

## INSTRUCTS AND ENTERTAINS

Charles J. Shields. *AND SO IT GOES Kurt Vonnegut: A Life*. Henry Holt: New York, 2011.

*William O'Rourke*

Orwell's famous remark about every man at age 50 having the face he deserves may also apply to biographers. Every author has the biographer he deserves and, since Vonnegut gave Charles J. Shields permission to proceed, it holds true in this case. As an author, Vonnegut was always Kurt Vonnegut Jr., and to have kept the junior all his life is more a rarity in the father-son sweepstakes: most juniors try to escape the designation as they become adults, but Vonnegut wore it more or less proudly and even was miffed when it first got left off one of the covers of his books. Nonetheless, the Jr. is left off the title of the book at hand.

Vonnegut turned Shields down at first ("demurring"), but Shields eventually sold himself to the elderly author by demonstrating traits that Vonnegut had or admired: the Midwestern persistence on Shields' part. He wrote Vonnegut, "I'd like the chance to make another pitch. A do-over. This time, I want to begin by telling you about myself." And he described any number of similarities he shared with Vonnegut, the fact that he had been raised in Indianapolis, the town of the Vonneguts, and his father had been a PR man at a large corporation, as Vonnegut himself had been.

So, the biography was on at last and Shields met with him three times and, on the third occasion, shortly after their meeting, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. died, or, rather, fell down the front steps of his Manhattan townhouse, injured his head badly, lapsed into coma and was dead a month later.

After Vonnegut died in 2007, cooperation with the executors of the Vonnegut estate, more or less, ceased for Shields. Vonnegut's wife at the time, his second, Jill Krementz, the photographer, wouldn't deal with him. But there is a downside to not dealing with a biographer; it is likely you will forfeit any sense of charity he or she might have been able to summon while portraying you for posterity.

And biographies, eventually, become virtual tombstones, of the modern sort; they speak to those who come after. Perhaps technology may make that happen in the not so distant future. Press a button on a tombstone and a hologram will appear and articulate the life of the deceased year by year.

I suppose some science fiction writer has already thought of that, since science fiction was Vonnegut's first mode of fiction. Eventually the literary

world caught up him and converted his practice of that lowly genre to meta-fiction.

Vonnegut is a significant literary figure in any number of ways. It can be claimed that he is the last of the species of literary culture hero, a type that is no longer being recognized, since literature now plays a decidedly different role in the culture than it did in the era of Vonnegut's heyday: the Sixties and Seventies, the culminating era of the writers born into the so-called Greatest Generation, writers who came of age during WWII. Here is an image: Robert Lowell, Norman Mailer, Kurt Vonnegut, all appearing at various Vietnam-era protests, or other do-good events populated by the energized young. The three writers covered all the genres, Poetry, Nonfiction, Fiction, literary giants all in the eyes of their many supporters, but known to larger audiences, too, thanks to what passed for mass media back then.

As I have written elsewhere, at the close of 1960, according to the U.S. Office of Education, there were 3,215,455 Americans enrolled in institutions of higher learning; by 1971 there were 8,948,000. That unprecedented increase (the number had not even doubled from 1919 till 1960, much less tripled within a decade) had a profound impact, especially on the literary world. It was the Golden Age of Reading and made everlasting stars of a number of writers of that WWII generation. They, of course, are now dying off, Mailer, Lowell, now Vonnegut, as well as any number of others, including Joseph Heller, another veteran, Saul Bellow, and so forth, and the necropolis continues to be filled with the veterans of the Golden Age of Reading, those who caught the tail end, such as John Updike. Those writers were launched into a celebrity orbit so high they couldn't fall from it once reached. Now, even when a writer might approach orbit, usually with a first book (those bubble, bloated advances of 1990s and early 2000s!), they usually tumble back into the atmosphere soon as so much space junk.

It is a Golden Age no longer. But that time did accelerate the notion that personality was as important as the prose. The old saw of the post-WWII generation—that everyone had one book in them—has been turned into everyone has one publishing company in them, as so many “writers” take to self-publishing, coterie publishing, small presses, resulting in publishers everywhere.

Vonnegut did see it coming: his science fiction-y mind did make him an amateur futurist and in the 1950s he did predict “the decline of slick magazines as venues for fiction” and “playing short story pinball for a living [was] obsolete.” (130) Look at the back of the latest *Best American Short Stories* volume and see the pages and pages of outlets, 95% of the literary magazines there based at universities, who pay little or nothing for short fic-

tion and then look at a volume from the 1940s and 1950s, only a page long, but nearly three-quarters being the high paying slicks.

And the science fiction, futurist side of Vonnegut has him representing another split, much discussed in the 1950s: the Two Cultures, Science vs. the Humanities, a British division, between the privileged world of the humanities and the more meritocratic world of the upwardly mobile geeks elbowing their way through the British class system. In America, it was more plain science vs. the humanities, the simplistic split between those with literary knowledge and those with scientific knowledge. Vonnegut, in his sporadic forays in higher education, was a science major.

This accounts for some of his unhappiness at the literary establishment for relegating him to the world of science fiction genre writers, not according him the literary status he thought he deserved. Why did he think he deserved it, especially early in his career? Shields doesn't actually answer that in his long biography, though I would lean toward the fact, well-drawn by Shields, of Vonnegut's upper-class background, his entitlement endowed by membership in the much-accomplished Vonnegut clan of Indianapolis, even though when Vonnegut was experiencing it, the endowments of both his father and his mother's families were diminishing. And, he was never short of a large ego, though one annoyed by insecurities, some of the profound sort brought about by his mother's suicide on Mother's Day in 1944, when the young enlistee Vonnegut was home on leave.

He was at Cornell in 1940 and in the ROTC, eventually writing for *The Cornell Daily Sun* and being a general campus cut-up, but dropped out from both; not finishing any higher education was, paradoxically, helpful, insofar as it gave him a bit of empathy with the dolts and do nothings, the un-credentialed. Not enough, surely, but it did give him a taste of being a "self-made" man, a type of 19<sup>th</sup> century figure like so many of his successful forebears. There were plenty of paradoxes to go around in Vonnegut's life, but unlike a number of contemporaries, he was able to profit from them, until the end.

Vonnegut also represents a transitional figure in the world of creative writing programs. He embodied the "visiting writer" model of the 1960s, where writers of some reputation were invited to teach in the handful of programs that existed then. Vonnegut was a replacement pick for the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop of 1965-66, substituting for Robert Lowell. The switch of genres doesn't seem odd to Shields, in his account, but Vonnegut's most recent novel at the time, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, had received a good amount of attention, and more of America's youth had begun to take notice in the mid Sixties.

Including me. I had spent the summer of 1965 in West Barnstable, Ma., home of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. His big house on Scudder's Lane was just a stone's throw from the smaller salt box house, the front painted pink, of Alexandra Crane, who worked with me at Captain Gray's Swedish Smorgasbord, one of the odder summer tourist restaurants in the town of Barnstable. Lexa taught me how to sail that summer and the Vonneguts came up in conversation now and then. West Barnstable was more a literary place than Shields makes it out to be in *So It Goes*. The Crane family owned Crane Duplicating, further down the road (6A), near a public school, a printing concern which made many of the bound galleys for the New York publishing world. A lot of fiction was around Lexa's place, and I was introduced there to the work of Kurt Vonnegut Jr..

At Captain Gray's there were six fetching, in all senses of the word, waitresses and one busboy, me. At nineteen, I thought the arrangement wonderful. Lexa's husband-to-be was off on a graduate school fellowship, doing something anthropological in a foreign land. I was doing more immediate anthropology, another Midwesterner, like KV, encountering the natives of Cape Cod.

So, I heard tales about the Vonneguts, long before they were chronicled in the pages of any biography. Kurt didn't seem to be around that summer; his family had doubled its size in the late 50's when his beloved sister Alice and her husband died within a week of each other, the former of natural causes, and the latter in a train accident. It was a riotous household that resulted and the local rumors floating around during that period and later included one that Kurt had a vasectomy and was headed for Esalen, the free love zone in California's Big Sur region, which had begun to acquire some notoriety. Rumors of this sort are the sort writers who are on the cusp of success put up with and, as preposterous as they might be, the vasectomy one had the currency of possible truth, because of the tragic explosion, given the circumstances, of kids in the Vonnegut household.

Shields doesn't traffic in any of these rumors (no mention of Esalen), or even discuss their existence. They are, after all, just the small town talk that amuses bored residents while abusing the targets of the tales. But Shields does detail a number of affairs Kurt began in this period and, eventually, there were no more biological Vonnegut offspring.

Nonetheless, my introduction to Vonnegut was that summer sailing around Barnstable bay. Vonnegut is the exception that proves the rule in any number of ways. His background in American business, the world of PR for GE, provided him with ample material, as well as service in the army during WWII, the good luck of surviving the fire-bombing of Dresden. He,

like Norman Mailer, knew he wanted to be a writer when he went off to war. Mailer, who also had a nonliterary education (he studied engineering at Harvard) just as Vonnegut did, still saw literature as a viable career. To baby boomers today such an aspiration only seems funny.

Vonnegut's generation was the last that saw the wholesale abnegation of wives to their husbands' careers and Jane Vonnegut was no exception. She thought her husband was a genius and even though she was a college graduate, Swarthmore, unlike her husband, she did all the domestic chores and the raising of the children, her own and her husband's relatives, the boys who had suddenly appeared in the household.

So, when Vonnegut quit GE (a regular *Mad Men* milieu), he was aided in his career building by not only his wife, but by a male acquaintance he had made at his abbreviated Cornell career, Knox Burger, a more literary type who shepherded Vonnegut's writing life in different ways for a number of years, as editor, publicist and general booster, at a number of different publishers where Burger worked over the years. When Burger became an agent in the late 60s, though, Vonnegut, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, declined to be his client. Another man, Seymour (Sam) Lawrence, recharged Vonnegut's career and standing as an author; Lawrence knew how best to turn him (and other authors he published) into a product, giving him status plus marketing savvy. Vonnegut cut Lawrence loose, too, after Vonnegut had reached the apex of his celebrity orbit and was, in the years that remained, unlikely to fall from it.

The book that put him in that high orbit was, of course, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. This is Vonnegut's most successful novel and it took him many years to find a way to write it. Emotion recollected in tranquility, more or less, though Vonnegut's life was never tranquil. There is another biography out now, by Gregory D. Sumner called *Unstuck in Time: A Journey Through Kurt Vonnegut's Life and Novels* (no one in the title business seems to like the junior), and covers the critical and biographical ground of the books themselves. Shields' book is best read by those who already have some familiarity with Vonnegut's work. Nowhere in it does Shields remark on the almost unavoidable comparison between the beginning nonfiction section of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the Custom House prologue to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. It's not the only comparison that can be made between those two books.



Vonnegut became a millionaire somewhat suddenly, though previously

he had lived in a haute bourgeois bohemian style (big house on the Cape, trips to Europe), though, at times, resorting to eating cereal at home. Again, it was Vonnegut's own version of his extended family's life, great wealth gone, but the accouterments of the rich were still implanted in his psyche. As a boy Vonnegut would go off in the summers to a family compound at Lake Maxinkuckee in north central Indiana. It's not every kid whose hometown (Indianapolis, IN) is so studded with edifices and evidence of his family's mark and influence. I, but apparently not Shields, have always thought that the name of the lake itself (Maxinkuckee) was the progenitor of so many of Vonnegut's goofy monikers for his characters.

Another man, Don Farber, handled the Vonnegut money after it began to come in in great gobs. And Farber seems to have done a good job. Vonnegut was never guilty of gaudy conspicuous consumption. An affectionate uncle had given Vonnegut a copy of Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* when Kurt was fairly young and some of the critique had stuck.

But Vonnegut's life overall, according to Shields, is yet another American account of the old adage of money not bringing happiness. For those of us who want to differ, I could only think of how unhappy and less productive Vonnegut's life would have been had he not been rich for almost half of it.

Which brings me to my second brush with proximity to the man himself. Near the end of 1976 I went to, or, rather, crashed, a party held at the Strand bookstore, at Broadway and Twelfth in Manhattan, one of the few independent bookstores that still flourishes. The party was for the publication of a book filled with Burt Britton's solicited self-sketches of "book people" (*Self-Portrait: Book People Picture Themselves*, Random House, 1976). Britton worked at the Strand then, in the review books section down in the basement, which I had made use of when I wrote reviews for *The Nation* in my early twenties while in graduate school at Columbia, selling review copies for a quarter of their price, which the Strand then sold for half their price. Britton had been collecting spontaneous portraits of mainly writers for many years. It was a by-invitation-only party and I heard it was happening because my friend Craig Nova, whose self-portrait was in the book, told me, adding he wouldn't be going himself. I volunteered to take his place.

I showed up after the festivities were underway and happened to arrive right behind Fran McCullough, who was Craig's editor at the time. When the doorman inquired who I was, I replied I was Craig Nova's substitute and Fran McCullough turned her head and looked at me strangely, but I was let in. I'm not sure any other party has matched the density and makeup of this particular gathering. It was book people: only authors and editors

and publishers. Hardly any civilians. I would say none, but there's always an exception. Earlier that day I had been talking to my editor at Random House about an anthology of mine RH was publishing, *On the Job: Fiction About Work by Contemporary American Writers*. She hadn't mentioned the party to come that night, and when I saw her later in the crowd she looked surprised. Back when I had proposed the anthology idea to her, I heard later from a mutual friend that she had said, How can we steal the idea from him?

But I was enjoying myself at the party, because, as my co-workers in the South Bronx used to say when we congregated together to avoid some unpleasant task: one grenade could get us all. All of literary New York City was in attendance, it appeared. The Strand had put up a very large stretched blank canvas for the guests to sign. There were around 700 self-sketches in Britton's volume, starting with Edward Abbey and ending with Paul Zweig, with everyone else (but me) in between. And it looked like most everyone had come. I, nonetheless, signed my name to the crowded canvas, appending, "who is not in the mainstream," and after I walked away, a very pretty young woman appeared, halting my stroll. She wanted to interview me, beginning with who I was. I forget what publication she was from (it was an obscure one) and I continued walking away from the canvas (it was about twenty feet long), with her tagging along. Then I stopped and told her, "You don't want to interview me, you want to interview him." Standing next to me by then was Kurt Vonnegut and standing next to him was Richard Yates. "Yes, not me, I'm not famous enough, but he is," I said, pointing my drink-filled hand at Vonnegut, "and he," I went on, "can introduce you to him," indicating Yates, "who is even more famous."

Vonnegut and Yates, who loomed above us, both being taller, looked down at me bemusedly. I was, after all, handing over a lovely young woman with demonstrated literary interests to them.

But, I didn't realize till I read Shields' book that I unintentionally stumbled upon Vonnegut's central pet peeve: that he lacked the literary cachet of other famous writers. Because, truly, that's what I meant when I told the young woman (she was, likely, my age at the time, or a bit younger) that Yates was more "famous": in a literary way, that is, famous to other writers, not the masses.

Yates and Vonnegut's careers had almost opposite trajectories: Yates's first two books, the collection of short stories, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* and the novel *Revolutionary Road*, where huge literary hits, whereas Kurt Vonnegut's first two books (*Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*) were largely ignored and considered low status "science fiction" volumes. I had put a Richard

Yates story in my anthology-to-be (“Wrestling with Sharks”), but I hadn’t put any story by Vonnegut (never having read any of his short fiction, his “hack” work) in it, though I’m sure if I looked now there would be a “work” story that qualified.

Things, of course, rapidly changed for both of them. But that night in 1976 they were in many ways literally and figuratively next to each other. But, by the ends of their lives, Vonnegut had become a personage, a “spokesman for a generation,” and Yates had become a broken, practically penniless, specter, dragging along an oxygen tank, dying ignominiously in Alabama, after teaching for a semester in Tuscaloosa. Vonnegut, too, had died ignominiously, tripping over his tiny dog’s leash, but, nonetheless, most everything else was different.

Both authors, though, did share another critical thing: the same publisher, Sam Lawrence, who stuck with Yates till the end, whereas Vonnegut had bailed from the man who had helped create his literary reputation.

At the Strand party, there was another major figure of Vonnegut’s life, Jill Krementz. She wasn’t yet married to Vonnegut then, but they were involved; she figures as an *eminence grise* in Shields’ book. I knew of her because she had taken photos of all the fashionable contemporary authors during the last few years, and I was not fashionable. She was not hanging with Vonnegut and Yates, but was in the middle of the room, talking intimately with Anatole Broyard. Broyard, at the time, was a daily book reviewer for the *New York Times* and he played a role in both Vonnegut and Yates’s literary lives, mainly by writing vicious attacks on their books. But that was Broyard’s *metier* in the review game. Toward the end of his reign at the *Times*, Broyard reviewed first novels by a series of attractive young white women and excoriated them all. It became a sort of comedy sketch, all those bad reviews coming one after another of good-looking young female authors.

Broyard was one of the last famous cases of “passing,” a Black American posing as “white”; there had been rumors for years of Broyard being a “mulatto,” and he threatened anyone who publically passed them on in print; and no one wrote of him “passing” until after his death in 1990.

But he and Krementz were conspiratorially conferring, two heads of luxuriously glistening black curly hair, leaning into one another. Broyard must have had a bad and on-going case of self-hatred raging in him. He had wanted to be a “writer” and had published a few short stories early in his life, but never completed a novel. Book reviewers who are frustrated writers tend to be, often, hostile generally to novelists who do well. At the party Krementz would survey the room occasionally with a well-practiced calcu-

lating eye.

That night I didn't mention to Yates that his story was going into my anthology (I had to get the rights from his publisher, not him), nor did I mention to Vonnegut my ties to Barnstable. I didn't usually try to make myself memorable to famous novelists; they were memorable enough. It was just an enjoyable night being a part of literary New York.

Yates died in 1992 and got his biography in 2003 (*A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*, by Blake Bailey, Picador, 2003.) With publication of the Vonnegut bios, especially Shields', in 2011, I wonder if we are nearing the end of this sort of writerly attention. It's hard to picture biographies of the current crop of literary "stars"—for practical reason, the death of letter writing and the birth of email, but also because there are no more literary stars of the Vonnegut sort. No one plays that role in the wider culture anymore. As my young Random House editor, a harbinger of things to come, might have said back then, it's all dog eat dog, everyone for one's self. There are successful writers today, of course; some even try to aspire to celebrity-hood. But not culture heroes, not role models for the aspiring young. It almost takes a fatwa to create one and even then there's no guarantee. Perhaps the number of solely literary biographies will diminish (fewer PhDs in contemporary American literature being made, too), though celebrity bios will doubtless continue unabated.

Vonnegut did not want to be a role model, and, indeed, was not who his young admirers thought he was—an anti-materialist non-capitalist—but a man who still preferred Brooks Brothers' suits and most of the post-WWII-era male prerogatives. Indeed, it was only his own gnawing about not being accepted as a "real" writer, on his terms, that gave him some empathy for the disenfranchised and under-praised.

And, again, Vonnegut was predictive: he was anti-war by experience. As terrible as Dresden's aftermath was, what is truly shocking in Shields' telling is how Vonnegut's unit was out maneuvered and the subsequent details of their pathetic surrender, which led Vonnegut and others to their POW service in Dresden.

In an essay, "Torture and Blubber", which appeared in the *New York Times* in 1971, and Shields quotes, Vonnegut wrote:

Simply we are torturers....Agony has never made a society quit fighting, as far as I know....One wonders now where our leaders got the idea that mass torture would work to our advantage in Indochina. It never worked anywhere else. They got the idea from childish fiction, I think, and from a childish awe of torture....But children believe that pain is an effective way of controlling people, which it isn't—except in a localized, short term sense. They believe that pain can

change minds, which it can't. (292)

Unfortunately, life became even more absurd than Vonnegut thought it could and, post 9/11, torture began being spoken of as a virtue by the leaders of our country, primarily those in the Bush II administration.

Vonnegut used his literary celebrity by serving a number of do-good literary organizations, such as PEN, as a spokesperson. Books continued to be written, or assembled, and more nonfiction infiltrated the fiction (as autobiography has in this piece of criticism—creating a mixture of things, that is). Richard Yates, too, kept writing till close to the end (he left an unpublished novel.) When he died in 1992 Vonnegut offered an affectionate tribute, but, with the exception of *The Easter Parade*, which sold well in a Book-of-the-Month-Club edition, none of Yates's late novels made their advances back, which left him in dire need of money. But not Kurt.

The why of that is telling. Vonnegut, for all his savage critiques, is an entertaining writer, often goofy, which certainly was attractive to his young readership. Yates, though equally excoriating, is not given to humor other than the gallows sort and his gray, wrenching novels could only summon (without BOMC help) sales of ten thousand or so. Vonnegut was comedy, Yates was tragedy.

In the universities, during this period of the late 70s onward, the teaching of creative writing changed, too. Indeed, there had never before been so much study of literature (poetry, short stories and novels) with the intended purpose of students writing actual literature themselves. In the older past, university English departments taught students how to read and understand literature and only as a by-product did a handful of students end up writing it themselves.

And the growth of MFA programs produced a new generation of creative writing instructors. Not the visiting writer, but the full-time faculty member, dealing with various committees and all the other tasks of any other academic. If one was lucky, your fate wouldn't be traipsing from one university to another as an "adjunct", but becoming tenured and perhaps moving upward if some institution offered you a chair. Vonnegut only came face to face with one aspect of the new age of creative writing when he taught, very briefly, at Smith shortly before he died. The women students drove him from the classroom because he was so politically incorrect.

Today, the Humanities as a whole could be said to be housed in various Arts and Entertainment departments. It would be hard to say that Yates's novels qualify as entertainment, except in a profound, classical tradition way. Vonnegut's books were able to straddle this new divide; they

entertained the reader, especially the younger ones, while instructing them enough to pass muster. That was Isaac Bashevis Singer's definition of the purpose of literature, as reported by Richard Russo: "The purpose of literature is to entertain and to instruct." The difficulty, of course, is to find those who can be entertained by, say, advanced calculus. Yates's readers could be among them. Wherever they are, they are not that many, only, alas, existing in the thousands. But Vonnegut has reached much higher numbers, since he fulfills Singer's prescription. Though, these days, Singer himself is entertaining fewer readers. And since so much writing (not just by the students but by their author professors) is housed in universities, more particularized divisions have appeared, the traditionalists vs. the cerebralists, those who favor something that smacks of narrative realism, between those who favor narrative as an exercise of the mind. A bit of calculus-loving helps with this sort of literature, too.

This has always been the problem, the tussle between the popular and the, for lack of a better designation, the hyper literary: literature for the few not the many. At the commercial level, it is often easier to divide up authors. But some have written their way, by determination, into the literary canon. Take the example of Stephen King, another genre writer, like Vonnegut, who exceeded his genre and finally published a story in *The New Yorker*, something Richard Yates desired to do, but never accomplished—except, alas, posthumously, during a brief boomlet for *Revolutionary Road*, and things Yates-ian, in the early 2000s. Vonnegut breached *The New Yorker's* walls with a poem while he was alive.

King is doubtless an exemplary fellow (and certainly there will be biographies of him), and the literary world has caught up with him, though "caught up" doesn't capture the process. The literary world has in some ways surrendered to the world of Arts and Entertainment, under the spell of great forces and circumstance, the sort that caused Vonnegut's regiment to surrender during the Battle of the Bulge. Tens of thousands of men, according to Shields, were suddenly turned into prisoners, marching down foreign roads.

That comparison on my part is, of course, an exaggeration. Overall, Shields' biography is well worth reading if you have any interest at all in Kurt Vonnegut. It also covers well, though not overly consciously, the changes those pivotal years brought about. The test of any author for a reader is whether any words of the writer have ever "seeped into your soul," as Edward Dahlberg once put it. Often, they are not the author's most profound remarks. In the case of Richard Yates, I have regularly quoted the axiom found in his early short story "Builders", in his collection *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, "...I didn't have time to write you a short letter today, so

I had to write you a long one instead.”

The oddity of that—spoken by Yates’s bumpkin-ish cab driver character, Bernie, someone who desperately wanted to be a writer—is that it is a version of what would be held against Yates’s last novels: That Yates was too much a craftsman (especially by Anatole Broyard in the *Times*), that the novels were too well constructed, with too much attention paid to style.

But the old saw (not enough time to write you a short letter...) contains the nub of the problem, as well as does the notion entertain and instruct. In Kurt Vonnegut’s case, the line I think of often is one I can see in my mind, since I know the artifacts that produced it. I can’t remember which book it’s from, but it describes the flagpole swivel snap hook which is tied to the rope the flag ascends and descends on, how it bangs against the metal flagpole in front of a school at dusk, making a melancholy noise that means it’s “dinnertime everywhere.” I know the school in West Barnstable, I know the flagpole, I’ve heard the sound it makes. But the feeling Vonnegut’s image captures—for those who do not know that specific pole, but know at least one—is surely an emotion that instructs and entertains. And, over the years, every time I hear that sound I think of Kurt Vonnegut Junior.