

FIGURE 1 "Be a Doll,"
by Løchlann Jain.
Pen, ink, and digital
manipulation, 2022.

Be a Doll, Blow a Hero: The Apparency of the Drowned

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Positioning the Subject, in which the apparently drowned—as a body that could be otherwise—creates a mechanical quandary unsuited to the sensibilities of modern medical men yet is brought to life as ethically and aesthetically ennobling.

As a surface, water augured, sustained, and conveyed a global economy. As a volume, water threatened to engulf, kill, and conceal the individuals who were bringing that economy to fruition. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European hubs drew adventure- and capital-seeking nobles; ambitious mobiles; and choiceless slaves, prisoners, and servants. These bodies perched precariously at a precise and death-taunting juncture of land, water, and air. A tablespoon or centimeter off balance could make all the difference.

Rivers, canals, and oceans—brackish, clear, deep, or slow—were, like the land they colluded with, integral to major towns: residents waded through muddy thickets to collect food, leaned into canals to wash clothes or scoop water to carry home, or stepped from shallows into boats to get to the opposite bank. On land, people risked injury from fire, muggings, or errant horses, while proximity to water subjected one to shorelines that could suddenly give way. Urban lighting, docks, bridges, and barriers were rare.

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Drownings made their way into death tallies across the continent. *Bills of Mortality* published in London starting in 1603, for example, suggest that drownings accounted for nearly half of all accidental deaths (Spence 2016: 66).¹ In 1790, when a thick fog sheathed Amsterdam on New Year's Eve, ninety people were at one moment dancing merrily in the streets and the next swamped and freezing in the water. Eighty-four of them died (Cappers 1993). And yet drowning did not attract the attention given over to other, newfangled modes of death, such as fire, nor was there any expectation that bystanders could or would aid a drowning person.

By the late eighteenth century this inattention shifted with a vengeance, as drowning advocacy took root across the continent and beyond. By 1796 two Danish physicians could decry, correctly, that the Danes were some thirty years behind other nations' efforts to decrease drowning fatalities. In *An Attempt at an Historical Survey of Life-Saving Measures for Drowning Persons and Information on the Best Means by Which They Can Again Be Brought Back to Life*, the authors aimed to "arouse Good Will in our wealthy Fellow Citizens" and increase "the perfection of Medical Art" (Herholdt and Rafin 1796: preface). They noted that forty-five people a year drowned in Copenhagen. Since "30 fellow Townsmen" each year living another twenty years would result in an increase of six hundred people ("besides their offspring") over the space of thirty years, an excellent return on the costs of lifesaving measures was virtually guaranteed. Such manifestos assembled a range of emergent ideas and technologies: statistics, cost-benefit analysis, advocacy, appeals to brotherly love, resuscitation devices, experimental science, and new forms of governance that included fines, regulations, and rewards.

To be sure, these sociopolitical structures ultimately altered everyday meanings of life and death. But drowning gained a specificity in the overlapping media of advocacy, medicine, art, and literature that availed advocates to process it as a unique sort of event, aesthetic foil, medical and existential ambiguity, and scene for action and identity. The term that emerged in medical advocacy in the mid-eighteenth century, *apparently drowned*, captures the existential mystery of breath in conditions of submersion: the suddenness of life's cessation without air, and the quandary of how breath might be reinstated. The unbreathing body, like an ember, suddenly came to harbor a crucial moment of possibility.

In an age of globalization that conspired to submerge humans in myriad and newfangled ways, representations of drowning effloresced in European stories and

1. Spence (2016: 66) notes that statistics on risk would have been inaccurate, since without a fatal drowning there is "little indication that such an encounter with 'drowning' had occurred at all." Bamji (2020: 33) suggests that drowning "accounted for a very small proportion of deaths" in Venice.

novels, visual cultures for entertainment and edification, and scenes inscribed in medals awarded for lifesaving. Given the semiotic and material proximity of kissing, breathing, and scarcely clad bodies, drowning scenes could not *not* be constituted in relation to desires for and anxieties around intimacy with potential lovers or with strangers. These desires would be concentrated and piqued by the affective resonances of vulnerability: feelings of care, wonder, relief, grief, and gratitude seep through all manner of drowning accounts and accounting. As such, drowning presented a focused node for pondering broader social themes such as good citizenship, samaritanism, and gendered and sexual relations. Since the scope of such ponderings were limited by gender, race, and class, representations of life saving and medicine closely aligned with touchstones of white heteronormativity: male saviorism; beautiful, vulnerable women; and scenes of action and reward. Paradoxically, such social norms and identities did not always correlate to either the best means of resuscitation or any perceived need to rigorously test lifesaving recommendations.

A key question in the literature on humanitarianism has been framed as one of “worthiness.” In an effort to reveal structural inequities in public health, scholars reckon with the value of life: who is considered worth saving, who learns to swim, or who is literally and figuratively thrown overboard in times of emergency. The allied investigation broached here aims to understand the apperency of the drowned body as a projection of fear and desire that structures opportunities for action, heroism, and fantasy. Thus, this essay complicates the vector of “worthiness,” as it exposes lifesaving as a scene of violence in which cultural norms undermine the potential and promise of early Enlightenment science, even for those at the pinnacle of social hierarchies.

A blurry correspondence between person and thing irritates the story of drowning. Thus this history can be animated through a series of doubling events that have defined more broadly understandings of life in relation to death, animate in relation to the inanimate or potentially animate. The history collated here tracks the contiguity of the apparently drowned body in relation to its partially animated proxies: diagrams, drawings, paintings, casts, and masks, all of which became foils by which to practice affective responses to (types of) human bodies in (certain kinds of) trouble, and nodes through which community could be practiced through ideologies of rescue and feelings of responsibility.

Cumming Events Cast their Shadows Before

Though seemingly distant in content and approach from the literature on resuscitation and advocacy that emerged some two hundred years later, Christopher

Marlow's ([1598] 1885) homophilic drowning scene in "Hero and Leander" weaves themes of masculinity, Eros, nudity, and undersea imaginings in a way that provides a useful entry point to understanding the European history of drowning. These themes specifically relate to a paradox that undergirds my investigation: on the one hand, with the rise of Christianity, swimming fell out of favor for reasons of bodily modesty, leading to countless drownings. At the same time, images of young, vulnerable, undressed bodies washed ashore provided civilized entertainment with ample room for fantasy. On the other hand, lifesaving required a rather intimate engagement with bodies, pushing many Europeans out of their comfort zones. The Royal Humane Society report of 1823, for example, recommended that the body be stripped naked and warmed, even before inflating the lungs with a common pair of bellows placed in one nostril (1). Overlapping questions of intimacy, then, would be worked out in and through images of and ideas about drownings, a coincidence that resulted in extensive and shifting confusions about how resuscitations should be undertaken that lasted for a good two centuries.

In the Greek myth, the Strait of Hellespont (itself created by the drowning of Helle when she tumbled from the golden ram) separates the lovers Leander and Hero, who live on opposite sides. Guided by the light atop Hero's tower, Leander swims to her each night. When one night she forgets to ignite the flame, his drowned body bumps against the shore. She suicides in despair.

Of the many retellings, including those of Rudyard Kipling, Alfred Tennyson, Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare, and George Gordon Byron after his own 1810 effort to swim across the Hellespont/Dardanelles, Marlowe's version best dramatizes and eroticizes the material intercourse between water (as Neptune) and man. Neptune, mistaking Leander for Zeus's lover Ganymede, pulls him to the sumptuous floor of the sea, replete with pearls, mermaids, gold, and other treasures. Neptune "embrac'd him, called him 'Love.'" Finally releasing him, "almost dead," Neptune "slides" between Leander's legs, stealing kisses,

And, as he turn'd, cast many a lustful glance,
And throw him gaudy toys to please his eye,
And dive into the water, and there pry
Upon his breast, his thighs, and every limb,
And up again, and close beside him swim,
And talk of love. (Marlow [1598] 1885)

The cost of Leander's survival is Hero's dismay (and escape) on seeing him, full-frontal, as he comes to her door stark naked. (One wonders whether Marlowe's gay

reading extends also to Hero: might her neglect in lighting the torch not have been accidental?) Marlowe has grasped and graphically portrayed the interplays that infused the subsequent European history of drowning.

While Neptune dealt in water, air concerned Hypocrites. In 1732 mouth-to-mouth resuscitation gained traction as a medical intervention thanks to the publication of a case report by a Scottish physician. William Tossach (1752: 607) reported of finding a man who had suffocated in a coal mine: “Not the least Breathing could be observed . . . he was in all Appearance dead. I applied my Mouth close to his, and blew my Breath as strong as I could, . . . I felt six or seven very quick Beats of the Heart; . . . and the Pulse was felt soon after in the Arteries. I then opened a Vein in his Arm, . . . and then he bled freely.” By 1740 the Paris Academy of Sciences officially recommended mouth-to-mouth resuscitation of the apparently drowned. Even as medical practitioners broadly equated the cessation of breath with death, by 1766 a governmental edict from Zurich claimed that those who had lain underwater for extended periods could be restored to life (Atkinson and Boulton 1989).

The Society for Rescuing the Drowned in Amsterdam, founded in 1767 as the first of a series of organizations to arise at this time, took a multipronged approach to rescue. They raised money, offered rewards to those who saved the lives of drowning victims, provided equipment such as poles and ropes, advocated for artificial light at night and protective barriers between land and water, and kept data on drownings and revivals. Similar initiatives were made in Hamburg, Venice, and several other maritime centers. London’s organization, founded in 1774 as the Society for the Recovery of Persons Apparently Drowned (later the Royal Humane Society), aligned its motto, found on its stationery and lifesaving awards and medals with the cryptic inert body: “Lest some spark remain.”

The cofounder, Dr. William Hawes, though much ridiculed, paid for bodies recovered from the Thames to be resuscitated in accordance with specific directions by a group of trained physicians who would then write up the results.² By the end of the nineteenth century, the society maintained 280 receiving houses across Britain for those pulled from the water in shipwrecks or accidents. Drowning was a mechanical problem to be sure: water where air was preferable. But these societies made drowning evident as a social problem by advocating for fines (when, for example, a pub owner refused entry for a resuscitation in progress), awarding prizes to those who saved lives (particularly when they risked their own), sponsoring medi-

2. Diana Coke, archivist of the Royal Humane Society, writing to Ronald Trubuhovich, May 9, 2006 (email) found in the Royal Humane Society Archives at the London Metropolitan Archive, July 11, 2022.



FIGURE 1 (LEFT) “The Body of a Young Man Taken Out of the Water Apparently Dead in the Sight of the Distressed Parents.” Engraved by Robert Pollard, after the painting by Robert Smirke (1787). Credit: The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, London.



FIGURE 2 (RIGHT) “The Young Man Restored to Life.” Engraved by Robert Pollard, after the painting by Robert Smirke (1787). Credit: The Board of Trustees of the Science Museum, London.

cal studies, providing lifesaving instruction, developing and purchasing equipment, and proposing new urban configurations.³

Still, the details of *how* to rekindle this spark of life remained vague. A historian of drowning scrutinizing the archive of the Royal Humane Society finds that accounts identified in illustrations and reports alike most often skip from a drowning scene straight to a celebrated recovery. The details of the resuscitative methods and tools are most often elided. A pair of images (figs. 1 and 2) demonstrates the point. In 1787 the society commissioned the paintings as a gift for Hawes from painter Robert Smirke, known for his dramatic shipwreck scenes. For close to a century these, as well as lithograph copies by Robert Pollard, featured heavily in society publications and related news reports.

It is unclear whether the dyptic refers to a specific event or gestures toward Hawes’s “life-long involvement with resuscitation” (Griffin 1990: 521). Nevertheless, the original paintings and lithograph copies record, even as they disavow, the resuscitation that ostensibly elicits the scene of celebration. The images offer a before-after, tension-release drama, if not a clear cause-and-effect dyad. In the first image, an unconscious, young, naked man is pulled from a pond. His parents, artfully placed on the bank as unlikely witnesses, melt in shock. In the companion image, Dr. John Lettsom, founder of the London Medical Society, motions the overwhelmed and thankful family to rejoin their now animate (though still notably bereft of cloth-

3. The society claimed that 2,319 people had been saved between 1774 and 1799 (Hawes 1799: 4; cited in Bamji 2020: 59). In the eight years between 1784 and 1792, the Dutch Society reported that 297 apparently drowned persons were revived, while 547 died (Cappers 1993: 91).

ing) kin, propped up by Dr. Hawes. The tools of the trade lie scattered in the painting's foreground: a warming pan and bottles—liquor and apothecary. Notably, nothing relates specifically to how the resuscitation took place. For example, there are no bellows, which would, at the time, have been recommended for “inflating the lungs and injecting Stimulating vapours” (fig. 3).⁴

Two points bear noting in this dense iconography. First, Robert Pollard inscribed the title and a dedication to the king in both English and French, as he was “evidently assured of a sale on the Continent, where interest in the rescue of the drowned was as great as in England” (Winter 1974: 1578). Second, the mascot of the society, the angelic cherub, is given pride of place. In the Royal Humane Society’s logo, on Pollard’s etchings as well as on their medals and letterhead, the cherub blows the torch in an effort to rekindle it, thus illustrating the society motto. In the second image, success! The cherub smiles with its face to the viewer, the torch now fully aflame and the motto replaced with the portrait of the king. Successful drowning resuscitation links with the sovereign overseeing the health of his citizens.

In its effort to advertise the society, advocate for lifesaving work, commend its founders, and sell an artwork, the promissory image raises and then salves panic. It homes in on the most valuable social member—a young white man in the prime of life—at once at risk and recovered, unmarred by bodily fluids out of place, moral quandaries, or medical inefficacy. In a few decades the aesthetics of drowning will switch from male to female victims. But for now, despite the pastoral scenography of this image, drowned men would have provoked a real sense of urgency, due to lives lost at sea that commonly rendered wives and children destitute.

Lifesaving may in theory be “beautiful,” as physician Marshall Hall claimed in 1856. But in practice, the thought of a man resting his lips on those of another man provoked enough aversion, disgust, or illicit desire to ban the method of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation entirely. This, despite the links between air, lungs, and life

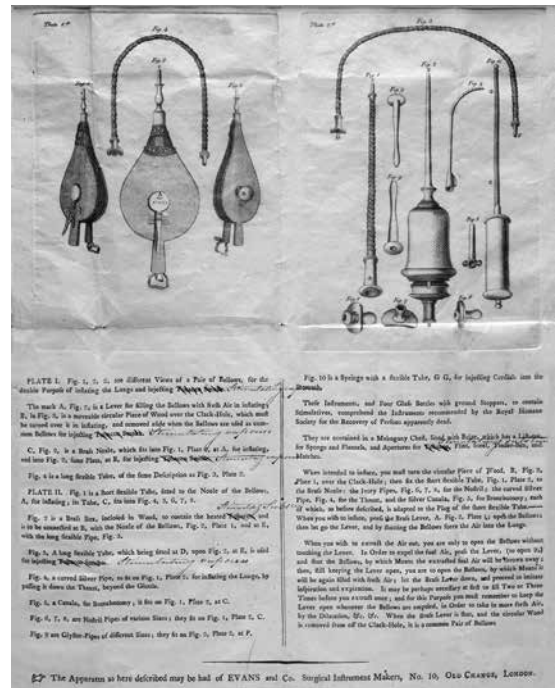


FIGURE 3 Advertisement for a tobacco resuscitator kit (Evans and C. Surgical Instrument Makers, 1774). Credit: Sir Henry Wellcome’s Museum Collection.

4. Evans and C. Surgical Instrument Makers, 1774, no. 10, Old Change, London, advertisement held at the Wellcome Library Collection, London.

having been a fundamental preoccupation of experimental science in the 1600s. By the late eighteenth century, mouth-to-mouth had fallen into disfavor “because it was vulgar” (Karpovitch 1953: 19) and “toilsome and loathsome” (Herholdt and Rafin 1790: 14). The ban, at least in theory, enabled strangers and potential samaritans to at least consider assisting someone in need, since they could offer the recommended assistance without having to go at it, *bouche-a-bouche*, with a stranger. It would be fair to say, from today’s perspective, that the deletion of mouth-to-mouth respiration most likely led to more attempted saves and fewer actual saves and that etiquette not only trumped efficacy, but obscured the very question of efficacy.

In any case, at that time, insufflation with air did not seem necessary. In 1775 surgeon P. Beije blew tobacco smoke into the anus of a victim to stimulate the lungs; the boy revived, and the surgeon claimed a prize (Cappers 1993: 83). The pressing of air into the lungs vied with, and lost to, warming, blowing smoke, beating with nettles, bloodletting, and massaging as the primary immediate actions. From today’s vantage point it seems more likely that these “drowned” bodies were unconscious rather than actually unbreathing, and the many lifesaving tales collected in the annual reports don’t usually specify which methods were used, making it difficult to determine which methods were working. While early suffocation studies of the prior century clearly indicated the exigency

of continued and repeated inspiration and expiration in the chemical and spiritual equation of continued life, this aversion to mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was soon justified scientifically with the theory that desaturated, “dephlogisticated,” pre-breathed air was as bad (or good) for a body as no air at all.

It’s also not inconceivable that drowners died of complications related to homophobia. Consider



FIGURE 4 Illustration of the Ready Method of resuscitation (Hall 1856: 458).

one particularly homoerotic illustration appearing in the *Lancet* in 1856 (Hall 1856: 468). “The Ready Method in Asphyxia” frames a bucolic scene: a prone nude centers a calm river eddy, posies of reeds, and four attentive, limb-massaging and surprisingly elfin fellows who studiously ignore the ripe and naked buttocks in their midst (fig. 4). Unlike an image that illustrates Tossach’s publication, no sense of urgency, panic, wasted energy, or anxiety interrupts this work-a-day demonstration of the “Ready Method” (a method that, as studies a hundred years later would demonstrate, had no

chance whatsoever of working). No spectators stretch their arms in dismay to suggest anything is amiss, and the other subject, asphyxia itself, remains as calm and comfortable in the knowledge of its triumph as the water that caused it.

One begins to see in these images new subject positions bounded by civilized intimacy, availing events now configured as potentially life-saving. Passive male victims and gentlemanly, if not heroic, gestures toward salvation would soon give way to the stigmatization of illness and victimhood. With the shift toward Muscular Christianity and a gendered imaginary in which victims were depicted more often as female, subjects could imagine new forms of involvement in scenarios of action. The Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society's medal, for example, given for heroic rescues, featured a theme echoed across many of the national lifesaving medals (fig. 5). A young, rippling muscled man clad in loose cloth from the waist down reaches from a raft toward a naked unconscious child being hoisted by a woman in the water, while another group of men hoist a buxom topless woman onto a rowboat. Heroic images such as these would continue to compete with a more Romantic notion that tied drowning to erotic love, suicide, and seduction.⁵ Scenes of rescue remained utterly distinct from the ability to preserve life.

The breath recedes.

An Armoire of Drowned

The work of French sailor Charles Meryon offers a more dramatic, if less sexy, drowning narrative. Published just two years after Hall's medical article, Meryon's works "remained popular not simply for their record of Paris before the transformations effected by Baron Haussmann or their technical brilliance, but also for their romantic, slightly sinister, portrayal of medieval sites as filtered through Meryon's individual and tortured sensibility" (Miller 1999: 4). Two successive scenes (figs. 6



FIGURE 5 Medal of the Liverpool Shipwreck and Humane Society, 1839. Photograph by the author.

5. I investigate these points in much more detail in a forthcoming book on this topic.



FIGURE 6 "Pont-au-change." Engraved by Charles Meryon (1854). Credit: H. O. Havemeyer Collection, Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer Bequest, 1929.

and 7) from his collection of etchings, *Eaux fortes sur Paris* (*Strong Waters in Paris*, 1852), take place in the center of the city where the Seine parts around the Île de la Cité.

The scenes tell an ambiguous story: the first portrays a man surely drowning and the next, a corpse dragged toward Paris's morgue. If the missing middle of the Royal Society images obscured the specifics of resuscitation, Meryon omits the details of the drowning event. Paris at that moment would surely have been in equal parts crowded and lonely—populated by strangers as ready to ignore or hurt one another as to help them. In *Le Pont-au-Change* (the same bridge from which Inspector Javert suicides in Victor Hugo's novel of the same period) a figure—large by comparison to those proximate—in the Seine stretches both arms toward a boat in which three men look skyward.

The next etching in Meryon's series, *La morgue*, offers a glorious last glimpse of the medieval apartments around the corner from Le Pont-au-Change. These would soon be destroyed by Haussmann's urban hygiene projects, which also required the removal of the morgue from that location in 1864. The action takes place in the lower left, boxed away between a bridge's dark diagonal shadow and a boat's steam pipe. Here two bearded men awkwardly haul a limp corpse who has arrived by boat. The man is now naked, his clothes have perhaps been torn off in an effort to resuscitate him. Or perhaps the nude indicates the artist's prerogative in signifying to

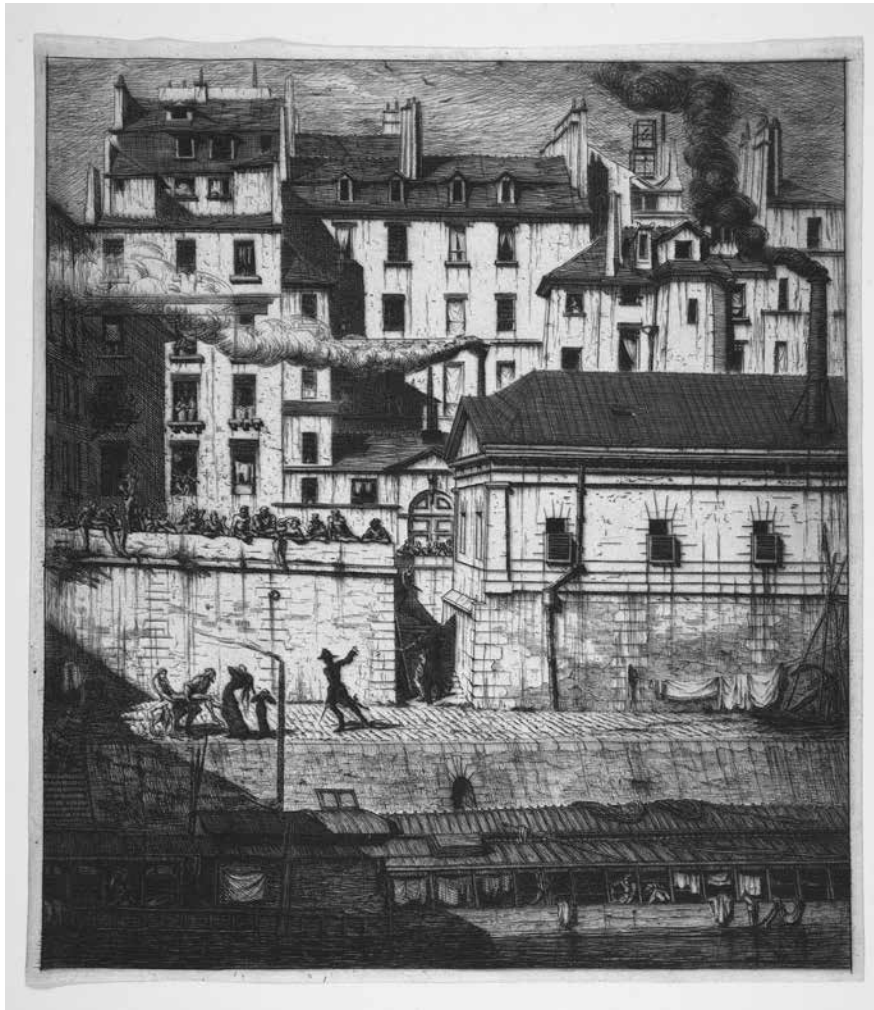


FIGURE 7 The Mortuary, Paris (La Morgue). Engraved by Charles Meryon (1854). Credit: Bequest of Susan Dwight Bliss, 1966.

the viewer that this body is both dead by drowning and a *sujet d'art* in the archetypal sense.

A closely knit row of bystanders rests against the wall while others gaze from windows above, posed as if they were extras batted down for a long theatrical scene. The clutter of buildings and spectators crowd a darkly clad woman and a child (wife and daughter, one assumes), and a gesticulating gendarme. Such curiosities were all part of daily life and death at the Paris Morgue and, one imagines, in the

crowded narrow streets of pre-Haussmann Paris whose sewers and industrial waste flowed directly into the Seine.

The Paris Morgue, in existence by 1604, was transferred from the Châtelet prison to the Marché-Neuf on Île de la Cité, a bourgeois building that “bathed its feet in the river that produced its goods” (Maillard 1860: 98).⁶ The drowned became principal luminaries in an institution that played a nearly mythic role in Paris, as hinted by the newspaper the *Figaro* in 1858: “the Morgue is an armoire of the drowned” (96, citing *Figaro*, February 18).

Bodies, refreshed with a trickle of water from above that served as refrigeration, lay behind glass on marble slabs seven days a week, their clothes pallid semaphores draped from hooks above. Though it was acceptable to peer at corpses, their genitals were covered by a leather swatch: “in effect, the uniform of the Morgue” (25). After three days on display, the unclaimed were buried, and clothes were displayed for a further fifteen days (49, 52). Visitors of all classes and nations visited the *salle d'exposition* (Martens 2007: 223). Parisians and paysans, sometimes twenty thousand or more a day, wandered down to “find the day’s news, examine the assassinated, count the drowned, and inspect the hanged” (Maillard 1860: 94, citing Louis Enault). Particularly gruesome or newsworthy deaths drew larger crowds still.

If decapitations and murders studded the scene behind the drawn red curtains of the morgue’s stage, drowning sang the chorus, representing two-thirds of the deaths (63–69). Records from the decade 1836–46 indicate that 2,851 corpses (excluding neonates and fetuses) made it to the morgue, 1,808 of whom had drowned from suicide and accidents. The next most numerous causes of death were 114 hangings and 105 killed in traffic accidents (63–69). In 1867, 312 of the 578 adults at the morgue had been dredged from the Seine (Martens 2007: 240).

Identification, edification, and a version of pleasure vied for primacy. The morgue, “with its huge windows framing the corpses on display, . . . bore an uncomfortable resemblance to a department store,” with perhaps similar pleasures of visual consumption (Soth 2020). Guidebooks listed it alongside sewers, catacombs, and the abattoir as a means for tourists to better understand Paris and its people (Martens 2007: 232). Others, like contemporary playwright Léon Gozlan, understood its pure entertainment value: “You go there to see the drowned as elsewhere you go to see the latest fashion” (226).

With noses pressing and fogging the glass between onlookers and a row of reclining corpses, observers might study and muse over these strangers, imagining the rural villages they came from and the hopes with which they arrived in the capital

6. All translations are the author’s.

and the circumstances by which they met their maker, possibly indulging a death wish or other moment of nostalgia of their own. Zola's oeuvre, for example, featured references to suicide as a means of escape and drowning as the most peaceful way by which to achieve it. Similarly, Charles Dickens wrote about the Paris Morgue, while drowning featured prominently in his works.

Still, descriptions bear out the rather gruesome reality of drowned bodies: "Often the flesh of the face was coming away bit by bit, the bones had pierced the softened skin, and the whole face was a mere flabby pulp" (Zola [1867] 1962: 108; McCauley 2020: 72–76). Such reports stultify too sentimental an understanding of what roles, and why, these drowned corpses served for the multitudes who bore witness to them. Given the sheer numbers of onlookers and the small proportion of Parisian deaths that drowning represented, one can conclude that the figures on display played an outsized role in the public's imagination until the morgue's closure in 1906.

The body is borne.

White Fomy Creame

While depictions of drowned women were not used in early medical resuscitation illustrations, they were nevertheless a near cliché in nineteenth-century painting. Untouched by the corrosive effects of water seen at the morgue, these perfectly preserved bodies of the drowned, semi-draped with clingy and transparent wet clothing, offered the possibility of an errant caress (with no one to tell) or even the frisson of imagining oneself, a grubby frog, emerging as the life-giving prince. The observers of women's bulbous parts need not avert their gazes but could integrate these bodies into their own forms of knowing and being, at once linking and juxtaposing mastery against vulnerability.

In her book on nineteenth-century paintings of dead women, art historian Elisabeth Bronfen (1992: 207) examines how "culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women," aiming to understand the interwoven tropes of death and femininity. Lifeless bodies disguise and enable forms of life. The anatomist in Enrique Simonet's painting *Anatomy of a Heart* (1890), for example, pensively regards the exhumed heart of his subject/object. Bronfen notes that such paintings can be read as showing the anatomist as the one who can translate the death into a scientific study that will carry "his own signature. . . [H]is experience of this death serves in part as a form of self-articulation" (207). The abstraction of death in these images diverts attention from characteristics of actual bodies: smell, sound, breath, vomit, illness, mood, and—let's not forget—the possibility of refusal.

More specifically, the genre established a hierarchy not only between dead and alive but also as a binary in which the survivors cloaked in the trappings—the dress, the gesture, the habitus—of expertise embodied knowledge itself. Medicine and art shared the ability to assert a vision for what could be appropriate subjects, methods and techniques, and affective engagements. This survivorship narrative required not only this shoring up and sentimentalizing of masculinity (the very definition of the male gaze) but also the creation of corresponding roles—which often had overlapping and contradictory burdens between expected behaviors and representations—for women.

The drowned and suffocated, their bodies for the most part left unmarked, were favorites among actual anatomists as well as painted ones. Unclaimed bodies were readily accessible for physicians in the UK and United States after the passage of various “anatomy acts” in the 1830s, and so one can infer that many of the represented drowned women would have been without kin. The first edition of *Gray’s Anatomy*, a book of illustrations for anatomists, was published in 1858. Gray’s treatise featured diagrams of body parts—an ankle, a stomach—solitary against a neutral background. At the same time as medicine was abstracting the body into normative and representative parts shared by everyone, distinctions of gender and race became more insistently marked.

These representations of expertise and drowned women contextualize the reception of one of the most influential and famous drowners of all time. The teenager who was to become known as “L’Inconnue” was found in the Seine in the 1880s and had possibly been raped and/or murdered, or maybe her death had been a suicide or an accident. At any rate, a body ended up in the chilled room at the Paris Morgue where an infatuated employee, the story goes, crafted a death mask of the sort that commonly decorated homes of the era. Whether this anecdote is true or not is not known. Regardless, the mask inspired hundreds, if not thousands, of stories, poems, songs, drawings, and photographs, reaching its apogee not until some fifty years later.

The mask of L’Inconnue de la Seine, which Albert Camus (possibly apocryphally) dubbed the “drowned Mona Lisa” (Sciolino 2017), could be purchased as a souvenir on the Left Bank, and soon enough throughout Europe. L’Inconnue was an object with the features of a subject; she was a person with “no physical body and no social body, no name, no fixed position within a kinship structure, and no story” (Bronfen 1992: 207). She became a “cipher for all possible divergent explanations and desires which its spectators wanted to project on it” (207). Notables such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Louis Aragon, Man Ray, Vladimir Nabokov, Pablo Picasso, Maurice Blanchot, Jule Supervielle, Alberto Giacometti, Anais Nin, Louis-Ferdinand Celine, François

Truffaut, and many, many lesser-known figures (Pinet 2002) could therefore employ her as a muse to work out themes of deception, beauty, happiness, seduction, and magic. By “the 20s and early 30s, all over the Continent, nearly every student of sensibility had a plaster-cast of her death-mask” (Alvarez 1971: 156).

Essayists, too, took part in the action. In an introduction to August Sander’s photographic portraits, German writer Alfred Döblin (1994: 9) attempts to pinpoint her attraction. Döblin moves seamlessly from L’Inconnue’s “initial despair” and “horror of suffocation” to the “uncanny element of seduction and temptation.” His writing is one indication of a broader phenomenon of enlisting the spectacle of an autoerotic asphyxiation / suicide of a beautiful young white woman in the process of working out broader social commitments, which in turn become the sites of working out bystander identities in conditions of emergency.⁷

Easy to transport, and with a satisfying heft, funerary masks were used by the ancients to transmit the likeness of an individual at a time when there were no accurate paintings. Like light on a photographic plate, or a typewriter key impressing ink on a page, the cast of a face guaranteed fidelity, capturing skin folds, fine lines, and sometimes a few hairs or flakes of skin. Georg Kolbe describes death masks in a famous book on the subject, *Undying Faces*, published by Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press in 1922. He notes the “supernatural character” of the “undying,” the not-quite-captured character of a subject as it appears in a death mask (Kolbe 1929).

The doubling effect of the mask, stuck between life and death, subject and object, offers a literal analogy of the uncanny—the life inferred from a representation seems to witness a seeming inability *not* to attribute some version of life to a representation of a face (not unlike the uncanny of the apparently drowned person with its potential flicker of life just out of view). Still, the making of a death mask requires a corpse, a subject that has already become object, a last effort to secure a memory or souvenir before the jar of ashes arrives in the mail.

Death masks presaged mannequins, Madame Tussaud’s wax figures, and fingerprints in their efforts to “find and transmit marks of identity” (Simons 2012). In this sense, L’Inconnue is already a paradox: a death mask with a superficial referent to only her beauty, her death, her (assumed) suicide, and a death by drowning. No one could attest to the micro-movements, warmth, and personality of a prior existence, leaving her, like a new lover, wide open for fantasy. Unlike the masks of Ludwig von Beethoven or Oliver Cromwell, old men whose faces registered ill health, L’Incon-

7. In this vein, one might consider D. H. Lawrence’s short story, “The Horse Dealer’s Daughter” (1922). There, a doctor jumps into a pond to save a young woman who has suicided. When revived, she takes his action as one of love.

nue offered a jejune face through which a European audience was already primed to ponder themes of love, suicide, and terror. *L'Inconnue*—in tens of thousands of copies—belonging to everyone and no one, joins at an odd angle a history of the death masks of famous old men, becoming a “cipher for all possible divergent explanations and desires which its spectators wanted to project on it” (Bronfen 1992: 207). Albeit divergent, the explanations do tend to relax into a deeply sentimental mode, notably different from the drowning activism of the previous century. Unlike those authors who decried the waste of life of their kinspeople, Kolbe (1929: 118), using a mixed Icarus metaphor, writes of this child drowned in the Seine as a “dainty butterfly fluttering without a care around the flame of life and so destroying and burning her wings before her time.”

The mask softens.

The Body Is a Dummy

There are moments in history when drowning, smoking, asthma, choking, polio, hanging, and other forms of curbed respiration gained currency as a medical research area in ways that served others (Jain 2023). And so the threat of poison gas in warfare heightened concerns about suffocation in the twentieth century. In 1957, when more doctors smoked Camels than any other cigarette and more people suffocated from cigarettes than in any other way, a military interested in the effects of poison gas supported the first genuine randomized control trial of resuscitation methods.

To compare mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to the contemporary standard procedures, such as raising and lowering the patient’s arms, Dr. Peter Safar and Dr. James Elam (1958) chemically paralyzed twenty-five volunteers, rendering them unable to breathe. Only mouth-to-mouth, he found, could successfully reoxygenate victims. What’s more, even “small women and Boy Scouts” could provide efficacious ventilation. After centuries of development and debate, the other methods were found to be essentially useless.

Proposing one simple method trained into habit, Safar (1960: 5) suggested: “The key to successful resuscitation is immediate oxygenation, speed being more important than the concentration of oxygen in the resuscitative gas. . . . Once an emergency arises, it is usually too late to think about what should be done.” Thus they replaced three dominant ideas: first, that stimulation and warming should be primary over oxygenation; second, that putting the body in various positions could impact air in the lungs and approximate breathing; and third, that specific instances of breathlessness require unique resuscitation techniques. The last idea was implied

in Peter Karpovitch's 1953 book, *Adventures in Artificial Respiration*. Featuring a chart of 114 resuscitation methods, he claims that a would-be rescuer could "easily locate the best method for the given situation." Flipping through the detailed book, the speedy identification of an appropriate method in a time of panic is hard to imagine.

In 1966, while Safar attended a conference away from home, his twelve-year-old daughter suffocated to death during an asthma attack. Realizing that someone trained in his methods could have saved her, Safar took to the road, widely publishing and advocating his findings. Safar and Elam factored out indecision (do I approach this stranger? Which method should I use?) through the training of one method practiced to habituation.

Despite the tiny chance that one would need to use it and the infinitesimal chance of it working if they did, cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and artificial respiration became the first medical technique taught broadly as a public health initiative (Baskett 2003). In short order, lifesaving classes, institutionalized through Christian and humanist groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association, Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, and the Humane Society, became a familiar facet of a middle-class Euro-American experience, although they were far from standardized.⁸

Still, Elam and Safar shared a quandary with both Jesus and the early members of the Society for the Resuscitation of the Apparently Drowned: how to elicit a willingness in people to press their lips to the mouths of strangers? Karpovitch (1953: 9–10) captured the problem perfectly:

If the victim happened to be a movie starlet looking exactly the way she looks in Technicolor there probably would be a Stampede among eager male rescuers anxious to be of help. But if the victim were an old, dirty, bearded, drunken man, . . . lying in a gutter with his respiration stopped because of alcoholic poisoning, how many male or female lifesavers would be eager to touch with their lips the mustache and beard covered with vomitus? A real Samaritan might do it but how many real Samaritans are there among us?

Mass-produced training required mass-produced equipment for which Safar approached a Norwegian inventor, Asmund Laerdal, an expert in the soft plastic polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Laerdal ran a thriving business making wound moulages such as adhesive cuts and blisters, as well as best-selling toys, the Anne doll and Tomte truck. Laerdal had—according to company lore—saved the life of his own son in 1955 after dredging his apparently drowned body from a lake, and so was eager

8. Frank Pia, interview by author, December 5, 2023.



FIGURE 8 Laerdal with Resusci Anne. Credit: Laerdal Medical.

to take on the project (AmCham Norway 2022). They unveiled the world's first patient simulator in 1960: Resusci Anne.

There were technical challenges to be sure: the doll had to be convincing as a look-alike object not only anatomically similar enough to train on (with “lungs” and a “heart”) but also attractive enough to provoke a desire to learn (with “features” and a “face”). As a patient simulator, the object had to be satisfying: the rubber soft enough to elastically yield to one's breath, the movement of a “chest” adequate to communicate that there was a relation

between the action and potential vitality. And the goal was not solely to teach a set of skills, but also to change behaviors and expectations—to create the possibility, plausibility, acceptability, desirability, and even *duty* for strangers not only to help but also to do so by placing their own mouth onto the mouth of a stranger in the age of polio, measles, homophobia, and gender and racial segregation. The training mandate needed to tip the balance toward the stranger's closeness, rather than distance, rendering them harmless and attractive: Resusci Anne (fig. 8) fit this bill.

If the swollen lips and yellowed teeth of unconscious sailors did not inspire others to expire in intimate proximity of their owners, Laerdal tapped into an adjacent figure, the trope of the beautiful young, white, and dead woman. In this story's key twist, Laerdal hired sculptor Emma Matthiassen to model Resusci Anne based on L'Inconnue. A revived L'Inconnue enabled tens of millions of people to learn CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

The invention of Annie corresponded to a period in which public pools across America were closing. Rather than allow African Americans into public pools as a result of the desegregation mandates of the era, several states shut them down. In their place, white communities subsidized private community pools or backyard pools. As a result, Black Americans lost access to swimming lessons as well as access to a culture of recreational swimming, including access to actual lifeguards who, it has been suggested, tended not to notice struggling Black swimmers as quickly as they noticed white swimmers in trouble. This soon came to correlate with higher rates of drowning among Black Americans that have only recently diminished (Wiltse 2014). In the meantime, learning to swim, CPR, and artificial respiration for drowning victims were increasingly bundled and required for not-obviously

allied certifications, such as college degrees, which tended to under-represent all but white men. The adoption of a white female model in the training of hands-on lifesaving scenarios cannot be unbound with the making and meaning of liberal hetero-normative white middle-class citizenship.

Not just a technical object, Annie evolved into a cultural hallmark: Michael Jackson borrowed the CPR language when he staccato crooned “Annie are you okay, are you okay, Annie.” In the fullness of the awkward intimacies she required, she also became something of a rite of passage, smeared in uncomfortable or dark jokes about lesbianism and necrophilia. Corpse, mask, child’s doll, sex doll, anatomical model, rape-able and robbable: she is a lover and a person in deep, deep trouble who very much needs your help.

Thus various semiotic threads compete for primacy at any given moment in consideration of this doll as drowned person. First, Annie, like any drowned person, is open to the fantasies of the would-be caretaker and/or aggressor. Second, resuscitation is about a general form of the body that has been made into a PVC model: every human physiologically breathes in similar enough ways. The model *is* the human body. Third, this victim may provoke the disgust and fear of the potentially lifesaving stranger on whom they depend because of their race, class, gender, excretions, or the possibility that they may not be in need of saving at all: they may be that most semiotically dense of all objects—a corpse. Any real or practice lifesaving moment contains all these mutually constituting threads, even as they are insistently disavowed in Safar and Elam’s national lessons in humanitarian responsibility.

The smile is an open wound.

Between Sharks and Spades

Dolls have their uses, as foils, yes, but also, according to psychologists, as physical and emotional attachment objects, as playmates, in role play. The child uses the miniature double as a means of triangulating an attachment, for example, in rebuking an authority figure: *Annie says I don’t have to eat my broccoli*. Through the body of the doll, the child is able to “explore the parameters of the adult world” (Simms 1996: 672). For generations, girls explored the intimate caretaking expectations of womanhood—hugging babies, changing diapers, playing house. Dolls, more than trucks and dinosaurs, served as the means by which gender was assumed, taught, and enforced.

Still, doll designers pointedly disavowed (or hid) sex bits. A year after Resusci Anne was rolled out, cockless Ken’s plastic briefs were permanently affixed to taboo genitalia—thus sentencing many a girl not only to unslaked curiosity but also to unpreparedness for the cumming adventures in penises at the same time as she was

being groomed to eventually accept—even welcome—the mysterious member into her body, and then tend to that of the resulting child.

In 1977 Archie Bunker’s grandson doll, boxed with tiny diapers and a tiny bottle, offered the first “anatomically correct” male doll, featuring a tiny penis (“a physically correct male”) that spurting water was placed in its mouth.⁹ The ads highlight the item as a little brother or a little son—not a little lover with whom to engage in some rough play, not a medical patient on whom to surgically remove an appendage, not an underage drowned boy on whom to superimpose sentimental backstories. No. The three- or four-year-old girl on the box illustration awkwardly holds the apparatus (not a collaborator): a doll nearly as large as she is. The tagline declares, without evidence, “A little girl will love playing mommy to a baby boy for a change . . . especially sweet Joey Stivic with his blue eyes, rooted hair, soft vinyl skin, and winning smile”—as if gender was the only meaningful vector of difference (how about playing with a South Asian or thalidomide baby for a change). Only a generation earlier, the prideful Archie would not have been misplaced at a State Fair “Better Babies” competition sponsored by a local eugenics society.

Something could be said, one supposes, about penis envy, although Joey’s particular penis isn’t detailed enough for the girl to know if it’s one of those she would want to own or suck. Meanwhile, there’s Archie. On the toy’s box, the archetypal sexist, racist old man coddles his nubby grandson, passing this pride in the male lineage off to a young girl in a fixed, unresponsive clump of plastic with the suggestion that if she doesn’t feel it even with sweet Joey Stivic—if she pulls out his rooted hair, cuts into his soft vinyl skin, or sits on his winning smile—her own girlhood, and thus personhood, would come into question. *Young ladies don’t . . .*

Of course, parents off at work make threats idle. As Rilke ([1913] 2018) noted, in the nineteenth century the doll playmate “would almost enrage us by its horrible dense forgetfulness, and the hatred which must always have been an unconscious part of our connection with it would burst to the surface.” The “girl” *can* throw or injure the doll, the “boy” *can* secret a snuggle, the child can put it in a dress or imagine the doll’s penis attached to or inside them. Maybe errant play or disinterest is how the girl comes to recognize that he is not a girl. The “original” shifts . . . the girl now wants a boy-doll, the girl now wants a truck, the boy now wants a doll, the girl wants not to have to play with a doll, the boy wants to be a girl, the new doll models are Black and brown, the girl doll has a penis. No longer a mere copy, the doll original plays out dark social transformations against its brightly idealized goal of cathecting social values.

9. Packaging for “Archie Bunker’s Grandson Joey Stivic,” 1976, produced by Tandem Productions, Inc., Ideal Toy Corp, Hollis, NY.



FIGURE 9 “Drowning Boy,” by Løchlann Jain. Pen, ink, and digital manipulation, 2022.

An armoire of dolls, recursive, messages received and rejected and interpreted anew, through the generations, creating new originals, new ideas to live by (fig. 9).

Resusci Anne contains the uncanny interpolative goals of any doll. And like little girls, not all men fall for an idea sprung on them about “proper behaviors” toward dolls and strangers. If the samaritan story sets up a grand humanist narrative about proper codes of behavior and self-making at the same time as explicitly excluding some people from partaking in that narrative, then the doll renders opportunities for something else altogether.

The infrastructure that produced Resusci Anne’s all too benevolent lifesaving project harnesses and reproduces white bourgeois values and agency with differential social effects. Thus she materializes a story that can be resisted, rejected, and reenvisioned in ways that are not fully, or solely, explainable through accounts of criminality or malice. Real and imagined (if there is a difference) women can be caught between these narratives.

Chuck Palahniuk (2005) envisions one version of this something else in his short *L'Inconnue/Resusci Anne* story, "Exodus." Small-town police detectives jockey to take "Breather Betty" for the night, returning her each morning with a gummy, smelly lungful of ejaculate. Palahniuk's Breather Betty might as well be the sex doll Ms. Wonderful (\$89.79), who was advertised as "perfect ladies! They don't whine when you watch football & drink beer. They love all kinds of sex, even kinky!! They NEVER get headaches" (Schwartz 1996: 127). Still, in "Exodus" the doll has a protector in the female clerk, who, stuck with the job of scrubbing Breather Betty out each morning, allies with and designs ways to protect her. She hides razor blades in Betty's throat, ignoring the miserable men as they limp into her office in the morning to return Betty after their evening romp. Breather Betty is not as predictable as Ms. Wonderful, but the story's ending, which won't be spoiled here, suggests that male supremacy rests on an entitlement to violence that may allow for some resistance but ultimately little recourse.

Traces of decay yet to come, the promise of the drowned body's unmarked, uninjured perfection has availed itself to water-boarders and water-colorists, philanderers and philosophers, gapers and saviors with varied interests in the mysteries, consumption, and integration of death and deaths. Nearly because of the scope and scale of responses to the apparently drowned body, the *civilized* response has consistently been made and remade ever in a sea of contradiction. The stranger—raced, gendered, classed, siliconed—who presents as wet and inert, the stranger who presents as potential savior, the strangers with varied and maybe undefined interests in each other and the act of saving and being saved meet in and make a history of drowning.

Meanwhile, Resusci-Anne lies on the verge of life and death with her open mouth, vinyl heart, and empty lung. She nods to the apparently drowned corpse with smoke billowing up his arse; she considers blowing the lusty hunk extracting her from the Thames; she eyes her neighbor on the Parisian marble slab, water dribbling along a curled lock; she winks at the milky virgin drowned by a painter's oily hand; she shrugs toward the brooding philosopher's conspirations of her routine and recursive death; she abides the alginate coating on her face in its journey into tourist knick-knack; she stays in character for the juicy boys hovering over her dead body, squandering their purist affections and most vile actions; and she lends her pliable artifice to anyone who wants to refashion their own bodies and selves, reconfiguring Laerdal's prime rubbery ingredients.

Be a doll, blow a hero.

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