Passengers of history
An accidental tourist in revolutionary Egypt
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‘The first feeling when writing other cultures...is a loss of authority.’
– Eva Hornung

‘I met a traveller from an antique land...’
– Percy Bysshe Shelley

THE garden café was at the northern end of a grassy park along the Aswan Corniche, a rare green space in bone-dry terrain shaded by vines and trees. We were glad to escape the sharp heat of the sun. The Nile was invisible from where we sat, but there was a clear view of the Aga Khan Mausoleum, high up on a desert hill across the water. A curly haired young waiter welcomed us and took our order. I was relieved not to be the only woman. Two Egyptians wearing hijab sat at the scattered tables with their families. A group of men in western clothes stared intently at the coverage of the protests in Cairo on a large television screen.

It was the second Friday since the Egyptian uprising began and we had reached an impasse in our journey. We knew only a few words of Arabic, so gathering information was slow and difficult. The internet and mobile phone access were blocked. We had no connection with home. We were unable to get through to the Australian embassy in Cairo even by landline. The easy flow of words and images we take for granted in our daily lives vanished, as if we had travelled back in time to before electronic information overload, when travel meant leaving the familiar and entering another world.

We had travelled that day from Luxor to Aswan, hoping to continue with our plans. The trains were all cancelled, but a taxi driver was pleased to take us. On the three-hour journey he kindly bought us a bag of fruit, and asked us to wait while he took his midday prayers in a mosque at Kom Ombo. But when we reached Aswan we found that our flight to Abu Simbel was cancelled, as were most flights out of the town. The museums and monuments were shut. Ian, who had been
hoping for a thickshake at the American café, was disappointed to find the place closed. ‘Until further notice,’ said the man, leaning on a rail beside the door, holding his cigarette and a useless mobile phone in one hand.

By late afternoon that day the fierce light had softened and Aswan’s concrete buildings shadowed each other. People milled along the main street towards the town square, where the demonstration was gathering. Lean boys ran together across the dusty pockmarked street. Women carried shopping bags filled from the market, their covered heads held high. Shopkeepers stood under awnings, their wild bursts of talk echoing. As we drew closer to the square, where we saw a large crowd now gathered, a youth wearing a blue *galabiye* stepped across our path. ‘No!’ he said, stamping his stick on the pavement. It was our first real warning that here, for once, foreigners were not altogether welcome. This moment belonged to the Egyptians, not to us. We nodded and walked away to the green space of the garden café.

Our drinks had just been served when three boys rushed in under the vine-covered gate. The fast thump of their feet made everyone turn to look. The waiter snapped the tops from three bottles and the boys up-ended the cold fizzy liquid over their faces. They had been right under the blast of tear gas used to quell the crowd – their eyes and noses were already swollen and inflamed. We could hear the roar of the demonstration a couple of blocks away. Before long we too felt the faint sting of the tear gas as it drifted across the park. The Egyptians sitting at the tables around us calmly covered their noses with paper napkins and kept their eyes on the TV screen.

The streetlights came on as dusk fell. The demonstration grew quieter. We did not hurry away. The families lingered, watching the last red rays of the sun slip below the Nile. Our travel arrangements overtaken, we tried to recover from the disappointment and think about what to do.

An interesting problem confronted us. This was not so much a problem of logistics, or resources, or safety, as a problem of narrative. The way I saw it, we had come to a point where the story, our story, could not yet move forward. Just as Egypt had reached a political impasse, so, in a more personal and infinitely smaller sense, had we.

Eventually there would be several possible directions to take. We might try to reach Cairo for an evacuation flight, return to the relative comforts of Luxor or stay in our hotel in Aswan, hoping that our scheduled flight from Cairo would not be cancelled. Or we could attempt in some more complicated way to leave the country, overland or by sea. On that day in Aswan, however, we were forced to accept the impasse. There was no action that we could take, nowhere to go. As tourists, we were out of place and time. We had no part to play in the surrounding events. Our personal story, as travellers in Shelley’s ‘antique land’, which we had recorded so carefully in all our notes, messages and photographs, was now already anachronous, overtaken by the grander narrative of the Egyptian uprising.
FROM CAIRO AIRPORT we took a public bus into the city. It was dirty and old: its broken metal armrests tore at our clothes. We sat waiting on cracked vinyl seats as the driver drank his tea. Ten minutes into our journey, the sputtering bus broke down on the freeway and the passengers were forced to climb down onto a narrow verge between the lanes of roaring traffic. The driver stood with his passengers, clutching his empty tea glass and a stained embroidered pillow, until an off-duty bus came to pick us up. In Egypt, uncertainty became a way of life.

On our way into the capital we passed tall apartment buildings with their once-elegant art deco mouldings now broken and stained with pollution. Their ground floors were infested with shops selling car tyres, furniture, toys, cushions and drapes, phone services, bolts of cloth. One was filled with bulging satin wedding dresses, their greying hems exposed below translucent plastic shrouds. Another bus change and we were walking up Talaat Harb near Tahrir Square, looking for our hotel.

Everywhere in the city the pavement was uneven, covered with low-lying obstacles and thick with dust from the desert winds. Hawkers loomed toward us in the street, throwing out charming hooks to catch tourists. Spotting ‘loomers’ became a game. Shop touts offered a ‘good price’ for everything and every price was negotiable. One street corner was adorned with a banner sporting the enormous face of President Mubarak. Then, everything seemed simple, a mapped journey unfolding. We thought we knew what to expect. We were wrong.

John Urry, in *The Tourist Gaze* (Sage, 2002), reminds us that what we ‘see’ as tourists reflects our preconceived ideas about a place and its people. In Egypt we wanted to tell the story we had already imagined and to take only memories of places, conversations, a small handful of souvenirs. On our way to Giza, at the desert edge, we watched a man crack a whip over the back of a thin, dirty donkey as it dragged a cart loaded with vegetables. I saw the pyramids for the first time from the muddied windows of another ancient bus, strange smoky peaks floating above the horizon. Beyond the ticket gate we walked along a road packed with camel drivers and donkey carts, ignoring them, preferring to walk with our cameras in our hands. We stayed there for hours circling the high, pointed monuments, stepping over foetid animal droppings as we paid homage to the Sphinx, with his tender, crumbling tail. In the last hour of the day the sun stained the earth and its ancient stones an impossible gold.

Exhausted, we took a bus to Tahrir Square, where bustling workers headed homeward past groups of men who stood talking and smoking in darkness. Were they among the insistent ones, the revolutionaries who would fill the square a few days later? I will never know. Later, we walked to our hotel along a cobbled lane where a young cat ran towards us, its white fur stained grey with the filth of the street, hoping for food or water.
In Cairo we walked along Sharia al-Azhar among the crowded shops, where boys carried cups of chai on shiny metal trays and women carried their shopping bags on their heads. There were falafel shops, stalls full of saucepans and bright acrylic blankets hanging up under the elaborate stonework of a medieval bridge. We sat in a café facing the portrait of a famous Egyptian writer. The Turkish coffee I drank there reminded me of burning cinnamon sticks on an open bush fire. Too tired to walk back, in darkness we climbed onto a crowded bus. The people held out their hands to help us climb over their boxes and crates full of what they had bought that day, or what they could not sell. The shops and cafés near our hotel on Talaat Harb stayed open very late, brightly lit, full of clothes and shoes that reminded me of a country town emporium I saw when I was a child. In Cairo I had *fuul* for breakfast, stewed broad beans flavoured with garlic and lemon, served by a girl wearing a pretty hijab. That last morning she showed me how I should tie my scarf, but afterwards my fingers couldn’t remember the feel of how to make the knots. We planned to go back, to stay in the same hotel, but after the uprising there was no way to return.

WE FLEW TO Luxor two days before the demonstrations began. The air seemed clearer there after Cairo’s thick pall, but the desert dust still cloaked the air. Our balcony overlooked the Nile, where dozens of cruise boats docked together at sunset and hot air balloons rose over the Temple of Hatshepsut in the soft red mist of dawn. By the end of our stay the balloon rides had been stopped, for fear of shootings.

We did not know the uprising was coming. Mubarak’s benign face looked down on us there too, from the sides of roads, bridges and buildings, a modern Ozymandias. On the day of the first Friday protest the town was quiet until lunchtime, except for the regular cries of worship. That morning even the hawkers were at prayer as we walked to the Luxor Temple. Between those massive columns a wild huddle of youths shouted and laughed, climbing on each other’s shoulders, to pose for photographs as ancient warriors ready for battle. That was the first time I sensed that something was about to happen, as their intensity pulled my attention from a chiselled harvest frieze.

I thought of them again, a day later, when we watched thousands of people pass along the main streets of the town from beneath the covered lanes of the *souk*. When the leader of the opposition came past, borne on the shoulders of his supporters, there was a sudden rush of joy and excitement among the crowd. One man turned to us, his face shining. He said, ‘We never had this hope before.’ At dinner that night, in an upstairs restaurant near our hotel, the waiter wept as he told us about his disappointed hopes, his life of working two jobs so that his children could go to university. ‘The cost of everything,’ he said, repeating that one word ‘everything’.
At the beginning we were not concerned for ourselves. We had another fortnight before we were due back in Cairo and by that time, we supposed, everything would have calmed down. The first shock came after the initial protests, when we found ourselves facing a wall of shields held by black-uniformed riot police at the end of the shopping arcade along the route to our hotel. The next day the police were replaced by a phalanx of armed soldiers ranged along the Corniche, facing the Nile.

The soldiers did not trouble us. They were there to protect the government building that was next door to our hotel, and to ‘keep the peace’ in the town. After our initial discomfort at having to walk past uniforms, guns, troop carriers and tanks, it became strangely amusing to watch the trail of dwindling tourists in their crumpled western clothes wandering to and from the hotel, as if oblivious to the military hardware. The soldiers themselves were young thin men in neat uniforms who slouched under the weight of their weapons and twiddled their buttons.

For several days the TV in our Luxor hotel room had no English-language news. Ian translated the Italian news for me and we watched a constant flow of images from Tahrir Square on Arabic, French and German channels. I did not realise that the text messages I sent to reassure my father had not gone through.

Our zeal for ancient monuments continued, refusing the standard pattern of travel in Egypt, the ‘fleeting views of spectacular scapes’, which was all that the tourist group packages allowed. We indulged ourselves with two consecutive days at the giant Karnak complex, which was still crowded with tour groups. But once it was clear that the protests were not a random, one-off event, there was a panic among many tourist groups. Embassies worked with the tour operators to get their nationals out of the country. This wasn’t helped by the internet and mobile phones being blocked. From what we could understand, Cairo Airport was almost at a standstill. Many local flights were cancelled.

The days passed, and we still managed to visit the tombs and temples of Luxor: Deir el-Medina, the Nobles’ tombs, the Valley of the Kings. Every morning we saw scattered shards from the riots of the night before. Government-owned enterprises, such as a money exchanges and communication centres, were the main targets. The Mubarak banners were in tatters. One afternoon the police blockaded a demonstration along the Corniche within view of our hotel balcony. Injured men were carried to an ambulance. One had been hit by a car. We tried to reach the Australian embassy by phone but no one answered. On our last day in Luxor the General Strike had stopped the trains, closed the shops and museums. The chaos of Cairo airport held no appeal. We decided to continue our journey in the south to Aswan, hoping it would be more peaceful there.
WE WILL NEVER know if the person who tried to kidnap us was a slightly crazed villager, a police informer or just mistrustful of foreigners due to the unrest. Neither of us spoke enough Arabic to understand what he said. All we know is that he thought we were suspicious and wanted to take us to the police. Maybe he thought he would be rewarded for his pains.

The days passed quietly enough, except for the ever more insistent solicitations of stall holders, and taxi and calash drivers, whose livelihoods had withered with the flight of the tourists. Opposite our hotel the taxi drivers congregated in a cul-de-sac at the entrance to the souk. One of them, a Nubian in a white *galabiyeh*, was more engaging than the rest. Each day he offered to take us to the Aswan High Dam or the temple Philae for ‘a good price’. Ian had read that there was a minibus to the Philae ferry near Shalal, but the Nubian shook his head: ‘No bus to Philae, only taxi.’

During those days I wrote nothing. I was barely a witness. That sense of selfhood, upon which writing so often depends, had abandoned me. There, words seemed to belong to others. Instead I tried to make out what was happening, watching English-language news for hours from the wide hotel bed. The winter sun was warm enough for me to swim in the hotel pool. We stood in the souk, now empty of tourists, talking with the shopkeepers about their businesses and the future of Egypt. Ian found a bookshop where we bought the standard tome on the Cairo museum, knowing we could not return there now, and a hardback edition of *Friendly Fire* (American University Press, 2009), the stories of the Egyptian writer Alaa al-Aswany. In ‘When the Glass Shatters’, Aswany describes a sensation that I had begun to recognise: ‘He was possessed by an astonishment that, while genuine, was unlike that ephemeral sensation that he experienced every day.’ In this story of a husband who turns on his wife with violence, the astonishment belongs to the reader as much to each of the characters themselves, as the disturbing events unfold. In Egypt, in a way, we were all astonished, and not just by the attacks on protesters or the disruption of daily life. We were astonished by the protesters’ determination, the restraint of the military and, however briefly, by this instantiation of change. Our astonishment held us in a kind of thrall.

We made one last effort as tourists. The journey to Abu Simbel abandoned, we decided to try to go by local minibus to the ferry for the island temple of Philae. In Luxor we’d taken local buses everywhere. It had seemed a great way to experience Egyptian life and much cheaper than taxis or tour buses. Certain conventions must be observed – women sit with women, for example. If you are sitting at the back of the bus, the other passengers will pass your coins to the driver.

We climbed onto a bus outside our hotel, then transferred at the bus exchange in Kima, a small town on the outskirts of Aswan where a handful of shops sold
vegetables, bread and groceries. As our guidebook said the ferry would leave from Shalal dock, Ian asked for the bus to Shalal. No one in Kima seemed sure about how to get to Philae, but the Shalal bus was already waiting. We climbed aboard.

A woman sat on one side surrounded by three heavy boxes of food for her family. Opposite was a man with two large metal trays, the kind that the chai-sellers use. His young daughter sat next to him in a hot-pink fluffy jumper. Two teenage girls joined us, both covered head to toe in black fabric decorated with silver plastic medallions, and their eyes widened with surprise when they saw us. I had tried to cover my hair but with our western clothes and pale skin there was no chance we would blend in. Gradually the bus filled up. After a bumpy, dusty ride we found ourselves in a remote-looking village with crumbling mud huts piled on the side of a hill amid huge boulders, an old car under a half-built shed and one scrawny donkey tied to a pole.

This was Shalal. Obviously we were off-track, nowhere near the ferry dock, and no other buses came there. One of the men began to pester us with questions. We had become used to that as a method of extracting business. So we were polite but refused to answer. He persisted. ‘Where do you want to go? Where is your hotel?’

We decided to go back on the minibus to Kima. With fresh passengers on board, the bus pulled away. But at the last minute the man with the questions called to the driver, picked up the hem of his *galabiyeh* and ran after us. He jumped back onto the bus and muscled his way inside. For the rest of the journey he continued to ask questions in an increasingly strident tone. ‘Where are you from?’ he said. ‘Where do you want to go?’ This time it seemed better to explain: ‘We are Australians and we are trying to go to Philae.’ He did not seem to understand. It was obvious that he was not used to tourists travelling by local transport. At one point he said, ‘You go with me to police.’ As far as we could tell, he had no authority to detain us. We had not offended any law or custom that we knew of.

At Kima we took the next available minibus to Aswan. We could not escape. Once again, the strange man murmured something to the driver and again followed us onto the bus. By this time we were becoming concerned. As the minibus approached Aswan the man in the *galabiyeh* spoke loudly in Arabic to the driver. We had agreed we would get off before our hotel. At the usual place Ian asked the driver to stop, but the man in the *galabiyeh* began to yell. The other passengers turned and stared. The driver yelled back but did not stop. The strange man yelled louder. We yelled too and banged on the door. The driver sped up.

Close to the centre of Aswan the driver turned a corner along the main street. Here he was forced to stop at an army roadblock, set up to stop protesters. Ian slid the bus door open and we jumped out. Everyone spilled onto the street. The strange man began to yell again and everyone gathered around him. We had no idea what he was saying.
Within seconds a tall smooth-faced young man appeared, dressed in a striped jumper and jeans, who claimed to speak English. He and the soldiers tried to persuade us to step back into the bus and be taken to the police. We politely insisted that we wanted to go to our hotel, which was about three blocks away. ‘What is happening?’ I asked. ‘What is that man saying? We don’t understand.’ Nobody explained.

When we continued to refuse, they tried to persuade us to go on foot. ‘This man is a teacher. He will take you. It is safe to go with him,’ said the tall fellow, pointing to a grey-bearded man in a white turban and a dark-green galabiyeh. I shook my head. ‘Why did that man follow us?’ I asked. ‘Who is he?’ Neither man replied. ‘We just want to go to our hotel,’ I said again.

‘You must wait here for the police,’ the tall man said. I had visions of being ‘detained’ for hours or days. At one point Ian said he would go with the grey-bearded man if I was allowed to go back to the hotel, but I grabbed his arm and stopped him. I spoke very firmly: ‘We just want to go back to our hotel! We have done nothing wrong. Why are you keeping us here?’

People came out of their shops and offices to see what was happening. A strong man with no neck. An older one with receding gums. They clustered around and asked us more questions. The bus was allowed to drive away with its remaining passengers. Grey-beard drew us away from the army blockade, to a shaded street corner, ‘for a conversation’. He offered us chairs but we repeated that we only wanted to return to our hotel. Although this man was introduced to us as a teacher it was clear he had the authority to interrogate us. Some of the men formed a kind of circle around us. We could not walk away. But at least we were still in public view.

By this time the man from the village and the tall man in the jumper had both melted away. We assumed that grey-beard and the tall fellow were both secret police. I asked again why we were being detained. ‘In case you have some problem,’ was all that he would say. We had to wait for the police to come. It would take time. They were far away.

This was the third Friday of the uprising. A general strike was in place for that afternoon. It was midday. Undoubtedly the police had other matters to deal with. In fact, officially at least, they never arrived. We stood on a street corner ‘conversing’ with grey-beard and the group of onlookers, caught in another impasse, another pause in the flow of larger events. We did not know how long it would take or what would happen next.

In this moment, we occupied another ‘in-between’ place in our story, a point of difference and yet connection, a feeling that we were at once separate from the turmoil around us and yet intimately involved. All writing about place is in some sense an act of authorisation, as Michel de Certeau suggests in The Practice of
Everyday Life (University of California Press, 1984). All narratives determine a field of action, a sequence of events, relationships, linkages and breakages of various kinds. Someone arrives or leaves, a place reveals its secret history, a couple is held against their will. We had no authority here. We were not free. The condition of our presence in Egypt as tourists had been disrupted by the rebellion. There was no other narrative of belonging to which we could legitimately lay claim. Most tourists had already left Egypt. We were out of place, out of time. Our presence now questionable, we were beholden to unseen and unexplained powers to direct our fate. The next step in the story was no longer ours to decide.

A second man, who also claimed to be a teacher, joined us. He was younger and more fluent in English than grey-beard. As we stood under the stained wooden balcony that shaded the broken concrete pavement, I tried to explain why we had been on the bus: ‘We are here because we love Egypt and her people.’ As soon as I said this the mood seemed to relax. Perhaps it was obvious at last that we were just Australian tourists who had bumbled off the tourist track, rather than spies or troublemakers. ‘I understand, you want to be able to go about freely,’ the young teacher said. I nodded. This seemed to satisfy grey-beard. Quite suddenly, without explanation, he told us that we were permitted to leave.

Early the next morning we went to the place where the taxi drivers park, to ask the Nubian driver to take us to the Philae island dock. His name was Jamal. He and all the other taxi drivers knew our story. ‘You can’t get to Philae by bus. You must take a taxi.’ They laughed good-naturedly at us. ‘But I will give you a good price,’ Jamal promised, revealing tobacco-stained teeth in his wide, warm Nubian smile. We sat back in his taxi and he drove on.