

“Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra” by George Saunders
from *The Braindead Megaphone*

At twenty-three, recent engineering grad that I was, I had read virtually nothing. But there was hope: I was living four out of every six weeks in the Sumatran jungle. On leave in Singapore, I loaded up on books to take back to the seismic crew. This was Serious business. If the books ran out before the four weeks did, I would be reduced to reading the same 1979 *Playboy* over and over, and/or watching hours of *wayang* theater on the bunkhouse television.

I was, to understate the case, an untrained reader. My understanding of literature at this time was: great writing was hard reading. What made something great was you could barely understand it. A scene I'd been imagining as taking place indoors would Suddenly sprout starts and a riverfront. At a fictional dinner party At which I'd understood there to be three people present, six were Suddenly required, based on the appearance of three unfamiliar names. In addition to the difficulties posed by my dullness, I also selected books oddly. The writers I preferred were writers whose English was least like mine. I believed great writing was done in a Language that had as little as possible to do with the one I spoke. The words were similar but arrange more cleverly, less directly. A Good literary sentence was like a floor with a hole hidden in it. You dropped into the basement and, scratching your head, thought: “Why'd he say it that way?” He must really be a great writer.” Plain American language was like the pale ineffectual relative you took for granted: always there, a little embarrassing. Plain American was fine for getting around your dopey miniature world, cashing checks and finding restaurants and talking about television and so on, but when the real work of Art was required, you hauled out the fancy language, the one nobody used. I had started writing a little by this time, sneaking back into the office after-hours to produce such early, Asia-centric masterpieces as “Be Not Afraid in Thy Deep Monotheistic Veritable Heart of the Jungle” and “Black River That Runs Through Various Metaphorical Villages.” Writing was, at this stage in my development, the process of trying to do whatever was most unnatural. Art was that thing you couldn't quite reach. The hope was that someday, when enough failure had been logged, a miracle would happen, and one would briefly be launched above one's station, suddenly able to write in that impossible, inscrutable, nineteenth-century language of the masters, and this miracle would happen often enough that one could eventually cobble together the two hundred or so pages it took to make a

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Real Book.

Then, on one of my Singapore jaunts, I picked up Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*. I knew, vaguely, that this was a classic. I knew it had to do with World War II, that the author had been present at the fire-bombing of Dresden. This sounded promising. At this time I also believed, courtesy of my hero Ernest Hemingway, that great writing required a Terrible Event One Had Witnessed. With any luck, one had been wounded during the Terrible Event, although not too badly. If not a physical wound, a mental would be fine. The Terrible Event was what I was in Asia seeking. I had been to the Cambodian border seeking it, been to the Khyber Pass seeking it, but everywhere I went, was too cautious to be blown up or see anything horrific. Given the chance to get into real danger, I would think: *Jeez, that sound dangerous*, retreat to my reasonably priced hotel, and read Hemingway.

But here was Vonnegut, a guy who had witnessed one of the most Terrible Events of his time. I was excited to see what he’d done with it. I hoped he hadn’t wasted it. I hoped he’d done something like Hem had done with it. I hoped he had come out of it sobered and sullen, broken by his Terrible Event, but also that he had taken notes, so his book would be filled with pages of terse literary descriptions that showed that, though wounded, he still appreciated a good sunbeam slanting across a crude wooden table or a nice wind-ruffled stand of oak trees through which a river flowed pleasantly.

But then I started reading. In chapter one, right off the bat, Vonnegut admits to trying and failing, over many years, to write the very book I was looking forward to reading: “As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations,” he writes, “I had outlined the Dresden story many times.” But then he admits: “I don’t think this book... is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away.” In chapter one he seems determined not to tell his war story at all. He writes, conversationally, about his days as a reporter, relates an anecdote about a visit with an old war buddy; scrolls through histories of the Crusades and the Gideon Bible; describes the carp in the Hudson River (“big as atomic submarines”). Then he offers this advance apology for the

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book we’re reading: “It is so short and jangled...because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” It’s an introductory chapter, one the reader suspects was written last, when the rest of the book was already finished, but still, the effect is of a haunted man, delaying as long as possible telling the big, sad story he’s been trying to get off his chest for years, realizing that if he insists on telling it in a grand style, it may get told falsely, or never be told at all.

In chapter two the story finally began. But immediately there were more avoidances of the lyric/epic masterpiece I longed to be reading. Because suddenly, here came some space aliens, from Tralfamadore, “two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber’s friends.” *What The heck?* I was thinking back in Sumatra, in 1982, *this is a classic?* Aliens did not belong in classics. Aliens belonged in movies. Aliens were great; I loved aliens in movies, but I did not want them in my Literature. What I wanted in my Literature was a somber, wounded, masterly presence, regarding the world with a jaundiced, totally humorless eye.

But no, Vonnegut was funny. Funny? Hem wasn’t funny. Only people I knew, like my beloved father and uncles, were funny. How wounded could he be, if he was so funny? The book was loose, episodic, written in vernacular. The is guy who had been in the belly of the beast wrote as if he were still, like me, a regular person from the Midwest. He wrote as if there were a continuum of consciousness between himself before and after his Terrible Event. Vonnegut did not seem to be saying, as I understood Hem to be saying, that his Terrible Event had forever exempted him from the usual human obligations of being kind, attempting to understand, behaving decently. On the contrary, Vonnegut seemed to feel that unkindness—a simple, idiotic failure of belief in the human, by men and their systems—had been the cause of his Terrible Event, and that what he had learned from this experience was not the importance of being tough and hard and untouchable, but the importance of preserving the kindness in ourselves at all costs.

There we were, in the deep German woods, behind enemy lines, but There was very little tension and almost no physical description. Vonnegut was skipping the lush physical details he had presumably Put himself into so much danger to obtain. He was assuming these

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physical details; that is, he was assuming that I was supplying them. A forest was a forest, he seemed to be saying, let’s not get all flaky about it. He did not seem to believe, as I had read Tolstoy did, that his purpose as a writer was to use words to replicate his experience, to make you feel and think and see what he had felt. This book was not a recounting of Vonnegut’s actual war experience, but a *usage* of it. What intrigued me—also annoyed me—was trying to figure out the purpose of this usage. If he wasn’t trying to make me know what he knew and feel what he’d felt, then what was the book for?

In fact, Slaughterhouse Five seemed to be saying, our most profound experiences may *require* this artistic uncoupling from the actual. The black box is meant to change us. If the change will be greater via the use of invented, absurd material, so be it. We are meant to exit the book altered.

As for the exact nature of the alteration, Vonnegut’s goal seemed to be to soften the heart, to encourage our capacity for pity and sorrow. Whatever would most soften the heart, is what belonged in the book. The sci-fi elements could be understood as a form of dramatic compression, meant to urge us more directly toward the truth of our existence. Do we travel in time? We do. Are there aliens that see us and judge us? There are, although they are in our heads, and sometimes we call them “Gods,” or “our conscience,” or “the superego.”

I’d like to say I found all of this liberating but at the time I didn’t. I couldn’t stop reading the book, went back and read it again—but in the way earnest young idiots have, I was anxious to discount it. Why? The aliens, the aversion to conventional drama, the jokes, the humility of the book, scared me. I was, then even more than now, a control freak, and the book felt like an ode to the abandonment of control, a disavowal of mastery. The young, Ayn Randish Republican that I was, discounted Vonnegut as one of them: A former hippie, maybe, or proto-hippie, someone who, unlike me, wasn’t earnest/tough/focused enough to be huge, classic, and utterly pure.

It would be years before I grasped the real power and beauty of the book, but a seed had been planted, and whenever I wrote or read something phony-baloney, there in the back of my mind was the Vonnegut of Slaughterhouse Five, looking askance of that false thing waiting for me to see the falseness of it too.

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Humor is what happens when we’re told the truth quicker and more directly than we’re used to. The comic is the truth stripped of the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation. An “auditorium filled with two thousand men and women eagerly awaiting a night’s entertainment” could also correctly be described as “two thousand smiling future moldering corpses” or “a mob of bodies that, only hours earlier, had, during the predressing phase, been standing scattered around town, in their underwear.”

This rapid-truthing is what Vonnegut does with the war. He takes an unusual vector through it. He refuses the usual conceptual packaging we associate with “war” and “soldiers” and “battles” and “prisoners of war.” “Soldier” is taken apart with a sad sharp eye: “He didn’t look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo.” Even the German soldiers are mere guys in uniforms. Even the German attack dog is real and pathetic (cowering, stolen from a Farmer, named Princess).

At the heart of Vonnegut’s voice is a humility my earnest young self didn’t feel comfortable with: In it, I heard evidence of real humiliation. War really was hell, with hell being the place where whatever you normally counted on or leaned on was taken from you, absolutely. Billy Pilgrim is a skinny, virginal dork, and when he gets to war, war leaps on his skinny dorkitude and devastates him unglamourously, and haunts him ever after. Wild Bob is just some guy from Wyoming who gets all forty-five hundred of his men killed, then dies insane in a boxcar. Roland Weary, a Hemingway stand-in, all self-control and stealth, ends up trudging along on feet bloodied from the little boy’s clogs he’s forced to wear, sobbingly begging Pilgrim to “Walk right! Walk right!”

Vonnegut seemed to have been in a place where all the comforting Verities had been stripped away, and was now cautiously trying to Reconstruct a meaningful language out of what scraps of certainty he Had left. Better to say too little, he seemed to feel, than too much, if, In saying too much, you might say something false. He’d been rendered a minimalist by aversion to bullshit and, if anything, was more Of a purist than Hemingway in this regard.

Early in the book, Vonnegut is confronted by Mary, the angry wife

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of his old war buddy, Bernard V. O’Hare. She knows the kind of war novel he’s going to write, “You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies,” she says, “and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs.”

He makes her a promise: in the movie of the book, there won’t be a Part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. In fact, he’ll call his book *The Children’s Crusade*. It will be, really be, an antiwar book.

And it is.

It didn’t, of course, stop any wars. As Vonnegut reminds us early on, war will not be stopped. When a director friend asks if the book is an antiwar book, Vonnegut replies that he guesses it is.

“You know what I say to people when I hear they’re writing antiwar books” the friend says. “Why don’t you write an *antiglacier* book instead?”

No, war will not be stopped. But it is a comfort, in the midst of the war, to read an antiwar book this good, and be reminded that just because something keeps happening, doesn’t mean we get to stop regretting it. Massacres are bad, the death of innocents is bad, hate is bad, and there’s something cleansing about hearing it said so purely.

What good is the prophet in the wilderness may do is incremental and personal. It’s good for us to hear someone speak the irrational truth. It’s good for us when, in spite of all of the sober, pragmatic, and even correct arguments that war is sometimes necessary, someone says: war is large-scale murder, us at our worst, the stupidest guy doing the cruelest thing to the weakest being.

It’s not as if the world will ever live by the extreme truth this prophet is speaking. War will never vanish from the face of the earth. Neither will sickness, but it’s good to hear someone praising the blessing of health.

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Earlier today, almost forty years after it was written and in the middle of another war, I sat in my kitchen reading *Slaughterhouse Five*. The book didn't stop the current war, and won't stop the next one, or the one after that. But something in me rose to the truth in it, and I was put in proper relation to the war going on now. I was, if you will, forbidden to misunderstand it. It is what it is: massacre and screaming and confusion and blood and death. It is the mammoth projection outward of the confused inner life of a handful of men. When someone says war is inevitable, or unavoidable, or unfortunate but necessary, they may be right. Vonnegut's war was necessary. And yet it was massacre and screaming and confusion and blood and death. It is the mammoth projection outward of the confused inner life of a handful of men. In war, the sad tidy constructs we make to help us believe life is orderly and controllable are roughly thrown aside like the delusion they are. In war, love is outed as an insane, insupportable emotion, a kind of luxury emotion, because everywhere you look, someone beloved to someone is being slaughtered, by someone whose own beloved has been slaughtered, or will be, or could be.

There's something sacred about reading a book like *Slaughterhouse Five*, even if nothing changes but what's going on inside our minds. We leave such a book restored, if only briefly, to a proper relation with the truth, reminded of what is what, temporarily undeluded, our better nature set back on its feet.

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