

90 The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,  
 Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of  
 Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love  
 Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur  
 1948 Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

1948

—◆◆◆—

## Stevie Smith

1902–1971

Stevie Smith was the sprightly nom de plume adopted by the woman who had been born the more conservatively named Florence Margaret Smith in 1902. Born in Yorkshire, she moved to London with her mother, aunt, and sister at age four, her father having abandoned the family, and lived in that house in Palmers Green, which she called fondly a “female habitation,” for the rest of her life. Stevie Smith’s subsequent life was not eventful on its surface, yet was bursting with the literary creativity that led her to reinvent the shy, forever single Florence as a hugely popular public poet, Stevie Smith.

While working as a private secretary to two lords in London, Smith began to publish poetry in *Granta* magazine. She published the autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper* to wide success in 1936, after discouraging reviews of her poetry had sent her to fiction; the novel depicted a struggling poet, like herself, living through the public and private effects of World War I on the English nation. Stevie Smith then began to produce the poetry collections for which she is best known today, with *A Good Time Was Had by All* (1937) and *Tender Only to One* (1938). Each of these works blends poetry with line ink sketches Smith drew to accompany her work. The unassuming, often humorous drawings lent their sparkle to her poetry, and her poetry counterpointed the sketches with witty yet serious charm. The public appeal of her poetry was somewhat harmful to its reputation, especially at a time of such poetic ferment in Britain—Yeats, Auden, Spender, Thomas, and others were creating the most innovative, deeply serious, and sophisticated poetry of the century. By way of contrast, Smith’s poetry seems unafraid of speaking in an open, personal, even stylistically simplified way, putting what might be seen as merely women’s concerns—love, family, illness and loneliness—at the fore. The bulk of Smith’s domestic life was spent devotedly taking care of her aunt at home; she survived this aunt by only three years, dying of a brain tumor in 1971. Nonetheless, she wrote her major collections of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, and is best known perhaps for the title poem in her collection *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957). After her *Selected Poems* came out in 1964, Smith was awarded the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry in 1966 and the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969. Her last two books, *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972) and *Collected Poems* (1975) were published posthumously.

Stevie Smith’s poetry has come to seem new again, a precursor in its speech-based patterns of the spoken word poetry movement, a lyrically expressive voice and a non-ironic emotionality almost contemporary in wearing its heart on its sleeve. Perhaps the current mode of writing most akin to Smith’s quirky and original poetry is contained in the lyrics of female musicians and songwriters, from Alanis Morissette to P. J. Harvey and Chrissie Hynde. Her sketches, too, share something of the jaunty self-revelations of that work and keep Stevie’s poetry ineradicably alive.

## How Cruel Is the Story of Eve

How cruel is the story of Eve  
 What responsibility  
 It has in history  
 For cruelty.

5 Touch, where the feeling is most vulnerable,  
 Unblameworthy—ah reckless—desiring children,  
 Touch there with a touch of pain?  
 Abominable.

Ah what cruelty,  
 10 In history  
 What misery.  
 Put up to barter  
 The tender feelings  
 Buy her a husband to rule her  
 15 Fool her to marry a master  
 She must or rue it  
 The Lord said it.

And man, poor man,  
 Is he fit to rule,  
 20 Pushed to it?  
 How can he carry it, the governance,  
 And not suffer for it  
 Insuffisance?<sup>1</sup>  
 He must make woman lower then  
 25 So he can be higher then.

Oh what cruelty,  
 In history what misery.

Soon woman grows cunning  
 Masks her wisdom,  
 30 How otherwise will he  
 Bring food and shelter, kill enemies?  
 If he did not feel superior  
 It would be worse for her  
 And for the tender children  
 35 Worse for them.

Oh what cruelty,  
 In history what misery  
 Of falsity.



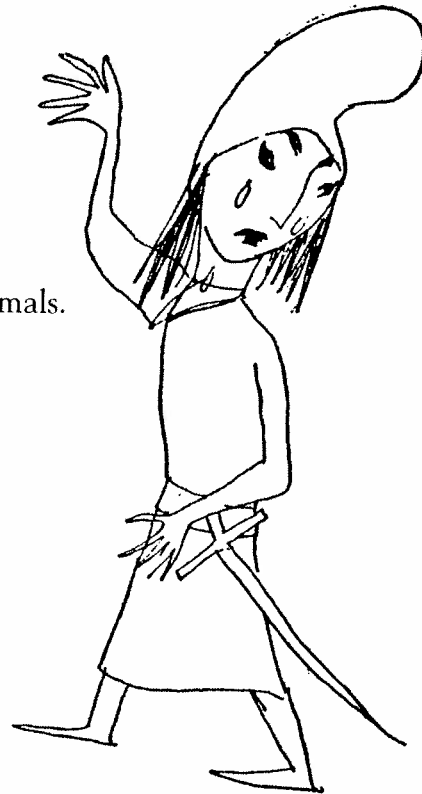
1. A neologism, or invented word; "insuffisance" suggests a blending of "insufficient" and "insufferable," qualities that

40 It is only a legend  
 You say? But what  
 Is the meaning of the legend  
 If not  
 To give blame to women most  
 And most punishment?

45 This is the meaning of a legend that colours  
 All human thought; it is not found among animals.  
 How cruel is the story of Eve,  
 What responsibility it has  
 In history  
 50 For misery.

Yet there is this to be said still:  
 Life would be over long ago  
 If men and women had not loved each other  
 Naturally, naturally,  
 55 Forgetting their mythology  
 They would have died of it else  
 Long ago, long ago,  
 And all would be emptiness now  
 And silence.

60 Oh dread Nature, for your purpose,  
 To have made them love so.



### The New Age

Shall I tell you the signs of a New Age coming?  
 It is a sound of drubbing<sup>o</sup> and sobbing  
 Of people crying, We are old, we are old  
 And the sun is going down and becoming cold  
 5 Oh sinful and sad and the last of our kind  
 If we turn to God now do you think He will mind?  
 Then they fall on their knees and begin to whine  
 That the state of Art itself presages decline  
 As if Art has anything or ever had  
 10 To do with civilization whether good or bad.  
 Art is wild as a cat and quite separate from civilization  
 But that is another matter that is not now under consideration.  
 Oh these people are fools with their sighing and sinning  
 Why should Man be at an end? he is hardly beginning.  
 15 This New Age will slip in under cover of their cries  
 And be upon them before they have opened their eyes.  
 Well, say geological time is a one-foot rule<sup>o</sup>  
 Then Man's only been here about half an inch to play the fool  
 Or be wise if he likes, as he often has been  
 20 Oh heavens how these crying people spoil the beautiful geological scene.

*beating; pounding*

*ruler*