

TRAIL GUIDE: AN INTRODUCTION



Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops at all.

—Emily Dickinson

I am a sociologist; my husband, Ernest Lockridge is a novelist. We've been traveling together for a quarter of a century, seeing the world through different professional eyes, biographies, spiritual and emotional longings. We wanted to collaborate on a book about our travels that would simultaneously honor our distinct voices, deepen our understandings of ourselves and our relationship, and offer some new writing ideas to others.

We decided to each write a personal narrative inspired by our shared travel, to read each other's narrative, and to have a freewheeling conversation (tape-recorded and transcribed) about the narratives. We talked about writing issues—ethics, authorship, collaboration, witnessing, genre, audiences, memory, observation, and imagination; and we talked about our relationship, our blended family, our biographies, and the world at large. (For those with interests in how this book was made, please see the appendix.)

Because we crisscrossed personal and professional boundaries, our “travels” have been more than geographical; they have been intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. The result is *Travels with Ernest*—the contemporary love story of two people who love each other, their work, and their lives.

Both Ernest and I think of writing as a method of discovery—a way to learn about one's self and one's world. In *Travels*, our discoveries build on

each other. Ernest writes a meta-narrative, beginning with the mystery—“Why is this guy so edgy?”—and ending with the mystery solved. He retains his novelistic perspective. In my narratives, I engage cultural themes, identity issues, and social processes; I do not have a novelist’s perspective.

Ernest joins me in inviting you to travel with us—to Death Valley, Ireland, Beirut, Copenhagen, Russia, and to St. Petersburg, Florida, and Sedona, Arizona. And we invite you to join us in a summing-up of sorts, direct from our hometown of Worthington, Ohio, the location of our final section, “Happy Trail—The Movie.”

Laurel Richardson

CHAPTER I DEATH VALLEY March 5–12, 1993



And if you're lost enough to find yourself
By now . . .

—Robert Frost

Death Valley Day

Sunday, March 7, 1993

Ernest Lockridge

“Doesn’t look much wider than a football field,” I observe, climbing from the driver’s side of our bright red rental car, a Pontiac Grand Prix. “Really makes you wonder why those old pioneers in their covered wagons didn’t cross the valley right here.”

Our gear’s stowed in the car trunk—wide-brimmed hats, multipocketed hiking vests, push-here-dummy camera, Power Bars, matching pair of aluminum Cub Scout canteens encased in navy-blue canvas that we filled and wet down in our room at Furnace Creek Ranch. It’s mid-morning. The sky is clear, the air utterly transparent and heating up in the blazing white sun. I’ve parked alongside Route 190 skirting the east side of Death Valley, which isn’t a “valley” but something called a graben, its floor sinking into a fault in the earth’s crust. Death Valley’s the hottest spot on the planet. There’s some hellish sand-hole in the Libyan Desert that once or twice has received a higher scorecard, but no place holds a candle to Death Valley for sheer consistency. Badwater Basin near the valley’s southern boundary is

the lowest place on the earth's surface—282 feet below sea level. Ten thousand years ago an inland sea covered the entire area to a depth of six hundred feet.

Our plan is to hike due west across Mesquite Flat. We selected the jumping-off point yesterday during a foray of driving about. The terrain looked friendly here, the crossing itself almost unbelievably narrow. West across Death Valley loom the Cottonwood Mountains, gray and white. Behind us are the Funeral Mountains. The story goes that back in 1850, when those who stayed behind in the Valley were finally rescued, one of their number, a woman, looked back over her shoulder and said, "Good-bye, Death Valley." In Death Valley death is a serious business.

"Let's look at the map," says Laurel.

I rummage through my vest pockets for the green circular handed to us by the park ranger who took our entrance fee the day before yesterday when we arrived at Death Valley National Monument, driving here from Las Vegas. "Guess it's still in the room," I say. "We were going to pick up a topographical map at the Visitor Center, remember?"

"I do."

"Can't trust those flimsy hand-outs, you know. The proportions are way the heck off."

"Should we go back?"

"That lucky old sun's not gonna get any lower, Laurel. And look at . . . whatever they call those things. . . ."

"Alluvial fans?"

"Yeah, that alluvial fan." An upside down V flowing out from between two of the Cottonwoods, the alluvial fan, composed of mud and boulders washed down from the mountains during the infrequent torrential hours of rain that strike Death Valley, resembles a vast mons veneris. "You can practically reach out across the valley and touch it."

"I know," says Laurel. "Still, something doesn't feel quite right."

"Let's set off and see what happens."

"You did remember to bring the compass?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Better make sure."

I explore a number of the Velcro-sealed vest pockets. "Aha! Told you." I wave the plastic wafer over my head. "And we remembered our can-teens."

"Why is this reminding me of Shenandoah?"

Three years earlier we'd set off from Milam Gap to Camp Hoover in Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. I'd forgotten to bring along our detailed topographical map. The trail map—a mimeographed sheet of paper from the ranger station at Big Meadows—showed a loop-shaped walk significantly less complicated than the little Worthington, Ohio, square block on which our house stands: Prong Trail down to Camp Hoover, then Laurel (!) Trail to Hazeltop Trail returning us to the parking lot at Milam Gap. An easy day-walk, easy as pie, except that a mile or so south of Camp Hoover we missed the Laurel Trail and (as we later learned) I got us off onto Fork Mountain Trail, to Staunton River Trail, which we followed for several miles to where the Staunton River meets the Rapidan—though we did not know their names. We forded the Rapidan, then followed the Rapidan River Trail into the heart of the wilderness where the Battle of the Wilderness, among the fiercest slaughters of the Civil War, was fought in 1864. Fighting panic, we began retracing our steps. Our food was gone, our water low. We knew that giardia, a deadly intestinal parasite, made the river water undrinkable. The sun was going down. We had no flashlight. Poison ivy sprouted everywhere along the trail. With darkness descending we could scarcely see the ground in front of our feet as the trail grew increasingly rocky and steep. Seconds before night fell upon us like a shroud I spotted an open space off to our left—flat and devoid of rocks or poison ivy. We passed the night at the foot of twin pin oaks whose trunks forked from one another at ground level. We covered ourselves with a flimsy windbreaker. Throughout the night I kept my camera handy. In the event we were set upon by one of the many hundreds of brown bears and grizzlies prowling the park at night I could pop the flash into its feral inhuman eyes. Our sole defense. I spent the night observing a full moon as it veered across a sky bristling with stars. . . . Later, discussing our ordeal with a park ranger and consulting a detailed map of the region, we learned that we had hiked more than thirty miles. . . . After such knowledge what forgiveness?

"Shenandoah, oh boy," I sigh, looking out across Death Valley. "Well, you know what, Laurel? This is entirely different. For one thing you can see exactly where you're going and where you're coming from. I mean, no hills or forests or anything. And for another, we don't have to go any farther than we're comfortable with. Here, I'll take a compass reading. We

can sight up with our Grand Prix—I mean, it looks like a stop light, or some kind of beacon you can spot for miles . . . and, uh, I guess that's it.”

“And when our car's still sitting here after a few weeks someone may come looking for us.” So far no cars have gone by us on the road.

“I like it when people put the Power of Positive Thinking to work,” I say, taking our first step out onto Mesquite Flat, its hard-baked clay surface strewn with fist-sized rocks. “One small step for a man—oops, I mean ‘person.’”

Here and there rise gratted strands of the eponymous mesquite. There's also a sparse scattering of some pint-sized shrub I can't name or identify, having been a lazy, good-for-nothing Cub Scout (my Den Mother was my mother) and Boy Scout who never learned his vegetation beyond the rudiments of oak, maple, catalpa, beech, and poison ivy. Several inches of rain have fallen during recent weeks. Portions of Death Valley are alive with wild flowers, but not Mesquite Flat.

“How long have we been walking?” asks Laurel, who prefers to hike out in front, imagining herself in the role of trailblazer. Now she's trailing me like an Oriental wife of yore.

“Maybe about a half hour is all. Why?”

“Well, for one thing that alluvial fan doesn't look an inch nearer than it did when we first started out. And for another . . . Please, just turn around for a moment.”

I turn to face the direction we've been coming from. In the blazing sun the Grand Prix appears to my eyes as a burst of unripe apple green before resolving back to red.

“Our car looks like we could get back to it in about five minutes,” Laurel observes.

“Or less,” I agree. “Jeez, what's that odor? Some kind of spice?” There's a musky, tangy aroma I don't recognize—pine and juniper and some vaguely familiar but unidentifiable perfume, an invisible spirit floating like a vapor in the hot dry air of March. It's almost as though I can *hear* it—a low subliminal whirring like the Flying Saucer in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, but a mere shade shy of complete and utter silence. “God, it's delicious!”

“Maybe that's the mesquite,” Laurel suggests.

“Don't you wish we could bottle whatever it is and take it home? Wait . . . look, Laurel! Up in the sky!”

“It's a bird . . . no, it's a *plane!*”

Two or three thousand feet directly overhead an enormous bat-winged aircraft is floating southward. A smaller bat-winged aircraft coasts alongside it like one of those sparrow-sized birds that buddy up to ravens in flight. They make a noise like feathers. “What is it, Ernest? What are they?”

“The little one's an F-111 Stealth Fighter. But, wow! The big one's the B-2 Stealth Bomber! There's still a debate about whether it even exists, the whole project's supposed to be such a hotshot top secret. And there it is!”

“What's it doing *here?*?”

“Well, Nellis Air Force Base is just north of where we are. I think there's a bombing range. . . .”

“Could they have flown off track?”

“Bombing Death Valley!”

“There's a thought,” says Laurel.

“B-2 or not B-2, that is the question. And there, up in the sky, is the answer!”

“Did you make that up, Ernest?”

“Afraid not. Some Senate staffer did, back when they were debating whether or not to fund the thing at two billion a pop.”

B-2 and little buddy F-111 vanish over the southern horizon of Death Valley.

“Wow! And they seemed to be just floating up there like blimps.”

“Ernest?”

“Uh-huh?”

“How long have you been retired?”

“Uh . . . let me think . . . one year, six months, twenty-one and one-half days, sixteen hours and,” I glance at my wristwatch, “forty-seven seconds. About.”

“Don't you miss all those day-in, day-out conversations and discussions concerning literature?”

“No.”

“You're always quoting stuff, making literary references. . . .”

We're stepping through a minefield of waist-high boulders. “Where'd these come from?” I ask. “They sure as heck weren't visible from the road. . . . So, did I tell you my latest teaching dream?”

“I don't know,” Laurel says. “Did you?”

"Let's see. . . . As usual, here I am back on campus thinking classes are supposed to start in a week, but the walkways are chock-a-block with students, and I see one of my colleagues, some faceless Entity, and I say, 'Hi there, So-and-so, how come there are these students all over the place?' And Entity responds that it's the first day of classes. And my heart drops, and I ask, 'Where am I teaching?' And Entity answers with the name of some building I've never heard of, that isn't even on the map, and Entity informs me that it's somewhere way the hell clear over on the other side of the university. So I ask, 'What time am I supposed to be teaching?' And Entity answers that my first class began five minutes ago. And I ask frantically, 'What precisely is it that I'm supposed to teach?'"

"So far, it's the old familiar dream," says Laurel.

"Right, the one that's afflicted me ever since the night preceding my maiden voyage into the classroom. But here's the part that's new. So Entity answers that the name of my course is 'Food Good for Women!' And I ask, 'What in God's name are the books I've assigned for the course?' And Entity vanishes. And the sole, the one and only title that comes to mind is *Looking for Mister Goodbar!*"

"No, you didn't tell me," laughs Laurel.

"Do I miss teaching? Do I, Laurel?"

"You were so good at it."

"But do you think I could actually miss twenty-eight years of something I never wanted to do in the first place?"

"I've never quite understood it," Laurel says. "Was it wanting to be a novelist, or—?"

"Honey, I'm a coward in front of groups—terminally shy."

"You?"

"True Confession time, Laurel. I've battled stage fright most of my life. I'd pathologically overprepare the classes I taught. There were mornings I'd sooner enter an execution chamber than a classroom where I had to teach. I've had panic attacks that forced me to dismiss class. Far safer, less stressful to hunker down in some monastic bunker and make things up on the typewriter, don't you agree?"

"Golly, Ernest. . . ."

The field of boulders ends abruptly. Before us lies a sandy maze of ravines—and we are teetering at the lip of a gaping slit fifty feet deep.

"What are you thinking, Ernest?"

"Oh, this? Well, the banks look a little steep, but it's sand."

I'm puzzled, though. Where did this formation come from?

"How long have we been walking?" Laurel asks.

I glance at my wristwatch. "I forget when we started out. Why?"

"Because I no longer see the car."

"See that mountain?"

"I see dozens."

"The really tall kind of peaky one?" I wave at one of the distant Funnels, a sharp-pointed shadow against a sky of periwinkle blue where clouds are now forming.

"I think maybe—"

"Well that baby ought to line up with our Grand Prix."

"Less than half my water's left."

"You can have mine if you run out. Hell, I'm not even remotely thirsty."

I rush headlong down the embankment and vigorously forge my way across the sandy bottom, Laurel following, our feet sinking to the ankles in the moist, powdery sand. We mount the far embankment's summit to discover another, deeper ravine awaiting us a few yards beyond the first.

"Let me . . . catch my breath, Ernest. . . . That . . . alluvial fan doesn't look . . . any closer . . . than when we started."

"Like some weird illusion."

"Maybe . . . we ought to consider . . . heading back," Laurel says, panting.

"Let's see what's on the other side of this ravine." And down I go.

Reaching bottom several seconds behind me Laurel gasps out, "I don't . . . envy how you . . . must have felt . . . during all those years of teaching. . . . A little like . . . I feel now."

"Like the laborers they shipped over from China to mine borax." Yesterday we visited the Harmony Borax Works Interpretive Trail near Furnace Creek Ranch. We learned that Zabriskie Point is named for an undertaker who made his first fortune burying Chinese laborers before he scaled the Harmony ladder and acquired a second fortune in borax. The museum's photo of Zabriskie sports the coldest, meanest eyes I've seen. "My current ambition is to live twenty-eight years as a retired person. At the present moment, I have another twenty-six years, six months—"

"But who's counting? . . . up we go again?"

"When he hosted 'Death Valley Days' didn't they pronounce Ronnie's name 'Reegan?'" I ask.

"That's . . . what I remember . . ."

"Must've recalled it was the name of Lear's evil daughter," I say. "Not a proper handle for the president."

"I'm . . . sure that's . . . the reason . . . they changed the . . . pronunciation."

"Ree-gun . . . Ray-gun. . . . It's a Horatio Alger success story either way." We're cresting the rise.

"Here's . . . another . . . one," says Laurel, laboring to breathe.

Confronting us now is a chaotic fast-moving body of water with innumerable rushing, gurgling rivulets and streams bulging with boulders. Jutting islets bristle with coarse vegetation. Birds flit and dart through the saturated air.

"Wouldn't you love fording this mess in a covered wagon, Laurel?"

"I won't even do it . . . on foot . . . Now can we . . . head back?"

"But we're nearly there." The Great American Alluvial Fan now looms larger by perhaps a third than when we set out. Beyond the water hazard, power lines sag between towering erector-sets. Civilization has preceded us.

"Where did all this come from?" I ask. "I sure didn't see it from the road."

"Isn't there a phenomenon called 'telescoping'? When the air is heavy and completely clear it acts as a giant lens. Objects miles away look like they're in your back yard."

"Oh. Beware, objects are *farther* than they seem?"

"That might explain it," Laurel says.

"I guess."

"How far do you think we've come?"

"Miles and miles. . . . Wow! Now the sky looks like that ceiling in Caesar's Palace! The casino shopping mall creates an illusion of blue sky full of white clouds. There's a fountain whose statuary comes to life on the half hour. Gods and goddesses. Bacchus. . . . Now the sun's a blast furnace in spite of proliferating clouds. "Sure could do with a couple of ice cold beers," I remark.

"Remember Grand Canyon, Ernest?" Laurel almost suffered heat stroke during our climb back from the bottom of the Canyon to its North Rim.

"Uh-huh."

"We didn't bring enough water," Laurel says.

"Here." I hand her my Cub Scout canteen, purchased in Graceland Shopping Center right before we flew to Las Vegas.

"This feels full," Laurel says.

"I told you, I say. 'I'm not thirsty.'"

"You're sweating like crazy, Ernest."

I'm looking at the sky. "Humm. . . . Maybe we'll have some flooding after all."

"Drink your water, Ernest."

"I'm keeping it in reserve. For you."

"Who do you think you are?" asks Laurel. "Superman?"

"Hardly."

"Ernest, why are you trying to kill yourself? Would you kindly tell me that?"

"Ready to head on back?" I ask her.

We're reentering the boulder field after traversing the two sandy ravines. Slow going. We lean against a boulder and Laurel makes me drink some water.

"Ernest?"

"Uh-huh?"

"Is this about your mother?"

"Mom's a fighter. I told you her dream, didn't I?"

"Would you like to tell me again?"

"Well, this naked intruder attacks her while she's taking a shower. And she realizes that he's Cancer and she decides rather than giving in she's going to fight him tooth and nail and she does. And she ends up beating him senseless and bloody on the bathroom floor."

"Do you think she'll make it?" asks Laurel.

"She does." The last time I visited my mother in Bloomington I took her to be fitted for a wig. She recently told me over the phone her hair's all fallen out now. "Hell, they cured my brother using pretty much the same treatment, and he's been in remission now for—what—twenty-five years? Mom's seventy-eight . . . seventy-nine in what is it, twelve days? And her mother lived to ninety-three."

Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. My youngest brother came down with it at twenty-five, but he did drugs. My mother's a lifelong nonsmoking

tectoral. During the fifties and sixties, however, a number of electron-ics plants began discharging toxins into Bloomington's air and water. And the atom bomb tests in Nevada sent tons of radioactive debris drifting directly over us.

"Can't be genetic, can it?" I ask. "Look at the age difference when Mom and Ross came down with it."

"Just an odd coincidence."

"Well . . . Ready?"

"If you are," says Laurel.

The sun's against our backs now, casting broken shadows among the boulders. "I'm kind of looking forward to Las Vegas again," I say. Laurel calls Las Vegas "a Great Big International Block Party." Before coming to Death Valley we spent three days at the Tropicana. We have a stray-over of a couple of days on our return. "Maybe we'll take in that al-bino tiger act."

"If you like."

"You're playing poker, Laurel. You're holding a Siegfried and Roy."

What do you have?"

"What do you mean?"

"In your hand."

"Hand?" Laurel asks.

"Your *poker* hand."

"Oh . . . I don't know."

"A pair of queens?" I say.

"I don't get it," says Laurel.

"The magicians, for God's sake. Everyone knows they're lovers."

"Not me," says Laurel.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask.

"What's wrong with *you*?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been acting strange for days, Ernest. You can't remember from one minute to the next. You take out across the desert without a map. I practically have to twist your arm to turn back. Sweat's pouring off you in sheets. You won't drink."

"There's our car!" It's green, then red, then green. But it's the Grand Prix. "See? I told you so."

"I feel better just seeing it. Ernest?"

"Yes?" I'm frantically patting my multipocketed vest with both hands.

"Did you forget the car keys?" Laurel asks.

"Ah . . . they're . . . *here!*"

"Whew!"

"We have a ways to go yet."

"Will the rain catch us?" Laurel asks.

Downpours cause instantaneous catastrophic flooding in Death Valley, washing hikers down abandoned mine shafts. Downpours grind the mountains into alluvial fans. In a few million years downpours will have washed the mountains away. "Not a chance," I answer.

We hike awhile in silence. My eyes are on the mountains, calm and lovely. Finally I say, "I am bothered by Mom."

"I know."

"Did you know that I've never loved her enough?"

"Has she loved you enough?" asks Laurel.

We're nearing the Grand Prix. The sun is casting long shadows. "There're other things, but I can't remember what. Or get my mind around them. Something's coming up, but what it is . . . has slipped my mind."

"It'll come to you," Laurel says.

"It's as though I can see its footprints." I'm pointing toward the hard-baked rocky ground between us and the Grand Prix. "Coming toward me. Just about . . . *there*. But I can't make out what it is."

"What are you seeing?" Laurel asks me.

"Don't know. I just don't know."

Ah, Wilderness!

Laurel Richardson

Death Valley—three million acres of wilderness in which all the great divisions, and subdivisions, of geological time are represented. Lavender, pink, white, marble cream, black mountains, contortions, alluvial fans, craters, mosaic floors, tilings, dunes. Deep blue sky, hints of pale green, ravens, locoweeds, eyeless fish. It is the driest, hottest, lowest spot in the Western Hemisphere. Never have I been anywhere more beautiful than Death Valley.

"Before us lay a splendid scene of grand desolation," William Manley wrote as the party he led entered Death Valley on Christmas Day, 1849. They had already abandoned most of their belongings and slaughtered most of their oxen for food. Routes north and west out of the valley proved futile. Exhausted from their journey, unprepared for the harsh desert, and with provisions severely depleted, the clurch of pioneers encamped by a spring, while the two "ablest" men headed south by foot. If they could find a passage through the Panamint Mountains, they reckoned they could quickly reach the little village of Los Angeles. They did not know that to get there they would have to traverse two hundred miles, one hundred of it in the desert.

Days passed. I cannot imagine the fear and anguish of the little party of women, children, and less-abled men in the desert nights that they shared with the hairy scorpion, rattlesnake, and centipede. But nights were probably easier than days, hungry, anxious, day after day—some certainly losing faith that they would ever be found alive.

More than three weeks passed before "the boys" returned with provisions. As one of the women, weak and weary, ascended the last ridge, she looked back and said, "Goodbye, Death Valley."

For years, I refused to go to Death Valley. I was frightened by its name, fearful that it might have some metaphoric hold on me. I wasn't ready to "Walk through the Valley of . . . Death. . . ." The Panamint Indians who survived this lowest, hottest place on earth are now extinct. The forty-miners seeking a shortcut to gold did not find it here. The Chinese brought here to mine borax, dead, too, after enduring unspeakable working and living conditions; their lives undisclosed in guidebooks, their graves unmarked.

But, now, although still not ready for that final "walk," I long to be again in Death Valley for both its beauty and its history call to me. Why? To answer that I turn to another beautiful place where I have my own familial history: Shenandoah.

On the third day of our second trip to Shenandoah, early September 1990, Ernest and I plan an easy day-hike, the 7.5-mile Hoover-Laurel Loop. During the hike out, I think and talk about death, about how quickly and unexpectedly death can happen, just one wrong turn. We do not know, I muse, how things are going to turn out, only that they will.

Therefore, I reason, this is the time in our lives—as in any time in any life—to "follow our bliss."

We reach Laurel Prong, but a new trail has been blazed with the old color, which we guilelessly follow. We're hiking too long, I think.

"Let's turn back, Ernest. Let's retrace our steps," I say.

"It'll be much longer if we do that," he counters. "Just ahead we'll be finishing the loop."

"But, what if you're wrong?"

Knowing I can't trust my judgment in these matters, I give in. The trail becomes rough, overgrown; the blazes disappear, along with signs of any other hikers—ever. The remnant of our trail runs into the tailings of a gravel road.

"See," Ernest says. "We'll just follow this gravel road back."

I feel relief.

We turn down the gravel road, but it dead-ends at groves of trees a half century high. How can there be a gravel road that goes nowhere in the middle of a forest? Nothing makes sense.

"Let's retrace our steps, now," I say, and under my breath, "if it's not too late."

"None of these forest openings," Ernest says, as we go in and out of the forest, "get us anywhere. It'll be dark soon. We'd better find a place to sleep," and I hear him saying, under his breath, "before we break our necks."

"Here, under this large tree. This will be good," he says. We curl together. Dark falls. We "sleep" that night with one windbreaker jacket between us, a full moon, six ounces of water, no guarantee of finding our way back, and visions of Laughing Wolf gently pulling the blanket, Night, over us.

When daylight breaks, we begin our search again. It feels futile. I am certain that we will die here. No one will come looking for us. Our car is properly parked; we didn't sign the trail book, and the room we've rented for the week has a sign on its door—"Do Not Disturb."

"I love you, Ernest," I say.

"I love you, too, Laurel," he says.

We laugh over our tacit agreement that if either of us should utter those little three words, the other must respond in kind. Thinking I will be dying soon, I don't lament or feel angry or cry. I simply give in to what I think is to be my fate. Our fate.

Too exhausted to continue our hike—now uphill on the gravel road that leads nowhere—I lie down on my back and close my eyes. Far away, it seems, I can hear Ernest yelling, and I think he is hurt, but I am unable to rouse myself.

“I have found the marker for our trail back! It’s written on a gray metal strip on a concrete post!” Ernest is standing over me. “Get up, Laurel.” He gives me a sip of his water. We survive. Our marriage survives.

We learn the next day that when Shenandoah became a National Park, fifty years earlier, groves of trees were planted across the gravel roads to keep the displaced mountain families from returning to the homes they were forced to abandon.

And, our hike? We had nearly twenty-two miles of wilderness hiking under our boots and twelve more to go before we left the area—called since before the Civil War and to this day “the Wilderness”—inhabited, now, by some four hundred bears, each a night roamer with a twenty-square mile territory.

The next year, Ernest and I return to Shenandoah. Prepared for a long hike, we retrace our steps to where we had spent the night. The giardia-filled river is rolling along below the arc of the hillside. We have seen no other clearing.

“We were really lucky that we found this. We only had a few seconds before dark,” Ernest comments.

“You found it,” I say. “I would have just crashed on the trail and rolled into that rolling river.”

We spread out our lunch. “Look,” I say, “we didn’t camp under one tree. It’s two of them, intertwined at the trunks, independent in their branches. What a metaphor for our lives!”

“If I put that in a novel,” Ernest comments, “it would be too literary to be believable.”

After lunch we build a dolman. Stone upon stone. We give thanks.

“Those are bear tracks, aren’t they?” I ask, seeing fresh paw prints in our clearing.

“Yep,” Ernest says, adjusting his pack.

Ernest and I both have ancestral roots in the Shenandoah. My father’s ancestors and Ernest’s father’s ancestors had lived there in the Wilderness

at the same time a way before the Civil War. Some of them died there. On the third day of our fourth trip to Shenandoah, we are again hiking the Laurel Prong trail.

“Can you feel it?” I ask him. In the air I feel stories, lives, deaths.

“Yes,” he says.

We veer off the hiking trail into an overgrown clearing. Fallen, scattered, are gravestones, plain, uncarved. No need to carve the names of the dead on stones for family knows who is buried where. Oral tradition passes on the history. And I, who have spent my lifetime writing, mourn for the passing of the oral tradition—and, yes, for my forgotten people. No one knows the names of the dead, the stories of their lives. I am crying. We set the stones upright and return to our hike.

“Ernest,” I say as I finish writing, “let’s go back to Death Valley. I want to look for gravestones.”

“How about early April?” he says.

“Perfect!”

Conversation: Death Valley

February 20, 2003

Morning. The Great American Kitchen in Middle America. Laurel and Ernest are sitting by one another at their round table. The Great American Back Yard, visible through the French Doors, lies buried beneath two feet of new-fallen snow. There’s a speckled crinoline of seed-husks surrounding the tall bird feeder that juts eight feet high out of the yard’s southwest quadrant. A rolling red-gray throng crowds the glass-walled feeder: cardinals, top of the pecking order. An electric birdbath brims with liquid water and a bobbing of finches. Winter has cancelled their brightness. A segment of orange electrical cord coils upward from the whiteness. Possum and Blue, beloved felines, rest in peace beneath a comforter of earth and snow. Ernest turns on the Radio Shack tape recorder.

Laurel: That is the idea; let’s make a little conversation.

Ernest: There’s a Frost poem where he talks about getting lost in order to find yourself. In some ways our narratives are also about that. Or

they're angled in that direction. We didn't exactly get lost in Death Valley but we made a pretty good stab at it. And we certainly did get lost in Shenandoah, and I think you were a good bit more generous to me than I would be to myself because, as I recall, I actually panicked. We should've retraced our steps much earlier, but I irrationally insisted on forging ahead, and we ended up walking in circles. One thing I discovered about myself is that I could do with more presence of mind, to say the least.

Laurel: I discovered things about myself as well in Shenandoah. I had recently finished the poem based on my interview with "Louisa May." Her philosophy that "things just turn out" was in my mind. Rather than panicking, I went into a stillness. I became somewhat fatalistic, accepting of my fate.

Ernest: Yes. You did.

Laurel: While working on my Death Valley narrative, I had a dream whose theme was my unwillingness to fight to stay alive. On waking, I decided that it was okay to accept the inevitable—or what one feels is the inevitable.

Ernest: It never even occurred to me that we wouldn't be able to get out of Shenandoah. I knew we could retrace our steps. I had a clear enough memory of how to do that—

Laurel: [*Laughs.*] Excuse me for laughing.

Ernest: Really, I knew we were going to find our way out. But also that we were doomed to rough it, in the Babes-in-the-Woods Motel.

Laurel: It was the only night that whole month that wasn't touched with frost.

Ernest: The old nursery song was floating through my mind that night. "They sobbed and they sighed, they bitterly cried, those poor little babes, they lay down and died." I had enough presence of mind not to sing it out loud.

Laurel: I thank you for that!

Ernest: You're welcome.

Laurel: We've never talked about this—this difference in perception—I didn't know until now that you thought we would get back. Did you know I thought we were going to die?

Ernest: When did you think that?

Laurel: In the morning, when I collapsed.

Ernest: Okay. When I came back to where you were lying on the ground, after I'd found the way back, you told me you'd given up. That's when I knew. But not until then, and not until I absolutely knew for a fact that we were getting out in one piece.

Laurel: And gratefully we did. So, even when I think I don't have the energy or the stamina to go on, I do.

Ernest: You do, yes.

Laurel: There is a reserve. Although sometimes I think I run on near empty. But I do have this coping mechanism. I imagine the worst possible outcome. So when whatever happens isn't that bad, it's okay. So, the worst possible outcome was that we were going to die out there. And well, that's how it is.

Ernest: And we didn't get into recriminations or arguments. We focused our energies on rescuing ourselves.

Laurel: We were in it together, we were complicit in it, and I wouldn't have been found again if you hadn't found a path.

Ernest: And no one did this on purpose.

Laurel: There was no malice aforthought.

Ernest: None.

Laurel: And you were generous in terms of sharing your water and in believing that I could get back out.

Ernest: I knew we could get out, even if one of us became incapacitated. You said you thought I'd broken my leg when you heard me yelling. I'd walked a mile up the road, found the way back and was hollering—hoping I wouldn't have to retrace my steps completely, that maybe you'd head toward me. But you were lying in the road, thinking it was all over, when in fact I was bringing you the news we were saved.

Laurel: Do you think that we often have such different interpretations?

Ernest: Would our marriage survive the "often"? On the whole, you tend to be positive about things, with a philosophy of "let's wait and see" instead of giving into the crisis of the moment. We don't live from crisis to crisis by any means.

Laurel: No.

Ernest: Nor do I consider you a fatalist. Or myself as someone who's always panicking.

Laurel: But when circumstances are really outside of my control, I do accept them. I'm not a Don Quixote tilting at windmills.

Ernest: There've been times in your professional life when maybe you have. But, no, generally you don't. . . . Of course, there's always The Big Windmill. You had a closer brush with it in Shenandoah than I did, but we both know where we're headed in the end. We know in our bones that it's only a matter of when. We don't want to be collaborators, you know—throwing ourselves into the blades. But when the time comes, it comes, not tonight maybe. . . . Not that night in Shenandoah, anyway. I knew from my Boy Scout days that there are worse things than an overnight in the woods.

Laurel: We seem to feel the need to tell of this experience often, as we are doing now. It's like a bone-deep memory that binds us deeply to each other. . . .

Ernest: Yes, it does.

Laurel: And our later experience in Shenandoah, too, where we felt the presence of our ancestors, the land alive with their deaths.

Ernest: And their continuity with the living, with ourselves.

Laurel: Yes, the continuity with the living, with ourselves, and that our families were neighbors in Ireland, too.

Ernest: If we're cousins, we're probably not close enough to be illegal.

Laurel: Kissing cousins?

Ernest: You know, the place where we stayed the night in Shenandoah just cropped up fortuitously. . . . really the only place like it—level, soft, devoid of poison ivy. And we regard it as a kind of holy place and shrine and have returned to it several times. We've found our dolman mostly intact, with fresh bear paw prints crossing where we slept. So our experience there has given us quite a few reasons to feel blessed—and connected. Maybe our ancestors were watching over us.

Laurel: A couple of years later, Hurricane Andrew came right through there.

Ernest: But we wouldn't have gone trail hiking with Andrew approaching.

Laurel: Oh, I don't know about you.

Ernest: Am I that reckless?

Laurel: No, you're not. And I'm not that reckless either!

Ernest: We've chosen these valleys of the shadow of death to start this book. Facing death, coping with it. My mother's cancer took her a year later, and, though it's not stated in the piece—something to do with the date, March 7—well maybe I won't say anything here and let it remain—

Laurel: For the reader—

Ernest: To discover later. I didn't know at the time that I was being pulled along by unconscious forces in Death Valley. Driven.

Laurel: Your description of Death Valley brought me back there again. I was thirsty, tired, scared. Angry. I was enmeshed in the beauty. All those feelings were back again. You know, I didn't know what was going on with you then, and I haven't known until now, when I read your piece.

Ernest: I put myself back there in memory as much as I possibly can, so that I'm back among all the sensations and the feelings.

Laurel: I've never asked you this—but did you think you might get cancer, too? Or, do you?

Ernest: I'm in denial.

Laurel: When I read your story to my friend Betty, she thought you made me sound very negative, not at all like my usual positive self.

Ernest: I know I have you sounding cautionary notes in my narrative. With plenty of reason, lord knows. Shenandoah. . . . and, too, our descent from the North Rim of the Grand Canyon without sufficient water, and when we reached the canyon floor your knee felt so bad you felt you couldn't make it back up to the rim.

Laurel: I never thought I was going to die in the Grand Canyon, though, just that I was going to be miserable until someone came down with a mule to get me.

Ernest: Yet you were much nearer to death than you ever were at Shenandoah.

Laurel: Because during the climb I almost went into heat stroke—

Ernest: Which we didn't realize at the time. Fortunately we were only a few feet from the water source, though we didn't know it. I went on ahead—

Laurel: Like you did in Shenandoah—

Ernest: And brought water back to you. And, I suppose, life. This is not a behavioral pattern that I would recommend.

Laurel: And we did break the pattern in Death Valley. Still, that place speaks to me metaphorically. The ablest men in 1850 went ahead to find a path to save the others. You went ahead on our adventures, too.

Ernest: Ah, yes. Though I do not exactly hold myself up as a Role Model for survival.

Laurel: And the Chinese died here, misused in labor camps by people who considered themselves superior beings, which was of course the experience of my mother's Jewish kin, and to some extent my father's Irish family.

Ernest: It's hard to find truly factual things about how the Chinese were treated. What you turn up at the site and on the Web is a much more benign vision than what I suspect is the truth.

Laurel: The Chinese buried in unmarked graves, our people buried there in Shenandoah with their gravestones uncarved. Nobody knows who or which or where. But there they are. Dead and gone and unmarked.

Ernest: Yes.

Laurel: My first draft about Death Valley began with a long introduction about my mother coming from Russia, traveling westward. I deleted it from the later drafts, but it focused my thinking. Her father, too, came ahead before his family. It's a gendered thing. The men go ahead and if they are successful in their forays, the women might be saved. The rest of my mother's family—those who did not go westward—lie in unmarked graves in Russia. Irish, English, Chinese, Russian. I am confusing myself.

Ernest: Look at our narratives as grave-markers. Legends carved into our headstones. Who we were, what we were to one another.

Laurel: I like that.

Ernest: Back when we were first together you expressed concern that we didn't have a "history" with one another. We sure have one now. And here we are writing it down.

Laurel: We "got lost enough to find" ourselves—as individuals and as partners. One more thing. You edited my sentence about walking through the "Valley of Death" to the "Valley of the Shadow of Death," which is the correct biblical passage, I know. But to me the idea of death is concrete. It is not a shadow. It's not the fear that Death is going to darken my way; it's more that Death is a real experience that I will be in, materially, physically.

Ernest: It's coming toward us, all right. Its footprints are almost visible here in front of us on the valley floor. And I have us walking to meet it, I guess. . . . Shenandoah. Grand Canyon. Death Valley. The Valley of the Shadow of Death deepens the . . . *mythology* of our time spent together.

Laurel: You descend into death.

Ernest: We haven't exactly had our near-death experiences on mountaintops.

Laurel: Well, you had one in Ireland.

Ernest: Whoops! Forgot that one.

Laurel: We should write about our travels in Ireland.

Ernest: We've got the photographs, the receipts, the ticket stubs. And, now, the memory.

Laurel: Why don't we write about Ireland?

Ernest: Begorra!

CHAPTER 3
BEIRUT, LEBANON

August 18–22, 1999



Your hope chest will be filled by evening.
The noblest Phoenicians, the highest born,
Have courted you.

—Homer

City by the Sea

Ernest Lockridge

September 15, 1999

Dear Sister and Brethren,

Returned a few weeks back from the sun-drenched oven of Beirut. I'd've written sooner, but promptly got a respiratory infection which by all odds should have been some exotic Med-bred bug, but more likely derived from the steam room of my local health club where I deposited my car-cass the day after arriving home to bake out the humors of foreign travel.

Our beautiful Helen is now married to that handsome and capable Phoenician, Jean-Paul, whom she met in Mali, West Africa, whilst she was in the Peace Corps and Jean-Paul was operating the West African wing of the family business. Jean-Paul's family, the Fayed's, and their circle of Lebanese Christians identify themselves (tongue-in-cheek, I think) as "Phoenicians" to further distinguish themselves from the bomb-happy Hezbollah and the Palestinians. My new in-laws are close friends of the family that once governed Lebanon, said friendship having, during Lebanon's civil war, drawn artillery fire down upon the Fayed's reinforced

concrete villa and upon the Christian suburb north of Beirut where my youngest daughter's sumptuous wedding took place.

Following a cathedral ceremony hallowed by the participation of a full half-dozen Maronite priests we attend the lavish reception on the shores of the Mediterranean, vintage champagne effervescing in the hot twilight, banquet table groaning with earthly delights. Arop Grand Tetrans of rice on three massive oval platters repose in crumbling languor a goat, a sheep, a goat. We eat, we drink, we gyrate. Festivities wind down with the release of white doves and nonlethal fireworks whose reflections bedazzle even the wrinkled old face of the wine-dark sea.

In meager counterbalance to the generosity shown us in Beirut I did treat the bride and groom, my brand-new in-laws and family-members, the bride's sisters, my wife, and my ex-wife to a pretty fine lunch a couple of days later in the Druse-controlled mountains surrounding Beirut. In a castle. Or a palace. Whatever they call those elaborate Casbahs that once concealed the harem from the plebeian gaze, from desires more common to commoners than to Grand Emirs.

The Fayed's are immensely gracious and attractive, and as nice as anyone. Jean-Paul's father Pierre, a handsome fellow, radiates bonhomie and robust health, though due to countless bouts with sub-Saharan malaria his health is precarious. You'd never know it, however, from the way he acts. One of the most gracious people I've met. Jean-Paul's mother and sisters are beautiful. All the women of their acquaintance, in fact, seem beautiful, charming; the men handsome and sophisticated. The very air they breathe is redolent of dangers that we can scarcely imagine, yet they give off no sign of worry. Henningway's famous "grace under pressure" describes them.

Beirut follows the shoreline like the endless scrolling of a Crazy Kat cartoon landscape. Reminders exist that this is a war zone—the bullet-pocked garden wall, the bomb-gutted apartment building, the disemboweled motion picture theater—but such touristic thrills are rare. Our drivers made no drive-by of the Beirut Power Plant, knocked out of commission by an Israeli airstrike a few days prior to our little visit.

Jean-Paul drives us on a freeway devoid of lane-markers amidst a pack of hyper-aggressive drivers violently jockeying bumper-to-bumper. Through this rampage Jean-Paul maneuvers his Mercedes calmly, effortlessly, perfectly attuned to the local rhythms. Men, women, and children rendered intrepid by poverty stand along this racecourse hawking the

drooling carcasses—glisteningly denuded of their pelts—of goats, sheep, rabbits.

Exotic items are for sale off-road in a hubbub of squalid pleasure domes whose marquees tease the Middle-Eastern tourist in strange syllables, a foreign language redolent of the snake, the Infidel. "Dallas!" sings their Siren song. "Vegas!" "Santa Fe!" The Saudi pilgrim to Beirut parks his wives at the Beirut Hilton then hastens the few short kilometers to this Beirut Mecca and here savors the rarest and most-prized fruits of the Great Satan, forbidden the hometown boy back in good old Riyadh. Here at last his strenuous tongue is afforded unrestrained license to burst joy's grape against his palate fine. Boozel! Hookers!

Our own little pilgrimage was perhaps no more "interesting" than it had to be. Even so, we are relieved to be back home in our own charming, prosperous and—as of this writing—unbombed suburb, Worthington, just north of Columbus, Ohio, where the Worthington police look out for our safety by routinely pulling over outsiders on suspicion of not being Worthington residents. In Lebanon, Syrian peacekeepers man the ubiquitous roadblocks, young men scanning Jean-Paul's Mercedes with their ruthless, watchful eyes and cradling battered AK-47s, arms and the men giving every appearance of having been thoroughly battle-tested—their presence no less reassuring, however, than our Columbus, Ohio police force, a rogue body that's been brutalizing, strip-searching, and shooting us with impunity, official misbehavior so barbaric that even the United States Department of Justice has at last been forced into taking notice.

All about Beirut loom billboards portraying old Dr. Assad, Lebanon's current peace-bringer, eyes shrouded in black sunglasses, and from the thin black line of his mouth extrudes a word-balloon explaining in Arabic that "it is not Syria's will but Allah's" that we are grinding your country beneath our boot heels.

The Syrian president appears ludicrously untutored in the debonair department, contrasting starkly with our own jolly madcap, Charming Billy, that irrepressible rake who oozes charm through every pore as he rains ordnance upon Afghans, Iraqis, Sudanese, and Serbs. Lebanese natives, Christian and Muslim, are not much given to criticizing their Syrian liberators, open mouths having dissolved in night and fog. Still, I consider my lovely daughter safer in Beirut than in, say, Washington, D.C., where she resided prior to her apothecosis.

The newlyweds will reside in Mali for six months out of each year. Like the Hutu butchers of Rwanda against whom the United Nations failed to intervene because the United States virulently opposed any such intervention, the Taureg insurgents of Mali are creatures of French foreign policy. Fortunately Jean-Paul is well armed, and the evening before we bid Beirut goodbye I issue a paternal directive. "Look, Helen, forget all the crap you may have heard regarding guns and just have Jean-Paul teach you how to shoot."

"Okay, Dad."

"Promise me!"

"I promise, Dad."

On the morning of our departure, Beirut International is so utterly clean, so given over to a Platonic Idea of Cleanliness that it is devoid of toilet paper. Here, too, are the young, hard-eyed Syrian soldiers, one cadre after another scouring our passports to shake loose the flimsiest ink-fleck of evidence that we have even once in our lives visited "that Zionist state in occupied Palestine," whereupon they'd arrest us on the spot.

The sole drama of this sort occurs on the second leg of our return from the Middle East, at London-Heathrow, where Western authorities search our luggage with a thoroughness I had hoped impossible, prying into all containers, twisting our prescriptions' adult-proof caps, unscrewing and squeezing our ointments, burrowing into zipper compartments, x-raying our bags when full and when depleted, a process so precise in its filtering and rifling of our little cache of personal belongings that an earring from Laurel's favorite pair magically vanishes into thin air!

We are not x-rayed, nor are we probed in our persons, merely "patted down," although said "patting down" does occur twice—(1) whilst the polite and pleasant young English fellow, Colin by name, is ransacking all of our luggage, and (2) at the departure gate as a humorless brace of Continental airline thugs, Americans, further savage our meager carry-ons. So beaten down are we, however, so powerfully conditioned by decades of living beneath the iron claw of our own beloved government here in the West, that Laurel and I, docile fellow travelers, maintain a steady, purring drone of tameness for our would-be captors. All during their pillaging and pawing, we keep insisting aloud to our assailants and one another that, actually, we feel no outrage, no! we feel, well, *reassured* by these Byzantine precautions. And I must admit that our subsequent flight westward over

the Atlantic does *not* explode—a la, say, TWA 800. Has the United States Navy taken the day off?

Airborne, I speculate aloud that the authorities mounted all this entertainment because my exotic, surly demeanor, plus the black scorpion tattoo upon my forehead, had succeeded in arousing their darkest suspicions. Laurel demurs, "It's that Beirut stamp in our passports, Ernest."

We agree, however, upon the wisdom of postponing those side trips to Baghdad, Belfast, and Belgrade.

Thine,

Brother Ernest

Laurel in Arabia

Laurel Richardson

TO: BFK123@aol.com

FROM: Richardson.9@osu.edu

Subject: Home Again

Date: September 15, 1999

Betty, Dear Friend—I'm home. Safe, but not sound. Something's seriously wrong with my shoulder. I can't raise my arm above my waist without excruciating pain. I've been at risk physically, religiously, militarily. The risks overlap and merge. So happy, so happy to be back home.

My shoulders were up to my ears for weeks before we left. The massage therapist worked on my neck, but without much relief. The United States prohibits direct flights to Lebanon so we had to change airlines—airports, too—in London.

I don't like flying, and there was so much of it; I get so tired, my body exhausted by time-zone changes—eight of them, each way—foreign waters, foreign foods. And the possibility of war, of course. That, too. The State Department had raised the travel-advisory level: "Don't go. The U.S. Embassy cannot protect you."

Most stressful though was knowing I would be immediately arrested in Beirut should the authorities discover I had been to Israel. I have a new passport, of course, without the Israeli stamp, but for all I know the

Lebanese government keeps computer records of tourists to Israel. Maybe their computer knows I am a Jew; a Jewish child who had trees planted in Israel in her name; a Jewish adult whose support of Israeli independence is recorded in Tel Aviv.

My mind settles on Jewish friends who live daily with feelings of vulnerability. I remind myself that my name is "Richardson" and that I look like my gentle father. If the Lebanese authorities ask me, I'll have to deny my Jewish heritage. I'll have to lie. I shudder thinking about it, preparing for denial and deceit.

No one who isn't Jewish seems to understand what I am talking about, how unsettling this is for me. It is as if I am no longer "half-Jewish," a safe category, but now "entirely Jewish," enduring the defining "Jewish experience": being at risk because one is not a Gentile. I think of my Jewish mother, whose witnessing of the pogroms led her to marry a Gentile so that her children would never have to face *the* Jewish Experience.

So why *did* I go to Beirut? You know why. I assessed Ernest's needs as greater than my fears, and I love him. Before we left I was telling everyone that Ernest's daughter, Helen, was getting married in Beirut. I liked how exotic it sounded, and how rehearsing nonchalance lulled my fears.

Jean-Paul and Helen picked us up at the Beirut airport in a Mercedes 500 SEL. I think there was about a six-mile "safe-zone"—no buildings, no trees, just the road—around the airport. Two hours after arrival—and after having our passports checked and rechecked by seven or eight guards, Lebanese and Syrian rifling through the pages, turning them on edge, looking for watermarks, erasures, anything out of the ordinary, I suppose, and me feeling more and more paranoid with each rifling—here we were in an Arabic-speaking hotel on the Mediterranean in the Christian sector of north Beirut.

Jean-Paul's parents, Marianne-Catholics, live outside Beirut in a stone fortress enfolding four sumptuous living rooms, five baths, a lookout tower, and a private well and generator, which they were using because the power had not yet been restored from the last Israeli bombing. Surrounding the house are acres of innocent-looking flowerbeds; beyond them an electrified fence. Under the full width and breadth of the house is another house, their bomb-shelter, intended to protect them from Israelis, Syrians, and Moslem Lebanese. The people who were to be my protectors were themselves at risk.

Speaking French, Jean-Paul's father explained the Lebanese wedding customs to Ernest: the bride rides to the church with her father only; he gives her to the groom at the door of the church; the wedding couple walks down the aisle together. Would that be all right with Ernest? Of course, it was.

Villagers lined the streets to see the bridal car, completely covered with flowers, and to get a glimpse of the bride, as if she were a Royal. Helen was beautiful, Jean-Paul handsome, and the cathedral wedding mass lovely and long. Six priests, three languages, flowers everywhere. The oldest priest told Jean-Paul to remain faithful to his wife and told Helen she could not get divorced. At the reception—Perrier water flowing like wine, food for the multitudes—a whole lamb, pig, goat, salmon, unnamed fish, a three foot sword brandished by Jean-Paul to cut the ten-layer wedding cake, a pair of doves set free, and fifteen minutes of fireworks over the Mediterranean. After dancing with Helen, Jean-Paul's father asked me to dance and the band to play jazz in Ernest's honor.

We all went sightseeing the next day. The temperature was over 100, the humidity close to 100 percent. Our camera records the sappy air. In four air-conditioned Mercedes, the families drove north through Lebanon's porno district, where Saudi men frequent clubs with American names and symbols—Black Paradise, Las Vegas Babes, Girls-a-Go-Go, Dallas. Here they find proof that the American way is the way of the devil. Some of the men have brought their wives. They are sitting on hotel steps in purdah, bodies and heads covered in heavy black wool garments. I catch one woman's eyes. I see pain. I no longer think the dress is simply custom; I feel its misogynist origins; its practice as abusive.

We stop at Biblos, the palimpsests of Phoenician, Roman, and crusader civilizations visible beneath the contemporary Lebanese culture. I remember my fourth grade report on the library at Biblos, and the purple dyes and sailing ships of the Phoenicians, the ancestors of the Lebanese, and feel centered through this remembrance. I loved fourth grade and I loved purple cloth.

But Syrian guards, young men with assault rifles, flanked by Russian tanks, stop us. Check us. What must it be like for Jean-Paul, a descendant of the powerful Phoenicians, to placate a Syrian soldier? Up into the mountains we go, up and up. The houses grow more grand. Syrian politicians have taken these houses as their own. More Syrian soldiers. More

checking. I imagine how it would feel to be stopped by foreign soldiers in my own country; how worried I would be about my sons. Through Druse territory, past the Cedars of Lebanon, and finally to Mir Amine, once a sheik son's palace in Beir Edine and now a resort. Jean-Paul's parents seat us facing the best view of the mountains; they sit across from us. Ernest gladly picks up the bill. We learn later that it is the custom for the bride's father to treat the groom's family on the day after the wedding.

We stop at the Emir's palace to view the royal baths, swords, and footstools, and down we go southward following a back road. A Lebanese soldier carrying an American rifle sitting on an American tank recognizes Jean-Paul and waves us on. We reach beyond the southern boundary of Beirut. More Syrian guards. My tension rises. We are in Hezbollah territory. We drive through Palestinian refugee encampments. The road is narrow and rough. People are driving too fast. Men try to sell us live chickens and live rabbits, and dead foxes and dead rabbits; gaunt children watch us pass by, uninterested. I see the awful displacement of the Palestinians—how they are not wanted by the Lebanese, Christian, or Moslem, how they are pawns in others' political games. I feel Israel's complicity.

We drive into downtown Beirut, past bombed-out buildings, walls still strudded with mortar shots and into the glare of Max and Erna's, McDonald's, T.G.I.F., Baskin/Robbins, Hard Rock Cafe. We could be anywhere. It was night. We were in Beirut.

I'm having nightmares, too. In them, I'm a passenger in a truck, rented car, or taxi. The vehicle breaks down in an uninhabited spot of land or, sometimes, on a highly congested road. I can't speak the language, I am in physical danger, and I can't decide whether to continue to my destination or turn around and head back. It is scary, this dream-text.

I am exhausted thinking about the contrasts—sea and mountains, rich and poor, Jewish and Gentile, Christian and Moslem, lies and truths, American guns and Russian guns, now and then.

All of my academic theorizing about breaking down oppositions, deconstructing binaries doesn't help me, now, in any practical sense. Or has it? Has it already? Do I glimpse that the oppositional pairs upon which my language/my Self is built requires seeing differences within a vision of nondifference?

You can tell I'm home again—at home, again—using my life as entry to the realm of the untheorized.

Meanwhile, Helen will make her life in Lebanon, while I am only comfortable in the Lebanon of my past—my fourth grade studies of Phoenicia.

My shoulder hurts. I can't type anymore.

Thanks for listening.

Love,

Laurel

Conversation: Beirut

September 30, 1999

Laurel: When I read your letter to your brothers and sister, I was struck by how different it was from my letter about the Beirut experience. I thought that the two letters offered a good example of how the ostensibly same experience is reconstructed differently through the process of writing.

Ernest: My letter's a bit like whistling in the dark. I'm uneasy about my daughter's new place of residence, so I'm trying to "beat the blues" by positing the notion that, hey, Beirut's really no more dangerous than America. Whether or not I believe it's true....

Laurel: Your fear regarding your daughter and your daughter's life maps onto my mother's fear for my life as a Jewish child, and my desire to avoid that which might endanger me. I've come to a deepened understanding of it because I put myself at risk.

So as different as our texts are in terms of writing style, apparent language choices, cadences and so on, what's driving both of them is the same emotional issue—the safety of daughters.

Ernest: That's true. If Helen were Jewish, it would be really impossible for me to imagine that she could live either in Beirut or in Mali. Mali, of course, is a Moslem country, and I think I'd just be in constant terror for her safety, that she'd be found out, that something terrible would happen to her. It's sort of possible to think about her living there, in large part, casting it in your terms, I suppose because she is not Jewish.

Laurel: Another parallel in the letters is that each of us begins with our bodies—with the discomforts in our bodies. Being back home is being

back home in our bodies. Relocating ourselves in our bodies. Of course my shoulder has not stopped hurting, and you've been off and on ill with respiratory infections since returning, so in some ways we're not yet "at home."

Ernest: I think that partly what we are doing here, both of us, is trying to write ourselves into mental and physical health. Writing this, I put myself figuratively speaking on the couch and tried to think about, analyze, even just purge some of the things that are still bothering me. There are lots of very difficult emotions that went into the writing of both of these letters.

Laurel: I wrote to enlist the healing power of writing.

Ernest: And it helped.

Laurel: I've always liked the epistolary form, but as we continue our conversation, I find myself entranced with its power for poststructuralist theorizing. In a letter, you get the sense of a particular person writing to particular people; there is claim to authorship and authority—not about the "facts" but about the emotional state of the writer. Because of the letter's conventions, the reader/listener knows that you are not trying to reconstruct a travelogue or write an ethnographic report. If you're a little exaggerated, so what. You're trying to convey to specific people the emotional experience, and the epistle permits that.

Ernest: I agree.

Laurel: I truly believe that writing can be a method of discovery. I have a hard time nowadays writing about that which I already "know." I want writing to teach me something new about myself and the world. To sit at a desk and be engaged in the process requires that I not know where the writing is taking me. And I think you have the same sense.

Ernest: I had little clarity regarding Beirut 'till I wrote about it.

Laurel: I suppose it's this American individualism, or something, but I like saying I did this myself. My "truth" was not constructed through my conversation with someone else—a therapist, say—but rather through my conversation with my multiple selves, my history and so on. It's a very different sense of owning what I claim to feel and know.

Yet, it is clear that you and I have been to Beirut, together. We went to the same places and saw the same things. We agree on the contours and general facts, as we always have throughout our marriage even though you are a novelist and I'm a sociologist. We rarely disagree but our perspectives differ; we have different takes, different ways of claiming knowledge—

Ernest: Or what is important to us at a particular time, because it would never even occur to me to disagree with your feelings of vulnerability as you state them. In my letter I employ hyperbole—a mode I often employ with family and friends. In your letter, the only example of hyperbole would be when you say that "no one understands" and what I think you mean is "I feel this very strongly." Of course I was aware of your sense of peril.

Laurel: We've shared our letters back and forth, and each of us has done some rewriting. The letters were enriched, not substantially changed in terms of style, form, or sense of audience, but in the concrete details. The process was very similar to the way focus groups work, and the way Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner co-construct narratives.

Ernest: After reading your letter I intensified the contrast between our respective "takes" and intensified, in mine, certain parallels regarding the United States and Lebanon. Paradoxically, it may even be *safer* for us in Beirut where our passports invite special consideration by the authorities, who will perhaps think twice before hauling in American citizens, stripping us, shooting us.

Laurel: Just as you're seeing political similarities between Lebanon and the United States, I'm seeing the similarities in the emotional costs and emotional experiences of peoples such as the woman in purdah, the Palestinians, John-Paul, John-Paul's parents. Through linking of experiences, I recognize others as not "the other." It's no surprise, then, that I end my letter with a nod to poststructuralism—the "other" as "myself." A vision of nondifference.

I think our letters are complementary. Yet, they cannot be one paper. Which brings me back to a recurrent issue of mine: There is no way for us to write together.

Ernest: Yes, but we've done it and we're doing it now.

Laurel: Only as dialogue.

Ernest: "Only" as dialogue?

Laurel: As two separate voices. There's no way to create one text in which both our voices are merged.

Ernest: But isn't that what we've been doing all along—here and elsewhere? In dialogue?

Laurel: [Long pause.] Anything more you want to say?

Ernest: Yes, this. I certainly have a deep liking and respect for my son-in-law and his family, and deep sympathy for the situation they are in.

These people bring home to me how it must feel to live in an existential world close to the bone where one makes life and death decisions, but also where one is in a world where you have more choices regarding life and death. For example, if you're dying in need of a kidney transplant in the Middle East you can buy a poor man's kidney. Okay, what would you do? If I were in a situation where my choice was to let my child die, or purchase a kidney—a choice I don't have in this country—what do you think that *I'd* do? And I did tell my daughter to learn to shoot.

Meta-Conversation: Beirut

August 15, 2000

Laurel: Our editors Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner have sent us a letter with some questions they'd like us to think about. Should we have a conversation about our conversation? A meta-conversation?

Ernest: Let's see, first they want to know whether our "conversation was helpful, illuminating, difficult, therapeutic, or what."

Laurel: That's easy. I found our conversation both illuminating and helpful because of the interplay between the personal and the political.

Ernest: I thought it was fun. And illuminating. For instance, I was aware of whistling in the dark, of a sort of manic defense regarding my daughter's safety, but I didn't get it fully under heel until our little conversation—which I wouldn't call therapeutic, alas, since it didn't cost 125 bucks an hour.

Laurel: [*Laughs.*] Here's another question. Carolyn and Art want to know about the conversation as a "meta-ethnographic and relational strategy." Great question! Definitely there are methodological parallels to ethnographic work. The Glaser and Strauss folks "memo" each other, and qualitative mentors read their students' field notes. And, definitely, the conversation strengthened our relationship. Experiencing, writing, conversing, rewriting, conversing, writing. Although we agree on what we see, we have a different edge, a different take on the experience. The differences within the similarity make us interesting to each other.

Ernest: Different—and complementary.

Laurel: Which leads to the next question: How have our "different emotional styles or forms of writing" helped us "cope with our emotionality?"

Ernest: I'd become thoroughly distressed by our own government's activities—the bombings, the cruise-missile strikes brought on by motives that look, at best, questionable. Whatever the late Dr. Assad's considerable flaws, folks around the world slept unconcerned that he'd murder them in their beds as a distraction from some homegrown scandal. More generally, though, I wanted to convey a sense of foreboding above and beyond the current situation—a general feeling of Power Run Amok as a continuing, unshakable, central part of the Human Condition. When World War II came to an end, I was seven years old, so I've experienced the phenomenon throughout my entire life. Now, in my sixties, I've simply had it up to here. So it's an emotion that I've attempted to control by giving it voice.

Laurel: Then, there is this question about audience—one of my favorite issues. "What did we do to write for different audiences?" For the larger audience we've revised the letters, redacting some material and adding some. We've been more "artful" in crafting, too. Taking audiences into account actually simplifies the writing task. I ask myself, "What does this particular audience need to know? How can I best communicate it? It makes the writing, symbolically at least, interaction, and therefore fun for me.

Ernest: If we'd had this kind of conversation prior to our writing of the letters, it would have made writing them more difficult and the result would've been wooden.

Laurel: That's a good point, because we each used our letter as a way of coming to terms with the experience.

Ernest: We didn't write the letters in order to have a conversation. We wrote them to friends and family.

Laurel: But when I read them I thought that they, along with a conversation about them, would make a good presentation to my sociological convention—the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction.

Ernest: Originally we'd thought about going out and experiencing something for the express purpose of writing about it—presumably writing differently, you through the eyes of a "sociologist," and me through the eyes of the "novelist," and then analyzing the results to see how we did it differently. Then we realized that in fact we had already done the primary research. We'd already—if we were, say, geologists—collected the rock samples. So why not use *them*, and make the project smell less of the lamp?

Laurel: I think of what we're doing as "Natural Sociology"—a term my dissertation advisor, Edward Rose, coined in 1960. He'd be happy with this work of ours, and I like that here I am both experimenting and honoring my sociological roots. That the two are not antagonists.

Ernest: In the early sixties I was in graduate school at Yale, studying for my PhD in English, immersed in "New Criticism" but all the while chomping at the bit to begin a career—not as a professor or "new critic"—but as a novelist.

Laurel: Now I think we're getting to the unspoken conversation. I see it in Carolyn and Art's question as to whether this form of writing can achieve the goal of merging voices. Ernest, you said in our earlier conversation that that's what we have been doing. Although I didn't agree, I couldn't articulate why, and so I let it go, thinking we were at an impasse. But Hurrah! Now, I've had a revelation! If I were to adopt your point-of-view—that we are writing "together"—I would have to revise my deeply held and heretofore unconscious notion of what I think of as a text. You are accustomed to "writing-in-characters"—presenting characters and characters' points of view—and narrators, partial, omniscient, or unreliable, even. So, as a novelist—I'm speaking for you now—

Ernest: Be my guest.

Laurel: You're used to having multiple voices in a text, each having different points of view, different from the narrator and possibly from you, the author. Although there might be "characters" in my texts—people I've interviewed or observed, they're always *not me*—always, *not solely my constructions*. And I would never willfully be an "unreliable narrator."

Ernest: Of course.

Laurel: You and I have different ways of knowing and of expressing what we know, different core sensibilities, so that although we can create an aesthetic, intellectual packet, our voices must remain separate, distinct.

Ernest: I couldn't have said it better.

Laurel: [Laughter.] This is interesting.

Ernest: I don't think a single voice is necessary. I worry that you have some sort of romantic ideal.

Laurel: It may be some romantic ideal, but—get this!—it's a romantic idea about science and the single voice of science. I may be exploring here the deepest level of my resistance to my own new ways of writing. It's the idea that we can tell "a" truth together. So it is not a romantic vision

about us that we can be one unified and homogenized voice, but my romanticization of the scientific way of knowing. Wow! That's a wonderful insight for me.

Ernest: And a relief to me.

Laurel: What, you don't want to be One?

Ernest: One of the things that attracts me to writing is the independence of it. It's a place . . . here is one place where, even given the, put it this way, the Iron Maiden of Language and Culture, one can experience at least the illusion of being independent and in control. It's tough to feel yourself under intimate pressure to relinquish that illusion.

Laurel: Whew! I think we're both feeling better about the co-writing because of this conversation. Unquestionably, Carolyn and Art's questions have brought us to a new understanding of our relationship to each other and to our work. I really like this. Thanks, Carolyn. Thanks Art.

Ernest: Yes, thanks.