

Magnitudes

By Howard Nemerov

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 million² 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?

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