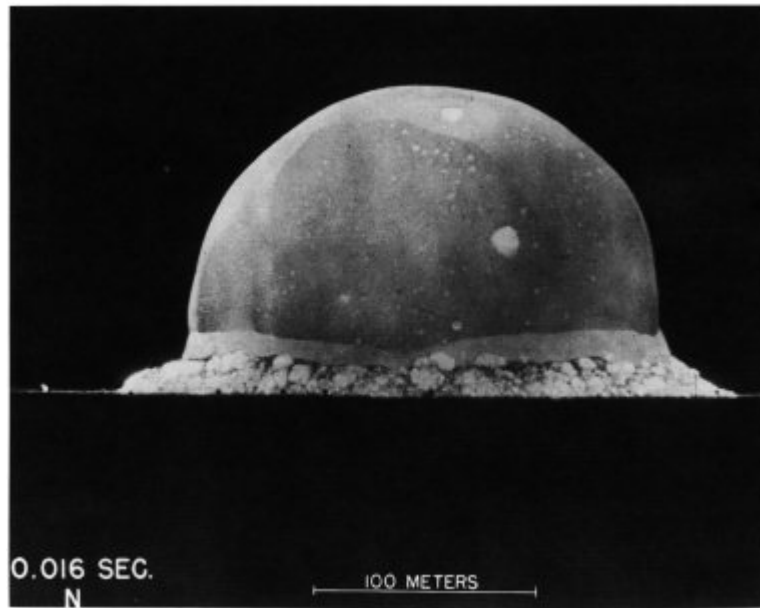


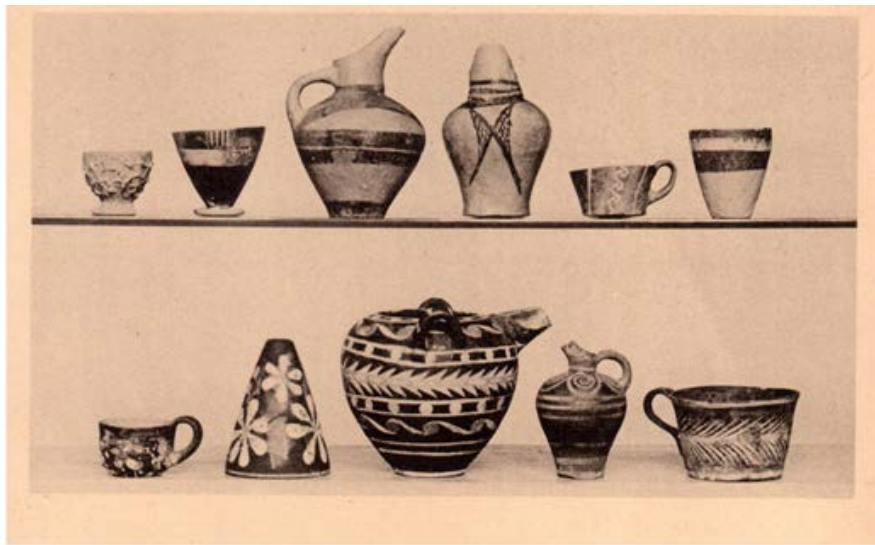
Oppenheimer

Gavin Murphy



He stared dead ahead at the horizon shimmering in desert heat minutes before the first test. His only movement was to raise his right hand to draw hard on another cigarette. When the countdown over the tannoy reached zero, a flash of light was followed by a deep earthly growl. Only then, did his body loosen in relief. By the evening of Hiroshima, he was able to take to the stage and accept plaudits, with his hands clasped like a prize-winning boxer. Oppenheimer, ashen faced and nicotine stained, was a picture of yellow and grey.

I found the postcard in a neon-lit second-hand bookshop on a cold wet November afternoon. It had been left between the pages of a book. I sensed its value straight away so I moved it to the inside of the back cover. This way it would pass through the hands of the bookseller unnoticed. I already had another copy of the book. The three Euro was for the postcard. I left the shop like a thief.



You can see the postcard now. The black and white photograph on the front is set soft on yellowed card. It probably dates from the 1960s. It shows two rows of ancient Cretan pottery. The contours are crisp. The irregular form and decoration enchant. The top shelf is depthless. It is as if antiquity is to perform on a modernist stage.

The ceramic pieces have been arranged in conversation. You can see a haughty chap on the top shelf with his chest puffed up at his companion's resolve. Look again and you can see there is a little jug on the lower shelf observing the hooting of the bellowed fellow.

The back of the card tells us the collection is from the Ashmolean Museum.

I think of an impish eye and the measured play of the curator as he arranged his collection to be photographed. He is long gone by now. I know what he lived for.

On the back of the card there is a handwritten note by the editor of *Connections* to a poet, dated October 2001. It reads:

*Dear ****,*

I hope you are well and your poetry is successful. Here's Autumn Connections. Do tell me your reactions! If I put your comments in Winter's issue you'll receive a free copy. I hope you don't mind this 2nd hand card. It's very interesting I think ...

Connections is a literary journal and the poet's work had been selected for the autumn edition. I presume the editor placed the card into an envelope alongside the journal and then put the package in the post. The editor has good wishes for the poet. She invites further thoughts from him that might well be included in the winter edition.

I am warmed by her touch. She recognizes the charmed nature of the image on the postcard. But then time is to shiver as events from the past flash into being once more:

... Where were you when you heard of the suicide bombings attacks on Manhattan? Most people remember. It's not likely one would forget, is it? - such a shock! I was very worried too about my American contributors especially the 2 who live only a mile from Zero Ground.

All best,

***** *****

P.S. Are you worried about the anthrax threat? Several people I know are but

**** and I are not.*

Her words have been unleashed from time. They now uncouple as one jolts into another. *The suicide bombing attacks on Manhattan*: they were not bombings but they were. Of course, the date in the top corner of the card. October 2001 - 9/11. It's not likely one would forget, is it?

She uses the phrase *Zero Ground*, not the *ground zero* we are used to now. An abyss has been preserved before the media would allay dread by a heroic inversion of the phrase. From *ground zero*, one can build again. Bigger, better, with conviction.

Terror is handled with a delicate and fractured language. Her concern for her family of *Connections* expands and contracts to the couple at its core. Not even anthrax can loosen that.

Instinct has me reaching for the search button on the computer screen. Input the details - the poet, the editor and her partner, their address, the poems, the journal - and their lives will be made visible. The level of information is unguarded, hence the redaction on the transcript. There is an innocence here, one worth preserving. Darker still, the poet could have passed away and his books given into the bookshop: that a relative never checked to see if there was anything inside. As I speculate, I sense a line in the sand marking what ought not to be known and a value in mystery.

So I owe this moment time at least. If I press the search button the mystery will be gone. Hold back and I can invent a story. It will be at their expense: the characters

already sketched from words written on the back of a postcard. I will use their lives for want of a tale. Fiction should not hide this.

I can know them too. The information is there. I will press the button to get them. I cannot help myself. When I write this, I will write to them. I can have their story if I play it right. Another story. A scoop. At their expense again. I can have two worlds if I preserve the first one. This is why I owe this moment time at least.

Time tells me I am in debt. I am in debt to a mystery. I didn't expect that one. I thought this was my find. I thought I was in control. I thought this was my world.

I will honour the debt by making an offering. This has worked in the past. Only then could I possibly contact them. When I do so, it must be without any obligation on their behalf. Justice should demand my silence. It should protect them. But this is not enough. I sit here graying from another cigarette. You already know, I cannot help myself.

I will offer up a postcard of my own. It was bought on a visit to a museum. It was placed in a picture frame and placed on the wall of the living room. It is too far from the sofa for it ever to have been given a proper look. The image was to be a rich pool of reflection. The eye would fall on it in moments of repose. When lifting my head up from a book or as a focal point when listening to music. Something like that.

I failed in what I had initially set out to do. I hadn't realized that. It seems as if my postcard had been there forever. Like all distant aspirations.

The title of the work is *Marvels of Creation*. It is from seventeenth century India. Mughal India, I presume. It might be part of a collection based on an epic tale in Indian or Persian literature, or even a treatise on the nature of the cosmos. The text to the right of the image is incomplete. It is cut off by the photographer of the piece and further still by my effort to fit the card into the frame.



The image shows a hunter and his prey. The archer's right hand is raised having shot his arrow. The tension has been released from the string on the bow with the force going into the arrow. The arrow tip touches the forehead of the gazelle. It is on the point of death. The raised leg of the gazelle suggests resistance and acceptance at the same time. It is as if the gazelle understands its role.

The scene is calm. Death is not to be feared. The gazelle looks back to the hunter. The grace of the gazelle is balanced by the prowess of the hunter. Their eyes join and share this understanding. This is how it is. There they are, forever bound by the flight of the arrow. This is how it will be. It is the way of things.



The deft touch of the artist works time into being around an instant. Another world is created beyond the everyday. It is a space that draws mundane life with all its distractions into it. And this imaginal world cleanses it with a promise of deep tranquillity.

Only now, after all these years, does this image come to life. The rich green of the pasture that drew the eye in the first place has long faded. It can still be seen on the edges of the card where the frame has blocked out sunlight. I have been awoken instead by a potency that remains undiminished: the chance find of time stilled.

I know I can't contact them. I know I have to let them go. They must live without intrusion. The story should rest as a mystery preserved. They are fiction now. They are safe. Framed in a world of their own.

I know I am drawn by these worlds. Words and images have sketched me into being. But I have only been captured for a moment. I can't help myself. Like the hunter, I am to be forever on the cusp of having. I know I must know. I know I must have. I know this has to be.

The search button is here. Now I am become Death. Now I begin again. Oppenheimer.

