

Writing

By Howard Nemerov

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-forgers 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.

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Source: *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (The University of Chicago Press, 1977)



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.

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