

Dispatch from a Man without a Country

Kurt Vonnegut

Kurt Vonnegut's latest book is A Man without a Country (Bloomsbury), from which this excerpt is taken by kind permission of the author.

Do you know what a twerp is? When I was in Shortridge High School in Indianapolis 65 years ago, a twerp was a guy who stuck a set of false teeth up his butt and bit the buttons off the back seats of taxicabs. (And a snarf was a guy who sniffed the seats of girls' bicycles.)

And I consider anybody a twerp who hasn't read the greatest American short story, which is 'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,' by Ambrose Bierce. It isn't remotely political. It is a flawless example of American genius, like 'Sophisticated Lady' by Duke Ellington or the Franklin stove.

I consider anybody a twerp who hasn't read *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. There can never be a better book than that one on the strengths and vulnerabilities inherent in our form of government.

Want a taste of that great book? He says, and he said it 169 years ago, that in no country other than ours has a love of money taken a stronger hold on the affections of men. Okay?

The French-Algerian writer Albert Camus, who won a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957, wrote, 'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.'

So there's another barrel of laughs from literature. Camus died in an automobile accident. His dates? 1913 – 1960 A.D.

Do you realize that all great literature – *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Bible*, and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' – are all about what a bummer it is to be a human being? (Isn't it such a relief to have somebody say that?)

Evolution can go to hell as far as I am concerned. What a mistake we are. We have mortally wounded this sweet life-supporting planet – the only one in the whole Milky Way – with a century of transportation whoopee. Our government is conducting a war against drugs, is it? Let them go after petroleum. Talk about a

destructive high! You put some of this stuff in your car and you can go a hundred miles an hour, run over the neighbor's dog, and tear the atmosphere to smithereens. Hey, as long as we are stuck with being homo sapiens, why mess around? Let's wreck the whole joint. Anybody got an atomic bomb? Who doesn't have an atomic bomb nowadays?

But I have to say this in defense of humankind: In no matter what era in history, including the Garden of Eden, everybody just got here. And, except for the Garden of Eden, there were already all these games going on that could make you act crazy, even if you weren't crazy to begin with. Some of the crazymaking games going on today are love and hate, liberalism and conservatism, automobiles and credit cards, golf, and girls' basketball.



I am one of America's Great Lakes people, her freshwater people, not an oceanic but a continental people. Whenever I swim in an ocean, I feel as though I am swimming in chicken soup.

Like me, many American socialists were freshwater people. Most American people don't know what the socialists did during the first half of the past century with art, with eloquence, with organizing skills, to elevate the self-respect, the dignity and political acumen of American wage earners of our working class.

That wage earners, without social position or higher education or wealth, are of inferior intellect is surely belied by the fact that two of the most splendid writers and speakers on the deepest subject in American history were self-taught workmen. I speak, of course, of Carl Sandburg the poet from Illinois, and Abraham Lincoln of Kentucky, then Indiana, and finally Illinois. Both, may I say, were continental, freshwater people like me. Another freshwater person and splendid speaker was the Socialist Party candidate Eugene Victor Debs, a former locomotive fireman who had been born to a middle class family in Terra Haute, Indiana.

Hooray for our team!

'Socialism' is no more an evil word than 'Christianity.' Socialism no more prescribed Joseph Stalin and his secret police and shuttered churches than Christianity prescribed the Spanish Inquisition. Christianity and socialism alike, in fact, prescribe a society dedicated to the proposition that all men, women and children are created equal and shall not starve.

Adolf Hitler, incidentally, was a two-fer. He named his party the National Socialists, the Nazis. Hitler's swastika wasn't a pagan symbol, as so many people believe. It was a working person's Christian cross, made of axes, of tools.

About Stalin's shuttered churches, and those in China today: Such suppression of religion was supposedly justified by Karl Marx's statement that 'religion is the opium of the people.' Marx said that back in 1844, when opium and opium derivatives were the only effective painkillers anyone could take. Marx himself had taken them. He was grateful for the temporary relief they had given him. He

was simply noticing, and surely not condemning, the fact that religion could also be comforting to those in economic or social distress. It was a casual truism, not a dictum.

When Marx wrote those words, by the way, we hadn't even freed our slaves yet. Who do you imagine was more pleasing in the eyes of a merciful God back then, Karl Marx or the United States of America?

Stalin was happy to take Marx's truism as a decree, and Chinese tyrants as well, since it seemingly empowered them to put preachers out of business who might speak ill of them or their goals.

The statement has also entitled many of this country to say that socialists are antireligion, are anti-God, and therefore absolutely loathsome.

I never met Carl Sandburg or Eugene Victor Debs, and I wish I had. I would have been tongue-tied in the presence of such national treasures.

I did get to know one socialist of their generation – Powers Hapgood of Indianapolis. He was a typical Hoosier idealist. Socialism is idealistic. Hapgood, like Debs, was a middle-class person who thought there could be more economic justice in this country. He wanted a better country, that's all.

After graduating from Harvard, he went to work as a coal miner, urging his working class brothers to organize in order to get better pay and safer working conditions. He also led protesters at the execution of the anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in Massachusetts in 1927.

Hapgood's family owned a successful cannery in Indianapolis, and when Powers Hapgood inherited it, he turned it over to the employees, who ruined it.

We met in Indianapolis after the end of the Second World War. He had become an official in the CIO. There had been some sort of dust-up on a picket line, and he was testifying about it in court, and the judge stops everything and asks him, 'Mr Hapgood, here you are, you're a graduate of Harvard. Why would anyone with your advantages choose to live as you have?' Hapgood answered the judge: 'Why, because of the Sermon on the Mount, sir.'

And again: Hooray for our team.



I am from a family of artists. Here I am, making a living in the arts. It has not been a rebellion. It's as though I had taken over the family Esso station. My ancestors were all in the arts, so I'm simply making my living in the customary family way.

But my father, who was a painter and an architect, was so hurt by the Depression, when he was unable to make a living, that he thought I should have nothing to do with the arts. He warned me away from the arts because he had found them so useless as a way of producing money. He told me I could go to college only if I studied something serious, something practical.

As an undergraduate at Cornell I was a chemistry major because my brother was a big-shot chemist. Critics feel that a person cannot be a serious artist and also have had a technical education, which I had. I know that customarily English

departments in universities, without knowing what they're doing, teach dread of the engineering department, the physics department, and the chemistry department. And this fear, I think, is carried over into criticism. Most of our critics are products of English departments and are very suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in technology. So, anyway, I was a chemistry major, but I'm always winding up as a teacher in English departments, so I have brought scientific thinking to literature. There's been very little gratitude for this.

I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I'd offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology. I got classified as a science fiction writer simply because I wrote about Schenectady, New York. My first book, *Player Piano*, was about Schenectady. There are huge factories in Schenectady and nothing else. I and my associates were engineers, physicists, chemists, and mathematicians. And when I wrote about the General Electric Company and Schenectady, it seemed a fantasy of the future to critics who had never seen the place.

I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex.



In 1968, the year I wrote *Slaughterhouse Five*, I finally became grown up enough to write about the bombing of Dresden. It was the largest massacre in European history. I, of course, know about Auschwitz, but a massacre is something that happens suddenly, the killing of a whole lot of people in a very short time. In Dresden, on February 13, 1945, about 135,000 people were killed by British firebombing in one night.

It was pure nonsense, pointless destruction. The whole city was burned down, and it was a British atrocity, not ours. They sent in night bombers, and they came in and set the whole town on fire with a new kind of incendiary bomb. And so everything organic, except my little POW group, was consumed by fire. It was a military experiment to find out if you could burn down a whole city by scattering incendiaries over it.

Of course, as prisoners of war, we dealt hands-on with dead Germans, digging them out of basements because they had suffocated there, and taking them to a huge funeral pyre. And I heard – I didn't see it done – that they gave up this procedure because it was too slow and, of course, the city was starting to smell pretty bad. And they sent in guys with flamethrowers.

Why my fellow prisoners of war and I weren't killed I don't know.

I was a writer in 1968. I was a hack. I'd write anything to make money, you know. And what the hell, I'd seen this thing. I'd been through it, and so I was going to write a hack book about Dresden. You know, the kind that would be made into a movie and where Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra and the others would play

us. I tried to write, but I just couldn't get it right. I kept writing crap.

So I went to a friend's house – Bernie O'Hare, who'd been my pal. And we were trying to remember funny stuff about our time as prisoners of war in Dresden, tough talk and all that, stuff that would make a nifty war movie. And his wife, Mary O'Hare, blew her stack. She said, 'You were nothing but babies then.'

And that is true of soldiers. They are in fact babies. They are not movie stars. They are not Duke Wayne. And realizing that was the key. I was finally free to tell the truth. We were children and the subtitle of *Slaughterhouse Five* became *The Children's Crusade*.

Why had it taken me twenty-three years to write about what I had experienced in Dresden? We all came home with stories, and we all wanted to cash in, one way or another. And what Mary O'Hare was saying, in effect, was, 'Why don't you tell the truth for a change?'

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story after the First World War called 'A Soldier's Home' about how it was very rude to ask a soldier what he'd seen when he got back home. I think a lot of people, including me, clammed up when a civilian asked about battle, about war. It was fashionable. One of the most impressive ways to tell your war story is to refuse to tell it, you know. Civilians would then have to imagine all kinds of deeds of derring-do.

But I think the Vietnam War freed me and other writers, because it made our leadership and our motives seem so scruffy and essentially stupid. We could finally talk about something bad that we did to the worst people imaginable, the Nazis. And what I saw, what I had to report, made war look so ugly. You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff. You're not expecting it.

Of course, another reason not to talk about war is that it's unspeakable.



FUNNIEST JOKE
IN THE WORLD:
"LAST NIGHT I
DREAMED
I WAS EATING
FLANNEL CAKES.
WHEN I WOKE UP
THE BLANKET WAS
GONE!"

ReSot

Here is a lesson in creative writing.

First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.

And I realize some of you may be having trouble deciding whether I'm kidding or not. So from now on I will tell you when I'm kidding.

For instance, join the National Guard or the Marines and teach democracy. I'm kidding.

We are about to be attacked by Al Qaeda. Wave flags if you have them. That always seems to scare them away. I'm kidding.

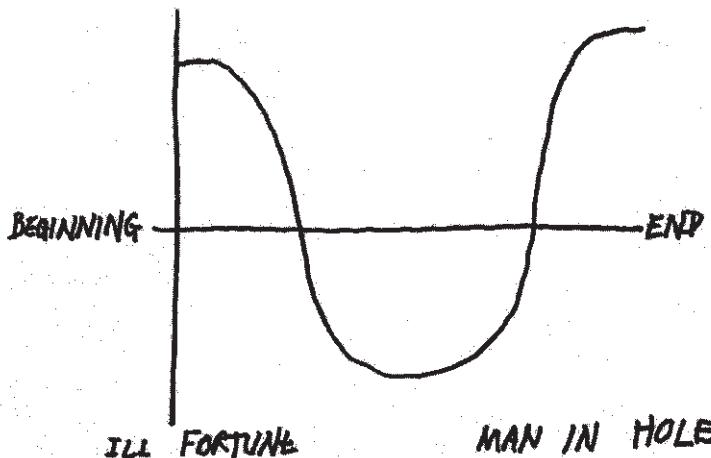
If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don't have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts. I'm not kidding. The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practising an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possibly can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.



I want to share with you something I've learned. I'll draw it on the blackboard behind me so you can follow more easily [*draws a vertical line on the blackboard*]. This is the G-I axis: good fortune – ill fortune. Death and terrible poverty, sickness down here – great prosperity, wonderful health up there. Your average state of affairs in the middle [*points to bottom, top, and middle of line respectively*].

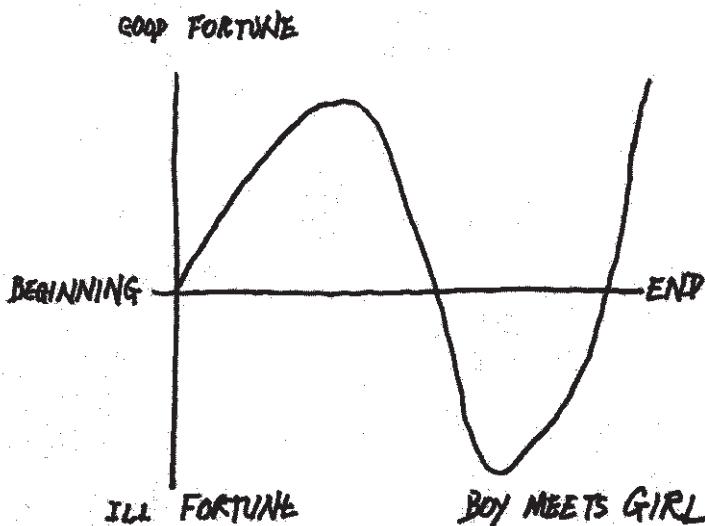
This is the B-E axis. B for beginning, E for entropy. Okay. Not every story has that very simple, very pretty shape that even a computer can understand [*draws horizontal line extending from middle of G-I axis*].

GOOD FORTUNE



Now let me give you a marketing tip. The people who can afford to buy books and magazines and go to the movies don't like to hear about people who are poor or sick, so start your story up here [*indicates top of the G-I axis*]. You will see this story over and over again. People love it and it is not copyrighted. The story is 'Man in Hole,' but the story needn't be about a man or a hole. It's: Somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again [*draws line A*]. It is not accidental that the line ends up higher than where it began. This is encouraging to readers.

Another is called 'Boy Meets Girl,' but this needn't be about a boy meeting a girl [*begins drawing line B*]. It's: Somebody, an ordinary person, on a day like any other day, comes across something perfectly wonderful: 'Oh boy, this is my lucky day!' ... [*drawing the line downward*], 'Shit!' ... [*drawing the line back up again*] And gets back up again.

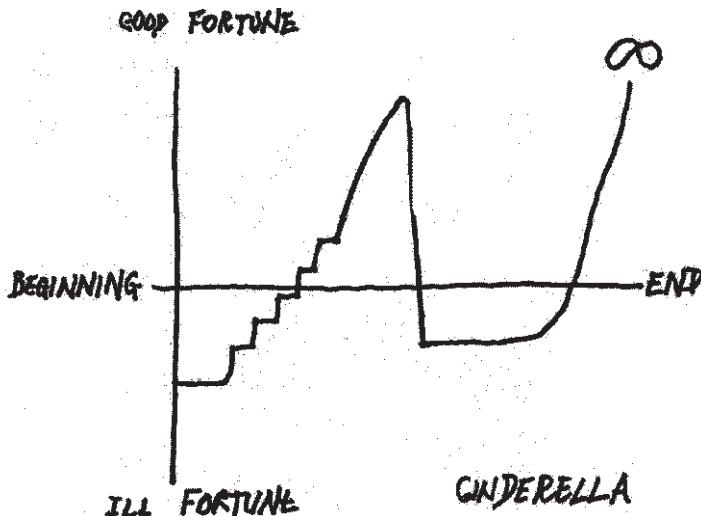


Now, I don't mean to intimidate you, but after being a chemist as an undergraduate at Cornell, after the war I went to the University of Chicago and studied anthropology, and eventually I took a masters degree in that field. Saul Bellow was in that same department, and neither one of us ever made a field trip. Although we certainly imagined some. I started going to the library in search of reports about ethnographers, preachers, and explorers – those imperialists – to find out what sorts of stories they'd collected from primitive people. It was a big mistake for me to take a degree in anthropology anyway, because I can't stand primitive people – they're so stupid. But anyway, I read these stories, one after another, collected from primitive people all over the world, and they were dead level, like the B-E axis here. So all right. Primitive people deserve to lose with their lousy stories. They really are backward. Look at the wonderful rise and fall of our stories.

One of the most popular stories ever told starts down here [*begins line C below*

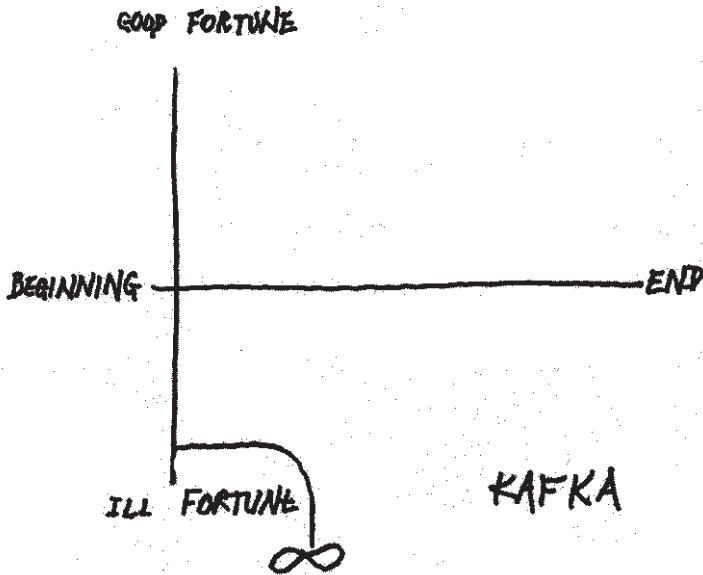
B-E axis]. Who is this person who's despondent? She's a girl of about fifteen or sixteen whose mother has died, so why wouldn't she be low? And her father got married almost immediately to a terrible battle-axe with two mean daughters. You've heard it?

There's to be a party at the palace. She has to help her two stepsisters and her dreadful stepmother get ready to go, but she herself has to stay home. Is she even sadder now? No, she's already a broken-hearted little girl. The death of her mother is enough. Things can't get any worse than that. So okay, they all leave for the party. Her fairy godmother shows up [draws incremental rise], gives her pantyhose, mascara, and a means of transportation to get to the party.



And when she shows up she's the belle of the ball [draws line upward]. She is so heavily made up that her relatives don't recognize her. Then the clock strikes twelve, as promised, and it's all taken away again [draws line downward]. It doesn't take long for a clock to strike twelve times, so she drops down. Does she drop down to the same level? Hell, no. No matter what happens after that she'll remember when the prince was in love with her and she was the belle of the ball. So she poops along, at her considerably improved level, no matter what, and the shoe fits, and she becomes off-scale happy [draws line upward and then infinity symbol].

Now there's a Franz Kafka story [begins line D towards bottom of G-I axis]. A young man is rather unattractive and not very personable. He has disagreeable relatives and has had a lot of jobs with no chance of promotion. He doesn't get paid enough to take his girl dancing or to go to the beer hall with a friend. One morning he wakes up, it's time to go to work again, and he has turned into a cockroach [draws line downward and then infinity symbol]. It's a pessimistic story.



The question is, does this system I've devised help us in the evaluation of literature? Perhaps a real masterpiece cannot be crucified on a cross of this design. How about *Hamlet*? It's a pretty good piece of work I'd say. Is anybody going to argue that it isn't? I don't have to draw a new line, because Hamlet's situation is the same as Cinderella's, except that the sexes are reversed.

His father has just died. He's despondent. And right away his mother went and married his uncle, who's a bastard. So Hamlet is going along on the same level as Cinderella when his friend Horatio comes up to him and says, 'Hamlet, listen there's this thing up in the parapet, I think maybe you'd better talk to it. It's your dad.' So Hamlet goes up and talks to this, you know, fairly substantial apparition there. And this thing says, 'I'm your father, I was murdered, you gotta avenge me, it was your uncle did it, here's how.'

Well, was this good news or bad news? To this day we don't know if that ghost was really Hamlet's father. If you have messed around with Ouija boards, you know there are malicious spirits floating around, liable to tell you anything, and you shouldn't believe them. Madame Blavatsky, who knew more about the spirit world than anybody else, said you are a fool to take any apparition seriously, because they are often malicious and they are frequently the souls of people who were murdered, were suicides, or were terribly cheated in life in one way or another, and they are out for revenge.

So we don't know whether this thing was really Hamlet's father or if it was good news or bad news. And neither does Hamlet. But he says okay, I got a way to check this out. I'll hire actors to act out the way the ghost said my father was murdered by my uncle, and I'll put on this show and see what my uncle makes of it. So he puts on this show. And it's not like Perry Mason. His uncle doesn't go

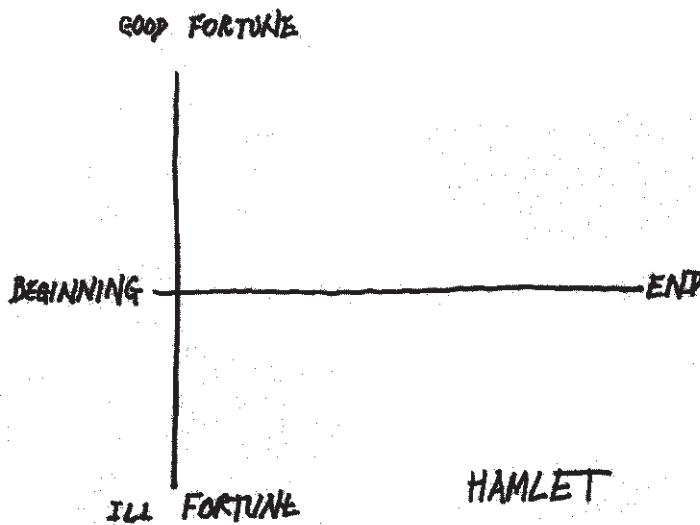
crazy and say, 'I-I-You got me, you got me, I did it, I did it.' It flops. Neither good news nor bad news. After this flop Hamlet ends up talking with his mother when the drapes move, so he thinks his uncle is back there and he says, 'All right, I am so sick of being so damn indecisive,' and he sticks his rapier through the drapery. Well, who falls out? This windbag, Polonius. This Rush Limbaugh. And Shakespeare regards him as a fool and quite disposable.

You know, dumb parents think that the advice that Polonius gave to his kids when they were going away was what parents should always tell their kids, and it's the dumbest possible advice, and Shakespeare even thought it was hilarious.

'Neither a borrower nor a lender be.' But what else is life but endless lending and borrowing, give and take?

'This above all, to thine own self be true.' Be an egomaniac!

Neither good news nor bad news. Hamlet didn't get arrested. He's prince. He can kill anybody he wants. So he goes along, and finally he gets in a duel, and he's killed. Well, did he go to heaven or did he go to hell? Quite a difference. Cinderella or Kafka's cockroach? I don't think Shakespeare believed in a heaven or hell any more than I do. And so we don't know whether it's good news or bad news.



I have just demonstrated to you that Shakespeare was as poor a storyteller as any Arapaho.

But there's a reason we recognize *Hamlet* as a masterpiece: it's that Shakespeare told us the truth, and people so rarely tell us the truth in this rise and fall here [*indicates blackboard*]. The truth is, we know so little about life, we don't really know what the good news is and what the bad news is.

And if I die – God forbid – I would like to go to heaven to ask somebody in charge up there, 'Hey, what was the good news and what was the bad news?'