



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*

Letting Go

There is so much wrong in the world.

And so maybe because of the sad and desperate flooding of our valley and its fragile towns, or maybe because one of my oldest, dearest friends (my age) was just diagnosed with ovarian cancer, or maybe because yesterday was the 10th anniversary of 9/11, maybe because a young girl I know is being taken off her ventilator to die...maybe because I have been bracing myself for the end of summer—the heat, late nights, sweaty kids, tomatoes.

There are so many good reasons to have missed this. And yet, today, the day I dropped A off for her first day of kindergarten, I noticed that fall is here, and it's actually really beautiful. When did it happen? When did the curled up leaves blow on to our deck? When did the light change from funky summer softness to this silver sun, brightening every edge?

It's been a long year. Last winter and its dumps of snow, freezing cold, and weekly pre-school cancellations got me thinking about Florida way more than any self-respecting Northerner should. T and I pulled a bloated dead raccoon through a hole in our basement wall. My various crises of identity have loomed so large at times it's been hard to even see, let alone appreciate, the bounty that is, today, so obvious. And when I'm not feeling the love, it's awfully hard to feel any gratitude. So the whole thing can get pretty small, and a little dark. And familiar.

When I was A's age, being dropped off into my life, I felt like I was already in the middle of a freefall, so it wasn't much of a transition, shall we say. And I remember feeling incredulous that anything would be asked of me. My mom, who demanded so little (for better or for worse), would occasionally enlist my help in emptying the dishwasher or setting the table. I balked, feeling—though definitely not saying out loud—that I never asked to be born, and how dare you (perpetrator of my aliveness) add one bit of misery to my burden. I swear, I had these thoughts, often.

It is only recently, humbled as I have been by the love I feel for my daughter and the desire to do right by her, that I have sat with and uncovered some of these fundamental beliefs I hold about being a human being, and the ways in which I carry these ideas into my parenting. For instance, the sad, quiet truth of feeling like I have wronged A by bringing her into this world, and my scrambling to try to make it right. And then making a mess of that, getting impatient, the grip of my assumptions getting tighter and tighter.

Though the Tibetan Buddhists say otherwise, let's just assume it's true: Be-

ing born is not of our own volition. Does this mean that life, therefore, sucks because we didn't choose it, and having to withstand anything unpleasant is adding insult to injury? I have a strong sense that there is another option. Like, maybe it's a good thing we fell into this existence. Not just relatively, like, at least I was not born with X or Y affliction to contend with. But maybe we can feel lucky to be born at all, and as the Tibetans also say, in the insanely unlikely position of being a human being (a woman no less) who has the opportunity to practice the Dharma and even be able to invite a fellow traveler to do the same. The way A inspires me to practice, the way I take her to the monastery on Sundays. It's not just that eating noodles in a Buddhafield is better than a potch in the tuchus, but it's truly, in and of itself, wondrous.

Or maybe we are lucky to be born because we get to smell fall. And go to kindergarten where we get to learn how to read. And then we get to read. And then we get to write. About everything, including how much it hurts, sometimes, to be alive, and for things to change.

Even though I have been sitting at this desk, alone, in this house, for years now, as A grows up for hours at a time elsewhere, without me, there is something to this kindergarten thing. It's not just that it's more days away, or that she might take a bus. It's more like I know that, in one sense, she is never coming back. And I long for her already. In these last five years we have gotten to know each other so deeply, and so privately, winding around each other in the house for hours and hours at a time. I know there is a whole huge thing ahead of us, believe me, but it was in this first part that I have received the unfathomable gift of really becoming a mother. And I will miss the one who taught me how to do that, playing with her legion of Barbies in the living room as I cook, scurry around, listen, make mistakes, and try to learn from them.

Looking out the window into our backyard I see the bottom of still-green maple leaves scattered between brown limbs, the whole thing spreading across the sky. There are millions of ways to try to hang on to what I want: summer, the perfect life. But none of them work, and then I am stuck with a half-assed version of nothing much. Zen Master Dogen writes, "When you let go, the Dharma fills your hands." Because I can let A—even for just a moment—walk, as she does, back straight, head bent, into the world alone, I can feel her here, soft curls, gentle hands, working it out, alongside me.

Whether or not we should bring people into the world is a question worth asking. And letting yet another summer die completely is a life worth living. ●