

## EARLY DAYS IN AUSTIN, 1998

*for MAK*

*On the highway of life, there will be chances taken  
On the highway of life, dont you be mistaken  
You drive or you ride, you fight or you die  
Somehow you survive, on the highway of life  
Billy Joe Shaver:*

At 8.20 pm Saturday October 17th, 1998, Marie being in Glasgow for one more week. I had the pencil in hand, the page on the table. The light reflected on the front window had the colours and configuration of a headstrong warrior goddess.

And a mosquito now biting my belly, and its compañero attacking my shoulder. In Austin the people seem to forget about their insects. There are these amazing *cacaroaches*; huge wee bastards with all kinds of tentacles and pincer-like wings. I trapped one in a plastic bowl early afternoon, took it outside in the heavy rain to set free, soaked my socks, slid on the tiles, nearly broke my fucking back, all to save its life. I think it was dying. Some of them are dying so that when ye can catch them they arent totally opposed to the idea. But some of them when they are lively are incredibly fast on their hundred feet. And they hide from ye! Stupid wee bastards. It's embarassing. Ye couldnay kill them man I'm telling ye, little fuckers.

<sup>1</sup> From the song, The Highway of Life, by Billy Joe Shaver, published by Suite Two 0 Five music / Restless Wind Music (BMI)

A sudden crack of thunder, and it seems to shake the house. I have the shutters down but not drawn. It is dark outside. Now the sheet lightning brightens the sky.

Yesterday was my father's birthday, he died 11 years ago.

It has been raining all day. Between 15 and 20 inches have fallen.

More thunder, farther off. Rumbling afresh. People here keep the shutters drawn, often down altogether, to keep out the sun . . .

Now at 8.33 pm a great crack of thunder, quite close, count the seconds until the lightning, calculate the distance.

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One great thing about art is that from quite an early stage it is possible for individuals to create something worthwhile. This truth should be self evident. Once we accept it we should be ready for some interesting consequences. Many of these will arise within the teaching profession. Perhaps this is especially the case where the teachers are themselves artists, as opposed to critics.

In Departments of English within the higher education system literary art occupies a peculiar position, it is the pinnacle of study yet among its teachers almost none of its practitioners may be found, not unless they hold qualifications that are appropriate to criticism but irrelevant to the creation of literary art. Whether or not they are creators of literature is irrelevant. Generally creators of literature are excluded from the teaching profession. Why else are some of its greatest practitioners not employed, as a matter of course, within the higher education system; why are they not paid by the state to give of themselves to the younger generations.

I am not presently addressing that point. I am addressing those who are fortunate enough to have gained positions of economic security

within the teaching profession, not as literary critics but as literary artists. This is a toty wee group of folk. In the English language most are domiciled in the United States of America. Not only are there courses and classes in what has become known as “Creative Writing” but the students who enrol are being taught by “Creative Writers”. In fact they are always being taught by Creative Writers, on occasion they are taught by creators of literary art.

Dostoevski did 10,000 words a day.

I’m now older than many of my heroes. Not that Dostoevski is a hero. He was a hero when I was younger. I am now suspicious of people into middle age or beyond who hold Dostoevski as a hero. Certain matters are undeniable, then untenable. Did Henry Miller held Dostoevski as a hero throughout his life? I find that consistent, not and never having been a fan of Henry Miller. I do know a couple of Henry Miller fans, they dont really have any politics, beatnik sort of notions, with a hippy quality to it, relativistic, zen, buddha, the art of do-nothing although what does that mean. Only political, I only mean political, activist political.

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I was looking through the books in the undergraduate library. It wasn't an arbitrary browse, I was seeking out linguistic cohorts. Messrs Saro-Wiwa, Earl Lovelace, Amos Tututola, Sam Selvon, Ayi Kwei Armah, and others. This was for the purpose of discoursing with the students, grads as well as undergrads. I was just about losing my temper altogether with the male graduate group from the Michener centre whom I meet for a three hour session once a week. To try and bridge the gap I thought to present them with some of the contemporary creators of English language literature. None of the graduate group of males seem to know

a fucking thing. They appear totally brainwashed by the system. They all think Hemingway is The Man, these man! the one only! the supreme formalist! forget 20th Century literature it stops and starts with Ernest! the most technically advanced! etc. and so on.

This is what these graduate students appear to believe. Even the fact that they didn't find it odd that this writer whom they assume is the greatest contemporary writer died forty years ago. It is weird. I'm talking about 1998 and young men of between 23 and 35 years of age who have studied literature and art for a few years.

It is true that Ralph Ellison once "selected Hemmingway as a model."

About the young women in the class, I don't yet know, they don't say much at all when it comes to such matters. I attempted to intimidate some of them by muttering that Ernest learned most everything he did best from Gertrude Stein. I can't remember any reaction.

White European-American male values are the values. This is a roost and the old WASPS rule it. The dominant value-system here in UT Austin, Texas, USA belongs to Oxbridge. I didn't know it was as bad as this, but my early impression is definitely that. Eliot is God and the same old rules, same old canon. As far as this major Texas university is concerned all aspire to the values of the British ruling elite. I find it shocking, and shameful.

Shameful? This must have to do with feelings of affinity to a marginalised people. It is true that people from the American south are scorned, ridiculed for their accent. Questions of inferiorization should be uppermost. But the horrible and pathetic thing here is of course denial. The key to so much of what goes on in the US is this: denial. The denial by the European-American culture. There is the stagey quest for ancestors by middle-class white Americans and if of Scottish extraction the presumption they'll be related to clan chiefs in some reasonably

direct manner, if not directly through the paternal line! It's all quite silly if not extraordinary, and vainglorious, such fucking foolish and adolescent egocentricity.

The reality as faced by their ancestors is the substance of the denial. It occurred to me that it is consistent that no Creative Writing student knows the work of Tillie Olsen.

I reread that amazing beautiful story, *Tell me a Riddle*. I was using it as a reference quite often so felt it was time I took another look. It truly is a masterpiece. Yet it surely touches on matters that are supremely American, immigration and related matters, denial of one's routes, and that peculiar refusal to see the experience of former generations as meaningful.

An older student in my undergraduate group, an African-American woman, tells me that in an art-class she took, the subject of a painting she did was based on a group of her African ancestors as she imagined them. Her white European-American artist-tutor-professor was coming round each of his students to see their work, making critical, technical comments etc. When the artist-tutor-professor came to this student he asked her about the subject matter then, after a pause, commented, Why paint people who are dead?

What a remarkable thing to say to a student. Coming to terms with his own racism. It reminded me of comments related to my own work, why write stories about one group of people all the time, you should broaden your subject matter. [Yes, and write about upper middle class white people from the Home Counties.]

But maybe it isn't remarkable at all. It fits in with some of the thoughts I've been having, based on the response from students to things I speak about, and based also on what I've become aware from readings I've

given during the last few years, in respect of literary culture ghettoisation being as strong as ever.

There seems an unwillingness from those who regard themselves as ‘Americans’ [i.e. European-Americans] to recognise the African-American literary experience as *their* literary experience. When I’ve been asked to name some American writers who have been important to me I might mention Richard Wright, James Baldwin or Ralph Ellison, maybe George Jackson’s letters, June Jordan’s essays, Malcolm X’s autobiography which, as I’ve mentioned elsewhere, was important for many white working class young people in the United Kingdom, of the post-war generation. The people who have asked the me to name the names will wait a moment before reacting, some may not know the names, others will wonder about the “context” and assume I’m making a ‘political’ point.

No no, these are writers whose work was important to me.

I was in San Francisco two years ago and met with two men from New York, close friends from infancy. The background of one was Italian; the other was African-American with little bits of other things thrown in, including I think a Scottish ancestor from last century. We got onto the subject of racism, and so on, and it was interesting that the one with the Italian background would describe himself and his community as American, in an unself-conscious manner, yet doing it in such a way as to exclude his childhood pal and the African-American community.

He was quite clear about this, that he came from an American background and his pal from an African-American background. His family had been in the States since the turn of the twentieth century, his pal from at least two or three hundred years before, as far as he could work out. The one with the Italian background thought I was taking things too far when I argued that his use of the term “American” in the

context might in itself be significant. He got very ratty and fell out with me, just managing to avoid falling out with his childhood pal.

But many white people are extremely sensitive on this issue. It has been said to me that there is very little racism outside of East Texas and almost none at all in Austin. I get accused of nitpicking when I point out things. I mentioned how in some record stores, including my favourite which is Cheapo's on Lamar, there is segregation, and not just Cheapo's. Major musicians like Albert Collins, Juke Boy Bonner, Johnny Copeland, Lightning Hopkins are found at the Blues counter and don't appear in the Local or Texas section. W.C. Clark is the exception to the rule because he's based in the town. Major white musicians occupy at least two counters, one being Local, the other the genre. Those whose fame doesn't extend much beyond Texas are confined to the Local.

Also once you begin checking out the venues you become aware that, well, for example, in a Austin nitespot known for its blues music, *The Continental Club*, I only ever have seen one African-American person in the audience on half a dozen visits [and she was in my own company]. Sure, performing with the band. But in the audience? No. It is foolish discussing venues such as *The Broken Spoke*, I happen to like it there, it's great, but I cannot imagine ever bumping into an African-American while two-stepping round the floor.

But this is an early impression.

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A friend invited me out earlier in the evening. Tom Paxton was playing at the Cactus Cafe, the local club right there on UT campus. I would have gone with him except that this rain became downright ridiculous. There have been flash-flood warnings all day. I was out driving at lunchtime and

there were some difficult driving conditions every way and some foolish folk were racing around, and I saw a few crashes. By the time this evening came the other guy and myself both found it easy to back out.

And then it turned out he had the wrong night. Tom Paxton was playing last night anyway, Friday, so even if we had made it we would have missed him. But he appears fairly regularly at the Cactus Cafe so there should be another time. And when it comes down to it he's also a regular back in Glasgow as well, as far as that goes. This new friend, a UT colleague, asked me if I had ever heard of Tom Paxton, and I replied:

*Bottle of wine fruit of the vine  
when you gonna let me get sober  
Let me alone let me go home  
let me get back to start over*

*Little hotel older than hell  
dark as the coal in a mine*

and so on, with apologies to Mister Paxton. Ask my daughters, I've been singing the damn thing for 30 years. A long fucking story which I didn't give to the new friend because it is kind of boring, depending on the context.

But I relate it here!

Back in 1967 I had a bed in a house halfway between Kings Cross and the Court of Chancery, just off Gray's Inn Road. I think I was a porter in Eastman's Dental Hospital which was a stone's throw away. One night we were playing cards with other guys living there - 3 Calthorpe Street - and I had a good win at pontoon. This other guy finished up owing me a fiver. Not a bad bit of dough at that time. He hadnt enough cash, so paid me in vinyl with a long-playing record - the Newport 1964 album

Maybe he thought he had conned me. What a deal. It was my introduction to various legends. The album had Doc Watson playing three numbers with his son Merle, brother Arnold, and Gaither Carlton, his father-in-law. Also there was old Fred McDowell; Koerner, Ray and Glover; and then a line-up calling themselves *The Cajun Band*: Dewey Balfa, Gladdy Thibodeaux, Louis LeJeune and Revon Reed. Then there were the Swan Silvertones, Hedy West and Judy Roderick; and of course two numbers by yer man, Mister Paxton.

But if we had gone to the Cactus Cafe tonight we would have heard Kimmie Rhodes, a country singer whose songs I know already from a CD album. Her guests on the album include Waylon Jennings and old Willie, wouldnt ye know. It would have been good to hear her at the Cactus, not much room for hiding there, little place that only seats about 160. Chris the bar-manager pours a good pint of guinness. Some lunchtimes I'm the only one there, He enjoys a guinness as well. He told me they've had 200 folk in there and it aint been too pleasant. It's strictly acoustic.

What an honourable history though. Doc Watson is just one of the performers who's passed that way. At least his poster is up. So too are are couple of Bob Dylan. Did he actually play there? I dont think so. Christ, he's been famous since he was twenty. But they do have good "Dylan nights" with Jimmy LaFave and others siting in. But could Dylan have played here? Hard to imagine. Townes Van Zandt was a regular, died the year before I arrived. And Billy Joe Shaver as well, he played there on Thursday October 4th 1998.

How do I remember the last with such amazing clarity? because I fucking missed it.

I can't remember why. Fucking hell man. I was amazed at him playing such a wee gig, having seen him in Glasgow's Old Fruitmarket Venue a

couple of years ago, playing to a near capacity house, more than a thousand skulls.

I heard a rumour that Jimmy Cliff is playing the La Zona Rosa.

Good stuff.

On the wider front, unfortunately, the Harry Ransom Centre's massive concentration of Anglo-American literature pisses one off, the usual mainstream establishment el crapero, the unbiased and objective nature of our anglo-american reality, from whose values we can all place Scott Fitzgerald as one of The Masters Of 20th Century Prose Literature . . . Ho hum, yes, dear o fucking dear doomed, doomed.

The writer uppermost in my mind in that connection has been Tutuola who died recently and for whose obituary I wrote a piece for *The Guardian* newspaper in England. I was fortunate to see one of his notebooks during spring of last year when myself and Duncan MacLean were in town. Duncan was all over the place with his beautiful wee book on American swing, the bugger, he had the cheek to introduce me to Johnny Gimble - imagine knowing Johnny Gimble, how does he do it.

Mia Carter was our host. She took the two of us to the building now facing my office directly here on campus. This is the Harry Ransom Centre [HRC] which houses one of the finest collection of manuscripts in the world, mainly English language but not exclusively. The place has *some* riches. But I liked it, as I did the couple of people I met who work in the manuscript section.

Don't judge the people.

And when I mentioned Tutuola's work to my librarian guide she told me that some of his notebooks and manuscripts were within twenty feet from where we were standing. And in the next breath she pointed out another amazing treasure trove just arrived: the literary remains and effects of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Jesus christ.

Stacked in boxes and suitcases. The archivist who was my guide would be involved in the unpacking of same.

Resist rubbing your hands.

Imagine being there and opening these old style brown suitcases and boxes, seeing old Singer's notebooks and all the rest of it!

He fought so long and so hard against the hegemonies, whichever, for Yiddish as a valid, literary language, in the tradition, Mendele the Bookseller, Aleichem, Peretz. All great in their own individual ways, struggling to make stories in language as used by living, breathing human beings. Kafka read aloud stories by other writers for the pleasure of friends, including Aleichem's humourous yarns, hot off the press.

Thinking about Tutuola, it is important the students here get to appreciate why I go on about his work and that of some other writers who use the English language in that malleable way. I want them to know he was a great writer and maybe get to understand why that can be. Academics accept that a writer such as Tutuola can be a good *story-teller* but stumble about unable to admit he was a very fine writer. That Oxbridge elitist shite again, to be a great writer is to be a great writer of Standard English Literary form.

Tutuola was at this university several years ago. He was not a guest of the Department of English. A writer and teacher here remembered with pleasure Tutuola's presence, telling me about it, and then he referred to how the great Nigerian writer "spoke pidgeon-English".

It was strange to hear this, from this particular guy with whom I have become friendly. He is not only a novelist, essayist and short story writer but comfortable in reading and writing in the French and Spanish languages - so one makes certain assumptions.

Would the phrase, “pidgeon-English”, ever be used of native French, German or Italian speakers speaking English? A Frenchman arriving in the country, oh he speaks "pidgeon-English". If this use of language is not evidence of that inherent racism in the culture there definitely is an evaluation of Tutuola’s work implicit and it sure aint complimentary.

This is difficult because the guy would be horrified to think I thought he was racist. So you have to work out about what it means, someone who says unthought out racist stuff but is never never ever racist, never never never, not at "the inner core of his being" etc. etc. Aw, I see, gie us a brek. That easy use of the phrase indicates the exact opposite that that racist culture is right at the core of the Anglo-American intellectual tradition and is up to them that want to do something about it do something about it out. Fucking stop using the fucking language man that is a fucking start, know what I'm talking about.

I’ve also noticed about another misjudged and typical assumption of mine, that most people I meet will be agnostic if not atheist. Here in the States almost everybody appears to believe in the existence of “God”. If not they dare not speak it aloud!

Weird stuff. I met this guy in the campus bar and he was blabbing away and I realized he belived in God and didn't know how to cope when he saw I thought he was kidding.

The language here is tricky and clumsy. I’m not sure how it all works. I dont think I would recognise a Native-American student.

There is poverty. It can be difficult to notice. People here live without air conditioning. My direct contact is with academics and European-Americans but up until a week ago I had no car so always walked or travelled by bus, and therefore was in the company of African-Americans, Mexican-Americans and maybe South-Americans.

No African-American males take Creative Writing options, very few Asian-American males either, but females of both. How long can Americans go on with this horrible differentiating. Well, that's up to the European-Americans. They hold the last button. Probably everybody else would prefer just to be Americans, but they aren't allowed. They are obliged to define themselves racially. Or so-called racially. Clumsiness abounds. I approve of the clumsiness in language, it heralds change. Since when were Hispanic people excluded from being European? Only in the US. Maybe we should say White European-Americans. But even that doesn't work because Spanish people are not not-white, or are they? Some use the term Chicano/Chicana, forget the Spanish conquistadores, the Latin stuff, it is good, positive, young bands and so on. No people are still there, forget the Hispanic stuff. Talking about Hispanics, accepting the imperialist project, the extinction of native "Americans", indigenous languages, indigenous culture.

Before coming to Texas I was quite looking forward to seeing how matters went around this area, race and immigration. This was based on a hunch I had that there might well be a healthy side to the "race-issue". I can't say I feel that way now. I over-estimated the reality, describing it as an "issue". There isn't any issue that I know of. Maybe I'll come to see it differently after a further few months. But for the time being all I see is that Black Americans live out of sight east of highway 35. No one mentions racism. What happened in Jasper is from another planet. Yet there is a campaign on the go just now, a girl twelve years of age is in prison for the murder of an infant. Whether or not she killed the infant I don't know but the trial and the surrounding events were just a joke, an outrageous carry on. But I don't hear this discussed anywhere. I'm a stranger though and when it comes down to it it is presumptuous to expect that I get brought into such conversations. Maybe such

conversations do happen, I'm just not party to them. I've seen some of the campaigning group and the campaign seems contained completely in the black community.

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This last while has seen a few others go: George MacKay Brown, Sorley MacLean and Norman McCaig, and now Iain Crichton Smith. Iain died the morning of Thursday past. Tom Leonard emailed me the information. I liked Iain a lot, as man and as writer. A most unassuming guy. When I first got know him I told him I enjoyed his short stories, the collections entitled *The Black and Red*, and *The Village*. He was one of the few Scottish writers I could relate to at all when I was beginning as a writer. I told him that and he was astounded, as much by the idea that somebody not only read his work but held thoughts on it and might want to discuss it. Modest to the point of - well, I think some of his close friends got a little annoyed at him for being too much so.

But was that true? Did any of his friends ever think that? How the hell do I know? Sentimental shite. Iain had a healthy recognition of greatness, just not his own. I have a memory of him from around 1980 in Paisley, the way he was in the presence of Sorley, some of whose poetry Iain translated himself. In Iain's estimation Sorley was a towering figure, way beyond anything he could ever himself aspire.

But most Scottish writers feel the same. Sorley was one in a million. I had organised this event at Paisley Town Hall 1980 which is why Iain and Sorley were there at all. Also on the programme was the poet Aonghas Macneacail and the singer Flora McNeil. What a line up! What a night! They were the first poets to perform at that venue since W.B.Yeats.

Fuck knows where I got that bit of information but it was true.

Sorley's wife had come along with him and these two had a laugh together and ye could see that was how it was with them. She loved telling a joke and he loved laughing. I met them and Iain and took the three for a meal. We went to a wee Indian Restaurant down Love Street. While we were walking I thought, Jesus Christ maybe this is a bad idea but no, not at all. It was the first time any of them had ever eaten in an Indian Restaurant, or so they said - that Hebridean humour, they were probably kidding me on.

Ach Iain, he was a great writer and also a great man.

What the fucking hell is 'greatness'.

And 'also', what is 'also', what does 'also'

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When me and Marie first flew into Texas it was via Oklahoma. We didn't know what all the brightness was in the sky. It was lightning storms.

Last time I saw such a sky was five years ago flying across Chad en route to Johannesburg but I just thought it was some sort of weird brightness, to do with the desert. Or something. Maybe a mirage, who knows, one need not work these things out. Anyway it was fucking electrical storms man no doubt about it. That was 1993, the year before the ANC became the party of government led by Nelson Mandela. At that time they had just been "unbanned" by the fascist white bastards and things were tense in the heart of Johannesburg. All the taxis from the Carlton hotel were driven by white guys. We stayed there until it was discovered how much we were being charged. These white taxi drivers wouldn't look at us, didn't talk to us, but worked from the Carlton and were unable to refuse us as fares. Oh man their hatred, it was not easily

concealed and to me because I was white, probably it was worse; any of us white folks who were there, guests of the ANC.

I preferred walking anyway and stopped taking their fucking taxis.

But Chad is so enormous a country it takes five hours to fly across. Five hours! Information to serve to a few Texans, maybe keep their feet on the ground.

Good god but these lightning storms, will we ever get out alive.

Flying down through Oklahoma State but, that was a funny sensation for me too, having passed by there on the ground 35 years earlier - Tulsa up past Oklahoma City, on a Greyhound bus from Los Angeles to New York City, taking what was then the regular run, the old Route 66 where they advertised cafes only a hunner mile from where you're now passing, a hunner miles on visit the Dry Gulch Cafe, Shiner, chops, and coffee: *Oklahoma City is oh so pretty* - taking it from memory a closer comparison would have brought in Birmingham's spaghetti junction - then from there on to St. Louis, where I saw kids in the school playground all playing soccer, back in 1964, and it looked like soccer was here to stay, yessir and no mistake, but it was a mistake. And up through Springfield, Missouri where lived the enigmatic Mr Rolland Comstock, collector of modern 1st editions par excellence. I liked him. He sent a postcard to me once in Glasgow, drollery of the first order: "Word is on the street you're reading in DC . . ."

I was, a year after the booker nonsense, and he was there at the signing desk, that wee smile he had - Chic Murray. He had flown up from Springfield, Missouri.

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I have to assume people want to learn

All quiet.

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Saturday Oct 17th, 1998; 8.20 pm and Marie is still in Glasgow another Week.

And I'm all damn bites from these bloodsucking mosquitoes. The wire mesh windows dont keep them at bay man they're worse than Tignabruaich fucking midges.

The humidity. I have to take off my tee shirt now, working here in a pair of shorts and that's that. Shorts are the thing here. Eighty or ninety percent of males wear them during the day, even out the house, in public!

Shorts in public!

One time we were in Tignabruaich and a man was there wearing short trousers. Kids followed him in the street. We thought he was a scoutmaster. Must be English, muttered my old man.

9.01 pm. Ah . . .

and a the air conditioning switches on.

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It seems to have stopped raining a while ago but the sweat now is dripping down my chin down my neck.

One has to put up with religion here. I havent felt free to raise certain basic questions because I cannot assume there are no fundamentalists in the company. If anyone is not a 'believer' they keep it to themself.

The writer Marianne Wiggins came through Austin a few days ago and was amused to find me there. She had been married to Salman Rushdie a few years previously. Here in the undergraduates library there is an

entire field of writings on the man. She greeted me by saying ‘*You’re* the Kelman’.

I realised Salman must have raised my name in some way. I knew he was not keen on an essay I had written, featuring censorship and his novel *Satanic Verses*. For the rest of the night this is how Marianne referred to me: not James, Jimmy, Jim or Mister, it was well then Kelman, yes Kelman, hullo Kelman, cheerio Kelman.

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Cheeky mosquitoes now at my ear and my neck. Or is it sweat?  
now stopping to flex the back muscles and maybe make a coffee or  
else open a bottle of cool beer . . .  
ye kidding  
and at 10.12 pm the weather channel tells me it is still 71 degrees and  
humidity at 100%. Honest! a fucking hunner! I’m entitled to stop  
cheer up son:  
Okay.