

## **THE THINGS I CANNOT WRITE**

by Lowry Pei

How could it have begun? How could it possibly have begun? He such a loner, Chinese, foreign not just to the U.S., but after so many years in the U.S. to China too, man without a place who had spent years on the move, living in hotel rooms, eating in restaurants, changing jobs, the railroads that were his profession forever carrying him on to yet another town so that he finally could say he'd been nearly everywhere in the northern half of the U.S. from coast to coast, a man of few and obscure relationships with women, who had sex with prostitutes at least sometimes, who spoke with a difficult accent and also stuttered, who became furious easily, who worried constantly about money, who willed himself never to get sick, never to miss work, never to need anyone else's help for anything, to count on himself alone not only in the moment but for all imaginable future, not even to accept help unless forced by overwhelming emergency, but who sent money every month to his brothers, his parents, whatever family needed it, who got through the Depression in a foreign country on his own, more American than an American in his furious self-reliance, his aloneness, his rootlessness, his constant movement across the face of the continent, his very profession the same railroads that had made America a possibility, the railroads built in great measure by other Chinese who left their villages to come to Golden Mountain and send nearly every penny home, yet he not even like them except in being Chinese, they having been rural peasants and he a son of the scholar bureaucrat class – what was such a man doing riding the running board of a steam locomotive in a Montana winter taking readings from his gauges that would tell him if its firebox was properly configured for

the most efficient conversion of the energy in coal to superheated steam? And after years of that, what then could possibly have happened between him and the woman from Columbus, Kansas, town of grain elevators and farm implement dealers, she the descendant of English and Scots tradesmen and schoolteachers, already married once and the mother of two children, one retarded and living in Columbus with her parents, with her mother who had said, on hearing the firstborn was retarded, "I dreamed you gave birth to a dwarf," and the other child also retarded and either already dead when the two of them met or soon about to die in the less than care of some state-run institution where she, driven by desperation and entirely against her will, had placed him, never to be forgiven by herself, the entire story and even that child's very existence barely mentioned in later years, she nearly having leapt from a bridge into the Chicago River after the child died, but did not, and survived in unending and perhaps irremediable sadness to marry the Chinese engineer and give birth to two more children before she began sleeping apart from him – what could have brought these two together? What impossible courtship, or – still harder to fathom because not driven by blood-red desire which would be at least its own explanation – what friendship could have blossomed between the solitary from China and the small-town American half-crushed by disappointments greater than she could ever have feared because to have feared them would have meant imagining they could happen to her? What words could they have spoken to each other first, what squelched hopes and buried memories fired along dim synapses to carry them past the first indifferent sentences and over the obvious implausibility, the impossibility of taking seriously for one second whatever embryonic intimation either of them surely would have denied, that those two human beings so perfectly unsuited for each other would somehow end up, despite all future estrangements, even despite her finally leaving him over twenty years later and marrying another man, complicit in each other's destiny for the rest of her life? And how could they think that they would find a common language, a more than mere pidgin, how could they hope to weld together a creole out of their spirits' disparate tongues, and failing that what could they have imagined they would do, all their lives, with the unspokenness of their secret hearts? Was it by recklessness or calculation, by hope or despair that they flung themselves on this most improbable of marriages, or could they, by then, no longer tell the difference?

No one knows the answers to these questions, no one ever can know. It is like trying to unearth the daily life of a vanished race when no one is left alive to speak the words of their enigmatic documents

with the proper intonation, the native rise and fall and innate cadence that alone could make them, though translated into something resembling English, more than the blank hieroglyphs they remain.

One just has parents, and in time, perhaps, marries and becomes a parent, and in between, the curtain descends. No matter how much we may love, we cannot pass the inner life on. The language becomes a hieroglyph, the crucial moment passes understanding, the soul's privacy is sealed by time and remains unbroken. We have forebears but not necessarily ancestors, and all is left to the imagination, and the world is ever to be begun anew.