

From UrbanTulsa.com

Originally published by Urban Tulsa Weekly Thursday, December, 2, 2004

©2004 [Urban Tulsa Weekly](http://UrbanTulsa.com).

Cover Story

Writer's Digest Award

The Toll It Takes

No corporate cubicle for him, David says a turnpike toll booth gives him enough room for his mind to wander by Barry Friedman

David leans against a metal cabinet in front of two Oklahoma Department of Transportation computer screens. Talking with both hands, he is standing between two sliding toll doors, their windows half covered in tin foil. On a shelf above his head is a 9" television/VCR combo and a microwave--a yellow post-it note, stuck on its glass, cautions "Do not use while the TV is on. They both may explode." A clock mounted on the wall behind David reads 12:15; he'll be here for another 6 hours and 45 minutes.

There's room for two in this toll booth, as long as one of us stands.

I sit on a ripped red stool, facing him, against a refrigerator and water cooler that was provided by ODOT. The five attendants who work the booth had to chip in for the TV/VCR combo and microwave.

For the moment, there are no cars in either direction, just miles of night outside.

When the new facility is completed, the attendants will have cable, too, but out here, in this temporary locale, there is no way to get it. Right now, *The Late, Late Show* is on, but the reception is terrible and the sound is inaudible. As for the television, David says the state requires that all sets be no larger than 9" so as not to be visible to motorists who might get annoyed to think they're paying the salaries of people who watch television for a living.

David says the problem with the 9" set is that, "You watch *The Three Stooges*, you only get to see two of them."

David smiles often, but rarely makes eye contact.

There isn't much traffic between 11 at night and 7 in the morning out here, so David has plenty of time for television and videos; plenty of time to write his poetry--long, stream of consciousness things best suited for coffee houses and venues where pierced teens sit on sofas and chain smoke; and plenty of time to spend with himself.

There's a portable toilet outside, something you'd see at an outdoor music festival, the kind that doesn't flush but which simply collects wastes. Worse, for David, the door opens into traffic, so he won't use it.

"What a way to go, huh?" he says, enjoying his double entendre.

2

He calls being a toll taker both the "best job in the world and the worst," quoting a line he once heard from a retired secret service agent: "At my job, I'm ninety-nine percent bored, one percent terrified."

Drinking a Diet Pepsi and in uniform and regulation hat, David says he's been doing this since 1980.

Only here 15 minutes and already slightly nauseous from the decades of automobile fumes imbedded in the derma of the booth, I wonder how, after 25 years, he hasn't snapped.

He laughs at that.

To spend time with David is to see a man whose RPMs are racing out of control. His job, he admits, is not strenuous, but it's the nothingness that exhausts him. He is hyper from boredom, like a man who's simultaneously doing coke and smoking pot. Collecting quarters for a living or telling people 43 times a night where they can find a convenience store or breathing in diesel fuel for a quarter century will do that to you. To say he acts like he's in a cage is an understatement. He is in a cage.

"If you want a job just to have a job," he says, "this is perfect. Good benefits, can't get laid off. For the first twenty years I hated it, just hated it. The hardest part is being out here eight hours. Talking to truck drivers all night is not always rewarding.

3

"And most people we see here are lost, anyway," but it's tough to know if he's joking.

Starry Nights

There isn't much out here, but cement dividers and trees and tire marks. We walk out to where his car is parked so he can show me where he saw a shooting star one night.

He talks of being "cussed out" by people who think Oklahoma charges too much for tolls.

"I used to let it get to me, but you develop a sense of humor." David's booth is primarily a refund booth.

"Don't ask me what the state was thinking," David says, referring to the system where motorists pay full price at Midway and then get money back if they exit before reaching Oklahoma City or Tulsa.

"It would make sense if they could pay here."

He does, though, collect the occasional quarter from motorists using I-44 for the short haul, quarters that are arranged on the counter in front of him.

Asked if he has ever been held up, he points to the quarters, laughs, and says, "Well, no, not unless they want to do laundry."

He says he likes the graveyard shift, one he calls "basically, a

4

night watchmen," because it gives him time to think of great thoughts.

Those on the night shift don't get a break. That's the deal, apparently: less work, no lunch hour.

He knows the toll, pardon the pun, this takes on his body.

"If I'm home and in bed by eight in the morning, and up by three or four in the afternoon, I'm fine."

Occasionally, when he works another shift, though, he says he can forget about sleep.

"We're supposed to work rotating shifts, but since nobody wants this one, I usually have no problem."

When he has vacation, and he has five weeks a year, he doesn't go anywhere.

"Yeah, I know I should," he says. But the time off throws his body into more of a spiral than it normally is. It isn't worth it.

He has a rhythm, though, on off nights. For instance, on Wednesdays, he goes to Rick's Cafe American to eat pan fried steak and hear his favorite singer. He loves live music. He also has more useless information than most, but he has more time than most to think about it.

He relays a story about Brian Wilson being so drunk and on drugs, he hit on his own daughter at a party; he advises

5

musicians to stay off planes on February 3, the day Buddy Holly died; and he tells me that Edgar Allen Poe only made \$12 for The Raven.

At Village Inn, at four in the morning once, I saw David put six, seven, then eight packets of sugar in his coffee. If he doesn't have OCD, he's on his way. He carries wet wipes with him, uses them often. But think about it: he touches more hands in a night than most of us do in a year.

"Any wonder you can't sleep?" I ask him, pointing to the ripped sugar packets in front of him. "Yes, I know."

David has a nervous laugh, a series of ticks really. He is shy, rushing through stories too fast; yet, to see him at the Gypsy, doing his poetry, which he performs under the name Fool, he knows to wait for the laughs. And it is when he is doing his poetry, he is as comfortable as he is going to be.

Road Hazards

The Oklahoma night out here, though, is not as friendly. David talks about the speeding semis that he's afraid may wipe out the plaza and him when they take the corners too fast, which is why the Christmas lights, hanging lazily around the top of the booth, haven't been taken down--he says they're not for celebration, but protection. He mentions the wild animals who run past him, the drug chases involving police cars, and the occasional overturned truck carrying poisonous chemicals.

6

There was also the snake he found inside a change booth he had to empty.

He says the last few years have been different, too, since he started concentrating on his poetry.

"A lot of the difference now has to do with the writing I've been doing."

He writes poems about cell phones and unapproachable women and his own struggles, but it started, naturally enough, with the world out here on the Turnpike.

"But I soon discovered that not everyone would care about that."

I ask if he ever thought of quitting, of trashing the booth, and walking away.

"Oh, absolutely."

It is then that Barrel Man drives by and stops in the lane to the Turnpike.

"Hey, Barrel Man," says David, excited for someone to talk with.

"I am now a dispatcher, too," comes the voice from the car.

Barrel Man is in charge of checking the equipment left on site for the construction of the new booth, including the orange

7

barrels. With his motor running and no traffic in sight, Barrel Man leaves his car in the lane. He and David talk about the girls swirling around their lives--neither are married or appear to be dating seriously so their musings are more of wonder and confusion than anger and bitterness.

They talk for a few minutes while I try to make out who's talking to Craig Ferguson. Barrel Man offers to buy David a burger and bring it back to him. David, dieting, says no thanks.

A car comes off the interstate in the other direction. Barrel man leaves. Anticipating its arrival, David slides open the door and window, but watches it drive by the booth without stopping. The people inside have Pike Pass, they don't have to, but, still, they're not supposed to be doing 40, either.

Others come by and do stop.

David seems to have a similar, yet sincere greeting for each.

"Hey, how you doing tonight?"

He has regulars, people who wonder how he's doing, but the conversation rarely lasts longer than the question takes to ask.

He once got a tip, \$5, for a map the state lets him hand out for free.

I'm not supposed to be here, for ODOT forbids people hanging out in toll booths. David tells me if a supervisor comes, we'll say I was a stranded motorist and that David couldn't let me stay out

8

in the car by myself. I wonder what we'll say about the notebook.

Before I leave, David wants to show me something, something he says was the most terrifying moment of his life as a toll taker- -so bad in fact, he has it on video. He pops a tape into the 9" combo and a car is seen driving up to a toll booth. The driver pulls out a buck, pays the attendant, but the car in front of him won't move. He honks. The toll taker quickly ducks down and men from that front car jump out and open fire on the man's car. Soon, more men appear from an adjoining lane and begin shooting, as well. The man inside, bloodied, torn apart, attempts to make his way out, but the shooting continues. His body is pummeled with each round. Eventually, he stumbles out of the car and falls to the road. Dead many times over, he is shot again and kicked in the head.

David laughs because he is showing me the causeway scene in *The Godfather* when Sonny Corleone is shot by Barzini's men. David has obviously done this before.

I then ask him something which I know will sound dismissive, but still I ask.

"You've been doing this for twenty-five years and I am amazed at how much hasn't happened."

"Nothing's happened," he says, correcting me. "Nothing good, nothing bad."

9

He slides open the door to let me out. The fresh night air fills the booth.

It is now 1:10--5 hours and 50 minutes to go.

"Did you get everything you need?" he wonders as I get up to leave.

I ask for and get a map. A few days later in my mailbox, Fool has left me a poem,

entitled *A Whole Lot of Nothing*. **I started out with nothing/and I still have most of it.**

It's time to change gears to get out of despair/and get out of this highway that's leading nowhere

I look in the mirror and what do I see/a whole lot of nothing staring at me.