



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

Are You Happy? Considering the Lobster Within

A few weeks ago, Azalea, T, T's parents, and I returned from a spring break vacation to Saint Thomas. Since we were traveling with two of Azalea's most doting and eager caretakers—her grandparents—I was actually able to do some reading, including *Consider the Lobster*, a book of essays by David Foster Wallace, the much admired, and very depressed writer who killed himself in 2008.

It was around Day Three of vacation when I found myself alone, on the beach in a lounge chair, with Wallace's book. From my chair, I watched random kids make sand castles, and heard some vague, depersonalized whining calling out over the smooth sound of waves breaking along the white sand. I read a little about the Maine Lobster Festival that Wallace attended and wrote about, his clever, but not too clever, observations of the visitors, the vendors, the whole vacation enterprise. I had a few thoughts of my own about my particular circumstance. I kept reading. T and I had been getting up early every morning to have some time alone and to do *zazen* at the beach before everyone woke up. So I was tired, but not at all fatigued or irritated by the wish that I were not tired. I read about whether or not lobsters feel pain. And then Wallace's questions like, What is pain? *Consider the Lobster*. Just sleepy. Staring into the water and the pale yellow light, shadowless, over the ocean. I love the feeling of getting soaked in sun, so I allowed myself a little that, read some more, then started seriously sweating, so I moved my chair beneath a palm tree to get a little shade. A hot breeze. Staring into the sea. Drifting...

Consider the lobster.

And then. It wasn't a dream, but a waking dream-like weirdness.

Of no longer just considering the lobster, but *being* the lobster!

Not in some literal way, like Kafka's giant human beetle, but deeply, a flash of ancestral innocence, the part of me that is un-evolved, reptilian, simple, and fierce. Technically, lobsters are not reptiles, they are arthropods—insects—exoskeletal, antennae, but as Wallace writes, "Like most arthropods, they date from the Jurassic period [otherwise known as the Age of The Ruling Reptiles], biologically so much older than mammalia that they might as well be from another planet." Once I shook off the strangely soothing and kind of hilarious feeling of actually experiencing my most primitive self, I knew what was going on. It was something about happiness.

There are endless ways to understand our human lives, and since the development of sophisticated brain scans, neurological explanations have become popular, and I see the appeal. Instead of one brain, we actually have three, what scientists call a triune brain, and these three aspects correlate to our evolution into the large-skulled, thin-hipped, bipedal creatures we are today. The most evolved, human part of the brain is the cortex, the wrinkly exterior that we see on the outside, and this is the place where we can (and I am going to way oversimplify here) reason, plan, argue, etc. Just beneath that exterior layer is our mammalian brain—the limbic system—our emotional center, and this is where we can feel, remember and crave. And beneath that layer is our reptilian brain, where it all began, which is where we fight, flee, digest, and regulate

basic things like breathing. These parts of our brain express themselves all the time, of course, in everything we do. And as a Zen practitioner, my practice is to bring awareness (and where that resides in the three part-brain I don't know!) to the ways I am moving through the different states of being. When I am cold, on guard, and singular, that's me, the reptile. When I rise above it all, make sense of suffering, that's me, the human. When I am happy in my motherhood, I am resting in my mammalian nature, taking care of my warm, hairy, needy, adorable little offspring.

The crazy thing is to realize that this mammalian connection is a life or death situation. If babies are not touched, they actually die. If not attuned to by their caregivers, at least to a good-enough degree, they really suffer. And they grow into adults who can't attune to their babies. We know where this leads (lizards raising lizards).

And yet, who can really know what happens inside a person? Or why a David Foster Wallace would hang himself in the house he knew his wife would soon enter. It is tempting to assume that his deeply curious, passionate, even, exploration of what happens when a lobster is thrown into a pot of hot water, is a body scan of his own day to day. He writes:

"However stuporous the lobster is from the trip home, for instance, it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you're tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container's sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle's rim like a person trying to keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster's fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature's claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around."

And while he is willing to allow us the discomfort of descriptions like this, he rather conclusively states, "Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anything's pain but our own."

I know what he means, but I think he's missing something. Something big, not just about misery, but about joy, and ennui, and absolutely everything, for that matter. We may not have direct access, but we sure are affected.

Azalea asks me all the time if I am happy, especially, of course, when she knows I am not, like after knocking over her juice for the third time in one breakfast. Her gaze into my face sharpens, and she kind of sings: *Mama, are you happy? Sad, angry, upset? Frustrated? Disappointed?* No amount of clarification soothes her (*no honey, I'm just frustrated*) because she knows I am pissed, especially when I have reverted to my reptilian state of being so irritated (i.e. threatened) that my capacity to feel anything is compromised. And that quick coldness is deeply threatening to our connection and thus, fundamentally, her survival.

As a human adult, my happiness is my business. And I guess I can resort to despair as I darn well please. But as a mammalian mother, my happiness is the juice of evolution. And seeing that connection clearly helps me come to life before being thrown into the pot. ●