Kurt Vonnegut in Flight

Ten stone steps lead up from the sidewalk to the front door of the Manhattan brownstone row house at 228 East 48th Street where Kurt Vonnegut lived for the last thirty-four years of his life. He'd walked up and down those stairs on thousands of days, but on the sunny afternoon of March 14, 2007, he descended them for the last time. Taking his little dog out for their usual walk, Vonnegut apparently got tangled up in his pet's leash and fell face forward onto the sidewalk. The resulting blow to his head sent him into a coma from which he was unable to recover. He died on April 11. He was 84. It was the end of one of the most remarkable lives of any great novelist of the second half of the 20th Century.

Vonnegut's final fall was foreshadowed by the circumstances of an anecdote Kurt had loved to tell about his beloved sister Alice's sense of humor. Kurt, Alice, and their older brother Bernard had grown up delighting in the vaudeville-style slapstick humor of the 1930s. On radio and in film, "Amos and Andy," Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and other great comics portrayed ordinary people matter-of-factly persisting though insults, eye-pokes, and pratfalls, and thereby succeeding in turning pain into humor. Vonnegut's anecdote about Alice described how the biggest laugh they ever shared happened one day when a city bus stopped suddenly right beside them: its door flew open, and an unfortunate passenger was thrown out ("horizontally," as Alice afterwards insisted) onto the sidewalk at their feet. To the shock of some of the other bystanders, as the dazed ejected woman picked herself up and stumbled away, Alice and Kurt laughed like maniacs.

Years later, in 1958, Alice, by then a mother of four small children, was dying of cancer in a New Jersey hospital. She described her family's bleak situation to Kurt as "slapstick"—so cruelly absurd as to be funny. What she didn't know yet was that her husband, James Adams, had been killed a day earlier in a freak train accident that drowned dozens of commuters in the Hudson River. Kurt and Bernard had been withholding the horrible news until consulting with Alice's doctor, but, in a final twist of the knife, Alice learned of it herself when she called a neighbor to ask if she knew where James might be. This was just after Kurt had left Alice's hospital room to take care of her children, and so he wasn't there to comfort her when she passed away just a few terrible hours after learning her husband had preceded her in dying.

Immediately after Alice's death, Kurt and his wife Jane, although raising three small children of their own, took in all four of the orphaned Adams boys (the youngest was later adopted by another couple). Voluntarily doubling the number of their children overnight (along with taking on the obvious financial strain) would be one of many generous and even noble things Kurt and Jane would do for others during their long marriage. Alice's death--like the shock of the Depression and like Vonnegut's chance survival of the firebombing of Dresden--imprinted in Kurt's mind the paradox that the arbitrary catastrophes of life could become, at their extremes, darkly comic. He would go on to make a fictional career based largely on that bittersweet existential insight.

It's hard not to see a causal relationship between Alice's death and the beginning of Vonnegut's greatest period of literary production. His first two novels, Player Piano (1952) and The Sirens of Titan (1959), had been quirky, imaginative, yet still apprentice work. But then his first great novel, Mother Night, appeared in 1962, and it was quickly followed by Cat's Cradle, (1963), God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, (1965), and then his masterpiece, Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). All of these novels, respectively, depict rather ordinary protagonists trying to deal with extraordinary, possibly fatal situations: a playwright hoping to survive as an American double agent in Nazi Germany; a writer caught up in the absurdities of a banana republic's politics and the ensuing unleashing of a new doomsday device; a philanthropist taking charge of his inherited fortune and deciding to give it away; and a sad, hapless soldier surviving World War II despite making almost no personal effort to do so. By 1970 Vonnegut, the formerly struggling writer, was perhaps the most recognized living novelist in the world—the Mohammad Ali of literature. Sought out for interviews, college graduation addresses, political rallies, Vonnegut seemed everywhere. Time called him "UltraVonnegut." Then the film version of Slaughterhouse-Five premiered in 1972 and cemented Vonnegut's fame.

And nobody could shove himself out into that old existential literary performance spotlight quite like Kurt Vonnegut. In person--blinking and coughing, enveloped in cigarette smoke and his characteristic Midwestern modesty--one of the world's most famous writers always seemed to walk on stage holding his metaphorical hat in his hands. Had he forgotten his lines? What was he waiting for? But then he would start to talk in that whiskey-and-cigarette-smoke-cured voice that carried faint notes of a melancholy jazz trombone. Being in the audience when he gave a talk wasn't like watching Waiting for Godot, exactly, since Vonnegut worked without a partner and had decided early on that Godot would be a no-show. Still, as in Beckett's play, one thing was always clear when Vonnegut took the stage: any entertainment (much less any "answers") would have to be supplied vaudeville style.

But the thing about Vonnegut was that he was such an extraordinarily fine vaudevillian. Chaplinesque, even. And he always sucker-punched the bad guy right through that hat-in-hand business. Sure, his lectures, and his fiction, typically started out as a little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants, but they inevitably ended humanely, wisely, and sometimes even almost magically, in the oxymoron of secular transcendence: Kurt preaching an ironic "sermon" in a Manhattan cathedral about how there really are no "fates worse than death"; Billy Pilgrim and Montana Wildhack lounging in their pleasure dome on Tralfamadore; or, in the wonderful novel Bluebeard (1987), Rabo Karabekian and Circe Berman transfixed in a potato barn in front of that huge painting of one fine spring day in modern European history. No, Godot never showed up in Vonnegut's little epiphanies, but bowling pins were juggled, and the self-important jerks and plutocrats of the world got well-deserved pies in the face, and little dogs named Spot sure did some fine tricks, and we in the audience laughed until we cried.

Come to think of it, there usually was a dog in there somewhere in KV's act—even in his last performance on his brownstone steps. So maybe he did work with a partner. Here's another example: when Stephen Geller, as a young screenwriter in his twenties, was struggling to complete his screenplay version of Slaughterhouse-Five, he got stuck with his characterization of Billy Pilgrim. Geller's problem: the hapless young soldier was so passive it was difficult to get a handle on him. Since passive characters' interior lives are much easier to reveal through fictional narration than on screen, Geller needed some sort of positive, external motivation for Billy in order to make him come alive. Geller had never met Vonnegut, but since the studio had provided him with Vonnegut's phone number, he decided to call Kurt up one night to get some help.

Vonnegut answered, Geller later recounted, in a late-night, mustard-gas-and-roses, FM-d-jay voice suggesting that the most famous writer in the world had knocked back a few. Identifying himself as the screenwriter for Slaughterhouse-Five, Geller then told Vonnegut about his problems with Billy. Not getting much of a response at first, he finally asked "Isn't there anything Billy's passionate about? Isn't there anything he loves?" Vonnegut replied, "Sure—he loves his dog." And that about wrapped up the conversation. Though at first puzzled by this revelation, even wondering if Vonnegut had been joking, Geller soon decided to write a love story of sorts into the film between Billy and the classically named Spot. Growing from a pup to an old decrepit dog as the film progresses, Spot is Billy's constant companion and solace, even on Tralfamadore, where Montana Wildhack finally creates some human competition for Billy's affections.

Vonnegut's fame only soared higher when the film was released, but simultaneously his personal life was crashing to earth. His long marriage to Jane had been strained by his affair in the mid-sixties with a graduate student he'd taught at the

M.F.A. Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and it was undergoing a slow death because of his current relationship in New York with photographer Jill Krementz. Wracked with guilt over being what he called "the first person in my extended family to get divorced," Vonnegut not surprisingly found himself unable to keep up the level of writing he'd finally achieved in Slaughterhouse-Five. While Breakfast of Champions (1973) sold well, Kurt didn't think much of the novel, and his attempt to start a career as a playwright stalled after the lukewarm reception of "Happy Birthday, Wanda June." After the publication of Slapstick (1976), which Vonnegut admitted was "an awful novel," he endured a critical backlash so extreme that he claimed "the critics wanted me squashed like a bug." Drinking too much, feeling guilty over his divorce and consequent tensions with his children, locked into a strained relationship with Krementz, critically scorned, Vonnegut looked like a beaten man.

Amazingly, though, his life and career did have a second act. He made a strong comeback with Jailbird (1979), Deadeye-Dick (1982), Galapagos (1985), and his best novel post-Slaughterhouse-Five, Bluebeard (1987). He turned away from the metafictional and sci-fi tricks of his earlier fiction and embraced social realism, tackling the Watergate scandal; the insanity of the nuclear arms build up in the Reagan years (when there were already enough nukes to blow up the world several times over); a possible scenario for the future "de-evolution" of mankind into seal-like creatures with much smaller brains; and the critical debate that had erupted over the merits of representational art versus the abstract paintings created by artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Employing aging, guilt-ridden first-person narrators, Vonnegut probed the inner world as well as the outer, producing fiction full of psychological self-revelations and crammed with ideas about environmentalism, art, politics, science, and the complex political history of America. So there was still life in the old boy, as Bluebeard's protagonist Rabo Kerabekian says of himself. Any reader's knowledge of Vonnegut's fiction is seriously incomplete if he hasn't read these four compelling novels.

The quality of Vonnegut's fiction understandably trailed off in the 1990s: Hocus Pocus (1990) and Timequake (1997) showed signs that the old master, now in his seventies, was winding down. But his non-fiction still had wind--spurred on by the rise of right-wing politics that had begun in the previous decade with Ronald Reagan. Vonnegut's brilliant analogy explaining the "true believer's" mind in Mother Night now seemed prophetic of American politics at the approach of the new century. In Vonnegut's analogy, the minds of right-wing authoritarians were like coo-coo clocks whose owners had intentionally filed off some of the teeth of the gears inside their brains. Those gear teeth they metaphorically filed off were facts—inconvenient truths that, if left in their

minds, would keep time painfully out of sync with their crazy ideologies. So some gear teeth facts in their brains had to go.

Vonnegut spent his last years valiantly trying to warn us that our first President of the Twenty-First Century had filed off most of the teeth in the gears of his brain, and was ignoring all the factual maps and road signs and driving our country straight off a very high cliff. As Vonnegut had recounted in Jailbird, back in Nixon's day, when he broke the law, he did his best to cover it up: during his two terms George W. Bush stole an election, ran up four trillion dollars in debt, started a nine-year war based on lies, tortured prisoners, and repeatedly violated the Constitution by simply ignoring laws (FISA, most notably) he didn't like. But unlike Nixon, Vonnegut observed, Bush *bragged* about having done so, and defied anyone to do anything about it. Incredibly, the rule of law in this country, while not successfully ended during Bush's Presidency, was clearly suspended during it. In response, Vonnegut, although visibly feeble, went on Jon Stewart's and Bill Maher's TV shows to say so—not to hobble out into the spotlight a few last times, but to try to live up to his duties as what he liked to call "a responsible elder in my society."

In Jailbird, when the crazy bag lady/millionaire Mary Kathleen O'Looney chances upon her old boyfriend Walter Starbuck on the streets of Manhattan after so many years, she exclaims: "Thank God there's somebody still alive who cares what happens to this country." Now, with Kurt gone, it's at least a consolation to know all his work is still in print, and that it awaits new generations of readers who may learn from and perhaps act on what they discover in it.

Not surprisingly, though, just days after Vonnegut's death, the brain-gear-teeth-filers were at him. One James Rosen of Fox News offered a condescending video obituary in which he described Vonnegut as "a scribbler of left-wing screeds…a despairing leftist…a failed suicide." Not long after, Patrick J. Deneen argued in the Claremont Review of Books that despite some criticism of right-wingers, "it is [Vonnegut's] criticisms of the Left that remain the most interesting, well-informed, and enduring." One was left to wonder who would be the next "conservative" writer to try and denigrate Vonnegut—or stranger yet, to claim him as one of his own.

The first few years after a writer's death are usually the most important in establishing his or her place in literary history. An exception was Melville, whose reputation underwent a major revision decades after his demise that lifted him from obscurity into the lofty pantheon of Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne. But Melville's case is rare: a deceased writer's status, especially if he's considered minor by his contemporaries, rarely recovers from that judgment. In the five years since Vonnegut's death, a flurry of eulogies, reminiscences, literary criticism, and, most recently, biography, have brought the making of Vonnegut's posthumous reputation to a critical

point. Two new books are now vying to define posterity's image of Vonnegut: Charles J. Shields' biography And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut, A Life (Henry Holt and Company, 2011) and Gregory D. Sumner's critical/biographical study Unstuck in Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut's Life and Novels (Seven Stories Press, 2011).

In his "Introduction" to And So It Goes, Shields recounts how he first contacted the 83 year-old Vonnegut in the summer of 2006 in a letter offering to be his biographer. It was less than a year before Vonnegut's death. Undeterred by Vonnegut's polite refusal of his offer, Shields tried again in a second letter, praising Vonnegut's writing (and his own) to the extent of "la[ying] it on a little thick," as he himself admits. Vonnegut replied with a postcard with two letters on it: "OK." Shields soon began gleefully claiming his biography would be "authorized," but in the face of Vonnegut's son Mark's later refusal to grant him permission to quote from his father's letters (a decision fully supported by Vonnegut's daughters, Edie and Nanny), Shields would only assert in the finished book that it was "authoritative." Shields apparently met with Vonnegut in person just two times: once late in 2006, and on March 14, 2007—the day of Vonnegut's fall down his stairs.

In his "Introduction," Shields says that "I've tried to retrace [Vonnegut's] life as son, husband, father, and colleague, but most importantly as an author…." If by "his life as an author" Shields means how Vonnegut *personally responded* to the great challenges, disappointments, rewards, and triumphs of his extraordinary career, then Shields succeeds in providing the reader with a sensationalized look into what he sees as the deeply flawed character of a man whose adult life revolved primarily around his work. However, if Shields means he hopes to present Vonnegut's "life as an author" in the sense of giving a detailed account of Vonnegut's writing, and of why it is or isn't important, then Shields fails in his self-described "most important" task. His forays into literary criticism are brief, mostly borrowed, and uninspired. As a result, Shields' biography is skewed toward the personal, and, unfortunately, skewed toward presenting the negative aspects of Vonnegut's complex psyche.

Sounding more like a prosecuting attorney than a biographer, Shields opines that Vonnegut despised his distant, self-indulgent mother; pitied his weak father; hated his older brother for being his parents' favorite; served in World War II, but only for a few months, and surrendered to the Germans rather fighting it out to the death. What seems most to preoccupy Shields is that after the war and his marriage to Jane Cox, Vonnegut sought out women with whom to have affairs, and actually succeeded in seducing a couple of them. Further, after becoming a success this adulterer stabbed two book agents in the back and was peevishly obsessed with his dismissive treatment by most literary critics.

According to Shields, Vonnegut was also guilty of rank hypocrisy: he wrote anti-war fiction for college draft dodgers in the 1960s because he knew it would sell; while publicly opposing the war in Vietnam he privately invested in companies like his old employer G.E. (the "sole manufacturer of napalm," Shields darkly observes); and, as part of his attempt to appeal to "hippies," Vonnegut let his hair grow long and perhaps even had it permed.

Shields' ultimate judgment of Vonnegut—one repeated like a damning mantra—is that he was "immature." Yet Shields says this of a man who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and as a German POW survived the firebombing of Dresden; married and raised six children while being the sole provider for his family despite being in one of the most uncertain professions in the world and despite suffering from PTSD as a result of the war; gave and raised money in his later years for fellow writers who were sick, injured or dying; kept the good will of his children even after his long, difficult divorce; and was a loyal and generous friend to many, many people over the years, including childhood pal Dan Wakefield; Don Farber; Sidney Offit; writer/director Bob Weide (who adapted Mother Night for film); and Dan Simon (editor of Seven Stories Press, which published Vonnegut's last major book, A Man without a Country [2005]). Tellingly, Shields—despite having voluminous end note citations in And So It Goes running to fifty-four pages--apparently never attempted to interview any of these men who knew Vonnegut intimately and who respected and even loved him. It seems that only bad news about Kurt Vonnegut was good news to Charles Shields.

Why would Shields produce such an unsympathetic biography of a man he'd courted with persistence, seeming affection, and high praise for his literary accomplishments? Monetary, political, and even religious motivations seem likely. Negative biographies promising revelations about the "real person" behind the public façade—especially when the subject is someone well known to a broad spectrum of people—often sell well. Although Shields is cagey about his politics in his biography, he's not as cagey as he imagines--especially given his relentless insistence that Vonnegut was really "a conservative" whose outspoken liberalism was mostly a ruse to draw attention to himself and sell books. Finally, with respect to religious motives, Shields writes on the last page of And So It Goes that, just a few hours before Vonnegut's fall down the stairs, "a visitor asked him, `Do you believe in God?'" Though Shields attempts to be wily with his readers to the end, it doesn't work: "the visitor" was, as the end notes make clear, Shields himself, asking a question his research must have already answered. Yet even then frail old Kurt, weak with pneumonia, was ahead of his biographer: "I don't know," he replied, "but who couldn't?" Now *that's* cagey!

Contrary to what one might expect, Gregory Sumner's Unstuck in Time, which is more a literary study than a biography, paints a more realistic portrait of the personal Vonnegut than does And So It Goes. If Sumner errs at all, it's in the direction of having almost nothing negative to say about Vonnegut's life or work. In one of the blurbs for Unstuck in Time, Vonnegut's friend and fellow writer Sidney Offit observes that the book is "scholarship illuminated by a fan's contagious enthusiasm." The word "fan" shouldn't raise alarms, however: Sumner is about as highly informed a fan as one could imagine, and his book, as Douglas Brinkley says in another blurb, "brims with analytic insight, biographical revelation, and old-fashioned storytelling."

One need only contrast Sumner's "Introduction" with Shields' to get a sense of the radical differences between the two books. Shields begins his biography with the following paragraph: "Writing this book has been like conversing with an empty chair. Because Kurt Vonnegut, in the argot of slapstick, his favorite form of humor, took a powder and left me holding the bag. We were working together when he passed away. In fact, the last time I spoke to him was just hours before he suffered an accident that resulted in his death." Sentence fragment aside, the tone here is disturbing: the focus is clearly on Shields himself rather than on Vonnegut, the attitude toward Vonnegut's death almost flippant. Yes, Mr. Shields—how inconsiderate of Vonnegut to die while you were working on his biography!

Sumner's spotlight, in contrast, never leaves the star of the show. Sumner's introduction, moreover, provides an alternative to Shields' "either/or" picture of Vonnegut's politics. Taking up the old idea of the "American Dream," Sumner convincingly argues that Vonnegut was both a believer in that dream—that one could rise in our society through hard work and talent—and a fierce critic of how it had been corrupted by corporate power, militarism, and unrestrained greed. Where Shields insists Vonnegut was really a conservative pretending to be a liberal, Sumner sees how Vonnegut was conservative *and* liberal, patriotic *and* skeptical, cynical *and* hopeful about his country. Where Shields sees a phony, Sumner sees "a heartbroken American Dreamer," an exemplary citizen in our democracy who, despite all our failures as a nation, hoped "to redeem the story,…to integrate the most rational and humane elements of our shared American Dream into the expansive ethic of `planetary citizenship' he knew was so urgently needed in our time."

In the body of the book, Sumner demonstrates the validity of his thesis many times over. In clear, unassuming prose free of academic jargon, he offers a carefully tuned balance of close reading of all fourteen novels and Vonnegut's biography designed to offer the reader maximum insight into how the fiction and life of his subject are inseparable. He examines Vonnegut's novels with the kind of minute attention Shields

gives Vonnegut only when airing his dirty personal laundry. While Shield's proclaims his biography "authoritative," Sumner usually frames his insights not as wisdom from on high but as questions—perhaps having learned the technique from Vonnegut himself. After all, one of Kurt's most justly famous lines is "*Poo-te-weet?*"

On that day in March, 2007, as Shields asked an old, exhausted, and sick Kurt Vonnegut whether he believed in God, it's hard not to suspect that the biographer would have been happy with either a "yes" or a "no." If the answer had been "yes," Shields would have had a blockbuster ending for his book: "The life-long atheist, nearing death, finally saw the light!" A "no," while less dramatic, would still have been serviceable, especially in retrospect: "The life-long atheist, just hours away from the fall that would end his life, stubbornly refused to the end to acknowledge his Maker!" But Kurt wasn't a yes/no kind of guy, and characteristically answered ambiguously. Then, like Dimmesdale slipping away from Chillingsworth's grasp, he was soon descending those front steps of his for the last time. And he did it slapstick style--like that woman ejected from the bus, like Alice lying on her hospital death bed, like her husband's commuter train hurtling off an open drawbridge into the Hudson.

Alice, her husband, Bernard, and Kurt are "all up in heaven now," as Kurt used to joke, where Kurt's probably amusing everyone with a little cartoon sketch of himself flying off those steps over his amazed little dog, arms spread out like a B-29's wings, Pall Mall cigarette in mouth, headed for a hard landing, but still hilariously horizontal, in flight forever.