

Classic Poetry Series

John Frederick Nims

- 12 poems -

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John Frederick Nims (20 November 1913 - 13 January 1999)

John Frederick Nims was an American poet and academic.

Life

He graduated from DePaul University, University of Notre Dame with an M.A., and from the University of Chicago with a Ph.D. in 1945. He published reviews of the works by Robert Lowell and W. S. Merwin. He taught English at Harvard University, the University of Florence, the University of Toronto, Williams College and the University of Missouri.

He was editor of Poetry magazine from 1978 to 1984.

The John Frederick Nims Memorial Prize, for poetry translation, is awarded by the Poetry Foundation.

Awards

American Academy of Arts and Letters grant
National Foundation for the Arts and Humanities grant
Institute of the Humanities fellowship
1982 Academy of American Poets fellowship
1986 Guggenheim Fellowship
1991 Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry.
1993 O.B. Hardison Prize

Works:

Bibliography

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Knowledge of the Evening (1960), which was nominated for a National Book Award
A Fountain in Kentucky (1950)
The Iron Pastoral. William Sloane Associates. 1947.
Five Young American Poets (1944)

Anthologies

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Translations

Euripides: Four Tragedies (1958)

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Editor

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Criticism

Martin Lammon, ed. (1996). "The Greatest English Lyric?". Written in water, written in stone: twenty years of Poets on poetry. University of Michigan Press.

Blind Joy

Crude seeing's all our joy: could we discern
The cold dark infinite vast where atoms burn
—Lone suns—in flesh, our treasure and our play,
Who'd dare to breathe this fern-thick bird-rich day?

John Frederick Nims

Christmas Tree

This seablue fir that rode the mountain storm
Is swaddled here in splints of tin to die.
Sofas around in chubby velvet swarm;
Onlooking cabinets glitter with flat eye;
Here lacquer in the branches runs like rain
And resin of treasure starts from every vein.

Light is a dancer here and cannot rest.
No tanagers or jays are half so bright
As swarms of fire that deep in fragrance nest
In jungles of the gilt exotic night
Where melons hang like moonstone. White above
Rises that perfect star, the sign of love.

On carpets' fairy turf, in rainbow dark,
Here once the enchanted children laid their heads,
Reached for the floating moon above the park,
And all their hopes were simple blues and reds.
Beneath the electric halo, none could see
Swords in the ankle of the victim tree.

Each named a patron star: Arthur said green
For August in the country; and Betty blue
For swinging and the Florida surf; while Jeanne
Decided gold. One horoscope was true:
The star of Donald low and lava-red—
Enlisted Donald, in Australia dead.

Our lives were bound to sorcery and night.
Zodiacs crumble on the boughs of rust
For every child is gone. Some burned too bright
And now lie broken in the bins of dust;
And some, a fortunate few, adventured far
And found assurance in the perfect star.

John Frederick Nims

Conclusion

legato con amore in un volume
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna . . .

If what began (look far and wide) will end:
This lava globe huddle and freeze, its core
Brittle with cold, or pulled too near its friend
Pop once like one gun in a long-drawn war,
And the stars sputter one by one, the night
So empty judging empty's out of date
(Space and time gone), then only, height on height,
Mind that impelled those currents and that freight,
Mind that after five days (see those days!
Regions all tropic one day, one all ice!)
Whistled man from the sea-moss, saw him raise
The blundering forepaw, blink from shaggy eyes—
If image, likeness in the ox-yoke brow
Long out of focus, focused mind to Mind—
Ah what unspeakable two and two allows
That silence huddle and all eyes go blind?
Our ups and downs—there! that remembered makes
Memory which is the single mind. How sweet
Carmine stars of the maple fumed in rakes
At 1350 such and such a street.
A thing to keep in mind. Yes and keep yet
When the vile essence violescence lies.
Once in winter by the richening sill
Quiet, the fireplace tiny in our eyes—
I mention this; there's more. The Almighty will
Aeons late stumble on it with surprise.

John Frederick Nims

Days Of Our Years

It's brief and bright, dear children; bright and brief.
Delight's the lightning; the long thunder's grief.

John Frederick Nims

Decline And Fall

We had a city also. Hand in hand
Wandered happy as travellers our own land.
Murmured in turn the hearsay of each stone
Or, where a legend faltered, lived our own.
The far-seen obelisk my father set
(Pinning two roads forever where they met)
Waved us in wandering circles, turned our tread
Where once morass engulfed that passionate head.

Cornice rose in ranges, rose so high
It saw no sky, that forum, but noon sky.
Marble shone like shallows; columns too
Streamed with cool light as rocks in breakers do.

O marble many-colored as reach of thought,
Tones so recollected and so distraught.
Golden: like swimmers when the August shore
Brightens their folklore poses more and more.
Or grey with silver: moon's whirling spell
Over the breathless olives we knew well;
Ivory as shoulders there that summer-dressed
Curve to come shyly naked, then find rest
(The tresses love dishevelled leaning dazed
And grateful). Or the wayward stone that blazed
As cheeks do. Or as eyes half-lowered flare.
Violet as veins are, love knows where.
Fine coral as the shy and wild tonguetip,
Undersea coral, rich as inner lip.

There was a stone to build on!
Friezes ran
In strong chorales that where they closed began;
And statues: each a wrung or ringing phrase
In the soul's passionate cadence of her days.

O stone so matched and massive, worked so well,
Who could believe it when the first brick fell?
Who could imagine the unlucky word
Would darken to the worldwide sigh we heard?
How our eyes wrenched together and held fast
Each face tightening to a chalky cast
(So poor a copy of one hour before).
Who could believe the gloom, the funnelled roar
Of cornice falling, forum falling, all
Falling? Or dream it fallen? Not a wall
With eaves to route the rain. The rivers swelled
Till roads groped in lakebottom. Nothing held
Clean edge or corner. Caking, the black flood

Left every luminous room tunnels of mud.
Earth shook: the columns walked, in midair clashed,
And the steep stone exploded as it crashed.

Soon the barbarian swarmed like locusts blown
Between the flood and spasm of our stone.
Grunted to tug their huts and marble sties
Where friezes broke like foam in the blue skies.
Blue noses poked, recoiling as they found
Our young and glad-eyed statues underground;
Singing salvation, the lewd chisel pecks
At boy and girl: one mutilated sex.

All our high moments cheapened—greed and grime
Charred them in rickety stithies to quicklime.

Murderous world. That town that seemed a star
Rose in our soul. And there the ruins are.
We'll not walk there again. Who'd wish to walk
Where the rats gather and grey tourists talk?
Who'd walk there even alive? Or bid his ghost
Trail phosphor on the melancholy coast?

John Frederick Nims

Isaiah's Coal

what more can man desire?

Always, he woke in those days
With a sense of treasure,
His heart a gayer glow
Than his window grand with sun,
As a child, its mind all whirring
With green and hollied pleasure
Wakes in a haze of Christmas!
The season of secrets done.

Or as one on country linen
Wakes with a start one morning—
Then on comfort snugger than pillows
Floats: July at the lake.
Or has married a golden girl
And can hardly believe, but turning
Sees blossom for him that very face
Worshipping cameras take.

Toy trains whirr perky on
Till springs contort beneath;
The middle-age rower slumps
Like a sack—indignant seizure!
Late editions wail
Screen Star in Mystery Death—
Yet in those same days
He woke with a sense of treasure.

Knowing: my love is safe
Though the Rockies plunge like water,
Though surf like a wildfire rage
And omens roam the sky;
Though limbs of the swimmer laze
Pale where the seaweed caught her,
Nothing can touch my love
As dangerous time goes by.

John Frederick Nims

Love Poem

My clumsiest dear, whose hands shipwreck vases,
At whose quick touch all glasses chip and ring,
Whose palms are bulls in china, burs in linen,
And have no cunning with any soft thing

Except all ill-at-ease fidgeting people:
The refugee uncertain at the door
You make at home; deftly you steady
The drunk clambering on his undulant floor.

Unpredictable dear, the taxi drivers' terror,
Shrinking from far headlights pale as a dime
Yet leaping before apopleptic streetcars-
Misfit in any space. And never on time.

A wrench in clocks and the solar system. Only
With words and people and love you move at ease;
In traffic of wit expertly maneuver
And keep us, all devotion, at your knees.

Forgetting your coffee spreading on our flannel,
Your lipstick grinning on our coat,
So gaily in love's unbreakable heaven
Our souls on glory of spilt bourbon float.

Be with me, darling, early and late. Smash glasses-
I will study wry music for your sake.
For should your hands drop white and empty
All the toys of the world would break.

Anonymous submission.

John Frederick Nims

Madrigal In Time Of War

Beside the rivers of the midnight town
Where four-foot couples love and paupers drown,
Shots of quick hell we took, our final kiss,
The great and swinging bridge a bower for this.

Your cheek lay burning in my fingers' cup;
Often my lip moved downward and yours up
Till both adjusted, tightened, locksmith-true:
The flesh precise, the crazy brain askew.

Roughly the train with grim and piston knee
Pounded apart our pleasure, you from me;
Flare warned and ticket whispered and bell cried.
Time and the locks of bitter rail divide.

For ease remember, all that parted lie:
Men who in camp of shot or doldrum die,
Who at land's-end eternal furlough take

—This for memento as alone you wake.

John Frederick Nims

Parting: 1940

Not knowing in what season this again
Not knowing when again the arms outyearning
Nor the flung smile in eyes not knowing when

Not sure beyond all doubt of full return
Not sure of time now nor the film's reversal
This all done opposite, the waif regathered

Like our lost parents in the blinded song
We bag in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through suburbs take our solitary way

Not that all clouds are garrisoned and stung
Not that horizons loom with coppered legions
Not that the year is dark with weird condition

All who parted in all days looked back
Saw the white face, the waving. And saw the sea
Not knowing in what season this again

For well they knew, the parters in all evenings
Druid and Roman and the rocked Phoenician:
The blood flows one imposed way, and no other

John Frederick Nims

Portrait

Seeing in crowded restaurants the one you love
You wave at the door, tall girl in imperious fur,
And make for him, bumping waiters, dropping a glove,
Arriving soft with affectionate slur.
As ladies half-turn, gazing, and men appraise
You heap the linen with purse, scarf, cigarettes, lighter,
Laughing some instantaneous droll phrase.
As if sudden sun came out, the table is brighter.

All moods: at a party everybody's delight;
Intent while brown curls shadow the serious page;
When people are stuffy (more correct than right)
The stamp and turn on heel of a little girl's rage.
But woman mostly, as winter moonlight sees,
Impetuous midnight, and the dune's dark trees.

John Frederick Nims

The Young Ionia

If you could come on the late train for
The same walk
Or a hushed talk by the fireplace
When the ash flares
As a heart could (if a heart would) to
Recall you,
To recall all in a long
Look, to enwrap you
As it once had when the rain streamed on the
Fall air,
And we knew, then, it was all wrong
It was love lost
And a year lost of the few years we
Account most &mdash
But the bough blew and cloud
Blew and the sky fell
From its rose ledge on the wood's rim to
The wan brook,
And the clock read to the half-dead
A profound page
As the cloud broke and the moon spoke and the
Door shook &mdash

If you could come, and it meant come at the
Steep price
We regret yet as the debt swells
In the nighttime
And the could come if you could hum in
The skull's drum
And the limbs writhe till the bed
Cries like a hurt thing &mdash
If you could &mdash ah but the moon's dead and the
Clock's dead.
For we know now: we can give all
But it won't do,
Not the day's length nor the black strength nor
The blood's flush.

What we took once for a sure thing,
For delight's right,
For the clear eve with its wild star in
The sunset,
We would have back at the old
Cost, at the old grief
And we beg love for the same pain &mdash for a
Last chance!
Then the god turns with a low
Laugh (as the leaves hush)
But the eyes ice and there's no twice: the
Benign gaze
Upon some woe but on ours no,
And the leaves rush.

John Frederick Nims

Tide Turning

Through salt marsh, grassy channel where the shark's
A rumor &dash lean, alongside &dash rides out boat;
For of us off with picnic-things and wine.
Pasty tufty clutters of the mud called pluff,
Sun on the ocean tingles like a kiss.
About the fourth hour of the falling tide.

The six-hour-falling, six-hour-rising tide
Turns heron-haunts to alleys for the shark.
Tide-waters kiss and loosen; loosen, kiss.
Black-hooded terns blurt kazoo-talk &dash our boat
Now in midchannel and now rounding pluff.
Lolling we eye the mud-tufts. Eye the wine.

The Atlantic, off there, dazzles. Who said wine &dash
Dark sea? Not this sea. Not at noon. The tide
Runs gold as chablis over sumps of pluff.
Too shallow here for lurkings of shark,
His nose-cone, grin unsmiling, Cr-ush! The boat
Shocks, shudders &dash grounded. An abrupt tough kiss.

Our outboard's dug a mud-trough. Call that kiss?
Bronze knee bruised. A fair ankle gashed. With 'wine-
Dark blood' a bard's on target here. The boat
Swivels, propeller in a pit, as tide
Withdraws in puddles round us &dash shows the shark-
Grey fin, grey flank, grey broadening humps of pluff.

Fingers that trailed in water, fume in pluff.
Wrist-deep, they learn how octopuses kiss.
Then &dash shark fins? No. Three dolphins there &dash shhh! &dash arc
Coquettish. As on TV. Cup of wine
To you, slaphappy sidekicks! with the tide's
Last hour a mudflat draining round the boat.

The hourglass turns. Look, tricklings toward the boat,
The first hour, poky, picks away at pluff.
The second, though, swirls currents. Then the tide's
Third, fourth &dash abundance! The great ocean's kiss.
The last two slacken. So? We're free for wine
And gaudier mathematics. Toast the shark,

Good shark, a no-show. Glory floats our boat.
We, with the wine remaining &dash done with pluff &dash
Carouse on the affluent kisses of the tide.

John Frederick Nims