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‘Such a death were sweet’: Invitingly Deadly Waters in the Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith

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‘I have plunged in a poem of the sea.’^{*1}

Stevie Smith’s uncollected poem ‘From the French’ depicts a mysterious journey of deep words and strange meetings. The speaker is at a ‘great depth’ (7) when they encounter a ‘pensive corpse’ (6) flowing with blood. Although the corpse cannot vocalize any words, the speaker is filled with a conviction that this body is conveying a message: ‘it was / As if our human love lay bleeding there’ (9–10). The philosophical speaker decides that the corpse is ‘alive . . . it was alive’ (11, 13) and with a nod to the Danish prince declares ‘[t]he rest was dead’ (13). Thus the world outside of this microcosm of communication is dismissed.

This short poem illustrates a pattern that is found in many of Stevie Smith’s poems and drawings concerning water. Submerged in the waters of this sea, the speaker forgoes the usual modes of verbal communication and encounters a more organic means of revelation, as if by osmosis. The presence of death as an ally and a confidante is a motif that pervades Smith’s work and in the poems I will be examining the organic communication that specifically occurs in contact with the water leads to death as a sweet homecoming. The reasons I have designated the waters of Stevie Smith’s poems and drawings as ‘invitingly sweet’ are twofold. Firstly, they lead to death and secondly, they facilitate a clearer and more

* All Stevie Smith extracts and drawings reprinted courtesy of Will May, Faber and Faber Ltd and New Directions Publishing Corp. This is third party content not offered under the Creative Commons licence that covers this article as a whole.

¹ Will May. Ed. ‘From the French’. *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015, p. 6, line 1. Further line references will be given parenthetically.

instinctive line of communication, usually between the speaker and either animals or supernatural elements.

That Stevie Smith was drawn to death as a friend who brings ‘extreme happiness . . . setting us free’² has been well documented by other critics and is evident throughout her body of work.³ Edward J. Mallot’s 2003 article illustrates how frequently death by drowning occurs in Smith’s work⁴ and I will demonstrate how the enveloping of the poetic figure by the water is very often parallel to, or a part of, the sweet embrace of death. Mallot asserts that drowning is a ‘particularly resonant metaphor’ that reflects some familiar Smith themes, such as ‘the unfortunate state of the world around her, the failure of communication between speaker and audience, and the seductiveness of escape and inner peace’.⁵ In his article, Mallot discusses this ‘failure of communication’ quite broadly, including drowning symbolically in words and focusing on the differences in male and female drowning victims. But, the sustained and subtle link between persuasive and powerful communication and the deadly waters that allow the message to be imparted has not been so thoroughly demonstrated. My analysis will show that when Smith’s poetic figures yield to the bodies of water they submerge themselves in and submit to death, they also gladly reject the interpersonal correspondence that belongs to the rational world and obey instead the intuitive call that they encounter in the water. In my discussion of these texts, I will be treating the illustrations as part of the poems, that is, not as optional decorative features of Smith’s work that are less important than the words but as co-contributors to our understanding of the poems as a whole.

² Stevie Smith. ‘The Ass.’ *The Spoken Word*, BBC, 2009.

³ See for example, Janice Thaddeus. ‘Stevie Smith and the Gleeful Macabre’. *In Search of Stevie Smith*. Ed. Sanford Sternlicht. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991. p. 86.

⁴ J. Edward Mallot. ‘Not Drowning But Waving: Stevie Smith and the Language of the Lake’. *Journal of Modern Literature* 27:1/2 (2003) pp. 171-187.

⁵ Mallot, p. 181, 179.

In 'Oblivion', from Smith's posthumous collection (*Scorpion and Other Poems*, 1972),⁶ the speaker recounts walking 'knee deep' (7) into a sea that 'wrap[s] round' them like a comforting blanket (6). The speaker repeatedly describes the seas as 'sweet' (6, 7, 16) as they progress towards the unknown, going deeper into the 'gentle' mists (15). They are seeking the 'sweet oblivion' (10) of death that is their inevitable 'destiny' (16). The repetition of these simple adjectives gives the poem an artless tone, as if the speaker were recounting a dream or personal anecdote. Likewise, when describing the voice that interrupts the speaker's reverie, they say 'It was a human face . . . A human being and a human voice' (1-2). Although the speaker at first refuses to return from their oblivion, the human voice is persistent and at the end of the third stanza, the speaker's recognition that the 'human and related voice' (11) is 'in pain' (12) causes the speaker to turn back. The resentment of the speaker is marked by two caesuras in quick succession, thus: 'That cried to me in pain. So I turned back.' (12). The speaker is unwillingly forced to turn back from their oblivion.

In the illustration which accompanies the picture (see fig. 1), the face is wearing an enigmatic smile, perhaps one of confidence or conviction, with one shrewdly raised eyebrow and very large, almost blank eyes looking away from the viewer. Significantly, they are wearing a hat, which Smith said in her poems 'represent[s] going away and also running away'.⁷ Although the speaker in 'Oblivion' does not complete their escape from the burdens of the 'human heart' (14), they continue to look forward to when they will connect with the feminine body of water. The seeming incongruity of the poem text and its accompanying doodle is met by Smith's assertion that her doodles illustrate the 'spirit or the idea in the poem rather than any incidents in it'.⁸ The speaker is not identified with a specific gender, but the feminine illustrated figure reflects the agency and determination of the voice.

⁶ May, p. 646.

⁷ Laura Severin. *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. p. 66.

⁸ Jonathan Williams. 'Much Further Out Than You Thought'. Ed. Sternlicht. *In Search of Stevie Smith*. p. 46.



Figure 1. 'Oblivion', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 646.

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In this poem, the speaker does not drown in the sea of their oblivion, although they look forward to doing so in the future, as the speaker concludes that the waters 'must come even if not soon' (17). However, it is the successful communication of pain from the 'human and related voice' that prevents the speaker from departing. Mallot's notion that drowning is linked to a lack of communication is sustained in 'Oblivion' where successful communication keeps the speaker, albeit unwillingly, from allowing herself to be consumed

by the waters of death. It is important, however, that the speaker resents being kept in the present world by their duty of care to other humans. Burdensome human interaction is superseded in the speaker's mind by their organic connection with the water. The sea is described as 'so pretty and so beautiful, growing deeper' (8) and 'those sweet seas that deepen' (16), as if the water is responding to the speaker's desire. The waters of oblivion are extremely attractive to the speaker and the interaction between them is easy and intimate, even if the journey is not completed in the poem.

In 'The River Deben', the speaker is also left without the consummation of death that they hope for.⁹ The poem opens with an apparent death scene, as 'All the waters of the river Deben / Go over my head to the last wave even' (1–2). The waters submerge the speaker with a gentle enveloping action. Again, this death is proclaimed as 'sweet', this time superlatively: 'Such a death were sweet to seven times seven' (3). The speaker then describes their present circumstances, as they row in a boat with the 'shrouded' (4) figure of 'Death' (3). The poem builds with expectation towards the climactic event, where Death will somehow act upon the speaker, however, we are informed that 'The time is not yet' (6). Instead the speaker describes at length the 'dark' 'waters' (10) 'Shadowed by cliffs' (11), the minute details of the surface light 'scatter[ed]' by the oars (13), the 'salt silt' of the river bed (21). Yet the atmosphere is not one of dread, but a 'pleasant' (7) and 'happy' (19) time as the speaker, waiting on the 'ecstasy . . . in thy breath' (20), leans toward a sensual experience of intimacy with 'night's companion Death' (19).

However, the poem ends still in the expectation of that climax, waiting for Death to act, but instead, the speaker almost fearfully notes the arrival of dawn on the horizon, saying 'tarry day . . . Thou comest unwished' (24). Instead of ending with the death scene outlined in the first stanza, which would have brought the poem to a satisfying cyclical conclusion, the speaker is left at an impasse with Death as the time of darkness runs out. Despite Death's welcoming smile, he cannot be forced to act before time. At the start of the poem the speaker remarks, 'he smiles and I smile it is pleasant' (7). In the final stanza the speaker says 'Smile pleasant Death, smile Death' (23), continuing the congenial mood. But although the speaker and Death continue to smile at each other, it is not a mode of communication that successfully brings about the conclusion the speaker hopes for. The speaker continues to row upstream and exert themselves physically ('my arms ache but will not yield' (17)), as if this

⁹ May, pp. 44-45. Originally from Smith's first collection, *A Good Time Was Had By All*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1937. pp. 50-51.

were a labour agreed upon with Death, yet the reasons are unknown, and so is the final outcome. Death remains a shadowy figure that the speaker cannot 'read'.

The illustration corroborates the mystery of the situation (see fig. 2). An odd, finger-like tree with wispy, single-line branches hangs over the rowing figure, as if it were tickling their neck. The tree behind the 'Death' figure, sitting as a guest in the boat, stands erect, with hair like branches faltering around the trunk. The drawing is also placed in between the second and third stanza of the poem, interrupting the flow of the verses. Although the drawing gives no indication that this is a night-time scene, the next line states 'it is pleasant in the boat at night' (7), introducing a setting that alters our reading of the illustration.¹⁰ The rowing figure, the speaker, has their eyes lowered as if in submission to their partner, who is wrapped in numerous cloths with a covering lowered over their large, blank eyes. One of the cloths of the passenger is trailing in the water, but they do not seem concerned by any damage or danger this might entail. Significantly, both of the figures have their heads covered, suggesting perhaps they are running away together, or sharing in the same fantasy. Death continues to stare at the rowing figure with an enigmatic smile that divulges nothing of its intentions.

In 'The River Deben', the speaker is hoping that Death will end their tiresome earthly labours and bring them to the heaven of 'seven times seven'. The 'dark . . . dark' waves (12) are their means of death, but, inviting as they are, the lack of a common language between the speaker and Death prevents the rower from entering the waters. Death by drowning is devoutly wished for, but a difficulty in communication seems to prevent that consummation occurring.

¹⁰ Compare this to Smith's drawing for 'The Boat', May, p. 110.



Figure 2. 'The River Deben', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 44.

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In the poem 'Venus When Young Choosing Death',¹¹ the speaker also meets a figure called Death, but she cannot ascertain whether she is submitting to 'Sleep or Death' (30). The posture of the female figure who stands above the title (see fig. 3) has both her hands raised, yet it is not clear if this is a welcoming or defensive gesture. She is also wearing a hat, this time decorated with oversized flowers and leaves, bringing a sense of abundance. Fertility is emphasized by the figure's bare breasts, the exposure of which seems at odds with the long, sarong style garment worn around her waist. We are used to seeing the female figure depicted

¹¹ May, pp. 526-7. This poem and drawing appeared for the first time in Smith's *The Frog Prince and Other Poems*. London: Longmans, 1966. pp. 51-52.



Figure 3. 'Venus When Young Choosing Death', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 526.

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by Smith in her doodles,¹² but here Smith mixes the familiar sketch of a pretty, long haired woman with the unfamiliar, exotic dress that alienates the figure from the ordinary and sets her up as a representation of the Roman goddess Venus of the title.

As in the figure in 'Oblivion', the speaker, Venus, begins 'knee-deep' (1) in the sea, but instead of progressing deeper into the waters, her guide into the unknown comes to meet her. After a series of 'gods' (2) come and 'kiss' Venus 'in friendship' (11, 12), in the latter half of the poem a new figure comes forward who is different from the others. The speaker announces '[t]hen came one drawing a boat after him' (17), introducing the possibility of travel and a new decisiveness from 'the gods' (9). This god 'set me in the boat . . . set me on his knees in the boat' (18–19), taking command of the situation and placing himself and Venus in parallel with Death and the speaker in 'The River Deben'.

¹² Particularly consider Smith's pairing of female figures with flowers for poems such as 'This Englishwoman', p. 68, 'Portrait (I)', p. 87, 'Pad, pad', p. 253, 'The Castle', pp. 228-229, 'Saint Anthony and the Rose of Life', p. 319, and 'When the wind...', p. 503 (all page references May, Ed.).

But, this time the communication between Venus and her helper is much more physical. Whereas the other gods took their turn to kiss Venus as ‘old friends’ (9), Venus and the new god embrace exclusively. When he kisses Venus (19), Smith uses litotes through Venus’s voice to state ‘[i]t was not for friendship’ (20). Venus repeats this claim three more times (23, 31, 32) although the last time it is phrased as a question: ‘You do not kiss one for friendship?’ (32). This partial uncertainty, although perhaps playfully put by Venus here, reflects further ambiguity in the poem’s text. The title states that Venus ‘chooses’ death, yet this seems also a tale of seduction. Venus repeats their physical closeness, with the qualifier ‘[b]ut not for friendship’ (23), before ‘a smell of poppies’ (25) floats into their atmosphere. The opiate scent accumulates overwhelmingly, as Venus finds:

And on his head, was poppies
And in his hand, poppies
And on his lips when he kissed me
A taste of poppies. (26–9)

In the ‘arms’ of the god (22), Venus experiences a sensual overload of the soporific odour. But, it does not seem to matter to Venus a great deal whether she is embraced by Sleep or Death – ‘Sleep or Death kissed me’ (30) – or what the eventual outcome will be, because she is happy there (21). In the final stanza, the male god seems to respond to her question about the meaning of kisses (32), by saying that they are ‘for welcome, / To welcome one home’ (33–4). As in ‘Oblivion’, the speaker willingly submits to the power of death, prefigured by a sweet unconsciousness that is facilitated by the water. Although she is not submerged in the water as in previous poems, the shallow waters at the seas’ edge act as a liminal threshold where the gods can approach her.

In ‘Oblivion’, the speaker was drawn towards nihilism whereas in ‘Venus When Young Choosing Death’, Venus has a ‘helper’ god guiding her. In the poem ‘Fish Fish’ the

speaker finds in the water a guide who will lead them to their final destination.¹³ This poem also involves an interplay of voices or at least a conversation is implied between the speaker who is intrigued by the water and his catch, and his male, adult companion who urges him to release the fish. This speaker has a habit of repeating themselves so that the same phrasal structure recurs throughout the poem. The speaker begins excitedly ‘[I]ook, man, look’ (1), wedging their address between repeated imperatives. This is echoed on the second stanza where the speaker impatiently replies (to an implied suggestion) ‘[w]hat, man, what?’ (5). The speaker continues to refuse the companion’s suggestion of letting the fish off the hook by saying ‘go now man, pray go’ (13), and finally says ‘Goodbye, man dear, / Goodbye quickly’ (25–6). This verbal pattern is reinforced by the speaker’s habit of repeating their nouns somewhat nonsensically, by insisting on calling his catch ‘the fish fish’ (3, 15, 27), and retorting ‘No fear fear’ (7) to an implied word of caution from his adult companion. The idiosyncratic speech patterns of the speaker suggest an age difference between the ‘man’, whose realistic ideas are in contrast with the childish spontaneity with the speaker. The implied voice of his companion has only reasonable suggestions that the speaker is impatient to ignore. The narrative of the speaker finding a fish to follow denotes a child playing affectionately. This impression is established by the youthful figure that accompanies the poem (see fig. 4). This character stands at the right hand side of the title and first verses, demanding the reader’s attention in coordination with the opening lines of the poem. The doodle illustrates the spirit of confidence and adventure that the speaker embodies. The legs are apart as if in action or readiness. The eyes are wide and spiky, as if glittering with excitement. There is a small, curious smile on the figure’s face, as if they know something we are not privy to.

¹³ May, p. 524-5. Also originally published in Smith’s *The Frog Prince*. p. 50.



Figure 4. 'Fish Fish', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 524.

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Indeed, the speaker in the poem seems not bound by the trappings of biology, physics or logic but happy to conclude that the fish he has caught is inviting him to the sea, whither he will depart presently. What originally begins as an apparently spur-of-the-moment decision to say 'Yes, now I think I will go down to him, / To have a look at [the fish]' (9–10), deepens into a discovery where the speaker finds the fish 'sits *on* the hook / It is not *in* him' (19–20). This distinction is important to the speaker, because on the strength of this technicality, the speaker concludes 'He is waiting for me / To carry me to the sea' (21–2). Whereas in the first stanzas, the male companion was a counterbalancing voice that the speaker responded to, in the latter stanzas his influence fades away as the fish becomes the sole focus of the speaker's future. In a token gesture, the speaker says 'Goodbye quickly' (26), hurrying to 'go to the fish fish / Impatiently' (27–8). The persona seems frustrated with his human counterpart and instead has a much stronger connection with the fish.

This instinctive line of communication is extremely persuasive, as the speaker decides that when he follows the fish to the ocean, 'I shall be happy then / In the watery company of his kingdom' (23–4). As in 'Venus When Young Choosing Death', the speaker seems convinced that they will find true belonging beyond the sea shore. Sanford Sternlicht argues that in this poem, the speaker is not following the fish to a fantasy kingdom of continued life

but ‘to the depths, to his deep world, and to death.’¹⁴ That death could be appealing to one so apparently youthful in Smith’s poems is perhaps unsurprising when we consider her own epiphany at a young age that death was a friend, able to help her escape at any time. She tactfully expresses this in rather more delicate terms in her Preface to *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse*, saying ‘I remember when I was about eight . . . thinking the road ahead might be rather too long, and being cheered by the thought . . . that life lay in our hands.’¹⁵ If the outcome of the poem seems morbid to the reader, for the speaker it is hopeful and full of promise.

In ‘Venus When Young Choosing Death’ and ‘Fish Fish’, two non-human helpers are able to communicate in unorthodox ways with the speakers, guiding them by means of the water, seemingly unto death. Although the communication relies on technicalities (for example, the meaning of kisses or whether the hook is in the fish or not), both speakers seem on the cusp of finding their way to a happy home, death, by means of their water guiders. The speaker in ‘Fish Fish’ is especially eager to reject any further interpersonal correspondence and instead obey the call of the water. In the poem ‘Come on, come back’, it is again the failure of human communication that cements the death by drowning of its main character, Vaudevue.¹⁶

There are several forms of cleaving or separation which anticipate Vaudevue’s death in the cold lake. She is introduced as a ‘girl soldier’ (3), ‘sitting alone’ (5), having been separated from her regiment and people as the lone survivor of a chemical weapon attack. She is alive but ‘without memory’ (18). The omniscient narrator of the poem says ‘[h]er mind is as secret from her / As the water on which she swims’ (25–6), as if it still exists, but is unknowable; it has been cleft from her. In her distress as ‘[s]he fears and cries’ (11), she turns to ‘the icy waters of the adorable lake’ (20) and jumps in, as if seeking solace. The water

¹⁴ Sanford Sternlicht. *Stevie Smith*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. p. 91.

¹⁵ Stevie Smith. Ed. *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse*. B.T. Batsford: London, 1970. p. 3.

¹⁶ May, p. 383-384.

itself is separated as it appears to be cut down the middle by '[a] ribbon of white moonlight' (22). Later the figure of the drowning Vaudevue is said to be 'swiftly severing / The waters' (32–3) and when the deed is done, the lake's waves 'close above her head' (33), separating Vaudevue from the air with marked finality.

These forms of separation reflect Vaudevue's isolation from humankind and her search to find a connection with the water. Vaudevue is described as 'Left' (1) and 'alone' many times (4, 5, 12). Her solitude is reinforced by her position 'on a round flat stone' (5, 12) as if perched on a stepping stone without a partner to jump to. Her instinctive reaction is to 'stagger' (13) to 'the margin of a lake' (15), another kind of borderland as the sea shore is for Venus in 'Venus When Young Choosing Death'. Here Vaudevue experiences a sensory connection with the water, as in her mind's blankness, she can tangibly feel '[t]he sand beneath her feet . . . cold and damp and firm to the waves' beat' (16–17). Along with the perfect, if somewhat delayed rhyme of 'feet' and 'beat', Smith also employs three clear iambs to echo the tidal rhythm to say the sand 'is *cold* and *damp* and *firm*' (17, emphasis added). Vaudevue removes the last vestiges of her connection to humanity when she 'strips her uniform off' (19) before diving in. Vaudevue's primal connection with the water is also made evident in her perception of a pathway marked out by the moonlight on the water, which the narrator calls 'the moony track' (23) and 'the river of white moonlight' (29) as if nature were guiding her along a predestined path. Although it is not clear whether Vaudevue entered the water intending to die, the lake responds to her desperation by '[s]eizing her in an icy amorous embrace' (31), cradling her in her lonely plight. The current is said to have '[d]ive[d] with her' (32) as if she were complicit or at least cooperative with the water in her death.

In contrast, when a fellow human (albeit an 'enemy sentinel', line 34) fashions a pipe to alert the swimmer, the call is ineffective and Vaudevue 'hears not the familiar tune' (46).

The final verses contain many echoes to William Blake's 'Introduction' to *Songs of Innocence* (1789), but some of the actions are inverted to create a hollow emptiness to the piper's call.¹⁷ For example, instead of the pleasant pastoral valleys wild, the watchman plays his tune in a desolate, chemical warfare landscape. The listener in the 'Introduction' is a happy child 'On a cloud' (3, 'Introduction'), but in 'Come on Come back', the child is replaced by a dead girl under the water, who began the poem 'sitting alone on a round flat stone' (5). Whereas the piper in Blake plucks a 'hollow reed' (16, 'Introduction') to preserve his songs for posterity by writing them down, the sentinel creates his pipe from 'hollow reeds' (39) to play an ephemeral tune that will disappear, unheard, into the night. The repetition does not cause the laughter or tears of joy provoked in the 'Introduction'; instead Vaudevue 'Sleeps on, stirs not' (45).

Smith's illustrative presentation is also in stark contrast with Blake's composite plates (see figs. 5 and 6). Whereas Blake has used vibrant colours and shapes and filled every inch

¹⁷ William Blake. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. London: Tate Publishing, 2006. Plate 4. Line references in parenthesis refer to 'Come on, Come back' except where indicated.

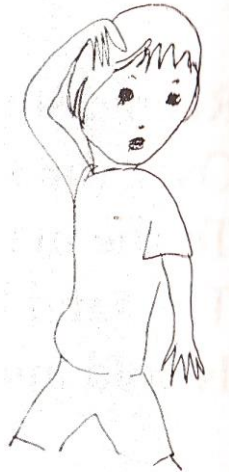


Figure 5. 'Come on, Come back', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 384.

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Figure 6. William Blake, 'Introduction', *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; ed. Morris Eaves, et al; Copy AA; 2003; The William Blake Archive. Accessed 28 September 2016.

<http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=songsie.aa.illbk.04>

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of his plate with patterns and text, Smith's simplistic line drawing looks even more sparse than usual in comparison. This poem first appeared in her 1957 collection *Not Waving But Drowning* without any illustration and this figure was added into the *Selected Poems* of 1962. Like the figure in 'Fish Fish', it has a childlike appearance and simple, childish clothing. This figure is not wearing the 'uniform' (19) of the 'girl soldier' (3), but her garb is also plain and removed from other cultural or historical associations, making her seem isolated from our understanding. The legs are separate in a stance of adventure or movement, but the hand is raised in an enigmatic gesture, perhaps pertaining to hurt or confusion, with wide blank eyes and an open mouthed stare. The expression is reminiscent of the distress Vaudevue feels when '[w]eeping bitterly for her ominous mind' (28). In both the editions where the illustration appears, it is placed besides the last verse when Vaudevue has already died, thus giving the faint sketch a ghostly resonance.

The parallels with Blake's 'Introduction' serve to demonstrate how empty and ineffective this pastoral mode of communication is in the frightening landscape of 'a future war', as the poem is subtitled. The dark water's rhythm calls the girl more effectively than music from a shepherd's pipe. Vaudevue remains separated from man whereas the rhythm of the water, a 'treacherous' and 'subtle' 'undercurrent', is able to 'embrace' her (30, 44, 31), having led her from the land. Again, interpersonal communication is superseded by the organic draw of the lake which, although fatal, provides more comfort than the meaningless music of the sentinel.

Likewise, in 'The Ass', a long poem from Smith's last collection (*Scorpion*, 1972), the protagonist Eugenia seems unable to find a satisfactory or effective mode of communication in her life on earth.¹⁸ The journeys and trials of the girl, nicknamed 'an ass' (14) because of her ineptitude, are told in a fairy-tale style narrative where time stretches out

¹⁸ May, p. 602-4.

unreasonably and the landscape contains fiends and voices. In this world, the ‘móross’ (22) that is central to Eugenia’s journey takes seven years to cross (29) and is said to ‘so[p] and shuff[le]’ (22) as if inhabited by a restless spirit.¹⁹ Despite the efforts of the dangerous world and malevolent figures around her, Eugenia’s happiness is undiminished to the extent that she unknowingly thwarts her enemies. The witch who sets her to work finds that she is unable to impress sobriety upon Eugenia through hard labour; instead, the girl ‘seemed so happy’ (11) that, for her captor, there was ‘no pleasure’ in her ‘tyranny’ (12). Eugenia’s blithe attitude seems impervious to suffering to the point of ignorance and insensitivity as she is ‘as happy . . . to roam and range’ (16–17) as she had been ‘happy . . . [a]t her labours in the witch’s bothy’ (18–19). The quality that might have left Eugenia vulnerable has foiled her captor since the witch is not able to effect a change within her. But, although the witch labels Eugenia’s happiness stupidity, the ‘fiend’ (30) who tempts Eugenia to stray from the solid path into the ‘soppy móross’ (5) receives an emphatic ‘No’ from the girl (33), emphasized by a full stop in the middle of a stanza and we are told ‘[s]he was not such an ass to try the green’ (34). The fiend has overestimated Eugenia’s naivety and thus fails to successfully draw her from the path. Once again, the apparently foolish ‘ass’ has frustrated the plans of her enemies because they have not been able to effectively communicate or enact their agendas upon her.

Her immunity to the influence of others is reinforced by her chosen mode of communication. When Eugenia herself speaks, or rather sings, it is in a childish gobbledygook of ‘Baa-baa-ba-bay’ (28). It is not the sophisticated, constructed language of a heroine; nonetheless, it allows Eugenia to evade capture and control. The narrator of the poem mimics Eugenia’s happy nonsense by saying ‘Heigh-ho, heigh-ho / Never was such a

¹⁹ Smith’s placement of an accent in ‘móross’ is intentional and is used on all occurrences of the word. In her introduction to the poem at a reading in 1968, she simply said ‘[b]y the way, the poem is slightly syncopated’, without offering any further explanation as to why she designated an idiosyncratic emphasis upon this word. Stevie Smith. ‘The Ass’. *The Spoken Word*, BBC, 2009, Audio CD.

happy idle ass' (36–7). The role of the narrator, who is apparently tracking Eugenia's movements, becomes increasingly important towards the end of the poem when Eugenia faces danger from the 'great waves' of the 'great seas' (52, 46). Having come to this dramatic landscape where the 'white crests com[e] at a dash' and 'roll in pleasure' (48, 47), the girl runs 'quickly' (51) to them. Although the narrator expresses some sympathy; 'Oh my poor ass' (50), she continues to use the cruel nickname of 'ass' instead of 'Eugenia' and then remarks '[n]ow she is gone' (53) as if any communication of warning would have been futile. The narrator does not seem troubled by pangs of conscience even though they continue to inhabit the same landscape as Eugenia. They remark that 'often as I walk that sandy shore' where the girl drowned (56), she is able to hear 'the sweet ass singing still with joy' (58). It is not simply the contented singing of the forest, but as if 'her best wish had come to pass' (60), that is to say, as if Eugenia had never been happier. Thus, the poem is concluded. Not only is Eugenia apparently even more happy in 'her tomb' (54) under the sea than she ever was on earth, but she has found her 'Paradise' (40) in the most fresh and attractive landscape of the poem, '[b]eyond' (46) the sand and slush of the other characters. Despite Eugenia's apparent ignorance, she is described as running to the waters 'as if coming home' (51), a sentiment echoed in 'Venus When Young Choosing Death' and 'Fish Fish', as previously discussed. The ocean's waves are also depicted as eager '[t]o fetch the ass' (49) as if reaching out to a reciprocal spirit. The organic communication between natural elements, uncomplicated by the hidden agendas and frustrated desires of the other characters in the poem who are constantly constructing their words and image, is powerful enough to secure a death that is 'sweet to seven times seven.' The lack of communication between herself and other humans does not seem to bother Eugenia just as the lightly illustrated girl seems to be happy to play with this animal creature (see fig. 7). By choosing to depict a human interacting with a four-

legged, tailed creature, Smith reinforces the message that we have seen in a number of previous poems where her characters have instinctively connected and communicated more

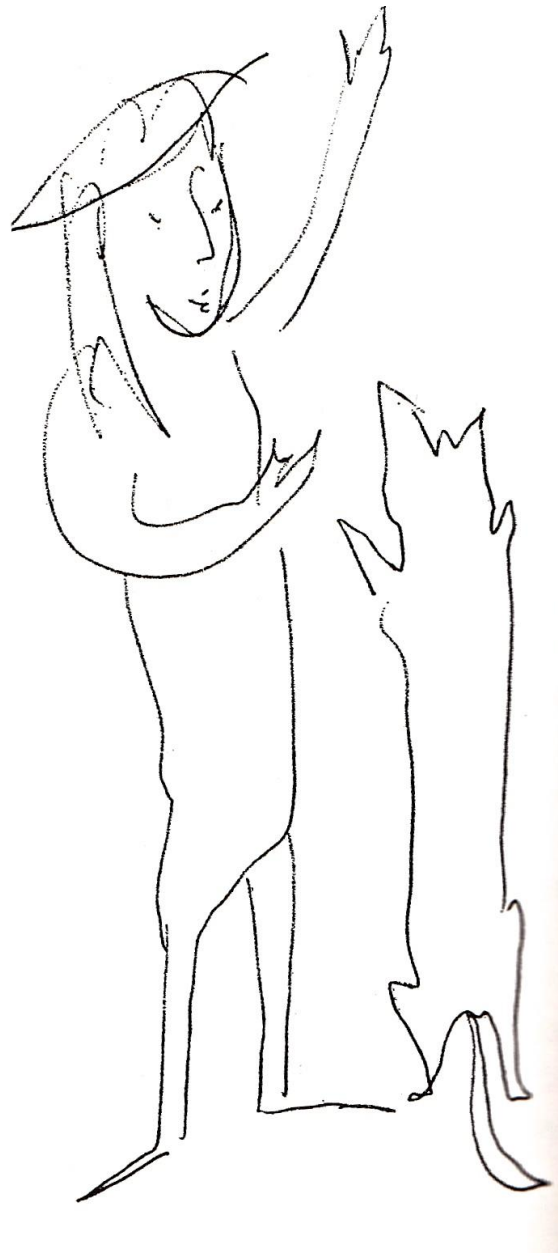


Figure 7. 'The Ass', May, *Collected Poems and Drawings*, p. 604.

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effectively with the natural world than with other humans. In these poems specifically these interactions have led them to water, apparently to their death, but to a happier existence beneath the ocean.

To conclude, Mallot argues that in death, Smith's characters often 'find a voice'.²⁰ From this selection of poems, I would like to nuance that by saying that where they have come to death by water, her figures discover a more natural, instinctive mode of communication as the loving embrace of the water surrounds their being. The words the characters use to interact with other humans are abandoned in favour of body language, the motion of swimming and surrendering to the water's embrace. Although in Smith's poems, water sometimes has sinister and deadly undercurrents, it is depicted as a watery kingdom in which its captives, willing or unwilling, are set free from the difficulties of communicating in the present life. Often the characters are said to have come home when they enter the water. If we apply this reading to the man in 'Not Waving But Drowning', we might read his death as less pitiful and more merciful, as in death he is finally able to say what he really meant. Although the waters are deadly, in Smith's world they represent the prospect of escaping the frustration of human dialogue, where words and gestures are frequently misinterpreted. The water is a place where one is embraced and welcomed home to the waves of instinctive truth, where communication is organic and easy. Such a prospect is inviting indeed.

²⁰ Mallot, p. 181.

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