



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*

She and I

Last night I went to Azalea's first parent-teacher conference, sat in her little chair, and heard all about her life in kindergarten. I got to see some of her work—her observation tree, her number scrawls, and some of her more vibrant drawings, including the one she drew of her beloved teacher L, who is expecting her first baby. Before coming to the conference, I asked A if there was anything she wanted me to tell L, that she might be too shy to share. "I love you," she said. When I asked A if there was anything she was worried about that I could tell L, she said, "The baby." I shared this with L and we kvelled in unison, in full agreement: Such a sweetie.

And then this morning I woke up with itchy eyelids. For anyone with eczema or related syndromes, you will appreciate what this means and how it bodes for the morning routine. Usually following some kind of disagreeable food episode (but in this case...tofu and kale?), the itchy eyelids thing arrives in the morning, threatening a kind of pink-eye level crustiness and irritation for a week or more. So not only does the present itching make me crazy, but I get caught in the dread of what might be on the horizon—a indeterminate spell of reptilian-like dryness, redness, and pretty extreme discomfort, which inspires that kind of deep itch desire, not to mention pretty serious insults to a basic dose of vanity. In other words, I am cranky and sensitive. So the three of us, T, A, and I in our tiny kitchen, making six meals in a matter of 20 minutes (3 breakfasts, two lunches, and one dinner for my late-working man), was not working for me. T, a big guy, kept, in my version, body-checking me as he squeezed by, and A's insistence of showing T her art from yesterday, which she had already showed him, instead of eating her hot cereal, which would get cold, and then need to be reheated to be eaten (!!!!!!!) sounded as shrill as an animal caught in a trap, demanding release. So...*Snap!* "A!" I barked, "I've had it! Eat your breakfast and quit whining." And, in my mind, "T, you, too....whatever you're doing, just stop..." for absolutely no reason!

And then...a few minutes later, in the bathroom, I told A to brush her teeth, and she stuck out her tongue. Instead of laughing, the only truly appropriate response to such shenanigans, I sent her to the couch (random), to think about what she was doing, and to come back when she was ready to apologize (ridiculous). Instead, she just sat around the corner of the bathroom, in the hallway, waiting. She came back and said, "You're a mean man!"

We worked out the toothbrushing thing. And she sulked off to her room as I gathered up her stuff for her ride to school. Out she came in a princess dress with her Wonder Woman costume over it. Perfect timing. I actually laughed and oooed and aahed and we gave each other a big hug. And then she drew another picture for L, complete with baby in belly and dog, and her own thought bubble, thinking of the baby, a little bean with dots. She wanted to make a book for L, but alas, there was not enough time, and so she agreed to take off her

costume while I folded the picture up to put in her backpack. I suggested we could do a book later, maybe after school. Ok, she said, and ambled out the door, a regular kid, changed back into regular clothes.

Regular, and so...does she get jealous? Yes. Insecure? Sure. Angry? Of course. Does she have one heck of a fish to fry with her high-strung mother? You bet. She is, as we like to say in our house, an ordinary meatball, a suffering sentient being, just like the rest of us. But thoughtful, and loving. And happy! It's crazy.

My late teacher, Daido Roshi, in his effort to help us understand the nature of things, our interpenetration with everything in the universe, and yet, our unique, relative position within it, used to say this all the time: *You are I are the same thing, yet I am not you, and you are not me.* It is classic Daido—personal enough to hook us into exploring what the heck that could mean.

A and I are the same thing. Not only do we share the cosmic oneness of every atom in the universe, but she is *of* me. We share DNA. We have the same calves. And because of that intimacy sometimes I lose the other side, thinking she *is* me. I imagine we feel the same things, and in one way, we do, and in another, we do not. There is interdependence, as the Buddha taught, and then there is projection. Two different things. In fact, A is not me. When her five-year-old feelings get hurt, it's big, of course, and confusing. And I feel them, as I have the potential to feel the feelings of any other creature, but her being my child, that connection is all the more likely. And yet, her experience of that is not the same as my own as a five-year-old, getting *my* feelings hurt, with no one to talk to, no recourse, and no end in sight. We live in different houses, on different planets. For instance, A appears to be learning to read and write because it's fun, and not just because she gets to be left alone, unbothered, listening to the Phonics headset and touching the sparkly, fuzzy raised letters on the workbooks, spacing out, identifying the sound of "h" along the way.

And yet, I put myself through such a wringer when I act out of all my own musty old bad habits of protecting myself from all those old bothers, even when those bothers are in fact, a beautiful child! A loving husband! Imagining that she, the lovely, tender kid that she is, feels what I felt when I was her age, and at the hands of *me*, is an intolerable loop. Taking note of all the ways A is *not* me is part of a colossal attempt to untie the loop and see her as she is. And I am. Then, now and in the unimaginable future.

It kind of makes sense how karma, according to the Buddha, moves forward, as its very nature. Actions beget actions, and there is no way to stop the dynamic unfolding of a thing already done. But it's really wild to consider how the Buddha said that karma moves in every direction, including backwards. This is serious business. Love fills the universe, moving everywhere, healing the past, unblocking the road toward more love up ahead. And all at once, it's timeless, it's everywhere. ●