



# 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*

## A Descent into the Dream World: Andre Dubus III on Fatherhood, Karma, and Creativity

Andre Dubus III is the author of *The Garden of Last Days* and *House of Sand and Fog* (a finalist for the National Book Award, and a major Hollywood film). His latest book, *Townie*, blew my mind. In it, he describes growing up broke and largely unattended in a rough Massachusetts neighborhood with his three siblings, and his hard-working mom, while his father, the celebrated fiction writer Andre Dubus II, lived across the river and saw the kids on the weekends.

After a childhood spent in fear, the young Dubus became an impressive street fighter, then a boxer, always on the lookout for someone to defend. What touched me so deeply about the book was the way Dubus talks about untangling himself from a net of violence, and finding himself in creative life.

His relationship with his father remained friendly but superficial until he, Dubus Senior, was in a terrible accident where he stopped his car to check in with a couple who had been in a crash, only to be run into by an oncoming car. He lost one leg as a result, and was in a wheelchair and chronic pain for the rest of his life. His son Andre Dubus III stepped right in and did everything he could to help his dad heal and return to his writing.

*Townie* is a pretty incredible story filled with wisdom.

**Bethany Saltman:** In *Townie*, you write about realizing that your dad had no idea what your life had been like. And then, “We were headed to a place where only hurt feelings could surface, both of us misunderstood, a universal human plight, it seemed. I changed the subject. But I told myself that he and I would have to talk openly about this one day. And what was this, anyway?” Can you talk a little bit about that choice?

**Andre Dubus III:** I think most people’s childhood is painful. And one of the things I find troubling about American culture is this overly psychological approach to pain. We have very little tolerance for pain, loss, ambiguity, emotional confusion, a lack of clarity. We’re such little worker bees with goals. I’ve always been really hesitant to try to fix something emotionally fraught too soon, too readily, with something like a conversation with my father. I think it’s kind of a talk-show approach, that when we have a problem, we must fix it.

**All of your three siblings and yourself suffered terribly. How did you all stay so connected as a family?**

People who were marooned on a boat for 17 days on an open sea with no food and sharks circling—I think there’s a bond from that kind of shared suffering. I also think that no matter what my parents were good or not so good at, I think somewhere along the way, we must have felt loved. Though I won’t say I felt treasured.

**You write a lot about karma in your book. For instance, when writing about the energy of violence you call it, “the light that shot into your brain, how it made you want to do the same to another.” It’s incredible to me how you transformed those karmic forces into a creative life.**

I think you’re right, and it has to do with my having gone to the belly of the beast with the violence. It was karmic. I knew innately that the more violence I did, the more I drew to me, and the violence got more and more dangerous.

The truth is, for me anyway, writing got me out of the ego, this whole practice of sitting with a pencil in my hand, staring at a page, and trying to become another human being really put me in a place of empathy. I think as a kid I looked at people as good guys and bad guys: Bullies were bad, and victims were good. It was the really rigorous discipline of writing fiction that got me into looking at people in a more complex way.

### Including yourself?

Starting with myself.

### One of my favorite short stories ever, and definitely my favorite of your dad’s, was “A Father’s Story.”

That’s also one of mine. It ends with the narrator having a conversation with God. Who the hell can pull that off?

**I know. The love the narrator has for his daughter is so mind-blowingly present and tender. Forgive me if this is too personal, but reading that, did you ever feel a hope, like, Wow, maybe my dad felt that way about me?**

Yeah, you’re right on. I think when I read the degree of love that the narrator had for his daughter, I was surprised at how much love was coming out of this father for a child.

I think 99 percent of us wake up trying to have the best day we know how to have. That’s not the same as the best day we *can* have. The truth is, my father’s capacity to show fatherly love surprised me in his work, and he got better as he got older, and especially after he became a crippled man. Talk about the Buddhist letting go thing, this guy had to sit still and listen. He was in a wheelchair, and he has to actually look at whoever is in the room and ask them for help. He was humbled, literally, which then humbled him spiritually. He told me he would still stop on that highway knowing everything he was going to lose.

**You used to study the cultural forces that create meaning—class structures, etc.—but in the end you found creativity to be meaning enough.**

Yes, this whole karma thing is fascinating to me. When I made the decision to box—which was, ironically, one way I was trying to control my violence—that probably created the space in which I sat down, brewed some tea, and wrote my first scene. Something made me sit down. And when I was done, I was in a heightened state of awareness. I could see, with great clarity, my dirty little rented kitchen in a way I hadn’t seen it before. I had no intention of being a writer; it was just the act itself that got me, this descent into the dream world. I was more myself. And I was more awake. And it was drug free, and I loved that. 🍵