

FIVE OBJECTS

by Lowry Pei

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"Write us something that shows us your day," my students say to me. "Show us in five objects."

These are some good students.

PEN

It came from a crafts store on Delmar Boulevard in University City, Missouri, a few blocks from the house where I grew up, and just outside the city limits of St. Louis. It was bought by my wife, Vaughn, while we were on a trip to visit two of my oldest friends and also to visit, because it is my duty, my brother Alan. He lives where he has lived ever since I was a child: on the east side of the Mississippi in Godfrey, Illinois, in an institution for the retarded which is more or less the black hole of my psyche. My brother Alan will never write anything. My wife Vaughn is an artist and thinks about virtually everything in the physical world on the basis of how it looks. The pen is handmade, black with orange swirls, consciously retro, fat in the hand. It seems to be made of vintage plastic, if there is such a thing. It has a wonderfully tenacious clip that has not lost its gripping power after a couple of years of use; the clip is wavy black metal, fanciful yet strong. It takes hefty refills of black gel ink that write in juicy strokes and run out much sooner than their fatness and price would seem to promise. The other day I somehow managed to clip it into my pocket with the point not under the cap but exposed, facing down, an act that feels completely out of

character. Not because I don't do stupid things, but because I don't do this kind. The pen exuded a massive black stigma onto my shirt which has yet to come out. Suspicion confirmed: it wants to write. And also confirmed, there is something different about me these days, after September 11th.

CLOCK

6:15 it says when I wake up and drink water; or 5:20; or 7:41 if I'm lucky; or 3 or 4 a.m., hours that vie for the title of worst of all. During those two revolutions of the longer hand I might give up, get out of bed, go downstairs and heat milk on the stove, drink it and meanwhile I should be reading something that will distract me from relentlessly thinking brain, but now it is perhaps impossible to resist reading something else that will only add more circling thoughts. It crosses my mind to go up to my study and turn on the computer in the dark, the screen far too bright, assaulting the eye until I tone it down. But if I sit there and write I will pay the price for it tomorrow and possibly the whole rest of the week, and what would I write, now, in these latter days? My novel interrupted not just by the school year starting but by something so much bigger that right now there is no turning the clock back, to my novel or any other erstwhile norm, all out of date in one flash we don't want to recall. There is only one possibility when one can't go back: to start again.

8:39 it says when we leave the house, or 9:01, which is not so good because it takes :24, let's say, to drive to the garage, and :13 to walk from the garage to school, and :06 to get coffee and walk upstairs, and when I put my key in the office door, carrying the exquisitely caffeinated espresso, I want it to say 9:30. Because that leaves 2:00 before class, to confer with Kristina the Mighty TA, and to write comments on papers which, if they are actual drafts, take a minimum of :20 apiece and usually much longer. 11:30 it would say when class begins if there were a clock in our classroom, but there is none which is good because I think it means the time we have is ours to define as we will. It says 1:00 when we have left and the cafeteria line is too long, 2:28 when I realize I am no longer at my best, 3:30 when my other class starts and I ask them if it's naptime and they say yes. So do I.

5:31 it says, or 5:47 or 6:17 when Vaughn calls and says she is or isn't ready to go home, can we stay another :15, can we go home now please? But we should have gone sooner because 6:03 it may say when my dad is trying to put his dinner on the table which is next to

impossible when he is trying to hold onto his walker, or any solid object so he won't fall down, which he inevitably will if he does not hold on, and at the same time move his feet and at the same time convey a plate of hot food, perhaps including hot sloshing liquid, the three feet from stove to table which for him is a difficult journey. Or, with luck, I do arrive before the clock says Dad's dinner and I accomplish in a couple of quick movements what takes him multiple shuffling, swearing trips. Then it is usually I who cook while it says 6:30 and the news comes on and we have to watch for reasons we are all aware of. I stand in front of the stove while things cook, watching them, as if that would help. 7:43 it says, 8:07, even 8:26 when we get up from dinner, clean up, sit down on the couch, read, 9:09 it says when I eat ice cream and have 1/4" of cognac, 10:00 it says and we finally feel we are authorized to go to bed.

But it never says the past that we were in anymore, it only says the future which we used to think we could control. We have joined the Old World now, and underground the unconscious is working night and day trying to process the fact that we are no longer New.

WATER

Is water a thing? Or is it a living element? One of my students wrote an ode to water last week; I am with her, and many others, in constant consumption of the sacred substance. It has only recently become usual for people to carry tanks of water with them wherever they go, and I am not quite yet one of those water-carriers, but I may become one. I don't believe in buying it, though. Once I've got the bottle, which it seems to me is all my dollar pays for, I keep it and fill it up with what comes out of the tap. What the city brings to us, in exchange for our paying the water bill, conveys to me the same blessings as that which Coca-Cola bottles and sells, no doubt from the same source. When I sit down at my computer and turn it on, at once I need a drink of water. Before sitting down I have consumed a good deal of coffee, a noted diuretic, and that which goes out must be replenished; but besides supporting the miracle of kidney function, water in some way pours its virtue into the mind. Perhaps thought is a liquid and moving water encourages it to flow. This would explain the intellectual and imaginative benefits of bathroom trips; I once told my old colleague Charlie L'Homme that this is how I get through my day of commenting on student papers: drink a lot, pee a lot, walk back and forth a lot. It

works. That made him laugh. Later, peeing was not an amusing topic for Charlie when he had an enlarged prostate that had to be operated on. He recovered from that but suffered from recurring respiratory infections. He smoked heavily for most of his life and maybe he would have been better off putting large quantities of water in his mouth. He was one of the smartest, funniest, most surprising people I ever worked with. He retired at the age of 62 or 63 and died two years later, had a heart attack one morning while reading a book. I think it is very possible that after he left Simmons College, his students, and his colleagues, he no longer knew what he was living for. I have no intention of retiring until I completely lose it, and though I don't link the two in my mind except right now, writing this, perhaps the constant watering of my thoughts will postpone that day a little longer than might otherwise be the case.

PAPER

When ruled, it is written on by hand after saying the magic words ("Let's do some writing"). When not ruled, it is put through printers (no typewriters anymore, though they were my way of life for many years) – printers that are our prosthetic writing hand, hooked up to computers (prosthetic memory) that sometimes work, bringing e-mail (prosthetic speech) that sometimes connects, attachments that sometimes open and sometimes download. Ejected from copy machines (the hand again) that sometimes do not jam, that sometimes successfully sort and staple, that sometimes are not out of paper which must be replenished with reams impatiently ripped open by flesh-and-blood fingers. Paper appears, by way of the human hand, through the slot next to the front door of the house or in my mailbox at the office, and much of it goes at once from my hand to blue bin or paper bag, where it waits to return to some mythic realm where Shiva, the goddess of destruction and creation, holds sway over all the world's discarded paper, ripping it to atoms with divine force and reconstituting it with the speed of thought, a parable of reincarnation. Nothing is lost; there is no end. How quickly paper hurtles through some of its lifetimes, enduring its mute struggles, learning lessons for the benefit of its eternal papery soul, and then, in a matter of days, passing on to the next. But how slowly some others drag as paper, saved perhaps in a pile of my old manuscripts, waits to be released from this incarnation. When will that blessed day come, paper asks (yellowing brittle and unread on a high shelf in my

office), and why am I kept here at all if he will never read me again, if no one will ever again cringe at his awkward apprentice efforts? Why save these of all pages if after a few more years no one will ever read even one sheet out of the mountain of paper on which he has spent his adult life placing millions of words? No graduate student writing her dissertation on Lowry Pei will ever stumble on his undiscovered manuscripts in the Simmons archives and realize that she is about to make her name as a scholar. But these lifetimes, too, must be lived until they end. The cycle is longer than anyone's imagination can realize and the workings of karma more indirect and complex.

WORDS

But surely this is cheating. Words are not objects. A written word is like a thing, we can point to it and it has a shape, but it is not a thing, and this not-thing is my work. The word visible on paper, the word spelled, the word printed, the word xeroxed, the word written by hand, is not the actual word. The actual word is invisible. It is a spirit entity. For a brief moment words come here from their home, the realm of thought, to manifest themselves temporarily in physical reality on paper, and then to return whence they came. The word is the vessel into which molten thought is poured, but the shape into which it hardens is never quite right. So I do not say the word; the word says me. Yet I put words one after another, as I am doing now, and something (which is not a thing) happens in the spaces between them. Each word is wrong yet the words, with luck and art, come a little closer to right. So I do say the words. What then of the words my students write, which make up the work of my days, their words handed to me and mine, about theirs, handed back to them? I read their words more times than they might realize, but reading every word on the page is the easy part. Much harder to read what is not written there. To make the iron words turn molten and swim upstream to the crucible. Who says I can ever do that – read not words but meaning, thought? How could I have the nerve to say, even secretly, I don't just read what you wrote, I read you? Am I a demigod then? No, it's only what reading is, what writing is, what teaching is. We are supernatural beings if you want to call it that. Mind readers trading packets of spirit energy. I gotta use words when I talk to you, the man said (though I've forgotten who), and this is always true. They're what we've got. Meanwhile the other thing is happening, the real thing which can't be put in words, that makes using words necessary and insufficient in the

first place. The other thing is invisible but it has every face, from the most terrifying to the most beloved, from crushing grief to freshest joy. Poor words, they can never say. But when the clock says 11:30, I go into a classroom with a group of other human beings for whom I have a high regard, and together we try to make words do what they cannot.