

Weather-Fear

New and Selected Poems, 1958–1982

John Engels

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BY JOHN ENGELS



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For Mozart, from the Beginning

*So magnified with new light
as to have become estranged
from the simple work, the song
continues itself. And since*

*from the blue radiance of the beginning
it rose into these minor volumes of the light
the greater we dream of
must from the beginning have contained;*

*and since the implacable light of the new sun
shone down upon the earth in which everything
was true, since then—
in the line of those few*

*who, seeing clearly by this light,
must have been somehow informed to choose
to love us and we have perhaps
loved back—there has been this one*

*to whom we might, with something
like the ease of instinct, speaking with something
like joy and in the fullness
of praise, have found it possible*

*to have cried aloud, but did not, that he
is indeed and always loved, who,
against all amulet and recipe, against
the cold gratuities of the subjectless,*

*seized in the real and made to flash forth
the mute transparencies*

*of matter, continued
the Creation, his heart so new,*

*boundless and unaltered, so
inhabited by beatitude,
as to have occasioned us to rise
from the regions of dissemblance toward one*

*another; and this despite
the effronteries of the disparate
body, sad goiter
of the other, because*

*his heart, and precisely by power
of the disaccord, from the first
instant of the first
spasm of light, prime turbulence, chord*

*of the Beginning, intent
on the immaculate bond of the ensemble, free
to cherish the light, beat, measured itself
and never otherwise gave voice*

*to the gorgeous numbers
of the increate sensation,
the disinterested poetry
of the source.*

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I

The Homer Mitchell Place (1968)

for Jessica and David

Salmon

This salmon, belly ripped up with my blade,
bloodies the hand; his gasping eye,
defined by generation to despise
any but shape or shadow of the fly,
pricks in the brain. And tender with
packed duns and spinners, beetles' zigzag
legs, a minnow's bones, the gut
bursts at the merest touch of knife.

Why, if the swollen belly ached with food,
did he gape in that stiff-finned rush and long
slant of the feeding run, the taut and final
water humped and flung, and in the rubric of that
free rise take and turn with to the grinding
riverbed the fixed fly coursed of angler,
stream, and light? O Angler, let the hunting hand
be sensitive as that fierce appetite!

Poem after School

With his yellow cap tipped forward
he runs home through the empty pasture,
the tall grass bending over on each side
making yellow tunnels, bright corridors
for him to fill up with the warming light
of his breath. What remains of the schooltime air
weaves into the grass: fathers,
lemonsweets, suppers waiting. And think

how he screams when, not quite home,
he feels the hunting-shadow's weight.
Night comes earlier on school days.
Again and again he is almost home,
and we have to search in the grass as if
we expected to find yellow cap-feathers,
burned-out books, or some other evidence
of breath we may have passed before
dark came, and the moon rang us home like a bell.

Sister Vincent Couldn't Pray

Sister Vincent couldn't pray,
and so informed us every day.
We prayed for her. For all our prayers
we never doubted her despair,

or ours. Bribed once with apple tart
I quicksilvered her Sacred Heart.
She wore it blazing on her gown
until in time it tarnished brown,

and she grew stern, and red of eye,
but did not weep. I wondered why,
and wonder still—she'd paid me well
to wear the brightest heart in Hell.

Growing old and somewhat stout
Sister Vincent went in doubt,
once she'd found the heart could dull
and apples thunder in the skull.

Sister Vincent tried to pray,
but died at Lauds one holiday.
I have not prayed since I was young
but tasted apples on the tongue.

A Domesticity

In spite of table, child and wife
we drove for greens one Christmas day
and stopped for stomach bitters in
some Polish tavern on the way.
The forest pine was dry and thin;
we swung our heavy brushing-knives
and skittered ice-pucks on the lake
until too late: in time we came

back home to find our wives awake
we had abandoned while we played,
so danced set measure in our shame
at child asleep and supper made
and spoiled upon the table, grown
as cold as wind across the ice
had played and tasted at the bone.
Grown seasonal in artifice

we lock our doors; our children dream.
If angry women weep alone,
we play at cutting evergreen
in our good time. And we come home.

For Philip Stephen Engels

August 23–October 24, 1965

Swarming by your head
red plastic butterflies
danced patterns on their strings
because that night you cried

and would not sleep; and I,
in my dark room, rejoiced
to know that bright beasts moved,
measured by your voice.

The sun came red as wings
to fix the swimming dust
in all our rooms. My son
your caught voice moves in us.

The house drowns in its lawns.
We watch the morning sun
thrust deep into the sky
a lithe and bloody tongue,

and in that roar of light
you sleep. Above your head
the blazing wings grow dull
and larval on their threads.

You were no voice at best.
I measure what I tell;
the housed and swallowed bone
grows hollow as a bell,

the breath swims in the throat,
the sun rings in the sky;
what color we remember
burns inward from the eye.

Distances

It is the final grief, how color echoes on the eye
in distance, and its cold perspectives.
I see a child in a red hat and jacket walking down
the lines of the severe fences
through a snowy field and spare bristle of weeds
till his brave color dances
random on the retina, and blots. The eye reflects
back travelled distances
of its cold fields, and color dies at the farthest range
in the green pine peninsulas.

Ghosts walk in color where the brain most dazzles white
and strains at distances the eye refused,
fearing most that fierce geometry that angles sight
to the utter point the blood eludes.
O our children die beyond our seeing, always,
having outwalked color, having moved
beyond the shadows of the neighbors' farthest trees.
Our eyes break on the fearful residues.

Poem at Daybreak, before the Grave

Half-turning to the window lights my eye;
snow runnels on the sulfur piles at dawn,
and from the elms, intaglio on sky,
I watch the rake of shadow down the lawn

and hear the rooftree roaring in its bark
as if it had awakened to the dark
of leaf and flower, or some such dispraise,
and later than its branching could be drawn

or figured for the sight again. Such brawn
of elm-bone braces in my house, and groans
its grave tune to this point of days,
the rotting spine leafs violently in praise,

the fingers flower inward on the bone.

Two Children

I am beset by cellars where dark water rots
to stink in hallways, and I have begot
by some confusion out of some fierce game
one child which died, another who did not.

I have a living child, whose greenstick bones
sprout from my fathers' tillage and my own,
or we were the soil, and gave enough to die,
and she is branch and flower of the stone.

She rackets in my rooms, her voices mock
the raucous bellings of the household clocks.
My cellars flood, this living child breathes
to make my rounds, unsnapping all my locks.

In time at last the narrow body grieves
at flood of season; twigs dam up the eaves,
the maple's dead, the mountain turns to stone.
My lot is littered with the bones of leaves.

My son is dead. My daughter lives with me
where I have lived, not having come to see
in bonfires blazing on the sodden lawns
the sweetened honeycomb the bone can be.