

Jeffrey Hammond

Egypt Land

THE ONLY PSYCHIC EXPERIENCE I ever had—if that’s what it was—occurred one Saturday night when I was ten or eleven. With my parents at the movies and my older sister out on a date, I was feeling grown-up at being left alone in the house for the whole evening with only one responsibility: to take a bath.

Scrunched low in the tub with my ears under water, I was thinking about nothing in particular when I gradually became aware of a jingly, rhythmic noise coming from the front room. It was very faint, but when I sat up it grew louder and more distinct. Somehow I knew exactly what I was hearing: it was ancient Egyptian music. I can still hear it when I close my eyes: hand drums, finger cymbals, a tambourine, and a tinny plucked string droning in an odd rhythm—not four/four but something like five/four or seven/four—as a reedy flute carries a minor-key melody that keeps looping back onto itself.

I remember thinking “I’ve got to see them” as I leaped from the tub and wrapped myself in a towel, but as I raced toward the front of the house the music evaporated into silence. I rushed to the window, but no cars were in sight. I checked to see if the radio and the TV were on, but they weren’t. Then I just stood there, trying to make sense of what had just happened and feeling the back of my scalp growing tight.



Egyptomania is nearly as old as Egypt itself. Herodotus is often credited as the first Nile tourist, but given the prominence of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible, people were fascinated by the Land of the Pharaohs long before him. When Moses went “way down in Egypt Land,” as the famous spiritual puts it, he came out with

a God and a people defined in opposition to the world of “old Pharaoh” and his subjects. Thus began an ever-repeating cultural narrative. Scholars have written a great deal about “Orientalism,” that long-standing Western fascination with the East as an exotic Other, a dreamy place that contrastively sharpened the European faith in rationality and materialism even as it indulged a fantasy of quasi-erotic encounters with the “secrets” of the Orient. Egypt has always played a primary role in that, but studies of the history and significance of Egyptomania won’t tell you what it feels like. To grasp Egyptomania from the inside, you need to talk to someone who heard ancient Egyptian music as a child.

Or thought he did. It’s perfectly likely that I drifted off and dreamed the music, or that a car sped by with its radio blasting Chuck Berry or the Drifters, imperfectly heard by a boy with his ears under water. These explanations, however, are not nearly as satisfying as the one I half-believed at the time: that somehow I heard what exactly I thought I heard. Of course, whenever the Virgin Mary is spotted she looks just like the Virgin Mary, which is to say that we encounter precisely what we’ve been prepared to encounter. And if ever a child was prepared to receive an ancient signal from KMET-Heliopolis, it was me.

My obsession with ancient Egypt had been raging since I was six, when my fascination with the Bible stories that my grandmother told me prompted me to be one of the smallest people fidgeting in line when *The Ten Commandments* came to Findlay, Ohio, in 1956. Like most Americans my age, I received my first visual encounter with “Egypt” from that movie. I was unaware, of course, that *The Ten Commandments* was a blatant political allegory, with the Hebrews as proto-American pioneers lighting out for the territories in search of freedom and democracy and Ramses the Great as a decidedly un-American tyrant—a Communist in a headdress—out to foil their plans. I’m sure I absorbed that lesson along with everybody else. Primed by our A-Bomb drills at school, I was as scared of Communists as the next kid.

But something about that movie bothered me, and I couldn’t shake it. Yul Brynner was far more interesting than Charlton Heston, whose self-righteousness reminded me of a boring

Egypt Land

teacher. When Brynner's Ramses barked "So let it be written, so let it be done," he was as decisive and self-sufficient as any young Midwesterner might dream of being. Heston's Moses, by contrast, seemed like a whiny momma's boy—or in his case, a daddy's boy—who kept asking God what to do next. Though God kept helping him out, it seemed perfectly obvious that Yul Brynner could have creamed Charlton Heston in a fair fight. For me, DeMille's propaganda backfired. The fact that Ramses was an even match for Moses—at least for a while—put me in awe of the ancient Egyptians. They were almost as good and powerful as the Hebrews, and they did it without God's help!

The Bible was endlessly fascinating, but to an earnest young Methodist it had one great drawback: if I didn't believe it, there would be Hell to pay. Because I wasn't sure whether I believed everything the Bible said, it occurred to me that I might be a kind of modern-day Egyptian, a boy who would have to get by without God's help. I sincerely hoped that someday I would believe in Jesus and be saved, but until then I figured that one could do worse than walk like an Egyptian—to be as strong and self-reliant as possible without Divine support.

The Bible said that the Egyptians were doomed because they practiced the wrong religion. Consequently, they were always losing out, getting their hearts hardened by God at critical moments. But it didn't seem to be their fault that their gods weren't God, and their downfall—clear enough in the pictures of ruined temples and crumbly pyramids I had seen—struck me as patently unfair. It's ironic that the ancient Egyptians, whose civilization lasted three thousand years, could be viewed as underdogs in an unfair fight, but that's how I saw them. Having lost my share of fights, I felt I understood.

The year of *The Ten Commandments* was also the year in which Gamal Abdul Nasser became President of Egypt. The grownups in my town grumbled about that, resentful at how he had taken over the Suez Canal and sent the Europeans packing. I didn't admit it, but I liked Nasser. Judging from his pictures in the newspaper, I thought he looked as strong and self-sufficient as Yul Brynner—a modern-day Pharaoh in a business suit. Why

were we Americans so upset? Wasn't Egypt supposed to be the Land of the Pharaohs? When I saw a picture of the seated Khafre, the nape of his neck shielded by Horus the Hawk, in my brother's old high school history textbook, he looked like a very smart man. If the builder of the second-greatest pyramid could believe that a hawk protected him, maybe the notion wasn't so silly. If his descendants wanted Nasser to lead them, maybe that wasn't so silly either.



I was the sort of child who pursues interests with a vengeance. If I were a kid today I'd own every Pokémon card ever made, probably in triplicate. With Egypt, as with other passions like dinosaurs and baseball statistics, the public library provided—and in ample store. I peered through the library's stereoscope at sepia-toned Victorian photographs of the pyramids, the Temple of Karnak, and some ruins labeled “Joseph's granaries.” I leafed through grownup books whose heft and covers I can still recall, especially the library's stiff, massive copy of James Breasted's *History of Egypt*. My favorite was E. A. Wallace Budge's edition of *The Book of the Dead*. I spent hours poring over its hieroglyphic text, convinced that if I stared long and hard enough, I would be able to read it.

Thus it was that I entered Egypt Land—not Egypt, mind you, but an interior realm that bore only faint resemblance to the real thing. The Land of the Pharaohs was a kind of not-Ohio, an exotic realm that did not adhere to the upbeat pragmatism of our small town. Born into a family of New Deal Democrats, I felt as if we were living in the Land of the Republicans. Egypt was, as Herodotus called it, the “gift of the Nile,” and while I tried to see Findlay, Ohio, as “the Gift of the Blanchard,” it didn't help. Maybe any kid immersed in Protestant guilt and Republican normality would have embraced mummified cats, Djed-eyes, and canopic jars containing royal entrails. Though I didn't actively resent my world of Doris Day songs, “I Like Ike”

Egypt Land

buttons, and softball at Riverside Park, ancient Egypt offered a far more interesting alternative.

What did I find there? My mental image of the Egyptian landscape came straight out of another library favorite, a book of dreamy, nineteenth-century watercolors by David Roberts. I can still see a broad river with palm groves lining the shore and the endless desert beyond, gently duned and bathed in golden light. This was a land where things happened that could not possibly happen in Findlay, and naturally it was the exotica—the seeming oddities—that first gripped my imagination. Upper and Lower Egypt were named backwards: wasn't north always up? The Egyptians wrote from right to left and left to right. They worshipped cats and bulls. They made dead bodies last forever. The Colossi of Memnon purportedly “sang” at dawn. When Sirius appeared in the sky, the Nile flooded like clockwork. A Pharaoh named Pepi II ruled for 90 years. According to Herodotus, women and men urinated in opposite ways from what a Greek—or an Ohioan—might expect.

The “mysteries” of Egypt—dusty mummies, secret tombs stuffed with unimaginable treasures, even the exotic appeal of Camel cigarette packs—comprised my first experience of the “foreign.” Egyptian names sounded less like names than magical incantations. Just pronouncing the beginning of Manetho's king list made me feel as if I were in a different time and place: the chant, as I remember it, went “Menes, Aha, Djer, Djet, Djen, Aqi, Semerkhet, and Qu.” The fact that kings' names had different spellings in different books (Ramses, Ramesses, or Ra-Mose; Thothmes, Thutmose, or Thutmosis) made their “true” names seem too mysterious to be rendered—an impression that was reinforced when I learned that every Pharaoh had a throne name as well as a personal name.

And, of course, there was that mesmerizing script, sufficiently pictorial to make me believe that I could read it if I just tried harder. Eventually I learned that some of those signs were like our alphabet, and I memorized them, but when I tried to get friends in school to pass our notes in hieroglyphics, they weren't interested. I read about the Rosetta Stone and discovered the existence

of “demotic” script, designed for quicker writing. That surprised me. Given my developing image of “eternal” Egypt, it was hard to imagine the ancient Egyptians doing anything in a hurry.



Even though ancient Egypt seemed to offer another way to see, my sojourn there was riddled with misunderstandings of what I thought I was seeing. For a young Ohioan, mysteries were to be solved, not savored, but I couldn't know that by “solving” them I was only revealing my own preoccupations. I saw Egypt through a glass, Midwesternly—and at the height of my obsession I saw it everywhere, making all sorts of connections that were only translations, and poor ones at that. I was convinced that my grandfather, with his hooked nose and bony face, resembled the mummy of Ramses the Great. The silos dotting the farmland surrounding our town resembled, in moments of blissful illusion, isolated lotus columns from Karnak. On bike rides I stopped to gaze at the local Hat-Hors—both beef and dairy—and imagined tomb-painted herdsmen coaxing them down Route 15. I learned that when Tutankhamen died he was about the same age as my brother, who was at Ohio State—a fact that made me resolve not to pester him so much.

I unwittingly translated the Pharaohs into extremely early Americans, with Menes as the George Washington of the Nile and Khufu as Egypt's FDR, his pyramid a mammoth WPA project designed to put idle farmers to work. Thutmose III was a great general, Ike in a helmet and ceremonial beard. Hatchepsut became an ancient Eleanor Roosevelt—or maybe Queen Victoria. The heretic king Akhenaten seemed wise and holy, the Socrates or Jesus of the New Kingdom. Hadn't this monotheist—this worshiper of the sun-disk Aten—moved things farther down the road of progress that eventually led to us? My books said that Ramses the Great was something of a braggart, but I liked him anyway because he erected buildings that looked as grand as the statehouse in Columbus. I saw the Hyksos, those

Egypt Land

“shepherd kings” who invaded Egypt between the Middle and New Kingdoms, as the bad guys, barbarians at the gates.

Egyptian art prompted the same muddled mix of seeing difference without being able to deal with difference. Those royal portraits exuded an unflappable calm that was enviable to a rabbit boy who was always being told that he worried too much. One look at those four massive Ramses the Greats surveying the Nile at Abu Simbel, and I knew that Ramses didn't sweat the small stuff. But what did Ramses really look like—that is, before he got old and resembled my grandfather? I knew, dimly, that the Egyptians had produced “great” art, but its lack of realism bothered me. I tried to peek behind those eternal masks by copying ancient Egyptian features from statues, paintings, and mummies, but rendering them into faces I might see on East Sandusky Street.

A select band of ancient Egyptian Buckeyes, half perceived and half created, became close companions: the magisterial Khafre seated on his throne, of course. But also Akhenaten with his pot belly and elongated face; the Sheik el-Beled, who could be heading up a road crew on the Ohio Turnpike; the pensive Sesostri III from the Middle Kingdom, who looked as though he could see those Hyksos coming; Giza's Ankh-haf with his weary eyes; Menkaure and his queen striding unafraid into eternity; the brightly painted Nofret and her husband Rahotep sitting side by side awaiting the same trip; Khafre again, this time as the imperturbable Sphinx; a kneeling woman playing a double-flute, who just might have produced music to bathe by on a Saturday night. And of course there was the glamorous Nefertiti, who resembled Audrey Hepburn. What did she see in that spooky Akhenaten? My favorite was a seated scribe—the intense, square-jawed figure who ended up in the Louvre. He looked confident and smart, waiting for dictation and not the least bit worried about messing it up. I imagined him teaching me hieroglyphics. This daydream was typical. While my classmates pondered the future, imagining themselves on spaceships to Mars, my fantasy was to take writing lessons from someone who had been dead four thousand years.

When you lie down with the dead, you get up with the dead.

With Egypt and the Bible as twin passions, my fate was sealed as a person devoted to the past. This put me at sharp odds with my time and place. Most of my friends subscribed to the religion of technological progress promoted in the late Fifties and early Sixties—but what did the future hold for me? Would I go to Mars, too? Colonize the Moon? Leap tall buildings in a single bound? I didn't think so. In fact, I didn't think much about the future at all except to indulge a vague dream of becoming an "Egyptologist" when I grew up. In eighth grade I told the guidance counselor about it, but I don't remember what she said. My guess is that she didn't say much of anything.



What, exactly, does a boy Egyptomaniac do? He performs small rituals through which he might gain something of that Pharaonic tranquillity, the enviable but Godless self-sufficiency of a Khufu or a Ramses. I staged elaborate burials with a plastic armyman wrapped in an old handkerchief doubling as the royal deceased, and afterwards conducted archaeological "digs" to retrieve the mummified G. I. and his treasures. In art class I sculpted a Pharaonic head, an oddity among the ashtrays and tiny dogs baking in the kiln. At home I made ushabti figures out of modeling clay, designating this one to do my homework and that one to take out the trash. I drew elaborate plans for rock-hewn tombs and pyramid passageways and hidden chambers. I clipped a color picture of King Tut from the Sunday magazine of *The Toledo Blade*, pasted it onto a board, and hung it over my bed, a benign not-Jesus to guard me as I slept.

A young boy with Protestant paranoia might need such guarding. Although I was not a morbid child, I did think about death a lot. In retrospect I think that my attraction to the past compensated for my oversensitivity to the fact that life did not last forever, my life included. Tutankhamen, staring placidly from my bedroom wall, served as a New Kingdom night-light, visual proof that the world would not end tomorrow. If a child is

Egypt Land

obsessed with death, who better to turn to for answers than the death-people par excellence, people who went so far as to preserve their bodies and erect artificial mountains as a stay against mortality? The Egyptian culture of death—the elaborate tombs, the mummies, the magical texts—reminded me that I was not alone in my concerns. What's more, the Egyptians found answers that satisfied them: didn't their beliefs remain essentially unchanged for three thousand years?

Egypt's "timelessness" is surely a cliché, but it held enormous appeal. Egyptian mortuary practices served as a child's memento mori, one that was far less scary than the Christian Judgment. Though the Egyptians were obsessed with death, my books told me that they were not especially gloomy about it. That made sense: as I stared at a picture of Tutankhamen's senet game, it struck me that a Pharaoh who packed his favorite things must have expected to use them—to have fun in the great beyond. I fantasized about what I would take along: my baseball mitt, some favorite armymen, my presentation Bible (just in case), and Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt's *Tutankhamen*, a Christmas present from my Uncle Jim. It may sound crazy, but these thoughts brought comfort because they gave me something to do as a counter to the unknown. I figured that similar reassurance might come from knowing that a tomb was being cut for you in the Valley of the Kings.

Somewhat defensive about my weird hobby, I was always correcting other kids' misconceptions about Egypt Land, especially its supposed scariness. One night when my sister and I were watching a horror movie on TV, I kept saying—to her irritation—that it was all a stupid lie. No self-respecting mummy would go staggering through Cairo looking for someone to kill: the ancient Egyptians wanted to preserve life, not end it. I read about the "Curse of the Pharaohs" and how Lord Carnarvon had died just as Tut's tomb was coming to light. And didn't Howard Carter die fairly young? But I had the perfect rebuttal: Sir Alan Gardiner, who translated the walls, didn't die until he was in his eighties. I was thirteen when that happened, and I remember thinking that if there was a curse, it sure took its sweet time with Sir Alan.

Then there was the simple fact that we still remembered the Egyptians, that we could see their tombs, their household goods, even their bodies. Their ongoing fame confirmed that while life is short, time is very, very long. The grand scheme of things was a lot bigger than any single person. Yes, I would die—but so did Khufu and Ramses and everyone else. Even the title “Pharaoh”—“great house”—confirmed that the royal household outlasted the individual kings who ran it. I gazed at photos of the pavement of Karnak’s Hypostyle Hall and tried to imagine the countless people who had walked there: ancient Egyptians, of course, but also Greeks, Romans, Muslims, and twentieth-century tourists. Someday—I was certain of this—I would walk there, too.



What little creepiness I felt about Egypt Land was limited to religion. I had a recurring suspicion that *The Book of the Dead* and *The Execration Texts* might not be the most wholesome reading for a young Methodist. If a kid knew what the wisdom-god Thoth knew, he could get into some real trouble. But the more I learned, the more I became convinced that the Egyptians were just finding their own way to God. Weren’t there plenty of parallels and overlaps? The Biblical story of Joseph and his boss’s wife was similar to “The Tale of Two Brothers.” Psalm 104 was almost identical to Akhenaten’s “Hymn to the Sun.” Some of the books suggested that Moses may actually have been an Egyptian, and that the Bible’s monotheism had been borrowed from Akhenaten’s Aten cult. And portions of the Biblical Proverbs had been taken from *The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet*. I savored these facts. Maybe I hadn’t turned my back on the Methodist God after all, but was simply approaching him by means of another, older path. Didn’t that Ankh symbol look a little like the Cross? And didn’t Osiris rise from the dead like Jesus? Maybe either one of them could get you saved.

I figured that such mysteries had been pondered by Imhotep,

Egypt Land

legendary architect and physician to King Djoser of the Third Dynasty. Ancient Egypt—or my childish distortion of it—let me ponder them, too, by providing what Christianity could not: neutral space in which to pursue spiritual things. I knew, of course, that the Egyptians had their own version of the Judgment, with Ammut the Devourer poised to eat the hearts of the unrighteous, and the dignified, ibis-headed Thoth waiting to record the verdict. A monstrous blend of crocodile, lioness, and hippo, Ammut was almost as scary as Michelangelo's painting of Christ the Judge, with his raised arm and dismissive expression. But Anubis the jackal was weighing the human heart against the feather of Ma'at—of justice, righteousness, and truth. Those qualities seemed possible to achieve, even by a boy who could not be sure that Jesus rose from the dead.

Although I continued to read the Bible, *Egypt Land* gave me something that I could never have articulated at the time: an alternate theology that I could handle, even if I did bend the old gods to my purposes. If Osiris was a less frightening version of Jesus, Amon-Ra emerged as a less frightening equivalent to “God,” to *the* God. The fact that I didn't have to believe in Amon-Ra took the heat off considerably—and besides, shouldn't a child's gods be fun to ponder and to draw? Even today I think of the Egyptian deities as wise old friends who once got me through a scary time: Bast the cat, Horus the hawk, Hat-Hor the cow, Anubis the jackal, Nut the sky, Geb the earth, and Bes the dwarf. And there was poor old Ptah, a perpetual dead man who was always mummiform. Thoth was my favorite: I liked the fact that he was always writing something down. While it worried me to think about my soul, I didn't mind wondering whether my Ba—or was it my Ka?—might measure up to the feather of Truth.

What emerged was a fantasy of order constructed out of mysteries that worked precisely because they *were* mysteries. The result was a child's clarity, a cosmology that was appropriately ancient and yet somehow my own. One that didn't rely on what the Republicans might pull next, what I was told in Sunday School, or whether or not I was “popular” at school (the answer

to which, in my case, is surely obvious). While Findlay, Ohio, presented an unsettling mix of predictability and unease, Egypt Land offered one River, one Pharaoh, and one Truth—and all the day-to-day stuff was just static, white noise. Within that one Truth the various gods assumed their places and did their jobs. Their animal heads made it clear that nature was part of the great plan, too.

Of course, not everyone “got” this. In the waning days of my sojourn in Egypt Land I started to get uncharacteristically bad grades at school, and my mother took me to see an adolescent psychologist in Toledo. Upon entering his office I spotted the blue Egyptian hippo that the Met used to sell sitting on his coffee table, but when I asked, the man didn’t know anything about it. For the rest of the session I listened politely but cynically. How good can a psychologist be if he doesn’t recognize a sacred object when it’s right in front of him? While he was advising me to get more involved in school activities, I was thinking that he should have been standing beside me two months earlier in the Toledo Museum of Art, as I gazed speechless at one of the miniature gold coffins designed to hold Tutankhamen’s viscera. I was instantly convinced that it was the single most beautiful thing in all of Ohio. The Tut exhibit, a modest collection traveling through the U.S., was one of the high points—quite possibly *the* high point—of my entire childhood. I had dreams about it for months afterwards. It certainly outshone the Ptolemaic mummy, too recent for my taste, which was on display at the Ohio Historical Society Museum in Columbus.



The young prince who would become Thutmose IV once had a dream while sleeping between the Sphinx’s paws. The Sphinx—probably the Ba of old Khafre—told him that if he cleared away the sand, he would become Pharaoh. Another old legend has it that the Holy Family rested there during their flight from Herod. I had an Egyptian dream, too, and I awoke from it

Egypt Land

when I was fourteen and teenage concerns began crowding it out. I soon learned that girls weren't much interested in ancient Egypt, and it began to matter that boys weren't supposed to care about it either.

If the purity of childhood memories counts for anything, my Egyptomania dissolved just in time. Nefertiti's seductive elegance notwithstanding, the erotics of Orientalism were lost on me because I left Egypt Land just when I might have grasped the deeper significance of Anne Baxter's low moan—"Moooohsesss"—in *The Ten Commandments*. As for that Coasters hit about the belly dancer—"Little Egypt came out strippin' wearin' nothin' but a button and a bow"—well, I thought that was just plain stupid. If I had remained an Egyptomaniac a year or so longer, I too might have entertained sordid thoughts about Potiphar's wife coming on to Joseph, or misconstrued the Bible's "fleshpots of Egypt," or seen *Cleopatra* and thought that Elizabeth Taylor actually had something to do with ancient Kemet, the Black Land. But my Egyptomania vanished at puberty like the Sun-Barque at nightfall—and just as quickly.

At least I didn't go down to Egypt Land alone. Abraham and Joseph's brothers went there, too, though they were escaping famine rather than Republicans and Methodists. So did my old friend Herodotus with his eye for the bizarre detail. In Hellenistic times Egypt was still a primary destination for mysteries that you couldn't get at home. When Alexander emerged from his audience with the oracle at Siwa, still reeling at being confirmed as the son of Zeus-Amon, he knew that the trip had been worth it. His remote successor Cleopatra—both in life and in Shakespeare—would not have wrapped Mark Antony around her little finger so easily if she had hailed from Antioch or Ephesus. And not long afterwards, early Christian monks went into the Egyptian desert seeking signs and wonders, trading temptations of the flesh for a scarier sort of temptation altogether, as witnessed by those grotesques swirling around St. Anthony in the old paintings.

Egypt Land is still a popular place. Waves of Egyptomania have recurred in the West ever since Napoleon plundered booty for

the Louvre, and the various takes on Egypt are as diverse and numerous as the people who have done the gazing. A recent Web search for “ancient Egypt” turned up no fewer than 223,000 pages. One website is devoted to ancient Egyptian astrological guidance. From another you can download a hieroglyphic font for Windows. Yet another explains how *The Book of the Dead*, properly understood, actually supports “Gospel Truth.” Everyone still wants a piece of ancient Egypt. It has become a flashpoint in contemporary racial politics, with inquiring—and racially obsessed—minds wanting to know whether the Pharaohs were really “black” or really “white.” Mummy movies continue to make enough money to stock a respectable Pharaonic tomb. Steve Martin can still occasionally be seen doing his King Tut routine on retrospectives of *Saturday Night Live*. Lots of people swear that the pyramids are too uncanny in their cosmic alignments to have been planned by mere earthlings: space aliens built them, or else showed the Egyptians how to do it. Not long ago, people were sitting under plastic pyramids trying to tap into that primordial power.

Old dreams die hard—a fact I discovered some thirteen years after leaving Egypt Land, when I was doing research for my dissertation at the British Museum and spent nearly as much time in the Egyptian galleries as I did in the old Reading Room. One day, after glancing around for guards, I reached out and actually touched the Rosetta Stone. Its surface was cool and smooth, and I tried to recall the lessons I learned—or the lessons I thought I was learning—when I was a child in Egypt Land. I remembered a day at the height of my Egyptomania when I accidentally broke a small reproduction of Nefertiti in a mad fit after losing a board game. My brother had given it to me for Christmas and I cried for hours, not least because I was bitterly ashamed of myself. An ancient Egyptian, more in tune with fate, would surely have accepted the gods’ will that this was not his day to beat his sister in Monopoly.

I know that this ideal of being attuned to cosmic forces is a shameless Western romanticization, yet another of those alleged “secrets of the Orient.” Can’t we get the same thing from

Egypt Land

Emerson as well as from Amen-em-Opet? But as I said, old dreams die hard, and a fantasy of “timeless” Egypt is probably the best that a middle-aged former Egyptomaniac can manage. When I think about ancient Egypt, it’s almost like remembering a childhood church. As things turned out, I ended up having to get by without Jesus *and* Amon-Ra, and sometimes I regret abandoning the Christian salvation and Pharaonic tranquillity that they offered. But relics from the Nile as well as the Jordan remain—and although I’m still a student of the Bible and sometimes teach it to undergraduates, I’ve not entirely lost my sympathy for the underdogs. *The Knopf Guide to Egypt* is close at hand for those nights when I can’t sleep. I still get self-righteously angry, like a reverse Charlton Heston, whenever I encounter one of those space-alien pyramid theories. And I can still write my name in deftly drawn hieroglyphics framed by a nicely symmetrical cartouche, though nobody has asked me to do that for a long time.

Friends who know my history think it strange that I’ve never been to Egypt, and I don’t quite know what to tell them. I would love to go there, of course, but to be honest I’m also a little scared. There’s a chance that so powerful a confrontation with old illusions would be unbearable. Having carried around this dream of Egypt Land in my head for forty years, I could very well get off that plane and see absolutely nothing at all. A lifelong fantasy of actually seeing Egypt would be fulfilled, but there I’d be: a middle-aged American slumped in a daze next to a baggage carousel, mumbling First Dynasty royal names as his suitcase went around and around and around.