from And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life by Charles J. Shields

By going into cellars day after day, a POW named Michael Palaia saw what all the other prisoners did, too. There were subterranean pantries of pickled asparagus, pickled onions, apple butter, cherries, string beans, beets, carrots, jams, jellies, sausage, pie fillings, and berry syrup—groaning shelves of sealed jars that a starving man could steal if he were careful

Palaia was one of the older prisoners and unable to withstand the deprivations as well as the younger men. While he was in a basement on the last day of March, someone shouted down at him, “Hey, the SS troops are coming, you better get your ass out of there, if there’s anybody in there!” Selecting a jar of pickled string beans, he stashed it under his coat and walked back out into the street. The Arbeitskommando was about to begin the return four-mile march to Gorbitz, and he was looking forward to sitting on his bunk and eating the beans

The SS officers who spotted him might have passed him by except he had made himself conspicuous through an earlier, fatal choice. From the frozen pile of overcoats inside the gate at Stalag IV- B, he had grabbed a heavy one that was different from most. On the back were the letters CCCP— the Russian abbreviation for Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The SS ordered him to stop and unbutton his coat. There was nothing he could do—the contraband was a good- sized jar, and they plucked it out. Later that night, said Vonnegut, Palaia was court-martialed and ordered to sign a document he didn’t understand, admitting he was guilty of looting.

The next morning, April 1, Palm Sunday, guards issued shovels to Kurt and three other prisoners and took them to a rise within sight of the camp so the rest of the Arbeitskommando could see the example being set. The four men were ordered to dig graves while Palaia and a Polish soldier stood nearby. When they had finished, an officer turned Palaia and the Polish soldier around by their shoulders, stepped back, and shouted an order. A firing squad shot the prisoners in the back; the Germans reloaded and shot them again. Vonnegut and the others were ordered to pick up the bodies and place them each in a grave. One of the Americans, knowing Palaia had been a Catholic like him, placed a rosary in his hands and said a prayer. Refilling the graves took a matter of minutes

Later, when telling his family how impassively the executions were carried out, Vonnegut burst into tears. “The sons of bitches! The sons of bitches!” He would model a character in Slaughterhouse- Five on Palaia, Edgar Derby, the forty-four-year-old English teacher executed for stealing a teapot.

The Waking

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.

I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?

I hear my being dance from ear to ear.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?

God bless the Ground!   I shall walk softly there,

And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?

The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do

To you and me; so take the lively air,

And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.

What falls away is always. And is near.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

I learn by going where I have to go.

 Theodore Roethke

Directions

Using “The Waking,” the selected non-fiction passage from So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life and Slaughterhouse-Five, write an essay in which you analyze how Vonnegut develops theme within his novel. Please cite your sources.