Not Waving but Drowning

By Stevie Smith

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.


Source: New Selected Poems (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1988)

Although the nursery-rhyme-like cadences of her poems and the whimsical drawings with which she illustrated them suggest a child’s innocence, Stevie Smith was much concerned with suffering and mortality. (Her macabre sense of humor can shock, as in her most famous poem, “Not Waving But Drowning.”) Born Florence Margaret Smith in Hull, Yorkshire, she moved with her family to London when three, then lived in the same house the rest of her life. She published several collections of short prose and letters as well as nearly a dozen volumes of verse. Glenda Jackson portrays the eccentric poet in the 1978 movie Stevie.

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