

November 2019

The Turnpike

Laura Munson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/anthology>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Munson, Laura (2019) "The Turnpike," *The Anthology*. Vol. 2019, Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/anthology/vol2019/iss1/18>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Anthology by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Winthrop University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@mailbox.winthrop.edu.

Margie yawned widely, the sound breaking an all-encompassing silence. Behind the sliding glass windows of her little toll booth, she was encapsulated in a small pod of white sterile light, beneath the even whiter, overwhelming light of the toll plaza. Beyond it, the interstate stretched as far as she could see into a vast expanse of darkness. There was no moon that night, only the smog of the nearest city, obscuring any stars. Far in the distance, there might have been a street lamp. Otherwise, the toll plaza was the only light in a void of darkness.

Margie looked down at her watch - 2:52 a.m. She had five hours and eight minutes to go until she could drive home in the gray light of a sun considering rising over the trees. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the sort of purse that a 52-year-old divorced, childless woman who worked the graveyard shift on the turnpike would keep cigarettes in. It didn't take her long to realize she'd forgotten a lighter.

The first time the lights flickered, it was only for a moment, so brief that for a fraction of a second, she thought she had merely blinked. When they flickered again, she knew it was real.

Maybe it was the shock of the blinking lights above or the fact that the approaching car's headlights weren't on, but Margie didn't notice the vehicle until it was right upon her. She turned with a start as the white car stopped at the window.

She opened the window. "Dollar fifty."

She locked eyes with the motorist, and felt the hair on her neck stand up. The woman was dressed in white scrubs, with a look in her eyes that made Margie nauseous. Beside her in the front seat there was a large bow, a quiver of arrows, and a single passenger who sat sweating and twitching in a restless, unwell slumber. Something glistened on his shirt that might have been mucus or vomit.

Margie started to open her mouth to ask if the man was ok, but her mouth didn't open. Her tongue didn't move. All she could do was accept the six quarters that dropped from the woman's claw-like hand and open the gate.

The woman thanked her in a soft, raspy voice, and drove off into the darkness.

Margie shut her window quickly, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling that the woman had left her with. The nausea remained, and seemed to be worsening with every passing second until she was certain she would vomit - but she didn't.

It was 3:15 a.m. when the next car pulled up. Margie had never seen such a red Jeep before, yet the oncoming vehicle was a

bloody, fiery shade of red. This one had its headlights on, like the glowing eyes of a red demon.

“Good evening,” she said to the newcomer. The man said nothing, only glared at her with a strange amount of wrath behind his eyes. As she looked into the man’s eyes, Margie felt a sharp pain as though a sword was being driven into her chest, a sensation so genuine that she brought her hand to her abdomen to search for the source of the pain. She felt only her rough t-shirt against her unaffected flesh.

The driver and the man in his passenger seat were wearing camo shirts, and Margie realized with horror that the passenger’s internal organs were spilling out of his abdomen onto the floor of the car as he sputtered out his bloody final breaths. This time, she didn’t even try to speak. She hurriedly accepted the one-dollar bill and two quarters that the man offered, opened the gate, and watched the red Jeep drive away.

Alone in the silence again, Margie was feeling panicked. Her chest still hurt, she was still sick to her stomach, and she felt the need for a cigarette more than she had before. Each minute felt like it took an hour to go by. It had to be later than 3:30.

In her desperation to focus on something simple and benign, she found herself watching the approaching headlights. Once the car came into view, she could see that it was quite small and black as the moonless night. The driver was like a skeleton, she was so gaunt. A set of weighing scales sat in her lap as she stared wordlessly at Margie, seeming to suck the life out of her. Margie had never felt so weak.

“Dollar fifty,” she managed to say.

The driver nudged her passenger, who somehow managed to be even skinnier, and was so weak that it appeared to be a near impossible task to lift the small pile of pennies from his purse. Once the passenger managed to present the coins, the driver took them swiftly and dropped them into Margie’s hand. It was obviously nowhere near a dollar and fifty cents, yet Margie opened the gate without counting them. The woman slowly drove off, leaving Margie to stare into the darkness.

As the third driver vanished, a deep and penetrating feeling of dread began to grow in Margie’s soul. She still felt the pain in her chest, the nausea, the weakness, the desire for a cigarette, or a snack, or to get the hell out of her uncomfortable glass box. The idea occurred to her to grab her car keys and leave. Fuck whatever her boss would say – something wasn’t right about that place on that night, and those disconcerting motorists. Then, she saw something on the small table beside her that silenced her racing thoughts.

Margie was not a religious woman, but some lady who worked the day shift always kept a small, blue Bible in the toll booth so she could bring some Christ into the hellish expanse of the interstate. Maybe she hoped Margie would open it and find some meaning in the Word of God. It hadn’t been on the table when Margie came into work, and it definitely hadn’t been open. She had never read the book of Revelations, and yet the words on the page drew her in and

struck her as familiar, with one phrase in particular standing out:

“I looked, and there before me was a pale horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”

Margie was hanging on that last sentence – sword, famine and plague – when she heard the creaking of a dilapidated car approaching. Somehow, it didn’t frighten her. Somehow, it felt like the last three drivers had been completely normal people or had not come through at all, and this was just another car stopping to pay a toll. The car was some sort of old, shitty commercial van with a pale, sickly green coloring. Margie didn’t look at the driver.

“Dollar fifty.” She still didn’t look at the driver. She felt the air move around her, indicating that a hand was reaching slowly from the window. When she finally looked up, she realized three things at once. First, that the hand was entirely bone, with a few bits of rotten flesh hanging on like the hand of a zombie. Second, that the face of the driver was shrouded in darkness, obscured by a large hoodie. Third, that there was no one in the passenger seat.

Margie didn’t move. The words in the blue Bible rushed through her head as she felt every sensation in its worst form.

“There before me was a white horse. Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown...”

“Another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people slay one another. To him was given a large sword...”

“I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand...”

Margie shifted her gaze from the outstretched bony hand to the pale vehicle, large enough for plenty of passengers, but empty except for its driver. She shut her eyes for a moment, feeling the cold air replaced by warmth, the harsh metal chair replaced by upholstery, and all her discomfort replaced by peace. She opened her eyes and glanced from the dashboard to her mysterious driver. Never in her life had she felt such euphoria.

Without the driver speaking, she received the instruction that seatbelts weren’t required in their car. If she looked past them, she could see into the toll booth and look upon the sort of sight that would have scarred her for life before she got into their car. It was her – or more accurately, her body – cold and several hours dead, gaunt and skinny with hunger, a small amount of blood and vomit on her shirt. The corpse had her hands outstretched, full of coins.

The car lurched forward, and Margie sank further into the intoxicating sensation of peace as they drove into the vast darkness. Before long, she ventured to turn her head and look back at the only light for miles – the tollbooth – as they drew further away from it. Before it was out of sight, she watched all the lights abruptly shut off, and the interstate was completely dark.