

The Vacuum

By Howard Nemerov

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.

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Howard Nemerov was born in New York City, and attended the Society for Ethical Culture's Fieldstone School and Harvard University, where he graduated in 1941. He then served as a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II, an experience he reflects on in "The War in the Air." After the war, he completed his first book of poems and began teaching at Hamilton College, his first of many teaching positions. In the poems "The Vacuum," and "Writing," Nemerov combines a formal elegance with an intelligent wit and strong emotions to describe the mysteries of death and written language.