Classic Poetry Series

Howard Nemerov

- 51 poems -

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Howard Nemerov (29 February 1920 – 5 July 1991)

Howard Nemerov was an American poet. He was twice appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1963 to 1964, and again from 1988 to 1990. He received the National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and Bollingen Prize for The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov. He was brother to photographer Diane Nemerov Arbus and father to art historian Alexander Nemerov, Professor of the History of Art and American Studies at Yale University.

Biography

Born on leap day in New York City, his parents were David Nemerov and Gertrude. His younger sister was the photographer Diane Arbus. The elder Nemerov's talents and interests extended to art connoisseurship, painting, philanthropy, and photography — talents and interests undoubtedly influential upon his son. Young Howard was raised in a sophisticated New York City environment where he attended the Society for Ethical Culture's Fieldston School. Graduated in 1937 as an outstanding student and second string team football fullback, he commenced studies at Harvard University where, in 1940, he was Bowdoin Essayist and he received bachelor's degree at this university. Throughout World War II, he served as a pilot, first in the Royal Canadian Air Force and later the U. S. Army Air Forces. He married in 1944, and after the war, having earned the rank of first lieutenant, returned to New York with his wife to complete his first book.

Nemerov then began teaching, first at Hamilton College and later at Bennington College, Brandeis University, and finally Washington University in St. Louis, where he was Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor of English and Distinguished Poet in Residence from 1969 until his death in 1991. Nemerov's numerous collections of poetry include Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961-1991 (University of Chicago Press, 1991); The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov (1977), which won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Prize; The Winter Lightning: Selected Poems (1968); Mirrors and Windows (1958); The Salt Garden (1955); and The Image of the Law (1947). His novels have also been commended; they include The Homecoming Game (1957), Federigo: Or the Power of Love (1954), and The Melodramatists (1949).

Nemerov received many awards and honors, among them fellowships from The Academy of American Poets and The Guggenheim Foundation, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, the National Medal of Arts, the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, and the first Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry.

Nemerov served as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress in 1963 and

1964, as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets beginning in 1976, and two terms as poet laureate of the United States from 1988 to 1990. In 1990 he was inducted into the St. Louis Walk of Fame. Nemerov died of cancer in 1991 in University City, Missouri. The Howard Nemerov Sonnet Award was instituted in 1994 to honor him, and by 2008 about 3000 sonnets were entered annually in the associated competition.

Poetry

Nemerov's work is formalist. He has written almost exclusively in fixed forms and meter. While he is known for his meticulousness and refined technique, his work also has a reputation for being witty and playful. He is compared to John Hollander and Philip Larkin.

"A Primer of the Daily Round" is his most frequently anthologized poem, and highly representative of Nemerov's poetic style. It is an archetypal Elizabethan sonnet, demonstrative of the prosodic creativity for which Nemerov is famous. Another widely appreciated poem is "The War in the Air," which draws on his wartime experience as a pilot.

Works:

Poetry Collections

The Image of the Law (1947)
The Vacuum (1955)
The Salt Garden (1955)
Mirrors and Windows (1958)
The Next Room of The Dream: Poems and Two Plays (1962)
The Blue Swallows (1967)
The Winter Lightning: Selected Poems (1968)
Gnomes & Occasions: Poems (1973) University of Chicago Press
The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov (1977)
Sentences (1980)
Inside the Onion (1984)
War Stories: Poems about Long Ago and Now (1987)
Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961-1991 (1992)
Grace to be Said at the Supermarket

Prose

The Melodramatists (1949)
Federigo: Or the Power of Love (1954)
The Homecoming Game (1957)
Journal of the Fictive Life (1965)

Literary Scholarship

The Oak in the Acorn: On Remembrance of Things Past and on Teaching Proust, Who Will Never Learn (1987)

A Day on the Big Branch

Still half drunk, after a night at cards,
with the grey dawn taking us unaware
among our guilty kings and queens, we drove
far North in the morning, winners, losers,
to a stream in the high hills, to climb up to a place
one of us knew, with some vague view
of cutting losses or consolidating gains
by the old standard appeal to the wilderness,
the desert, the empty places of our exile,
bringing only the biblical bread and cheese
and cigarettes got from a grocer's on the way,
expecting to drink only the clear cold water
among the stones, and remember, or forget.
Though no one said anything about atonement,
there was still some purgatorial idea
in all those aching heads and ageing hearts
as we climbed the giant stair of the stream,
reaching the place around noon.

It was as promised, a wonder, with granite walls
enclosing ledges, long and flat, of limestone,
or, rolling, of lava; within the ledges
the water, fast and still, pouring its yellow light,
and green, over the tilted slabs of the floor,
blackened at shady corners, falling in a foam
of crystal to a calm where the waterlight
dappled the ledges as they leaned
against the sun; big blue dragonflies hovered
and darted and dipped a wing, hovered again
against the low wind moving over the stream,
and shook the flakes of light from their clear wings.
This surely was it, was what we had come for,
was nature, though it looked like art with its
grey fortress walls and laminated benches
as in the waiting room of some petrified station.
But we believed; and what it was we believed
made of the place a paradise
for ruined poker players, win or lose,
who stripped naked and bathed and dried out on the rocks
like gasping trout (the water they drank
making them drunk again), lit cigarettes and lay back
waiting for nature to say the last word
—as though the stones were Memnon stones,
which, caught in a certain light, would sing.

The silence (and even the noise of the waters
was silence) grew pregnant; that is the phrase,
grew pregnant; but nothing else did.
The mountains brought forth not a mouse, and the rocks,
unlike the ones you would expect to find
on the slopes of Purgatory or near Helicon,
mollified by muses and with a little give to 'em,

were modern American rocks, and hard as rocks.
Our easy bones groaned, our flesh baked
on one side and shuddered on the other; and each man
thought bitterly about primitive simplicity
and decadence, and how he had been ruined
by civilization and forced by circumstances
to drink and smoke and sit up all night
inspecting those perfectly arbitrary cards
until he was broken-winded as a trout on a rock
and had no use for the doctrines of Jean Jacques
Rousseau, and could no longer afford
a savagery whether noble or not; some
would never batter that battered copy of Walden
again.

But all the same,
the water, the sunlight, and the wind
did something; even the dragonflies
did something to the minds full of telephone
numbers and flushes, to the flesh
sweating bourbon on one side and freezing on the other.
And the rocks, the old and tumbling boulders
which formed the giant stair of the stream,
induced (again) some purgatorial ideas
concerning humility, concerning patience
and enduring what had to be endured,
winning and losing and breaking even;
ideas of weathering in whatever weather,
being eroded, or broken, or ground down into pebbles
by the stream's necessitous and grave currents.
But to these ideas did any purgatory
respond? Only this one: that in a world
where even the Memnon stones were carved in soap
one might at any rate wash with the soap.

After a time we talked about the War,
about what we had done in the War, and how near
some of us had been to being drowned, and burned,
and shot, and how many people we knew
who had been drowned, or burned, or shot;
and would it have been better to have died
in the War, the peaceful old War, where we were young?
But the mineral peace, or paralysis, of those
great stones, the moving stillness of the waters,
entered our speech; the ribs and blood
of the earth, from which all fables grow,
established poetry and truth in us,
so that at last one said, "I shall play cards
until the day I die," and another said,
"in bourbon whisky are all the vitamins
and minerals needed to sustain man's life,"
and still another, "I shall live on smoke

until my spirit has been cured of flesh.”

Climbing downstream again, on the way home
to the lives we had left empty for a day,
we noticed, as not before, how of three bridges
not one had held the stream, which in its floods
had twisted the girders, splintered the boards, hurled
boulder on boulder, and had broken into rubble,
smashed practically back to nature,
the massive masonry of span after span
with its indifferent rage; this was a sight
that sobered us considerably, and kept us quiet
both during the long drive home and after,
till it was time to deal the cards.

Howard Nemerov

A Life

Innocence?
In a sense.
In no sense!

Was that it?
Was that it?
Was that it?

That was it.

Howard Nemerov

A Primer of the Daily Round

A peels an apple, while B kneels to God,
C telephones to D, who has a hand
On E's knee, F coughs, G turns up the sod
For H's grave, I do not understand
But J is bringing one clay pigeon down
While K brings down a nightstick on L's head,
And M takes mustard, N drives to town,
O goes to bed with P, and Q drops dead,
R lies to S, but happens to be heard
By T, who tells U not to fire V
For having to give W the word
That X is now deceiving Y with Z,
    Who happens, just now to remember A
     Peeling an apple somewhere far away.

Howard Nemerov

A Spell before Winter

After the red leaf and the gold have gone,
Brought down by the wind, then by hammering rain
Bruised and discolored, when October's flame
Goes blue to guttering in the cusp, this land
Sinks deeper into silence, darker into shade.
There is a knowledge in the look of things,
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.

Now I can see certain simplicities
In the darkening rust and tarnish of the time,
And say over the certain simplicities,
The running water and the standing stone,
The yellow haze of the willow and the black
Smoke of the elm, the silver, silent light
Where suddenly, readying toward nightfall,
The sumac's candelabrum darkly flames.
And I speak to you now with the land's voice,
It is the cold, wild land that says to you
A knowledge glimmers in the sleep of things:
The old hills hunch before the north wind blows.

Howard Nemerov

Amateurs of Heaven

Two lovers to a midnight meadow came
High in the hills, to lie there hand and hand
Like effigies and look up at the stars,
The never-setting ones set in the North
To circle the Pole in idiot majesty,
And wonder what was given them to wonder.

Being amateurs, they knew some of the names
By rote, and could attach the names to stars
And draw the lines invisible between
That humbled all the heavenly things to farm
And forest things and even kitchen things,
A bear, a wagon, a long handled ladle;

Could wonder at the shadow of the world
That brought those lights to light, could wonder too
At the ancestral eyes and the dark mind
Behind them that had reached the length of light
To name the stars and draw the animals
And other stuff that dangled in the height,

Or was it the deep? Did they look in
Or out, the lovers? till they grew bored
As even lovers will, and got up to go,
But drunken now, with staggering and dizziness,
Because the spell of earth had moved them so,
Hallucinating that the heavens moved.

Howard Nemerov

Because You Asked About The Line Between Prose And Poetry

Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle
That while you watched turned into pieces of snow
Riding a gradient invisible
From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.

There came a moment that you couldn't tell.
And then they clearly flew instead of fell.

Howard Nemerov

Casting

The waters deep, the waters dark,
Reflect the seekers, hide the sought,
Whether in water or in air to drown.
Between them curls the silver spark,
Barbed, baited, waiting, of a thought--
Which in the world is upside down,
The fish hook or the question mark?

Howard Nemerov

Found Poem

after information received in The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 4 v 86

The population center of the USA
Has shifted to Potosi, in Missouri.

The calculation employed by authorities
In arriving at this dislocation assumes

That the country is a geometric plane,
Perfectly flat, and that every citizen,

Including those in Alaska and Hawaii
And the District of Columbia, weighs the same;

So that, given these simple presuppositions,
The entire bulk and spread of all the people

Should theoretically balance on the point
Of a needle under Potosi in Missouri

Where no one is residing nowadays
But the watchman over an abandoned mine

Whence the company got the lead out and left.
'It gets pretty lonely here,' he says, 'at night.'

Howard Nemerov

Fugue

You see them vanish in their speeding cars,
The many people hastening through the world,
And wonder what they would have done before
This time of time speed distance, random streams
Of molecules hastened by what rising heat?
Was there never a world where people just sat still?

Yet they might be all of them contemplatives
Of a timeless now, drivers and passengers
In the moving cars all facing to the front
Which is the future, which is destiny,
Which is desire and desire's end -
What are they doing but just sitting still?

And still at speed they fly away, as still
As the road paid out beneath them as it flows
Moment by moment into the mirrored past;
They spread in their wake the parading fields of food,
The windowless works where who is making what,
The grey towns where the wishes and the fears are done.

Howard Nemerov

Gyroscope

This admirable gadget, when it is
Wound on a string and spun with steady force,
Maintains its balance on most any smooth
Surface, pleasantly humming as it goes.
It is whirled not on a constant course, but still
Stands in unshivering integrity
For quite some time, meaning nothing perhaps
But being something agreeable to watch,
A silver nearly silence gleaning a still-
ness out of speed, composing unity
From spin, so that its hollow spaces seem
Solids of light, until it wobbles and
Begins to whine, and then with an odd lunge
Eccentric and reckless, it skids away
And drops dead into its own skeleton.

Howard Nemerov

I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee

I tell you that I see her still
At the dark entrance of the hall.
One gas lamp burning near her shoulder
Shone also from her other side
Where hung the long inaccurate glass
Whose pictures were as troubled water.
An immense shadow had its hand
Between us on the floor, and seemed
To hump the knuckles nervously,
A giant crab readying to walk,
Or a blanket moving in its sleep.

You will remember, with a smile
Instructed by movies to reminisce,
How strict her corsets must have been,
How the huge arrangements of her hair
Would certainly betray the least
Impassionate displacement there.
It was no rig for dallying,
And maybe only marriage could
Derange that queenly scaffolding -
As when a great ship, coming home,
Coasts in the harbor, dropping sail
And loosing all the tackle that had laced
Her in the long lanes...
                I know
We need not draw this figure out
But all that whalebone came for whales
And all the whales lived in the sea,
In calm beneath the troubled glass,
Until the needle drew their blood.
I see her standing in the hall,
Where the mirror's lashed to blood and foam,
And the black flukes of agony
Beat at the air till the light blows out.

Howard Nemerov

Insomnia I

Some nights it's bound to be your best way out,
When nightmare is the short end of the stick,
When sleep is a part of town where it's not safe
To walk at night, when waking is the only way
You have of distancing your wretched dead,
A growing crowd, and escaping out of their
Time into yours for another little while;

Then pass ghostly, a planet in the house
Never observed, among the sleeping rooms
Where children dream themselves, and thence go down
Into the empty domain where daylight reigned;
Reward yourself with drink and a book to read,
A mystery, for its elusive gift
Of reassurance against the hour of death.
Order your heart about: Stop doing that!
And get the world to be secular again.

Then, when you know who done it, turn out the light,
And quietly in darkness, in moonlight, or snowlight
Reflective, listen to the whistling earth
In its backspin trajectory around the sun
That makes the planets sometimes retrograde
And brings the cold forgiveness of the dawn
Whose light extinguishes all stars but one.

Howard Nemerov

Kicks

The fishermen on Lake Michigan, sometimes,
For kicks, they spit two hunks of bait on hooks
At either end of a single length of line
And toss that up among the scavenging gulls,

Who go for it so fast that often two of them
Make the connection before it hits the water.
Hooked and hung up like that, they do a dance
That lasts only so long. The fishermen

Do that for kicks, on Lake Michigan, sometimes.

Anonymous submission.

Howard Nemerov

Learning by Doing

They're taking down a tree at the front door,
The power saw is snarling at some nerves,
Whining at others. Now and then it grunts,
And sawdust falls like snow or a drift of seeds.
Rotten, they tell us, at the fork, and one
Big wind would bring it down. So what they do
They do, as usual, to do us good.
Whatever cannot carry its own weight
Has got to go, and so on; you expect
To hear them talking next about survival
And the values of a free society.
For in the explanations people give
On these occasions there is generally some
Mean-spirited moral point, and everyone
Privately wonders if his neighbors plan
To saw him up before he falls on them.

Maybe a hundred years in sun and shower
Dismantled in a morning and let down
Out of itself a finger at a time
And then an arm, and so down to the trunk,
Until there's nothing left to hold on to
Or snub the splintery holding rope around,
And where those big green divagations were
So loftily with shadows interleaved
The absent-minded blue rains in on us.
Now that they've got it sectioned on the ground

It looks as though somebody made a plain
Error in diagnosis, for the wood
Looks sweet and sound throughout. You couldn't know,
Of course, until you took it down. That's what
Experts are for, and these experts stand round
The giant pieces of tree as though expecting
An instruction booklet from the factory
Before they try to put it back together.

Anyhow, there it isn't, on the ground.
Next come the tractor and the crowbar crew
To extirpate what's left and fill the grave.
Maybe tomorrow grass seed will be sown.
There's some mean-spirited moral point in that
As well: you learn to bury your mistakes,
Though for a while at dusk the darkening air
Will be with many shadows interleaved,
And pierced with a bewilderment of birds.

Howard Nemerov

Learning the Trees

Before you can learn the trees, you have to learn
The language of the trees. That's done indoors,
Out of a book, which now you think of it
Is one of the transformations of a tree.

The words themselves are a delight to learn,
You might be in a foreign land of terms
Like samara, capsule, drupe, legume and pome,
Where bark is papery, plated, warty or smooth.

But best of all are the words that shape the leaves –
Orbicular, cordate, cleft and reniform –
And their venation – palmate and parallel –
And tips – acute, truncate, auriculate.

Sufficiently provided, you may now
Go forth to the forests and the shady streets
To see how the chaos of experience
Answers to catalogue and category.

Confusedly. The leaves of a single tree
May differ among themselves more than they do
From other species, so you have to find,
All blandly says the book, "an average leaf."

Example, the catalpa in the book
Sprays out its leaves in whorls of three
Around the stem; the one in front of you
But rarely does, or somewhat, or almost;

Maybe it's not catalpa? Dreadful doubt.
It may be weeks before you see an elm
Fanlike in form, a spruce that pyramids,
A sweetgum spiring up in steeple shape.

Still, pedetemtim as Lucretious says,
Little by little, you do start to learn;
And learn as well, maybe, what language does
And how it does it, cutting across the world

Not always at the joints, competing with
Experience while cooperating with
Experience, and keeping an obstinate
Intransigence, uncanny, of its own.

Think finally about the secret will
Pretending obedience to Nature, but
Invidiously distinguishing everywhere,
Dividing up the world to conquer it.

And think also how funny knowledge is:
You may succeed in learning many trees

And calling off their names as you go by,
But their comprehensive silence stays the same.

Howard Nemerov

Life Cycle of Common Man

Roughly figured, this man of moderate habits,
This average consumer of the middle class,
Consumed in the course of his average life span
Just under half a million cigarettes,
Four thousand fifths of gin and about
A quarter as much vermouth; he drank
Maybe a hundred thousand cups of coffee,
And counting his parents' share it cost
Something like half a million dollars
To put him through life. How many beasts
Died to provide him with meat, belt and shoes
Cannot be certainly said.
                But anyhow,
It is in this way that a man travels through time,
Leaving behind him a lengthening trail
Of empty bottles and bones, of broken shoes,
Frayed collars and worn out or outgrown
Diapers and dinnerjackets, silk ties and slickers.

Given the energy and security thus achieved,
He did . . . ? What? The usual things, of course,
The eating, dreaming, drinking and begetting,
And he worked for the money which was to pay
For the eating, et cetera, which were necessary
If he were to go on working for the money, et cetera,
But chiefly he talked. As the bottles and bones
Accumulated behind him, the words proceeded
Steadily from the front of his face as he
Advanced into the silence and made it verbal.
Who can tally the tale of his words? A lifetime
Would barely suffice for their repetition;
If you merely printed all his commas the result
Would be a very large volume, and the number of times
He said "thank you" or "very little sugar, please,"
Would stagger the imagination. There were also
Witticisms, platitudes, and statements beginning
"It seems to me" or "As I always say."
Consider the courage in all that, and behold the man
Walking into deep silence, with the ectoplastic
Cartoon's balloon of speech proceeding
Steadily out of the front of his face, the words
Borne along on the breath which is his spirit
Telling the numberless tale of his untold Word
Which makes the world his apple, and forces him to eat.

Howard Nemerov

Lion & Honeycomb

He didn't want to do it with skill,
He'd had enough of skill. If he never saw
Another villanelle, it would be too soon;
And the same went for sonnets. If it had been
Hard work learning to rime, it would be much
Harder learning not to. The time came
He had to ask himself, what did he want?
What did he want when he began
That idiot fiddling with the sounds of things.

He asked himself, poor moron, because he had
Nobody else to ask. The others went right on
Talking about form, talking about myth
And the (so help us) need for a modern idiom;
The verseballs among them kept counting syllables.

So there he was, this forty-year-old teen-ager
Dreaming preposterous mergers and divisions
Of vowels like water, consonants like rock
(While everybody kept discussing values
And the need for values), for words that would
Enter the silence and be there as a light.
So much coffee and so many cigarettes
Gone down the drain, gone up in smoke,
Just for the sake of getting something right
Once in a while, something that could stand
On its own flat feet to keep out windy time
And the worm, something that might simply be,
Not as the monument in the smoky rain
Grimly endures, but that would be
Only a moment's inviolable presence,
The moment before disaster, before the storm,
In its peculiar silence, an integer
Fixed in the middle of the fall of things,
Perfected and casual as to a child's eye
Soap bubbles are, and skipping stones.

Howard Nemerov

Magnitudes

Earth's Wrath at our assaults is slow to come
But relentless when it does. It has to do
With catastrophic change, and with the limit
At which one order more of Magnitude
Will bring us to a qualitative change
And disasters drastically different
From those we daily have to know about.

As with the speed of light, where speed itself
Becomes a limit and an absolute;
As with the splitting of the atom
And a little later of the nucleus;
As with the millions rising into billions—
The piker's kind in terms of money, yes,
But a million in terms of time and space
As the universe grew vast while the earth
Our habitat diminished to the size
Of a billiard ball, both relative
To the cosmos and to the numbers of ourselves,
The doubling numbers, the earth could accommodate.

We stand now in the place and limit of time
Where hardest knowledge is turning into dream,
And nightmares still contained in sleeping dark
Seem on the point of bringing into day
The sweating panic that starts the sleeper up.
One or another nightmare may come true,
And what to do then? What in the world to do?

Howard Nemerov

Money

An introductory lecture

This morning we shall spend a few minutes
Upon the study of symbolism, which is basic
To the nature of money. I show you this nickel.
Icons and cryptograms are written all over
The nickel: one side shows a hunchbacked bison
Bending his head and curling his tail to accommodate
The circular nature of money. Over him arches
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, and, squinched in
Between that and his rump, E PLURIBUS UNUM,
A Roman reminiscence that appears to mean
An indeterminately large number of things
All of which are the same. Under the bison
A straight line giving him a ground to stand on
Reads FIVE CENTS. And on the other side of our nickel
There is the profile of a man with long hair
And a couple of feathers in the hair; we know
Somehow that he is an American Indian, and
He wears the number nineteen-thirty-six.
Right in front of his eyes the word LIBERTY, bent
To conform with the curve of the rim, appears
To be falling out of the sky Y first; the Indian
Keeps his eyes downcast and does not notice this;
To notice it, indeed, would be shortsighted of him.
So much for the iconography of one of our nickels,
Which is now becoming a rarity and something of
A collectors' item: for as a matter of fact
There is almost nothing you can buy with a nickel,
The representative American Indian was destroyed
A hundred years or so ago, and his descendants'
Relations with liberty are maintained with reservations,
Or primitive concentration camps; while the bison,
Except for a few examples kept in cages,
Is now extinct. Something like that, I think,
Is what Keats must have meant in his celebrated
Ode on a Grecian Urn.
Notice, in conclusion,
A number of circumstances sometimes overlooked
Even by experts: (a) Indian and bison,
Confined to obverse and reverse of the coin,
Can never see each other; they are looking
In opposite directions, the bison past
The Indian's feathers, the Indian past
The bison's tail; (c) they are upside down
To one another; (d) the bison has a human face
Somewhat resembling that of Jupiter Ammon.
I hope that our studies today will have shown you
Something of the import of symbolism
With respect to the understanding of what is symbolized.

Howard Nemerov

On an Occasion of National Mourning

It is admittedly difficult for a whole
Nation to mourn and be seen to do so, but
It can be done, the silvery platitudes
Were waiting in their silos for just such
An emergent occasion, cards of sympathy
From heads of state were long ago prepared
For launching and are bounced around the world
From satellites at near the speed of light,
The divine services are telecast
From the home towns, children are interviewed
And say politely, gravely, how sorry they are,
And in a week or so the thing is done,
The sea gives up its bits and pieces and
The investigating board pinpoints the cause
By inspecting bits and pieces, nothing of the sort
Can ever happen again, the prescribed course
Of tragedy is run through omen to amen
As in a play, the nation rises again
Reborn of grief and ready to seek the stars;
Remembering the shuttle, forgetting the loom.

Howard Nemerov

Ozymandias II

I met a guy I used to know, who said:
"You take your '57 Karnak, now,
The model that they called their Coop de Veal
That had the pointy rubber boobs for bumpers--
You take that car, owned by a nigger now
Likelier'n not, with half its chromium teeth
Knocked down its throat and aerial ripped off,
Side stitched with like bullets where the stripping's gone
And rust like a fungus spreading on the fenders,

Well, what I mean, that fucking car still runs,
Even the moths in the upholstery are old
But it gets around, you see one on the street
Beat-up and proud, well, Jeezus what a country,
Where even the monuments keep on the move."

Howard Nemerov

Pockets

Are generally over or around
Erogenous zones, they seem to dive
In the direction of those

Dark places, and indeed
It is their nature to be dark
Themselves, keeping a kind

Of thieves' kitchen for the things
Sequestered from the world
For long or little while,

The keys, the handkerchiefs,
The sad and vagrant little coins
That are really only passing through.

For all they locate close to lust,
No pocket ever sees another;
There is in fact a certain sadness

To pockets, going in their lonesome ways
And snuffling up their sifting storms
Of dust, tobacco bits and lint.

A pocket with a hole in it
Drops out; from shame, is that, or pride?
What is a pocket but a hole?

Howard Nemerov

Poetics

You know the old story Ann Landers tells
About the houseife in her basement doing the wash?
She's wearing her nightie, and she thinks, "Well, hell,
I might's well put this in as well," and then
Being dripped on by a leaky pipe puts on
Her son's football helmet; whereupon
The meter reader happens to walk through
and "Lady," he gravely says, "I sure hope your team wins."

A story many times told in many ways,
The set of random accidents redeemed
By one more accident, as though chaos
Were the order that was before the creation came.
That is the way things happen in the world:
A joke, a disappointment satisfied,
As we walk through doing our daily round,
Reading the meter, making things add up.

Howard Nemerov

September, The First Day Of School

I

My child and I hold hands on the way to school,
And when I leave him at the first-grade door
He cries a little but is brave; he does
Let go. My selfish tears remind me how
I cried before that door a life ago.
I may have had a hard time letting go.

Each fall the children must endure together
What every child also endures alone:
Learning the alphabet, the integers,
Three dozen bits and pieces of a stuff
So arbitrary, so peremptory,
That worlds invisible and visible

Bow down before it, as in Joseph's dream
The sheaves bowed down and then the stars bowed down
Before the dreaming of a little boy.
That dream got him such hatred of his brothers
As cost the greater part of life to mend,
And yet great kindness came of it in the end.

II

A school is where they grind the grain of thought,
And grind the children who must mind the thought.
It may be those two grindings are but one,
As from the alphabet come Shakespeare's Plays,
As from the integers comes Euler's Law,
As from the whole, inseperably, the lives,

The shrunken lives that have not been set free
By law or by poetic phantasy.
But may they be. My child has disappeared
Behind the schoolroom door. And should I live
To see his coming forth, a life away,
I know my hope, but do not know its form

Nor hope to know it. May the fathers he finds
Among his teachers have a care of him
More than his father could. How that will look
I do not know, I do not need to know.
Even our tears belong to ritual.
But may great kindness come of it in the end.

Anonymous submission.

Howard Nemerov

Storm Windows

People are putting up storm windows now,
Or were, this morning, until the heavy rain
Drove them indoors. So, coming home at noon,
I saw storm windows lying on the ground,
Frame-full of rain; through the water and glass
I saw the crushed grass, how it seemed to stream
Away in lines like seaweed on the tide
Or blades of wheat leaning under the wind.
The ripple and splash of rain on the blurred glass
Seemed that it briefly said, as I walked by,
Something that I should have liked to say to you,
Something . . .the dry grass bent under the pane
Brimful of bouncing water . . . something of
A swaying clarity which blindly echoes
This lonely afternoon of memories
And missed desires, while the wintry rain
Unspeakable the distance in the mind!)
Runs on the standing windows and away.

Howard Nemerov

Style

Flaubert wanted to write a novel
About nothing. It was to have no subject
And be sustained upon the style alone,
Like the Holy Ghost cruising above
The abyss, or like the little animals
In Disney cartoons who stand upon a branch
That breaks, but do not fall
Till they look down. He never wrote that novel,
And neither did he write another one
That would have been called La Spirale,
Wherein the hero's fortunes were to rise
In dreams, while his walking life disintegrated.

Even so, for these two books
We thank the master. They can be read,
With difficulty, in the spirit alone,
Are not so wholly lost as certain works
Burned at Alexandria, flooded at Florence,
And are never taught at universities.
Moreover, they are not deformed by style,
That fire that eats what it illuminates.

Howard Nemerov

The Author to His Body on Their Fifteenth Birthday, 29 ii 80

“There’s never a dull moment in the human body.”
—The Insight Lady

Dear old equivocal and closest friend,
Grand Vizier to a weak bewildered king,
Now we approach The Ecclesiastean Age
Where the heart is like to go off inside your chest
Like a party favor, or the brain blow a fuse
And the comic-book light-bulb of Idea black out
Forever, the idiot balloon of speech
Go blank, and we shall know, if it be knowing,
The world as it was before language once again;

Mighty Fortress, maybe already mined
And readying to blow up grievances
About the lifetime of your servitude,
The body of this death one talkative saint
Wanted to be delivered of (not yet!),
Aggressively asserting your ancient right
To our humiliation by the bowel
Or the rough justice of the elderly lecher’s
Retiring from this incontinence to that;

Dark horse, it’s you we’ve put the money on
Regardless, the parody and satire and
The nevertheless forgiveness of the soul
Or mind, self, spirit, will or whatever else
The ever-unknowable unknown is calling itself
This time around—shall we renew our vows?
How should we know by now how we might do
Divorced? Homely animal, in sickness and health,
For the duration; buddy, you know the drill.

Howard Nemerov

The Beautiful Lawn Sprinkler

What gives it power makes it change its mind
At each extreme, and lean its rising rain
Down low, first one and then the other way;
In which exchange humility and pride
Reverse, forgive, arise, and die again,
Wherefore it holds at both ends of the day
The rainbow in its scattering grains of spray.

Anonymous submission.

Howard Nemerov

The Blue Swallows

Across the millstream below the bridge
Seven blue swallows divide the air
In shapes invisible and evanescent,
Kaleidoscopic beyond the mind's
Or memory's power to keep them there.

"History is where tensions were,"
"Form is the diagram of forces."
Thus, helplessly, there on the bridge,
While gazing down upon those birds—
How strange, to be above the birds!—
Thus helplessly the mind in its brain
Weaves up relation's spindrift web,
Seeing the swallows' tails as nibs
Dipped in invisible ink, writing…

Poor mind, what would you have them write?
Some cabalistic history
Whose authorship you might ascribe
To God? to Nature? Ah, poor ghost,
You've capitalized your Self enough.
That villainous William of Occam
Cut out the feet from under that dream
Some seven centuries ago.
It's taken that long for the mind
To waken, yawn and stretch, to see
With opened eyes emptied of speech
The real world where the spelling mind
Imposes with its grammar book
Unreal relations on the blue
Swallows. Perhaps when you will have
Fully awakened, I shall show you
A new thing: even the water
Flowing away beneath those birds
Will fail to reflect their flying forms,
And the eyes that see become as stones
Whence never tears shall fall again.

O swallows, swallows, poems are not
The point. Finding again the world,
That is the point, where loveliness
Adorns intelligible things
Because the mind's eye lit the sun.

Howard Nemerov

The Brief Journey West

By the dry road the fathers cough and spit,
This is their room. They are the ones who hung
That bloody sun upon the southern wall
And crushed the armored beetle to the floor.

The father's skin is seamed and dry, the map
Of that wild region where they drained the swamp
And set provision out that they might sit,
Of history the cracked precipitate,

Until the glass be shattered and the sun
Descend to burn the prosperous flesh away
Of the filthy world, so vilely fathered on
The fathers, such black cinders, sitting there.

Old pioneers, what lecheries remain?
When schoolgirls pass, what whispers of their skirts,
Cold gleams of flesh, solicit in your veined
And gemlike eyes the custom of desire?

None now. Their eyes are sunk in ancient flesh,
And the sarcastic triumph of the mind
They now enjoy, letting their lust alone
Who may have kin but have no longer kind.

Neither tomorrow's monstrous tumor nor
The reformation of the past they wish,
Who hold in silent colloquy the world
A shrivelled apple in the hand of God.

They hang at night their somber flags aloft,
And through the amorous dark pursue their theme
Of common images, that sleep may show
Them done with all disasters but the one.

Howard Nemerov

The Consent

Late in November, on a single night
Not even near to freezing, the ginkgo trees
That stand along the walk dropp all their leaves
In one consent, and neither to rain nor to wind
But as though to time alone: the golden and green
Leaves litter the lawn today, that yesterday
Had spread aloft their fluttering fans of light.

What signal from the stars? What senses took it in?
What in those wooden motives so decided
To strike their leaves, to down their leaves,
Rebellion or surrender? and if this
Can happen thus, what race shall be exempt?
What use to learn the lessons taught by time.
If a star at any time may tell us: Now.

Howard Nemerov

The Dependencies

This morning, between two branches of a tree
Beside the door, epeira once again
Has spun and signed his tapestry and trap.
I test his early-warning system and
It works, he scrambles forth in sable with
The yellow hieroglyph that no one knows
The meaning of. And I remember now
How yesterday at dusk the nighthawks came
Back as they do about this time each year,
Grey squadrons with the slashes white on wings
Cruising for bugs beneath the bellied cloud.
Now soon the monarchs will be drifting south,
And then the geese will go, and then one day
The little garden birds will not be here.
See how many leaves already have
Withered and turned; a few have fallen, too.
Change is continuous on the seamless web,
Yet moments come like this one, when you feel
Upon your heart a signal to attend
The definite announcement of an end
Where one thing ceases and another starts;
When like the spider waiting on the web
You know the intricate dependencies
Spreading in secret through the fabric vast
Of heaven and earth, sending their messages
Ciphered in chemistry to all the kinds,
The whisper down the bloodstream: it is time.

Howard Nemerov

The Goose Fish

On the long shore, lit by the moon
To show them properly alone,
Two lovers suddenly embraced
So that their shadows were as one.
The ordinary night was graced
For them by the swift tide of blood
That silently they took at flood,
And for a little time they prized
Themselves emparadised.

Then, as if shaken by stage-fright
Beneath the hard moon's bony light,
They stood together on the sand
Embarrassed in each other's sight
But still conspiring hand in hand,
Until they saw, there underfoot,
As though the world had found them out,
The goose fish turning up, though dead,
His hugely grinning head.

There in the china light he lay,
Most ancient and corrupt and grey.
They hesitated at his smile,
Wondering what it seemed to say
To lovers who a little while
Before had thought to understand,
By violence upon the sand,
The only way that could be known
To make a world their own.

It was a wide and moony grin
Together peaceful and obscene;
They knew not what he would express,
So finished a comedian
He might mean failure or success,
But took it for an emblem of
Their sudden, new and guilty love
To be observed by, when they kissed,
That rigid optimist.

So he became their patriarch,
Dreadfully mild in the half-dark.
His throat that the sand seemed to choke,
His picket teeth, these left their mark
But never did explain the joke
That so amused him, lying there
While the moon went down to disappear
Along the still and tilted track
That bears the zodiac.

Howard Nemerov

The Host, He Says That All Is Well

He didn't want to do it with skill,
He'd had enough of skill. If he never saw
Another villanelle, it would be too soon;
And the same went for sonnets. If it had been
Hard work learning to rime, it would be much
Harder learning not to. The time came
He had to ask himself, what did he want?
What did he want when he began
That idiot fiddling with the sounds of things.

He asked himself, poor moron, because he had
Nobody else to ask. The others went right on
Talking about form, talking about myth
And the (so help us) need for a modern idiom;
The verseballs among them kept counting syllables.

So there he was, this forty-year-old teen-ager
Dreaming preposterous mergers and divisions
Of vowels like water, consonants like rock
(While everybody kept discussing values
And the need for values) , for words that would
Enter the silence and be there as a light.
So much coffee and so many cigarettes
Gone down the drain, gone up in smoke,
Just for the sake of getting something right
Once in a while, something that could stand
On its own flat feet to keep out windy time
And the worm, something that might simply be,
Not as the monument in the smoky rain
Grimly endures, but that would be
Only a moment's inviolable presence,
The moment before disaster, before the storm,
In its peculiar silence, an integer
Fixed in the middle of the fall of things,
Perfected and casual as to a child's eye
Soap bubbles are, and skipping stones.

Howard Nemerov

The Icehouse In Summer

A door sunk in a hillside, with a bolt
thick as the boy's arm, and behind that door
the walls of ice, melting a blue, faint light,
an air of cedar branches, sawdust, fern:
decaying seasons keeping from decay.

A summer guest, the boy had never seen
(a servant told him of it) how the lake
froze three foot thick, how farmers came with teams,
with axe and saw, to cut great blocks of ice,
translucid, marbled, glittering in the sun,
load them on sleds and drag them up the hill
to be manhandled down the narrow path
and set in courses for the summer's keeping,
the kitchen uses and luxuriousness
of the great houses. And he heard how once
a team and driver drowned in the break of spring:
the man's cry melting from the ice that summer
frightened the sherbet-eaters off the terrace.

Dust of the cedar, lost and evergreen
among the slowly blunting water walls
where the blade edge melted and the steel saw's bite
was rounded out, and the horse and rider drowned
in the red sea's blood, I was the silly child
who dreamed that riderless cry, and saw the guests
run from a ghostly wall, so long before
the winter house fell with the summer house,
and the houses, Egypt, the great houses, had an end.

Howard Nemerov

The Lobster

Here at the Super Duper, in a glass tank
Supplied by a rill of cold fresh water
Running down a glass washboard at one end
And siphoned off at the other, and so
Perpetually renewed, a herd of lobster
Is made available to the customer
Who may choose whichever one he wants
To carry home and drop into boiling water
And serve with a sauce of melted butter.

Meanwhile, the beauty of strangeness marks
These creatures, who move (when they do)
With a slow, vague wavering of claws,
The somnambulist¹s effortless clambering
As he crawls over the shell of a dream
Resembling himself. Their velvet colors,
Mud red, bruise purple, cadaver green
Speckled with black, their camouflage at home,
Make them conspicuous here in the strong
Day-imitating light, the incommensurable
Philosophers and at the same time victims
Herded together in the marketplace, asleep
Except for certain tentative gestures
Of their antennae, or their imperial claws
Pegged shut with a whittled stick at the wrist.

We inlanders, buying our needful food,
Pause over these slow, gigantic spiders
That spin not. We pause and are bemused,
And sometimes it happens that a mind sinks down
To the blind abyss in a swirl of sand, goes cold
And archaic in a carapace of horn,
Thinking: There's something underneath the world.

The flame beneath the pot that boils the water.

Howard Nemerov

The Makers

Who can remember back to the first poets,
The greatest ones, greater even than Orpheus?
No one has remembered that far back
Or now considers, among the artifacts,
And bones and cantilevered inference
The past is made of, those first and greatest poets,
So lofty and disdainful of renown
They left us not a name to know them by.

They were the ones that in whatever tongue
Worded the world, that were the first to say
Star, water, stone, that said the visible
And made it bring invisibles to view
In wind and time and change, and in the mind
Itself that minded the hitherto idiot world
And spoke the speechless world and sang the towers
Of the city into the astonished sky.

They were the first great listeners, attuned
To interval, relationship, and scale,
The first to say above, beneath, beyond,
Conjurors with love, death, sleep, with bread and wine,
Who having uttered vanished from the world
Leaving no memory but the marvelous
Magical elements, the breathing shapes
And stops of breath we build our Babels of.

Howard Nemerov

The Murder Of William Remington

It is true, that even in the best-run state
Such things will happen; it is true,
What's done is done. The law, whereby we hate
Our hatred, sees no fire in the flue
But by the smoke, and not for thought alone
It punishes, but for the thing that's done.

And yet there is the horror of the fact,
Though we knew not the man. To die in jail,
To be beaten to death, to know the act
Of personal fury before the eyes can fail
And the man die against the cold last wall
Of the lonely world—and neither is that all:

There is the terror too of each man's thought,
That knows not, but must quietly suspect
His neighbor, friend, or self of being taught
To take an attitude merely correct;
Being frightened of his own cold image in
The glass of government, and his own sin,

Frightened lest senate house and prison wall
Be quarried of one stone, lest righteous and high
Look faintly smiling down and seem to call
A crime the welcome chance of liberty,
And any man an outlaw who aggrieves
The patriotism of a pair of thieves.

Howard Nemerov

The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar’s House

in memory of the painters Paul Klee
and Paul Terence Feeley

I

The painter’s eye follows relation out.
His work is not to paint the visible,
He says, it is to render visible.

Being a man, and not a god, he stands
Already in a world of sense, from which
He borrows, to begin with, mental things
Chiefly, the abstract elements of language:
The point, the line, the plane, the colors and
The geometric shapes. Of these he spins
Relation out, he weaves its fabric up
So that it speaks darkly, as music does
Singing the secret history of the mind.
And when in this the visible world appears,
As it does do, mountain, flower, cloud, and tree,
All haunted here and there with the human face,
It happens as by accident, although
The accident is of design. It is because
Language first rises from the speechless world
That the painterly intelligence
Can say correctly that he makes his world,
Not imitates the one before his eyes.
Hence the delightsome gardens, the dark shores,
The terrifying forests where nightfall
Enfolds a lost and tired traveler.

And hence the careless crowd deludes itself
By likening his hieroglyphic signs
And secret alphabets to the drawing of a child.
That likeness is significant the other side
Of what they see, for his simplicities
Are not the first ones, but the furthest ones,
Final refinements of his thought made visible.
He is the painter of the human mind
Finding and faithfully reflecting the mindfulness
That is in things, and not the things themselves.

For such a man, art is an act of faith:
Prayer the study of it, as Blake says,
And praise the practice; nor does he divide
Making from teaching, or from theory.
The three are one, and in his hours of art
There shines a happiness through darkest themes,
As though spirit and sense were not at odds.

II

The painter as an allegory of the mind
At genesis. He takes a burlap bag,
Tears it open and tacks it on a stretcher.
He paints it black because, as he has said,
Everything looks different on black.

Suppose the burlap bag to be the universe,
And black because its volume is the void
Before the stars were. At the painter's hand
Volume becomes one-sidedly a surface,
And all his depths are on the face of it.

Against this flat abyss, this groundless ground
Of zero thickness stretched against the cold
Dark silence of the Absolutely Not,
Material worlds arise, the colored earths
And oil of plants that imitate the light.

They imitate the light that is in thought,
For the mind relates to thinking as the eye
Relates to light. Only because the world
Already is a language can the painter speak
According to his grammar of the ground.

It is archaic speech, that has not yet
Divided out its cadences in words;
It is a language for the oldest spells
About how some thoughts rose into the mind
While others, stranger still, sleep in the world.

So grows the garden green, the sun vermilion.
He sees the rose flame up and fade and fall
And be the same rose still, the radiant in red.
He paints his language, and his language is
The theory of what the painter thinks.

III

The painter's eye attends to death and birth
Together, seeing a single energy
Momently manifest in every form,
As in the tree the growing of the tree
Exploding from the seed not more nor less
Than from the void condensing down and in,
Summoning sun and rain. He views the tree,
The great tree standing in the garden, say,
As thrusting downward its vast spread and weight,
Growing its green height from the dark watered earth,
And as suspended weightless in the sky,
Haled forth and held up by the hair of its head.

He follows through the flowing of the forms
From the divisions of the trunk out to
The veinings of the leaf, and the leaf's fall.
His pencil meditates the many in the one
After the method in the confluence of rivers,
The running of ravines on mountainsides,
And in the deltas of the nerves; he sees
How things must be continuous with themselves
As with whole worlds that they themselves are not,
In order that they may be so transformed.
He stands where the eternity of thought
Opens upon perspective time and space;
He watches mind become incarnate; then
He paints the tree.

IV

These thoughts have chiefly been about the painter Klee,
About how he in our hard time might stand to us
Especially whose lives concern themselves with learning
As patron of the practical intelligence of art,
And thence as model, modest and humorous in sufferings,
For all research that follows spirit where it goes.

That there should be much goodness in the world,
Much kindness and intelligence, candor and charm,
And that it all goes down in the dust after a while,
This is a subject for the steadiest meditations
Of the heart and mind, as for the tears
That clarify the eye toward charity.

So may it be to all of us, that at some times
In this bad time when faith in study seems to fail,
And when impatience in the street and still despair at home
Divide the mind to rule it, there shall be some comfort come
From the remembrance of so deep and clear a life as his
Whom I have thought of, for the wholeness of his mind,
As the painter dreaming in the scholar's house,
His dream an emblem to us of the life of thought,
The same dream that then flared before intelligence
When light first went forth looking for the eye.

Howard Nemerov

The Town Dump

“The art of our necessities is strange,
That can make vile things precious.”

A mile out in the marshes, under a sky
Which seems to be always going away
In a hurry, on that Venetian land threaded
With hidden canals, you will find the city
Which seconds ours (so cemeteries, too,
Reflect a town from hillsides out of town),
Where Being most Becomingly ends up
Becoming some more. From cardboard tenements,
Windowed with cellophane, or simply tenting
In paper bags, the angry mackerel eyes
Glare at you out of stove-in, sunken heads
Far from the sea; the lobster, also, lifts
An empty claw in his most minatory
Of gestures; oyster, crab, and mussel shells
Lie here in heaps, savage as money hurled
Away at the gate of hell. If you want results,
These are results.
                Objects of value or virtue,
However, are also to be picked up here,
Though rarely, lying with bones and rotten meat,
Eggshells and mouldy bread, banana peels
No one will skid on, apple cores that caused
Neither the fall of man nor a theory
Of gravitation. People do throw out
The family pearls by accident, sometimes,
Not often; I’ve known dealers in antiques
To prowl this place by night, with flashlights, on
The off-chance of somebody’s having left
Derelict chairs which will turn out to be
by Hepplewhite, a perfect set of six
Going to show, I guess, that in any sty
Someone’s heaven may open and shower down
Riches responsive to the right dream; though
It is a small chance, certainly, that sends
The ghostly dealer, heavy with fly-netting
Over his head, across these hills in darkness,
Stumbling in cut-glass goblets, lacquered cups,
And other products of his dreamy midden
Penciled with light and guarded by the flies.

For there are flies, of course. A dynamo
Composed, by thousands, of our ancient black
Retainers, hums here day and night, steady
As someone telling beads, the hum becoming
A high whine at any disturbance; then,
Settled again, they shine under the sun
Like oil-drops, or are invisible as night,
By night.
        All this continually smoulders,

Crackles, and smokes with mostly invisible fires
Which, working deep, rarely flash out and flare,
And never finish. Nothing finishes;
The flies, feeling the heat, keep on the move.

Among the flies, the purefying fires,
The hunters by night, acquainted with the art
Of our necessities, and the new deposits
That each day wastes with treasure, you may say
There should be ratios. You may sum up
The results, if you want results. But I will add
That wild birds, drawn to the carrion and flies,
Assemble in some numbers here, their wings
Shining with light, their flight enviably free,
Their music marvelous, though sad, and strange.

Howard Nemerov

The Vacuum

The house is so quiet now
The vacuum cleaner sulks in the corner closet,
Its bag limp as a stopped lung, its mouth
Grinning into the floor, maybe at my
Slovenly life, my dog-dead youth.

I've lived this way long enough,
But when my old woman died her soul
Went into that vacuum cleaner, and I can't bear
To see the bag swell like a belly, eating the dust
And the woolen mice, and begin to howl

Because there is old filth everywhere
She used to crawl, in the corner and under the stair.
I know now how life is cheap as dirt,
And still the hungry, angry heart
Hangs on and howls, biting at air.

Howard Nemerov

The View From An Attic Window

Among the high-branching, leafless boughs
Above the roof-peaks of the town,
Snowflakes unnumberably come down.

I watched out of the attic window
The laced sway of family trees,
Intricate genealogies

Whose strict, reserved gentility,
Trembling, impossible to bow,
Received the appalling fall of snow.

All during Sunday afternoon,
Not storming, but befittingly,
Out of a still, grey, devout sky,

The snowflakes fell, until all shapes
Went under, and thickening, drunken lines
Cobwebbed the sleep of solemn pines.

Up in the attic, among many things
Inherited and out of style,
I cried, then fell asleep awhile,

Waking at night now, as the snow-
flakes from darkness to darkness go
Past yellow lights in the street below.

2
I cried because life is hopeless and beautiful.
And like a child I cried myself to sleep
High in the head of the house, feeling the hull
Beneath me pitch and roll among the steep
Mountains and valleys of the many years
That brought me to tears.

Down in the cellar, furnace and washing machine,
Pump, fuse-box, water heater, work their hearts
Out at my life, which narrowly runs between
Them and this cemetery of spare parts
For discontinued men, whose hats and canes
Are my rich remains.

And women, their portraits and wedding gowns
Stacked in the corners, brooding in wooden trunks;
And children’s rattles, books about lions and clowns;
And headless, hanging dresses swayed like drunks
Whenever a living footstep shakes the floor;
I mention no more;

But what I thought today, that made me cry,
Is this, that we live in two kinds of thing:

The powerful trees, thrusting into the sky
Their black patience, are one, and that branching
Relation teaches how we endure and grow;
The other is the snow,

Falling in a white chaos from the sky,
As many as the sands of all the seas,
As all the men who died or who will die,
As stars in heaven, as leaves of all the trees;
As Abraham was promised of his seed;
Generations bleed,

Till I, high in the tower of my time
Among familiar ruins, began to cry
For accident, sickness, justice, war and crime,
Because all died, because I had to die.
The snow fell, the trees stood, the promise kept,
And a child I slept.

Howard Nemerov

The War In The Air

For a saving grace, we didn't see our dead,
Who rarely bothered coming home to die
But simply stayed away out there
In the clean war, the war in the air.

Seldom the ghosts come back bearing their tales
Of hitting the earth, the incompressible sea,
But stayed up there in the relative wind,
Shades fading in the mind,

Who had no graves but only epitaphs
Where never so many spoke for never so few:
Per ardua, said the partisans of Mars,
Per aspera, to the stars.

That was the good war, the war we won
As if there was no death, for goodness's sake.
With the help of the losers we left out there
In the air, in the empty air.

Howard Nemerov

Threshold

When in still air and still in summertime
A leaf has had enough of this, it seems
To make up its mind to go; fine as a sage
Its drifting in detachment down the road.

Anonymous submission.

Howard Nemerov

To D—, Dead By Her Own Hand

My dear, I wonder if before the end
You ever thought about a children's game—
I'm sure you must have played it too—in which
You ran along a narrow garden wall
Pretending it to be a mountain ledge
So steep a snowy darkness fell away
On either side to deeps invisible;
And when you felt your balance being lost
You jumped because you feared to fall, and thought
For only an instant: That was when I died.

That was a life ago. And now you've gone,
Who would no longer play the grown-ups' game
Where, balanced on the ledge above the dark,
You go on running and you don't look down,
Nor ever jump because you fear to fall.

Howard Nemerov

To David, About His Education

The world is full of mostly invisible things,
And there is no way but putting the mind’s eye,
Or its nose, in a book, to find them out,
Things like the square root of Everest
Or how many times Byron goes into Texas,
Or whether the law of the excluded middle
Applies west of the Rockies. For these
And the like reasons, you have to go to school
And study books and listen to what you are told,
And sometimes try to remember. Though I don’t know
What you will do with the mean annual rainfall
On Plato’s Republic, or the calorie content
Of the Diet of Worms, such things are said to be
Good for you, and you will have to learn them
In order to become one of the grown-ups
Who sees invisible things neither steadily nor whole,
But keeps gravely the grand confusion of the world
Under his hat, which is where it belongs,
And teaches small children to do this in their turn.

Howard Nemerov

Walking the Dog

Two universes mosey down the street
Connected by love and a leash and nothing else.
Mostly I look at lamplight through the leaves
While he mooches along with tail up and snout down,
Getting a secret knowledge through the nose
Almost entirely hidden from my sight.

We stand while he's enraptured by a bush
Till I can't stand our standing any more
And haul him off; for our relationship
Is patience balancing to this side tug
And that side drag; a pair of symbionts
Contented not to think each other's thoughts.

What else we have in common's what he taught,
Our interest in shit. We know its every state
From steaming fresh through stink to nature's way
Of sluicing it downstreet dissolved in rain
Or drying it to dust that blows away.
We move along the street inspecting shit.

His sense of it is keener far than mine,
And only when he finds the place precise
He signifies by sniffing urgently
And circles thrice about, and squats, and shits,
Whereon we both with dignity walk home
And just to show who's master I write the poem.

Howard Nemerov

Witnessing the Launch of the Shuttle Atlantis

So much of life in the world is waiting, that
This day was no exception, so we waited
All morning long and into the afternoon.
I spent some of the time remembering
Dante, who did the voyage in the mind
Alone, with no more nor heavier machinery
Than the ghost of a girl giving him guidance;
And wondered if much was lost to gain all this
New world of engine and energy, where dream
Translates into deed. But when the thing went up
It was indeed impressive, as if hell
Itself opened to send its emissary
In search of heaven or 'the unpeopled world'
(thus Dante of doomed Ulysses) 'behind the sun.'
So much of life in the world is memory
That the moment of the happening itself—
So much with noise and smoke and rising clear
To vanish at the limit of our vision
Into the light blue light of afternoon—
Appeared no more, against the void in aim,
Than the flare of a match in sunlight, quickly snuffed.
What yet may come of this? We cannot know.
Great things are promised, as the promised land
Promised to Moses that he would not see
But a distant sight of, though the children would.
The world is made of pictures of the world,
And the pictures change the world into another world
We cannot know, as we knew not this one.

Howard Nemerov

Writing

The cursive crawl, the squared-off characters
these by themselves delight, even without
a meaning, in a foreign language, in
Chinese, for instance, or when skaters curve
all day across the lake, scoring their white
records in ice. Being intelligible,
these winding ways with their audacities
and delicate hesitations, they become
miraculous, so intimately, out there
at the pen's point or brush's tip, do world
and spirit wed. The small bones of the wrist
balance against great skeletons of stars
exactly; the blind bat surveys his way
by echo alone. Still, the point of style
is character. The universe induces
a different tremor in every hand, from the
check-forger's to that of the Emperor
Hui Tsung, who called his own calligraphy
the 'Slender Gold.' A nervous man
writes nervously of a nervous world, and so on.

Miraculous. It is as though the world
were a great writing. Having said so much,
let us allow there is more to the world
than writing: continental faults are not
bare convoluted fissures in the brain.
Not only must the skaters soon go home;
also the hard inscription of their skates
is scored across the open water, which long
remembers nothing, neither wind nor wake.

Howard Nemerov

Young Woman

Naked before the glass she said,
“I see my body as no man has,
Nor any shall unless I wed
And naked in a stranger’s house
Stand timid beside his bed.
There is no pity in the flesh.”

“Or else I shall grow old,” she said,
“Alone, and change my likeliness
For a vile, slack shape, a head
Shriveled with thinking wickedness
Against the day I must be dead
And eaten by my crabbed wish.”

“One or the other way,” she said,
“How shall I know the difference,
When wrinkles come, to spinster or bride?
Whether to marry or burn is bless-
ed best, O stranger to my bed,
There is no pity in the flesh.”

Howard Nemerov