Rereading Slaughterhouse-Five on its 50th anniversary

Five decades ago, Billy Pilgrim came unstuck in time and hurtled into the American canon. March 31 is the 50th anniversary of Kurt Vonnegut's novel , one of the saddest, funniest, and weirdest books ever to become institutionalized on high school syllabi throughout the country.

I read *Slaughterhouse-Five* for the first time the same way you probably did: in my 10th-grade English class, as part of a unit on motifs or something. Dutifully, I underlined the famous phrase "so it goes" as it was repeated again and again after every death in the book — from the death of a fizzed-out bottle of champagne to the deaths of people killed in a massacre — and with a puzzled eye I skimmed over Billy Pilgrim's abduction by the Tralfamadorians, the little green aliens shaped like toilet plungers who see all of time at once.

I probably did not notice the casual disdain that suffuses the book's descriptions of women. (Poor Valencia, Billy's fat wife, who never appears in the book without a candy bar in hand and whom "no one" but Billy would have married.) But I absolutely did not notice, or come even a little bit close to understanding, what is at the center of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which is an attempt to talk about something which cannot be talked about.

Rereading it as an adult, that's all that I saw. And it made me think that the most important part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* isn't everything that comes after that famous line, "Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time." It's what comes before.

Slaughterhouse-Five draws on Vonnegut's time as a prisoner of war in Dresden

Dresden was bombed by Allied forces on February 13, 1945. Nazi reports said that 135,000 civilians died in the attack; since then, historians have revised the death toll to 25,000 people. By either measure, it was a massacre.

Among the few survivors were American soldiers who were being kept in Dresden as prisoners of war. They were sheltered from the firestorm in an underground meat locker, a slaughterhouse, and emerged only after the bombing was over. Vonnegut was one of them, and for 20 years afterwards – he writes in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five* – he tried to write a book about it.

Vonnegut describes outlining "my famous Dresden book" over and over, revisiting his memories again and again and always finding them useless. At the end of the first chapter, he describes finally putting the book together, and it is that description, more than anything else that happens to poor traumatized Billy throughout the rest of the novel, that makes *Slaughterhouse-Five* make sense to me. Here's the passage in full:

> *I taught in the afternoons. In the mornings I wrote. I was not to be disturbed. I was working on my famous book about Dresden.*
>
> *And somewhere in there a nice man named Seymour Lawrence gave me a three-book contract, and I said, 'O.K., the first of the three will be my famous book about Dresden.'*
>
> *The friends of Seymour Lawrence call him "Sam." And I say to Sam now: "Sam – here's the book."*
>
> *It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is*

> *supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.*
>
> *And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?"*

Slaughterhouse-Five is a book that tries to talk honestly and intelligently about war and about death, and finds that they are both impossible to talk about. It's impossible even for Vonnegut, whose precise, understated prose can make almost any topic sound conversational — any topic except for a massacre.

That's why Vonnegut repeats, again and again, the phrase "so it goes," which the alien Tralfamadorians use as their response to death. It's banal, sure, and it doesn't precisely mean anything, but what else can anyone possibly say when faced with death? What can you do?

The only alternative, *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests, is to follow the birds and say "Poo-tee- weet?"

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