

Hiền Trang

The graveyard of stories

This is the worst compliment that I've ever gotten: "You are so productive! How can you write several thousand words every single day, and write as easily as hens lay eggs?" I am well aware that this person didn't mean to mock me, nor did they have ill intentions at all. In Vietnam, a country known for its agriculture, everything can be traced back to farming life. Writers love to describe themselves as humble farmers plowing in the fields of words. Thus, such a simile, in which a prolific writer is tacitly associated with a prolific breeder, is not something unusual.

However, being prolific is not that easy.

Indeed, to me, the hardest part of writing is not the writing itself. Rather, the hardest part is settling down and starting to write. It's not the wicked critics being a writer's natural predator, but their procrastination to write.

Aziz Nesin, my most beloved humorist, wrote a short story about a man who desired to become a writer. But he lived in such a tiny, cramped house that he didn't have personal space for creative thinking. He swore that once he got a room of his own, he would write a monumental work of literature. Then, when he had it, he started studying and didn't find time for writing. Again, he claimed that after graduating, he would start to write. He graduated, but then he was drafted for military service. He left the army, but then he had to find a decent job with a stable income. The excuses went on forever: after starting a decent job, he needed a decent house, a decent marriage, and a decent position. Once he accomplished everything, he still couldn't write, because in Turkey there were so many fleas disturbing him! He wished fleas were extinct, and only then could he work tirelessly on his ambitious novel.

I used to be like this character, believing in an impulse of creation and inspiration, something like a fleeting dream in which Paul McCartney heard the divine melody of Yesterday. I once put my faith in a muse. But my faith was betrayed. Because a muse, if there is one, can be very much like a femme fatale. She is seductive, however, relying on her is dangerous. After all, Sir Paul has worked harder than any musician. I also think of tennis player Roger Federer, who is a perfect combination of genius and hard work. He always seemed to create magical shots out of nowhere. Many said: "No one can practice or be trained to play like that. Roger could because he was born with a racket in his hand." But as a long-time avid fan of Roger, I can say with certainty that he has devoted time and effort to the sport more than anyone – because he didn't want to waste his talent.

It doesn't mean that I will opt for a K-pop-modeled literary industry, where writers are formulaically manufactured, and every piece of publication is a processed product. Being discovered by a talent scout and instructed as a trainee for 10 years before making a debut? Thank you, but not for me. Becoming a writer is a way for me to crack a hole, though miniature, in the seemingly uncrackable dullness of an office worker's life. Becoming a writing machine will be no different than the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa; even though you transform into another kind of being, you will still be trapped in the same

meaninglessness.

But waiting for revelations from a muse can be a trap, too. One can wait forever, and the muse never shows up. But instead of waiting for the muse to flirt with me, I look for her in books, films, and music that I'm exposed to every day and flirt with her first. Maybe in the end, she will still have no interest in me. It's alright because I will move on and find another muse to flirt with. Muses are everywhere.

No one masters at flirting with muses more than Gabriel García Márquez. I remembered reading one of his short stories about a list of stories that he never finished, which he called "the ocean of my unfinished stories". Like most of us, Márquez had many good reasons to not finish a story – and could these reasons as well. However, contrary to us, even the absence of a muse could become his muse. He found the inspiration to write even in uninspired writings.

Every time I look at my graveyard of stories, I will think of Márquez, and realize that even the death of a story could give birth to another story. My latest novel, *Chopin Vanishes*, was written in a hurry to be in time for a literary competition in Vietnam, and it was built up from two other drafted novels that I had been hopelessly edited. It tells about a detective who, while investigating a murder of an actress, came to know that the world of art was about to collapse. I intentionally wrote my main character as an amateur detective, and also an amateur reader, an amateur piano player, and an amateur movie audience. Amateur, but passionate. He was indeed the only one who could communicate with a woman coming from a song, who could be deemed as a muse, and she revealed to him about the apocalypse of the world of art. Thus, he was the only one who had a slight chance to protect it. No professional artist could see the things he saw. Because I believe that a muse was visible only to those whose eyes were ardently looking for her.