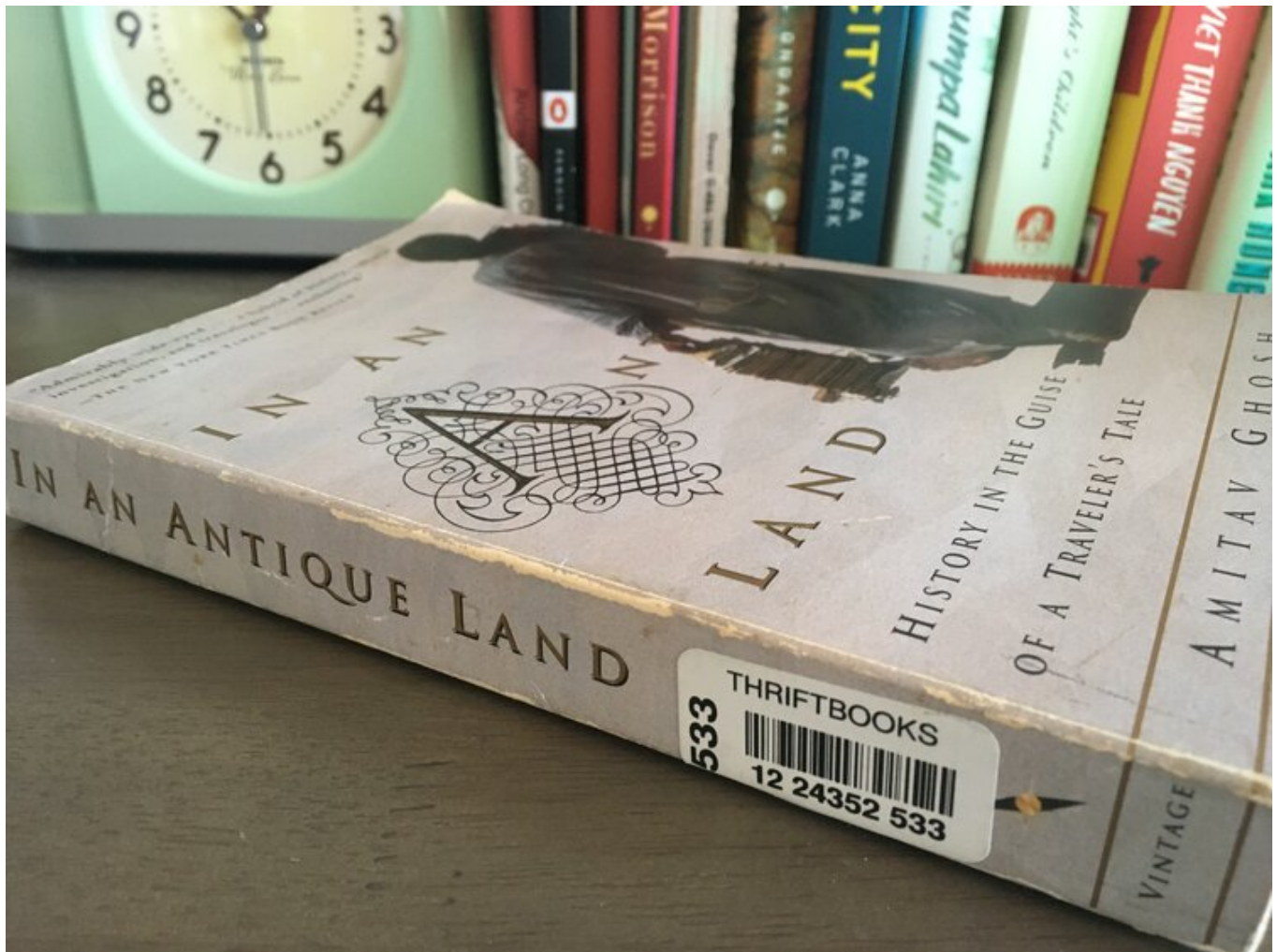


Nov 2

Dispatches from Air Force One



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Sometime in late February, I was lying on my couch and idly skimming a new book. I mean “new” here in a very grad-student sense of the word: assigned for a seminar, purchased “Used

- Good” from whatever independent seller was cheapest. The book was Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*, and I would be reading it several weeks later in a course on literature of the global middle ages.

My initial assessment, as I lay there so unwittingly, was that this copy was a bit more “used” than “good.” There were a lot of handwritten notes in the margins, all in pen; on the last few pages were scrawled what appeared to be lists of names, a family tree, some translated terms. I flipped quickly from back to front, and the book opened to a small, white card that had been tucked between two pages. “UPI Correspondent” was printed in black at the top. Beneath that, in blue, was the seal of the President of the United States. And below that still, in bold, blue letters: “Welcome Aboard Air Force One.”

I took a few moments to consider what this might mean for the book in my hands. It seemed legit—the “UPI” designation was too specific not to be—and the marginalia struck me as sufficiently detailed and haphazard to be the work of a member of the press. That was enough for me; I took swift action, sending proof by way of Snapchat to a few close friends, the caption something to the effect of, “tfw the used book u bought for a sem was on Air Force One w/ POTUS.”

Nice.

I don’t think more about the book until I’m reading it for class several weeks later. In that time I discover a number of additional brief, personal notes among its pages and a second artifact: a torn ticket stub from The Egyptian Museum in Cairo. By now I am decidedly enchanted. Who was this mystery reader? What were they doing in Cairo—and when? We discuss the text in a seminar on March 9, a Monday. Four days later, my morning run is interrupted by an email from the university. Campus remains closed for the remainder of the semester.

There was a lot of free time in the beginning. Or empty time, maybe. I took morning walks. I also took evening walks. I finally unwrapped and solved a Keith Haring jigsaw puzzle that I’d been gifted a year earlier. My roommate and I tried to watch *Thor*; we couldn’t finish it. We baked a carrot cake and washed it down with a bottle of prosecco. Within seven days, the neighborhood pedestrians—in wordless, determined solidarity—reclaimed the shuttered golf course as our own. I hopped a flight to Cairo.

I am always amazed by how easy it really is, if you can discern the right combination of keywords, to find someone you're looking for with Google. I've developed that skill, and in the end it made quick work of my research. Since I know literally nothing, I started with the basics: "UPI media." United Press International—that makes sense. Who gets a press pass to Air Force One? I tried "UPI White House correspondent," and the results were almost disappointingly conclusive. Helen Thomas, pioneering American reporter and the first female member of the White House press corps, worked at United Press for 57 years.

The rest was simple. Ghosh's novel was published in 1992 and Thomas departed UPI in May of 2000—an eight-year window. The H.W. administration? Clinton? Wikipedia, I now know, has a page documenting all U.S. presidential visits to the Middle East. Bush visited Egypt only once, in 1990. Too early. Clinton visited twice within that time frame, once from October 25-26, 1994 and again on May 13, 1996. Surely, I thought, the UPI website has a digital archive that one could search by date? It does; I did. On October 26, 1994, Helen Thomas reported from Cairo: "U.S. President Bill Clinton arrived in Egypt on his historic peace mission in an exuberant mood Wednesday, even as aides played down the possibility of a major breakthrough on the Syrian front." I'd found my proof. It had taken all of half an hour.

There was the question of how the book landed in my hands, which was also easily answered. Thomas was from Detroit; when she passed away in 2013, her ashes were buried there. I'd purchased the book from ThriftBooks Motor City. Then there was her life and career to discover—who *was* this person whose literary ponderings I had innocently inherited? Helen Thomas was universally revered and beloved among U.S. presidents from Kennedy to Obama, holding the longtime privilege of a front-row seat at White House press briefings (although she was moved to the back row under W.). She was blunt, tough, exacting. She took to closing presidential press conferences with a trademark line: "Thank you, Mr. President." In 2010, Thomas drew scrutiny for comments made regarding the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. "Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine," she said. Facing widespread criticism and accusations of antisemitism, she retired suddenly, and the controversy followed her for the remainder of her life.

That's about as far as I flew with Helen Thomas. The enchantment faded after a few days, albeit long ones (*What a year this week has been*, etc.). I put down Ghosh's book and I didn't pick it up again. The semester was moving on, and I had things to do. I had other books to read. I had papers to write and reviews to edit. There were Zoom seminars to attend and virtual office hours to arrange. ("How are you? What are you doing to take care of yourself right now? Is there anything I can do to support you?") There were calls to make and texts to send—every day—to friends in the city and parents upstate ("Hey, texted X last night and haven't heard back...do you know if he's ok?"). I refreshed my Twitter timeline and stared at the ceiling. I developed chronic pressure in my chest, painful and unrelenting, a condition I'd not experienced since high school, which was one afternoon so severe that I had to shut off my camera in my middle of a class and lie on the floor of my bedroom, breathing slow. I read a photo essay in the *Times* one night before bed—a mistake.

The lie of exceptionalism laid bare on a Brooklyn sidewalk, the remainder nothing more than bare life. Enchantment be damned.

In another universe, this might have been a different essay. I might have reflected on what my "Used - Good" book had to say to me about materiality and archive, about intimacy and distance, in the midst of a global pandemic. I might have found it significant that Ghosh's book is a chronicle of the Indian writer's own archival encounter with a twelfth-century Jewish merchant and his Indian 'slave and business agent'; Ghosh's travels to Egypt as a doctoral student in the '80s—bookended by the Iraq-Iran and Gulf Wars—to retrace their steps; and his discovery that "the remains of those small, indistinguishable, intertwined

histories, Indian and Egyptian, Muslim and Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, had been partitioned long ago.” Maybe I would have wondered at the fact that Thomas chose this book to read on a flight to Cairo in 1994, where President Clinton was to begin a “historic mission” to bring peace to the Middle East. I’d have questioned if there was something to be learned from her annotations: Why had she starred that line I quoted above? Where was she thinking of when she’d written, “How I feel @ [illegible] / 3 yrs since I visited / 4 1/2 yrs since I lived”? And what of the fact that now, looking back, I see that she and I have both marked one sentence in particular, decades collapsed in a single ink-and-graphite impression on the page: “the lassitude of homecoming mixed with a quiet sense of dread”?

So perhaps, If I were a more attentive and diligent student of literature, I might have written that essay. But I’m not feeling particularly attentive and I don’t have the energy for diligence. I am tired, all the time. My eyes hurt from the hours staring at my phone, my computer, my phone again. I still take walks in the morning and evening, but there’s something desperate about them now, an obligation, the difference between a good day and a lost one. The golf course is open again. Sometimes, we’ll breach it to watch the sunset—such a small beauty, such a simple gift. A man in khakis yells at us to get out of the way.

I might have used that essay to say something meaningful about a presidential election, and I may even have ended it with something quippy and cute (*Thank you, Mr. President*). But quippy and cute feel insufficient to the task, or incommensurate with the facts, and besides, I’m not in the mood for cleverness and I’m not interested in searching for meaning where there’s none to be found.

I want to open a book and breathe it in, to inhale its scent and brush my fingers against its yellowed pages. I want to crawl inside its fragile spine and fall out the other side, into a seat several miles above the earth. I want to turn to the stranger next to me and feel their slow breath on my face and smile: *Going or coming?*

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