Creative Writing/ Creative Memoirs Wednesday 9 December 2015 2-3:30+-, Calvert Library, Stoakley Road, Prince Frederick.
"Re-Write Your Life—Or Someone Else's" workshop in the first meeting room to the right. Bring 8 + copies of some 800 words, have more in reserve in case we have time for more. Please double-space, in BOLD 14-point font.

After this December workshop, we won't meet again until March 9, 2016, but meanwhile, escape from the clamor for BUY BUY BUY, write and rewrite! Meanwhile, visit CalvArt Gallery, which has some lovely items big & small.

I've collected several interesting articles, including one at the end on Kurt Vonnegut and his wife Jane—who inspired and masterminded his work. Meanwhile, this from Neruda, who speaks for us all.

"I'm given to write lines
no one reads,
I'm given to sing for someone
who one day
I'll never meet…"

Then Came Back: The Lost Neruda, **translator Forrest Gander, Copper Canyon Press, 2016…**

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Can't not include this item about Cam's latest book, published by Springer, with more on the way, and while it is designed for the medical profession, how to treat patients returning from active war zones, will surely interest others of us. More info coming on www.elspethcameronritchie.com

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Related Diseases in Combat Veterans Editor: Ritchie, Elspeth Cameron (Ed.)

This book takes a case-based approach to addressing the challenges psychiatrists and other clinicians face when working with American combat veterans after their return from a war zone. Written by experts, the book concentrates on a wide variety of concerns associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including different treatments of PTSD. The text also looks at PTSD comorbidities, such as depression and traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other conditions masquerading as PTSD. …Other subjects: returning veterans, including pain, disability, facing the end of a career, sleep problems , suicidal thoughts, violence, and mefloquine "toxidrome". Each case study includes a case presentation, diagnosis and assessment, treatment and management, outcome and case resolution, and clinical pearls and pitfalls.

"There are two kinds of description that will have your reader waking up his or her spouse to read a line out loud: really good description and really bad. In order to make sure your descriptions fit in the former category rather than the latter, keep an eye out for the following spouse-elbowing sins of descriptive language and do everything in your power to avoid them.

1. <u>Mixed Metaphors</u> "A metaphor involves a relationship between two unrelated things, compared in order to better illuminate one of them, as in "The road of life has many sharp turns" (a bit of a cliché, true, but we'll take on clichés in just a moment). But when you try to compare one thing to two different things, or try to link one metaphor with another one, what you've got is a mixed metaphor, as in, "The road of life is swimming with dangerous alligators," comparing life to both a road and an alligator pit, I guess. My favorite example of a mixed metaphor comes from Leslie Nielsen as Lt. Frank Drebin in the cinematic masterpiece The Naked Gun: "I'm playing hardball, Ludwig. It's fourth and fifteen and you're looking at a full court press."

2. <u>Other Ineffective Comparisons</u> "In a metaphor there's a certain relationship: The two things compared must be unrelated, but they can't be incongruous. Thus a metaphor becomes problematic when either (1) the two things compared aren't sufficiently different, or (2) when they're so different the relationship seems nonsensical. An example of the first kind might be simply, "Her tears were streams of water," which makes no sense given that her tears are indeed streams, just not the kind with trout in them. To illustrate the second, where the things compared seem not to match in any way, I turn again to a fictional character, this time George Costanza from Seinfeld: "The sea was angry that day, my friends. Like an old man trying to send back soup in a deli."

<u>3. Excessive Description</u> "If your handsome, muscular, confident hero strides assertively and briskly into the dusty, spare, lamp-lit room, you've got a problem with excessive description—specifically, with the overuse of adjectives and adverbs. Inexperienced writers are too often tempted to pile on the modifiers as a shortcut to significant description, though as you see in the example, such piling on is really more distracting than anything else. Some writing teachers will suggest a good rule of thumb is to try to excise adjectives and

adverbs from your work altogether, though of course they don't mean this literally. What they mean is, if you're vigilant in keeping control over adjectives and adverbs, the ones that make it in will be there for a reason.

4. Abusing Your Thesaurus "Does your character imbibe superabundant measures of energizing decoction? Or does he simply drink too much coffee? The simplest, most precise way of saying something is always the best way, whether you're being literal or poetic. (In fact, figurative language requires the most precision of all.) So by all means, buy a good thesaurus and stick it on the shelf, but only reach for it when you're stuck for the best way of saying something and need a nudge. Likewise, there's no reason to have your character strut, stride, amble, jog, or lurch if he can simply walk, or to have him exhort, exclaim, interrupt, groan, bark, or whine if he can simply say. Using such overly demonstrative verbs when simpler ones would do only makes your character look like a collection of tics rather than a person.

5. Clichés "Clichés are the poetry of the uninspired, a way of making connections and comparisons between unlike things without having to make the effort. But clichés are also insidious, and the thing that makes them insidious is the very thing that makes them clichés in the first place: The more accepted and widely used the cliché, the less likely we are to recognize it as one. We begin to think that the cliché itself has meaning.

"Unfortunately, there's no simple rule for spotting clichés in your work; the only way to spot them is to be diligent in searching them out. But once you've found them, there are ways of rehabilitating them, looking at what the clichés are attempting to do and then finding a fresh approach to accomplish that.

[from *Writer's Digest*, Joseph Bates: *Writing Your Novel From Start to Finish: A Guidebook for the Journey* and *Tomorrowland: Stories;* www.josephbates.net]
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Do We Romanticize Writers Who Die Young?

NOV. 10, 2015, *SUNDAY NYTIMES BOOK REVIEW*
***FIRST ANSWER:* Dana Stevens:**
***What would "The Trial" have read like if Kafka had put the fragments in the order he wanted them?* If by "we" you mean "I," then yes,**

probably. The propensity to spin mythic tales about those figures in human history who have proved themselves most capable of, precisely, spinning mythic tales may be one of the few unchanging features of the literary landscape. Nearly 50 years after the death of the author (remember when that happened? #RIP), individual authors who died before their time retain their seemingly undeconstructable glamour. Just as a long-dead movie star can still seem to reach off the screen and pull the viewer in, an even-longer-dead author can draw the reader into the vortex of the page. But a movie star leaves behind only an image, the insubstantial imprint of a body. A writer leaves behind trails of words, which, if they're the right words, can seem to transport us directly into the living matter of another mind (or in the case of poetry, to open our own minds to new possibilities of language).

When we mourn the early death of a writer who was just beginning to find his or her true voice, we're also mourning, by implication, every work that author never finished, or never started. What would Franz Kafka's "The Trial" have read like if he had put the surviving fragments in the order he wanted them, then written the connecting bits? Can you imagine Sylvia Plath's follow-up to "Ariel" — the book she might have written if she had lived, brought up her children and eventually gotten over Ted Hughes? Would a midlife slump have slowed the breakneck momentum of John Keats, who faux-modestly wrote his fiancée, a year before his death from tuberculosis at 25, that "if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd"? Keats's small body of lyric poetry, dismissed by many critics during his lifetime as vulgar fluff, has since ascended to the peaks of the English Romantic canon.

Writers don't tend to be the most durable of human specimens. Oscar Wilde lived to be 46, the same age at which David Foster Wallace would take his life 108 years later. Jane Austen was 41 when she died of undetermined causes, her writing career at full tilt; Poe was just 40 when he fell, possibly drunk, into his last Baltimore gutter. None of the Brontë sisters survived past their 30s. There are no real conclusions to be drawn from this anecdotal correlation between short lives and long-lived literary influence. The fact of dying young and under tragic conditions is certainly not a cause of great writing (nor could it be said, even in cases of addiction or suicide, to be that writing's result). It seems intuitively sound to suppose that the inward-looking, depressive types who tend to be drawn to writing might also have weaker constitutions (or a lower resistance to addictive substances) than their sunnier counterparts. But there's no question that figures who embody this quasi-sacrificial ideal of literary purity — writers who bloomed early, produced a relatively small quantity of superior work and died young with their record unblemished — retain a lasting cultural power, even for people who have read little or none of what they wrote.

Maybe idealizing the work of brilliant authors who died too young isn't the worst thing in the world, as cultural practices go. After all, it wasn't just these people's writing careers that were cut short by the cruelty of fate.

It was their lives, their collective earthly shot at love and failure and awe and laughter and rage — all the experiences that, with their gifts, they might or might not have gone on to turn into great literature, but that would have been worth having anyway. They didn't get that many days on earth, and they chose to spend some number of them putting down words that have found their way — in some cases through the centuries — into the minds and hearts of those who came after.

[*Dana Stevens*, Slate and a co-host of Slate Culture Gabfest podcast.]

SECOND ANSWER By Benjamin Moser

Like any other talent, the talent for not dying is distributed undemocratically.

"Lack of talent," scoffed the Dutch novelist Harry Mulisch, when talking about writers who die young. Mulisch himself lived 83 years and wrote almost half as many books. He was a paragon of persistence who always maintained that whatever his physical age, his "absolute age" — the age in his head — had stubbornly remained a mere 17. And he had no truck with those who tried to sneak offstage before the curtain fell.

"Why should you get run over by a tram when you're young," he asked, "or get struck down by a meteor? What's the point? There are people who are depressed and scared of the future, but I am not one of those people. And dying: No, that's just not for me." By the time he issued this defiant growl, he was already an old man. But he had lost none of his Olympian vigor, nor his awareness of what real talent consists of: not giving up

Like any other talent — for singing, for dancing — the talent for not dying is distributed undemocratically. Not everyone can dance, and not everyone can grow old. But as with any other talent, inheriting propitious circumstances is one thing. Bringing a natural ability to full flower is something else entirely. For that, only the rarest genius can dispense with the artist's most essential talent, which is the capacity for relentless work.

Relentless work can be admirable in many ways. But it will never be romantic. In this respect, it resembles money. In the present, money and work are simply, boringly useful. In the past — money once it is lost, work once it is done — they can lend themselves to a story. And stories can be made romantic: the plantation recalled beneath the peeling wallpaper of the boardinghouse, the creator in thrall to the muse. But to get through life, writers need the same unromantic qualities everyone else requires to get through theirs.

As a young woman just arrived in the big city, *The New Yorker's* Joan Acocella fell in with a group of artists "so brilliant, so bold" that she

naturally looked forward to seeing what would become of them. Over the years, though, one after the next failed to live up to their promise. "Bad divorces, professional disappointments, cocaine" peeled them off. "The ones who survived combined brilliance with more homely virtues: patience, resilience, courage."

These vices and virtues are hardly the stuff of romance. We cannot know what might have been. Perhaps Byron's and Shelley's and Keats's genius for expression would have been overwhelmed by their conspicuous lack of the unglamorous qualities Acocella described. Perhaps, like Rimbaud, they died having said what they had to say.

Would that be so terrible? Athletes and dancers accept that their careers will be short. But — rightly or wrongly — we think of writing as a spiritual exercise, a project coextensive with the writer's life. When such a project is cut off early, it will always feel incomplete, a glorious cathedral nonetheless missing a spire. The idea, like the image, is itself highly romantic. But it might help explain what is so poignant about a dead young writer.

A dead young writer is, above all, a dead human being. And for any human being, early death is a hideous reality. It is no more romantic than tuberculosis or syphilis, diseases once thought to confer a sexy allure on their victims. And the fine line that separates romance from treacle is the same that divides mourning from kitsch; to cross it is to glorify a heart-rending death instead of remembering the achievements of a life.

There is something grotesque about finding romance in drug abuse, or car crashes, or venereal disease. Far better to admire the writer's real talent: for getting up every morning, going back to the desk, keeping at it, not dying. Writers, like anyone else, never lack for reasons to give up. And if we remember a writer, it should not be for his death — for what he might have been — but for what he was, for what he managed to become.

Benjamin Moser is the author of "Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector," a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award, and the general editor of the new translations of Clarice Lispector at New Directions. A former New Books columnist at Harper's Magazine, he is currently writing the authorized biography of Susan Sontag. He lives in the Netherlands.

A Deer in the Target by Robert Fanning

I only got a ten-second shot,
grainy footage of the huge deer
caught in the crosshairs

of a ceiling security camera, a scene
of utter chaos in a strip mall store,
shown on the late local news.
The beautiful beast clearly scared
to death in this fluorescent forest,
its once graceful legs giving out
on mopped floors, think Bambi
as a fawn its first time standing.
Seeing the scattering shoppers,
you'd think a demon had barged
into this temple of commerce,
as they sacrificed their merchandise,
stranded full carts and dove for cover.
And when the aisles were emptied
of these bargain hunters, who was left
but an army of brave red-shirted
***team members*, mobilized by**
the store manager over the intercom
to drive this wild animal out.
I wager there's nothing on this
in the *How to Approach*
an Unsatisfied Shopper
section in the Target employee handbook,
but there they were: the cashiers
and stockers, the Floor Supervisor,
the Assistant Floor Supervisor,
the Store Manager,
the Assistant Store Manager,
the District Associate Manager,
the District Supervisor,
the District Assistant Supervisor
and visiting members from
the Regional Corporate Office,
running after it, it running after
them, bull's eye logos on their red golf shirts,
everyone frenzied and panting: razor hooves
clattering on the mirror-white floor tiles,
nostrils heaving, its rack clearing
off-season clothes from clearance racks.

All of them, in Target,
chasing the almighty buck.

["A Deer In The Target" by Robert Fanning.]

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From *You Can't Go Home Again* by Thomas Wolfe, pp. 443-444
[thanks to Sandy Anderson for typing this out for us]

"Oh, yes," he said quietly. "You'll always know if it's true. Christ, man, you're a writer, you're not a bright young man. If you were a bright young man you wouldn't know whether it was true or not. You'd only say you did. But a writer always knows. The bright young men don't think he does. That's the reason they're bright young men. They think a writer is too dumb or too pig-headed to listen to what they say, but the real truth of the matter is that the writer knows much more about it than they can ever know. Once in a while they say something that hits the nail on the head. But that's only one time in a thousand. When they do, it hurts, but it's worth listening to. It's probably something that you knew about yourself, that you knew you'd have to look at finally, but that you've been trying to dodge and that you hoped no one else would discover. When they punch one of those raw nerves, listen to them, even though it hurts like hell. But usually you'll find that you've known everything they say a long time before they say it, and that what they think is important doesn't amount to a damn.

. . . Don't stall around. I've known a lot of young fellows who froze up after their first book, and it wasn't because they only had that one book in them, either. That's what the bright young men thought. That's what they always think, but it just ain't true. Good God, man, you've got a hundred books in you. You can keep on turning them out as long as you live. There's no danger of your drying up. The only danger is of freezing up."

[Sandy's summary: "A lot of good advice continues on pp. 444-445. It appears that Wolfe has an ax to grind about those brilliant young critics dominating the Ivy League schools and the writer's cliques. My take-away is that it's telling the writer to just write, and ignore all the critics.

Which is a feel-good thought at times."
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ON THE NOVELLA: "I believe the novella is the perfect form of prose fiction. It is the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated, ill-shaven giant," Ian McEwan wrote a few years back on our Web site. The novel, he explained, "is too capacious, inclusive, unruly, and personal for perfection. Too long, sometimes too much like life. . . . But I could at least conceive of the perfect novella. Or, rather, imagine one approaching perfection like an asymptotic line in coördinate geometry." A short story can try to capture *something*—a moment, an idea, a joke, a heartbreaking fact of life. A novel can try to capture everything, to be all-encompassing. So what does a novella do? It leaves things out, jettisoning, as McEwan wrote, its "quintuple subplots and swollen midsections." The novella is not, usually, an expanded story. Rather, it is a contracted novel, in which the omissions cover much ground. It is more ambitious than a story, denser and more gemlike than a novel. —Deborah Treisman, Fiction Editor *NYTimes*

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Sleep Apnea

Night after night, when I was a child,
I woke to the guttering candle
of my father's breath. It made a sound
like the starlings that sometimes
got caught in our chimney, a chirping
that would gradually, steadily build
to a desperate, flat slapping of wings,
then suddenly drop into silence,
into the thick soot at the bottom
of midnight. No silence was ever
so deep. And then, after maybe
a minute or two, I would hear
a twitter as he came to life again,
and could at last take a breath for myself,
a sip like a toast, lifting a chilled glass

of air, wishing us courage, those of us
lying awake through those hours,
my mother, my sister and I, who each night
listened to death kiss the fluttering lips
of my father, who slept through it all.

Ted Kooser: Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2005, for collection *Delights and Shadows*. Most recent collection: *Splitting an Order*, published last year by Copper Canyon Press.

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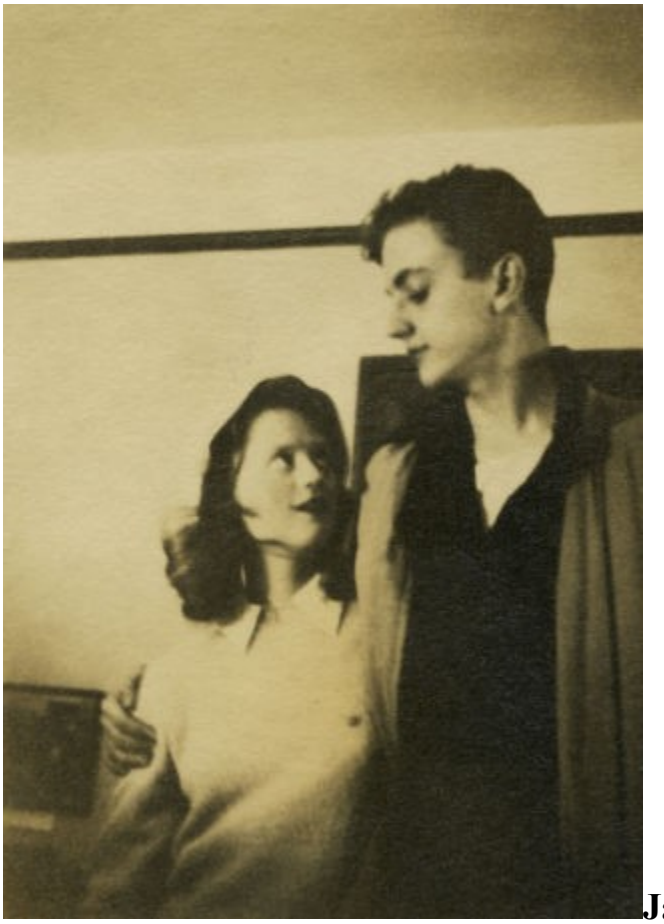
And this should find resonance with several of you joined to fellow writers and artists:

How Jane Vonnegut Made Kurt Vonnegut a Writer

BY GINGER STRAND *NEW YORKER*



Jane Cox and Kurt Vonnegut had grown up together; they married in 1945, after Kurt returned from the European theatre.

Kurt Vonnegut, at age twenty-two, didn't know what to do with himself. It was autumn, 1945. He was back from Europe, having survived the firebombing of Dresden as a prisoner of war, and he had convinced the love of his life, Jane Cox, to marry him.

Beyond that, he had no positive ideas, only negatives. He wasn't going to be a scientist—his bad grades at Cornell made that clear. He didn't much like working in an office. At one point he had considered law school, but not for long. And he knew for sure he wasn't going to be a writer. He wasn't good enough.

He was still in the Army; after his wedding on September 1, 1945, he had been assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, where he was working as a clerk-typist while awaiting his endlessly delayed discharge. It gave him plenty of time to ponder his future. "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief; Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief," he wrote to his new wife that October. He wrote to her often, and the twin themes of these letters are his uncertainty about his future career and his love for her. Copies of the first eleven letters are at Indiana University's Lilly Library, but there are scores more, still in the Vonnegut family's private possession. Jane Vonnegut was the family archivist, and while Kurt's letters have been preserved, hers have not. But even hearing just Kurt's side of the conversation gives a sense of how it went. Jane knew what her husband should do with his life: he should write. And she seems to have made it her first mission as his spouse to convince him of that.

It would be easy to view these letters as sorry proof of yet another woman shunted to history's backstage. But their passionate and thoughtful character instructs us rather to re-see what we may have missed—to write Jane back into the story and acknowledge the clear-eyed ways in which she helped shape the Vonnegut narrative, both in life and on the page. Many of the ideas and themes that characterize Vonnegut were born in the conversation between Kurt and Jane, and throughout his career she remained a voice in the text. She was there: that was her.

Jane and Kurt had known each other since kindergarten, long enough that Kurt could tell Jane she was his "best friend," a less clichéd declaration, perhaps, in 1943. He had confided in her for years—since they each left Indianapolis for college, he at Cornell, she at Swarthmore. His college letters laid out plans for house parties and weekend dates, bragged about his columns for

the *Cornell Sun*, and occasionally made rosy predictions about his future as a biochemist. But his main subject was their mutual future. They would be married in 1945, he declared as a sophomore—he placed a bet on it with a fraternity brother. They would have a home with books and art and a well-stocked bar. They would have friends over for intellectual conversations. They would have seven kids. He traced sevens behind his paragraphs and signed most of his letters with seven X's. They both dreamed of writing. Together they fantasized about going to Europe or Mexico to work as news correspondents, going to Hollywood to work as screenwriters, building side-by-side studios in their back yard and pounding out masterpieces. "I wish I could write as well as you," he told her in an undated, postwar letter. "Right now you're the composer and I'm the musical instrument. We periodically swap roles."

Vonnegut's letters are delightful, full of love and passion and thought, sprinkled with creative typography and illustrations. He drew yin-yang symbols, representing how they were two halves of a single whole. Like Howard Campbell and his wife, Helga, in "Mother Night," Kurt and Jane were a nation of two. "The world is divided into two groups: us, and the other people," he told her. "We'll win against any combination of powers." Once married, the pair began figuring out how to run that nation, which was to be, they decided, a nation of love, arts, common decency, and peace. Jane drafted a household constitution: "We cannot and will not live in and be hogtied by a society which not only has not faith in the things we have faith in, but which reviles and damns that faith with practically every breath it draws."

Kurt was more pragmatic, casting about for career ideas—teaching, reporting, opening a library with a bar. Jane had just one idea, and she pressed it with patient determination. Kurt would be a writer—a great one. Her conviction terrified him. "You scare me when you say that I am going to create the literature of 1945 onwards and upwards," he wrote to her in August of that year. "Angel, will you stick by me if it goes backwards and downwards?" Jane brooked no such doubts. She suggested books for him to read—"The Brothers Karamazov," "War and Peace"—and they discussed them by letter. She urged

him to use his free time at Fort Riley to pound out stories. He worked from five-thirty to seven-thirty each night and mailed his efforts back to Indianapolis for Jane to edit and re-type.

"Any changes you see fit to make, please make," he wrote of his fourth story, in October. "This is not a work of art but a grasping at money." He saw his writing as supplemental to whatever he might end up doing. He would need a steady income to support seven kids. Besides, he might not have the talent. When Jane found an "author's counsel" to send some of his stories to for comment, Kurt worried that he "might not think the stories are so God damned hot." "Angel, please go over the crap I've written for spelling and punctuation," he wrote. "I can picture you reading along and suddenly looking pained; running to get a pencil to hide from the world the astonishing gaps in the education of your loving husband."

Her faith sometimes baffled him. "I can only hope, and this on your instigation, that I've not reached my full stature," he wrote. "I'm willing to work like a dog to attain it." And he did. But even as he slowly embraced her ambitions for himself, he remained determined to find another career. Either a newspaper or an advertising firm, he told her. He could write in his free time. "I get sick with fear that I'm a bluff, that I'm actually no damned good," he confessed. "I don't want to let you and your fantastic hopes down with a thump. I don't want those fantastic hopes to take the place of love. I don't want successes to become the consummation of that love, because failures will be the death of it."

But in November, 1945, he wrote Jane in a fever of excitement. He had been reading the foreign affairs section of *Newsweek* when he realized something: "Everything that was reported by ace newsmen from the heart of Europe I found to be old stuff to me. . . . By Jesus, I was there." *That was me; I was there*. That astonishing moment in "Slaughterhouse-Five" was the impetus for the entire book, first felt in 1945. His war experience was crying out to be written. He told her he was trying to remember every little thing that had happened to him. He would write about that. But one

thing was clear: "I'LL NOT BE ABLE TO DO IT WITHOUT YOUR HELP."

The next week, in a calmer mood, he articulated his new conviction. "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief? Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief?" he wrote, reprising his old theme. "From your loving me I've drawn a measure of courage that never would have come to me otherwise. You've given me the courage to decide to be a writer. That much of my life has been decided. Regardless of my epitaph, to be a writer will have been my personal ultimate goal."

FOR THIS IS THE VERY ECSTASY OF LOVE
WHOSE VIOLENT PROPERTY FORDOES ITSEL
AND LEADS THE WILL TO VIOLENT UNDERT

Beloved:-

Still
in sight--staring at the ceiling, try
spent the bulk of these past few nigh
gether and of the turquoise ocean of
splendid--but the day dreams are obs

Rich ma
your loving me I've drawn a measure
courage to decide to be a writer. Th
writer will have been my personal ul

What m
Sinclair, Wylie, Wells, Farrel, Lardn
Of those I've named, none gives much
write--and most of their information
noteworthy collector of extraneous in
cern--Leo Burnett's, if he'll have me
for, with an additional $90 per month
necessity of establishing myself as a
University of Chicago, I will be 25
having me take. I am going to give
bucking the iron-clad middle class p
very little benefit from my studies
writer. I think it's the <u>soundest</u>

In his letters to his wife, Kurt Vonnegut poured out his fears and praised her influence.

Jane would continue to be the source of his confidence for the next twenty-five years. Many of the ideas and images for which he became known had their source in the couple's mutual dialogue. "You ask me questions I like to answer," he told her. In his letters to Jane he mused on the nature of time, on the dangers of science, on the existence or nonexistence of God. "The greatest man to ever live will be the one that invents the real God, and presents the World with a book of His teachings," he wrote her in 1945. "A bible written in a Lunatic Asylum may be the answer." It's hard to imagine a better summary of Bokononism, the fictitious religion Vonnegut would go on to depict in "Cat's Cradle."

In "Timequake," his semi-autobiographical last novel, published in 1997, Vonnegut recalls that Jane submitted a controversial thesis when she was at Swarthmore. It argued "that all that could be learned from history was that history itself was absolutely nonsensical, so study something else, like music." He is, in essence, glossing the last line of "Slaughterhouse-Five," where Billy Pilgrim wakes up to discover that the war has ended. He and his buddies wander outside into a springtime day. Birds are singing. "One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, 'Poo-tee-weet?' " As Jane had argued, there's no meaning to be made from a massacre, from death in industrial quantities. The only thing left to do is listen to the music of the birds. And, as Father Zossima recommends in "The Brothers Karamazov"—Jane's favorite novel, and one of Kurt's—to ask forgiveness of them.

As it turned out, Kurt's failures were not the death of their love—but his successes were. At least, that's what the chronology suggests. His departure in the middle of the nineteen-sixties for a teaching stint at the University of Iowa, where he completed "Slaughterhouse-Five," was the beginning of the end of their marriage. It didn't help that, since 1958, they had faced the organizational and financial challenges of a household packed to bursting. Kurt's sister Alice and her husband, Jim Adams, had both died within a couple days of each other, and Kurt and Jane

adopted their four boys. Added to their own three children, that made the seven Kurt always said they would have.

After "Slaughterhouse-Five" was published, in 1969, Kurt never came home to Jane for good. His next novel, "Breakfast of Champions," got a mixed reaction from critics. Buffeted by bad reviews and caught up in the protracted and painful dissolution of his marriage, he next wrote "Slapstick," a novel about a brother and sister who are ignorant and fumbling when separated, but geniuses when they touch. In the autobiographical preface, he declared that his own sister Alice was the person he had always written for: "She was the secret of whatever artistic unity I had ever achieved. She was the secret of my technique." Lately, however, he could no longer feel her presence.

Alice was surely on his mind, but he was also writing about Jane. "One peculiar feature of our relationship," he wrote Jane in 1943, "is that you are the one person in this world to whom I like to write. If ever I do write anything of length—good or bad—it will be written with you in mind."

"Slapstick" follows what happens when siblings Wilbur and Eliza Swain are forcibly separated. Wilbur goes on to become President of the United States, while Eliza is locked away in an asylum. Coming into physical contact one last time, they write a manual on child-rearing.

We went berserk. . . . I could no longer tell where I stopped and Eliza began, or where Eliza and I stopped and the Universe began. It was gorgeous and it was horrible. Yes, and let this be a measure of the quantity of energy involved: The orgy went on for five whole nights and days.
Critics have largely taken Vonnegut at his word about "Slapstick," believing the book to be about Alice. But Jane was his compatriot in child-rearing. She was his other half, the yin to his yang, without whom he feared he might never get it right again. In a 1943 letter to Jane explaining why he loved her, he

described their union as a kind of outburst much like those of Wilbur and Eliza Swain.

I have a number of wild dreams which come and go with the green in the leaves. Once conceived I tell you about them. If they're good dreams you take them up with a flood of enthusiasm and we're very soon shrieking to each other about them in a transport of delight much greater than if the dream were realized. Then we sink back, logically in each other's arms, happily exhausted by a swift trip to heaven and back.
Read as a valedictory rumination on the end of a marriage, on the loss that attends the collapse of any nation of two, "Slapstick" is a much better novel.

In "Timequake," Kurt recalls that Jane, by then Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky, phoned him near the end of her fight with cancer. She asked him to tell her what would determine the moment of her death.

Why ask him? "She may have felt like a character in a book by me," he muses. It seems like a heartless thing to say, especially when many critics—not to mention Vonnegut himself—have pointed out the paucity of fully realized female characters in his books. But, in another way, he was simply being honest. Marriage merges individuals into a unit. Kurt and Jane Vonnegut worked together to build his career, a fact he readily acknowledged upon their separation. "Jane has a strong feeling that we have both earned whatever we have, and she is right," he wrote his agent Donald Farber in 1973.

Jane Vonnegut was in some sense a character invented by Kurt. But only in the sense that Kurt Vonnegut was, and equally, a character invented by Jane.

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