Out of the Blue (Excerpt)

SUMMARY

The speaker, a man trapped in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on 9/11, speaks directly to the reader/an onlooker filming him, declaring that "you" have noticed him. In distant footage of the burning building, you've just spotted a billowing white shirt.

The truth is that the speaker is waving that shirt over and over again. He's so high up that he's just a speck in the clouds, but he's still waving and waving. He wonders if anyone watching can see a human being worthy of rescue.

He wonders when you will come to save hime, and if you think you're just looking at a man shaking away some crumbs or hanging up his laundry rather than signaling for help.

He's trying his best. The brutal heat of the fire behind him is pushing him forward, but he's not ready to wave the white flag of surrender. He's not yet hopeless enough to jump.

A bird flies past the man. The ground is horrifically far below. It's horrific that others like him are plummeting through the air, their bodies spinning wildly as they fall.

He wonders if your eyes can even believe what they're seeing: that he's still up there in the tower, and still alive.

But he's starting to get increasingly tired. The sounds of ambulances and fire trucks ring out from the ground. He's lost feeling in his arm and is losing his willpower. He asks a loved one directly if they can see him. He is giving up, surrendering.

THEMES

TERROR, DESPAIR, AND LOSS OF HOPE

Armitage's poem, part of a longer sequence titled "Out of the Blue," imagines the desperate final moments of a man trapped in the World Trade Center on 9/11 (the poem is based on actual footage from the day). The poem traces the man's loss of hope and control as the tragic reality of his situation sets in and his death becomes ever more inevitable. Facing death, the poem illustrates, is terrifying and overwhelming.

At first, the speaker tries to get the reader's—or anyone's—attention, hoping that his life can still be saved. The man waves a white cotton shirt, "twirling [and] turning" it in a desperate attempt to get help. He understands that he's hard to see—a part of a "distant shot of a building burning" and "small in the clouds." He also observes other people leaping or falling out of the tower, calling the sight of their "wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling" bodies "appalling"—utterly shocking and horrific.

Still, the speaker is "trying and trying" to get someone to rescue him, insisting that his white shirt is not "the white [flag] of surrender" and seeming confused as to why no one has yet "come" to help. The "depth" below him is sickening, and he can't yet imagine "diving" off the building as others have done. His refusal to give in conveys his intense desire to survive, but it also reflects the difficulty of confronting the terrible truth of his situation: that he has no control, and that rescue is impossible.

Eventually, though, terrible reality sets in. He can wave as much as he wants, but there's nothing anyone can do to help him. The "[s]irens" of ambulances and fire trucks are too far "below," unable to reach him; he's so high up that a bird flies past. The speaker's arm goes "numb" from all the waving, and his hope gives way to despair as he wonders whether anyone is even aware that he's still alive. He then asks, "Do you see me, my love." That this question ends with a full stop, rather than a question mark, conveys the man's utter despair and hopelessness, as though he knows full well the answer: no one can identify him, and he can't even say goodbye to those he loves.

The speaker's last word, "flagging," acknowledges that he's given in: the shirt which he waved in a desperate plea to get help now does become a symbol of surrender. He has no control over anything except when to jump.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

CATASTROPHE AND INSIGNIFICANCE

In addition to illustrating the terror of death, the human desire to survive, and the pain of losing hope, Armitage's poem also conveys the immense horror of 9/11 itself. Zooming in on a single man makes the tragedy personal and visceral, yet the poem also makes clear that this man is just one of many who lost their lives that day. The poem highlights the overwhelming, almost unfathomable chaos and horror of the terrorist attack, in turn juxtaposing humanity's capacity for destruction with the smallness and fragility of individual human life.

The speaker, who is the poem's lone voice, desperately waves his shirt to get help. For him, it doesn't matter that he's part of a major event in human history: he just wants to live. Other moments in the poem emphasize his individual perspective, such as his observation of a bird flying past as if nothing is happening, or his pained cry in the last line: "Do you see me, my

love." This reminds the reader that the man was a real person with his own life and loved ones; he's not *just* a symbol of the day's horror.

But the man also knows he's hard to see and appreciates the scale of what's happening. The catastrophe is far bigger than him, and he is just one of the thousands in the same or similar horrific predicaments. The images of him relentlessly waving shirt, growing tired, and hoping someone will save him illustrate just how small he is compared to this event. He seems hopelessly fragile against the backdrop of flames and smoke; he's stuck up there with the birds, and there's nothing the "sirens"—that is, the emergency services—can do from ground level. Nothing can save him, and the "wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling" people all around him suggest it's a question of *when* death will come, not *if*. Just as his energy levels drop, he effectively disappears into the sheer magnitude of the event. His final moments take on symbolic power as an image representative of the wider horror, but as an actual individual—with a name and a personality and a life—he dissolves into the background.

Adding to the poem's sense of tragedy is the fact that, in real life, the people seen waving and falling from the Twin Towers before they collapsed were never identified. When this man asks if his "love" can see him, no one really can—other than as a grainy figure in footage shot from far away. The awful truth is not just that he dies, but that he dies alone—far from his "love," rendered anonymous by the immense chaos that surrounds him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

You have picked ...
... is twirling, turning.

The poem takes place on 9/11. According to the poet, the speaker is an English trader stuck in the World Trade Center's North Tower after the first plane struck but before the tower's collapse. The poem was inspired by actual footage: Armitage has described the image of a bystander pointing a video camera up at a person trapped in the burning building and waving a white object.

The speaker addresses "You" throughout the poem. The identity of this "you" is never made clear within the poem itself, allowing that "you" to stand for any or all of the following: the person recording this footage, and, later, the viewers of that footage; the reader; the man's loved ones; the general public on 9/11; and humanity in a broader sense. Part of the poem's power is that the speaker doesn't really have a true destination for his words; no one can actually hear him, and he is going to die.

The reader knows this, creating dramatic irony and granting the whole poem a sense of inevitability and futility from beginning to end. These are the imagined thoughts of an anonymous, doomed man, spoken as if in real-time during the event and, in a way, after the fact. Here, he is both living and a ghost.

In the opening line, the speaker says, "You have picked me out." The speaker then describes his situation from the perspective of the camera/that "you." He forms part of a "distant shot of a building burning," that bold /b/ alliteration calling attention to the horror of the poem's setting.

The speaker then says "you have noticed now," that "now" implying that it takes a beat for whoever is looking at this "shot" to spot him. Really, they just spot the "white cotton shirt" that's "twirling, turning" in the distance; it's not clear yet whether or not actually see the speaker himself.

This stanza, like the rest of the poem, is chock-full of "-ing" verbs, or present participles. The building is "burning"; the white shirt "is twirling, turning." These words make the poem sound urgent and immediate. They wrench the poem uncomfortably into the present moment, forcing the reader to try to imagine what it was like to be in the speaker's shoes. The poem's immediacy rehumanizes the speaker, reminding the reader that he isn't just a symbol of the day's horror; ultimately, there is a real person behind the poem, even if these words are imagined. The asyndeton in this stanza and throughout the poem adds to the building sense of confusion and panic; there's no time for an "and" in "twirling, turning."

The poem uses quatrains (four-line stanzas), with every second and fourth line ending in an "-ing" verb and often with a full rhyme to boot (e.g., "burning"/"turning" in this stanza). This set-up makes the speaker seem at once frantic and frozen: he's also stuck on a particular sound just as he's stuck in a particular part of the building. He's moving, relentlessly waving that shirt, but firmly in place.

LINES 5-8

In fact I ...
... soul worth saving?

In the second stanza, the speaker clarifies that he isn't just "twirling" or "turning" his shirt:

> In fact I am waving, waving.

In other words, he's trying to get someone's attention so he can be rescued. The poem repeats the word "waving" four times in this stanza alone, emphasizing that this relentless "waving" is just about the only option the man has left (apart from jumping). The epizeuxis—that is, the immediate repetition of

the word—makes it sound all the more desperate and emphatic.

There's also a possible allusion here to a famous poem by British writer Stevie Smith, titled "Not Waving but Drowning." In Smith's poem, onlookers on the shore interpret a drowning man's flailing arms as him casually waving rather than desperately trying to stay afloat:

> I was much further out than you thought
> And not waving but drowning.
> [...]
> I was much too far out all my life
> And not waving but drowning.

Though the speaker of Armitage's poem isn't drowning, he is similarly helpless, rendered small by distance and unable to communicate with those on the ground. He's a speck in the sky to those watching from far below.

This line also acknowledges that the man is, tragically, just one "small" part of 9/11, which remains the deadliest terrorist attack in world history. Understanding his isolation up "in the clouds," the speaker then asks, desperately, "Does anyone see / a soul worth saving?"

This is a harrowing, heartbreaking question, one that speaks to the way the enormity of 9/11 threatens to dwarf the individual, personal tragedies of that day. The question reminds readers that this man—who is again based on real footage of 9/11—is a human being, someone with a "soul," not just a statistic.

The sibilance of "see"/"soul"/"saving" casts a whispery hush over the poem, which might convey the whistling of the wind or the quiet surrounding the man, so far from help. The question seems to echo aimlessly in the bright morning air.

LINES 9-12

So when will ...
... pegging out washing?

The third stanza consists of two questions. The speaker directs both at "you," but there's no sense of that "you" being able to answer back. This questioning positions the reader as a kind of witness to the speaker's terrible situation—a witness incapable of providing any help or comfort.

Consider the first question:

> So when will you come?

Asking "*when* will you come?"—rather than just "will you come?"—suggests that the speaker still hopes that he might survive this. He still thinks that someone is coming to rescue him.

Confused, desperate, and frustrated that "you" haven't arrived yet, the speaker wonders, rhetorically, if "you" misunderstand what "you" see—if you think that, rather than signaling for help, the man is simply "shaking crumbs" from his shirt or hanging up the laundry. He's essentially saying, *"What are you waiting for? Do you think I'm just waving my shirt for no serious reason up here?"*

These mundane, domestic images create a jarring contrast with the reality of the man's situation. Both activities seem a million miles removed from the speaker's actual situation, and readers know he'll never get a chance to do either again. The epizeuxis of "watching, watching" also calls attention to the only thing that people can do in this situation: watch.

LINES 13-16

I am trying ...
... of leaving, diving.

In line 13, the speaker insists:

> I am trying and trying.

The diacope of "trying" conveys the speaker's desperation. And the sentence is all the more heartbreaking for what it *doesn't* include: what, exactly, the man is "trying" *to do*. The reader can fill in the blanks—the man is "trying and trying" to stay alive—but still, that "try" feels futile, reflecting the fact that there's truly nothing the man *can* do.

And the situation is only getting worse. The heat "behind" the man "is bullying, driving"—pushing him forward, closer to the window. This line personifies the heat, treating it like an aggressive and cruel figure trying to shove the man out of the building. The punchy alliteration of "behind"/"bullying" adds to the effect, making that "heat" seem even pushier.

The speaker hasn't given up yet, however. He insists that "the white of surrender is not flying," playing with the idea that this white shirt might look like a flag from a distance (white flags traditionally indicate surrender, as by an army on a battlefield). The speaker is still fighting for his life. He's not ready to jump—"not at the point of leaving" the building (and life itself) by "diving" out the window to his death.

By this point in the poem, it's also clear that each stanza features very similar phrasing. It's as though the speaker's words keep circling back on themselves, emphasizing that he's stuck. For all his efforts, he can't escape; his repetitive language echoes his fate.

LINES 17-20

A bird goes ...
... wheeling, spiralling, falling.

The speaker is up so high that "A bird goes by." The speaker presents this observation in blunt monosyllables. In this context, this simple, harmless phrase conveys the immense horror of the speaker's situation. The speaker is so high up that birds are flying past, utterly oblivious to the speaker's plight.

The next line adds to the poem's sense of vertigo, as the

speaker notes the "appalling" "depth" between himself and the ground. Note that he doesn't say that the *height* "is appalling"; he's looking *down*, no doubt imagining what it would be like to fall.

The speaker begins the next sentence by repeating the word "appalling," an example of the device anadiplosis:

> The depth is appalling. Appalling

As "appalling" as the "depth" is the fact that people are jumping out of the building to their deaths. These people are "like" the speaker in that they all face a potentially quicker and less painful, end. (That "like me" might also remind readers that all these people are like *them*, too; they're all *human*.)

Those who have either jumped or fallen from the building spin and twirl as they plummet toward the ground. They've totally lost control of their bodies, which twist violently through the air. The asyndeton of "wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling" makes these words come at the reader at great speed, mirroring the velocity of the people as they drop. The enjambment of lines 18-20 ("The depth [...] falling.") also pulls readers swiftly down the page, evoking the pull of gravity on those falling bodies.

LINES 21-24

Are your eyes ...
... am still breathing.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker asks "you" another question. Words like "you" or "your" often create a sense of intimacy in a poem. Here, however, they emphasize the fact that the speaker is completely *alone*. No one can hear him as he wonders whether "your eyes" can believe that he's still alive.

The epizeuxis of "believing, believing" highlights the surreal horror of 9/11, an event so immensely horrible that it was, and remains, difficult for people to wrap their heads around. (As Armitage points out in his comments on the poem, many people remember exactly where they were when the attacks happened because they were that earth-shattering, their scale that difficult to truly comprehend.)

The speaker then says that he's "in the gills," a metaphorical description of the steel girders of the World Trade Center that evokes the way smoke billows from the tower like breath. The Tower becomes a kind of living creature here that has the speaker in its clutches (or, maybe, it seems more like an innocent creature that has been mortally wounded). The word "gills" also emphasizes that the speaker *himself* is "still breathing," still, almost unbelievably, holding onto life.

LINES 25-28

But tiring, tiring. ...
... am failing, flagging.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker's strength starts to wane. He's still alive, "But," he continues here, he's also "tiring, tiring." Again, epizeuxis creates emphasis, suggesting that the speaker is growing more exhausted by the second. The brevity of this sentence fragment makes the line itself sound even more, well, tired, like the speaker's eyes are closing and he's losing coherence.

Note, too, that each line of this closing stanza is firmly end-stopped with a period. This slows the frantic pace of earlier sections and creates a stark, resigned tone, reflecting the fact that the speaker is losing his will to keep going.

Emergency services are in the area, their "sirens" ringing out, but they're down at street level, and the speaker's up at bird height. The poem subtly personifies those sirens by saying that they're "wailing," crying out in despair. (Note, too, that "sirens" can refer to mythological creatures whose song lures sailors to their deaths. These sirens, calling up from the ground, perhaps lure the speaker out of the building, calling to him to jump and put an end to his misery.)

The speaker has been waving his shirt for so long at this point that his "arm is numb." His "nerves are sagging," no longer tight and tense from adrenaline. The soft, muffled /n/ alliteration of "numb" and "nerves" subtly evokes the dulling of the speaker's senses. The word "sagging," meanwhile, suggests the downward pull of gravity—again, perhaps, a reference to the speaker's growing desire to jump out of the building.

Sensing that the end is close, the speaker calls out to "my love," asking if this "love" can see him. It doesn't sound like he's calling for help anymore; instead, it sounds like he's accepted that he won't survive and just wants to be able to say goodbye to a loved one. Tragically, this person can't respond—he's simply too far for whoever it is to identify him. The speaker seems to know this: though he's asking a question, this sentence concludes in a full-stop caesura, not a question mark. His love can't hear him, let alone answer.

Finally, the speaker says:

> I am failing, flagging.

The soft, muffled /f/ alliteration evokes the man's loss of strength. The speaker is "failing" to maintain his strength, "failing" in his quest to survive. Readers know that he never stood a chance, making this sense of failure even more tragic; his death is not due to a lack of personal willpower, but because it is impossible to escape (in the North Tower, where the speaker is located, no one on the floors above the plane's impact zone survived).

The poem's final verb, "flagging," is a dark pun. One the one hand, this word means losing steam. At the same time, it harkens back to earlier in the poem, when the speaker said he was not yet waving "the white [flag] of surrender." Now, he is

"flagging"—he is waving that white flag, signaling that he can't fight any longer.

The speaker's devastating last line technically leaves the poem on a cliffhanger—readers know the speaker dies, but the poem never *explicitly* says this, nor does it say *how* he dies. This reflects reality: again, the poem is inspired by actual footage of people trapped on the upper floors of the Twin Towers on 9/11, and it's impossible to know exactly what their final moments were like (whether they jumped, were burned, suffered from smoke inhalation, or were crushed by the building when it collapsed). The poem ends on a note of irresolution, cut off before its time—much like the speaker's life.

SYMBOLS

THE WHITE SHIRT

In a desperate bid to get help, the speaker waves his white shirt out of the window. He insists that this is not "the white of surrender," a nod to the fact that, traditionally, waving a white flag is a way of signaling that you've given up. For example, a depleted army might fly a white flag on the battlefield to admit defeat. The speaker expressly denies this symbolism at first, saying that the shirt doesn't represent his giving up but rather his refusal to give in, his (ultimately futile) hope that he can still be saved.

That changes in the poem's final moment, when the speaker says, "I am failing, flagging." The speaker ends with a pun that alludes to the aforementioned military symbolism. The white shirt, in the end, does turn into a kind of white flag—a sign of the man's surrender. He is growing tired and seems to give in to the inevitable.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "you have noticed now / that a white cotton shirt is twirling, turning."
- **Line 15:** "the white of surrender is not yet flying."
- **Line 28:** "I am failing, flagging."

THE CLOUDS AND THE BIRD

The man's interactions (or lack thereof) with clouds and the bird in the poem come to symbolize his isolation, fragility, and insignificance. The speaker is trapped on an upper floor of an extremely tall building. He's so high up that he appears, to those on the ground, "Small in the clouds": a mere speck in the sky, so far away that his individuality gets lost in the magnitude of the day's horror. "Does anyone see / a soul worth saving," he asks, tragically suggesting how distance has obscured his humanity itself.

The bird that flies past similarly makes the man seem like a small and insignificant figure. He's just one of many people stuck in the tower. A bird "goes by" minding its own business, presumably uninterested in the human drama unfolding right by its side.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "In fact I am waving, waving. / Small in the clouds, but waving, waving. / Does anyone see / a soul worth saving?"
- **Line 17:** "A bird goes by."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration fills the poem with rough, unpredictable music and brings specific moments to life on the page. In short, it helps to dramatize the speaker's terrible situation. The punchy, plosive /b/ sounds of line 2, for example, call readers' attention to the speaker's horrific surroundings:

> Through a distant shot of a building burning

This alliteration jumps out at the reader, hinting at the brutality of the attack and of the flames themselves. The poem uses this same technique in line 14:

> The heat behind me is bullying, driving,

Those /b/ sounds make the heat seem menacing and forceful, as though it's out to get the speaker deliberately.

Other sounds create notably different effects. Take the sibilant alliteration in lines 7 and 8:

> Does anyone see
> a soul worth saving?

The speaker has established already that he is utterly, tragically alone, closer to the clouds than to the emergency services on the ground. These /s/ sounds cast a whispery hush over the speaker's call for help, creating an eerie quiet that's at odds with the chaos going on around him.

Elsewhere, the poem's sounds evoke its imagery. In line 4, for instance, the sharp /t/ alliteration of "twirling, turning" suggests the sounds of the man's shirt snapping in the wind. Broader consonance adds to the effect, filling the line with sharp, crisp sounds and growling /r/ sounds that suggest the man's effort:

> that a white cotton shirt is twirling, turning.

The sounds of the poem's final two lines are similarly evocative,

those dull, muffled /n/, /m/ and /f/ sounds helping to convey the speaker's sorrow and fatigue:

> My arm is numb and my nerves are sagging.
> Do you see me, my love. I am failing, flagging.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "building burning"
- **Line 4:** "twirling, turning"
- **Line 7:** "see"
- **Line 8:** "soul," "saving"
- **Line 10:** "watching, watching"
- **Line 12:** "washing"
- **Line 14:** "behind," "bullying"
- **Line 17:** "bird," "by"
- **Line 20:** "wind-milling, wheeling"
- **Lines 21-22:** "believing, / believing"
- **Line 24:** "breathing"
- **Line 27:** "numb," "nerves"
- **Line 28:** "me, my," "failing, flagging"

ASYNDETON

The poem is exploding with asyndeton, a device that adds to its panicked, frantic, terrified tone. Nearly every pair of present participles in the poem are tied together with just a comma rather than a coordinating conjunction. The man's shirt isn't "twirling and turning," but "twirling, turning"; the fire isn't "bullying and driving" him, but "bullying, driving"; and so on.

Squeezing these verbs together speeds up the poem and conveys the relentless, nonstop quality of all these actions. That shirt never seems to stop in its "twirling, turning" motion; the fire never ceases pushing the man forward. The lack of "and" creates urgency and immediacy.

The list in line 20 creates the longest string of asyndeton in the poem:

> [...] Appalling
> that others like me
> should be wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling.

Again, the lack of conjunction words quickens the poem's pace, evoking the terrible speed of people falling to the ground. Their different body shapes come thick and fast at the reader; there's no time for anything other than these brief, sketch-like images as bodies rush past.

In the poem's final stanza, asyndeton conveys the speaker's growing exhaustion and hopelessness. He is "tiring, tiring" and, ultimately, "failing, flagging." The speaker sounds utterly worn out. It's like he starts to lose his grip on consciousness, and his words become more fragmented and repetitive to match.

Note that much of the poem's asyndeton overlaps with its use of epizeuxis, as in "waving, waving" and believing, believing." This quick repetition adds to the sense of simultaneous panic and tedium; the speaker is relentlessly waving, relentlessly trying to reach those below, but, the repetitive language implies, there are only so many things he can do.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "twirling, turning"
- **Line 5:** "waving, waving"
- **Line 6:** "waving, waving"
- **Line 10:** "watching, watching"
- **Line 14:** "bullying, driving"
- **Line 16:** "leaving, diving"
- **Line 20:** "wind-milling, wheeling, spiralling, falling"
- **Lines 21-22:** "believing, / believing"
- **Line 25:** "tiring, tiring"
- **Line 26:** "wailing, firing"
- **Line 28:** "failing, flagging"

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors help to convey the speaker's fear, isolation, and exhaustion. In line 14, for example, the speaker personifies the heat from the flames inside the building:

> The heat behind me is bullying, driving,

The speaker treats the heat as though it were a bully, a malicious figure deliberately trying to make the speaker jump. The metaphorical language evokes just how unbearably hot it actually is in that burning building.

The speaker also subtly personifies the sirens down at ground level, describing them as "wailing." This is a common way to describe the sound of sirens, but here the word adds to the poem's tragedy: it's as though even the ambulances and fire trucks are crying out in despair.

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker describes himself as being "in the gills" of the building, "still breathing." These gills are the tower's internal supports (Armitage points this out in his discussion of the poem), while gills are the organs that fish use to breathe. The metaphor treats the building itself as a living creature—one that's been mortally wounded. The mention of "gills" also ties into the speaker's assertion that he's "still breathing" in his own "gills," or lungs.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "The heat behind me is bullying, driving,"
- **Line 15:** "but the white of surrender is not yet flying."
- **Lines 23-24:** "here in the gills / I am still breathing."
- **Line 26:** "Sirens below are wailing,"

REPETITION

This poem's intensely repetitive language adds to its urgency and immediacy: readers can sense the speaker's panic as he desperately tries to get someone's attention. At the same time, however, the poem's use of repetition also highlights the fact that the speaker is doomed: the poem keeps repeating itself, but the speaker gets no closer to salvation.

First, note the sheer amount of verbs ending in "-ing" ("waving," "watching," "believing," and so on). These present participles make it seem like the poem is unfolding right *now*, the speaker relaying terrifying moment after terrifying moment as they happen.

Note, too, that the speaker often repeats the same "-ing" verbs in immediate succession without any conjunctions between them: "waving, waving"; "watching, watching"; "believing, believing"; "tiring, tiring." This combination of epizeuxis and asyndeton makes all these actions seem relentless; they keep happening over and over again, increasing in intensity. The speaker repeats "waving" a whopping four times in a single stanza, in fact:

> In fact I am waving, waving.
> Small in the clouds, but waving, waving.

The more the speaker waves, the more desperate and futile this action seems. If he were successful, he could *stop* waving.

Similarly, the epizeuxis of "believing" emphasizes how *unbelievable* this situation seems. The epizeuxis of "tiring" emphasizes that the speaker is only getting more and more exhausted. The epizeuxis of "watching" emphasizes that there's nothing anyone can do *but* watch. And the diacope of "trying and trying" emphasizes the speaker's initial refusal to give up.

Other specific types of repetition work similarly. Take the anadiplosis of line 18:

> The depth is appalling. Appalling
> that others like me

It's like there's no more appropriate word than "appalling"—and so the speaker has to say it twice. Later, the parallelism of "My arm is numb and my nerves are sagging" hammers home the fact that the speaker is losing steam.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I am," "waving, waving"
- **Line 6:** "waving, waving"
- **Line 10:** "watching, watching"
- **Line 13:** "I am," "trying and trying"
- **Line 16:** "I am"
- **Line 18:** "appalling. Appalling"
- **Lines 21-22:** "believing, / believing"
- **Line 25:** "tiring, tiring"
- **Line 27:** "My arm is numb," "my nerves are sagging"
- **Line 28:** "I am"

VOCABULARY

Pegging out washing (Line 12) - Hanging up laundry on a clothesline using pegs.

White of surrender (Line 15) - Referring to a white flag, traditionally waved to signal surrender.

Wind-milling (Lines 18-20) - The speaker is describing people's arms (or perhaps entire bodies) rotating like the arms of a windmill as they fall from the tower.

Gills (Lines 23-24) - The respiratory organ of fish (and some other creatures). The speaker is using the word metaphorically in reference to his lungs.

Sagging (Line 27) - Drooping downwards/getting weaker.

Flagging (Line 28) - Becoming weak/low-energy. This is also a pun on waving a flag (e.g., the white flag of surrender).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem is number 10 in a longer sequence entitled "Out of the Blue" (which also has an accompanying film) and is inspired by real-life footage of 9/11. It's also a dramatic monologue, spoken from an imagined perspective separate from the poet's.

The poem's 28 lines are broken up into seven quatrains (that is, four-line stanzas). The lines themselves feature frequent enjambment and vary widely in length, which keeps the poem feeling somewhat freewheeling and unpredictable, as though the speaker's situation is unfolding in real-time. The uniformity of the quatrains, meanwhile, gives the poem a distinctive shape on the page. Squint a little, and the poem looks a bit like a tower, with each stanza appearing like a separate story of the building.

METER

"Out of the Blue" uses free verse, meaning it has no strict meter. This suits the poem's confused, panicked tone.

Note, though, the frequent placement of present participles and gerunds at the end of lines. The second and fourth line of each stanza ends with an "-ing" word, as do some others. Though this doesn't create a regular *meter*, it does create a sense of metrical *irresolution* throughout the poem: unstressed syllables like "-ing" make for weak endings, as opposed to the more satisfying click of a stressed syllable. Take lines 13-16, each of which ends with an "-ing" verb (or two):

[...] trying.
[...] bullying, driving,
[...] flying.
[...] leaving, diving.

The use of so many present participles makes the poem's language start to sound generally monotonous and repetitive, evoking just how long the speaker has been hoping for someone to save him. These weak endings also capture the speaker's increasing fatigue and despair as he realizes that there's nothing anyone can do to help.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is filled with rhyme, but its rhyme scheme is not entirely predictable. In all stanzas except the last, the second and fourth lines rhyme. In a few stanzas, the first and third lines rhyme as well. And the majority of the poem's lines end with an "-ing" suffix. As a result, the poem starts to sound quite repetitive; it keeps circling back to the same sound again and again. It, like the speaker, is trapped.

Stanza 1 features the rhyme scheme ABCB:

[...] out. A
[...] burning B
[...] now C
[...] turning. B

The second stanza repeats the word "waving" at the end of lines 1 and 2, creating the rhyme scheme AABA:

[...] waving. A
[...] waving. A
[...] now B
[...] saving. A

The third stanza rhymes its first and third lines *as well* as the usual second and fourth, making the pattern ABAB:

[...] *come? A*
[...] watching B
[...] *crums A*
[...] washing? B

The fourth stanza uses this pattern again—except, this time, the first and third lines ("trying"/"flying") *also* form slant rhymes with the second and fourth ("driving"/"diving"). As such, one might actually mark the rhyme scheme here as AAAA:

[...] *trying. A*
[...] *driving, A* / B
[...] *flying. A*
[...] *diving. A* / B

And the final stanza rhymes AABB:

[...] *tiring. A*
[...] *firing. A*
[...] sagging. B
[...] flagging. B

Nearly all of these rhymes feature weak endings: that final "-ing" is unstressed (as in "flagging"). All these weak endings evoke the speaker's increasing fatigue and despair as the poem—and his terrible situation—wears on.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a man trapped in the North Tower of the World Trade Center during the 9/11 attacks, after the plane has struck the building but before the tower has collapsed. Armitage has said he pictures this man as an English trader, but this excerpt itself doesn't make this specific (other poems in the "Out of the Blue" sequence do). The poem, then, can be considered a dramatic monologue—a piece of writing in someone else's imagined voice. Armitage based it on real footage from 9/11.

The speaker addresses an unspecified "you" directly throughout the poem. At some moments, this seems to refer directly to the person far below, recording footage of the man on their camera. At others, however, it sounds like the speaker is talking from beyond the grave to someone looking at this footage in which he appears as a spec in "a distant shot of a building burning." Really, it doesn't matter who he's addressing; no one can help the man, giving the poem an atmosphere of futility and heart-wrenching inevitability.

The speaker clearly, desperately wants to survive. He waves a white shirt to signal for help, "waving" and "waving" it despite knowing that those far below can barely see him. When help doesn't come, he grows confused; he wonders, rhetorically, whether the people think that instead of signaling for help he's just "shaking crumbs" from his shirt or hanging up the laundry.

The "heat behind [him] is bullying, driving"—pushing him closer to jumping in order to escape the smoke and flames. Still, he refuses to admit defeat. He sees others falling but is "not at the point of leaving, diving" into the air and certain death. He's waving his shirt because he still thinks that he might make it out alive—not as the "white of surrender."

As the poem goes on, however, the man's body grows tired and he starts to lose his will to keep going. Seeming to accept the inevitable, he calls out to his "love" in the poem's final moments. That ending verb, "flagging," is a pun: it means getting weaker and it harkens back to the flag of surrender mentioned earlier in the poem. The implication is that the man has sensed the truth: he is going to die, and there's nothing anyone can do

about it.

SETTING

The poem is set on September 11, 2001, the day of the infamous terrorist attacks on the United States. It specifically takes place shortly after the first hijacked plane struck the North Tower of New York City's World Trade Center (at 8:46 a.m.) but before that tower collapsed (at 10:28 a.m.).

The speaker, like many others, is trapped on an upper floor with no way out, waving a white shirt to signal that he's alive and in need of rescue. He's at cloud/bird height, however, rendering the emergency services on the ground far below helpless. The building is burning, the ferocious heat pushing the man closer and closer to jumping or falling out the window—as others around him have already done, their bodies spinning horribly through the air. If he looks down, the "depth" to the ground is "appalling."

The image of the man is captured by a distant camera. This camera "shot" represents the reader's vantage point; the poem's readers are mere observers of the man's suffering, incapable of doing anything to save him.

The reader gets insight into the man's experience, relayed with vivid immediacy. At the same time, the poem's audience knows that this has all already happened and that his man is undoubtedly dead, creating an unsettling dramatic irony.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Simon Armitage is one of the UK's most popular contemporary poets. He was born in Yorkshire in 1963 and began writing poetry at a young age. His first collection, *Zoom!*, was published by Bloodaxe Books in 1989 and was an immediate success, selling well and getting shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award. The outward simplicity of Armitage's poetry often conceals complex emotional worlds and reflects the influence of other important 20th-century poets such as Ted Hughes, W.H. Auden, and Philip Larkin.

This poem is part of a longer sequence titled "Out of the Blue," written in 2005 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of 9/11. It was released with an accompanying film, as well as in audio and book format. There were many literary responses to 9/11, including Don DeLillo's novel *Falling Man* and the *Poetry After 9/11* anthology, which collected work by numerous New York-based poets not long after the attacks.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On September 11, 2001, the Islamist extremist network al-Qaeda launched four coordinated terrorist attacks on the United States. Terrorists hijacked four planes, deliberately crashing two into New York City's World Trade Center (a.k.a, the Twin Towers) and one into the Pentagon (the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense); the fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania following a fight with passengers on board. Nearly 3,000 people, hailing from 102 countries, were killed; 67 of those people were from the UK.

This poem focuses specifically on the attack on the World Trade Center. The North Tower was hit on a crisp blue morning at 8:46 a.m. Many assumed that the collision was an accident until the South Tower was hit 17 minutes later by a second plane. The impact of the planes caused fires throughout the towers and destroyed numerous stairwells, trapping many people on the upper levels (like the man in this poem). Both towers soon collapsed, creating an enormous cloud of dust and debris and killing anyone left inside.

The towers were targeted in part because of their symbolic power. At the time of their completion, they were the tallest buildings in the world and were a center of economic activity. The attacks were also widely televised, with millions around the world watching them live or on the news shortly after. Being so well documented, 9/11 produced a number of famous—and heartbreaking—images. These include Richard Drew's haunting "Falling Man" photograph and Thomas Dallal's "Impending Death," which depicts people trapped in the burning North Tower leaning from the windows to escape the smoke and flames.

Armitage had a particular piece of footage in mind when writing "Out of the Blue": that of a figure waving a white object from a window high up in the North Tower. In a BBC piece on the collection, Armitage describes how "the frame of the picture wobbles around and can't always keep the person in the tower in focus. To try and replicate that a little bit, I use repetition in the poem. So I've tried to get the nature of the poem to resemble the nature of that actual piece of film."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Armitage at Boston University — Listen to the poet read and discuss a range of his work, including "Out of the Blue." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCmdGeSQ4Z8&t=398s)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Armitage's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/simon-armitage)
- Armitage on Poetry — Watch a brief interview with Armitage in which he discusses his poetic philosophy as well as the violence that appears in this poem.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvFcbedyQ0A&feature=youtu.be)

- Poetry After 9/11 — Read an article about the various poetic responses to the September 11 attacks. (https://granta.com/undoing-the-folded-lie-poetry-after-911/)
- "Out of the Blue" Film — Watch part of the film that accompanied "Out of the Blue," in which actor Rufus Sewell reads this section of the poem. (Content note: this film includes the actual documentary footage that inspired the poem, which is quite disturbing.) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufZey15WTAk&ab_channel=ukevids)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIMON ARMITAGE POEMS

- Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass
- Hitcher
- Mother, any distance
- Remains
- The Manhunt

HOW TO CITE

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