

*To be a giant and keep quiet about it*

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*Trees*

by Howard Nemerov

To be a giant and keep quiet about it,  
To stay in one's own place;  
To stand for the constant presence of process  
And always to seem the same;  
To be steady as a rock and always trembling,  
Having the hard appearance of death  
With the soft, fluent nature of growth,  
One's Being deceptively armored,  
One's Becoming deceptively vulnerable;  
To be so tough, and take the light so well,  
Freely providing forbidden knowledge  
Of so many things about heaven and earth  
For which we should otherwise have no word—  
Poems or people are rarely so lovely,  
And even when they have great qualities  
They tend to tell you rather than exemplify  
What they believe themselves to be about,  
While from the moving silence of trees,  
Whether in storm or calm, in leaf and naked,  
Night or day, we draw conclusions of our own,  
Sustaining and unnoticed as our breath,  
And perilous also—though there has never been  
A critical tree—about the nature of things.

This group exhibition takes its title from the first line of Howard Nemerov's poem *Trees*, "To be a giant and keep quiet about it." The opening is a lyrical expression of non-human dignity, reflecting the awakening environmental awareness and environmental imagination of the mid-twentieth century. Nemerov, an acclaimed American poet Laureate from New York who often wrote about the duality of nature, published *Trees* in 1977 (from *The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov*, University of Chicago Press), a prescient discourse which counters the notion of human beings occupying a privileged position in our world. It was written after the first images of planet earth from the moon forever changed temporal and visual perception in relation to landscape, yet Nemerov's intimate moments, drawn from introspection and imaginative empathy, restore a sense of earthly discovery. This sense of discovery is one that art has repeatedly claimed.

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