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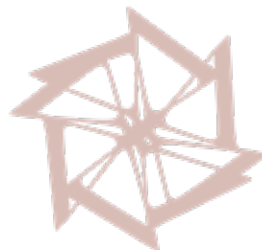
ATMOSPHERE

People Near the Storm

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Volume One, Issue Two

Fall 2020



People Near the Storm

James Engell

I foresaw a caravan go by in
Single-filed rich array, and dressed in
Silk and gaudy bright brutality, thin
Figures painted all around, demeaned in
 Squinting at leaders before, those walking
 Close behind, cordons winding, trailing from
 The dark to a black mass'd heart of storm.
 So they went. But some left to follow first
 Pressures, merely turning the ghost leaf back,
 Giving birds a last flight; their thirst and grass
 Waiting for rain from anvil-headed black.

Those remaining walked past all these, still to
 The storm, peering at their own line—wordless,
 Full of stops and cares, carrying their deceased
When they would topple and start to pitch through
 The airy trail; they tried remembering them.
But the errant ones in open artfulness,
 Common dreamers perhaps with common dream,
 Fled instead to tops of breezes; and quick,
And self-rising to the tempest, now seem
 To see a form or figure on the ridge
 Beyond the curtained rain, falling for the sick,
But unheedful of their state; and above

Even that they could find clear winds
Continually blowing over peril, no less
Over calm, not waiting, but receptive,
With rites of fleeting grandeur staged for flesh.

Then again the line's full, and rife with talk,
Curt murmurings and half attempts from those
Who've returned; the squall is up, sudden
Shift, a writhing, break, and pours of rain
Swamping in confusion those dumb again who walk,
Pulling hoods to heads where their necks have froze
In stares as questions that are asking, "When?"
My children have been late out into the night,
They're under the low scudding clouds:
Could one say succor, help, and not feel right?

The storm moves, or there, do the people?
The sight's surely been a dream gone
Like it was not, unheard, inviting some
Interpretation, futile if only
Found again in transitory flight.

JAMES ENGELL is Gurney Professor of English and Professor of Comparative Literature, a member of the Committee on the Study of Religion, and a faculty associate of the Harvard University Center for the Environment. He has directed dissertations in American Studies, as well as Romance Languages & Literatures (French).

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