

NEW BOOKS

By John Leonard



When he wasn't covering Third World coups, civil wars, and revolutions as a nomadic correspondent for the Polish Press Agency, the late Ryszard Kapuściński was publishing such wonderful books as *The Emperor*, about Ethiopia's Haile Selassie, and *Shah of Shahs*, still the best account of the Islamic revolution in Iran. Not even a shortening of his leash by the Warsaw authorities after he supported Solidarity in 1981 kept him from the Congo and Honduras, Mexico and Mozambique. Clearly, like his hero Herodotus, Kapuściński was happiest on the road, with the scorpions, hyenas, and hallucinations. But it seems to me that he also harbored a secret, domestic agenda—that his soccer wars and harvest festivals, his autocrats and ancient mariners, his borders and bloody baroque, add up to a kind of metafiction, speaking in code about Communist Poland. In the way that such postmodernists as Borges, Calvino, and Stanisław Lem wrote reviews of

imaginary books to make subversive points, so Kapuściński left town to write about his squalid homeland, as if he were as alien and disinterested as an anthropologist from Mars.

THE OTHER (Verso, \$16.95), a series of lectures that were delivered, for the most part, in the five years before his death in 2007, doesn't exactly confirm my suspicion, or invalidate it either. Beginning with a literature of discovery that includes the Upanishads, the I Ching, Homer, Hesiod, Gilgamesh, the Old Testament, the Koran, and Popol Vuh, he swiftly narrows his focus to the confrontation of the arrogant white European with the stigmatized African, Asian, and Latin American Other ("a looking glass in which I see myself and in which I am observed"). See this Stranger through the eyes of Alexan-



der the Great, or the Crusades, or the Spanish Conquest, or the slave trade, from the genocidal point of view of the imperialist, the exotic-story point of view of the journalist, the ethical angle of such priestly theologians as Solidarity's Krakow chaplain, Józef Tischner, the phenomenological perspective of such philosophers as the Lithuanian Emmanuel Levinas, and the relativistic open-mindedness of such anthropologists as Bronisław Malinowski ("to judge something, you have to be there").

Kapuściński's personal Other, encountered among Indians in Bolivia, nomads in the Sahara, and crowds bewailing the death of Khomeini in Tehran, is invariably nonwhite, usually religious, ultranationalistic, and "very emotional." This stranger must become our "partner" instead of "the object of research." In a world "where there is so much demagogy, disorientation, fanaticism and bad will," a world of "mass culture and mass hysteria, mass tastes . . . and mass paranoia, mass enslavement, and finally mass murder," a world in which "the only hero on the world stage is the crowd, and the main feature of this crowd, this mass, is anonymity, impersonality, lack of identity, lack of a face," we have lost the individual, the specific Self with whom dialogue is possible. Instead of apartheid's walls and moats, Kapuściński calls for Silk Roads and

agoras, markets and shrines—a hybrid and heterogeneous "culture of hospitality."

As Neal Ascherson observes in his introduction, it is a relief to read a journalist more interested in those he meets in the outside world than solipsistically absorbed with "guilt-making problems about voyeurism" and "repressed attraction to violence," but *The Other* feels skimpy nonetheless, omitting all mention of previous work in the field, especially by French intellectuals at least as pertinent as Levinas—e.g., Rimbaud, whose "I" was an "Other";

Camus, whose *Stranger* murdered an Arab; and de Beauvoir, who Otherized sex. Still, Kapuściński does open a sort of Pandora's portal through which it is possible to access every imaginable Other, erotic and exotic, sacred and profane, to define the inchoate Self.

In **SPRING, HEAT, RAINS: A SOUTH INDIAN DIARY** (Chicago, \$25), David Shulman—born in Iowa, transplanted to Israel, a despairing peace activist, “heartsick philologist,” and professor of Humanistic Studies in the Department of Comparative Religion at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, needing “to reinvent myself”—leaves the Middle East for Andhra Pradesh in the spring of 2006 and would rather never return. So absorbed is he in the Hindu Other, so ravished by Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu poetry, so smitten by rickshaws and tamarind trees, lotus pads and herons, cashew groves and cosmic turtles, sun temples and *lingam* shrines, royal elephants and Karnatak music, black butterflies and pickled genitals, the dwarf-sage Agastya and “a god who needs to be thickened with flowers,” that he disappears for pages at a time into sensuous latticework dream. Yes, he is mastering a language, Telugu, and recovering its thousand years of refined literature, and translating for us court poetry of an exquisite order, and hobnobbing with the local gentry, every one of whom has written either a novel or a book of epic poems, all the while on his scholarly sabbatical disdaining politics (whether of Karl Marx, Indira Gandhi, or the obstreperous Naxalites) and postmodernism (the chichi French). But his fateful relationship is not with idioms and syntagmas; it is with an erotic Other of taste, smell, color, song, and dance—an intensity that's almost lurid. And Shulman isn't some hippy-dippy pilgrim on the shaggy-yoga road past Om through the Veil of Maya. He is a married man, and middle-aged, and full of obdurate facts. He has been to Berlin and Ispahan. He has read Mandelstam and listened to Haydn. He wears Western culture like a pair of

pajamas. Yet his India is sensational, the Other as monsoon.

Whereas, in Daniel L. Everett's **DON'T SLEEP, THERE ARE SNAKES: LIFE AND LANGUAGE IN THE AMAZONIAN JUNGLE** (Pantheon, \$26.95), the Other is a contradiction and a disillusioning, a conundrum and a reproach. Aside from time out for academic stints in various American and British universities, Everett has spent most of three decades in the Brazilian rain forest, learning indigenous languages and losing his Christian faith. He first appeared in the Amazon as a missionary, determined to convert simple fisherfolk to Christ. But the Piraha had no more need for Christianity in their provincial lives than they've needed words in their language for colors, or numbers, or left, or right; for “worry,” “God,” “thanks,” or “sorry.” They seem to have gotten along just fine without a concept of the future or the past, of sin, poverty, baby talk, or fear of death. They deal with incivility by ostracism. They are equally unacquainted with the idea and the fact of soap. They aren't much for ritual, and refuse to believe anything they haven't seen with their own eyes or heard with their own ears, though they will sometimes credit the hearsay evidence of another Piraha so long as he swears he was there. They can be sarcastic, but not, apparently, unkind. And what they did to Everett was subversive. Innocent of doubt, wonder, or absolutes, free from any trace of “depression, chronic fatigue, extreme anxiety, panic attacks, or other psychological ailments common in many



industrialized societies,” these happy forest Others suggested to the Protestant missionary that God wasn't strictly necessary, costing him his family as well as his faith; and that Noam Chomsky's theory of universal grammar and Stephen Pinker's “language instinct” are both wrong, at least in certain parts of Brazil. So long as we are spared the vital statistics on life expectancy and child mortality, and are willing to forgive movies, newspapers, and the occa-

sional surprising idea, *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* makes the rain forest sound like a magic mushroom.

Fiction, of course, is where we've always gone with our white skins and male chromosomes and American passports and platinum credit cards, such a lot of privilege, on a tour of the Other, seeking discrepancy and abrasion, ambush and romance, Oz and Elsewhere—the heart of darkness and the blood of lambs. Such a quest has inspired Sabiha al Khemir, an art historian, a television documentarian, and the director of Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art, to write a novel about privileged foreigners—“people made of a different clay”—on an archaeological dig in the Egyptian desert, looking for a magnificent tenth-century Koran and finding instead, like a pottery shard, the Other in themselves. Although we return periodically to the tenth century to peek over the shoulder of the calligrapher who rendered this Koran, most of **THE BLUE MANUSCRIPT** (Verso, \$24.95) filters through the ghostly perspective of Zohra, a half-English, half-Tunisian translator insecure in everything from her sexual identity to where in the world she belongs, monitoring the frantic activities of an American entrepreneur, an English lab assistant, a blonde Italian bombshell, an Irish professor of the Fatimids, a German-Jewish recluse, and a kite-flying Japanese technician, not to mention an entire superstitious village.

There will be fire, flood, fraud, Puccini, and Dante's *Inferno*, as well as a Tree of Wishes, a Well of Silence, a Green Pavilion, and a “gratuitous death.” Has it ever occurred to you to wonder why Christians sound a bell to summon the faithful to worship, Jews blow a horn, Hindus beat a gong, and Muslims are called to prayer by a human voice from a minaret? *The Blue Manuscript* is as full of information and historical tidbits as it is of lonely owls, doomed love, rock crystal, grotesque shadows, portentous dreams, peacock eyes, goats and flutes, a love of Arabic, and a fractal theory of Islamic art—a novel as hybrid and heterogeneous, as forgiving and inspiring, as Ryszard Kapuściński's “culture of hospitality.” ■