


KURT VONNEGUT



palms
sunbooy

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
COLLAGE

DELACORTE PRESS/NEW YORK

KURT VONNEGUT

But now, as a physician, as an open-minded scientist, he has delivered himself into the hands of a talk therapist, blabbing his head off about Jane and me and his sisters and his cousins and all that, I hope, and finding it hilariously beneficial.

Hooray.

There will be talk about how people wronged him. It's about time. It's about time.

✻

EVERYTHING is about time.

Yes, and somewhere in there I looked in on George Roy Hill while he made a motion picture based on a novel of mine, *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

There are only two American novelists who should be grateful for the movies which were made from their books. I am one of them. The other one? Margaret Mitchell, of course.

✻

THE Eastern Seaboard's intellectual ranks will probably always require one woman to be so brilliant, supposedly, that everybody else is scared to death of her. Mary McCarthy used to hold that job. Susan Sontag has it now.

Susan Sontag approached me at a party one time. I was petrified. What brilliant question would she ask me, and what would be my pip-squeak reply?

"How did you like the movie they made of *Slaughterhouse-Five*?" she said.

"I liked it a lot," I confessed.

PALM SUNDAY

"So did I," she said.
How sweet and easy that was, and what a great motion picture *Slaughterhouse-Five* must really be!

✻

THERE was a depression going on in the movie industry in Hollywood back then. Only two pictures were being made, both based on works of mine. The other one was *Happy Birthday, Wanda June*.

This movie, starring Rod Steiger and Susannah York, turned out so abominably that I asked that my name be taken off it. I had heard of other writers doing that. What could be more dignified?

This proved to be impossible, however. I alone had done the thing the credits said I had done. I had really written the thing.

✻

YES, and it wasn't the only bad job I ever did. I have graded my separate works from A to D. The grades I hand out to myself do not place me in literary history. I am comparing myself with myself. Thus can I give myself an A-plus for *Car's Cradle*, while knowing that there was a writer named William Shakespeare. The report card is chronological, so you can plot my rise and fall on graph paper, if you like:

<i>Player Piano</i>	B
<i>The Sirens of Titan</i>	A
<i>Mother Night</i>	A
<i>Car's Cradle</i>	A-plus
<i>God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater</i>	A

KURT VONNEGUT

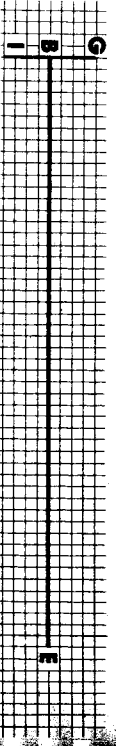
<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i>	A-plus
<i>Welcome to the Monkey House</i>	B-minus
<i>Happy Birthday, Wanda June</i>	D
<i>Breakfast of Champions</i>	C
<i>Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon</i>	C
<i>Slapstick</i>	D
<i>Jailbird</i>	A
<i>Palm Sunday</i>	C

✻

WHAT has been my prettiest contribution to my culture would say it was a master's thesis in anthropology which was rejected by the University of Chicago a long time ago. It was rejected because it was so simple and looked like too much fun. One must not be too playful.

The thesis has vanished, but I carry an abstract in my head, which I will here set down. The fundamental idea is that stories have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper, and that the shape of a given society's stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads.

In the thesis, I collected popular stories from fantastically various societies, not excluding the one which used to read *Collier's* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. I graphed each one. Anyone can graph a simple story if he or she will crucify it, so to speak, on the intersecting axes I here depict:

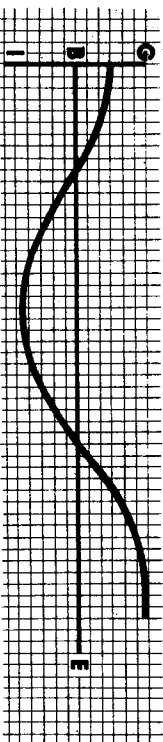


PALM SUNDAY

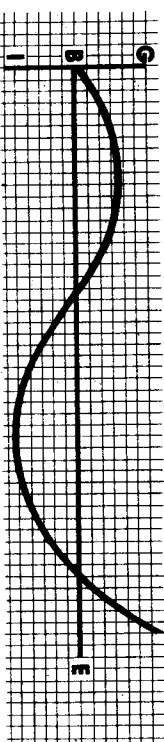
"G" stands for good fortune. "I" stands for ill fortune. "B" stands for the beginning of a story. "E" stands for its end.

The late Nelson Rockefeller, for example, would be very close to the top of the G-I scale on his wedding day. A shopping-bag lady waking up on a doorstep this morning would be somewhere nearer the middle, but not at the bottom, since the day is balmy and clear.

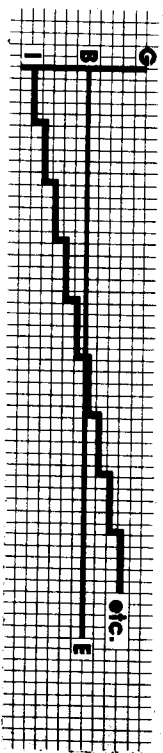
A much beloved story in our society is about a person who is leading a bearable life, who experiences misfortune, who overcomes misfortune, and who is happier afterward for having demonstrated resourcefulness and strength. As a graph, that story looks like this:



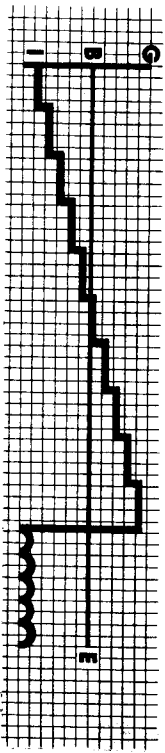
Another story of which Americans never seem to tire is about a person who becomes happier upon finding something he or she likes a lot. The person loses whatever it is, and then gets it back forever. As a graph, it looks like this:



An American Indian creation myth, in which a god of some sort gives the people the sun and then the moon and then the bow and arrow and then the corn and so on, is essentially a staircase, a tale of accumulation:

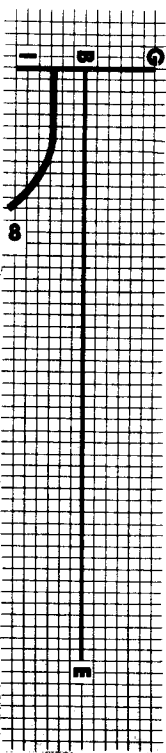


Almost all creation myths are staircases like that. Our own creation myth, taken from the Old Testament, is unique, so far as I could discover, in looking like this:



The sudden drop in fortune, of course, is the ejection of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.

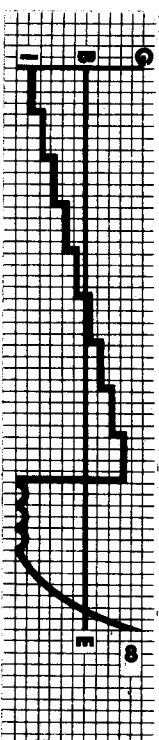
Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," in which an already hopelessly unhappy man turns into a cockroach, looks like this:



But could my graphs, when all was said and done, be useful as anything more than little visual comedies, cartoons of a sort? The University of Chicago asked me that, and I had to ask myself that, and I say again what I said at the beginning: that the graphs were at least as suggestive as pots or spearheads.

But then I had another look at a graph I had drawn of Western civilization's most enthusiastically received story, which is "Cinderella." At this very moment, a thousand writers must be telling that story again in one form or another. This very book is a Cinderella story of a kind.

I confessed that I was daunted by the graph of "Cinderella," and was tempted to leave it out of my thesis, since it seemed to prove that I was full of shit. It seemed too complicated and arbitrary to be a representative artifact—lacked the simple grace of a pot or a spearhead. Have a look:



The steps, you see, are all the presents the fairy godmother gave to Cinderella, the ball gown, the slippers, the carriage, and so on. The sudden drop is the stroke of midnight at the ball. Cinderella is in rags again. All the presents have been repossessed. But then the prince finds her and marries her, and she is infinitely happy ever after. She gets all the stuff back, and *then* some. A lot of people think the story is trash, and, on graph paper, it certainly looks like trash.

But then I said to myself, Wait a minute—those steps at the beginning look like the creation myth of virtually every society on earth. And then I saw that the stroke of midnight looked exactly like the unique creation myth in the Old Testament. And then I saw that the rise to bliss at the end was identical with the expectation of redemption as expressed in primitive Christianity.

The tales were identical.