

JESPER BLÅDER

And now . . ., 2019
Oil on panel, 24 x 31½ in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

JUDITH BARRINGTON & RACHEL ROSE

Geographic Cures

Dear Rachel,

Suitcases gape openmouthed on the couch.
Now and then you throw something in.
The dog is nervous:
she knows what it means.
Will she be coming too?

Hot weather? Wet weather?
Raincoats and sweaters—or tank tops
decent enough for Italian churches,
where the pious get nervous
if we show too much skin, reminding

them of—oh, the bodies of foreigners,
so much more sinful
than their own! But wait . . .
Who is it who's packing today? Not me.
I'm the stay-at-home these days,

so it must be you, preparing for the adventure
you so easily embrace, or that's how it seems
from here, too far away to know for sure.
But shouldn't I be packing too? No—I'll remember
adventures I didn't know would become

adventures in the little green car inherited from
my mother, high in French mountains, heading
south to a job I'd been promised, along with
a handful of notes and the name of my new boss—
his address a small dark wine store full of barrels

with red crusting around their corks
like the purple that would soon stain my mouth
mornings after too many tastings. I'm driving
south inside a bubble where I haven't just
lost my parents. Driving and looking for a cure.

—Judith

Judith Barrington's sixth collection of poetry, *Long Love: New & Selected Poems 1985–2017*, came out from Salmon Poetry in 2018. The title poem of *The Conversation* (Salmon Poetry, 2015) was the winner of the Gregory O'Donoghue International Poetry Prize. Her *Lifesaving: A Memoir* (Eighth Mountain Press, 2000) was the winner of the Lambda Literary Award and a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir. She was a faculty member at the University of Alaska Anchorage's MFA program and has taught poetry at the Poetry School and Arvon Foundation in the United Kingdom as well as at Stanford University and many programs in the United States. She is cofounder of Soapstone Inc., an organization offering study groups to women writers in Portland, Oregon.

Judith,

I have invested great faith in a geographic cure.
I write you from under the flag of the Moor.
Tortoises in the garden bite plums
from my hand, chew with slow precision.
Motorcycles burn their rune
under the shuttered window; the sun
burns patterns into my skin.
The shimmering heat blots out all thought.

I wanted to live outside history.

I found a way to let us move through time
differently. A year of no fixed address
with my wife and kids. The dog sleeps on our knees
in Corsican cafés, where we drink pastis
and sweet apricot juice. My French is rusty
as the garden gate in this old stone house.

In Paris last week, government militias
patrolled the squares, guns resting
on their hips. We were all on high alert.
When I had hope that things could change,
I wrote poems to provoke
people into action. Now I write to comfort,
as we awkwardly navigate these years.
Palliative verse, if you will.

A pause then, a last adventure
at twilight, before what we wrought
claims us. Frost wrote verse
musing on the end days: fire or ice?
Now we know the truth: we will end in flame
and in the north I call home,
glaciers, disappearing, become a blue dream.

Is it wrong, then, that I self-soothe
by disappearing underwater?
Hover over silver webs of anchovies
as they flash across the yellow sand,
breathing apparatus clenched in my teeth.
Salt water becomes my mute button,
filling my cars. I am left with the sound

of my own breath. Drift.

Twice I've been accosted by flying fish.
They make the sound of wind against glass
as they slice through the skin of the sea
in quicksilver arcs.
Because of my own human heart
I hold their flight as a gift.

We drove to Pila-Canale,
the village where my love's family was exiled
five hundred years ago. Almost ran into
a herd of sheep on the difficult road.
The ram's golden eye caught mine
as we sped past. You should know, Judith,
no goats were harmed on the road to Pila-Canale.
The hillside graves were hard to navigate
under the Corsican sun. A shepherd dog trotted by,
cowbell clanking around his neck, off
on important business he could not
discuss with us. We sought shade in the only café.
Everyone else knew each other.
We knew the freedom of strangers.

One night we walked in Ajaccio, very late,
in search of ice cream. The beach was full of people
laughing and drinking. At the water's edge we passed
a crowd of children building castles, fighting the
gentle tide
with all they had. Nearly naked,
wrestling the sand with shovels,
they pitted their strength against the sea. In my city
children are not permitted wild joy.

Let us return to the Moor, the Corsican figurehead,
U Moru.
He is the black bandit profiled on every flag, in
every café.
Symbol of the original North African inhabitants,
before the waves of Romans, of Italians, of French.
But in this place,
inhabited for over three thousand years, not a trace

of women's lives. *U Moru* intrigues me.
This is what I learn. In ancient times, she was female,
blindfolded, and wearing a necklace.

To become the symbol of this fierce island,
with more Mafia murders than Sicily,
all the ancient Moors had to do
was lift the blindfold to her forehead,
become bandit instead of blind,
take off her necklace, and
transform into a man.

What news where you are? Has the air cleared?
Do the lies continue? I will write to you from Rome.
We leave tomorrow.
For today I will try not to swallow
too much salt.

—Rachel

Rachel,

I write to you from behind a curtain—
Northwest mizzle, Northwest not-quite-rain
but rain enough for drops to wander down
the arms of my old green raincoat,
hauled out of the basement in disbelief
after these months of burning and nursing
the thirsty garden into popping out the deep red
of raspberries and the orange red of tomatoes . . .
but now, sodden canes bend in sorrow
while you speak to me of tortoisés and that
turquoise sea I have loved so long.
This morning I miss it with a sharp southern
pain.

Moment by moment, history is making itself
in patterns sometimes familiar, other times,
as now—scrawled across the paper in dark lines
like an early draft of a Giacometti portrait—
lines that must be washed over again and again
until only the eyes glare out from the easel
cursing at yesterday and fearing tomorrow. Yes,
I, too, would live outside history. If only.

But that lovely sea is safely wrapped in memories:
still lapping the rocks below Bagur, where
hundreds
of tiny fish rehearse their synchronized swim,
still shimmering across the bay of Tamaru, with its
one wooden fishing boat upturned on the beach,
and rolling far into the night under stars that saw,
stars that witnessed, that swim with my mother,
both of us sweeping phosphorescence in great
green
circles that would surround us forever
in spite of what treacherous time might tell of it.

Today, Rachel, in the Scotch mist of Oregon,
I took the dog trotting beside my scooter
down Hawthorne to the baker for a loaf of
Goldendale.
It reminded me a little of a true Scotch mist
years ago in Cairloch, my mother unhappy
with the rain on her eyelashes, the dogs

chasing rabbits, their cars flying like crazy wings
as if they tried, like me, to reach the outer edges
of those heathery moors—the edges of the circles
that held us all, wild ponies corralled at the whim
of someone who could build a fence.

—Judith

Judith,

It shone in Venice as we walked fairy-tale streets
crowded with happy travelers. Imagine:
a whole city made for people, not cars!
We got lost even with our phones,
let the dog drag us down the smallest streets,
each one appearing to end,
but that was just the next blind
corner inviting adventure. Even the laundry
garlanding the buildings was festive.
Judith, we walked outside of treacherous junctures,
away from news and memory.

How the dead stay with us,
fixed in time, your mother's eyelashes
perpetually wet with salt.
Today, back in Florence
we move under thunder, drenching rain.
In Pittsburgh a man kills Jews with a gun.
I walk the continent where my father's people
were murdered, though I won't go there, to Hungary,
where the land was taken, the ghettos erased.
The gun in Pittsburgh was legally purchased.
The synagogue
was helping immigrants.
What can hold us indivisible, bind us together
through whatever history has in store for us?
If only I could master this rising fear. For years
I felt the force of progress,
that hopeful movement through time.

Venice is its own history lesson, the ghetto there, with
its plaque
listing the Jews taken to death camps,
the memorial naming the reason I write:
to remember, to make an exact recording of history
as the bread and salt in my mouth.

Perché le nostre memorie sono la vostra unica tomba . . .
“For our memories are your only grave . . .”

After your cardiac emergency, I stopped writing
this poem.
I did not want to further hurt your heart.

And your heart, Judith, has suffered damage.
The body echoes the body politic, the heart
beats to the blockages of the earth, the grave heat
of these times. The good news is, perhaps
we may yet recover. Where we are,
the canals of Venice have flooded.
Rising seas fill the piazza, catch the light
in all its shimmering brokenness.
All banks have been breached. All bets are off.

In great and terrible times, poets get small and specific.
In the particular observation
the intimate conversation
the possibility of hope resides.
So the Venetian dogs walked on their own business
through the streets
thronging with Americans. So they walked
belonging only to themselves, peering into restaurants,
pissing against ancient stones, content
not to know history, willing, sometimes, when I held
out a hand, to greet me in perfect freedom.

Let your heart heal, Judith. Let Ruth comfort you
with raspberries, with the strong love of many years.
Let the waters recede and the dykes be repaired.
Let the smallest puns bring laughter.

Let poetry move from trying to change the world
before it's too late, to what we need now,
poems sandbagged against the shimmering waters
that threaten to obliterate
all we love and create.

—Rachel

Rachel,

Did memories of your father's murdered people
stalk you down those tight Venetian streets
whose blind corners shelter
the shades of long-ago crimes—
long ago giving way to the awful now
as a man kills eleven Jews with his legal gun.
News and memory pound on every door:

even my own dead, it seems,
are on the road with you and yours,
the image of my mother's salted eyelashes
such a generous gift—a gift of healing
for my damaged heart that thumps out
gratitude while gasping after the attack
they call broken-heart syndrome.

They say it can heal, takotsubo, named
for the shape of a pot used in Japan to trap
an octopus—oddly, I'd been reading about
the wisdom of that very same creature, my heart
loving it, but never expecting the deep pain, the hours
in emergency. Now I must wonder, once again,
how long I have; we have; the planet has . . .

You know, Rachel, trying to write poems
that will change the world before it's too late
is a task that I, for one, am not up to—
it feels like scaling an ice-covered mountain
with no crampons, the mountain's great shadow hiding
this ungodly, wordless dark. I tell you, Rachel,
bats were beating around my skull until

I even considered ending my life as a poet—
an entirely new thought. But then you reminded me—
good friend that you are—how today's poems can walk
carefully up grassy hills cropped close by sheep.
My heart doctor agrees, says ten-minute walks
are best just now. No mountains.
Surely what we need is first to survive.

You're right that our precious bodies echo
the body politic. My left ventricle is misshapen,
bulging with adrenalin or some other stress-

related symptom that I see swirling far out
in the ocean when I look from Neahkahmnic Mountain.
Those great waves licking sands or smashing rocks
used to hush us into sleep, but not now—

now they beg for relief from the garbage with which
they roil, and from the death throes of all the creatures
poisoned in Neptune's magnificent, weary body.
These are terrible times. Where is hope hiding?
Where laughter? In this bitter wind, it's hard to
remember the sunglow on the raspberries whose
brittle canes stand stark now, with just one daring leaf.

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I'd like to meet the Venetian dogs, friendly
in their independence, forgetful of their canine
histories, except, perhaps, when a dogged gene
leads them to the old haunt of an ancestor,
a modest house in the ghetto where grandmother
once saved scraps of chicken fat or fish skin.
Years ago, I befriended a Spanish dog, new mother

hiding her pups below the beach wall, heavy
with milk but ribby from long-lasting hunger.
I fed her leftovers, hoping to encourage the species
whose name we reverse and refer to as god—
an excellent substitute for whichever deity
is currently torturing its children and witnessing
our world scatter poison into the deeps.

I'd bend a knee to the right canine—yes,
though everyone laugh and stretch out hands
to grab the scruff of her neck. Desperation
takes over my fingers, typing words of fantasy
worlds while stuck in this much-too-real world
I don't know how to change or even
describe in all its fast-fading loveliness.

—Judith

Judith,

Venice now is memories seen through beach glass,
blurred
refracting light, lost to the mist of another language.
When I walked in the Jewish ghettos in Venice and
in Rome,

I tried to think of the living, not the dead.
I'll claim a bond with the people of the book
if not their jealous G-d. But the living
are gone from here, the thousands of years of family life
lost to death camps. Ghosts snagged
across the narrow streets, bedsheets snapping
in the wind. How easily we are erased, reduced
to not even the salt of memory
when those who loved us also die.

In Italy a coalition of the far right and far left
have made their unholy alliance. Power
is the only religion. What seems impossible
again begins to rise from ash.

Better to speak of dogs
than people in these times. In Rome,
above our flat, a dog howled night after night,
barking
and tapping overhead at 3:00 A.M.
We complained to the concierge,
who told us what we heard was a *cat*.

There was no arguing
with her. We pressed our ears to the door
and heard it bark. That's what life is like now,
the strangeness of being told
what we know is fake.

I write to you from Toulouse,
a city of red brick and few trees
where the air reeks with cigarettes.
Here the markets are hung with meat,
a calf's head sits under glass at the butcher's,
eyes closed by the slaughterer's hand.
Piss rises from the gutters, the smell of coffee
roasting, warm bread, cologne. Here
the cyclists are intent on running every light.

Students drink

all night at the bar below us. We stay awake
until two in the morning, hushed by the lullaby
of laughing crowds. Mopeds and street cleaners
violate our dreams.

Every Saturday since we arrived, protestors
have filled the streets. Every bank has been smashed.
At first I was sympathetic; the wages are low, the
streets full
of homeless people, with their trios of friendly dogs
asking cheerfully for a coin, bread, because good cheer
is the price of a meal here. But the breaking goes
on and on.

The *gilets jaunes* bring out the old anti-Semitic taunts,
blaming Jews for their pain, blaming immigrants.

We all need
a reason for why we suffer. Helicopters clatter
outside my window, so low I can feel the wind
in my hair.

The tear gas tastes like nothing else, chemical
and wrong.

It makes my nose run, eyes burn.
The politicians wait for the anger to burn itself out.
The police kill themselves in startling numbers.

Cars are set afire, streets barricaded.

The rage is incendiary.
If this happened in America, there would be
citizens shot
in the streets. You understand this is my opinion only.
You understand my ultimate powerlessness to do more
than record the minute perceptions of the hour.
We plan our mornings carefully, *manifestations*
envelop us and we live inside, baking cakes,
watching from up high the streams
of riot police running in formation, the rising gas.
It's incredible what you can get used to.

At first my body reacted with terror.
But no one dies below us. Nothing changes.
It is regular as the tide. Now we go about
our day under house arrest.
It sounds like a war zone, but we just turn up the music.

The world is even more beautiful now
that we recognize her fragility. Like you:
precious friend with your half-broken heart.
It's done me some good
to be away from your country.

Here, the schoolgirls paint their lips
in the reflection of each other's sunglasses
and my friends across the ocean
post pictures of themselves
to show how happy they are,
smiling the way people do these days:
eyes wide, mouths open
as if in shock.

—Rachel

Rachel Rose is the author of four collections of poetry, including *Song & Spectacle* (Harbour Publishing, 2012), which won the Audre Lorde Award in the United States and the Pat Lowther Memorial Award in Canada, and *Marry & Burn* (Harbour Publishing, 2012), which received a 2016 Pushcart Prize and was nominated for a Governor General's Award. Her memoir, *The Dog Lover Unit: Lessons in Courage from the World's K9 Cops* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2017), was shortlisted for the 2018 Arthur Ellis Award for best nonfiction crime book. A former fellow at the University of Iowa's International Writing Program, she is the poet laureate emerita of Vancouver, British Columbia. Recent fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bellevue Literary Review*, the *Antioch Review*, the *New Quarterly*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and *Joyland*.