

## BURT LEVITSKY

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



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JUDITH BARRINGTON

# Westward Ho!

## My Oregon Trail

**T**he 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

myself reading Simone de Beauvoir, writing a travel journal, and contemplating my life. But that first day at sea, I was so tired that I slept all the way through lunch. Later, I leaned over the rail, watching the wake fan out into a white pathway, and wondered if the gulls would escort us all the way to the New World. I found my solitary figure, steaming away from Europe, quite romantic.

After all these years, I remember only two of the characters from the table for eight where I ate six dinners, seven breakfasts, and five lunches. Karen was a thirtyish woman from Brooklyn whose wild black hair and forthright opinions seemed familiar. In spite of her elegant evening dresses, she was not so different from the American feminists I knew in London. Randall, a student at Harvard, distinguished himself by eating what seemed like an impossible amount of food at every meal. Suavely dressed in a tuxedo, he announced on that first night that the price of the ticket included all you could eat and he intended to get his money's worth. Sure enough, he devoured soups and oysters, salmon and game birds, every conceivable kind of vegetable, cream-filled desserts, ripe stiltons and more. Understandably, he didn't talk much at meals.

The rest of us chatted about the weather, the relative merits of the ship's swimming pools, and the hairdressers (women) or the gyms (men). But inevitably, as lunches followed breakfasts, people slowly began to ask more personal questions. At the second dinner, someone leaned across and asked me about my "folks."

"My parents are dead," I muttered ungraciously, and an awkward silence fell. Then, feeling responsible for this faux pas and suspecting that it would be more than a little tactless to describe their midocean deaths, I added brightly, "but my brother and sister live in the south of England."

Then, on the third day, we met a hurricane.

A long detour added an extra day to our trip and didn't entirely bypass the towering waves that caused even the well-stabilized *QE2* to shudder and roll. Passengers disappeared as if by some conjuring trick. First the medical officer offered antiseasickness shots that knocked you out for twenty-four hours, and then the ship fell quiet as everyone went to sleep. Even though I had never been midocean in a hurricane before, I knew I wasn't going to be sick, so I didn't take the shot. Instead, I found myself in the midst

of the Sleeping Beauty story, a minor character left awake while almost everyone else dreamed away the days.

"I sure do like it when it gets rough," Karen told me at breakfast, our table reduced to just the two of us. "I go over to London every spring and I always cross by sea. Believe me, I've met just about every sort of weather. We'll be okay."

After dinner that night, Karen and I left the dining room and moved to the huge, deserted bar, where the band had been given the night off. A handful of passengers sat around the walls, most of them looking rather green and clutching goblets of brandy. When Karen went off to bed, I wandered around until I found a window that provided a view of the outdoors—now off-limits due to the weather. Alone with just the hum of engines and air-conditioning, I watched curtains of spray fly across the games deck. Beyond this small, lit area, I could see nothing, but I imagined the raging seas and occasionally glimpsed a wisp of foam that came spinning into the light. In order to skirt the hurricane, we had turned to the north: soon I was thinking about icebergs, the *Titanic*, and the enormous power of the swells that crashed into the ship's flanks.

Looking back, I could endow this moment with huge significance, but at the time I didn't experience it as momentous. I was holding on precariously to some kind of equilibrium, determined to remain in the present moment. Even though I wrote regularly in my journal, I neither reflected on the past nor anticipated the future. And although I knew that those huge waves heaving under the ship might well be the very ones that had overwhelmed the bodies of my parents and sucked the last of the air from their lungs, I certainly didn't let that knowledge linger in my mind.

I had no idea that this crossing would turn out to be part of a huge decision—not a decision made at any single moment, but one consisting of many small choices that piled up until one day I would find myself living in a new country. All I remember about that first step is that it felt adventurous: I was off to explore America!

It was early morning when we cruised majestically past the Statue of Liberty and moored up in the great city that looked just as it always looked in the movies. "Have a good stay," the customs official said, stuffing into my backpack the clothes and shoes, notebooks, shampoos, and moisturizers that he had hauled out and fingered

slowly, one by one. "Thank you," I beamed and stepped out into a wall of heat and what would, in time, become my new country.

The streets of New York were littered with cans and plastic sacks disgorging their stinking refuse onto what I now had to start calling "sidewalks." I had heard there was a garbage strike on but had hardly imagined this dismal scene. Two blocks from the customs shed, I turned a corner to witness a young man stabbing an older guy in the stomach. As he sprinted away, a crowd gathered around the bleeding victim. Later that night, booked into a hotel with Lilian, I said, "I hate this city. When you go to visit your relatives, I'm taking the Greyhound to San Francisco."

"That's a long way," she observed, "but I guess you've got three weeks before our camping trip."

"San Francisco," I repeated, not really knowing why I'd said it. In fact, it was one of the only two cities I could name on the West Coast—the other being Los Angeles, which didn't appeal. I'd heard that San Francisco was a mecca for hippies, flower children, and gay people. I thought it would be all tie-dye and the Beach Boys singing in the streets.

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I woke up at dawn somewhere in the middle of Oklahoma. The sun announced itself with gold streaks. My forehead, pressed against the window of the bus, ached. As I opened my eyes, forgetting for a moment where I was, all I could see were the colors of emptiness: the land, infinite and bare, stretching away in shades of ochre; the sky, bigger than I had ever known it. I sat up quickly, a kind of panic in my empty stomach, and looked ahead through the windshield. The highway ran on forever in a straight line. With mounting horror, I turned to look back toward New York: perhaps, while I was sleeping, we had passed through some small town, which I would now see receding into the distance as we rolled on toward the Wild West. But there was nothing. I had never, in my whole life, seen so much space. It was like a dream of falling into the void.

There is a very real adjustment that anyone from Europe has to make when encountering the vast spaces of middle America, but what overcame me there on the bus was even beyond that. In my early twenties I had driven alone all over Europe, crossed Alpine passes in storms, and found my way at night through Spanish mountains

populated by bandits, but now, slumped in my seat on the Greyhound, I was more afraid than I had been on any of those adventures. Except for rare occasions in Scotland, I had never found myself in a landscape devoid of human habitation. This complete absence of humanity, I discovered, was far worse than the presence of even the most dangerous people.

I saw the bus trip as an expression of the freewheeling seventies with their spontaneity, road-trip camaraderie, and a network of communes ready to welcome strangers. But however much I felt like a free spirit, I now think that perhaps that morning in Oklahoma was the moment I began a serious search for somewhere to put down roots. Torn from everything familiar, I began to understand that I needed a place—a place where I would find work, earn respect, even, if I was lucky, some kind of enduring love, and that place would not be anywhere familiar.

I fought down my panic and unfolded the tattered map across my lap. Should I take the next Greyhound back to New York or go on to the West Coast? I pulled my pen from my pocket and traced my route so far, marking the highways from New York to Pittsburgh, the side trip to Arkansas in a VW camper with friends of friends, the bus routes through Missouri and Texas. The pen paused in Oklahoma where miles of nothingness were still rushing past the windows. According to the map, it would be as far to go back as to go on.

Eventually we reached a rest stop—a gas station where everything, including my ham sandwich, was covered with dust. Realizing how bus-weary I was, I decided to get off for at least one night in the next city, Albuquerque—a place whose name, spelled out on the map, looked nothing like the name I'd just heard shouted out to the waiting passengers.

Had I turned back, who knows where I would have put down roots? But, that night in Albuquerque I decided to go on and, with that decision, I became part of a history I didn't yet know. It would be years before I read about the generations who crossed the country on horseback, in wagons, in ramshackle jalopies, or on the trains that ran over the blood and sweat of those who had laid the rails. I was following my own Oregon Trail on a Greyhound bus, though I barely knew where to find Oregon on the map.

Western migration didn't end with covered wagons; the Oregon Trail is alive and well, even today. Modern adventurers in cramped plane seats stare through windows at the peak of Mount Hood—so close they could almost touch her; far below, pioneers in mud-spattered Toyotas and rusty Chevy trucks follow the setting sun along I-84, while the Columbia River begins to etch its grand image onto a new generation of minds.

Some days, I find it extraordinary that I ended up in this place I'd never even heard of until I was over thirty. I think back then to my mother's gesture at the top of the lighthouse in *Westward Ho!* She was holding out her arm in an almost prophetic pose. "That's the way to America," she'd said casually, pointing straight into my future.

**Judith Barrington's** *Lifesaving: A Memoir* was the winner of the 2001 Lambda Literary Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for the Art of the Memoir. She is also the author of the best-selling *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art* and four collections of poetry. Her fifth poetry book, *New and Selected*, will be published by Salmon Poetry in the spring of 2018. She has been a faculty member of the University of Alaska Anchorage's low-residency MFA program and teaches workshops around the U.S. as well as in Britain and Spain.

## BURT LEVITSKY

*Skipping Clouds*, 1995  
Oil on linen, 24 x 46 in



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