

DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... 30 MARCH 2014

Never begin with the weather. That's what the writers' self-help books say. I wonder why that is? I remember the rule, but I've forgotten the reason. It is permissible, however, to open a story with your character reacting to the weather. Some of my writer friends tell me to ignore these books full of advice; get on with it, they say, open a vein and let it flow. I know who my characters are, and I know roughly how the first half of the story will go. But I find myself wanting to know more about their world. The working title for the book is *All of This Was Mine*, after a line in a song I wrote about these people caught up in the Galveston Storm of 1900.

Write what you know. Another adage, this one reminds me of Bill Clinton: it depends on what you mean by *know*. Appearing in last Friday's *International New York Times*, Mohsin Hamid has this to say: "In the end, what we know isn't a static commodity. It changes from being written about. Storytelling alters the storyteller. And the story is altered by being told."

Back at the beginning of the month I determined I needed to know a whole lot more about late 19th Century America. I suppose somewhere in this computer might be found a record of all my Google searches. I wanted to know about railroads, steam engine locomotives, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, the Freethinkers Movement; women's issues, women suffrage, fashion, Gibson Girls, corsets, childbirth and contraception; Louisiana and Texas history, Galveston history, the 1900 Storm; race riots, lynching, racial attitudes in popular song, medicine shows, popular songs in general, ragtime; popular expressions of the day. The saying, "It's a small world" has been with us since 1890. I would be writing science fiction if my characters were to come back and wake up in the 21st Century. Surely it would blow their minds. But one thing I'm finding out: they were going through bewildering changes in their day, just the same as we are.

This is the basic stuff of their lives. I anticipate I will hit a tipping point where I feel like I can begin. Like a train I feel there's a tremendous amount of inertia to overcome to get a book going. We are not yet up to speed but I can feel momentum now. I may not know much, but I'm beginning to sense the rhythm; I want to make this run successful.

The songwriter muse seems to be coming round again now that I've begun another project. Maybe she suspects I've been seeing another muse. I've written three songs this year to date. Song cuts are rolling in too: The Donuts, a band from Philadelphia, and Paul Loether from Maryland have recorded versions of "A Useful Girl Who Could Sew." Mary Cutrufelo has recorded a version of "Always One More River," a song once covered by Pinto Bennett.

This month has run by here like a turkey through the corn. I've been out on my bike nearly every morning. Working together in the garden, Edith and I have our potatoes in, salad and kohlrabi and fennel under plastic. Old friend Hugh Moffatt graced our town with a visit and played a marvelous concert at the Löwen. My 72nd birthday came and went. We had a quiet celebration, walking next door to the Restaurant Adler where I ate an entire *gebackene Forellen*. Foreshadowing all this was the release of the "lost" Johnny Cash record with John and June Carter Cash singing "Baby Ride Easy." The record—and the song—are receiving a lot of media attention. I remember exactly when I wrote it, working offshore on a drilling rig in the Gulf of

Mexico. I wrote it on a piece of paper sack. The year was 1971, and it was one of the few songs I took with me to Nashville when I moved there shortly after.

Congratulations to Houston songwriter Danny Everitt for winning the Texas Music Academy Songwriter-of-the-Year award. As I mentioned before, I consider it an honor to have been twice-nominated. In a larger sense all the nominees—myself, Bob Cheever, Danny Santos, Jack Saunders—share this reward collectively. It's good to have an organization and an annual event like this to celebrate and honor people in the business. But as Emmylou Harris famously said, this is not a horse race.

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Here in Switzerland public attention has moved on from the story of Carlos, the knife-wielding delinquent turned wannabe Thai kick-boxer, the guy whose rehabilitation was running to twenty-thousand Francs a month. He is at last report living with his trainer. I never heard an update on mass attack there. Arguably more important, the evening talk shows this month have featured a lot of discussion of the immigration referendum. The press has painted this development as an expression of far rightwing, anti-foreigner views. Personally I get the feeling that support for immigration regulation comes from across the political spectrum. Crime rates suggest that many people come here not to work, but to steal. Rising crime rates and overcrowded jails are not mentioned in the *New York Times* reports. Meanwhile, another referendum will be coming up in May to propose a minimum wage of 4000 Francs a month. My prediction is this one won't pass.

As for weather, the news is this was the best March we've had in eleven years. The café owners got a jump on the season and put their chairs and tables out. Forsythia and trees are exploding with blossoms. I'll be headed to Texas in a little more than two weeks, where my first gig is with songwriter-author Mike Blakely April 22nd at the River City Grill, in Marble Falls. For other dates please check the website. Hope to see you down the trail

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