**Not Waving But Drowning**

Nobody heard him, the dead man,

But still he lay moaning:

I was much further out than you thought

And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking

And now he’s dead

It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,

They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always

(Still the dead one lay moaning)

I was much too far out all my life

And not waving but drowning.

—Stevie Smith

**The One Thing That Can Save America**

Is anything central?

Orchards flung out on the land,

Urban forests, rustic plantations, knee-high hills?

Are place names central?

Elm Grove, Adcock Corner, Story Book Farm?

As they concur with a rush at eye level

Beating themselves into eyes which have had enough

Thank you, no more thank you.

And they come on like scenery mingled with darkness

The damp plains, overgrown suburbs,

Places of known civic pride, of civil obscurity.

These are connected to my version of America

But the juice is elsewhere.

This morning as I walked out of your room

After breakfast crosshatched with

Backward and forward glances, backward into light,

Forward into unfamiliar light,

Was it our doing, and was it

The material, the lumber of life, or of lives

We were measuring, counting?

A mood soon to be forgotten

In crossed girders of light, cool downtown shadow

In this morning that has seized us again?

I know that I braid too much my own

Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me.

They are private and always will be.

Where then are the private turns of event

Destined to bloom later like golden chimes

Released over a city from a highest tower?

The quirky things that happen to me, and I tell you,

And you know instantly what I mean?

What remote orchard reached by winding roads

Hides them? Where are these roots?

It is the lumps and trials

That tell us whether we shall be known

And whether our fate can be exemplary, like a star.

All the rest is waiting

For a letter that never arrives,

Day after day, the exasperation

Until finally you have ripped it open not knowing what it is,

The two envelope halves lying on a plate.

The message was wise, and seemingly

Dictated a long time ago, but its time has still

Not arrived, telling of danger, and the mostly limited

Steps that can be taken against danger

Now and in the future, in cool yards,

In quiet small houses in the country,

Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets.

—John Ashbery

**Squarings viii**

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise  
Were all at prayers inside the oratory  
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep  
It hooked itself into the altar rails  
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope  
And struggled to release it. But in vain.  
‘This man can’t bear our life here and will drown,’

The abbot said, ‘unless we help him.’ So  
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back  
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

—Seamus Heaney

**Help**

Imagine *help*

as a syllable,

awkward but unutterable.

How would it work

and in which distress?

How would one gauge

the level of duress

at which to pitch

the plea? How bad

would something

have to be?

It's hard,

coming from a planet

where if we needed something

we had it.

—Kay Ryan

**An Old Story**

A few days after my mother died

the furnace went out, and my father,

who had been sitting in his chair

across from hers since the funeral,

his unshaven chin on his chest,

heaved himself up and went down

the cold gray cellar stairs to see if

he could relight the pilot himself

or would have to call for help.

I know what it must have been like

because I remember him other times

on his back down there, cursing

match after match, god damning

each for burning his fingers, as he

reached through the tiny metal door

as many times as it took. This time

it lit, caught, and roared back to life.

When my father sat up he faced

the washer, the dryer, the empty

laundry basket, the ironing board,

and my mother’s radio above the sink,

her absence so vivid that climbing

the stairs he thought he heard her

behind him, and he turned around.

—Richard Hoffman