

BURT LEVITSKY

The Road to Westport, 1995
Oil on panel, 20 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JUDITH BARRINGTON

Westward Ho!

My Oregon Trail

The summer I turned seven, my parents took me to a place called Westward Ho! I remember nothing about it except its wonderful name, enhanced by the official exclamation point. I was enchanted—a town with a name that included punctuation!

We were on holiday in North Devon, staying in another oddly named place: Sheepwash. Persuaded by my mother to abandon his fishing on the River Torridge for a few hours, my father drove us to the coast, snaking through narrow lanes until I got carsick. Perhaps it was because I took a while to recover that the place itself—streets, houses, shops—remains a blank. What has endured is a photograph of me posing between two men wearing what look like British naval uniforms. They were, in fact, the lighthouse keepers at Hartland Point, a headland not far from Westward Ho! where we were given a tour. Huge seas hurled water into the wind as we sneaked glimpses of the turmoil far below, and, as we walked back to the car park across close-cropped, emerald grass, the gale knocked us sideways. Hundreds of sheep stood stoically, all facing the same direction, their wool pressed flat against one flank.

Later, I would remember looking out from the top of that lighthouse where my mother had touched my arm and pointed into the empty space between the whitecapped ocean and the roiling clouds. “That’s the way to America,” she had said matter-of-factly.

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Some twenty-five years later, I crossed the Atlantic for the first time. Lilian, my on-again, off-again American lover, wanted to visit her mother and various relatives in New York. She suggested that I come along to do some sightseeing while she did the family thing; when she was finished, we would go camping in the Berkshires. My only reluctance was the flying, as I suffered from plane phobia, so when I came across a special deal offering a sea crossing on the QE2 with a return by air, I decided to go. At least I wouldn’t have to fly both ways.

My nine housemates, with whom I shared a chaotic communal house, and I had become a tight group. Caught in the turbulence of the times, we’d argued about being radical feminists, vegetarians, and shoddy housekeepers. Emergency meetings had been called to respond to sexist advertising and mice on the kitchen table. But recently, exhausted from the effort of remaking the world, we’d taken time out from politics for a weekend trip on a canal boat—just for fun. As I made my plans, these friends grew worried: I could tell from the way they glanced at each other when I told them I was going by sea, and from the silences that broke out when I walked into the kitchen, that they were talking about me.

I soon discovered the reason. While to me it seemed obvious that after years of communal living I needed some peace and quiet, my friends attributed my choice to something else entirely. It was only a few years since I had lost both my parents at sea when the cruise ship they were on had caught fire; my housemates assumed that I must be engaged in a deep psychic struggle with hostile waters—that I was testing myself by facing down what my drowned parents had faced with such disastrous results. It made sense to me that someone else, under the same circumstances, might do something of the kind, but that wasn’t my motivation. I was truly looking forward to being out on the great Atlantic.

“Do you really think you should travel *alone*?” Deborah asked me more than once.

“Is it really *wise*?” said Eunice.

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In a burst of extravagance, I had blown the last of my savings on a single cabin. Five days in a space of my own, even a tiny one, had seemed very appealing; I’d imagined