

# Extract(s)

## Book Review: The Conversation by Judith Barrington

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### by Maggie Trapp

*The Conversation*

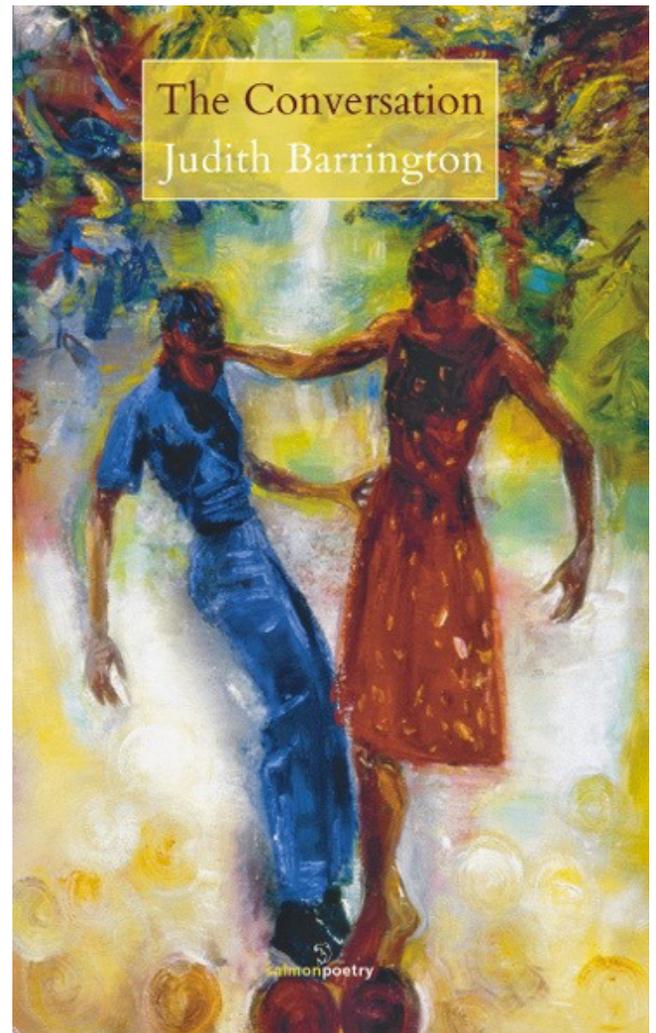
By Judith Barrington

*Salmon Poetry*. 78 pages. \$21

It can't be an accident that the word *revenant* shows up, by my count, three different times in Judith Barrington's latest poetry collection, *The Conversation*. In this new work, Barrington is often concerned with returns and remains, with what leaves and what gets left behind. These are poems that mark loss as well as gain, lines that welcome back as often as they say goodbye. We witness death and loss here, just as we are invited to consider new perspectives on both.

The speaker in these poems discloses the various chapters and choices of her life, her underwater revelations while diving, her unwell sister and her dead brother, her childhood in England as well as her partner of 34 years. We read about grief, about looking back at your life from the vantage point of middle age and beyond, about illness, about discovery, about fear, and about love.

Barrington has a way of taking ordinary incidents and making us feel about them more than we expected to feel. She shows us what we didn't expect to see, or, more precisely, she shows us what we might expect to see as well as what we didn't even know was there underneath our expectations. These lines are elegies and celebrations at once. Her poems play with



ideas of the revenant as well as with ideas of verse itself: turns and returns, verse and reverse. Barrington teaches us to read that which returns; she opens our eyes to what is lost and what is then, despite everything, gained.

*The Conversation* is filled with gorgeous lines and arresting images. In “Night Dive” we read of a diver returning to the surface:

Up through a stream of her own breath’s bubbles—  
up towards where the sea ceiling gleams,

she rises, each fathom bringing her closer to air,  
and closer to—not who she was but who she’ll become.

We hear “up towards where the sea ceiling gleams” and we need to stop for a moment, the language is so lovely and lilting, the assonance and slant rhyme working on us so subtly. And here we see again Barrington’s trope of loss, return, and gain. This diver returns—not to what she was, but to who she’ll become. As with many moments in these poems, a speaker returns changed, and it is this alteration that allows her, and us, to see things anew.

In “Drinking with My Dead Brother” the speaker opens by recalling her brother’s favorite toast —“May You Live Forever”—adding that he did not, in the end, manage to live up to his own cheery prompt. Now that he has died, the speaker facetiously wonders if she and her sister will indeed live forever. The ailing sister has no memory now of who her family members are; the speaker is the only one of the siblings who is left to remember what has been lost. We read,

Still, I admit that not knowing what’s to come  
could drive a person to drink. My sister and I  
clink glasses—she not remembering who I am,  
and I remembering all too well her former self:

the one who sat me on her knee and read to me;  
my former self too, exploring tales  
of badger and the mole: sisters  
spelling our way into what seemed like forever.

These are wistful, elegiac lines that remind us of what we can’t help losing, as well as what we will always keep. Here, as in many of the poems in *The Conversation*, the past mingles with the present, and the future as once seen in the past is now recognized as the altered, unanticipated, but still-loved present. Barrington allows us to feel these losses as well as these gains. What returns is always different than that which left. But, as Barrington suggests, we can come to recognize the beauty in this.

**Maggie Trapp** teaches literature and writing for UC Berkeley Extension. She has a PhD in English, and she’s currently getting her MFA in writing. She is the staff poetry reviewer for *Extract(s)*. [Email our editor](#) to suggest your book. Please use “Poetry Book Review” as the subject.

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