

Mother Night ~ Kurt Vonnegut On the Banks of the Big Tennessee

By Don Williams

Hi ho.

Unless the universe has begun running backwards like a run amok player piano, Kurt Vonnegut is dead and not likely to rise again any time soon. But time being what time is, and Vonnegut being who Vonnegut... is... yes, it could happen. Especially if he's like his characters, who bounce around time like pogo riders on checkered kitchen floors stretching to infinity.

Maybe his checking out on April 11, 2007, at age 84, is a way of celebrating lucky deliverance from times too much like those in a favored book—*1984*, by George Orwell—or from a body too bothered by medicinal hocus pocus. Either way, if Vonnegut and Faulkner are right to say the past is with us always, then Vonnegut lives.

See the unkempt hair, moustache and wry grin, lending a huggable quality to the rationalist-humanist even as he ponders frigid truths with every bounce of time's whimsical ride.

See the young reporter turned ad man stringing words to push product down the pipeline while honing novels in the 1950s. Watch him quarrel with book marketers who classify *Sirens of Titan* as sci-fi, limiting his exposure to a broader audience, if only for awhile.

Hear the clatter of typewriter keys as he turns notions into print—like the concept of Ice-Nine, an element of Vonnegut's imagination. Careful. One vial of that doomsday weapon would crystallize all the waters of the planet if emptied into, say, the Tennessee River. Something like that happens in *Cat's Cradle*—a title derived from an old parlor game performed with simple string—leaving his frozen protagonist at the end of that novel eternally giving the finger to an eternally frozen universe.

Hi ho.

Maybe young Vonnegut dreams up such images in 1942 as he oh so briefly walks the banks of the Big Tennessee. Inklings of waterways' unity flow into one another, as gathering awareness of Oak Ridge's true purpose flows into darkening visions. Maybe rabid sports worship here on these same banks turn the University of Tennessee mechanical engineering student against such tribal loyalty for all time.

His most controversial novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, is about a man who goes space-and-time hopping through a universe as shattered as Dresden, Germany in World War II. In 1945, Vonnegut is a prisoner of war there, working in a factory making vitamins for pregnant women, when Brits

carpet-bomb the city, a renowned center of culture. Maybe the specter of total war chases him out of his mind and body and time's matrix, until Russian soldiers rescue him. He returns to Dresden years later, if only in imagination.

Perhaps in his 50s he realizes how WWII lends psychic immunity to Americans dropping record-breaking ordnance on Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and '70s. Perhaps as an old man approaching death in the 21st century, he sees how such bombings immunize Americans against revulsion to the Shock and Awe we visited on Iraqis.

Just before bouncing out of his corporeal life, he hears death cries of millions in some future war. Hmmm, is that a mushroom cloud he glimpses exploding there, courtesy of good Christians and Jews and agnostics in Los Alamos and Oak Ridge?

Did I mention Vonnegut is an atheist? That he likes Jesus quite a lot anyhow? Especially the Sermon on the Mount? That he believes kindness is the one gift all should bring to the world? That he rescues his son from insanity and self-medication in the 1970s, nurtures him to wellness with tender love and affection? That he thinks we all could use just a little more socialism? And that war's a terrible idea for people on a finite world grown clever at making bombs? That he writes, "We're addicted to oil" years before the Shrub discovers the convenience of paying lip service to reality? That he knows time is relative?

So it goes.

Vonnegut believes our greatest heroes are altruistic volunteer firefighters and not, say, warriors like Pat Tillman or Jessica Lynch, whom the military-industrial-media machine sought to foist off on us as poster children for the war. Think what a younger Vonnegut might do with such real-life material. The economy he'd bring to showing soldiers in camouflage running out of a hospital carrying Lynch, as if in rescue. Imagine how the writer might pogo his readers across time's checkered kitchen floor to show her riding a tire-swing at age eight, all freckles and curls as she swings round a West Virginia white oak tree and muses on the future. How he'd cut back to show an Iraqi surgeon picking up a phone to call Americans and say, "We've dressed the wounds of one Jessica Lynch. She's leddy to check out now."

Watch Vonnegut bounce back to boot camp, then across time and space to portray Pentagon PR flacks as they tailor the Lynch legend. Watch how they position cameras to record Americans rushing the hospital, guns drawn. Vonnegut might sum up the darkly humorous hero scam as he sums up so much of the world's phony baloney in *Cat's Cradle*, with five little words:

No cat. No cat's cradle.

No Vonnegut? Time forfend. Earlier this century I miss an opportunity to meet him when he speaks at UT. A friend relates his charm, his wit, the story of how he'd recently survived a house fire. Does his admiration of firefighters, best expressed in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*, foreshadow this event by 50 years, somehow, or is the reverse true?

Bouncing around my own life's hologram, it's hard to imagine it without Vonnegut. See me in the back of Miss Pearsall's chemistry class reading *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, looking into my own bigotry and closed-mindedness, thanks to Vonnegut's clarifying X-ray vision. I'm 15. I'll devour four more Vonnegut books before I'm 16, and through all the years, I'll see how Vonnegut gets so much right in book before book. I'll thank him for warnings and foreshadowings of heartbreak and wisdom to come. I thank him tomorrow. I thank him yesterday. I thank him now.

God bless you, Mr. Vonnegut.

With love and loss and sad admiration after all these months.

So you go.

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