

# 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 million<sup>2</sup> 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, "Magnitudes" from *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961-1991*.  
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Source: *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems 1961-1991* (1992)