

Letters from Beirut

I sent these letters to friends and family during the bombardment of Lebanon in July 2006.

Subject: letter from beirut july 16
Oh my dear ones—

This morning I started crying while eating the delicious olives Farida gave me, that she made from the fruit of their own trees on their land up north. Last night I didn't hear the bombs from my basement apartment but yesterday there was a lot of bombing and firing up close: the Boom-Crack of naval artillery, the wall-shaking Boom of bombs, and some pop pop pops I don't know what they are, and the constant low thunder of their planes circling just to spook us. And the echo.

Since I've been living here I've been enjoying watching my neighbors on the balcony opposite: the young man who comes out on the balcony to pray and goes in to watch the Mondial on TV, the Sri Lankan nanny playing with her young charge on the balcony below, the elderly fellow who waters his luxuriant plants every day. People still need to eat and look after the kids and the flowers in wartime.

At the little shop downstairs of Mr. Fouad where I buy big bottles of water, he offers me a chair and cigarettes so I can watch the news with him. He turns to an American channel for me but I can't bear it, it's all about where is Nasrallah hiding, like he is a wild animal in uncharted territory, not the thickly inhabited human country that the Israelis are blasting to smithereens. (Unlike the Western media I try to avoid passive verbs—"are being bombarded," "sustained casualties," and use active ones, "bomb," "kill.") Fouad tells me, "I love Bush." He has a brother in Houston whose two sons are in the army in Iraq. I don't tell him the depth of my bitter hatred for Bush. (BTW the best source for news from here is the Lebanon Daily Star online.) It looks the Canadians have finally got their shit together to put us on a boat to Cyprus, though the details are not yet clear. As I howled to Mommy on the phone, those are American bombs falling on the city, American artillery shooting at us, paid for by American money, and I'll be damned if I dust off my U.S. passport to get onto their stinking ship. So now it looks like soon the greatest danger I'll face will be scrambling to find a hotel in Cyprus already packed with tourists and refugees—in fact I do find this a bit scarier than the bombs. It's not yet though and the wait makes me anxious. Until recently leaving the city was more dangerous than staying, with the roads being bombed, and it still is more dangerous than not moving at all.

But in any case it is obscene, Israel giving a brief safe passage from the Beirut port for foreign ships, so that once all we foreigners are gone they can bomb the city to oblivion. I feel guilty, as though I were part of a protective shield for Beirut that is being pulled away. I think Israel's goal is not just to get Nasrallah (indeed their purpose changes every day) but to punish Lebanon for its recovery, slowly and finally, from the civil war, the changes made by Hariri before he was

assassinated to build connections with Gulf capital, on one scale, and install wonderful cheap public telephones, on another. We will have proof of that if they bomb the new downtown, the pinnacle of post-war reconstruction and private investment that I've never liked because it seems mostly for Saudis, but that is crowded every night with people strolling and enjoying outdoor restaurants and squealing children playing around the Place D'Étoile. I hope they don't. But they dropped leaflets on the city yesterday—in the sky it looked like a huge flock of tiny birds—with a picture of people fleeing from bombs, an ugly portrait of Nasrallah as a serpent, and a warning in Arabic: "The resistance protects the country...? The country is the victim of the resistance!"

Here's my understanding of Hizb Allah. A lot of people, not only Shi'a, like the party, or used to, because they're the only ones who have successfully defended the country against Israeli invasion; they appeal to an aggrieved nationalism, and their heroic TV spots are rousing. Plus, for many years Hizb Allah was the only organization that cared for the poor Shi'a of the south while the government ignored them: the party put in roads and hospitals and schools. Now however they seem to be capitalizing on that patriotic feeling when in fact they're a cat's paw for Syria and Iran. Why the hell, if this is a fight between those countries and Israel, is it being played out on Lebanese turf? Why are the Israelis bombing an ambulance, bombing a bus full of civilians fleeing to the Syrian border (this is why our escape route is by boat), and despite its famous surgical accuracy missing the Hizb Allah radio station and bombing an apartment building? So many people dead and wounded! If you are unlucky enough to live in southern Lebanon or the southern suburbs of Beirut, everything is destroyed! My friend Hani the taxi driver sent an SMS that he and his children are out of their house but they are safe. Lebanon—beautiful beloved Lebanon with its cynical, smart, generous people is like a precious toy that a lot of bug unruly children are fighting over, tugging it till it breaks.

Last night I went to my friend Ahmad's bar to hunker down together, listen to music and joke. He likes the Eagles but he put on the lovely oriental strains of Ziad Rahbani for me. We were Lebanese, Norwegian, Egyptian, and us three students Bulgarian, Canadian, and American. We told jokes about fate and undignified deaths. I gave the example of falling off the uneven Beirut sidewalk while distracted by the sound of the bombing (as I did yesterday) and smashing myself up; Alice said they'd have to make room for you in the hospital among all the war casualties. Her example was an old Norwegian woman who broke her thighbone not slipping on the ice, feeding the birds, but falling off a camel. But this light talk our way of dealing with the terrible shots on the TV of people injured, screaming, exposed in their pain.

Young Victor the Bulgarian had printed off a bunch of his favorite poems and was handing them out like talismans. He gave me this one by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

The real hero of the Isaac story was the ram,
who didn't know about the conspiracy between the others.

As if he had volunteered to die instead of Isaac. I want to sing a song in his memory—

about his curly wool and his human eyes,
about the horns that were silent on his living head,
and how they made those horns into shofars when he was slaughtered
to sound their battle cries
or to blare out their obscene joy.

I want to remember the last frame
like a photo in an elegant fashion magazine:
the young man tanned and manicured in his jazzy suit
and beside him the angel, dressed for a party
in a long silk gown
both of them empty-eyed, looking
at two empty places,

and behind them, like a colored backdrop, the ram,
caught in a thicket before the slaughter.
The thicket was his last friend.

The angel went home.
Isaac went home. Abraham and God had gone long before.

But the real hero of the Isaac story
was the ram.

Love to all,
Laura

July 16, 2006

Re: oppose israel's invasion of lebanon

The Hon. Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
The Hon. Peter MacKay, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Hedy Fry, M.P. Vancouver Centre
Gregor Robertson, M.P.P Vancouver-Fairview

To the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and my representatives:

I am a Canadian currently living in Beirut, a city today quiet in the grip of fear.
Israel is wreaking a destruction on Lebanon that goes far beyond "self-defence."
The Lebanese infrastructure has been demolished--highways, bridges, airports,
electrical plants, even gas stations have been repeatedly bombed. Israeli bombs

have killed at least 73 Lebanese people as of this morning, many of them families and children. Hundreds are wounded, and because Israel has bombed access roads in the South as well as bridges and main highways, medical help cannot reach them. Morgues have no more space for the dead. This crippling of an entire country, with special emphasis on the impoverished Shiite people of the South, cannot possibly be considered reasonable retribution for Hizballah's kidnapping of two soldiers last week. Yesterday Israel fired on an ambulance crossing a bridge. Is this legitimate defence, or a war crime?

I urge Prime Minister Harper to reverse his support for Israel. I ask him to join those countries that criticize the utterly disproportionate scale of Israel's bombardment of Lebanon and to call for Israel to cease its attacks before this country--where things had finally begun to look up after the civil war--is pulverized.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,
Laura U. Marks
961-03-079543 (mobile in Lebanon)

Subject: letter from beirut july 17

Hi dear friends—

Bless Chirac, the only Western leader with any sense!

Slept well in my basement apartment, only heard 2 very big booms at 5 in the morning. Another one just now, it's 11. And another, shaking the building.

57% of CNN voters (down from 63% earlier today) think the Israeli Offensive on Lebanon is justified; please give your opinion by voting on their Quickvote:
<http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/07/13/mideast/index.html>

You can also write to the PM and Foreign Minister or to your US equivalents and tell them Israel's offensive is killing innocent Lebanese and bombing the country back 20 years, at cost to this country of \$8 billion a day—seems a pretty idiotic way to go after Hizballah, which does not represent Lebanon. It appears that Israel is using phosphorous incendiary bombs, which suck the air out of a building and don't stop burning, on civilians, this is illegal of course. It might make a difference that 7 (or 8) of the people killed in the south yesterday were Canadian—but since they are Lebanese-Canadian maybe they're not considered to count. And how about asking our governments to contribute to Lebanon's multi-billion reconstruction?

The Hon. Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada pm@pm.gc.ca

The Hon. Peter MacKay, Minister of Foreign Affairs MacKay.P@parl.gc.ca

Let me reiterate that Israel is bombing things that have nothing to do with Hizb allah but only with immiserating the Lebanese. Why bomb the Beirut-Damascus highway? Does Hizb allah bring arms in through Lebanese constoms? Of course not—it's just to make it impossible for people trying to leave. Ditto the airport and the port—Hizb allah doesn't use them. It's to punish the Lebanese people and turn them against Hizb allah, but the reverse may be happening. So this means Is. Is probably going to hit us even harder in the next few days while they still have the green light from the US.

Of course you are worried about me, but know that I am still safe living in Ras Beirut, which with awful irony is the safest neighborhood Beirut because there are so many of us foreigners here. I fear terribly for my friends here once we should leave. Yesterday I packed with manic calm, putting my stuff into 4 bags, one of which I could jettison with a twinge (my books! My Arabic homework!), one that I would be quite sad to lose (my clothes and the pretty souvenirs I've bought for you from Cairo and Beirut), one that I really do not want to lose because it is my brain (my computer) but not my life, and for emergencies my purse (my passports including the hated--sorry American dear ones-- expired US passport, my wallet, dollars, my blue notebook, Lebanese phone, that wonderful invention the USB stick, sleeping pills, earplugs, sunscreen, camera, and lipstick, to cheer people up).

But the Canadian embassy is moving slowly and not keeping us well informed. While the French have started evacuating people in ferries to Cyprus (with 20,000 French registered here and ferry capacity of max. 1000, that's a lot of shutting back and forth in the Mediterranean), the Dutch have already left, and Kuwaitis are long gone, the Canadian government has not changed the message it sent several days ago. "We are developing options for potential evacuation of Canadians," the foreign ministry said in a statement. "Until instructed otherwise, Canadians are reminded to stay indoors and limit their movement as much as possible." Great huh! Of course some governments, like Egypt, are not doing any thing to evacuate their nationals. While some of us are waiting for our embassies, many have left—my friends Victor and Carole took off in a taxi to Turkey yesterday.

Last night I stayed inside the friendly bar of Ahmad, Ahmad, and Alice. Ahmad was playing The Eagles as usual. Bassem showed up, the sweet grumpy swim instructor who I sat through the Gulf War at Ahmad's last bar Walimat. They are so sad, so devastated for their country that all they can do is smile softly, Bassam's glass full of neat vodka. Had a long chat with a leathery veteran UN negotiator who worked in the south for 20 years. He says Hizballah does still represent the sentiments of many people in the Arab world, not only Sunnis, because people in these countries have been crushed again and again by the West and their own governments, and Hizballah is the only resistance—it gives people pride. Al-Jazeera was on TV with news from here as detailed as a

Lebanese TV station; Timor said, however, that no news of the war on Lebanon shows on Al Jazeera in places like Egypt and Jordan, “so the people won’t get ideas.” I asked him if Syria would get involved. He said no because 1. it is weak militarily and 2. it is the only country that can negotiate with Hizballah (Iran is too far away), so Israel and the US need it. I asked Timor if he misses Turkish food; he said in the Armenian neighborhood of Bourj Hammoud there are lots of Turks, migrant workers and also some ladies who married Lebanese bank managers of the generation who sought the prestige of the Ottoman connection; Turks and Armenians live there together and eat the same food. But he does miss the sound of the Turkish oud, sadder and more soulful and technically difficult than the Lebanese oud.

Alice is Norwegian and married Ahmad (“Ahmad taani,” I call him, the other Ahmad, as I know Ahmad 1 better) and they started this nice little resto-bar. She is racked with anxiety: should she go to Norway and be safe and not a burden on Ahmad, who lived through the civil war and has the calm of a saint? (okay I know not all saints are calm) But what if it escalates and she can’t return, and he can’t get a visa out? If the neighborhood empties of foreigners and the siege drags on, will gangs come out like during the civil war? It will take 25 years to rebuild the economy, and in 25 years she’ll be 75. What about their nice little restaurant with the international flags and framed M.C. Escher prints on the walls?

Had a coffee with Sohail in his shop. Business is brisk—he’s out of Coke and Marlboro Red and almost out of Pepsi!

Hani hasn’t responded to my messages; he lives in Jiyeh where the Israelis have bombed the power plant into mile-high black clouds. I fell for his usual over-sanguineness when he last SMSed me 2 days ago “Things are fine till now. I am out of the house with my children”—now I realize he meant, now things are not fine. So scared for him, dear verbose infuriating Hani!

Got more to tell but will send this off. I must pick up my mended sandal from the good man at Ras Beirut Shoes has fixed my sandal (to whom 3 years ago I spoke my first complex Lebanese colloquial sentence, “Uult shway, hatha ktir”—I said a little, this is a lot!, when he overstretched my stylish shoe. Even if I’m not traveling any time soon, refugees need good shoes.

Love to all
Laura

Subject: letter from beirut july 18

Hi dear ones. I may be leaving tomorrow. Canada has arranged for ships to take us to Cyprus or Turkey, and from there it will charter planes to take us to Canada. Bless them! (despite the idiocy of prime minister Harper, whose support of Israel’s devastation of Lebanon will lose us friends here. Usually when I tell someone I’m Canadian they say “Canada—good. Canada is beautiful,” and are mindful of our abstinence from the war on Iraq. But now people are asking

Canadians on the street, “Why is your government supporting Isra el?” Anyway, it is wonderful that the Foreign Service is paying our way all the way home, while the Americans are being evacuated at their own expense to Cyprus, where they will be left to fend for themselves.

Also we’re allowed to bring 20 kg of luggage, better than the 20 pounds allotted the Americans. I am hanging onto my beautiful Hans Wehr (Librairie du Liban) Arabic-English dictionary, alphabetized by the root of the word. I love how from one three-consonant root all the words unfold, transforming into all their variations. And I like the onomatopoeia of Arabic, how words sound like their meaning: the soft insistence of Hubb,” love (an aspirated “h”, and the “u” not as in “hubcap” but as in “furry”); the exhalation of “raaha,” comfort; the finality of inTaqaala, to be cut off; the harshness of qaSaafa, bombardment. And I swear, on every other page there is an entirely different words whose meaning is “to look up in the dictionary”! An erudite product placement perhaps?

Isra el continues to bomb civilian targets. They told people in the south to run for their lives, but it is bombing any remaining roads they might take; yesterday it killed 10 people escaping in a bus across a bridge in the south. The 38,000 refugees are staying in schools; they bombed a school. 204 Lebanese people are dead as of this morning, all but 14 of them civilians (so why does the Globe and Mail state the numbers of the dead and then do an interview with the family of an Isra eli soldier who died on duty?). And it breaks my heart even more to think of the suffering of the wounded. Everything of use to Lebanese people is being destroyed, including gas reserves. They may bomb the power plants after we foreigners depart, I pray they don’t. They are bombing Lebanese military bases, but note that the Lebanese military is not taking part in the fighting, and that one of the conditions of a ceasefire is now that the Lebanese army would patrol the south (rather than Hizb allah—a potential problem of its own as the South is mostly Shi’a and the army is mostly Sunni and Christian).

Timur Goskil, the man who worked for the UN in the South for 25 years and knows Hizb allah very well, says Hizb allah does not have a military base. He says their 15,000 or so missiles are hidden one at a time—in caves, in homes, in the complicated mountainous terrain of the south. So if Isra el wants to disarm them, they would have to enter on the ground and search for them, “like a needle in a haystack.” Timur speaks from the Olympian height of someone who’s seen it all; and yet he doesn’t understand the timing of this adventure, why Hizb allah decided to take those two hostages now, why Isra el responded with such overwhelming violence. Maybe because they’re smarting from the humiliation of the unilateral withdrawal from the south in 2000: “Never humiliate an army.”

He also had some very interesting suggestions for diplomacy, which Bush seems to have had in mind when he didn’t know his microphone was on yesterday and said “See, the irony is what they need to do is get Syria to get Hizb allah to stop doing this shit and it’s over.” Timur pointed out that Hizb allah would of course never negotiate with Isra el or the US, but it would listen to Syria—Iran is too far away. Syria is isolated nowadays and would love to be an international peace broker. He suggested Egypt and Jordan, which have peace agreements with Isra el, might have a part in encouraging Syria, and that Saudi

Arabia, which has its own oppressed Shi'a majority, would be happy to back up Syria ... well this is already looking obscure to me and probably to you.

Back to Ahmad's bar, it is packed with people. A couple in love: she's a Lebanese-Canadian accountant from Montreal, he's Lebanese "bess," only. "What color is your passport?" He borrows my passport (I hate to let it out of my hands even for a charade) to show how, traveling to Morocco from France, he did like the French people at the border crossing and walked purposefully past the guards, holding up his passport but obscuring the words with his fingers. They fingered him and made him wait.

And dear sad-eyed Bassem says many foreigners feel deeply drawn to Lebanon as I do. "Our social life, there's nothing better." He talks of the tenderness in even the smallest daily transactions, and I feel this too. Caught in a soft web of social connection and care; I never feel alone here. Like the other day when I go to get my manoushi bi zaatar (yum!) at Snack Faysal, and Naji the cashier says, "I saw you walk by yesterday, why you don't come say hello?" And of course Farida who always makes me a huge meal when I come over and sends me away with mountains of leftovers. (She and her family are in their house in the north, like everybody who has that option.) Another wonderful woman, Fadia, the proprietor of the Ras Beirut Bookshop, says "We [Lebanese] can be okay with just a cup of water, and even have enough for everybody [and I would add, and make a party of sharing it]; that's why they want to destroy us." Three years ago I was telling Fadia about my research comparing Islamic art and computer art, and she, a Greek Orthodox, said "The Orthodox icons also are non-figurative—you don't look at the picture" of the saint or Mary or Jesus, "but past it to God."

Among the things I donated to refugees is some nail polish and an Arabic fashion magazine. A nice distraction for me and I hope for the woman who receives it.

Good news sources: Al Nahar, www.naharnet.com, and the Lebanon Daily Star online.

The Lebanese Red Cross/Red Crescent is working hard despite the damaged roads. If you have some spare change rattling about and you'd like to contribute it to the Lebanese relief effort, you can make it in USD to Ministry of Finance, Donations and Grants Account, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, BIC code FRNYUS33, routing number 021084694, specifying Favor Banque du Liban, account number 021084694. Or the Lebanese Red Cross or UNICEF Lebanon.

Frankly today I'm weepy and badly slept. It is helping me a lot to write to you as my upper lip starts to wobble.

Love, Laura

Subject: letter from Beirut July 19

The Canadian cruise ship is in the damaged port, I haven't seen it but I can imagine it gleaming there like an obscene wedding cake.

Last night at the bar sat in on a fascinating conversation between Timur Goskil and this terrific woman who's a writer for the Sunday Times, Hala Jaber. They ask, you're Canadian? Why are you going? I say, I'm in love. Everybody laughs and they say, in that case you can go, that's the only reason.

Both of these veterans—Hala was in Palestine for 3 years before the PA? kicked her out, physically, as a security threat, then she went to Iraq, now she's here "on vacation" and determined to work on her tan whether the Israelis like it or not. Fantastic woman. Both are stymied as to why Hizballah decided to do this maneuver (to kidnap the 2 Israelis) now. Hizballah plans everything to a T. Then there's a big terminological debate, with me the Canadian as judge: did Hizballah miscalculate or misjudge? (power just went out ... and came back) Much laughter and a toast, "I am just a Turk"; they misjudged. Timur says, "They are in love!" We all laugh a lot and I make as though blushing, but the mystery is troubling. i Hala and Timur's opinions, nobody "orders" Hizb allah to do anything. But otherwise they have a solid analysis. Why it's been quiet the past 1 1/2 days? Timur: the haze. Israeli smart weapons rely on laser and it doesn't work when it's hazy. Listen, they have operators on the ground who "paint" a target, as small as an apartment on a certain floor, with a laser. The israeli pilot only needs to push a button and the missile finds the laser-lit target. Who are these people on the ground? Palestinians. Broken people, tortured, threatened, a brother in prison, they're going to die anyway but their family will be in trouble for 50 years if they don't cooperate. Timur says today Hizballah captured maybe 5 of these agents.

Also, very scary: nobody really wants Nasrallah to be captured, because whoever might replace him would be worse—more radical, not a politician. Lebanon would become like Iraq with open war between Shi'a and Sunni. God let it not come to that.

And scariest—he says the worst is Is. will bomb Lebanon to the Stone Age.

Bassem likes movies about nature; mountains, prairies, water, especially water. We talked about March of the Penguins, the males huddled together protecting the eggs. I told him about the violent life of Vancouver: sea otters menacing fish! Seagulls devouring starfish!

Madame Souad comes in to clean my apartment. She's the one whose home is destroyed, and whose family, refugees now, are all living in this building—yet she asks me if I need anything, if I have food.

Below is a letter to the newspaper, feel free to copy it:

Love, Laura

July 19

To: The Toronto Star, the Globe and Mail, the Vancouver Sun

Israel is committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Lebanon. As of this morning, July 19, 300,000 Lebanese have fled their homes. Israel warned people of the south to flee but bombed all roads in the south; families are fleeing

on foot. Many refugees are housed in schools; Israel bombed a school yesterday. This morning Israel bombed a tourist bus and an truck carrying medical aid from the UAE. Israel is dropping illegal phosphorous incendiary bombs on civilians. As of this morning 230 people have been killed: 208 civilians, 22 Lebanese Army soldiers (who are forbidden to fight), and 5 members of Hizballah. The Lebanese infrastructure has been bombed back at least 20 years: all roads, airports, ports, bridges, power plants, gas storage, gas stations, a milk company, a medicine supply company, a paper plant, a plastics plant—everything useful.

Does Hizballah brings arms in through the airport, the Damascus Road (where Israel has bombed fleeing civilians), the ports? No it does not. Are tour buses, ambulances, milk, medicine, and roads by which civilians flee and food reaches the capital, terrorist targets? No: it is an onslaught aimed to devastate the people of Lebanon. Only civilian targets remain, and Israel will terrorize them while the US gives them the green light.

I urge readers to contribute to the Lebanese Red Cross, Unicef Lebanon, or other aid agencies for the wounded and displaced.

Laura Marks
Beirut

July 19

Today I shopped around for some agate worry beads for Bryan as promised (and his auntie is certainly giving him things to worry about!) and found some in an antique shop. I tell them in Arabic I'm an art history professor, and the fellow visiting the shop says he's a sculptor and invites me to his gallery. As we walk along, Nadim, who's from Palmyra, says since childhood he knew he could make sculptures like the ancient ones around him. He says "My work is in the Metropolitan Museum in New York! And in Paris! But not signed!" Gradually my brain glommed on to the fact that he make fakes!! He sold a sculpture to a friend for \$500 who sold it in New York for \$25,000. Ha ha ha! We went to his shop, across from Patisserie Taj Al Molouk, a cool dusty place packed with ancient-looking busts and statues, and his signed works too, surreal paintings and drawings, political and sensual. He gave me tea, a necklace, and a book he wrote demonstrating that all world religions are one, which I promised to be able to read in two years. (To protect him from spies from the Met I have changed the name of the artist and the patisserie.)

Ranin is back; the Yale insurance airlift actually consisted of spiriting them to a five-star hotel that functioned as a kind of very expensive earplugs, so after three days, when they realized they weren't going to be taken out, they came back. Relief that the American students are gone on their bunker ship—apparently there were a lot of tearful interviews in the women's dorm that wasted a lot of press and sped their departure.

Ranin's roommate Steven, a master's student from North Carolina, gives every appearance of an American redneck with his baseball cap, pale cropped hair, and pleasant drawl, but he reads Arabic, switched from Middle Eastern

studies to Latin American studies after a punishing research summer in the Yemeni desert. Now he's studying the Lebanese emigrants to Argentina (he pointed with longing to Buenos Aires on the map, he'll be there this fall). He's coming away from AUB with microfilms of Lebanese newspapers from the 30s documenting their emigration.

Sohail is out of soft drinks. While I was sitting with him a little Filipina maid came in, in maid's uniform and baseball cap, to buy three packages of Kotex. He fetched them down with his hook on a stick. A houseful of menstruating women too scared (or lazy) to go out. Menstruating women of the world unite! My Ria brand "tampóny" are from Bratislava.

There are lots of other foreigners here in Beirut who are of course not going anywhere: the housemaids from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, the menial laborers from Sri Lanka and Somalia, who collect the garbage and clean the streets, wandering solitary with long-handled trash-picking implements, wearing the green and red Sukleen uniforms. And it seems to me there are many more Sudanese here than 2 years ago, refugees from their own ghastly terror. It is nice to see Africans here. One Sudani fellow labors up the road by my building every day on that rarest of Beirut vehicles, a bicycle. And at least two of the dead are Sudani and Sri Lankan.

July 20

Last night I did a live radio interview with CBC British Columbia. I am proud of it. I diverted attention from the anxiety of waiting Canadians to idiotic Cdn. foreign policy, war crimes, and the incredible kindness of the Lebanese people. And right on cue there were two big echoing Boom Booms. You can hear it online somewhere.

I am not eating well cuz of knot in stomach. Bar peanuts are my friend. Yesterday fifty-seven people were killed and the refugee toll is at five hundred thousand. Here's how Marc Sirols of the Daily Star puts it: "As of Wednesday evening, Israeli attacks had killed at least 260 civilians in Lebanon," while 13 Israeli civilians have been killed by Hizb Allah. "Lebanon has approximately 3.5 million people. On a per-capita basis, that means that as of Wednesday, the rough equivalent of 9/11 has happened here every day for eight days."

I am furious that the idiot in Emergency Foreign Services in Ottawa, when Rick finally got him on the phone, cast shade on my Canadian identity. I truthfully answered their question "Other citizenships?", "U.S.", and now they're saying I'm not really Canadian??

I dream that the time between the last foreign evacuation and Condoleezza Rice getting her ass over to the "Middle East" will collapse to no time at all, saving lives. But the monster Olmert promises to bomb and bomb and bomb, Condi or no Condi.

On another note. Li has been staying in one of the men's dorms on campus, emptied of the evacuated Americans. Yesterday several Shi'a women refugees

moved into the building. Normally people of the other sex are not allowed in after 11 p.m. There's only one bathroom, so the ladies have to stand in front of the door to defend it from Li and the janitor! It is great that AUB is letting people come live here; as I've said it is the safest place in Lebanon, considered U.S. territory.

Li Guo is a lovely American and that rare thing, a Chinese-born Arabic teacher. He's also a historian of the Mamluk period and, what is great for me, a palaeographer—someone who loves to peer at old inscriptions on stone. When I was in Cairo I took many photographs of the Fatimid mosques in Cairo, 10th-12th Cs, especially their mysterious Kufic lettering that intertwines and sprouts vines and leaves. Some argue that the inscrutable nature of floriated Kufic lettering reflects the emphasis in Shi'a Islam on latent meaning and interpretation (the Fatimids were Shi'a). I'm hoping Li and the native Arabic readers here will help me decipher the inscriptions and understand the nature of their difficulty. I'll go donate some blood at the hospital. Maybe the recipient will get drunk for the first time in her life! (Joke. It's noon here. I'm not drinking.)

Love, Laura

p.s. This is a very good charity to contribute to because it's local:

Al Huda Society for Social Care is a civic non profit organization based and active in Beirut. The Society was established in 1987 during the Lebanese civil war. It has been active in providing social care for underprivileged families in Beirut, responding to the needs of each era. Its activities included launching a sponsorship program for children, who were orphaned during the 1975-1990 war; providing a day care services center for children; organizing summer camps for children of the occupied zone in South Lebanon (before 2000); providing assistance and relief for internally displaced families during the Israeli attack on Lebanon in April 2006; and establishing Nasma Learning and Resource Centre for students in public schools in the Ras Beirut area.

In light of the Israeli attack on Lebanon at this time, thousands of families have fled the most afflicted areas to become refugees in other parts of their country, including Beirut . Al-Huda Society has redirected its resources to cater to the needs of as many families as possible. Currently it is responsible for the welfare of around 200 displaced families in the Ras Beirut area. It is distributing daily rations to each family with the cost of each ration being 15 USD. The Society aspires to increase the number of families in its care, as the number of families fleeing the Israeli bombardment is continuously increasing. The essential condition for achieving this goal is increasing resources, namely financial.

In this respect all assistance is a need.

Please send your donations to:

Account Name: Al Houda Society

Account No. 02 43020 047465

Bank: Bankmed

Branch: Makdessi Branch

Via: Bank of New York , New York

A/C No. 8900057343

UID: CH035040

SWIFT: MEDLLBBX

July 20, later

Frankly I'm depressed. Now I feel a bit of what it's like to be in a war, or more accurately, besieged, rather than to be leaving one. Have to unpack some things. Went to buy food. There's not a lot. There's no big bottles of water left. Wanted

Halloumi cheese; the fellow sold me Bulgarian feta. Because Liban Lait was bombed. Well, probably we won't feel the effect of that bombing for a couple more days—he sold me feta because trucks can't come in with food.

Well the Harper government made about the biggest balls-up possible didn't it? Full support to Israel's "measured" attack on Hizb allah—and a mismanaged evacuation, only a few hundred Canadians have left. And since Canadians are far more "embedded" in the population than Hizb allah is—there's 40,000 Canadians here and 7000 (or is it 700?) Hizb allah—the two actions result in a thumbs-up for Israel to bomb Canadians.

Unless you don't think Lebanese-Canadians are really Canadians. To sound nineteenth-century, it's a scandal that could fell a government. I don't feel like writing to the government about that but will one of you please?

...Was quite upset for a while there but sitting with Mr. Fouad in his shop cheered me up. How often does that happen in N. America?

The building is full of refugees, girls playing in the stairway, boys moving concrete things in the parking lot. I had a child's book in Arabic, about a mountain that fell in love with a bird, that was my homework for Arabic class. Took a leaf from Rick my honey's book, he always has books around to give to kids, and offered it to the girls. They immediately took it to a mom in the lobby to read to them. So I went to Ras Beirut Bookshop and with Fadia's advice bought a bunch of books for different ages, with pictures, and some magazines. Brought them back for Charlie the afternoon manager to distribute, and he did.

I told Madame Souad I was leaving and she could have my soap, cooking pot and vase. She misunderstood and took more than that. (She oversees the cleaning of the building and has keys to the place.) Negotiated the release of my kitchen knife, cutting board and corkscrew.

Actually I ate well tonight: frozen cheese sambousek, frozen artichokes, tomatoes, the delicious indescribable vegetable called me'te, and Farida's olives. I read The Book of Saladin, taking comfort in wars of 800 years ago. Felt that I'm very well off.

Thanks to my computer I can gaze at a picture of my beautiful Rick and me, smiling, and at the same time listen to Rima Khcheich singing love songs in her limpid voice, all while sitting on the balcony in the quiet night. I love my computer. I love electricity. The neighbors' TV across the way not tuned for once to the news; women chatting in the street; a cat prowling in the parking lot's potted garden. Then comes one thunderous Boom, maybe from the port, and another, and the neighbors start channel surfing again.

Love, Laura

July 22

Hello dear ones,

Am a bit sunburnt: went to what was supposed to be a 10-minute vigil for the dead at Martyrs' Square, and although there were already more press than participants, we waited an hour for the live TV to show up.

I've moved to the women's dorm at AUB. Now I am truly in the safest place in all Lebanon. My suitemate is Esraa, a cute 18-year-old with an American accent who's here studying business management. She left me a nice note last night. This morning she was reading the Qur'an and waiting for news of her family, from Nabatieh in the south, who were attempting to drive to a relative's farm in Jordan. We ate cherries and I showed her pictures of my sweetie. This afternoon she got news they've safely arrived. She couldn't get south to join them, and though she is a US citizen she is not leaving; she says she'd feel like a traitor.

I wish you would stop worrying about me and make some protest to your government and talk to people about what's really going on here. My letter to the Vancouver Sun the other day was the only one that did not support Israel. Janine (my dear pal in Ottawa) says letters to the paper there are suggesting that Lebanese-Canadians are not real Canadians and the gov't shouldn't be going to all that trouble to bring them home from their family vacation. An irate fellow trying to get onto a departing ship also said, "I'm a true Canadian, born in Edmonton"—ergo he should get a place before those brown Canadians do. Sounds like John Bolton, the US ambassador to the United Nations, who says "there is not a moral equivalence between Lebanese civil losses and Israeli ones"—I'm translating from the French but that's what he said. Is a Lebanese worth 1/4 of an Israeli? 1/3? 1/10? Even so we would be at par, because at least 341 Lebanese civilians have been killed as of this morning, 305 of them civilians, and 1100 are wounded; 33 Israelis, including soldiers, have died.

I only learned today that almost half of the Lebanese dead are children. There's a picture going around of an Israeli girl writing on an Israeli rocket "To the children of Lebanon from the children of Israel." Cannot imagine such hatred. Well, children were buried in a mass grave in Tyr in the south today.

Hisham says hi to Janine and thanks for the kiss. His relatives were escaping from the South on a motorcycle. They thought the motorcycle would be safer because the Israelis would see them and would not bomb them. Well An Israeli plane saw them and they did bomb them, killing father and mother; the five-year-old is in hospital. I am holding back tears as hard as I can as I write this, but I want you to cry and be angry and do something. Sorry dear ones.

It's 6:10. The Israelis told people in 13 villages in the south that they have until 7 tonight to leave. Leave how?? The roads are destroyed. Lots of old people are just staying. Remind you of anything?

Meanwhile the ships are passing in and out of the harbor. The Lebanese watch them go with dread. I do too, I have already told you why.

But you will be glad to know I dug up that old passport, issued in Tokyo in 1985 (my round young face!) and expired 11 years ago, and for what it's worth I registered with the Americans. But frankly I dread being evacuated with the Americans. As of this morning they've evacuated 3500 people (some friends from the university went out in a dramatic helicopter airlift at 5 this morning), the Canadians about 2500. Not such a disparity—considering that three of the ships the Americans are using are Canadian! What's that about?! But I do not want to go the American way because, while their web site promises air-conditioned lodgings with cots, in fact some Americans are camping on a Cypriot fairground. I prefer the Canadian way because I don't know what it is. They have been quite mum about what happens to folks once they arrive in Cyprus or Turkey.

Last night a pleasant research interlude: Steven from Ohio State showed me his painstakingly compiled bibliographies, photos and microfilms of Lebanese newspapers in Argentina in the early part of the last century. Fascinating. Debates about whether Lebanon should be part of greater Syria, a street fight between Italian and Lebanese Argentinians when Italy did (sorry I forget what) military aggression in Lebanon in (1918?), society photos of suited, moustachioed gents, advertisements for doctors, dentists, lawyers with Arab and Jewish and Spanish and Dutch names, and sometimes the name Argentina is expressed in Arabic as Watan Ard al-Fadl, the country of earth of silver. (I am so happy I can read Arabic, even with painful slowness!) There's a great feeling of the optimism of immigrants and nation-makers of the late 19th, early 20th C. Immigrants were allowed to vote in Argentina. And now—everybody's sucking back their borders, and suddenly you are “not really Canadian” if you have relatives abroad.

It's hot today. People are sitting on their balconies, a light breeze flapping the awnings. Goys playing soccer in the parking lot. Gentle waves on the Mediterranean, the sea that's seen it all. I went to the laid-back, air-conditioned café Prague to read the papers. This evening I'll see my friends at By the Way then go to Gemmayzeh (in east Beirut) for a benefit concert. There I will meet Anne de Mo, a fierce, cuddly, smoky-voiced film editor from France who's lived in Beirut for a few years. Beirut is still safe if you're not in the southern suburbs or the port or the airport or a truck that looks big enough to hold a missile, of the sort that got bombed in Ashrafieh the other day. They've also bombed the TV stations' antennas in the mountains up north, showing they have no qualms about bombing Christian areas.

Sorry these letters are so depressing. Please remember you can speak up and you can contribute to charities that sorely need it.

July 23

A quiet day, other than two big bombs in Dahiyeh at 2:30 at night and another just now. The fighting is in the south and there is not much news yet. It's hot and bright today and down at the rocky beach are lots of bronzed boys and men, fishing and swimming and smoking arguileh. On the horizon beyond, them, the ships glide away from the port.

I am well though I have nasty dreams I don't remember.

Lebanese pride is asserting itself. Got some Tshirts last night: "Beirut, a city that will never surrender." (see SaveBeirut.org) Wore one out this morning and the first people I saw, Naji and Ahmed at Snack Faysal, coaxed me out of it if you know what I mean, and all the stickers too. If the Israeli army comes to Beirut, people will be ready for them. Hisham reminds me that every Lebanese man knows how to shoot.

Hani is okay! They had to their house in Jiyeh because it's next to a bridge. His middle boy Ahmed (the fourth Ahmed in this story) was in an accident 3 days before the war started—a journalist speeding in a Jeep hit him—and he had to have surgery on his pancreas. He is okay and Hani is ever the optimist. Both he and Ahmed (the first) say this is the last war Lebanon will have. ??

Love, Laura

July 24

Hello dear ones,

Thank you so much for your kind messages and cheerful pictures. God bless Louise Arbour!

Feel today that we foreigners who are going to fuck off should hurry up and fuck off, and leave the Lebanese to deal with their life. As Jean the librarian says, classes are canceled, they have nothing to do; "We are waiting for our destiny." Since I am going, my presence here, like the boats moving toward the port, is an insult.

Got lots of books for kids of all ages, and magazines for grown-ups, which Esraa will take to the refugees at the Lebanese University. Books about faraway places, old Arabic stories, science, plants and animals. As you know at least half a million people are displaced (1/7 of the population) and at least 50,000 are homeless, living in schools, mosques, churches, and outdoors. Need is great for basic things like food, water, and medicine. As for how Lebanon will rebuild later—on top of the 40 million in debt it had already—who knows. Hariri (the prime minister who was assassinated last year) built 40 bridges in this country. He was one of those boys who likes bridges. They're all destroyed. BTW the Lebanese insurance companies are chuffed because few people took out war insurance. Haram!

Well I did meet with the great Mr. Fisk. The power was out for blocks around so he shone a flashlight from his balcony to guide me. We had a drink on the balcony of the apartment he's written from for 30 years, hearing the whoosh

of the waves on the shore. It was very kind of him but he was understandably distracted and I don't think I cheered him up any. He was making phone calls to a colleague who works for Le Monde and who, with her photographer, managed to get to the south on foot 2 days ago, fording a river up to their shoulders, carrying their equipment on their heads. When they got to the other side they were arrested as spies, by either the police or the army, I forget, and they spent a night in jail. Idiotic! He was worried for his life because today he's joining a Red Cross convoy to Saida, Sur and Marjayoune in the deep south. They have a 10-15% chance of being bombed by the Israelis despite the big red crosses on the roof. He answered my question, will the Israeli army come to Beirut, with a Lebanese "tsk"—no.

Like all reasonable people, I pray that Nasrallah will not be captured or killed—because any person who led Hizballah in his place would be much more radical.

Got my first bit of hate mail, or at least someone who criticizes me for speaking only of Lebanese innocent dead and not Israeli innocent dead. Imagine I will be pelted with tomatoes when I arrive at the Vancouver airport. In an interview for the Georgia Straight, the Vancouver alternative paper, I had to explain why my critical stance toward Israel is not anti-Semitic. What kind of question is that? Explained patiently that I rely not only on critical Jewish voices inside and outside Israel, but also, as a scholar, on the critical and visionary voices of Jewish intellectual tradition. Like dear old Walter Benjamin.

Had the pleasure of reading some about the Mu'tazila, the 9th C rational philosophers indigenous to Islam (as opposed to being Greek-influenced). The logic unfolds from the word, from Arabic grammar. I got a C in my first exam this summer, but my teachers were great. Now I understand enough about Arabic to see how bad arguments—and even anti-intellectual and fundamentalist views—arise from bad grammar!

It's a beautiful evening, people are out strolling on the Corniche, the call to prayer from the mosque nearby stirs the heart. Am finishing Tariq Ali's The Book of Saladin, reading about terrible battles that swept through the same towns that are now under siege—Haifa, Tyr (Sur), Sidon (Saida), Beirut, and more unto Al-Quds, Jerusalem—back in 1187.

july 28 a.m.

Hi dear ones am in montreal going to vancouver tomorrow. news later of harrowing journey of boatful of souls.

laura

July 28

Hi dear ones. What to tell you about this journey? Back in Beirut when interviewed about the slow Canadian evacuation I said I'd be patient. But after the hideous experience 400 of us went through to get to Montreal I see there's a

political problem here that extends beyond incompetence into racism, because 95% of the passengers were Arab-Canadians. If Canadians had been evacuating from, oh, France or Japan, would they have been treated like animals? Lebanese are dignified people and we were treated like cattle.

Anyway to be specific. Journey begins with many many hours in a huge air-conditioned conference center near Beirut port, getting “processed” and waiting. From the windows we admire the vast cruise ships in the harbor. Then we get on buses, which swing along the dock, past the cruise ships, to an tiny and ancient Turkish ferry. (“You’ll be looking for a man named One-Eyed Willie,” some Red Cross jokester said to our bus driver.” “Sorry, can you repeat more slowly?”) We pile in and wait as the ferry fills, and fills more, until 400 souls are packed on a boat meant for 150. The A/C doesn’t work. Quickly many of us seek the comfort of the deck and there we watch Beirut recede, and as we watch, Dahieh is bombed again, 3 times and the smoke rises in mushroom clouds. We’d been told it would be a 6-8 hour trip, but the great cruise ships speed by, and people start trying to extract information from the Turkish crew (no Canadian reps on board, no medics), and the news comes out: 20 hours. Soon the hellishness of our conditions become apparent. Inside the cabin it is unbearably hot and stinking. The toilets overflow. No toilet paper; I hoard tissues like gold. People fill all the chairs, the café benches, and the floors. Children howling. Mothers try keep flies off their babies’ faces. One poor woman traveling with her 4 children got seasick and fainted. I happened to see her baby crawling up the stairs to the deck, grabbed him, and handed it to someone who knew where he came from. Many of us resort to sleeping on the iron deck, which is only unbearable as opposed to absolute hell inside. The deck fills with our sleeping bodies, resting heads on pieces of cardboard; a mom and daughter use her guitar case as a pillow. Out here it is cooler but the stench of diesel and tar is overwhelming. Nowhere on the boat can I draw a good breath.

Next day the heat rises. The only food available is for sale in American small bills. (I convinced them to take Canadian.) We seek shelter in the small shadows of the lifeboats. Our clothes and the ladies veils are ruined with drips of tar spewing from the smokestack.

I have to say there was a camaraderie and caring among us, people looking out for each other. Had some fascinating conversations to pass the time. I’ll just mention Yusuf, originally Palestinian, now owns a Hasty Market in London Ontario, who taught me some beautiful poems in Arabic and wrote them in my book. His young wife traveling to Canada for the first time. Some people live in Canada and visit Lebanon, or really manage to divide their time between the two. Well-to-do people wearing a fortune in gold jewelry. More heart-wringing are the families who have lost everything and are traveling to one relative in Canada, or people who left their families behind and hope to bring them later—their life is on a shoestring. But the physical discomfort is such that it’s hard to think of the future or of what’s happening in Lebanon. I cannot overemphasize the many kinds of stench,

The point is this evacuation was a scandal. A few people who have 2 citizenships said "Forget Canada. It's obvious we're not welcome." We said, "So much for multiculturalism."

We arrive in Mersin. 2 hour wait in stinking hot passport control. Pretzels and juice. Our clothes are soaked through with sweat and it is again like hell. Here finally are some Canadian workers, with vague information: "You are going to a stadium in Adena to rest while you wait for your flight." Uh-oh, euphemism control! "Rest"??

2-hour bus ride. I don't know where all these places are. The stadium is, after what we've been through, paradise: it's air-conditioned, we all get a fresh towel and bar of soap, and the place is paved with thin blue mattresses that feel divine after the iron deck. The food is good, the mayor of Adena donated kebabs. Wait, wait, wait. The din of voices and children crying disperses around the stadium. We can't leave the building except to walk on the small grounds, where the Turkish people observe us like zoo animals. Notice the calm and simplicity of life here: slow-paced bicycle riders, 3 on a tiny motorbike, laundry and grape vines on the roof.

Some of our number get onto planes that night. Only about 150 are left to retire to our heavenly 3-inch foam mattresses till the morning. Wait, wait, wait. There's one telephone, one TV. When Turkish CNN shows Lebanon we gather round to try to decipher: body bags; two babies in a morgue; Israeli tanks penetrating the south; Israeli soldiers practicing on virtual reality, which obscenely shows buildings and not people. Some of us weep.

After 24 hours (cannot describe here how I and others try to fill time; I gained a few hours from a brilliant novel Zayni Barakat about espionage and total surveillance in 16th C Cairo, a Foucauldian nightmare much like the presence) we get the call and are elated. The rest is slow but well-organized: bus, wait, 12-hour flight to Montreal via Shannon. We gather around American CNN in the Irish airport and the story is much different: no pictures of Lebanese dead, lots of info on Israeli strategy and Nasrallah-hunting, Condoleezza playing the piano in Japan. My heart is broken for Lebanon, and I had less to lose than all my fellow passengers.

Now I will fly to Vancouver. Love to you all.

Epilogue

Here's a joke that's been making the rounds:

An Israeli recently arrives at London's Heathrow airport. As he fills out a form, the customs officer asks him: "Occupation?"

The Israeli promptly replies: "No, just visiting!"