

# The Mailbox Had a Pulse

By Austen Tucker · 2026

an ai generated image of a mid 2000s furry con

His name was Captain Webster.

He sent me letters. Long ones. Generous ones. The kind of letters a young writer keeps in a folder and reads again on bad nights. He told me my work was good. He told me to keep going. He wrote back fast (the same day, sometimes within the hour), and for a kid writing alone in the Midwest, that felt like proof the work was reaching somewhere.

Then the letters stopped.

I waited a few weeks. I sent another. I waited again. Eventually I reached out through other channels, and someone (his next of kin) wrote back to tell me he was gone.

That was the first death I really felt. Not the first death I knew about. The first one that left a shape in my life I had to walk around afterward.

I was a kid. I didn't know what to do with it. So I did what I always did. I kept writing.

I lost the letters. All I have now are echoes of kindness.

I miss him.

## The path

Captain wasn't the only one.

There was Cubist. There was Michael Bard. There was the whole TSA crew: Kitcoon, Rabbit, Kristi Bunni, Andibunny, Jacob O'Hare, Linneaus. A loose network of older furry writers who read what newer writers sent them and wrote back. Email was the medium. The mailbox was the room. You sent a story, somebody read it, somebody replied, and that was the entire transaction.

That network led me to ANTHRO. ANTHRO led to my first Ursa nod. The Ursa nod led to my first sale.

I want to be specific about that chain, because looking back, it's the only on-ramp I ever had. A kid with a story and an email address. A community of older writers willing to read. A small press that took submissions the same way Captain took letters, through a mailbox, with a pulse on the other end.

Nobody told me I was supposed to have a platform. Nobody asked for a query letter. Nobody told me to build a brand. I sent stories. People read them. Some of them wrote back.

Michael Bard is gone now too. Not when Captain went — later. But the mailbox keeps thinning, the way mailboxes do.

## **The hole**

The infrastructure didn't last.

Email lists thinned out. Forums replaced them, and forums had hierarchies and drama and a social tax I couldn't pay. Webpages replaced forums, and webpages had to be maintained. Presses got submission portals. Submission portals had guidelines. Guidelines had deadlines. Every step between writing a story and getting it read grew a layer of friction. My brain could write a novel in a fugue state at 2am. It could not, for love or money, fill out a Submittable form at 11pm on a Tuesday.

So I stopped sharing.

I didn't stop writing. I have never stopped writing. Writing is how I metabolize being alive. I wrote for twenty years into a hole, and the hole was fine, because the hole didn't ask me to maintain a webpage or pay a social tax or remember which press wanted which formatting.

People sometimes compare not-being-heard to Salinger. It's a flattering comparison and it isn't mine. Salinger had a door and chose not to walk through it. I had a door that closed, and on the other side of that closed door, I kept working anyway, because the work was the point and always had been.

But I missed the room.

I missed Captain. I missed the mailbox. I missed sending a story and knowing, sometimes within the hour, that somebody on the other end had read it.

## **The build**

So I built the room back.

Not the people in it — I can't bring Captain back, and I can't make 2003 happen again. But the infrastructure. The handles. The thing that turns "I finished a chapter" into "it left my hands" without requiring me to navigate eight separate websites at midnight.

I run my blog on Payload CMS. I wired an MCP server to it. The publishing actions (create a post, set a slug, schedule it for next Wednesday at 9am, suppress the newsletter blast because this batch is an import) are now tools an agent can call. I hand Claude a folder of stories and say serialize this. Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 9am Central. Skip the newsletter on the import; turn it back on going forward. And it does.

The writing is mine. It has always been mine. What Claude is doing is the eight steps after writing: the steps that for twenty years stood between me and the room. The slug, the metadata, the schedule, the send. The medieval clerk work. The work that wasn't writing and wasn't sharing but stood between them like a tollbooth.

That tollbooth is what closed the door. And the harness is what opened it back up.

AI did not make me a writer. It gave me back the hallway between writing and being read.

## Tomorrow

Tomorrow, a chapter goes out.

Captain Webster will not write back. Michael Bard will not write back. Cubist is not waiting in the inbox. The room I'm sending into is not the room I left.

But somebody might be there. Somebody might hit reply. And if they do, the path will be open: the same path, more or less, that ran from a kid's mailbox to ANTHRO to Ursa to a first sale. Send a story. Somebody reads it. Somebody writes back. The whole transaction.

In writing, I found community. Kindness. A place to be seen. I lost the infrastructure that made that possible, and I wrote into a hole for twenty years because the hole was the only room left.

So when tomorrow comes, and the next bit of the Zoo dribbles out into the world, read.

Reply, like the Captain would, if you wish.