

# Not Waving but Drowning

BY STEVIE SMITH

1957

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith, "Not Waving but Drowning" from *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. Copyright © 1972 by Stevie Smith. Reprinted with the permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker of the poem? Who does the speaker align himself or herself with—the drowned man or the gathered crowd?
  2. What is the effect of repetition in the poem? By altering the first stanza's final phrase, what does Smith suggest about the life of the drowned man?
  3. Smith's poem asks us to think about the ways in which we misunderstand or misread the people around us—what opinion does the gathered crowd seem to have of the drowned man? Does the poem suggest that they ever know the truth about him? Can you imagine the type of person he was from the poem's brief descriptions?
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Speaking of “serious,” “Not Waving but Drowning” is Smith’s most famous poem. This twelve-line punch to the gut is one of her most sober and plainly nihilistic pieces.

The poem begins after the central drama has already taken place. We join a crowd that has gathered at the site of an accidental drowning. Nothing can be done, so our witness is essentially forensic—until the dead man’s voice floats up from the deep. The first stanza shifts quickly from event reportage to the interior monologue of the drowned man trying, even in death, to convey to the living his lifetime of desperation. It’s a grim premise: Life is a series of opportunities to be misunderstood.

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

He’s dead from the very beginning, but he continues to moan. His witnesses have failed him, so now we will take their place. The man’s words aren’t set off with italics or quotation marks, which subtly reinforces his place as the primary consciousness of the poem. A pass at rhythm, an off-rhyme (moaning/drowning), lends an air of jollity to the harrowing setup—it’s a hallmark of the macabre. But in the next stanza, the perspective shifts outward again and the chill really sets in:

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he’s dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

They *knew* him. And they knew him long enough to know his tendency toward “larking.” That’s their half-assed eulogy. (Who wants to imagine the six-word summation of his own character? It’s almost worse than imagining death itself.) And “poor chap”—oof. We’re not allowed to be haunted by the dead man’s testimony for too long before this glib epithet snaps us back to the social occasion. That third line tumbles out fast in monosyllables, like the murmuring of a crowd. Prancing around the edges of corniness, the irony is Pure Stevie: *they* were too cold for him. His heart *broke* under the strain of being misunderstood for so long, he wants to tell us. And so he does; that the dead man gets the last word is the poem’s only consolation:

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.

Language failed him. Salutations failed him. We are all odd birds, all in danger of having our gestures, habits, and roles misread, mistaken for our substance. At work, whose collar doesn’t chafe? I guess I’d argue that it’s prissiness on our part when we sum up a “minor” poet like Smith as mannered, precious, or quirky—not that those terms aren’t useful. There’s a pleasure in being held at arm’s length, in being dared to embrace—and to dismiss—a poet’s mannerisms. “The human creature is alone in his carapace,” Smith wrote. “Poetry is a strong way out. The passage that [Poetry] blasts is often in splinters, covered with blood; but she can come out softly.”