

Summer's Autumn
by Tania Norfolk

When I was not yet born, nor named, but swam in my mother's belly, I grew in the darkness moving fingers and toes, stretching elbows and knees, unfurling my seahorse spine. I wrapped myself in softest down and formed buds for ears. And as time moved from frost to thaw, my ears grew, until they were no longer mere whorls of skin, but tiny conduits of sound. I listened for a first echo and heard my mother's voice, and with it a tymbal chorus – the sound of the sun captured in the bellies of cicadas. I might have been named Summer, had I come then, but I was in no rush, filling the walls of my mother's womb until I was snugness itself. And there I waited until late summer crickets took up their sad song, and the first yellow leaf fell from the ash tree outside my mother's window. My mother, gathering her strength, saw the leaf in its twirling, and with a final grunt and a gasp pushed me out into the world. And so it was that I was christened not Summer but Autumn, though as I grew, my mother said that I was both and neither. Sunny and cool. My warm smile often a ghost in a face that darkened, longing for something I could not name.

When I was eleven, I searched for wild blackberries with my brothers and sisters. We skipped our feet over withered grass and dry dirt. We laughed as we kicked the earth and watched dust clouds settle in our wake. We climbed hills and scaled rocks for those ebony jewels, and our mouths watered for the sweet tartness our tongue-memories held. It was I that found them, following the curve of a bank, dodging gorse with my bare feet. And I would have called to my brothers and sisters, would have shouted with glee had I found them on a different day, a different hour, a different minute. I never knew when it would come, the changing, only that in that moment I

did not slip the berry I held in my hand into my mouth, savouring juice-filled drupelets, but crushed it in my palm watching it bleed in crimson drops on the grass.

When I was twenty-two, I looked upon the face of my lover, saw the bronzing of his skin beneath the sun's rays. He looked with desire to the flowers I had placed in my hair, and I lay him down and covered his eyes with a golden cloth. I encircled his body with scent-filled blooms and guided sweet fruits into his mouth, tracing the juice that overflowed on his lips with my finger. And I lay with him, our bodies entwined in naked splendour. And I was his Goddess of Love, so he said. His Aphrodite. His sun. Only, he hadn't yet seen my moon-face, hadn't glimpsed my waning, and I thought it would only be a matter of time before he ran for the hills, like the others before him.

When I was thirty-three, my name by then was Mama. And how strange it sounded on my tongue. And though I tried not to, how I longed to follow pīpīwharauoa. I watched her departure to distant shores, parental duties foregone – no home building, no feeding, her single egg resting in a nest built by another's beak, raised by a none-the-wiser foster mother. And I almost followed. I almost ran, even as milk streamed from my breasts. Her freedom was a knife in my chest, that shining cuckoo, as she headed north to idle in warmer islands. I longed for sleep, and I longed to find my summer face, afraid my babe would feel only the scratch of my autumn leaves as I tried my best to wrap her in sunshine. It was the summer's flowering toetoe that saved me, that year. I stroked my face with those fronds, as soft as the down beneath cuckoos' wings, until the leaves that wrapped my nerves once again greened a little with hope, and I walked back across the grass, slipped back through the door to soothe my baby's cries.

When I was forty-four, I baked bread for my family, scooping handfuls of flour, cool and dry, from my pantry's darkness. I drew liquid circles in the stone ground wheat, felt gluten's strength between my fingertips. And I kneaded, rolling and moving the yeast-scented dough, a massage born of appetite. I waited patiently for the rising, and when it was time, I placed the dough in my oven's heart. And so it was that our house was filled with a scent all bakers know, loaves warm and round and golden. And *ooh* it was good, and *oh* it was grand, and *mmm* it was a happy time, for the changing stayed quiet in those days, and though I was still Autumn in name, my heart and soul claimed a more permanent hue of summer.

When I was fifty-five, I watched the makeover of the old rātā tree, her red blush appearing year after year, like the summer blush on my cheeks. And with it came a time of bird celebration, tūi feasting on flowers whose nectar was sweet and rich, filling their bellies until they were fat with delight. And they tried to beckon me, those birds, with songs of heaven in bell-like notes and shrieks of joy, but that was a time when I could not hear them. And where before I had reached for those same blossoms, filling a vase with their crimson stars and raising my voice to sing a song of summer, my vase sat empty. My eyes turned colour blind, the tree's red and green merging to browns, flat and dull. And it was that year a new vocabulary filled our house; words that began with 'D', doctor, diagnosis, depression, and words that began with 'M', mental, manage, medication. And some days it helped. And some days, it didn't.

When I was sixty-six, my name might as well have been Mellona. A beekeeper I became, and I knew they had come to save me those bees, their yellow and black stripes tiny artworks, reflections of my heart and soul, of my dark and light. But they drew me always toward the sun. I watched clouds of them for hours in their industry, a dance from flower to flower. And to my hives they would come by the hundreds, apian engineers, builders and sculptors of wax, filling their hexagon perfections cell by cell, row by row. Alchemists too, those tiny workers, adding and sharing their enzyme juices, and all the while the nectar changing and thickening to a syrup of gold. And when the time was right, I took from my bees an extraction, thanking them for their gift. Upon my bread I spread, wax and all, a slice of comb, a feast of honey. And in jars I stored their sticky miracle, a bottled taste of the sun for times of darkness.

When I was seventy-seven, my children's children took my hands and lead me to view the rising moon in all her fullness. And I raised my face to her glow and smiled, even as I knew her waning would follow. We'd become old friends the wax and the wane, my changing no longer an ache of descension, but a rhythm, a dance I had survived. And there beneath the stars was a table fit for a party, a moonlit garden adorned in decorations weaved of grass. And oh, how we feasted on watercress soup and roasted chestnuts and baked kūmara, giving thanks for a harvest rich and bountiful. They gave me gifts of poems and songs, and the swirls of my ears shivered to hear their words, their throats bursting with lunar beauty.

And when I was an old, old woman and my name was many things, I sat on my veranda at dusk, closed my eyes and listened. I listened for all the babes not yet born.

I listened to the sound berries make in growing, a blood sound if you listen closely. I heard lovers dreaming, and mothers baking bread. I heard the call of a cuckoo and the dry sound feet make over parched grass. And to my ears came the rustle of red stamens brushed by bird wings, and the buzzing of bees in their hives. And I sang, as if for the first time, though it was the last, a treasured harvest song. And finally, as I left my seat and flew, I heard the sound of the sun captured in the bellies of cicadas and the single chime of a cricket. I kissed a yellow leaf and bid it a soft fall as it drifted past my cheek, for it was the end of summer and the start of autumn.