the above book, and I would like to remain in a position to do this for pay. I also like spending time with my wife and children and worry my being caught throwing stones at cars will also prevent me from doing this. I am therefore at the preliminary stage of this project. I am learning to throw stones in such a way that I will not get caught.

In order to avoid being caught I must not be seen throwing stones at cars in such a way that I can be identified. If am to be identified it must be as a blur, a shadow or an unknown, admittedly low-level, vigilante. A number of possible means of achieving this anonymity have occurred to me. Option one. I can run away after having thrown the stone. In other words, I set myself up at a section of road I know to be used by drivers who speed and when a car passes the section of road where I am located, I throw the stone. The windshield is the obvious place to throw this as it will cause the most expensive, not to mention dramatic, damage. However, so long as *sufficient* damage is caused, any part of the car will do. One obvious advantage of this approach is standing fully prepared and open about by willingness to throw gives me maximum preparation time to pick my spot on the car and effectively target the projectile. After I have thrown the stone, the idea is that I then sprint away as quickly possible. This tactic can be further facilitated by finding a section of road where exits are plentiful and easy to access. Performing the act at night so as to keep my appearance obscured from drivers and passers-by is also an option, though this might compromise my ability to properly judge the speed of passing cars. My vigilantism aspires to be fair-minded.

I am not currently pursuing this strategy. My reasoning is simple. I am not that fast. In my mind's eye, I can see, and clearly, the image of an aggrieved driver braking hard and, without parking, leaping from his car and setting off after me, wherever I might have gone. To be sure, I will get a certain distance, but, perhaps aided by passers-by who fail to recognize the service my project will provide for the community (and by the metastasis of example, humanity), or else just because some people are naturally

sympathetic to car drivers (sympathy which tracks an affinity for conservative politics, especially of the landlordist variety) the angry driver quickly locates me, before proceeding to bash me mercilessly. After said bashing, the driver would in all likelihood avail himself of the services of the state, ironic given his own law-breaking preceding said chase and bashing. In all frankness, such a violent reaction would be entirely natural from the point of view of someone willing to break speed limits at the speed at which I am proposing to use this intervention.

My second approach, the one I have elected to pursue, is to introduce some subtlety into the act of the throw. This will involve timing and finesse. I have been trying out a number of techniques. The first goes as follows: I must position my body in such a way that I will not be seen throwing the stone. This is hard to describe and involves a number of components. I must be walking on the side of the road where there is oncoming traffic. Where the car drives on the left hand side of the road, as it does where I live, I must be walking on the road's right, i.e. to the left of the car's direction of travel. As the car approaches, I twist my body to the right, away from the road. So, again, when the car is coming along the left hand side of road, I will turn my body clockwise – my ambulation still carrying me forward – with a stone poised within the crook of the index finger of my left hand. The turn itself will generate the force needed to release the stone (at 5 o'clock I want to say) with sufficient energy, while my body – this is the theory – will actually shield the actual release of said stone from said hand from the eye-line of the driver.

One significant drawback of this technique is the timing aspect. In attempting to alleviate the worry about chases and bashings, I am instead electing to hit a moving object while I too am on the move, and against the object's direction of travel at that. I am therefore not in a good position to throw directly at the car – the obvious, if singular, advantage of the first approach. Plus, the sight of a weirdly twisting pedestrian combining with the chipping or even shattering of a windshield, may create worryingly instant synaptic connections in the driver's mind such that the braking, the refusal to properly park, the foot pursuit and merciless bashing will all occur in spite of my precautions.

The second technique within this second approach – so let's call it 2b – involves timing and finesse, but less exposure. 2b is my current favourite. The idea is to set myself up with a sufficiently long view of instances of speeding traffic. This will require, I have calculated, around 50 meters of lead-in distance, to assess whether the driver is speeding excessively enough to merit a damaged, hopefully shattered, windshield. Luckily, the road in front of my apartment is both long and straight, precisely what has caused drivers to treat it as a launch-pad. Once the speed has been gauged and the judgement made as to whether or not to make the throw, the stone must be launched high in the air, with a parabola that peaks somewhere halfway across the road, followed by a curving descent back to earth, road and oncoming windshield. A few of the advantages here: one, better protection. A stone can be thrown high into the air without imposing undue contortions on the throwing body. Second, when sufficient height is coupled to the car's excessive speed, the impact of glass on stone will be plenty satisfying. Third, if timings can be properly assessed, it can also be thrown high enough to offer significant amounts of protection from other suspicious eye-lines. A stone thrown two seconds prior to impact will allow the thrower, in this case me, to regain all the composure of a regular pedestrian, effectively rendering him invisible at the point of impact. I have begun practising this technique, not yet onto the road where unperfected it could cause unintended damage, but choosing instead to keep the stone's parabola and descent confined to a local park, the pavement and, finally, roadside hedges. In so doing, I have developed, I believe, the knack of being able to judge the trajectory of a stone thumb-flicked from waist height, up into the air, where it hangs for just the right amount of time, before dropping more or less

directly onto where a windshield will be, adjusted according to the egregiousness of the excess speed. Obviously, there will be variations of the angles that will need to be employed once the stone is sent road-wards, but I do not anticipate serious problems of adjustment in this regard. The practice has thus far gone well, such that I can consistently arch stones into a small bucket at a distance of some eight feet. Tonight is the first of my evenings spent as a roadside vigilante. Report to follow.

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The above experiment has proved a considerable success, but not without the incurring of some regrettable collateral damage. It was the opening throw of the first night, and the stone I chose to throw – you will notice the above report neglected to mention my calculations with respect to this element of size, and that is because I was insufficiently attentive to this particular dimension of the experiment – was far too large for the purposes of vehicular sabotage. (For those readers interested in the details, the stone was about the size and weight of a two-pound coin. I can in good conscience recommend nothing larger or heavier than a five cents piece.) The car – blacked out windows, Mercedes, large shiny rims (I am not good with specific models, but it is precisely the type of car that offends me merely on seeing it) – was going about 15 mph over the speed limit. Here was an obvious candidate. I launched the stone when he – the dental records proved definitive in identifying at least *his* sex – was approximately 25 metres away. No more than a second could have passed between the throw and stone meeting glass. The noise was, at first, immensely satisfying. It was explosively loud, and I imagined from my bed it would really have sounded quite like an ocean wave ripping into a beach. However, the *sight* of what followed, which was of horror, pure and simple, was much less satisfying. The driver, understandably startled by the sudden flow of air mixing with glass about his face, did not put his foot to the brake pedal. Instead, he turned his wheel sharply. This was not a wise decision on his part, and probably testifies to the man's overall lack of intelligence. Of course, and in his defence, he could not have expected to be so suddenly thrust into a situation where such quick decision-making was going to be called upon. But, on being confronted with a shattered windshield less than a foot from his or her face, I wager nine-tenths of humanity would look to slow down and indeed stop as soon as possible. I submit the driver thus bears some blame in what his swerving ultimately brought about.

In any event, the car turned and did so onto the pavement. To be clear, this was not usually a busy street, and certainly not at this time of the evening. The cars – most especially the speeding cars – were not an invitation for people to gather here. So I was immensely surprised to see this car, its speed having barely decreased, pile into the six or seven people (the precise number was never established) populating the pavement at this time. More surprising still was the fireball that seconds later shot up from that concatenation of petrol, metal, glass, flesh, bone and pushchair. The ocean waves conjured by shattered glass was now replaced with the heat, and somehow the winds, of a thousand suns exploding all at once. Even now, I can feel the tight, crackled skin around my lips and under my eyes.

As a result of this incident – which took several weeks to clear up and is still adorned with scorch marks, balloons, flowers and small teddy bears commemorating the site – there has been a speed limit of 20mph established and a heavy police presence enforcing it. Traffic has slowed accordingly, my sleep, and I imagine that of others as well, is far more restful, and it is now possible to converse while on the pavement, and even enjoy the sounds of wind through trees and birdsong. Ancient sounds we should call them. I think 8 deaths, even taken together – the neck-cracking spectacle was merely the incident's

rhetorical flourish we might say; at least eight people were eventually going to die on that road, I am sure of it – is a small price to pay for such progress. And yes, I remain at large.