

**MARTINUS NIJHOFF (1894–1953)**

**ZERO HOUR**

**A POEM (1936)**

*For St. Storm*

It was a summer day.  
The street still as a grave lay  
baking in the heat.  
A man turned up the street.  
On a distant pavement a group  
of children played, although that group  
carried but little weight,  
rather the opposite, it made  
the street seem even more deserted.  
The sun reigned undiverted.  
Even those bound by their  
second nature to appear  
here at this hour: the lone  
student, the lady quite unknown,  
the teacher now retired,  
had felt themselves required  
to depart from routine today,  
they were missed, missed in a vague way.  
More so: the workman who  
had till the hour of two  
or three dug a hole apiece  
for the central path's new trees,  
had left his spade right there  
and now had gone elsewhere.  
But stranger, yes indeed  
far stranger than the street  
being empty, was the fact  
of the silence so compact,  
and that the sound of the feet  
of the man now in the street

left the silence as it was,  
yes, that each stride as  
he quickly covered ground  
made the silence more profound.  
No thief, no spy could outbid  
what he so effortlessly did;  
and the feathered leather shoes  
on which Hermes would choose  
to descend from his mountain place  
did not as quietly traverse space  
as he could move along the street,  
just walking, shoes on his feet.

The pavement sound he made  
was ominous and yet stayed  
inaudible – it had the air  
of an early warning flare  
shot high and out of sight:  
in a small cloud light  
bursts into a glaring star  
and along the whole line of fire  
no one can disavow  
that zero hour has come, now  
ends all uncertainty  
about the time allotted me,  
now it's too late for everything.  
The silence arising then  
is a silence, not just one of form,  
a silence before the storm,  
but a silence of a sort  
where things are heard uncaught  
before by human ear.  
Such was the silence here.  
For as the man fast covered ground  
with measured tread, the sound  
of gas in pipes could be heard  
beneath the houses, the surge  
of water underneath the street,  
and, to make things complete,  
in wires to radio and phone  
a crackling buzzing tone  
as if bees were nearby.  
Nobody peeked on the sly.

For when somebody goes past  
one's interest usually grows fast,  
one draws the lace curtain aside  
as it normally seems implied  
to a greater or lesser extent  
that each passer-by's an event.  
Was there nothing one could see  
about him? Could this be  
since everyone was sleeping tight,  
or since his footsteps were so light  
no curtain moved as he went by?  
No, no, each window was eye,  
a shuttered lid, the slit  
of a peering owl that sits  
upon its branch of oak.  
The silence that nothing broke  
throbbed, and then music was heard.  
Panic is such a big word,  
but well describes the silent fright  
that at that moment quite  
possessed the empty street.  
A languid cloud, like a brief  
small island, unfurled in clear sky,  
signalled the do-or-die  
offensive was soon to be.  
All with binoculars could see  
against the sky's blue ocean  
a battleship in motion.  
And was it friend or foe?  
One simply could not know,  
no flag was at the mast.  
Just as the man who passed  
bore nothing by which one can  
tell one man from another man.  
And the music sang on, grew higher,  
swelled to an unseen choir.  
For from that very moment  
water, gas, buzzing current  
could all be heard to stream,  
so too had heartbeat, and dream,  
and yawn, and circulation,  
and silent hope, and desperation –  
in short, all that never found voice,

formed a concert of distant noise  
which inescapably  
increased in clarity  
and from silence drew breath.  
Longing, mauled to death,  
a child slayed in a keep,  
cried out, now shaken from sleep,  
for plaything and playmate instead.  
For that which is dead is dead,  
but what's murdered lives on undeterred,  
lives after that time less disturbed  
than what lives and never has died.  
The deed that never was tried  
does more wrong than the deed that was done.  
To face death with death once overcome  
is mercy, but woe to the man  
who in a single span  
must suffer the pain and the loss  
of living and dying, must cross  
with no bridge death's abyss.

Quite swift a step was his,  
the man's, though not swift enough to stop  
each window misting up  
with breath from a mouth gaped wide,  
that found no words inside  
no matter how wide it grew.  
And at the same time too  
as this unnameable woe,  
the music then brought in tow, –  
and note, in a street that less  
than gladly mentions distress,  
that, conversely, with glee  
would only like to see  
the sorrows others meet, -  
and note, in such a street.  
when behind pane on pane  
the stammerers all strained  
to strike up an infernal roar  
of language, – and once more,  
smothered cries only implored, -  
when then this hellish chord  
vibrated through all the hot air,

so that anyone standing there  
most certainly would have done  
the same – i.e. upped and gone –  
as the man who forgot his spade,  
the one who earlier had made  
the holes but not planted the trees, -  
when that dissonance wrote a frieze  
of spirals shrill and loud  
up to an innocent cloud  
afloat on a sea still and slow, –  
the music then brought in tow,  
– for such is music: it plays –  
while all this time people’s gaze  
followed the stranger who strode  
past the houses flanking the road,  
that every mortal there  
had a vision, became aware  
of euphoric, heavenly bliss.

The doctor, for one, who’d set up his  
practice here as a local GP  
in the street after he,  
then a young assistant, had quit  
an experiment merely since it,  
though far-reaching, only had fed  
him with meagre crusts of bread, –  
back the wild music bore  
him to a still clinic: he saw  
himself standing, remote,  
rubber gloved, in a white coat:  
in a cabinet on the wall  
things of glaze and metal,  
of enamel and glass broke  
into sparkling language that spoke  
of a rising dawn behind  
evil of every kind. –  
The judge now saw himself shorn,  
no official attire to be worn:  
no wig, no bands, no gown:  
from a sense of law alone  
and with high-raised hand  
he stuck to his oath’s command:  
in the name of justice he

let sin off perfectly free  
and his personal guilt had to own. –  
The lady quite unknown,  
the vixen as she's referred  
to, saw herself without her  
flowery blouse, a Diana quite bare  
in a wood: a deer drew near:  
and when she saw how he  
knelt down, so then did she:  
her hand quivered, her eye gleamed  
now she drank from a living stream.

So everyone gazed at  
something – one this, one that.  
But the pure bliss to be tasted:  
an instant was all it lasted  
before it had vanished and gone.  
It was rather like being on  
an abandoned ship, on deck  
where one keenly follows the speck  
of the lifeboat that disappears:  
so dire are then one's fears  
that one, as belief dictates,  
pours oil onto the waves:  
and for one split second alone  
there is calm, a calm unknown:  
the ship holds itself in check:  
but already over the deck  
rolls a heavy wave mixed with oil,  
and that which was meant to foil  
the sea catches fire, explodes,  
and the clogged wreck sags from the load  
like a sludge-filled barge under strain.  
So behind each window pane  
in the waters, glass-smooth and clear,  
a man sees his image sink near,  
his own image, now all awry. –

Oh, that oil then gambled away  
had for sure not been spilt in vain!  
For briefly the spirit had strayed  
through panoramas quite vast,  
and like the camel had passed

through the narrow needle's eye.  
In what land did he arrive?  
On earth. – In his own land. –  
Just like a moon was the hand  
that slid across his brow  
and slowly seemed to plough  
on through a dew of sweat;  
so too his staring eye that  
was constantly open wide –  
it seemed more qualified  
to be a moon than a sun.  
Soon though the blood had sprung  
in spurts from a thawing spring,  
and already had borne everything,  
the dream and its wake out of sight  
on that stream – like a tree might  
after a storm drift downstream.  
A sermon's amen then seemed  
to be formed in relief like a sigh.  
And down from an empty sky  
the spirit, at one stroke  
returned again to the yoke  
of fixed job and daily bread,  
was grateful that this death  
had freed him from fear of space.  
He was, now back in the flesh,  
tired, to be sure, very tired,  
but, plainly put, chuffed and inspired  
although flesh was feeble stuff:  
no deficit blatant enough  
that could not be pinned on this  
paltry partner of his,  
allotted to him by fate. –  
But look, that companion sat  
there once more toiling away  
at his desk – and in such a way  
that the spirit looked down ashamed  
at that loyal zealous friend  
and found he dared only draw near  
after quelling an awkward tear.  
Out of silent defence, though, the man  
did not even put down his pen,  
pull a chair up, or look his way. –

The spirit thus could not stay,  
had no choice but to re-ascend to  
his place of exile, void and blue,  
between earth and sun.  
His partner followed for one  
moment the willing one's soar,  
pondered, and in the air saw  
a tiny cloud, and saw too  
the stranger still passing through –  
still that man in the street.

But, as can be surmised, at such speed  
– for people slowly came round  
from their reverie so profound  
and he fairly swiftly made tracks –  
what they now saw was his back.  
His welcome had hardly been  
all that festive or keen;  
nor would that have seemed justified;  
but luckily he kept up his stride,  
and when the likelihood  
of maybe now – for good –  
getting shot of him grew more  
and more likely than before  
at every step of his,  
the whole street made, that is  
each and everyone  
– with the exception of one  
whom the careful reader may guess  
was the judge himself, no less –  
all made the sign of the cross,  
except the judge of course  
– sit verbo venia –  
behind the retreating man.

But for the umpteenth time to be sure  
this was counting one's chickens before  
they were even hatched. And so  
would bitter experience show,  
for the man in the street was still there.  
With one's forehead placed full square  
against the window, one's flesh  
blood-red from the curtain mesh,



one could follow his every pace.  
It was then that something took place  
beyond words for those in the street.  
The shock made their hearts skip a beat.  
Fuming with rage, deathly pale,  
fists clenched, they followed wholesale  
the frightful events that below  
the man in the street brought in tow.

The place where the kids were at play  
on the pavement now lay  
directly ahead of the man, quite near. –

It's often not what it appears,  
their play: children sometimes don't bother  
and simply chat with each other,  
the words in themselves are a joy.  
Three of the group were young boys,  
but a girl was the last of the four.  
This though one only saw  
when it happened to catch one's eye  
that down towards the thigh  
of her sailor's blouse it frilled  
into a scotsmanlike kilt.  
Foot on his scooter, one lad  
pointed out that it had  
indicators to show  
which way he intended to go.  
'That doesn't make it a car,'  
said the largest, clad in plusfours.  
'Talking of cars,' he went on  
in a condescending tone,  
'Haven't you lot got a car?'  
Over nickelplated handlebars  
the girl then swung her leg high  
– she was natural in every way:  
her tilted-up nose, and her hair  
cut like a boy's, had an air  
too artless for manners as yet, –  
'With ours you cannot do that,'  
she said, swinging it back.  
His arms behind his back  
– what else could he have done

with only a bathing suit on?  
the smallest one cried: 'And the bell,  
does it ring?' It rang. And he: 'Well,  
that's something cars don't do.'  
The owner, though, was not through  
with opening and shutting the wings  
of his indicator things,  
his face now as if made of wood.  
A miracle can't be withstood.  
There came not a single reply.  
And then the man passed them by.

Now there's a certain game  
that children play with the name,  
so I'm told, of 'treading on shadows'.  
As someone walks, one follows  
his shadow and keeps in his wake.  
Normally, for each step he takes  
one has to take two to his one.  
It cut one right to the bone,  
it tore at the heartstrings to see  
the group in a row to be  
skipping along as they did –  
a stranger followed by kids.  
It cut to the quick to be sure  
to see sailor's blouse and plusfours  
dancing arm in arm together,  
all the while holding in tether  
the other two at their sides:  
sailor helped swimsuit who  
had managed to lose one shoe  
and the second would follow the first,  
while in a sudden burst  
of speed alongside the plusfours  
ran the owner of the poor  
scooter, dumped at the kerb in full view. –  
It was now long overdue  
that all of this came to a close.  
Against the house windows  
there came the loud tapping  
of fingers all rapping,  
like an angry hen had begun  
to call chickens back to the run.

The children paid no heed.  
What had just occurred would need  
their attention to the full.  
The shadow now stood still.  
Quite undaunted, they viewed,  
their eyes raised, the stranger who  
had come to a halt close by.  
His head held half to one side  
he gave them a serious look.  
Unabashed, not one of them took  
away either one of their hands.  
And thus interlinked the band  
of the four children stood,  
like Tom Thumb in the wood,  
gazing down at the tiny stones.  
It lasted a minute perhaps, though  
one that was an eternity.  
Then the man moved on, and he  
with his strange, extended walk  
was seen – in no time at all –  
to be round the corner and gone.

At once, windows were flung open on  
all sides, flung open as wide  
as could be. It was time.  
For what could be observed?  
The meals were about to be served.  
How was this to be seen?  
From the steaming soup tureen  
now given pride of place  
and from the array of plates  
each with their silver spoon.  
Through open front doors one soon  
saw mothers go outside and,  
commandingly clapping their hands,  
call out their children's names.  
From elsewhere too there came  
a similar such cry.  
It came from high in the sky.  
It was the starling and sparrow,  
the blackbird and gull, like arrows  
diving down from the gutter.  
They flapped their wings and twittered,

breasts quivering poured out scales,  
till right in mid-street, on the rails,  
along which the tram, delayed  
by a power breakdown now made  
its appearance, and that,  
hurtling along jam-packed,  
was trying at every cost  
to make up all time lost.

But children, off like a shot,  
never come home on the trot.  
That's how they are, and were here.  
Before they were all in their chairs  
at table, napkins to the fore  
fifteen minutes had passed or more.  
And by the door, on the tiles,  
even resting awhile  
on the open window-sill,  
a little bird fluttered a trill  
for some crumbs, completely at ease.  
There were no birds, though, in the trees,  
No none in the trees could be found,  
for those were not yet in the ground.

How lovely though – yes, every time –  
are blossom and leaves in their prime.  
How lovely? Heaven knows how.  
But that's well and good for now.