

**KURT
VONNEGUT**



THE PETRIFIED ANTS

**FROM
LOOK AT THE BIRDIE**

UNPUBLISHED SHORT FICTION

THE PETRIFIED ANTS

From the collection

**LOOK AT THE BIRDIE:
UNPUBLISHED SHORT FICTION**
by

Kurt Vonnegut

Featuring a Foreword by Sidney Offit

Delacorte  Press

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FOREWORD

by Sidney Offit

As I read this anthology of Kurt Vonnegut's previously unpublished short stories, I was reminded of the paradoxical aspects of his personality. Few writers in the history of literature have achieved such a fusion of the human comedy with the tragedies of human folly in their fiction—and, I suspect, fewer still have had the grace to so candidly acknowledge them in their presentation of self.

During the years of our friendship, though I was aware that he might be suffering private misery, Kurt scuttled his demons with élan as we played tennis and Ping-Pong, skipped off to afternoon movies and jaunts around town, feasted at steak houses and French restaurants, watched football games on television, and twice sat as guests in a box at Madison Square Garden to root for the Knicks.

With his signature gentle but mordant wit, Kurt participated in family celebrations, meetings of writers' organizations, and our gab and laugh sessions with Morley Safer and Don Farber, George Plimpton and Dan Wakefield, Walter Miller and Truman Capote, Kevin Buckley and Betty Friedan. I don't think it an exaggeration to suggest that I, as well as Kurt's other friends, felt that time with Kurt was a momentous gift no matter how light our conversation. We often found ourselves imitating his amused reserve about his own foibles and those of the world.

Along with the fun and warm support he so graciously expressed to his friends, Kurt Vonnegut treated me to intimate glimpses of the master storyteller whose ironic and frequently startling observations of people emphasized the moral complexities of life. Walking uptown after a memorial service for an unmarried female author who had devoted her life to literary criticism, Kurt said to me, "No children. No books. Few friends." His voice expressed empathic pain. Then he added, "She seemed to know what she was doing."

At Kurt's eightieth birthday party, John Leonard, a former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, reflected on the experience of knowing and reading Kurt: "Vonnegut, like Abe Lincoln and Mark Twain, is always being funny when he's not being depressed," Leonard observed. "His is a weird jujitsu that throws us for a loop."

The Vonnegut acrobatics are off to a fast start in this circus of good and evil, fantasy and reality, tears and laughter. The first story, "Confido," is about a magical device that provides instant conversation, advice, and therapy to the lonely. But—and here comes the flip side—Confido, the ingenious mind reader, eagerly reveals to its listeners their worse dissatisfactions, leading to painful discomfort with life. This story suggests not only the risks of psychiatry, where the patient may learn too much about himself/herself, but also the drastic spiritual consequences of biting the knowledge-bearing apple.

Although I recall Kurt as being appreciative of his brief adventure with psychotherapy, misgivings about the practice of psychiatry are a recurring theme in this collection. "Look at the Birdie" begins with the narrator sitting at a bar, talking about a person he hates. "Let me help you to think about it clearly," the man in a black mohair suit with a black string tie says to him. "What you need are the calm, wise services of a murder counselor ..."

This bizarre tale is resolved with a version of the old-fashioned O. Henry surprise ending that requires the reader's suspension of disbelief. But who can resist the enchantments of a storyteller who has a mad character tell us that a paranoiac is "a person who has gone crazy in the most intelligent, well-informed way, the world being what it is"? That's not just jujitsu. It's martial art.

Other gems of Kurt's wit and verbal play, his dour but just about always humorous commentaries, punctuate these tales. "F U B A R," a story title as well as theme, is defined for the reader by the bemused and sometimes mocking narrator as "*fouled up beyond all recognition.*" Then we are asked to consider that "it is a particularly useful and interesting word in that it describes a misfortune brought about not by malice but by administrative accidents in some large and complex organization."

With one brief sentence, the weather in Indianapolis, Kurt's hometown, which is the scene for the story "Hall of Mirrors," is vividly described. Although the first words of the sentence lead us to expect a lovely nature ramble, the balance surprisingly allows the reader to see, feel, and hear the ugly chill. "Autumn winds, experimenting with the idea of a hard winter, made little twists of soot and paper, made the plastic propellers over the used car lot go *frrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr*." Twenty-eight *r*s by my count. How's that for sound effects in prose that says it all, courtesy of Kurt Vonnegut!

One of the few stories with an unhappy ending, “The Nice Little People” provides a preview of the coming attractions of Kurt’s later career as a novelist. We are engaged by a reversal of the familiar image of larger than life space aliens: In Kurt’s tale, a platoon of sweet, tiny, insectlike folk descend in a spaceship the size and shape of a paper knife. They turn out to be frightened creatures whom Lowell Swift, a linoleum salesman, befriends. But on guard! The role the aliens play in the resolution of Swift’s deteriorating marriage is as harrowing as it is unpredictable. Unpredictable! Hmm. I should have suspected that! Especially with a hero named Swift and a hollow knife handle full of highly sensitive Lilliputian characters.

When I asked Kurt what he thought was the most important aspect of the craft of fiction that he taught his students during his years on the faculty of the University of Iowa's graduate writing program, as well as Columbia and Harvard, he told me, "Development. Every scene, every dialogue should advance the narrative and then if possible there should be a surprise ending." The element of surprise serves, too, to express the paradox of Kurt's viewpoint. When all is said and written, the resolution, the surprise, turns the story around and gives it meaning.

Unpublished is not a word we identify with a Kurt Vonnegut short story. It may well be that these stories didn't appear in print because for one reason or another they didn't satisfy Kurt. He rewrote and rewrote, as his son, Mark, as well as agents and editors testify. Although Kurt's style may seem casual and spontaneous, he was a master craftsman, demanding of himself perfection of the story, the sentence, the word. I remember the rolled up balls of paper in the wastebaskets of his workrooms in Bridgehampton and on East Forty-eighth Street.

The closest Kurt ever came to confessing an ambition for his writing was when he recited to me one of his rules for fictional composition: “Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.”

To Kurt Vonnegut writing was kind of a spiritual mission, and these stories with all their humor seem most often to be inspired by his moral and political outrage. They are evidence, too, of the volume of Kurt's prodigious imagination, a talent that enabled him, after World War II and into the fifties and early sixties, to help support his growing family by contributing short stories to the popular ("slick") magazines.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s bylines appeared routinely in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Argosy*. He later reminded his readers of the satisfactions of this association when he wrote in his introduction to *Bagombo Snuff Box*, "I was in such good company.... Hemingway had written for *Esquire*, F. Scott Fitzgerald for *The Saturday Evening Post*, William Faulkner for *Collier's*, John Steinbeck for *The Woman's Home Companion*!"

Hemingway! Fitzgerald! Faulkner! Steinbeck! Vonnegut! Their literary legacies survived the demise of so many of the magazines that provided them with generous fees, per word or per line, and introduced them to hundreds of thousands, even millions of readers.

Kurt's stories selected for this collection are reminiscent of the entertainments of that era—so easy to read, so straightforward as to seem simplistic in narrative technique, until the reader thinks about what the author is saying. They are Kurt's magic verbal lantern, the Confido that projects so relentlessly the vagaries and mysteries of human behavior, but with a leavening of humor and forgiveness.

The discovery of this sampling of vintage Vonnegut confirms the accessibility that is the trademark of his style and the durability of his talents, a gift to all of us—friends and readers who celebrate the enlightenments and fun of Kurt Vonnegut's jujitsus and his art.



GOOD NEWS

I

"This is quite a hole you have here," said Josef Broznik enthusiastically, gripping the guard rail and peering into the echoing blackness below. He was panting from the long climb up the mountain slope, and his bald head glistened with perspiration.

"A remarkable hole," said Josef's twenty-five-year-old brother, Peter, his long, big-jointed frame uncomfortable in fog-dampened clothes. He searched his thoughts for a more profound comment, but found nothing. It was a perfectly amazing hole—no question about it. The officious mine supervisor, Borgorov, had said it had been sunk a half mile deep on the site of a radioactive mineral water spring. Borgorov's enthusiasm for the hole didn't seem in the least diminished by the fact that it had produced no uranium worth mining.

Peter studied Borgorov with interest. He seemed a pompous ass of a young man, yet his name merited fear and respect whenever it was mentioned in a gathering of miners. It was said, not without awe, that he was the favorite third cousin of Stalin himself, and that he was merely serving an apprenticeship for much bigger things.

Peter and his brother, Russia's leading myrmecologists, had been summoned from the University of Dnipropetrovsk to see the hole—or, rather, to see the fossils that had come out of it. Myrmecology, they had explained to the hundred-odd guards who had stopped them on their way into the area, was that branch of science devoted to the study of ants. Apparently, the hole had struck a rich vein of petrified ants.

Peter nudged a rock the size of his head and rolled it into the hole. He shrugged and walked away from it, whistling tunelessly. He was remembering again the humiliation of a month ago, when he had been forced to apologize publicly for his paper on *Raptiformica sanguinea*, the warlike, slave-raiding ants found under hedges. Peter had presented it to the world as a masterpiece of scholarship and scientific method, only to be rewarded by a stinging rebuke from Moscow. Men who couldn't tell *Raptiformica sanguinea* from centipedes had branded him an ideological backslider with dangerous tendencies toward Western decadence. Peter clenched and unclenched his fists, angry, frustrated. In effect, he had had to apologize because the ants he had studied would not behave the way the top Communist scientific brass wanted them to.

"Properly led," said Borgorov, "people can accomplish anything they set their minds to. This hole was completed within a month from the time orders came down from Moscow. Someone very high dreamed we would find uranium on this very spot," he added mysteriously.

"You will be decorated," said Peter absently, testing a point on the barbed wire around the opening. His reputation had preceded him into the area, he supposed. At any rate, Borgorov avoided his eyes, and addressed his remarks always to Josef—Josef the rock, the dependable, the ideologically impeccable. It was Josef who had advised against publishing the controversial paper, Josef who had written his apology. Now, Josef was loudly comparing the hole to the Pyramids, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the Colossus of Rhodes.

Borgorov rambled on tiresomely, Josef agreed warmly, and Peter allowed his gaze and thoughts to wander over the strange new countryside. Beneath his feet were the *Erzgebirge*—the Ore Mountains, dividing Russian-occupied Germany from Czechoslovakia. Gray rivers of men streamed to and from pits and caverns gouged in the green mountain slopes—a dirty, red-eyed horde burrowing for uranium ...

“When would you like to see the fossil ants we found?” said Borgorov, cutting into his thoughts. “They’re locked up now, but we can get at them anytime tomorrow. I’ve got them all arranged in the order of the levels we found them in.”

“Well,” said Josef, “the best part of the day was used up getting cleared to come up here, so we couldn’t get much done until tomorrow morning anyway.”

“And yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, sitting on a hard bench, waiting for clearance,” said Peter wearily. Instantly he realized that he had said something wrong again. Borgorov’s black eyebrows were raised, and Josef was glaring. He had absentmindedly violated one of Josef’s basic maxims—“Never complain in public about anything.” Peter sighed. On the battlefield he had proved a thousand times that he was a fiercely patriotic Russian. Yet, he now found his countrymen eager to read into his every word and gesture the symptoms of treason. He looked at Josef unhappily, and saw in his eyes the same old message: Grin and agree with everything.

“The security measures are marvelous,” said Peter, grinning. “It’s remarkable that they were able to clear us in only three days, when you realize how thorough a job they do.” He snapped his fingers. “Efficiency.”

“How far down did you find the fossils?” said Josef briskly, changing the subject.

Borgorov’s eyebrows were still arched. Plainly, Peter had only succeeded in making himself even more suspicious. “We hit them going through the lower part of the limestone, before we came to the sandstone and granite,” he said flatly, addressing himself to Josef.

“Middle Mesozoic period, probably,” said Josef. “We were hoping you’d found fossil ants deeper than that.” He held up his hands. “Don’t get us wrong. We’re delighted that you found these ants, it’s only that middle Mesozoic ants aren’t as interesting as something earlier would be.”

“Nobody’s ever seen a fossil ant from an earlier period,” said Peter, trying halfheartedly to get back into things. Borgorov ignored him.

“Mesozoic ants are just about indistinguishable from modern ants,” said Josef, surreptitiously signaling for Peter to keep his mouth shut. “They lived in big colonies, were specialized as soldiers and workers and all that. My myrmecologist would give his right arm to know how ants lived before they formed colonies—how they got to be the way they are now. That *would* be something.”

“Another first for Russia,” said Peter. Again no response. He stared moodily at a pair of live ants who pulled tirelessly and in opposite directions at the legs of an expiring dung beetle.

“Have you *seen* the ants we found?” said Borgorov defensively. He waved a small tin box under Josef’s nose. He popped off the lid with his thumbnail. “Is this old stuff, eh?”

“Good heavens,” murmured Josef. He took the box tenderly, held it at arm’s length so that Peter could see the ant embedded in the chip of limestone.

The thrill of discovery shattered Peter’s depression. “An inch long! Look at that noble head, Josef! I never thought I would see the day when I would say an ant was handsome. Maybe it’s the big mandibles that make ants homely.” He pointed to where the pincers ordinarily were. “This one has almost none, Josef. It is a pre-Mesozoic ant!”

Borgorov assumed a heroic stance, his feet apart, his thick arms folded. He beamed. This wonder had come out of *his* hole.

“Look, look,” said Peter excitedly. “What is that splinter next to him?” He took a magnifying glass from his breast pocket and squinted through the lens. He swallowed. “Josef,” he said hoarsely, “you look and tell me what you see.”

Josef shrugged. “Some interesting little parasite maybe, or a plant, perhaps.” He moved the chip up under the magnifying glass. “Maybe a crystal or—” He turned pale. Trembling, he passed the glass and fossil to Borgorov. “Comrade, you tell us what you see.”

“I see,” said Borgorov, screwing up his face in florid, panting concentration. He cleared his throat and began afresh. “I see what looks like a fat stick.”

“Look closer,” said Peter and Josef together.

“Well, come to think of it,” said Borgorov, “it does look something like a—for goodness sake—like a—” He left the sentence unfinished, and looked up at Josef perplexedly.

“Like a bass fiddle, Comrade?” said Josef.

“Like a bass fiddle,” said Borgorov, awed ...

II

A drunken, bad-tempered card game was in progress at the far end of the miners' barracks where Peter and Josef were quartered. A thunderstorm boomed and slashed outside. The brother myrmecologists sat facing each other on their bunks, passing their amazing fossil back and forth and speculating as to what Borgorov would bring from the storage shed in the morning.

Peter probed his mattress with his hand—straw, a thin layer of straw stuffed into a dirty white bag and laid on planks. Peter breathed through his mouth to avoid drawing the room's dense stench through his long, sensitive nose. "Could it be a child's toy bass fiddle that got washed into that layer with the ant somehow?" he said. "You know this place was once a toy factory."

"Did you ever hear of a toy bass fiddle, let alone one that size? It'd take the greatest jeweler in the world to turn out a job like that. And Borgorov swears there wasn't any way for it to get down that deep—not in the past million years, anyway."

"Which leaves us one conclusion," said Peter.

"One." Josef sponged his forehead with a huge red handkerchief.

"Something could be worse than *this* pigpen?" said Peter. Josef kicked him savagely as a few heads raised up from the card games across the room. "Pigpen," laughed a small man as he threw his cards down and walked to his cot. He dug beneath his mattress and produced a bottle of cognac. "Drink, Comrade?"

"Peter!" said Josef firmly. "We left some of our things in the village. We'd better get them right away."

Gloomily, Peter followed his brother out into the thunderstorm. The moment they were outside, Josef seized him by the arm and steered him into the slim shelter of the eaves. "Peter, my boy, Peter—when are you going to grow up?" He sighed heavily, implored with upturned palms. "When? That man is from the police." He ran his stubby fingers over the polished surface where hair had once been.

"Well, it is a pigpen," said Peter stubbornly.

Josef threw up his hands with exasperation. "Of course it is. But you don't have to tell the police you think so." He laid his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Since your reprimand, anything you say can get you into terrible trouble. It can get us both into terrible trouble." He shuddered. "Terrible."

Lightning blazed across the countryside. In the dazzling instant, Peter saw that the slopes still seethed with the digging horde. "Perhaps I should give up speaking altogether, Josef."

"I ask only that you think out what you say. For your own good, Peter. Please, just stop and think."

"Everything you've called me down for saying has been the truth. The paper I had to apologize for was the truth." Peter waited for a rolling barrage of thunder to subside. "I

mustn't speak the truth?"

Josef peered apprehensively around the corner, squinted into the darkness beneath the eaves. "You mustn't speak certain kinds of truth," he whispered, "not if you want to go on living." He dug his hands deep in his pockets, hunched his shoulders. "Give in a little, Peter. Learn to overlook certain things. It's the only way."

Together, without exchanging another word, the brothers returned to the glare and suffocation of the barracks, their feet making sucking noises in their drenched shoes and socks.

"Too bad all our things are locked up until morning, Peter," said Josef loudly.

Peter hung his coat on a nail to dry, dropped heavily on his hard bunk, and pulled his shoes off. His movements were clumsy, his nerves dulled by a vast aching sensation of pity, of loss. Just as the lightning had revealed for a split second the gray men and gouged mountainsides—so had this talk suddenly revealed in a merciless flash the naked, frightened soul of his brother. Now Peter saw Josef as a frail figure in a whirlpool, clinging desperately to a raft of compromises. Peter looked down at his unsteady hands. "It's the only way," Josef had said, and Josef was right.

Josef pulled a thin blanket over his head to screen out the light. Peter tried to lose himself in contemplation of the fossil ant again. Involuntarily, his powerful fingers clamped down on the white chip. The chip and priceless ant snapped in two. Ruefully, Peter examined the faces of the break, hoping to glue them together again. On one of the faces he saw a tiny gray spot, possibly a mineral deposit. Idly, he focused his magnifying glass on it.

"Josef!"

Sleepily, Josef pushed the blanket away from his face. "Yes, Peter?"

"Josef, look."

Josef stared through the lens for fully a minute without speaking. When he spoke, his tone was high, uneven. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry or wind my watch."

"It looks like what I think it looks like?"

Josef nodded. "A book, Peter—a book."

III

Josef and Peter yawned again and again, and shivered in the cold twilight of the mountain dawn. Neither had slept, but their bloodshot eyes were quick and bright-looking, impatient, excited. Borgorov teetered back and forth on his thick boot soles, berating a soldier who was fumbling with the lock on a long toolshed.

“Did you sleep well in your quarters?” Borgorov asked Josef solicitously.

“Perfectly. It was like sleeping on a cloud,” said Josef.

“I slept like a rock,” said Peter brightly.

“Oh?” said Borgorov quizzically. “Then you don’t think it was a pigpen after all, eh?” He didn’t smile when he said it.

The door swung open, and two nondescript German laborers began dragging boxes of broken limestone from the shed. Each box, Peter saw, was marked with a number, and the laborers arranged them in order along a line Borgorov scratched in the dirt with his iron-shod heel.

“There,” said Borgorov. “That’s the lot.” He pointed with a blunt finger. “One, two, and three. Number one is from the deepest layer—just inside the limestone—and the rest were above it in the order of their numbers.” He dusted his hands and sighed with satisfaction, as though he himself had moved the boxes. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you to work.” He snapped his fingers, and the soldier marched the two Germans down the mountainside. Borgorov followed, hopping twice to get in step.

Feverishly, Peter and Josef dug into box number one, the one containing the oldest fossils, piling rock fragments on the ground. Each built a white cairn, sat beside it, tailor-fashion, and happily began to sort. The dismal talk of the night before, Peter’s fall from political grace, the damp cold, the breakfast of tepid barley mush and cold tea—all were forgotten. For the moment, their consciousnesses were reduced to the lowest common denominator of scientists everywhere—overwhelming curiosity, blind and deaf to everything but the facts that could satisfy it.

Some sort of catastrophe had apparently caught the big, pincerless ants in their life routine, leaving them to be locked in rock just as they were until Borgorov’s diggers broke into their tomb millions of years later. Josef and Peter now stared incredulously at evidence that ants had once lived as individuals—individuals with a culture to rival that of the cocky new masters of Earth, men.

“Any luck?” asked Peter.

“I’ve found several more of our handsome, big ants,” replied Josef. “They don’t seem to be very sociable. They’re always by themselves. The largest group is three. Have you broken any rocks open?”

“No, I’ve just been examining the surfaces.” Peter rolled over a rock the size of a good watermelon, and scanned its underside with his magnifying glass. “Well, wait, here’s something, maybe.” He ran his finger over a dome-shaped projection of a hue slightly

different than that of the stone. He tapped around it gently with a hammer, painstakingly jarring chips loose. The whole dome emerged at last, bigger than his fist, free and clean—windows, doors, chimney, and all. “Josef,” said Peter. His voice cracked several times before he could finish the sentence. “Josef—they lived in houses.” He stood, with the rock cradled in his arms, an unconscious act of reverence.

Josef now peered over Peter’s shoulder, breathing down his neck. “A lovely house.”

“Better than ours,” said Peter.

“Peter!” warned Josef. He looked around apprehensively.

The hideous present burst upon Peter again. His arms went limp with renewed anxiety and disgust. The rock crashed down on the others. The dome-shaped house, its interior solid with limestone deposits, shattered into a dozen wedges.

Again the brothers’ irresistible curiosities took command. They sank to their knees to pick over the fragments. The more durable contents of the house had been locked in rock for eons, only now to meet air and sunlight. The perishable furnishings had left their impressions.

“Books—dozens of them,” said Peter, turning a fragment this way and that to count the now-familiar rectangular specks.

“And here’s a painting. I swear it is!” cried Josef.

“They’d discovered the wheel! Look at this wagon, Josef!” A fit of triumphant laughing burst from Peter. “Josef,” he gasped, “do you realize that we have made the most sensational discovery in history? Ants once had a culture as rich and brilliant as ours. Music! Painting! Literature! Think of it!”

“And lived in houses—aboveground, with plenty of room, and lots of air and sunshine,” said Josef raptly. “And they had fire and cooked. What could this be but a stove?”

“Millions of years before the first man—before the first gorilla, chimp, or orangutan, or even the first monkey, Josef—the ants had everything, *everything*.” Peter stared ecstatically into the distance, shrinking in his imagination down to the size of a finger joint and living a full, rich life in a stately pleasure dome all his own.

It was high noon when Peter and Josef had completed a cursory examination of the rocks in box number one. In all, they found fifty-three of the houses, each different—some large, some small, varying from domes to cubes, each one a work of individuality and imagination. The houses seemed to have been spaced far apart, and rarely were they occupied by more than a male and a female and young.

Josef grinned foolishly, incredulously. “Peter, are we drunk or crazy?” He sat in silence, smoking a cigarette and periodically shaking his head. “Do you realize it’s lunchtime? It seems as though we’ve been here about ten minutes. Hungry?”

Peter shook his head impatiently, and began digging through the second box—fossils from the next layer up, eager to solve the puzzle of how the magnificent ant civilization

had declined to the dismal, instinctive ant way of life of the present.

“Here’s a piece of luck, Josef—ten ants so close together I can cover them with my thumb.” Peter picked up rock after rock, and, wherever he found one ant, he found at least a half dozen close by. “They’re starting to get gregarious.”

“Any physical changes?”

Peter frowned through his magnifying glass. “Same species, all right. No, now, wait—there is a difference, the pincers are more developed, considerably more developed. They’re starting to look like modern workers and soldiers.” He handed a rock to Josef.

“Mmmm, no books here,” said Josef. “You find any?”

Peter shook his head, and found that he was deeply distressed by the lack of books, searching for them passionately. “They’ve still got houses, but now they’re jammed with people.” He cleared his throat. “I mean ants.” Suddenly a cry of joy escaped him. “Josef! Here’s one without the big pincers, just like the ones in the lower level!” He turned the specimen this way and that in the sunlight. “By himself, Josef. In his house, with his family and books and everything! Some of the ants are differentiating into workers and soldiers—some aren’t!”

Josef had been reexamining some of the gatherings of the ants with pincers. “The gregarious ones may not have been interested in books,” he announced. “But everywhere that you find them, you find pictures.” He frowned perplexedly. “There’s a bizarre twist, Peter; the picture lovers evolving away from the book lovers.”

“The crowd lovers away from the privacy lovers,” said Peter thoughtfully. “Those with big pincers away from those without.” To rest his eyes, he let his gaze wander to the toolshed and a weathered poster from which the eyes of Stalin twinkled. Again he let his gaze roam, this time into the distance—to the teeming mouth of the nearest mine shaft, where a portrait of Stalin beamed paternally on all as they shambled in and out; to a cluster of tar-paper barracks below, where a portrait of Stalin stared shrewdly, protected from the weather by glass, at the abominable sanitary facilities.

“Josef,” Peter began uncertainly, “I’ll bet tomorrow’s tobacco ration that those works of art the pincered ants like so well are political posters.”

“If so, our wonderful ants are bound for an even higher civilization,” said Josef enigmatically. He shook rock dust from his clothing. “Shall we see what is in box number three?”

Peter found himself looking at the third box with fear and loathing. “*You* look, Josef,” he said at last.

Josef shrugged. “All right.” He studied the rocks in silence for several minutes. “Well, as you might expect, the pincers are even more pronounced, and—”

“And the gatherings are bigger and more crowded, and there are no books, and the posters are as numerous as the ants!” Peter blurted suddenly.

“You’re quite right,” said Josef.

“And the wonderful ants without pincers are gone, aren’t they, Josef?” said Peter huskily.

“Calm down,” said Josef. “You’re losing your head over something that happened a thousand thousand years ago—or more.” He tugged thoughtfully at his earlobe. “As a matter of fact, the pincerless ants do seem extinct.” He raised his eyebrows. “As far as I know, it’s without precedent in paleontology. Perhaps those without pincers were susceptible to some sort of disease that those with pincers were immune to. At any rate, they certainly disappeared in a hurry. Natural selection at its ruggedest—survival of the fittest.”

“Survival of the somethingest,” said Peter balefully.

“No! Wait, Peter. We’re both wrong. Here is one of the old type ants. And another and another! It looks like they were beginning to congregate, too. They’re all packed together in one house, like matchsticks in a box.”

Peter took the rock fragment from him, unwilling to believe what Josef said. The rock had been split by Borgorov’s diggers so as to give a clean cross section through the ant-packed house. He chipped away at the rock enclosing the other side of the house. The rock shell fell away. “Oh,” he said softly, “I see.” His chippings had revealed the doorway of the little building, and guarding it were seven ants with pincers like scythes. “A camp,” he said, “a reeducation camp.”

Josef blanched at the word, as any good Russian might, but regained his composure after several hard swallows. “What is that starlike object over there?” he said, steering away from the unpleasant subject.

Peter chiseled the chip in which the object was embedded free from the rest of the rock, and held it out for Josef to contemplate. It was a sort of rosette. In the center was a pincerless ant, and the petals looked like warriors and workers with their weapons buried and locked in the flesh of the lone survivor of the ancient race. “There’s your quick evolution, Josef.” He watched his brother’s face intently, yearning for a sign that his brother was sharing his hectic thoughts, his sudden insight into their own lives.

“A great curiosity,” said Josef evenly.

Peter looked about himself quickly. Borgorov was struggling up the path from far below. “It’s no curiosity, and you know it, Josef,” said Peter. “What happened to those ants is happening to us.”

“Hush!” said Josef desperately.

“We’re the ones without pincers, Josef. We’re done. We aren’t made to work and fight in huge hordes, to live by instinct and nothing more, perpetuating a dark, damp anthill without the wits even to wonder why!”

They both fell into red-faced silence as Borgorov navigated the last hundred yards. “Come now,” said Borgorov, rounding the corner of the toolshed, “our samples couldn’t have been as disappointing as all that.”

“It’s just that we’re tired,” said Josef, giving his ingratiating grin. “The fossils are so

sensational we're stunned."

Peter gently laid the chip with the murdered ant and its attackers embedded in it on the last pile. "We have the most significant samples from each layer arranged in these piles," he said, pointing to the row of rock mounds. He was curious to see what Borgorov's reaction might be. Over Josef's objections, he explained about two kinds of ants evolving within the species, showed him the houses and books and pictures in the lower levels, the crowded gatherings in the upper ones. Then, without offering the slightest interpretation, he gave Borgorov his magnifying glass, and stepped back.

Borgorov strolled up and down the row several times, picking up samples and clucking his tongue. "It couldn't be more graphic, could it?" he said at last.

Peter and Josef shook their heads.

"Obviously," said Borgorov, "what happened was this." He picked up the chip that showed the bas-relief of the pincerless ant's death struggle with countless warriors. "There were these lawless ants, such as the one in the center, capitalists who attacked and exploited the workers—ruthlessly killing, as we can see here, scores at a time." He set down the melancholy exhibit, and picked up the house into which the pincerless ants were crammed. "And here we have a conspiratorial meeting of the lawless ants, plotting against the workers. Fortunately"—and he pointed to the soldier ants outside the door—"their plot was overheard by vigilant workers.

"So," he continued brightly, holding up samples from the next layer, a meeting of the pincerless ants and the home of a solitary ant, "the workers held democratic indignation meetings, and drove their oppressors out of their community. The capitalists, overthrown, but with their lives spared by the merciful common people, were soft and spoiled, unable to survive without the masses to slave for them. They could only dillydally with the arts. Hence, put on their own mettle, they soon became extinct." He folded his arms with an air of finality and satisfaction.

"But the order was just the reverse," objected Peter. "The ant civilization was wrecked when some of the ants started growing pincers and going around in mobs. You can't argue with geology."

"Then an inversion has taken place in the limestone layer—some kind of upheaval turned it upside down. Obviously." Borgorov sounded like sheathed ice. "We have the most conclusive evidence of all—the evidence of logic. The sequence could only have been as I described it. Hence, there was an inversion. Isn't that so?" he said, looking pointedly at Josef.

"Exactly, an inversion," said Josef.

"Isn't that so?" Borgorov wheeled to face Peter.

Peter exhaled explosively, slouched in an attitude of utter resignation. "Obviously, Comrade." Then he smiled, apologetically. "Obviously, Comrade," he repeated ...

Epilogue

“Good Lord, but it’s cold!” said Peter, letting go of his end of the saw and turning his back to the Siberian wind.

“To work! To work!” shouted a guard, so muffled against the cold as to look like a bundle of laundry with a submachine gun sticking out of it.

“Oh, it could be worse, much worse,” said Josef, holding the other end of the saw. He rubbed his frosted eyebrows against his sleeve.

“I’m sorry you’re here, too, Josef,” said Peter sadly. “I’m the one who raised his voice to Borgorov.” He blew on his hands. “I guess that’s why we’re here.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” sighed Josef. “One stops thinking about such things. One stops thinking. It’s the only way. If we didn’t belong here, we wouldn’t be here.”

Peter fingered a limestone chip in his pocket. Embedded in it was the last of the pincerless ants, ringed by his murderers. It was the only fossil from Borgorov’s hole that remained above the surface of the earth. Borgorov had made the brothers write a report on the ants as he saw them, had had every last fossil shoveled back into the bottomless cavity, and had shipped Josef and Peter to Siberia. It was a thorough piece of work, not likely to be criticized.

Josef had pushed aside a pile of brush, and was now staring with fascination at the bared patch of earth. An ant emerged furtively from a hole, carrying an egg. It ran around in crazy circles, then scurried back into the darkness of the tiny earth womb. “A marvelous adjustment ants have made, isn’t it, Peter?” said Josef enviously. “The good life—efficient, uncomplicated. Instinct makes all the decisions.” He sneezed. “When I die, I think I’d like to be reincarnated as an ant. A modern ant, not a capitalist ant,” he added quickly.

“What makes you so sure you aren’t one?” said Peter.

Josef shrugged off the jibe. “Men could learn a lot from ants, Peter, my boy.”

“They have, Josef, they have,” said Peter wearily. “More than they know.”

KURT VONNEGUT was a master of contemporary American literature. His black humor, satiric voice, and incomparable imagination first captured America's attention in *The Sirens of Titan* in 1959 and established him, in the words of *The New York Times*, as "a true artist" with the publication of *Cat's Cradle* in 1963. He was, as Graham Greene declared, "one of the best living American writers." Mr. Vonnegut passed away in April 2007.

SIDNEY OFFIT has written two novels, two memoirs, and ten books for young readers. He was a senior editor of *Intellectual Digest* and a book editor of *Politics Today*, and for three decades he has served on the boards of the Authors Guild and PEN American Center. Currently, Mr. Offit is the curator emeritus of the George Polk Awards in Journalism. He lives in New York City with his wife, Avodah.

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