

Cultural Daily

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On Writing and Fatherhood

Bunkong Tuon · Wednesday, May 10th, 2017

It is 2 a.m. I am sitting in front of the old black Underwood typewriter I bought from the Salvation Army on E. Spring Street in Long Beach, California. A copy of Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* is within reach. A cheap jug of red wine from the corner liquor store sits like a black cat rubbing itself against my feet. No Bach, Beethoven, Mozart on the stereo; the tape deck plays The Cure's *Standing on the Beach*. On the B-side, "The Exploding Boy" moves me to tears. I scream along to Robert Smith singing: "I couldn't hear a word you said / I couldn't hear at all / You talked until your tongue fell out / And then you talked some more."

Fired up, I begin hammering the keyboard, firing in rapid succession the black keys to the painful memories of my childhood: what it felt like growing up without parents, the racial slurs and saliva spat at you because you were different, an uncle who was overbearing and abusive, the impression that your uncles and aunts were not telling you what happened exactly to Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge regime, thoughts of suicide.

In the whirlwind of memory, desire, and language, I feel like I can write anything. Of course, it helps to have Charles Bukowski, wine, and Robert Smith on my side. Soon, the walls begin to shake, the earth tremble. Cockroaches begin appearing. They come out of nowhere to serve as witnesses, as compatriots, to help usher my story into the world.

The next morning I wake up exhausted, run to the bus stop, and wait for the bus to take me to a 9 a.m. class. I try to stay awake as Professor Jennings lectures on the historical and mythic origins of Homer's *The Iliad*.

The next evening, this strange ritual repeats itself.

This was in the 1990s. I had all the time in the world then. I was young, naïve, and pushed my body to the limit. I could forego a night of sleep and make it up in the weekend. I had a dream then: to write the great Cambodian American novel. Such confidence and arrogance are generally reserved for the young dreamers of the world.

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I am now a professor. I have a lovely wife and beautiful daughter. There are committees to attend and meetings to chair, classes to prepare and papers to grade, lawn to mow, a driveway that needs to be clear off snow and ice, and, of course, a daughter to care for and cherish. All of this is to say,

the time I thought I had is no longer mine.

I can't afford to stay up late into the night to write. I don't get up before dawn, brew coffee, turn on the computer, and sit down to write. If I get up early, it has to do with my daughter crying in her crib. Maybe she's sick, teething, or has a nightmare. By the time we put our daughter back to sleep, it's 4 in the morning and I might as well brew coffee and grade student papers.

I write when my daughter sleeps or takes afternoon naps. Usually, I have an idea, an image, a feeling or sensation that haunts me all day. If it's still there fluttering beneath my breastplate after my daughter goes down for the night, then I put it down, pin it to a Word document.

I have no time for long essays, let alone novels and autobiographies. But somehow I am not bothered by all of this. No Pushcart, no Pulitzer, no Nobel prizes; no *New Yorker*, no *Paris Review*, no *Iowa Review* publications; nothing can compare to the joy I feel when my daughter wraps her arms around my neck, rests her head on my shoulder, and whispers, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy."

The great Cambodian American novel can wait. My daughter needs me. There's a playground at Birchwood Elementary School I need to take her to.

Featured photo of the author and his daughter, taken by Nicole M. Calandra.

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