

On Forcing Creativity: The Analytical Bitch vs. The Muse
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This is the first time I've been asked to write a guest blog post. Having blogged for over five years now, I'm no stranger to it, but I am a stranger to "forcing" a post. I call my blog "a mind vomit receptacle"—it's where I toss any and all thoughts that flounce into my head, thoughts that have nothing to do with the story I'm currently crafting, and therefore, will inhabit said crafting until I write them out. Sometimes, posts descend on me as soft as stardust, and other times, they're more like dodgeballs to the face. It feels criminal to ignore stardust. It's nearly impossible to ignore a dodgeball to the face.

For this post, I'm supposed to write about the muse and the analytical bitch, a topic I suggested, and one I have un-poetically waxed about more times than I care to count. But when I sit down and open a new document—nothing. I feel neither stardust nor dodgeball nor anything in between. I turn to my muse, Ezekiel: a chubby gnome who sits atop a mushroom in my subconscious and makes cupcakes (i.e. inspiration), which he then hurls at the walls of my skull, hence the dodgeball sensation. But today, there isn't one cupcake to be found. Ezekiel is cross-legged, picking at his nails.

"Hey," I say. "We have work to do."

He shrugs.

"But Zeke, this is going to be about *you*," I say, and give him my best flirtatious smile.

He shrugs again.

"This was your idea," I say, my voice getting sharp.

He whips out an emery board and starts filing.

Now what? I whine. I email my best friend and writing compatriot, bemoaning the blank page, and growing increasingly more aware that I have nothing relevant to say. "Tell yourself it's an essay," my friend suggests. "Let your scholarly self take over." *Brilliant*, I think, but that lasts about five seconds. This post is supposed to be conversational, while also being informative, and my scholarly self can't achieve such a feat. My insides start to itch. Ezekiel is clipping his toenails, and panic looms like a storm cloud, which is the most unoriginal metaphor ever contrived, which only heightens my sense of failure.

In this chasm of desperation—Ezekiel giving me the silent treatment—I fall prey to the other half of my creative brain: the analytical bitch, as author Pam Houston calls her. The analytical bitch is not the "anti-muse," though if she enters the writing process at the wrong

time, she becomes exactly that. For me, that wrong time is the fledgling stage—any point from the idea's inception to the completion of a first draft. I am smack in the middle of the fledgling stage, not a draft in sight, and a chill creeps up my scalp. I sense a presence at my back.

Meet Greta, my analytical bitch. Greta tucks her lithe body into a gray skirt suit, blond hair pulled tight in a bun, and perches her wire-rimmed glasses on the end of her nose, so as to perpetually look down on me. She barks out criticisms in the thick German accent of my ancestors. Paramount to revision, but deadly to creating, Greta is Darth Vader to Ezekiel's Luke Skywalker. She marches in with an ominous theme song, knocks Ezekiel's unproductive butt off the mushroom, and breaks out the chainsaw. She would sooner cut off my creative oxygen supply than cut me a break.

By now, I've learned that when Ezekiel is mute and Greta gets loud, I need to get away from the desk. But I am a work-aholic, and this makes Greta hard to ignore. She's the voice in my head at the store, berating me for having the audacity to buy cereal, asking if I even deserve cereal since I didn't do any writing today, and suggesting instead that I starve, which would serve my lazy self right. Every shopper I pass, even the apathetic cashier ringing up my brazen purchase, is judging me. Everyone knows what I'm really supposed to be doing.

There is no arguing with Greta, and by now, I've also learned that I can't kick, scream, or hair-pull my way back to writing. To tune her out, I have to sneak attack: make the coffee too strong, eat copious amounts of chocolate, shove in the headphones, and listen to Bach and Rachmaninov, drowning out any other, ahem, voices. This is my only shot at making the magic happen. In this cultivated environment, I open creativity's trapdoor—take away Ezekiel's mani-pedi tools, hand him a mixing bowl and spoon, and say, "Bake." Then, I start to type.

I write whatever comes into my head. Will this sentence make it into the final draft? Doesn't matter. I'm going through the motions until Ezekiel catches on and decides to join me. This can take a while—hours, days—but I type and type, pausing as needed to turn off Greta's bellowing and turn up the Mendelssohn. The choirs sing in Latin, I have no idea what they're saying—I have no idea what I'm saying—but on I go, reminding myself, perfectionist extraordinaire, that this is the birthing phase. It's supposed to be messy. Only when the child has arrived in its first draft splendor can I let Greta back into the process. Only then will her merciless hands sculpt my baby into the grownup it needs to become.

But for now, I'm gestating, which means writing, even when I don't feel like it, and even when I fear that, this time, Ezekiel has left me for good. But you know what? He hasn't abandoned me yet, and what I've come to believe about this mysterious process known as "creating" is that my muse is always with me, even when I can't hear him. Sometimes, I think his silence is by design—perhaps it isn't meant to drive me mad. Perhaps he grows quiet so I will as well.