



AUTUMN COMES

poems

Sarai Austin

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Chapbooks by Sarai Austin

Butter

Cowboys

Fire on the Mountain

In, Then Out

Provocative Duet

Shirts

Sod Woman

Voices

Autumn Comes

Sarai Austin

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*All things on earth point home in old October; sailors to sea,
travellers to walls and fences, hunters to field and hollow
and the long voice of the hounds, the lover to the love he has
forsaken.*

Thomas Wolfe

Autumn comes, the air is chilled. The lady gardener next door wears a blue coat and there are no parking places on the street. Autumn comes and with it the necessity of bushel baskets, of hot apple pie by the fire. The ax is left lying on the cement patio. Leaves are driven to the corner of the steps, not the crisp, colorful leaves of childhood, but the damp leaves of a California autumn.

Autumn comes, bringing cornucopias and collective dinners. Calculations of dinner guests and table extensions. The dwindling wood pile an answer to the plea for necessities which feel necessary, for a life which makes sense.

Autumn comes, a robin sings on the edge of the chimney. A white sailboat disappears behind the telephone pole, a woman passes in turquoise pants. Nights become a frightening time when the bushes bash against the window and the need for shelter is not an illusion.

Answers begin to speak themselves before reason has found the questions, answers like the singing voices of children in the quiet corners where life is still living. Choices fall into patterns. Necessity is and fills its own arms.

I need to build a nest
of twigs and captured bits of hair,
found objects of no particular usefulness
except within a harmonious composition.
Born of a *material imagination*,
fond of permanency and repetitive rhythms.
The oak tree lives in an acorn,
where might my home be?

I walk slowly,
imagining my father building a barn,
trying to know the things
I didn't learn
so that I might learn from them,
listening for the rhythm of his hammer.

Forget barns.
Think like a robin, small and plain.

I want to build a nest.
It is almost a lie,
but not entirely.
It is not so much that
I want to build the nest,
as I need a place to inhabit.

I am a robin with disturbed instincts,
nature gone awry as a result
of wrong-hearted intentions,
tampered urges that have grown a mind
full of useless reason,
forgetful of purposefulness and necessity.

I bang into branches
like a mechanical thing,
over-wound and re-active.
Having no place of my own to inhabit
is a truth so terrifying to realize,
it prevents me from building a nest.
I am a robin, beak chattering with fear.

In summer I would have believed
I could not sing because I had no nest,
but in autumn I see things differently.
I am a robin whose first and dearest home
is the song, who fears too much exuberance
will disturb the nest,
afraid to inhabit the place
nature made for me beyond houses
and men and children.
I am a robin,
a common thing of varied tones,
born in mud and sticks
to sing my way home.

Autumn comes, a slow pulse, a bee enters the center of the morning glory. A white butterfly grazes the pine. Across the street a man carries large bags of manure. We move cautiously into each other's lives, leaving things. The heart strengthens. Blue Chevrolet trucks, red compact cars with surf boards, ease around the corner, unaware of the task at hand, or silent of the awareness. Life begins, and ends, and continues.

Think like a robin,
small and plain.
If you can't eliminate the metaphor,
reduce the size of it to something
you can carry in your mouth.

The word serious means:
1) thoughtful or subdued
in appearance or manner.
As always the first meaning
is not most true. A cultural
error born of values which
place too much emphasis
on looking right.
2) requiring much thought or work
3) not trifling
4) having important or dangerous
possible consequences.
These are more useful definitions.
Usefulness is a new value,
capable of being put to use.

The autumn air is chilly.
The wind flips the page
while I gather twigs.

Autumn comes, lingering flowers confuse us. Bands of light intersect the sky, no branch bends, no bird is singing. Life hesitates while cars stream around the corner. Joggers pass each other on the sidewalk. People stroll to the mailbox. Old ladies struggle to step down from the curb.

Women rest their hands in their laps. Men move through the room, conscious of their spines. Cars and trucks and sailboats drift past, some instinct stirred, which can't yet speak itself, prepares for what it does not need to name.

TUESDAY 7:30 a.m.

Pick up the hammer. Feel it gripped in your hand, the sticky, black rubber padding against your palm. Life is more than vision, a bronze gate of ornate implications that does not extend beyond your mind's eye. Make it a material thing, and when it has become, when you have made it be, put it in someone's hand.

Autumn comes, the blood recalls
something it cannot name,
pricked alive by tales
of hickory nuts
gathered and drying
in her yard up north.

Summer ends,
something remembers forgetfulness
reading letters full of blueberry jam,
the last rush of vegetables
packed away in winter's jars.
"Your father is making wind chimes
and I am doing the last of the canning."

Summer ends, my hair
and the ocean grow silver,
living a more urgent request
that makes itself known.

Autumn comes to the land
they say has no seasons.
I see golden trees, a singular radiance
against the gray sky.
The air resonates something back to life
that cannot remember its purpose,
but feels itself born in the need
to gather, acquire and store.

And the words I speak to the only woman
who knows the roots of my face,
"I feel so autumnal," are no reflection

upon the weather but some resounding
urge within,
I should have been a tree,
a deciduous, blooming, fruit-bearing tree,
so there would be something I could do
simply because I live.
I need to shed leaves.

I cannot lose the image of the hurrying squirrel,
of nuts that must be gathered one at a time,
carried in the mouth.

Winter is a tremendous task.
I think of home as a place life itself
made for us to inhabit and the necessity of
laying in provisions, feeling the function
of inhabiting here where the skin
is new to my arms.

Memory and image unfold as always
when the heart is rushing in response
to meanings, not new themselves
but newly seen. Use and function
become important words in autumn.
Possessive pronouns
take on their own significance
and I look for places to attach
the word mine.

Autumn comes, the urge to nest becomes the need for shelter. The earth heaves a needed sigh in preparation for silence. Children forget to see what made things happen in their mother's tired faces, their father's worn hands. A crisp turkey descends on the table and in the child's eye it is all magic. Autumn comes, the day has a luminous quiet. Hearts ache for what their hands cannot reach that time has dulled the urgency of, for all that seemed magic that was produced with great effort.

Autumn comes, something begins to know itself before it is spoken, stirs and stings the heart with life, a constriction in the breast of something which needs to be done. Bundles of kindling. Warm shirts. The heart buds faith regardless of comprehension and urges settle, accepting themselves. Autumn comes, I embrace the necessity of my life with no great revelation but simply because it fills my arms.

So it is, my father builds barns. Large and red, and permanent, profoundly material. I build small, mis-shapen things which are only visible to an active imagination. So it is, an oak is a tree and an acorn is a nut.

Look closely. You will see splintered red wood, my father's hand on every twig I bend into place.

The sun rises over the tree
the nest is warmed
day comes
everywhere
there are worms.