



FLOWERS FALL

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

No, Get Mom

YET, THOUGH IT IS LIKE THIS, SIMPLY, FLOWERS FALL AMID OUR LONGING,
AND WEEDS SPRING UP AMID OUR ANTIPATHY.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

This weekend I am teaching a poetry workshop through the group Writers in the Mountains called “Top Ten Memories.” I got the idea from Allen Ginsberg, who was my teacher and advisor in the MFA program I attended, and this was one of the first things he asked us to do in his workshop. In my early 20s, when I completed the assignment, my number one memory was about the time I was in the bathtub, maybe three years old, and my dad poked his bald head in through a crack in the door and I said: *No, get mom.*

When I wrote the poem about that moment, it felt meaningful, as if I had uncovered a truth about myself, my life, my relationship to my father. And regardless of the “truth” of that moment, I suppose I had, in the sense that I had revealed my story, if nothing else. I was in the process of coming to terms with the fact that I never really liked my dad. (Apparently this process is a long one, as I am still engaged in it, several years after his death.) But instead of just accepting my feelings, as sad as they may be, I have been searching for reasons: the stack of *Playboys* in my parents’ room and the greasy bathroom of the auto-parts store that he owned, then lost in bankruptcy—another reason. And there was his awkwardness, his effort, his lack of effort. Yuk. I just didn’t like him. The bathtub incident sealed my case against him. Clearly, that little girl *sensed* something. Something really bad.

No, get mom. I “remember” it well. In the memory, I can see the ’70s-style bathroom: There were two sinks! And foil wallpaper. My mom’s thin red robe hanging on the back of the door—to imagine her in it reminds me of her yellowish frosted hair and her pack of Tareytos lying on the counter. I can feel the warm water and the barely blue air filling my little bath chamber. I can’t remember any bath toys floating around, which isn’t to say there weren’t any. I can fill the scene with the soft, watery sound of a mild little girl (Azzie’s age, but so different!) kind of just sitting there in the tub, waiting for someone to come and do whatever it is adults do to kids: wash, play, love, ignore. And then the door opens and in pops my dad’s bald head, probably trying to look happy, but exposing some fundamental anxiety on his face, which in truth may or may not have had a darn thing to do with me. But I of course didn’t know that then. *No, get mom.* Over the years I have carried this moment around in my pocket as some coin of truth, even wisdom, that helped me justify my sourness and my anger, not just toward my dad, but in general.

So when Azalea started saying to T, “No, get mom,” I was psychically

startled. *Wait a minute. How is this possible?* Azalea adores T, and the feeling is mutual. “Come wrestle me,” she’ll say, and then the scrappy couch bouncing begins. They hang out for hours throwing rocks into the river (remember summer?), they love to make a big mess painting, making cards, baking cookies. T will sit and scratch her back at night for much longer than I will because I’m always buzzing around doing dishes, trying to catch up on work, freaking out (our Buddhist names mean Enduring River and Enduring Mountain: Can you guess which one I am?). He can get her to eat several spoonfuls more of whatever’s for dinner. T even has better hair! I know I have my strengths, but I don’t think I am being unduly self-deprecating to say that if parenting were the kind of vocation one applied for, he would totally get the job over me. And yet, she says, “No, get mom” to him *all the time.*

So this is what I wonder: Is it possible that I just wanted my mom to come to the tub because, like Azzie, I was in the Mommy-Mommy-Mommy stage, and not because I was intuiting some dark thing? Clearly, there were “issues,” as I never stopped preferring my mom. And, yes, my dad was clueless about a lot of things and made some serious errors in judgment. There are definitely aspects of my childhood I wish had been different, and the hurt that I feel is real. But is it necessary or helpful for me to construct a narrative that “makes sense” around the whole thing? Can I live with the mystery of Wow, who knows? Can I just accept that life is hard for human beings, including for my dad who was flatly rejected by his only daughter and never really let off the hook for some vague and mysterious transgression? And won’t it totally suck if (okay, probably *when*) Azalea comes to me at 16 and tells me what a horrible mother I’ve been? How much she resents all this bullshit pontificating I actually put *in writing*, and demands me to answer this: What kind of person knows she is so temperamentally ill-suited to be a mother, and actually *tries* to have a baby anyway? *I mean, Jesus, Mom!*

But won’t it be something else if I can look her in the eye and stay there, in that crazy space between us? I will know how hard I have worked, and how for whatever reason I still failed her. Will I be able to say I’m sorry with an open heart, and vow to keep at it? Will I mean it? Wouldn’t it be nice if my father and I could have this conversation, from this side of my life as a parent, now that I know deep down, how imperfect I am, as well?

And then I could tell him that I forgive him for being lame.

And myself, too. ●