Flying Home

A recollection of my parents

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MAY 24, 2023 | ESSAYS, FEATURES

The Aviation Issue

An aerial photograph dated August 12, 1944, shows the view from the plane of the author's

father, Howard Nemerov, attacking a German minesweeper off the French coast between Royan and La Rochelle. (Courtesy Phil Simmonds)

*"*There was a great wind blowing today, and after lunch I wandered out near the Firth by the Skinburness Road, and there, where the wind flattened the brown seagrass and blew away my words so no one could hear, not even myself, I had a long conversation with you.*"*

—from a love letter of my father to my mother, 1944

In 2016 I received an email from a man in Derbyshire, England, about my father, the poet and beloved Washington University English professor Howard Nemerov, who died in 1991. The man was researching his uncle, a member of the same squadron of the Royal Air Force that my father had belonged to in World War Two. The uncle, whose name was Eric Prince, had disappeared one night in January 1945 flying in bad weather over the North Sea, and he and his navigator had never been heard from again. As a boy in the 1960s, my correspondent had been given some of his uncle's military effects by his grandmother, but it was only recently that he had begun researching his relative in earnest. This had led him to my father's poem "For the Squadron," written just after the war, with its mention of

Middlemas and Prince . . .
Resting forever behind their
Four smashed and rusting guns

The man writing to me was touched to find that his uncle lived in poetry as well as logbooks and flight records. I wrote back to say that until receiving the message I had wondered if Middlemas and Prince—with their *Hamlet*-like names—had been inventions of my father, the lone American in the

British squadron. But no, they were real, and the poem in its aerie of fantasy and sounding depth—conjuring these men at the bottom of the ocean—was telling the truth.

Yet something more prosaic caught my eye in my Derbyshire correspondent's message. Among his uncle's effects that his grandmother had given him were photographs taken from the wing-mounted cameras of the Bristol Beaufighter airplanes in the squadron. One of these was taken from a Beaufighter that a logbook shows my father flew that day from a base in Cornwall. I had never imagined seeing a photograph of my father's experience in combat, but here it was, on my computer screen.

Dated August 12, 1944, the photograph shows the view from my father's plane as he attacks a German minesweeper off the French coast between Royan and La Rochelle. Armed with four 20 mm cannons and eight rockets with 25-pound solid heads, his plane is blasting the helpless ship, which by that point in the war is a sitting duck, a remnant of the once-mighty German Kriegsmarine. Soon after the photograph was taken, according to the operations record book, a huge explosion rocked the minesweeper, which emitted a cloud of dense black smoke and then became engulfed in a "sheet of flame." It sank without survivors.

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Poetry and destruction. The photograph is its own kind of poetry: a set piece, skewed and precise, like an amulet worn by an Elizabethan poet, a sculpture of the phrases of the sun. It shows the ship at an angle, perhaps 500 feet below my father's plane, on a bright sunny day, about 1:30 in the afternoon, according to the records. Centered in the crosshairs at each edge of the frame, the black ship with its slow white wake receives direct hits of rocket fire from my father's plane—hits preceded by a flurry of sparkling lights on the placid ocean, signs of the cannon fire he had used to find the range. Geysers rise where the rockets strike, the solid heads doing as intended, piercing the hull just below the water line, even as a trail of white smoke marks their path speeding from the plane. The ship's fate is a blank and distant moment, penetrating and true, unassailable in its veracity, fact-checked and cross-referenced, with all the lucid remoteness my father described in his later poem "The Air Force Museum at Dayton," where he writes of a "robot saint," part eye, part sky, delivering death to those below.

My father was there, the photograph says to me directly. But he was also not there. Not only not visible in the photograph—which, taken from the wing, shows no hunched shoulder or flying cap to indicate the person pressing the firing button—but not there at all. Concentrating, yes; in fear for his life, yes. Supremely there, of course, while the shipboard German gunners sprayed flak at him and he dropped his powerful twin-engine airplane into a dive. But also absent, in a reverie. In the love letters he wrote to my mother, a young English woman named Peggy Russell he met and married during the war, I found one dated ten days after the attack with a poem in it called "Song." There he writes of himself as "Merlin of Cornwall," a magician always at sea, among the clouds and waves, forever apart from the dull world of "jack-box" houses and stinking fishing ships anchored at harbor, a solitary dreamer of the tide that "splits on tall rocks, the white spray [that] subsides in blue." As he put it in another letter to my mother, "The sea and sky change so much, in a few hours over a few hundred

miles, and I like to watch the black rocks approach and become purple then gray and at last green and brown." Flying was a magic dream for my father. Poetry was too, and so was being in love.

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How strange that Peggy Russell, the humble recipient of these letters, knew more about flying than he did. This was not literally the case. During those years she worked as a clerk in the Bank of England. But she knew the air from the ground up. Nightly during the Blitz the Luftwaffe had tried to kill her and the other citizens of London. Later, they resumed their efforts during the V-1 and V-2 attacks that rocked the city in 1944-45. To the end—she died in 2011, at the age of 86—she had trouble walking down staircases or riding escalators because the German bombs did something to her balance.

Some deep emotional pain corresponded to this physical injury. One night, weary and sad in the kitchen, which she had just cleaned to a spotless shine, she told me she had once scraped her neighbor's body off their front gate in Croydon. Not given to exaggeration—she mostly kept silent about the war years—she told me that as a girl she had once been walking on a beach when a lone German airplane spotted her and strafed the sand with bullets. Who knows how being singled out for death from above stayed with her during her whole life. Hearing me watching a World War Two melodrama on television back in the 1970s, when I was an adolescent and these sentimental films featuring square-jawed actors and lovely actresses were common, my mother would walk into the room after a long day of running the household and burst into gin-soaked tears of rage.

Was this her flying? Maybe it was. But I came to see her flight better only this summer, in an unlikely way—in my day job as an art historian. Planning an upcoming course, I was thinking about which paintings I might teach and recalled one that I had long admired but never lectured on—an unusual work by the seventeenth-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán called *Christ and The Virgin in the House of Nazareth*. It is a strange picture because unlike most every painting of Jesus—which show him either as a baby or an adult—Zurbarán's work shows Christ as an adolescent, seated at home quietly with his mother, who looks upon him with tears falling down her cheeks.

Francisco de Zurbarán's "Christ and The Virgin in the House of Nazareth." (Wiki Commons)

Back in college in the early 1980s, I had selected this painting to write about for a term paper. To this day, I recall how "right" the picture seemed to me for my meditations—a choice that I now think of as odd, given all the

extraordinary paintings we studied by Caravaggio and other seventeenth-century artists in that course. What drew me to Zurbarán's painting above all others? What beyond the simple formulas of argument and evidence that I mustered to earn an "A" back when I was 20? This summer, with the vantage of hindsight, I saw what it was.

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The painting shows a mother and child. They are in a room in a house. The mother has been sewing but stops to look over at her adolescent son. Preoccupied with a wound he has given himself—he has inadvertently pierced his finger with the crown of thorns in his lap (such is the symbolism of the apocryphal scene)—he does not see that she weeps for him and perhaps for herself. With a force of overwhelming love and beauty—her gaze intensified by the lilies that spring from their stems and appear themselves to look at the boy—she devotes all her attention to contemplating his tragic future.

The room of mother and son is both stable and off-kilter. The stability is clear enough. They sit across from one another, fixed in place, a weighty walnut table planted stoutly on the floor between them. But the table appears at an angle, as if rotating, and it tilts up, defying the laws of perspective. The objects symbolically placed upon it—open and closed books, a brace of sexualized pears—seem about to slide off the edge. The steady room swirls

and even seems to fly—the heavens enter at left, in a ray of golden light flecked with cherubim streaming above Jesus's head, and through a window above Mary showing a gray and stormy sky. The house is up in the air, recalling to me that most terrifying of childhood spinning homes—Dorothy's in *The Wizard of Oz*—where in the great midwestern storm the child awakes to find that her house is flying and that evil rides the wind.

Dorothy's midwest house from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

What terror descends from one generation to the next? Whose house lands where? Out of what past do the descendants arrive, tentatively at first, and in what place of lollipop colors and sugar snow? How is the fantasy of freedom and pleasure so intense that it actually draws one back in penance to the dusty place one left, there to relive the storm, the muslin cyclone laying waste to the barnyard set, to experience the feeling, over and over, that all is lost?

The sweetest and best times I ever spent with my mother—to this day, they shape my sense of goodness in the world—were when she and I watched late-night movies on Sunday evenings in our house in St. Louis.

Readers from that city will recall this programming of the 1970s: *The Bijou Picture Show*, it was called, featuring old Hollywood movies, one after another, running in triple- and quadruple-features starting at 10:30 p.m. and going on, interrupted by commercials heralded by the distinctive appearance of a movie theatre marquee and a curious tap dancing-type music, until the last film concluded sometime after 5 a.m.

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My mother and I would watch the first feature that began at 10:30—films such as *Mutiny on the Bounty*, starring Charles Laughton and Franchot Tone, or (my favorite) *A Tale of Two Cities*, with Ronald Colman. These were the movies of my mother's youth, the ones she saw in theaters in 1930s England, back before she was bombed, when she was the age I was as we watched them together in St. Louis. An unspoken closeness grew between us, the room dark but not too dark: just pleasantly dark, something like the atmosphere in Zurbarán's painting, which seemed to grasp (strange for a picture made in 1630s Spain) exactly what the feeling of watching *The Bijou Picture Show* was like in our house in St. Louis—the glow from the television set, the two people apart but together, secure in the shared sadness mother gave to son. How beautifully Zurbarán knew the score, that in such a house even a solid and sane room spun.

I would like to believe I have left that room, but I think I never can. My perpetual return to that place is the prick of the thorn—the tragedy that the mother mourns: not only her son's augured future, his destined sorrow, but the past's nameless track, the calamities that will take him back, his inability

to leave or even grieve. Shedding her tears, she weeps for herself as well, taking this moment when he is not looking to recall when she too was young, when she waited in other rooms for news of my father's return: from flights, from missions, from futures canceled before they passed. Transposing that sorrow onto her son, she gave him stories he did not write, feelings not his own, projector beams fastening onto ships and dreams.

But in another sense that room granted me my independence. Out of many pasts—those of the movies, my mother, and my own—I fashioned something new. In Zurbarán's painting the mother sets the emotional tone—predestining, darkening—but she also grants the boy his own space. Selflessly, she cries because of the separation she creates. Absorbed in his own drama, the boy becomes free to exercise what Winnicott called "the capacity to be alone." And if what he does with this freedom is examine his own wounds—self-inflicted but also visited upon him by plots and stories not his own—he is a strange Narcissus indeed. With my mother by my side, absorbed in the films that made her fantasy life as a girl, I found myself alone. But for her I would not have flown.

A photograph of my mother taken in 1944, when she was nineteen and newly married, shows this person foretelling me. Pained around the eyes, she smiles sadly, as if pitying the photographer his blithe business of portraying happiness—his arrangement of her shawl in a cowl, his request for her to smile and display her ring—even as she politely plays the part she is too wise to believe. She came to America not long after, on a troop transport bearing wounded from the Battle of the Bulge, sailing stateside with a few other English war brides in early 1945. All the cabin doors on the ship had been removed—the doors jammed when ships were struck by torpedoes—and in one of those bare rooms of safety and dread she slept. At war's end my father joined her in New York, where they started their new life together, and he began writing poems like the one about Middlemas and Prince.

With my mother by my side, absorbed in the films

Peggy Russell, the author's mother, in a 1944 photograph at age nineteen. (Courtesy Alexander Nemerov)

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"There came a moment that you couldn't tell/ Then they clearly flew instead of fell." My father wrote these lines in a late poem about raindrops turning to snow. He called it "Because You Asked about the Line Between Prose and Poetry." I remember reading the poem at his memorial service at our house in 1991. As I think of it now, is it me or the poem or that whole house that still remains in the air? I look down, I look all around. What is substantial is never neat. The folder of yellowed love letters spills from a drawer—it might well be from the walnut table between mother and son. From rooms grow recollections, sheafs of paper that could have fluttered on the wind, gone missing, but survived the storm of time. If something in them remains lost—the words blowing away—then I think my love for my parents is also a type of flight.

Author's note: My thanks to Phil Simmonds for contacting me with information about his uncle, for sending me the photograph taken from my father's plane, and for granting permission to use it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Nemerov

Alexander Nemerov is the author most recently of *The Forest: A Fable of America in the 1830s* (Princeton, 2023), a series of tales each centering on a visionary experience in the last years of America as a heavily forested land. Praised by Annie Proulx ("deeply beautiful," "astonishingly tender," "one of the richest books ever to come my

way”) and Edmund de Waal (“moving and shocking and beautiful, an extraordinary achievement”), *The Forest* conjures a lost world of shade and sun. Nemerov’s previous book, *Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York*, was short-listed for the 2021 National Book Critics Circle Prize in Biography. He teaches art history at Stanford University.