

upfront

quick-change artist

Her only routine is that she doesn't have one. For novelist Susan Minot, living out of a suitcase just makes it easier to follow the path of inspiration.

DESERT FLOWER:
THE AUTHOR AT EGYPT'S
PYRAMIDS OF GIZA.

Art is not concerned with environment; it doesn't care where it is . . . the only environment the artist needs is whatever peace, whatever solitude, and whatever pleasure he can get at not too high a cost.—WILLIAM FAULKNER

One of the great advantages of being a writer is having your work with you wherever you are and being able to take it with you wherever you go. As long as you have a pen and paper you can write—on the end of a dock in a swamp, on a counter in a diner, on an armrest in a tiny airport.

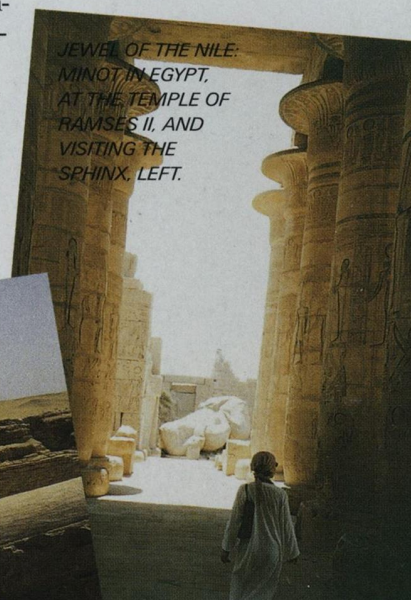
Bruce Chatwin, who traveled widely, observed that there are two kinds of writers—those who require the daily certainty of habit and place to work and those who prefer the lack of familiarity and even disorientation they find in places far from home. Chatwin kept an apartment in London but more often wrote in distant locations, from towers in Tuscany to bars in Patagonia.

When I first started writing, my choice of surroundings had simply to do with what was available. In school I'd write during study hall, feeling I was asserting a tiny protest, not doing homework as I was supposed to do. For much of my teenage years I'd write late into the night after everyone had gone to bed. Cigarettes, now a discarded habit, were integral to this practice. After I left home I continued scribbling in coffee shops and libraries, on ferries, trains, in museums, or waiting for the lights to go down in movie houses. I had no trouble writing while I was driving. I was a compulsive writer, and much of my relationship with writing had to do with the fact that it was not the thing I was supposed to be doing. When I began to write in earnest—that is, actually completing and selling stories for publication—it was an adjustment to set up a routine. I found I could still keep that furtive

spirit alive if I changed locations, like a fugitive in a movie changing identities, huddling on different street corners. If no one really knew what I was doing, it could remain safe, and private, and protected.

Though I spent the better part of my 20s not moving off the island of Manhattan, I frequently changed neighborhoods. I never lived in one place for more than three or four months. For a while I slept in my aunt Jean's painting studio in the daybed, happily surrounded by her canvases on easels and brushes in jars and tables covered in beautiful old fabrics. The tall windows looked across the street to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and at night the pale building gave off a rosy topaz glow. There was a bookcase above my bed where I first found a book by Raymond Carver. Reading his stories was one of those encounters that one remembers as suddenly altering one's view of the world and of writing, and one of the memorable moments of finding treasures in other people's libraries.

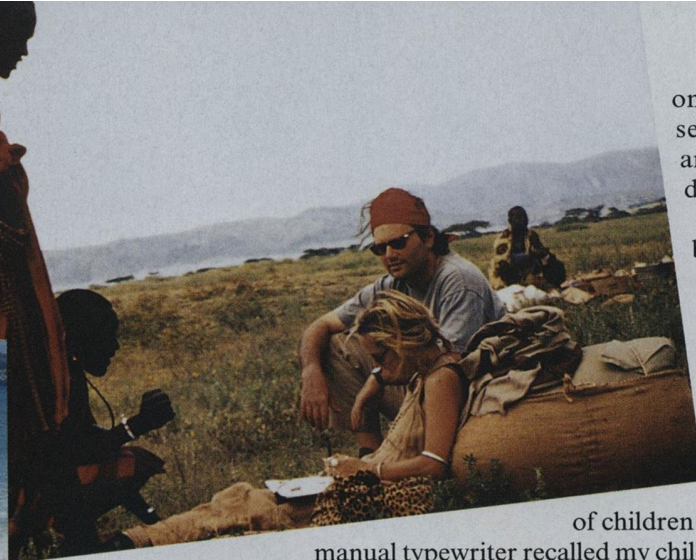
I passed through many spare rooms. The maid's room of my sister's apartment, to which I returned often, was the exact size of a double mattress—this one was on the floor. There *up front* ▶150



JEWEL OF THE NILE:
MINOT IN EGYPT,
AT THE TEMPLE OF
RAMSES II, AND
VISITING THE
SPHINX, LEFT.

Bottom: LUCY WINTON (2), all courtesy of Susan Minot.

DESPERATELY
SEEKING SUSAN:
MINOT FINDS
HERSELF IN TANZANIA,
RIGHT, AND ON
TORTOLA, BELOW.



I wrote at the dining-room table. A friend away for the summer lent me her tiny apartment on West Fourth Street, where I wrote on a propped-up door

looking out on stink trees through her white-grated windows. There was a trickling of sublets. Other people's libraries were endlessly interesting. But just as instructive, if not more so, were the actual writers I encountered close-up. On East Third Street I shared quarters with two journalists and learned that one stayed up all night, stopped bathing, and became incommunicado in order to meet deadlines. In one sublet I had the honor of having the legendary Murray Kempton as one of my roommates. Murray used to fall asleep listening to the ball game with a radio propped on his chest. In the kitchen, opera played as he made breakfast. But it was the notes he left me about mundane matters—who'd called, how he'd broken the washing machine—that were exquisite examples of writing that drolly managed in the manner of his newspaper columns to raise moral dilemmas and comment ironically on the folly of human nature, a style as instructive as anything I was coming across in the graduate writing program at Columbia University.

This off-kilter manner of living paralleled in an odd way the process of writing—that is, a process that involves tentatively feeling one's way on a search for what finally is worth saying. Though there was a dislocation to moving around so much, not committing myself to a permanent residence gave me the illusion of, if not actual, freedom. I shuddered at the notion of "settling down," taking the phrase in its least appealing sense to mean settling for something less than what life might offer. I was spending nights at my boyfriend's apartment, but there was still another place where I was officially living. Freedom, of course, ended up costing a lot more—in practical matters. I was hard to reach. Sometimes I had to sneak in at my own door. Would the neighbors who shared the same brick wall in the bow-shaped studio I lived in one winter on Sixth Avenue inform the landlord that my dancer friend who held the lease was nowhere in evidence?

But no matter where I found myself there was one constant: my writing. After publishing my first book, I expanded my peripatetic inclination to a wider terrain. I began crossing oceans. Instead of changing neighborhoods, I was changing currencies.

I recently completed my fourth book, *Evening*. The manuscript traveled over three different continents, visited five countries, was worked

of children below as I pounded on my manual typewriter recalled my childhood, and rather than disturb me it was a consoling feeling. I did my best trying to pitch in with the shopping and cooking and the occasional dinner. I read bedtime stories to the kids. I was definitely getting the better end of the deal.

There were, of course, the long stretches of unavoidable solitude—it is the essence of the writer's life, after all. I spent weeks in a huge empty house in the woods with bare branches and howling winter winds, night after night on Tortola listening to the same distant reggae song. There were the dinners spent reading books while a mixture of foreign languages gurgled up from the restaurant in the Roman square below. Most balanced were the times I paired off with a similar solitary soul involved in the Struggle. She'd be at the other end of the veranda, writing, or he'd be in the back room, computer keys clicking. We'd meet for meals without disrupting too much that delicate shell that forms around long days spent in composition and dreamy imaginings.

I fell back on my family. My aunt K-K let me write in her shack above a beach of flint in Dark Harbor across Penobscot Bay. I stayed there all day with my pen and ink and manual typewriter and at night slept in the round guest room in her multi-porched house. She very generously took me out to dinner, and in the evenings I would slip into aspects of the island's social life, not quite on vacation, not quite a houseguest, but in danger of imploding if I stopped interacting altogether. (When the simple sudden barking of her terriers nearly gave me a heart attack, I realized I'd become a little fragile.)

The places one writes have a far greater effect on the nature of one's life than on the writing itself. Writing takes place only in the head, and if one is truly concentrating and truly composing, one is not aware of surroundings. One is in a state of transcendence. Of course

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GOING PLACES: WRITING IN HER SISTER'S MAINE HOUSE, LEFT, AND TAKING THE PLUNGE IN ASWAN, EGYPT, ABOVE.

on in six states, five islands, seven cities, fifteen towns, and saw at the very least 30 different tables.

I relied on the kindness of both friends and strangers. I took up the offer far more times than I'm sure was expected by generous people who idly said, "You're welcome to stay in my house." Before they knew it, I would.

I moved in with families. Hearing the shouts



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the choice of where one writes may affect the swiftness with which one penetrates, in Delacroix's phrase, "the crust of the everyday," that layer through which an artist must break each time he sets down to work. For me, being at home among my all-too-well-known things presents a more rigorous obstacle course than the one I face entering an empty shed with a view of gray sea being overtaken by fog. No phones are ringing.

Finding a place conducive to writing, to supporting that shell of concentration, is important, but it is the hours when one is not writing that are more affected by where one finds oneself. I have written in the other way. My third book—about a woman living in Boston in the twenties and thirties, depicted, perhaps not coincidentally, trapped in her life—was written exclusively in one viewless room in a loft in Tribeca. But the refreshment of being able to take an unknown walk down a frozen dune and return in the dark half-lost, of discovering unexplored blocks in strange cities, the stimulation of speaking a different language at dinnertime, of smelling the smoke of foreign fires—all that turned out to provide me with the kind of reinvigoration I need for writing a book. To watch a line of giraffes glide by a green lake in northern Kenya while Beethoven plays from the upper rooms of a tower may not serve as direct inspiration to a book set in New England, but it certainly lifts the spirit for the task at hand: another page or two tomorrow.

Each time I change locale I have the illusion of freshness. One's skin feels different in the tropical air, and strangely the ink seems to flow differently there too. Why the silhouette of thorny bushes on a beach on the Indian Ocean seems to twist thoughts in my head is hard to say, but that's how it feels. I once was given a fortune dictated by my birth date—it was "You will meet yourself wherever you go." When I see that purple sky over



FOOD FOR THOUGHT:
MINOT ON THE MASAI
MARA IN KENYA.

The places one writes have a far greater effect on the nature of one's life than on the writing itself

the Masai steppe and rainstorms on the horizon, it doesn't seem that way.

The "discipline" required for a writer's life is often mistakenly seen as the arranging of hours set aside to sit at a desk. The real challenge is more subtle. Anyone can sit at a desk for hours; a dog could be trained to do it. Actually writing something at that desk is the thing. The hard part comes in not standing up in despair.

There is a paradoxical stillness in travel. Watching a landscape move by inspires a kind of meditation. Everything is transient and flowing; one develops a soothing internal focus. Unfamiliar smells and the foreign look of people carry no personal associations, so life seems altogether new—important for a writer who aspires to say something that has not been said before, to convey life in a way in which it hasn't yet been conveyed.

Rather than satisfying my restlessness, stirring up dust has made me want to keep moving. My mind is as full of images of places I have not been—India, South America, the Far East, China—as of those I have. Prospects for settling down aren't looking too good.

Writing is the thing, after all, which has allowed me to travel, and though I cannot say what effect travel has on writing, I can say the effect travel has on my life: It casts a spell over my days when I return from a trip and find almonds in my pocket and bite into them and they taste like the market where I bought them a few days before in Cairo. And if nothing else, I am made to feel a citizen of the world when sand from a beach on Zanzibar spills from the hem of my skirt onto the seat of a New York cab. □