This newly opened bridge is dedicated to the memory of Henry M. Flagler, pioneer developer of the east coast of Florida. This bridge connects the northern parts of the Palm Beaches, bring one of those servicing these two cities. Also showing the Breakers and Palm Beach Biltmore in the background.

PALM BEACH, FLA.
AUG 18
9 P

Knows you like to see these. Wish you could be too. Certainly is pretty up here. Regards

POST

Rembrant

GLENROCK
SEP 2
1 PM
1952
WYO

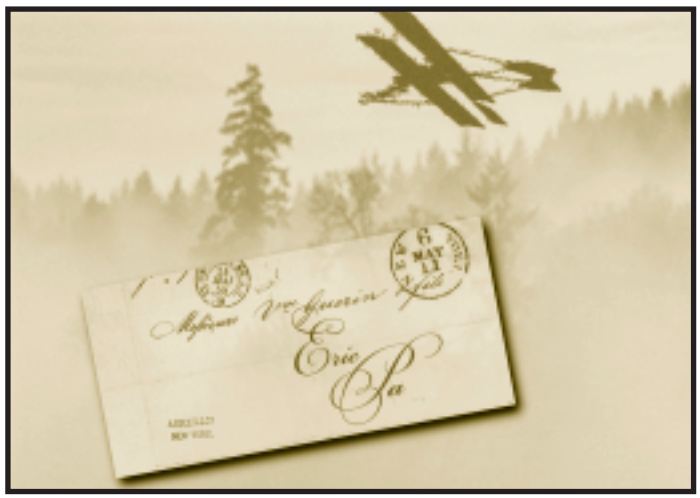
Mr D D Hamel

POST

Surely is cold here - wish I had brought a sweater -

mamie

Mrs Mrs
Waldam



A Postcard from America

Robert Olen Butler

The picture postcard is nearly ninety years old. It is an original photograph, taken by someone with the newly invented Kodak Brownie camera and then printed onto a stiff piece of cardboard with a postcard back. This was a common practice in the early 20th century in America. People took photos of every aspect of their daily lives and sent the images through the mail to each other. This particular image is of an achingly fragile biplane, in the perilous early days of aviation, flying solitary before an empty sky. If you look closely you can see the right end of the upper wing beginning to tear away. The message on the back of the card simply reads: "This is Earl Sandt of Erie Pa. in his aeroplane just before it fell." 1

I have been collecting old American postcards for more than a decade. My collection focuses to some extent on the images on the fronts of the cards—this one, certainly, was extraordinary—but even more so on the messages on the backs. Before telephones were common, people would not infrequently speak their hearts on the backs of postcards. 2

As a writer—a writer whose work, I feel, is deeply rooted in the spirit of America—I am enchanted with these messages. An artist of any nationality is keenly attuned to nuance and innuendo and subtext, to the revelation of personality and the deep yearning in every human heart. And these fragments of voices of Americans who have long since passed away are profoundly resonant not only of the individual lives pulsing behind the words but also of the preoccupations and character of this nation in the early years of what would be an extraordinary century. 3

I am now beginning to write a book of short stories based on my collection of American postcards from the first two decades of the last century. There will be two dozen or more stories, with the front and the back of each card reproduced as a kind of found epigraph. I will take on the voice in the message on the back of the card or the voice of the recipient, or perhaps even seek out the voice of someone mentioned in the message. 4

© U.S. Signal Corps

Quanah Parker

Quanah Parker was one of the most famous Native Americans and a household name in Texas history. The town of Quanah, Texas is named after him.

Glossary

avert *v.* to turn away from intentionally.
aviation *n.* a science related to flying and the development of aircraft.
biplane *n.* a type of plane flown in the early 1900s. It had two sets of wings; one set was above the other.
doughboy *n.* a name for American army soldiers in World War I.
egalitarian *adj.* promoting a belief that all people are equal.
epigraph *n.* a quotation, sometimes at the beginning of a poem or novel, that sets forth a theme.
innuendo *n.* an idea that is implied or suggested in an indirect way.
Kodak Brownie camera *n.* one of the first cameras sold in the 1900s. A very popular brand. Millions of people bought and used the camera because it was inexpensive and easy to use.
nuance *n.* a slight difference, as in meaning, feeling, or tone.
paradox *n.* a statement that seems contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is true.
real-time *n.* the actual time when something takes place.
resonant *adj.* having a presence or an effect for a long time.
revelation *n.* something that is revealed, sometimes with surprise.
sanitarium *n.* a hospital for people who are recovering from serious illness such as tuberculosis, a disease of the lungs.
subtext *n.* an author's meaning that is not stated directly, but implied.
take a (car) out for a spin *idiomatic expression:* to drive a car for enjoyment.
Webcast *n.* broadcast of an event over the Internet as that event is happening.

In another private photo card, a woman sits beside a female friend in a 1906 Mitchell automobile and she has written a poem beneath the image: "No chord of music has yet been found/ to even equal that sweet sound/ which to my mind all else surpasses/ an auto engine and its puffing gasses." She added, writing to the friend who sat beside her, "Don't this recall many pleasant rides over the beautiful Drive Way?" The town she wrote from was Quanah, Texas, named after a Comanche chief, Quanah Parker, who was the last to bring his people into the reservation in the Texas Staked Plains and who later became a successful businessman, a hunting companion to Theodore Roosevelt, and the deputy sheriff of Lawton, Oklahoma. 5

The story I have already written from this card chronicles the two women slipping off, while their husbands are at a horse auction, and taking the automobile out for a spin themselves, an assertion of independence which brings them face-to-face with the town's namesake. This nation, built on the preservation of the rights of minorities, has sometimes been slow to apply those rights fully. But this card captures an early 20th-century moment in the process of the further opening of American society. A Texas town honors in its name a Native American chief who led a protracted struggle against the very establishment of such a town but who then adapted successfully to a new world. A woman delights with another woman in the technology of a male-dominated society perhaps sensing that this very technology would one day help transform that society into something even more egalitarian. 6

An image of the building that held the U.S. War, State, and Navy Departments in Washington, D.C., bears this message: "For my darling Jojo: As a memento of the pleasant hour spent standing in front of the U.S. War, State, & Navy Department (on a chilly day) waiting for the procession to move up to the White House where we shook hands with President Roosevelt, New Year's Day 1908. From her own baby Deedee." This card, like many of those that contain the most personal of messages, has no stamp. It had been placed inside an envelope for mailing to preserve its privacy. Two women, quietly connected in an unconventional way, nevertheless were proud to wait to exercise their rights to shake the hand of the President of the United States. 7

On the Fourth of July in 1906 an anonymous young man sent an image of the Saco River flowing through the White Mountains of New Hampshire to a man in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, perhaps his father. The postmark indicates that the young man was staying at one of the grand resort hotels of the White Mountains, the Crawford House. "This is a quiet 4th," he wrote. "There are 220 in the house. When the flag was raised this morning they gathered on the piazza and took off their hats and gave three cheers. Going to pitch tomorrow." The card is very moving to me in its understatement. Nearly a hundred years ago everyone in this great old hotel came out into the yard, mostly strangers to each other, and cheered their devotion to an America that so closely bound them together. Then the next day our young man went off and participated in that very American game, baseball, united yet again with others, this time in play. 8

Still another private photo was clearly taken on the entrenched front lines in World War I, with tree trunks stacked against the deeply dug dirt walls and the fleeting image of a doughboy up above, moving away. Standing on the dirt floor of the excavated position is a stout, matronly woman in a dark gabardine dress and a narrow-brimmed hat with her pocket watch pinned to her chest on a chain and with a faint, thin-mouthed, you-better-be-taking-care-of-yourself smile. The handwritten caption simply says, "Mother in the trenches." This very American mother has come to the front lines to check on her son. 9

A mass-produced card shows an artist's image of a woman looking forlorn. The card's printed sentiment says: heartbroken. On the message side, someone has written these simple words to a man in Attleboro, Massachusetts, with no salutation and no signature: "We'll meet in death." This at first sounds like a bitter break-up of two lovers. But a closer examination of the man's address shows that he is in a sanitarium. He is dying of tuberculosis. The relationship drastically shifts in one's imagination and becomes complex indeed — particularly with the absence of any words of endearment or even identity in the message. In an age when so many diseases readily turned fatal, a woman has stripped down her words to the essence of belief that she shared with the dying man she loved. 10

There is something in this woman's faith and pragmatism and courage that seem particularly American to me. As do the Texas woman's impassioned engagement with technological progress 11

and the Washington couple's pleasure in the openness of a representative government and the young man's comradeship with his unknown compatriots and the mother's strength and protectiveness and ability to abandon convention for a higher goal. But, of course, all these qualities are universal, as well.

12 And it is important to understand how the particular and the universal are wedded in art. A work of art does not come from the artist's mind. It does not come from the rational, analytical faculties. It does not come from ideas. Art comes from the place where the artist dreams. Art comes from the unconscious.

13 The unconscious is a scary place. The great Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa once said, "To be an artist means never to avert your eyes." And if the artist truly does that, if she goes into her unconscious, day after day, work after work, and does not avert her eyes, she finally breaks through to a place where she is neither female nor male, neither black nor white nor red nor yellow, neither Christian nor Muslim nor Jew nor Hindu nor Buddhist nor atheist, neither North American nor South American nor European nor African nor Asian. He is human. And if he happened by birth or choice to call the United States of America home, he looks about him at the particulars of this place and culture and finds those aspects of it that resonate into the universal humanity we all share on this planet.

14 This past fall, I undertook a writing project using the Internet in order to teach this basic tenet of the artistic process. My students had long heard me speak of the origins of art being in the unconscious, and of the corollary that works of art are fundamentally sensual objects that comprehend and articulate the world in non-analytical ways. The paradox of teaching this art form, however, is that one inevitably ends up using analytical discourse, as in these very sentences, to reject analysis.

15 So on October 30, 2001, I began a Webcast under the auspices of the Web site of Florida State University, where I teach. I would write a literary short story on the Internet, for two hours each night, until it was done. Students could see the artistic process directly, in its moment-to-moment fullness. I began with a simple concept, and with no other preparation, I created the story in real-time. My viewers saw every creative decision, down to the most delicate comma, as it was made on the page. Every misbegotten, awkward sentence, every bad word choice, every conceptual dead end was shared and worked over and revised and rewritten before the viewers' eyes.

16 I waited until the morning of October 30 to open myself to an inspiration so that I would not have a chance, even unconsciously, to pre-plan the story. I wanted the whole process to be shared on the Webcast. So I went to my postcard collection on that morning in search of the card that had the strongest story hovering about it. And the one that leaped out at me held the image of Earl Sandt's biplane.

17 When I'd bought that card at a postcard convention the previous January, I'd known that one day I would write a story inspired by it. I'd always assumed, however, that the story would be in the voice of Earl Sandt, the doomed pilot. That changed on October 30. I took up this antique postcard, and my artistic unconscious, my sense of myself as an American, and my larger identity as a human being all powerfully converged. Instantly I knew that I had to write the story in the voice of the man who watched.

18 Because on September 11, 2001, we were all the ones who watched. From my dreamspace I wrote this story about America of the early 20th century, and in doing so I realized something crucial about that terrible day in America of the early 21st century. The man who snapped the photo and wrote the postcard ninety years earlier felt the same thing that we all did on September 11, and I came to understand that the most profound and abiding effects of that day have very little to do with international politics or worldwide terrorism or homeland security or our unity as a nation. Those issues are real and important too, of course, but it seems to me that the deepest experience of 9/11 happened for us one soul at a time in an entirely personal way. We each of us viewed the fall of an aeroplane under stunning circumstances for which we had no frame of reference, and as a result, the event got around certain defenses that we all necessarily carry within us. And we confronted — one by one by one — in a way most of us never have — our own mortality.

19 Artists of all the nations of the world pass each day through the portal of the personal unconscious and enter into the depths of the collective unconscious, and these artists emerge with visions of the things that bind us all together. I am an American. I am an artist. I look at my country and I seek the human soul.

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Robert Olen Butler

Robert Olen Butler has published 12 books since 1981, 10 novels—*The Alleys of Eden, Sun Dogs, Countrymen of Bones, On Distant Ground, Wabash, The Deuce, They Whisper, The Deep Green Sea, Mr. Spaceman* and *Fair Warning*—and two volumes of short fiction—*Tabloid Dreams* and *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* which won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

His stories have appeared widely in such publications as *The New Yorker, Esquire,* the *Paris Review, Harper's, GQ, Zoetrope, Hudson Review,* the *Virginia Quarterly Review,* and the *Sewanee Review.* They also have been chosen for inclusion in four annual editions of *The Best American Short Stories,* seven annual editions of *New Stories from the South,* and numerous college literature textbooks. His works have been translated into a dozen languages, including Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Polish, Japanese, and Greek.

A recipient of both a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, Butler also won the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. He was also a charter recipient of the Tu Do Chinh Kien Award given by the Vietnam Veterans of America for "outstanding contributions to culture by a Vietnam veteran."

Since 1995, he has written two teleplays and several feature-length screenplays. He is a Professor of Creative Writing at Florida State University in Tallahassee, Florida. Butler is married to the novelist and playwright Elizabeth Dewberry.