Traffic
an excerpt by Tom Vanderbilt
(2008)

Surely you have had a moment when you were driving down the road and suddenly found yourself "awake at the wheel," unable to remember the last few minutes. In a way, much of the time we spend in traffic is like that, a kind of gauzy dream state of automatic muscle movements and half-remembered images. Traffic is an in-between time in which we are more likely to think about where we are going than where we are at the moment. Time and space are skewed in traffic; our vision is fragmented and often unclear, and we take in and then almost immediately forget hundreds, perhaps thousands of images and impressions. Every minute we are surrounded by a different group of people, people we will share space with but never talk to, never meet.

Considering that many of us may spend more time in traffic than we do eating meals with our family, going on vacation, or having sex, it seems worth probing a bit deeper into the experience.

As Americans in the early twenty-first century, we live in the most auto-dependent, car-adapted, mileage-happy society in the history of the planet. We spend more on driving than on food or health care. As of the last census, there were more cars than citizens. In 1960, hardly any household had three vehicles, and most had only one. Now more own three than own one. Even as the size of the average North American family has fallen over the past several decades, the number of homes with multicar garages has almost doubled–one in five new homes has a three-car garage.

To pay for all that extra space, commute times have also been expanding. One of the fastest-growing categories in the last "commuting census" in the United States was that of "extreme
commuters," people who spend upward of two hours a day in traffic (moving or otherwise).

Many of these are people pushed farther out by higher home prices, past the billboards that beckon "If you lived here, you'd be home by now," in a phenomenon real estate agents call "drive till you qualify"– in other words, trading miles for mortgage. The average American, as of 2005, spent thirty-eight hours annually stuck in traffic. Not IN traffic, STUCK in traffic. In 1969, nearly half of American children walked or biked to school; now just 16 percent do. From 1977 to 1995, the number of trips people made on foot dropped by nearly half. This has given rise to a joke: In America, a pedestrian is someone who has just parked their car.

Traffic has become a way of life. The expanding car cup holder, which became fully realized standard equipment only in the 1980s, is now the vital enabler of dashboard dining, a "food and beverage venue" hosting such products as Campbell's Soup at Hand and Yoplait's Go-Gurt. In 2001, there were 134 food products that featured the word go on the label or in ads; by 2004, there were 504.

Accordingly, the number of what the industry calls “on-the-go eating occasions” in the United States and Europe combined is predicted to rise from 73.2 billion in 2003 to 84.4 billion in 2008. Fast-food restaurants now clock as much as 70 percent of their sales at drive-through windows. (Early in our romance with the car, we used to go to “drive-in” restaurants, but those now seem relics of a gentler, slower age.) An estimated 22 percent of all restaurant meals are ordered through a car window in America, but other places, like Northern Ireland – where one in eight people are said to eat in the car at least once per week – are getting into the act too.

McDonald’s has added a second lane to hundreds of its restaurants in the United States in order to speed traffic. Starbucks, which initially resisted the drive-through for its fast-food connotations, now has drive-throughs at more than half of its new company-owned stores. The “third place” that Starbucks espouses, the place for community and leisure between home and work, is, arguably, the car.

Traffic has even shaped the food we eat. “One-handed convenience” is the mantra, with forkless foods like Taco Bell’s hexagonal Crunchwrap Supreme, designed “to handle well in the car.” I spent an afternoon in Los Angeles with an advertising executive who had, at the behest of that same restaurant chain, conducted a test, in actual traffic, of which foods were easiest to eat while driving. The main barometer of success or failure was the number of napkins used. But if food does spill, one can simply reach for Tide to Go, a penlike device for “portable stain removal,” which can be purchased at one of the more than twelve hundred (and growing) CVS drugstores that feature a drive-through window.

The “audiobook,” virtually unheard of before the 1980s, represents a business worth $871 million a year, and wouldn’t you know it, “traffic congestion” gets prominent mention in sales reports from the Audio Publishers Association.

Car commuting is so entrenched in daily life that National Public Radio refers to its most popular segments as “driveway moments,” meaning the listener is so riveted to a story they cannot leave their car. In Los Angeles, some synagogues have been forced to change the time of their evening services from eight p.m. to six p.m. in order to capture commuters on their way home, as going home and then returning to services is too much to bear in L.A. traffic. So much time is spent in cars in the United States, studies show, that drivers (particularly men) have higher rates of skin cancer on their left sides – look for the opposite effect in countries where people drive on the left.

We are all traveling the same road, if each in our own peculiar way.

White Noise

an excerpt by Don DeLillo
(1985)

A family's desperate escape from a chemical disaster unfolds almost entirely from the vantage point of the car. Even though this novel dates back to 1985, DeLillo captures how modern life funnels us into our cars during moments of crisis – not just as transportation, but as isolation chambers where we search for meaning and process collective fear alone.

"They want us to evacuate," he said, not meeting our eyes. … "It said something like 'Evacuate all places of residence. Cloud of deadly chemicals.'"

We sat there over sponge cake and canned peaches. … Twenty minutes later we were in the car. The voice on the radio said that people on the west end of town were to head for the abandoned Boy Scout camp, where Red Cross volunteers would dispense juice and coffee. … We joined the traffic flow into the main route out of town, a sordid gauntlet of used cars, fast food, discount drugs and quad cinemas. As we waited our turn to edge onto the four-lane road we heard the amplified voice above and behind us calling out to darkened homes in a street of sycamores and tall hedges.

"Abandon all domiciles, Now, now. Toxic event, chemical cloud."

The voice grew louder, faded, grew loud again as the vehicles moved in and out of local streets. Toxic event, chemical cloud. When the words became faint, the cadence itself was still discernible, a recurring sequence in the distance.

We made it onto the road as snow began to fall. We had little to say to each other, our minds not yet adjusted to the actuality of things, the absurd fact of evacuation. Mainly we looked at people in other cars, trying to work out from their faces how frightened we should be. Traffic moved at a crawl but we thought the pace would pick up some miles down the road. … The two opposite lanes were empty, which meant police had already halted traffic coming this way. An encouraging sign. What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos.

The snow came more thickly, the traffic moved in fits and starts. There was a life-style sale at a home furnishing mart. Well-lighted men and women stood by the huge window looking out at us and wondering. It made us feel like fools, like tourists doing all the wrong things. Why were they content to shop for furniture while we sat panicky in slowpoke traffic in a snowstorm?

Air-raid sirens were still sounding in two or more towns. … I started pushing buttons on the radio. On a Glassboro station we learned there was new and important information. People already indoors were being asked to stay indoors. We were left to guess the meaning of this. … I kept punching buttons, hoping to find someone with background information. A woman identified as a consumer affairs editor began a discussion of the

medical problems that could result from potential contact with the airborne toxic event. …

“Convulsions, coma, miscarriage,” said the well-informed and sprightly voice.

We passed a three-story motel. Every room was lighted, every window filled with people staring at us. We were a parade of fools. … Why weren’t they out here, sitting in heavy coats behind windshield wipers in the silent snow? …

Slowly we approached an overpass, seeing people on foot up there. They carried boxes and suitcases, objects in blankets, a long line of people leaning into the blowing snow. …

There was a family wrapped completely in plastic, a single large sheet of transparent polyethylene. They walked beneath their shield in lock step, the man and woman at each end, three kids between, all of them secondarily wrapped in shimmering rainwear. The whole affair had about it a well-rehearsed and self-satisfied look, as though they’d been waiting for months to strut their stuff.

We moved slowly beneath the overpass, hearing a flurry of automobile horns and the imploring wail of an ambulance stuck in traffic. Fifty yards ahead the traffic narrowed to one lane and we soon saw why. One of the cars had skidded off the incline and barreled into a vehicle in our lane. Horns quacked up and down the line. A helicopter sat just above us, shining a white beam down on the mass of collapsed metal. People sat dazed on the grass, being tended to by a pair of bearded paramedics. Two people were bloody. There was blood on a smashed window. Blood soaked upward through newly fallen snow. Drops of blood speckled a tan handbag. The scene of injured people, medics, smoking steel, all washed in a strong and eerie light, took on the eloquence of a formal composition. We passed silently by, feeling curiously reverent, even uplifted by the sight of the heaped cars and fallen people.

[My teenage son] Heinrich kept watching through the rear window. … He described for us in detail the number and placement of bodies, the skid marks, the vehicular damage. When the wreck was no longer visible, he talked about everything that had happened since the air-raid siren at dinner. He spoke enthusiastically, with a sense of appreciation for the vivid and unexpected. I thought we’d all occupied the same mental state, subdued, worried, confused.

It hadn’t occurred to me that one of us might find these events brilliantly stimulating.