

A Writer Looks At His Career
By Alex Shoumatoff

Writers tend to have an inflated sense of their own importance and lasting worth. Mine was deflated in 1999, by a visit to the basement of Alfred Knopf, the eminent publishing house. I was doing a magazine piece on the remarkable, feisty couple, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, who founded it. There, on row after row of shelves, were all the books that Knopf ever published. The lovely old woman who was cataloguing them (she was in her eighties, the firm's Oldest Living Employee), showed me the 26 books by Karl van Vechten. He was the biggest writer in the twenties, she assured me, much bigger than Hemingway or Fitzgerald. I had actually read one of van Vechten's books, *Nigger Heaven*, a novel about Harlem's *haute bohémie* that now seems dated by racism and condescension.

In another aisle, next to the two of books of mine that Knopf published, were the works of Mikhail Sholokov, who won the 1964 Nobel Prize for Literature for *And Quiet Flows the Don*. How many people read this book any more, I wondered, or have even heard of it? We proceeded to the enormous output, the fifty or so books, of John Updike, one of America's literary masters of the late twentieth century, a true man of letters. I had just lunched with him, in fact, at the Boston Ritz. He was a fund of Knopf stories. But even Updike, who will be reading him in 20 years? He will probably recede into the canon until he is somewhere back there along with Trollope and Smollett. As Jorge Luis Borjes, who spent most of his adult life working in the municipal and national libraries of Buenos Aires, observed, nothing demonstrates the futility of existence better than a library.

A few weeks later my son Andre had arranged for me to give a talk to his writing class at the University of Vermont, and I told the students about my sobering visit to the basement of Knopf. "If you think your writing is going to make you immortal," I told them, "forget it. But there is one writer that Knopf published who was unquestionably immortal, and that, of course is-- Albert Camus." I looked around the room. Blank faces. The kids had never heard of him.

After these experiences, I began to ask myself, "What For?" to borrow the title of the unpublished autobiography of my late great aunt, Olga de Hartmann (who escaped from Russia during the Revolution with the Georgian mystic, G.I. Gurdjieff, and became the formidable transmitter of his teachings, Madame de Hartmann). Or as she pronounced it, when I visited her, a shriveled but still feisty crone in her nineties, in 1983 in Nambe, New Mexico: "Vat For?"

Further fuel for my mounting malaise about what was not only my *métier*, but my entire *raison d'être*, was provided by the publication, "on a back street in East Hoboken," as Edward Abbey described one of his own dismal publishing experiences, of my epic, 560-page book on the Southwest, which had taken me ten years, on and off, to produce (I also wrote two other books and dozens of magazine pieces during this period), and had had no less than eight editors in three houses, by the time it was finally brought out, by Knopf in 1997. It was trashed in the daily New York Times, by Mitchiko Kakutani (or Bitchiko, as the many writers who have not fared well with her refer to her), but raved on the cover of the New York Times Book Review by Verlan Klinkenborg, bless his heart. Time Magazine named it its number-two non-fiction book of the year,

and it got the top regional prize, the Mountains and Plains Booksellers' award. But it wasn't in the stores—an essential part of the equation if a book is to go anywhere. And the only foreign sale it got was Italy, while my previous book, *The World is Burning*, was translated into eleven languages, because Knopf's foreign salesperson was asleep at the wheel and wasn't even aware the house had the foreign rights, and I didn't have an agent at the time. The promotional budget was \$0.00, apart for my book tour, whose important stop was the biggest bookstore in Albuquerque, but when I got there, the publicist who had booked my signings had gotten the date mixed up, and it turned out to be the night of a cookbook author, who was already there, sitting a table with a stack of her books. Most writers have similar tales of woe, but when you bitch about it all you do is end up sounding like a whiner, and it doesn't help your cause. As editor of one of my early books told me when I complained about how little the house was doing to even recoup its investment. "Nobody asked you to be a writer." Today my attitude about the writing game, about everything in general, is more mellow. I'm grateful that I even have a publisher, and that I have been able to make a living and raise a family through my pen alone, without having to teach, drive a cab, or be a night watchman. This is only possible in the U.S., or for writers from other countries who have cracked the American market.

The publishing industry has never been a particularly competent business, editors having drifted into the profession with little more than an interest in writing, perhaps even an ambition to write themselves, which they lacked the talent or courage (or perhaps the foolishness) to act on. Their limited knowledge about writing, on a par with that of critics (another species of failed, wannabee writer), is only matched, or exceeded, by their ignorance about business. Of course are great editors (and good critics, too). I've been fortunate to work with maybe ten excellent ones, a few real masters. It's a noble calling, like teaching: you are trying to help another person realize himself, to express himself as beautifully and powerfully and honestly as possible. A great editor must have, as Nabokov said of comedians, the moral equivalent of perfect pitch. But fewer do. Fewer editors even sully their hand with the copy, leaving the changes that have to be made to the copy editor, and matters have only gotten worse since the publishing industry was taken over by and folded into a handful of media empires, and it's all become about the bottom line, not what the book is about or the contribution it could make to the culture or people's awareness of what is going on in the world, namely that yo dudes, we're at the eleventh hour here. 65,000 books are published each year in the U.S. alone, and thousands more writers are being cranked out every year by 350-some graduate schools of writing, but the number of readers is shrinking; the written word in general, at least the way I learned to use it, is going the way of poetry; and the writing game is becoming like (to borrow an image from the life history of the desert spadefoot toad) a shrinking pool of carnivorous tadpoles. Kids are not reading, I know, because I have five of them, and only one of them is a reader. They're all spending most of their time and mental energy on the Internet and playing video games. Many kids today don't have the attention span to get through anything that's more than 20 pages. I doubt that any my boys are going to follow in my footsteps, not that I would want them to, or wish such a stressful profession on anybody (although when a story of yours is published that actually make difference, nothing is more satisfying), and not that they should. They're going to have useful, productive lives of their own choosing. My oldest two already are.

There are not many cases of children of writers becoming writers. They and the wives of writers have no romantic illusions about what it is be one. Some of Cheever, Updike, and

MacPhee's progeny have gone into the profession, but they will always be measured with their dads, who are impossible acts to follow. Children of famous writers, actors, famous people in the arts, famous or very successful people in general, tend to be fucked up, I've noticed, which is one of the reasons I've had mixed feelings about whatever notoriety my writing has attracted, why I have never snatched the prize that was in my grasp. The other reason is that the idea of perpetuating oneself through one's writing, the whole ego-trip of thinking you're this great writer and basking in the adulation, the packaging of yourself as a literary lion, as someone on a higher moral, intellectual, and artistic plane than ordinary people, is such an obvious crock, pure deluded vanity, and a distraction from the real mission, which is not about you, in the end, but about being useful. At best, you can only leave a detailed record of your existence, and whatever interest it may have for others is not something you have any control of, so it's best to not even think about it, unless you are going to actively promote yourself and do the talks and signings and hit the lecture circuit to get your name out there, which many writers do and is an escapable part of the writing game today, but something I've always regarded as *infra dig* and not what I want to be putting my energies into. Good writing speaks for itself and attracts its own audience. But anybody who wants me to put in an appearance I usually oblige. I just did four roundtables at the Blue Metropolis Literary Festival here in Montréal. They didn't pay diddly-squat, but I met some interesting fellow-scribes, particularly the novelist Anita Bau Badami, a great storyteller whose *Can You Hear the Nightgale Sing?* I highly recommend.

Back in the days of the old, William Shawn New Yorker, in the 1980s, when I was making a name for myself, the staff was divided into the lefties and the righties. Being apolitical at that point, my mid-thirties (my current, intensifying radicalism having not yet evolved), I was on good terms with both of them. The righties generally had lunch at the Century Club, and the lefties at a sushi restaurant on 43rd street. The lefties were, paradoxically, more calculating about their careers and presentations than the righties were. One day at the sushi place, one of my colleagues observed that "the glue that binds us is ambition." He was absolutely right, because after Mr. Shawn retired (or was retired; he came to his office one morning after the new owners took over, and everything was in boxes), we all went our separate ways, and I have only kept up with a few of them.

I had already been disabused of the notion that writers and other creative artistic types, or any of us, are these original, independent thinkers, which the individualistic societies of the West are so heavily invested in, in 1986, when my fourth book, *In Southern Light*, was published. The title, for a collection of two pieces, one about the Amazon, and the other about Zaire (as the Congo was then called) had come to me in an inspired moment, when I was driving to the New Rochelle post office. I thought it was lyrical and understated and something that had welled up spontaneously from the depths of my poetic soul, until I walked into the Shakespeare and Co. bookstore on the Upper West Side and not letting on that I was the author, asked one of the young men on the floor if he happened to have this book, *In Southern Light*, that had just come out. Sure, he said, it's right over there in fiction, and I thought fiction? It must be misplaced. There in the fiction section was a novel that had also just been published, called *Southern Light*, most of whose dialogue takes place in front of a south-facing picture window overlooking Chesapeake Bay. So I went back to the salesman and said, trying to control my consternation, it's not fiction, it's *non-fiction*, and the title is *In Southern Light*. So the young man said, Oh yes, of course, now I remember. It's right over there, in the travel section. That's more like it, I thought, and when I got over to the travel section, damned if there wasn't a book called *South Light*, about Anatarctica, also

just published, right next to mine. Maybe I should invite the two other authors for lunch at the Algonquin and suggest that our three books be published together, in a boxed edition, I thought. That fall must have been the moment in the culture for south light and its variants, just as there had been, in recent publishing seasons, several *Continental Drifts* and several *Fire and Ices*. This brought home to me that literary, or any artistic, creation takes place in a sharply circumscribed cultural setting. There are certain things that you have to touch base with, without even being aware that you are doing so. The suite of buzzwords over the last decade, phrases that seem to encapsulate the zeitgeist for a few years, are another example of how limited our verbal repertoire actually is. First there was “oxymoron,” then “the perfect storm,” and now it’s “the tipping point.” Very rarely does a true, transcendent genius, a prophet of the age, a Shakespeare or a Bob Dylan, come along. In fact writers in general are an unusual occurrence on any family tree. On mine, some of whose branches I can take back to the 800s, of the hundreds of ancestors I know about, there have been only two other writers: the fabulist and father of the short story, Nikolai Gogol, and his contemporary, the poet Vladimir Panayev, much admired in his day, but now forgotten by all but scholars of early nineteenth-century Russian literature.

So for all of these reasons, I was asking myself, why am I doing this, For vat have I spent days and months on end in solitary confinement cranking out these books (beginning with my first book, *Florida Ramble*, which I wrote in two months in a friend’s basement in Cambridge, scarcely emerging to see the light of day)? How viable a means of communication are books any more these days, anyway? Who has two or three nights in a row with nothing to do but read a 250-350 page book? I have a whole stack of them on my bed-table. I’ll read fifteen pages in one before I go to sleep and not get back to it for a couple of weeks. Books need to be shorter, 90 or 100 pages, novella-length, something you can knock off in an evening, if the medium is going to keep up with the times. This said, there is nothing powerful than the silent transmission of the written word, when it sings. I believe in the power of writing to deepen the reader’s awareness, as a reader myself whose life has been changed by a few dozen of the thousands of books I’ve read.

At this point, I was in my early fifties and was also becoming aware of my own mortality. I felt as if I was the last of a breed, a dinosaur of sorts. Who carries around a notebook and scribbles in it obsessively any more? The two writers of my vintage I have the most in common with, Bruce Chatwin and Ryszard Kapuscinski, are both gone. The great tradition of Russian literature, in which I see myself—the one that begins with Gogol and ends with Nabokov, which I see myself as the decadent dernier cri of-- is history. At the same time, new writers, with very different goals and approaches to their craft, have proliferated, a function of population growth, the growing numbers who are getting higher education, and a rich economy that can support literary professions. There are way too many writers, in fact. It doesn’t have the cachet it used to. It is common for non-fiction writers these days to find themselves in competition with one or more other writers who are writing about the same subject. I found myself in that disagreeable situation with my ninth book, *The World is Burning*, about the murder of Chico Mendes and the fight to save the Amazon rainforest, although my rival, Andrew Revkin, now an environmental reporter for the Times, couldn’t have been nicer; and again with my eleventh book, about the rival incarnations of the seventeenth Karmapa, the head of the Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism—an obscure topic, you would have thought, that no publisher would have touched fifteen years ago—but by the time I turned it in, in June of 2007, there were no less than eight other books about it.

But what else could I do at this point? I could go back to writing songs and performing them, but I would be starting at zero, and I'm not a night person. As a Jamaican folk song goes, "In the morning I rise up singing, in the evening I wither away." And my voice is idiosyncratic, and not always in key or in time with my guitar-playing, so I'd better not quit my day job, which is being a "literary journalist." This is what I do, not so much what I chose to do, as it chose me. If I didn't write I would go crazy. This is how I process and make sense of the world. At this point I have over 70,000 pages of notes that I've taken since 1962, most of them in 358 (as of 6/07) little hardbound Red Chinese notebooks. I don't write for others, I've realized, except when it is about something that I think they need to know about, when I'm doing advocacy journalism or an exposé. I've always felt that my primary responsibility as a writer is to leave a detailed, accurate record of the world as I found it, and much of what I've written already has historical interest, because the conditions that I described no longer exist. And now that I've hit sixty, I have re-embraced the Muse with new ardor and a sense of urgency. There are at least four more books in me that I want to leave the world, for whatever they're worth, and a lot more than I want to get out there. Only five percent of what's in my notebooks has been published. Hopefully, when I'm no longer ambulatory but still compos, I'll be able get to them. I want to put my house in order, my custom-built private glass house of pain, and there's a lot of work to do.

My name recognition, which peaked in the late 1980s, when I reckoned (from randomly sampling a broad geographical and social cross-section of them) 1 in 200 Americans had heard of me, is in serious need of resuscitation, but I'm just as happy to go about my work unnoticed. Celebrities forfeit their freedom of movement. They end up being walled in the palace, and you have to get out of the palace if you're going to be a real writer, or anyone who hopes to understand the structure and meaning of existence. I have also reached the age when I am taking stock, wondering what does it all mean, what is the significance of this career to which I have devoted the last 45 years? How can I make myself most useful at this critical juncture in human history, when enormous changes must be made, if we and the rest of the life on earth are to survive much longer? What do I have to offer? What is special about me, as opposed to the millions of other people who are expressing themselves on the Internet, in magazines and books?

The first point in my favor (I'm only tooting my horn here to give a leg up to critics, scholars, institutions interested in my papers, foundations and others who might want to dissect or support my career, and when the time comes, in the all-too-imminent future, obituary writers) is that it is probably not an exaggeration to say that no writer in any language at any time has had the range across cultures and species, has taken on such a variety of subjects, from the surprisingly diverse Westchester County to the incomprehensible vastness and complexity of the Amazon rain forest, from Donald Trump to the Dalai Lama, from the pawnee montane skipper (a small, drab, orange butterfly that generated a \$60 million environmental impact statement and stopped a dam from being built in Colorado in the 1980s) to the pygmies of the Ituri Forest. To be convinced of this, all you have to do is dip into the more than 800 pages of my writing posted on my DispatchesFromTheVanishingWorld.com. They convey the richness and diversity of my subject-matter—which is the world, what is out there, as much of it as I've been able to take in-- and the many voices I have employed to do justice to it.

Blurbs, second opinions, peer review, can be supplied as back-up if you don't believe me. Here's Edward Hoagland: "Admirably protean, encyclopedic, and indefatigable, Shoumatoff has

the curiosity of an army of researchers, and writes like a house afire.” Timothy Ferris: “Shoumatoff is a genuine citizen of the world, at home with people everywhere, and his example serves as an inspiration to all who cherish the ties that unite humankind... in my opinion, he ranks among the very best nature writers of our or any other time.” Edwin McDowell, in the New York Times : “consistently the farthest-flung of the New Yorker’s far-flung correspondents.” Simon Finn, songwriter : “a range and empathy not seen since Shakespeare, if then, a heart without borders.” I’ve been called a lot of things: “a wonder writer,” by the Stanford population geneticist Luca Cavalli-Sforza (a key source for *The Mountain of Names*; our most recent interaction concerned a village of albinos in the Sierra Madre descended from Alsatian soldiers left behind by Maximilian of Austria in 1867 after his failed bid to make himself emperor of Mexico); “an accidental journalist” (who writes about whatever he runs into) by Ursula Demeter, a Munich journalist who was married to the legendary mountaineer, Reinhold Messner. Perhaps I should be called “a magic journalist.” Among fellow-writers and book and magazine editors I have the reputation of being “one of the heavies,” a writer with “bottom.” Professor Richard Robbins of SUNY Plattsburgh has called me, with my erstwhile aristocratic provenance and compassion for the world’s underclasses, “a latter-day Tolstoy.” The cultivated late Prince Alexis Scherbatov said of my fourth book, *Russian Blood* that it “compares favorably with Nabokov,” which I took as the highest compliment. (See the two-part New Yorker excerpt (click for part 1 & part 2), a classic of literary journalism that ranks with the best of my work, posted on the Dispatches. It gets more hits than anything else.) There are some interesting family connections with this genius of *émigré* Russian literature. The epic central Asian butterfly collector in Nabokov’s novel, *The Gift* (pp. 102-46 of the Vintage paperback edition) was inspired by my great uncle, Andrey Avinoff, one of the main characters in *Russian Blood*. Avinoff, whose 80,000 mostly Central Asian butterfly specimens were impounded by the Bolsheviks in 1917 after he took the last train out of St. Petersburg, the day before the October Revolution, preceded Nabokov to the New World by 25 years and was the first person Nabokov contacted when he came to America in 1940. (Avinoff by then had been the director the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh for fifteen years). I have Nabokov’s monograph on the Nearctic Lycaenidae inscribed to Avinoff in Cyrillic, ot avtora, from the author. Avinoff’s brother Nikolai, a liberal progressive, was a political confrère of Nabokov’s father, Vladimir N. Nabokov; they were both on the Constituent Assembly during the brief, doomed attempt, between the February and October revolutions in 1917, to transform the Russian monarchy into a democracy. Nabokov père was shot by monarchists in Berlin in 1922, and Nikolai Avinoff was executed by Stalin’s secret police in the Moscow suburb of Butavo, along with 20,000 others, during the Yezhov Purge of 1937. (Andrey and Nikolai’s sister Elizabeth Shoumatoff, my grandmother, became in the second half of her life one of America’s most prominent portrait painters. She was painting FDR when he collapsed from a massive cerebral hemorrhage in front of her on April 12, 1945.)

I was born into an erudite family of artists and explorers, with seven generations of naturalists, going back to Old Russia in the 1830s. I grew up in the 1950’s in Bedford, New York, now the home of Ralph Lauren, Carl Icahn, George Soros, Martha Stewart, and dozens of other megabucksters, but in those days inhabited by the low-key old WASP gentry-- the world of John Cheever (a delightful man and exurbia’s Chekhov, whom I got to know at the end of his life, in the late 1970s). The Shoumatoffs lived in a modest house on the edge of Bedford Village, with tens of thousands of books on butterflies and Russian art and Avinoff’s amazing paintings on the walls (he

had died in 1949). My parents were different, more Old World than mainstream American, more mystically than materialistically inclined. Having lost everything, the palace in Poltava

with the Memling madonna and its other treasures, they were post-capitalist and, by my generation, anti-elitist. Our core values were a deep reverence for nature and the Enlightenment belief that a broad knowledge base, as much information about it as you could absorb and retain, was the best way to pay homage to what Avinoff called “the infinite variety and supreme unity” of the life on earth. My father, with his uncle Andrey, had made the definitive collection of the butterflies and moths of Jamaica in the 1930s (an iridescent blue lycaenid, the family Nabokov specialized in, from the island was named Shoumatoff’s hairstreak after him). He was the president of the New York Entomological Society and the Bedford chapter of the Audubon society and a member of the Explorers’ Club, and we were brought up with the notion that a fluency in the local flora and fauna was as essential an acquisition for a man of parts as a command of grammar and syntax. Languages came easily to me. By the time I was four, after a month at Chalet Flora in Gstaad, Switzerland, where my parents were billed ten centimes for every word of English my brother and I spoke, I was at home in French. Other Romance tongues followed. Later, when I started my explorations, no culture was alien or impenetrable. I was able to relate to everybody naturally and on the basis of our common humanity. This cultural plasticity, which distinguishes me from all but a few American writers, was the legacy of being born into a family that had tremendous intellectual curiosity about the world, what scientists call “the real earth system,” and, having lost its homeland, was freed to explore it.

Avinoff was an artist as well as a scientist, and was as knowledgeable about Russian art and culture as he was about natural history. His library and his paintings filled the converted barn behind our old colonial house and set a very high bar for us, and from this dead man we never knew, from this museum of this extraordinary departed sensibility, we acquired a more Da Vincian or Shakespearean view of nature, that man and his works are part of nature, too, rather than the Thoreauvian/Muirian view, which sets them apart and has been the prevailing American attitude, to the detriment of the conservation movement. This family-transmitted view, that nature and culture are not inherently separate, but both expressions of the diversity of life on earth, was reinforced by a childhood divided between romping in the lush woods of Bedford and fishing every brook and stream that flowed through them, chatting with the merchants in the village, and knocking around golf and tennis balls at the Bedford Golf and Tennis Club with the children of the local gentry. My parents’ Bedford friends included some extremely cultivated people like the Bechtels (intimate friends of the poet Wallace Stevens) and Miss Helen Clay Frick, whose father had donated the Frick Collection in New York. I took it all in, with the open, omnivorous, indiscriminating curiosity of childhood, and was at home in every milieu. Having a woods to explore and roam is the perhaps the most precious gift a child can have, and the woods became my temple, where sitting alone beneath the trees, I had several ecstatic experiences, moments of mystical convergence with the life teeming in them.

Already in Westchester, and later, when I started traveling to pristine ecosystems and cultures in far-off corners the world, I confirmed and reconfirmed the truth of Sir Francis Bacon’s statement that “the subtlety of nature is many times greater than the subtlety of the senses and the understanding.” So I’ve never been tempted to try my hand at fiction (apart from an unfinished picaresque novel I started in my sixteenth year but never finished, about the last night in the Tower of London, during the reign of Henry VIII, of a gentleman named Marmaduke Neville, who was to

be executed in the morning for poaching the Duke of Rutland's trout). My writing in this sense belongs more to the tradition of nineteenth-century explorers like Alexander von Humbolt, Richard Frances Burton, and Alfred Russell Wallace, who were interested in everything and filled their journals with detailed observations of the wonders they encountered, than to that of the Russian novelists. But this does not mean that any less art has gone into my storytelling and or that my use of language is any less rich or inventive. (See, for instance, [Dispatch #28 : "The Fall of General Stroessner,"](#) written in the style of the South American magic realists, but entirely "factual," and the on-line American Heritage Dictionary, which cites my usages of "akimbo," "comprise," "ripe," "riverine," "projection," "disturbance," and "chicken scratch.") I have just never felt the urge or need to go over the line that Kapuscinski, who was part journalist and part fabulist, transgressed so gleefully and delightfully. My respect for what is actually out there, and the challenge of doing justice to it in all its complexity and ambiguity, has suppressed the impulse to take imaginative flights. But I employ the same techniques that novelists do: vivid characterization and description, snappy dialogue, concurrent sub-plots, foreshadowing, telling such a good story that the readers effortlessly absorbs the detailed information about the subject at hand that I am giving him. I polish and "love," as Mr. Shawn called it, the writing until it glows with a soft, burnished sheen, like my grandmother's luminous, multi-layered watercolor portraits. I used to bristle at novelists who looked down on literary journalists as being an artistically inferior form of writer. In fact, they are the greatest fiction writers of all, because they are passing themselves off as writers of "non-fiction," and their creativity is constrained by having to stick to "facts."

This distinction between fiction and non-fiction, like the one between culture and nature, I find artificial and ultimately meaningless. There are only degrees of fiction; the entire journalistic pursuit of "hard facts," I have always felt to be something of a fool's errand. Factuality consists of simply presenting the fact-checker, if the magazine has one (and newspapers and book publishers and don't), with credible, convincing documentation-- often something already in print that underwent no verification process of its own and became "fact" solely by virtue of its being published. Journalism is as flawed a process for establishing the truth as the justice system. The standards of truthfulness applied to scientific "data" are supposedly higher. Data are more rigorously objective and have greater statistical value and "robustness," but in my interactions with scientists over the years, I have been amazed by how subjective their findings often are, and how little of the full picture they are able to assemble, confined by their disciplines and lack of interest and expertise outside their own area of specialization; and how often they are wrong even in it, the journals they publish in not being able to afford checkers, so there is no independent verification, except for "peer review," which can be fraught with personal agendas. Science is a work in progress and a belief system of its own. Today's state-of-the-art data are superseded by newer, better studies. An ambitious young scientist comes along with the latest techniques and knocks the reigning *éminence grise* off his pedestal. New information, new pieces of the puzzle, are coming in all the time. But the information that science has processed and accepted is still only a minute fraction of what is out there to be gleaned. Even the most basic geographic facts are not written in stone. With the discovery of a new, farthest-from-the-mouth tributary, on the slopes of a volcanic snowpeak in southern Peru called Mt. Mismi, the Amazon is now the longest river in the world, not the Nile. It's about time!

The journalistic and even scientific pursuit of "the truth," is so flawed and filtered by culture and projection that I have come to believe, like Buddhists, deconstructionists and scholars

of “the production of history,” that ultimately there is no absolute, independent reality, only the perception of reality and the selling of it. But there is a “real earth system” that goes on whether one is here or not, and each of us has his own unique trajectory and karmic baggage. At best, particularly in a new, unfamiliar culture where first impressions are almost always wrong, and when trying to get to the bottom of past events, you can only be what I call a “total-immersion, version journalist.” One person tells you this, the next tells you something totally different, and you can only present the versions and handicap the likelihood of each version being what actually happened. History is his story. But each version tells you a lot about the culture you got it from. And you have to be careful how you phrase your question. If the question anticipates a yes, for instance, you can get an affirmative for half a dozen reasons.

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At Harvard I received a rigorous, now extinct liberal-arts education, which included four more years of ancient Greek (on top of the four I had already taken at St. Paul’s School in Concord, New Hampshire). By the time I was twenty, I had decided to become a poet in the great tradition of English literature and studied the craft with Robert Lowell, the greatest living poet of the day. (see in the Dispatches my epic poem, “[The Notice of a Lady Pruning](#),” and the short, poignant, “[To My Father](#),” which Lowell, who had a difficult relationship with his father, particularly liked.) My love of language and precision in its use were honed by having to pay attention, in my verse, to the sound and rhythm of each syllable and the nuances and resonances of each word choice.

But it was the late Sixties, and the times they were a-changin’. With the death of Robert Frost, and later Lowell, the poet ceased to play a central, oracular role in American culture. Poetry became an obscure, fringe medium whose practitioners wrote mainly for each other and fought over the limited grant money and positions in academe. So I adjusted my sights and morphed into a songwriter. Since the age of sixteen, I had been taking guitar lessons with the blind Reverend Gary Davis, one of the legendary masters of southern country blues, gospel, and ragtime stride-thumb finger-picking, whom I had found living in a shack behind a row of condemned buildings in Harlem in 1963 (by the end of the sixties, Davis, who had made some famous recordings in the thirties and been forgotten, would be rediscovered, his songs would be covered by the Rolling Stones and the Grateful Dead, and he would open the Newport Jazz Festival. See in the Dispatches [the 1971 Rolling Stone profile of Davis](#), my first published magazine piece.)

Davis and his wife Annie were major figures in my impressionable young life. The warmth and humanity of the world they inhabited attracted me more than the lilywhite wealth bubble I had been born in or the American ruling class that I was being groomed to take my place in, and they launched me on my life-long quest for The Other. The young Bob Dylan was another huge influence. After hearing “Another Side of Bob Dylan,” I realized that Dylan, not T.S. Eliot, at whose altar the Harvard English Department was still worshiping, was the prophet of the age. Overnight my role model changed, and I emerged from the intensely contracted, self-absorbed medium of poetry into the expansive, sensually glorious age of Aquarius. I went from being a minimalist to a maximalist, eventually embracing the world to a degree that no other writer has or perhaps ever will again. After 40 years of traveling the world I have come believe that the

individual consciousness is infinitely expandable, only limited by one's ability to circulate, which is a function of time, health, finances and family obligations, fear and other psychological inhibitors.

LSD had made its way from Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert's lab to Adams House. There I had my first experiences with substance-induced altered states of consciousness. Among my friends and fellow-experimenters with psychoactive drugs were the graduate students of the marvelously eccentric, proper Bostonian professor of ethnobotany, Richard Evans Schultes, who had spent fourteen years in the Amazon, taking the hallucinogenic drugs of the rainforest native people and meticulously describing their effects ("paisleys began to appear at 09:00," etc.). The accounts of his students' collecting trips to the Amazon awakened a burning desire to get to this enormous, mysterious rainforest and to spend time with people who had no idea that the modern world even existed, except for the jet planes that streaked across the sky.

I was on the Harvard Lampoon—its jester, in fact, dressing up in a harlequin costume and dancing on the table while my clubmates, in black tie, belted out Keats's poems in the doo-wap and Chuck Berry rock of the day. My senior year I roomed in an off-campus copulatorium on Kirkland Avenue with Doug Kenney, who went on to found the National Lampoon and write the scripts of "Animal House" and "Caddyshack." All these influences combined to produce a writer who was classically trained and had unusual cultural fluidity, but was still, inescapably and quintessentially, American. I had the openness, informality, irreverence, naivité, heart, and hedonism that are hallmarks of our culture. I was American in a way that Nabokov never was, I had let go of that Old World rigidity, but I was alternative American, informed by the Sixties counterculture. (The only way I've been able to relate to the American mainstream is through golf). And yet, such is the power of cross-generational trauma, I still longed for what Nabokov called a "hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blossoming Russia" that my family had left two generations earlier, that hadn't existed for fifty years, and that I myself had no personal experience of. This sense of loss partly explains my empathy for the dispossessed, deracinated, disempowered, and disenfranchised, and why I ended up choosing as my life work the documentation of flux, of cultures and ecosystems that are in the process of disappearing.

I was, though I didn't know it yet, an exile, the last of the wandering white Russians, a rootless cosmopolitan, Anagarika, the Homeless One-- I would adopt dozens of appellations, but in the end settled on the Suitcase, and in the decades that followed I would travel the world, trying to find where I belonged, until I finally realized that I belong nowhere, and everywhere: the world is my home. As Gary Davis sang in one of his songs, "I got one foot in the East and one foot in the West, /And I'm just trying to get home." And as I wrote in one of the songs that were now, in my early twenties, beginning to pour out at the rate of three or four a day, "I've lived in the country and in the city/I live sometimes between/ I lived in a drive-in in Salt Lake City/In a small room above the screen..."

Upon graduation in 1968 (magna cum laude in English and Greek after fucking off my first two years), I was hired by the Washington Post as a night police reporter. Within six months I was already in discussion with the foreign desk about being the next Moscow correspondent. But I was I-A, and there was no way I was going to 'Nam and blow away innocent "gooks," so I enlisted in an obscure Marine intelligence reserve unit that sent me to study Russian at the Defense Language

Institute in Monterey, California and trained me to be parachuted behind the Iron Curtain and to melt into the local population, which was unlikely to happen, as the commies we were fighting were the Chinese and Indochinese ones.

The Sixties were in full swing in California, and realizing that I had made a big mistake when the Marines started teaching me ghastly interrogation techniques (the same that were later transmitted to the Uruguayan police and used on student demonstrators), I went to Rev Davis with my 22-year-old's moral crisis about my military service. Davis made me a minister in a heated moment in a Harlem store-front church, and this enabled me to get a 4-D discharge from the Marine Corps, the D standing for divinity.

Instead of returning to the Post and being posted to Moscow, I "dropped out" and lived with my "old lady" on a farm in New Hampshire, and did what I really wanted to do, write songs. In 1970 I got a song-writing contract with Davis's manager, Manny Greenhill, who also managed Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, and Muddy Waters, and moved down to the East Village. I was supposed to perform them, but they were very personal, and I didn't have the confidence in my voice or guitar-picking to put them over on strange urban audiences. Songwriting, moreover, didn't satisfy my boundless intellectual curiosity. Nature had hit me, as my mother put it (I started with the birds, as many do, and proceeded to the wildflowers, trees, and mushrooms, keying out the species with the Golden and Peterson field guides), and I longed to see the world. So rather than spending the next twenty years in smoke-filled dives or o.d.'ing before I was thirty, as happened to Doug Kenney, I recast myself as a nature writer and literary journalist. My new heroes were Peter Mathiessen and John MacPhee, and my ambition was to be published by the New Yorker, which finally happened in 1977, when I returned from nine months in the Amazon reporting a Sierra Club book and learned that my book on Westchester County was going to be excerpted (see [the profile of Westchester in Past Dispatches](#)). In 1978 I joined the magazine's staff as a writer of "long fact." Under the guidance of Robert Bingham, MacPhee and Mathiessen's editor, I soon established myself as "consistently the farthest-flung of the New Yorker's far-flung correspondants." Raymond Sokoloff, in a Wall Street Journal review of African Madness, wrote that I was "overqualified," in the way that A.J. Liebling was. I got a Guggenheim and was inducted into the Century Club. One evening I took the train from my office at the New Yorker home to New Rochelle, and half the people in the car were reading a piece of mine in the latest issue. I heard my name mentioned in reverent whispers. I was a force in the culture. I had made it, or so it seemed.

Mr. Shawn gave me and all his writers carte blanche, the freedom to write about whatever we wanted to, at whatever length seemed appropriate, which, since we were paid by the word, meant long. "We're interested in whatever you're interested in," Mr. Shawn told me. Little did he know that I was interested in everything. My taste for the exotic and my hereditary biophilia and love of exploration took me to the farthest corners of the world. But it was my luck to come upon these places at a time when they were undergoing biological and cultural destruction on an unprecedented scale, due to overpopulation, rapacious multinational corporations, the developed countries' insatiable appetite for resources, and the arrival of modern inventions like bulldozers, chainsaws, defoliants, and television. The wholesale destruction that I encountered at every turn radicalized me. I became an advocate for these disappearing, voiceless species and native people,

and in 2001, just a few weeks before 9/11, I launched my Web site to raise consciousness about the hidden costs and far-reaching impacts, the “upstream and downstream burdens,” of America’s and the rest of the developed world’s oblivious hyperconsumption of the world’s resources and raw materials. The site now has 75,000 readers a year from all over the world, each month from ninety or countries. Its readership is not just the small group of people who buy books and magazines. Most of them are people who want to find more about something specific that they are interested in and stumble on the Site by Googling one of its eclectic cornucopia of offerings. One reader recently e-mailed from India, “you are the most important writer in the world at this moment.” That is all the reinforcement a writer could ask for, even more meaningful than being raved on the cover of the New York Times Book Review by the generous, straight-shooting Verlan Klinkenborg.

By 1985, I was chafing under the New Yorker’s stylistic prissiness, and the William Shawn era was coming to end. I had begun to feel like a member of the Royal Academy who had to paint still lives in prescribed, tasteful colors, eschewing the “arch” primary ones, but longed to be an Impressionist, to break out for the open sea instead of, in Updike’s term (the title he gave a collection of his criticism), “hugging the shore.” The opportunity to cut the umbilical cord came when in 1986, when my piece on Dian Fossey was taken by the newly resurrected Vanity Fair and Paramount Pictures bought the movie rights, which made me more money in a few weeks than I was making at the New Yorker in a year. It was incredibly refreshing to be able to write in the language I actually thought and talked in, and the pieces I turned out for Vanity Fair in the late eight and early nineties, under the aegis of Tina Brown, were, as Graydon Carter, the magazine’s editor since 1992, has written, literary events that caused a frisson in the culture and played a historic role in helping Vanity Fair rise to the prominence it has to today. While the New Yorker was incredibly important for me in terms of learning the writing craft and precision in the presentation and qualification of “fact,” and of enabling me to slake my wanderlust and satisfy my far-ranging intellectual curiosity, Vanity Fair has been, over the years, the most important outlet in my career, and though we’ve had our ups and downs, our relationship continues to this day. I’m about to become a contributing editor again, after a six-year hiatus.

At this point, mid-2007, I have nothing more to prove as a writer. If I didn’t publish another word, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. Few people would notice or care. Few people were aware of Kapuscinski’s passing earlier this year, or even knew who he was, I realized when I sang his praises at the Blue Metropolis festival last month and looked out at the audience and saw the same blank faces that I saw at Andre’s writing class.

But I ain’t done yet. Far from it. I can’t stop writing any more than I can breathing. I have pretty much answered, at least for my purposes, Gauguin’s fundamental questions (Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going?); my take on them will soon be brought out by Houghton Mifflin in my latest book, *To Each His Karmapa : Confessions of a Sometimes Buddhist*. I don’t I don’t feel any great need to travel any more. My wanderlust has died down, along with my lust and other sensual cravings. But once I’m on the road, I get into it, the juices start flowing. There are always surprises, not always pleasant ones, and new things to learn; there is no shortage of stories in the world. I go back to places I used to haunt twenty years ago and they are unrecognizable or completely gone. I feel like Rip Van Winkle, superseded. The show has gone on without me. Soon I won’t even be around to check up on it. But this is fine, because I have come to realize that we are not here for ourselves. The whole ego trip of being a great writer that I was once

so caught up in now seems faintly comical. My best writing may be behind me, but it may be not. At some point it will be, though, so I approach every new assignment and project with humility. I see myself as a “service soul,” in the term of a New Age savant in Phoenix who gave me a “soul reading” in 1992. My service is to bring the world together through my writing, to expose things that should not be happening, and to make people aware of things that need to be saved. I’m just an ink-stained wretch; a shit-kicking writer, as the Taos novelist John Nichols describes himself; a *neudobnyi chelovek*, an inconvenient person, who has the courage or rashness to tell the truth that no one wants to face and has no respect for artificial political and conceptual boundaries; a weary, beat-up suitcase, “flying by the seat of my pants, catch as catch can/ just trying to stay one town ahead of the re-po man,” to borrow a couplet from my song, “Suitcase On the Loose.” People who have followed my spiritual odyssey, world travels, and writing career are beginning to call me a “shaman” and a “mystic.” Shamans are, in the cultural geographer Daniel W. Gade’s definition, “people with an inner curiosity about their surroundings who have become repositories of esoteric knowledge and provide interpretations of it.” They are “holistic minds” due to their “unusual capacity to balance both hemispheres of the cerebellum. The right brain thinks in terms of symbols and images that create patterns as wholes, whereas the left brain uses scientific observation and logic in its cognitive process.” They have epiphanies in which they have “direct experience of appealing the secret intelligent powers without being filtered through a bureaucratic overlay.” They have “wide-ranging interests, affinity for wild or remote settings, psychological dissociation, special interest in altered states of consciousness, and a larger world view than most people.” They position themselves as outsiders and are often mentally unstable, marginals living precariously in a world of their own. All this describes me quite well (and even better my older brother formerly known as Nick, now a Delaware Indian crazy yogin artist hermit in the Catskills by the name of He Who Stands Firm, who was a huge formative influence on me). I’m becoming a bit of an urban recluse in Montreal, a citybilly of sorts.

Writing to me has always been an act of love and conscience. Early in my career, when I was convinced I was the greatest writer who ever lived and that my oeuvre would bring me immortality, and planned to take the world on, state by state (after Florida I was going to do Texas), my literary motives were also ego-driven. But I no longer suffer from these delusions. I am just one of millions who are expressing themselves and contributing to the collective consciousness of mankind, which the Internet has provided an unlimited, free access to and to. Like many an unreconstructed (or derailed) product of the Sixties, I have lived more like a grasshopper than an ant, with nary a thought for the morrow. The nest I padded in my thirties and forties and have done little maintenance on since is unraveling and returning to the elements. I’ve done more, over the years, to sabotage my career than to promote it, squandered financial and literary capital with abandon, blissfully pissed away whatever funds or respect came my way. I could have managed the business and political side more skillfully, but I have no regrets, except for the excoriating blasts of anger that I have sometimes unleashed on friends and colleagues, which I have more or less of a handle on, by the natural mellowing of age and the practice of Buddhist anger-management techniques.

In 2005 I revisited India, Mexico, Russia, Brazil, and Peru—the countries, along with Tibet, Madagascar, Mali, and the U.S., that have given me the richest material and the most to think about (and Canada, our home since 1999, is surprisingly fascinating, particularly Manitoba, which I find as exotic as anywhere I have been). In my travels I always taken along a little guitar and a tape

recorder to jam with the locals and learn their music. In April, 2006, I went into the desert of Rajasthan to play music with its indigenous caste of gypsies and test a theory about the universal language of music that I had been formulating since I went to Mali in 2003 (see the Dispatch on Bamako, particularly the postscript). And now, at last, I am recording a c.d. of my song songs, called “Suitcase on the Loose” (two versions one of its songs, “One Morning Soon,” can be heard on the Dispatches), a bag of tunes I’ve been carrying around and adding to for lo these forty years. So I’ve come full circle.

Anyone interested in finding out what this wordsmith is all about has only to spend some time in the Dispatches. It’s all there, or most of the best stuff. The Russian family, [Dian Fossey](#), [Chico Mendes](#), and Tibet pieces were seminal events in American journalism; “[A Long Weekend in Armenia](#)” is a freewheeling, Twainian travelogue; “[Annals of Investigative Golf: The Gavea Golf Club, Rio de Janeiro](#)” pushes the envelope of golf writing into the dada. “[The Alcoholic Monkeys of St. Kitts](#)” is a vintage Shoumatovian *désaventure* that turns out to be far more interesting than if everything had gone as planned. For tropical natural history see the [Amazon Woman](#) and [Ituri Forest](#) pieces, and [the introduction to Henry Walter Bates’ A Natural History of the Amazon](#). For temperate natural history, see [the profile of Westchester County](#). For boreal natural history, see the [hydro](#), [gartersnake](#), and [Bloodvein River](#) Dispatches from Manitoba.

Rather than quote from one of these Dispatches, here is something that isn’t on the site: a section of the chapter called “The Hub of Northern Westchester” from my 1978 book, *Westchester: Portrait of a County*. It didn’t make the *New Yorker* profile, perhaps because it was my debut in the magazine, and Robert Bingham didn’t want to present his promising new find as someone who couldn’t even hold down a job. “I never knew anybody could write about Westchester with so much love,” Mr. Shawn told me admiringly on our first meeting, in 1977. (I had just come back from the Amazon, and Mr. Shawn asked me, with his characteristic timidity and awe, “So you do get the feeling of the wilderness, down there, do you?”) The book is long out of print, so it is gratifying to rescue this passage from oblivion.

About my brief stint at Fox & Sutherland’s stationery store in Mount Kisco, these half-dozen paragraphs convey who I was in my early twenties and still am today, essentially, though encased in sixty pounds of lard, and all the cells in my body having been replaced themselves three times, and having shed ideologies and world views like the transparent pupal casings emerging cicadas leave on tree trunks. The themes of flux and loss, the failures and obstacles (most of one’s own making) that always pave the road to realization, and the attempt to give all forms of life their due, that have always preoccupied me are all here. I had taken the job to demonstrate my worthiness to marry my editor at Harper and Row’s assistant. The marriage, it turned out, lasted only a year and ended in excruciating heartbreak, driving me, like Evelyn Waugh, to wander in the Amazon for nine months. Fox & Sutherland’s itself ceased to exist in the late nineties, after the building it was in burned. It was resurrected in a new location down the street, but a few years later was dealt the coup de grace by the Border’s in the nearby mall. Mount Kisco is unrecognizable from this nearly thirty-year-old vignette, and so is Bedford, and I live now in Montréal, an exile of two empires, the Russian and the American, as I sometimes think of myself, with no connection to the world of my childhood, which made me who I am and is still the locus of most of my dreams, which I will carry within me to my dying day.

The astute reader familiar with the Russian writers will detect, although the writing is early Shoumatoff and nothing to get excited about, similarities with both Gogol and Nabokov (especially *Dead Souls* and *Pnin*, respectively), which are all the more telling because they were not conscious or deliberate.

In those days [the end of the nineteenth century] the culture center of Mount Kisco was a general store by the name of Cox and Fish. The local sages would gather there around a big potbelly stove; armchairs and cuspidors were provided by the management. Next door was William Carpenter's Stationery Store. It flourished for four decades, but when Herman Fox and Morris Oxman took it over in 1928, it had fallen on bad times. Fox had immigrated from Argentina, worked for a while in a New York garment factory, then gone into business with his brother-in-law, Oxman, who had a stationery store in Pleasantville. Soon after they took over, the Depression struck. Some of the wealthy people in the surrounding estates were wiped out completely, and with a lot of time suddenly on their hands, they began to stop at the store. "That was the first we ever saw them," Fox told me. "Before that we would only see their butler or chauffeur." They talked to Fox about the economy and about the books they were reading; Fox started to stock books. Forty years later, his is the best-stocked book, record, stationery, and toy store for miles around. A visit to Mount Kisco is for many synonymous with a visit to Fox's. The store has become as much a cultural center as Cox and Fish used to be, minus the armchairs and cuspidors.

When I was twenty-five I worked briefly at the store. My duties were to sort out the paperbacks and to sweep the floor at the end of the day, and I was paid a relatively high starting salary because I had a college education. While putting the books in alphabetical order I found it difficult not to be curious about their contents, to my eventual downfall. One evening, in the second week of my employ, after I had spent too much company time on an aluminum stepladder "familiarizing myself with the stock," Cal Fox, Herman's son, came to me and told me very nervously that he really liked me and all but he didn't think I was working out or even, for that matter, working. I said I was really sorry and would try to do better starting tomorrow, but he said no, he didn't think I should come back tomorrow. What could I do but turn in my book of charge slips and exit gracefully? I left by the back door, walked across the parking lot, and stood on a wooden bridge watching a sluggish creek called Branch Brook flowing through the valley it had made. Empty soda cans and opalescent swirls of oil drifted under the bridge and into a thicket of reeds of Japanese bamboo. Several yards downstream a muskrat stood licking its greasy paws.

It was an evening in early June. Miasmal gases had begun to rise from the reedbeds and I could smell the produce from the empty cartons and crates in the shed behind the Finast supermarket, the fumes of a commuter train, and the blossoms of the big catalpa tree between Doris Cawley's Shell station and the movie theater. Texas Chain-Saw Massacre was at the movies, with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs as the weekend matinee.

Just then the ten horns of the air warning system went off on the roof of the municipal building. It was six o'clock. The six deafening blasts were followed by a mellow rendition of "Rock of Ages" from the Lutheran churchbells higher up the hill, and then by the booming laughter of the barman in David's Restaurant-Bar. Swamp mosquitoes were beginning to emerge from the hollow reed stalks and old tires containing water and to swarm into the air. *Aedes Canadensis*, *cinereus*, and *stimulans*— their bite could give you malaria or encephalitis, but has never been known to do so in Mount Kisco. A shirtless black teenager with a woolen hat rode by on a unicycle, dribbling a basketball.

I walked up Main Street, passing a policeman who was leaning against a stop sign with his hat pushed back on his head, chatting with a senior citizen. A girl who had just caught a fish in the creek came running by, grinning ear to ear. Farther on I came on an old man hosing the suds off his twenty-year-old, immaculately kept Buick. Across the diner stood the red, metallic Midnite Diner. Or rather Mid*ite Diner, since the n has been missing from its neon sign for as long as I can remember. An enormous Grand Union truck, into which you might have been able to fit the entire diner, was parked in front. I went inside, took a booth, and ordered a cup of coffee. At the counter two men, several stools away from each other, were eating hamburgers in unison. From inside the kitchen came the sound of dishes crashing to the floor, followed by an explosion in Greek. Gloria, the buxom Puerto Rican waitress, brought my coffee, then went inside to see what had happened. I drank up, left a quarter on the table, walked to the register, dialed a toothpick, popped a mint into my mouth, and parted the double glass doors. No one there, I decided, would have been especially interested to hear that I had just been fired, but the atmosphere of indifference was benign and somehow supportive.

Mount Kisco is that way.