

AUTUMN AND I

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Storybook House

After Joyce Carole Oates's WE WERE THE MULVANEYS

Only now that it's long gone
Can I appreciate what it meant.

My mother, heavily pregnant in hazy late
August, fans herself with a 1997 newspaper,
Happily restless, a home being built
For her two towns away.

My father lays down expensive stretches
Of black tile, scrapes cement in smooth movements,
Runs a satisfied hand over the gleaming granite
That they'd chosen together.

Together, they'd chosen high ceilings,
Chrome fixtures and cut-glass lamps
Handmade and obscure art and tables
Long and heavy enough for company.

Two, three, four, five, six
Bedrooms with painted walls and
New furniture wait to be filled.
And then they were.

He used to push us on the long swing, the one
Atop the small hill that overlooks the field.
Only now, I see that he must've found
A way up that tree to tie the ropes.

The seat of yellow plastic was rough, scratched, and
Now I wonder where he found it, or if he made it himself.
My little fists gripped the waxy ropes, bare feet kick
In anticipation for him to ask, grinning, *Underdog?*

stanza break

And then, both hands on the ropes, he pushes and
Runs downhill, runs right under me,
Sends me sailing over his head, and at the very top,
I lift ever so slightly off the seat, just for a second, just

Before taking flight.
On that same long branch,
While I'm in the sky, sits my mother
On a real wooden swing, army green stripes

On the cushions, gold chains screwed into the bark:
She smiles, so young, and pats the cushion beside her
(But I never understood why anyone would want a swing
meant for sitting)— and I run back to the yellow swing.

And before I got too close to the sky—like the sudden snap
Of a weak tree branch—the money ran out, and we left.
I can't remember if they kept the swing, either of them.
But when our crowded car slowed over the cracks

In the new driveway, I knew right away
These trees wouldn't be tall enough for them.

Sinking and Swimming

I still remember that time we had to flush my first fish:
While he endlessly swirled for a panicked moment,
I could've sworn that he was swimming.

I never learned to swim—well, no one ever taught me.
I think it was one of those things filed under *if we had the time*,
Which no one ever did—but I was fine.

Yes, there was that time at the water park,
Pushing my body awkwardly through the water;
Aimlessly, desperately swatting my feet and hands,
Sunken with embarrassment in that plaster-yellow vest, and

There was that time I almost drowned
At that hotel in Virginia, when no one noticed as I
Released myself from that underwater plateau,
Kicking myself towards the deep end where the big kids belonged,
Kicking aimlessly, desperately, until my legs got heavy, and
My chest was tight, and my lungs, and the water,
So much water
Wherever I turned, it consumed me, I was losing, it was winning
Over all my senses, and it was fine, and

Suddenly I was there, gripping the edge, gasping,
Thinking of my fish swimming, circling 'round his bowl, and
I don't think it ever occurred to him that his life was
Anything but whole.

Trouble with Homophones

Before bed, we read:
 Not red (like blue),
 Or read, rhyming with need,
 Like the kisses they blew.

Night falls like hope
 With a slap and a scream
 Words like hate and love
 Interchangeable, it seems.

Some words are harder
 Like *you're* and *they're*
 You either are or you're not,
 The fault is yours or theirs.

Your mother, he says,
 Like she's mine, not his.
 Like he's not *your father*,
 Which she'll bitterly hiss.

Your father, she says
 Is right always.
Your mother, he says
 Is incredibly vain.

I wonder then,
 If I should change
 The things that I write
 And the blood in my veins.

Your father, she says,
 Is making a scene.
Your mother, he says,
 Can never make peace.

I wonder then,
Which pieces of me
Are ugly like theirs
And if I should be seen.

I need help with homework:
The word that means *couple*.
Mom says *to*, Dad says *too*
(Even I know the answer
Isn't one).

To His Lost Lover

After Simon Armitage

You'd think they'd no longer
be any trouble to each other,

But I'm still turning things over, still obsessed
With figuring it out, with making sense,

Like it's business unfinished.
For instance...for instance,

How he never said sorry—
raised hell but never worried

about the echoes of his curses
against the ears of his children;

how they'd scurry like mice
from their beds into mine.

How he sat in luxury upon excuses,
so that we couldn't say abusive.

How that December, that cold Christmas
she suddenly screamed out her wishes:

That he'd fall already, trip on concrete
crack his skull, end her misery.

It's louder today, roaring in my head,
than it was the first time, at the age of ten.

Louder still, the later cries of my brother,
a man at twelve defending his mother.

I shouldn't hear screams as I fall asleep
Or their echoes distorted in my dreams.

stanza break

And I shouldn't be watching in silent horror
as my baby sisters, those other daughters,

find themselves with my own scars—
reopened, searing, defining their arms.

But sometimes, I think about his lost lover
How he tells her story, speaks well of her.

How he knelt for her before she went—and
how she died while he worked: car accident.

And I like to think that if, for instance,
she hadn't gone with unfinished business,

that he'd be happy, and that we would
all be exactly who we should.

Rough Draft

I wrote a letter to myself
And I told her all of the things I hate.
I made her promise to change,
And signed your name.

I write this poem often
Then crumple the words and
Toss them into the fire that
I sleep in every night.

But tonight, I'm awake, and
I'm writing a letter to you,
Telling you all of the things I hate.

I hate that I'm scared of your voice.
I hate that I let you win.
I hate that I
I hate that I can't say this to you,
Except at night, in the fire,
Inside my head.

I hate that I hate you,
I write at the bottom.
I do not want to hate you, and
I hate that I have to hate
myself instead.
I sign my name, and go to bed.

The Blinds

All we knew about ourselves was that we didn't want to be them.
So we drew the curtains, and smoothed our sheets and made a list
Of all the things that they are.

And each day we slept on our project, making plans with our hands
On the bible we wrote; sunny plans to see the dawn, to be different,
To be what they are not.

Outside and above us, the leaves did their work,
Redressing and progressing through their
Vibrant cycle.

If we'd looked, we might've remarked that they are prettier now, that
That ingrained change was where they became beautiful,
But we didn't dare move our hands or eyes.

Finally,
We parted the blinds and found ourselves
Staring right at them in the clouded glass,
And past them

The sun was the same,
And so were we.

Spin Cycle

Could it be me?—I'm
the one who will sever
the cycle?

I certainly won't be the one
who perpetuates it;
but so, I suppose, said everyone
before things were soiled;
hypnotized with standby eyes
and slack mouths
who cannot bring themselves
to wonder,
Could this be me?

To Give a Life

My mom wakes up first.
Coffee trickles then drips
Red chipped mug scrapes the table
Familiar crinkle of library book plastic
I share her quiet moment
From under my covers.

Up and down the stairs
In her uniform nightgown and old
Black socks, folding ours mismatched.
Shirts in squares and fabric softener
I close my eyes and see hers squinting
At the sun bouncing off the decaying porch

I keep closing until I see that same sun
Burning in an impossible sky, far and
Her favorite shade of blue, and her coffee cup is new
And her socks are clean, and her book
Is owned, not rented.

But she wakes me up and there are
Six plates laid out, mismatched
Six kids shuffle in, hungry and she
Serves everyone before herself
My mom, who wakes up first.

Smoking Cigarettes in the Morning

You've got me addicted to
These things,

This early sky,
These cancer-sticks,

This hazy high,
Your crucifix.

The color between
Periwinkle and peach,

The clouds and smoke,
Your puffed-out cheeks.

That bitter blaze
Burning down my throat,

Those dizzy seconds
On which I float.

The way you make
Death feel fine,

The way you make
Me feel alive.

That ferocious smile,
Those pretty lies.

I can't say no—you
know I've tried.

Sand Street Beach

At Sand Street Beach, a flattened can rattles across asphalt,
casts an aluminum chime into the quiet morning.

A lone seagull rides that same wave of wind, and I
Rest my knees on the steering wheel and watch.

At Sand Street Beach, leashes are taught between eager
Puppies and their hand-holding elderly men and women.

On my old blue towel, I let the wind turn pages of my book
While I dream of who I might become with you

At Sand Street Beach, you watch my eyes widen at fuzzy baby geese,
And we wonder how they know to swim in straight lines.

We follow the crescent moon here, and you
lean over the center console to kiss me for the first time.

At Sand Street Beach, a man with an empty gaze
Eats a sandwich alone, one arm dangling out the window.

The keys in the ignition chime a song of their own, while
We climb over to the backseat.

At Sand Street Beach, we escape our lives and
Watch the boats bob on waves that carry birds.

I like the one with the canvas cushions, and you
prefer the yacht that gleams.

We have our first fight.
Our second.

Our third. I watch
Raindrops chase each other down the window while you speak.

stanza break

At Sand Street Beach, we set our alarms for tomorrow,
We plan to watch the sunrise—maybe.

Couples and puppies watch the sunrise without us, and
tomorrow begins with the smallest spark, a sizzling calm, and

At Sand Street Beach, the monotony of blue skies is taken
for granted, but always, everyone

Gathers here for the spectacle of the sunset, when the day ends
Smoky, smoldering, vibrant, and dark.

Happy Belated

You sent me flowers for my birthday.
They arrived one day late, which is fine.
They ruined my day.

To the most beautiful girl I know...
Why'd you write that? Why'd you end with,
Thinking of you...

One day late, I spent it not
writing *Thank you* to the people I love,
but thinking of you...

You: unshaven and red-rimmed, sulking in your basement,
writing *beautiful girl*, signing
not your name, but your initial: one

Lonely and woeful *G*
attached to your last word
only by an empty space.

A rounded symbol, almost one full circle, but
broken—drawn in, sharply—then
out again,

just enough to seem inviting,
to let me consider how it might feel to
perch my tired body upon its edge, but

never mind those belated thoughts.
My limbs are strong, and where they're not
I will put that letter towards my growth.

Your yellow roses are rotting already, and
I'm sweeping those brittle brown pieces
into my palms, crushing them to dust.

Leftovers

He wants me, I think:
 I try to think it loudly
 Try to scream
 It inside my head
 Until it excites me,
 The way it should
 Be with another man.

Be with another man,
 They say, again, my friends
 Want me to do this, say
 It is the right thing
 For me.

For me, you were always there
 But that's not how
 I'm supposed to think
 Anymore.

Any more of this,
 And I *will* scream
 Any more? He is asking me
 Looking down—I haven't touched
 My plate, and he wraps the leftovers in clear plastic.

He shows me a poem he has written, and
 I almost laugh at how I'd have died for you
 To do the same
 But I point out his typo, and he calls me a type-A
 And when I don't laugh, he reminds me it's a joke,
 And that he cares about my opinion—and you
 Asked for my opinion on things, often—and I
 Hated that you couldn't decide for yourself.

And while he is in awe of me I am staring
at the string of dust that hangs from the corner
of his ceiling that sways when the fan turns and
though it is nothing—nothing but dust—it
clings and, despite
my silent hopes, it never falls,
not after he's asleep, not after I leave, and each time
I come back, it is there.

October 31st

November pressed his toe
To the clean sheet of ice in the sky
And sent crackling branches, black across the haze.
And orange October spent all
Of her colorful letters in golden rain
That's turned rust on the cracks in the sidewalk.
There was cozy hope for change and still,
We wandered through October again
To find ourselves under cold trees, naked and dead

Like the years before, we matured
Through earthy tones of autumn.
Slowly from green like the sun goes, to
Its own chemical yellows and fiery reds,
Before we were muted and maroon,
And finally, we fell
Soaked and limp, matted
On the pool cover,
Plastic and blue.

My Rooted Friend

For C.

Today and you are yellow, impossibly
Bright and warm, like the flickering square
Of bedroom window in the corner
Of my dark house down the block.

Down the block, at the coffee shop we share
Sips of steaming poetry, nibble at the edges
Of the women we could become.
At our corner table, in our laptop worlds,
Our espressos are doubles, and we
Toss them back with memories that only get older.

You drive too fast while we sing too loud,
You like poems and people without structure,
You hate rhyme but love reason, and
You will always tell me how my words sound.

Like the leaves on the trees down the block
Who are brilliantly, suddenly scarlet,
You are.
And on our block, like those trees,
There are parts of each passing year
When we wither away from one another

But, impossibly, we find that we never run out
Of colors and I know, like them, you will remain
Rooted here, where I know
You are.

Just Yesterday

I got an abortion yesterday—you
Want me to say it again?

I got an abortion yesterday,
And I'm doing alright, and
What that means is
I'm not thinking about it.
I'm not thinking about it, the blood, or
The abortion I got yesterday.
Yesterday, I woke up,
Thirsty and hungry and not knowing
When I'd be allowed a sip of water,
Or a comfortable sleep in my bed.
Yesterday, I did not let myself feel
Fear.
Or pain, like the other girls did,
I did not let myself scream or cry like
The other girls did,
Yesterday.

Today, I drink water and spend more time
Scouring my mind
For the things that I feel, so
The lines—so that I
Can say precisely
The right thing here,
Because you can't just get an abortion
And write a shitty poem about it—
God forbid.

Ribs

I wake at four forty-three,
 my neck bent, sharp, over my left shoulder,
 my robe, thick, stuck to my arms with sweat,
 the sun, hot, roasting the room.
 And for the first time in six days
 I make it down the hallway,

and I pull open the refrigerator and I pull out an obscure shape of
 crinkled tin-foil
 where the barbecue ribs remain, congealing in their own sweet sauce
 and fat, left over
 from six nights ago when my mother put them in the slow-cooker
 and I stubbornly
 stated that I simply wouldn't consume the meat off the bones of
 another animal.

Vaguely, I am aware that my robe hangs open
 like the refrigerator door on which I lean, and my hands
 raise the small rack of ribs to my teeth, my taste buds
 like prisoners slamming fists against their gates,
 quivering in anticipation,
 shivering off the feverish heat, I eat every last
 strip of sinewy flesh off of those cold, gray bones.

In one, carnivorous sitting, the kitchen walls absorb
 the wet sounds of flesh tearing from flesh,
 strings of flesh tearing from bone, of me,
 letting the slimy faces of my teeth scrape against
 skin and bone, sticky remnants of buttery animal fat linger
 on my cheeks, a halo of grease around my panting mouth.

I even suck the cold slippery bones, something I'd seen my father do,
my lips the seal of force, releasing stubborn marrow and rubbery
chunks like some sick form of fattening in reverse, until each
bone gleams like old deli meat in the harsh fluorescence
of the refrigerator light.

And after: those three sinister bones, the size and strength
of my index finger, the slope and the dead color of driftwood,
sit naked on the soiled foil,
And I try to imagine the animal whose heart they had been protecting
before my mother covered their meat in bottled barbecue sauce and
pressure-cooked them until it might slide
so easily off.

Regret

My hand hugs the pencil, it's pink
And something beautiful is revealing itself on the page
But suddenly,
In one horrific instant, I look down, and the pencil is inside my hand,
Under my skin, some grotesque thing, I panic, I pick up
A butcher's knife, and swiftly bring it down, slice at my wrist
And only later, when I see myself in the mirror, smeared with blood
Dried brown and red,
Do I look down at my severed, dripping hand

Opal and Marigold

My mother and I were born in October,
The month of opal and marigold.

In October this year, it is warm like summer,
And the marigolds bloom, if confused.

Like my mother, the marigolds wear shades
Of red with accents of gold, they silently
Progress through their earthly duties.

In October this year, there are two full moons,
Fat opal orbs spilling over with light.

And this year, I am more afraid than ever—afraid that I,
Like the irregular veins that define the opal,
Will never produce a color pure enough for her to name.

Afraid that the moon will empty and fill,
The marigolds will die, October will run out

Of color, and my mother and I
Will celebrate our lives never needing
To know the other exists.

My mother and I were born in October,
The month of opal and marigold.

Notes

“Storybook House”: The title of this poem is derived from Joyce Carol Oates’s novel, *We Were the Mulvaney’s*.

“To His Lost Lover”: This poem was inspired by Simon Armitage’s poem “To His Lost Lover,” from his collection entitled *The Shout*.