

STILL LIFE

生之靜物

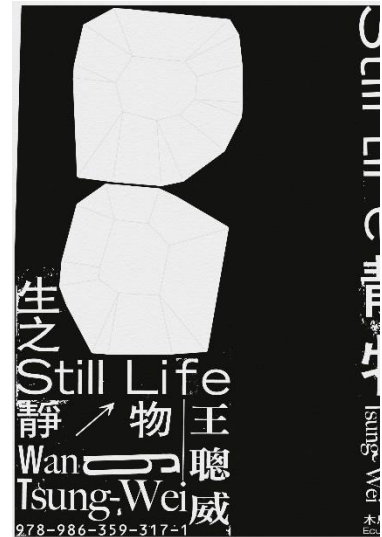
An unexpected, violent confrontation between Mei-Chun and her husband leaves her body bruised and her life shattered. Mei-Chun's resolve holds firm; she takes her daughter, moves out, and serves her husband with a divorce settlement. She does not wish to part with him, but she will not simply submit, so she moves in with an emotionally generous friend from college and waits for her husband to step up and apologize. The wait is paralyzing for someone who has already endured severe emotional damage; unable to work or conduct her life normally, she relies on her friend more and more for support as she gradually cuts all ties to the real world.

Still Life is a work of monologue as broken dialogue. Every chapter features the utterance of a different character, often speaking in the confessional or accusatory second person as well as in the first. But do these soliloquies ever connect to their intended recipients, or are they spoken into the ever-present void between individual spirits?

Wang Tsung-Wei, a literary craftsman well-acquainted with stories of passion, obsession, and loneliness, offers us here his newest piece of emotional artisanship, in which many voices stand on their own, singing to each other, and to the darkness surrounding them.

Wang Tsung-Wei 王聰威

Author and editor Wang Tsung-Wei has at one point had his hand on or near the tiller of the most successful periodicals in the country, serving as deputy editor-in-chief of *Ming Pao*, *Marie Claire*, and *FHM*. Since taking on the position of editor-in-chief of UNITAS Publishing, he has guided the magazine to 2016 Golden Tripod Awards for Magazine of the Year, and Best Arts & Humanities Magazine as well as 2017 Golden Tripod Award for Best Art Design. His name frequently populates short lists for book awards, and he is well known as a literary personality all over Taiwan.



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STILL LIFE

By Wang Tsung-Wei

Translated by Zac Haluza

Our new home is several metro stops away from our old one, just a twenty-minute trip in total. Although it's already too late to explain, this alone should show that I didn't really want to leave home. But wouldn't saying this only make me look useless? It may just be putting on appearances, but I want you to know, Ren, that we still live close to one another. You can still talk to me about anything. I don't want you to grow distant. Are you home now? It's a little past seven, and I'm in this old apartment, boxed in by odds and ends that don't belong to me, thinking about every little thing. If you are home, what are you doing? Playing video games? What did it feel like to see the signed divorce form I left there?

Twelve o'clock came and went, and I started to tire. Was it because I felt bored? When I was working, I would always have to go from one place to another. I barely had time to be tired. Sleepiness only became a habit after I was pregnant with Chuan, and even after I had her, I couldn't go back to my old routine. Sleep would sneak up on me stealthily, so that I wouldn't feel there was anything to be afraid of. I'd think I could fight it off. But when it finally pounced, I would be powerless to resist. I would fall unconscious. It was awful, really. After I had Chuan, I couldn't get rid of my fatigue. No matter how much sleep I tried to make up afterwards, I couldn't shake off exhaustion, even if I spent the whole day lying down. People say that children bring their own wealth with them, so you don't need to worry about being unable to provide for them. Yet I felt like all she brought was fatigue – all the fatigue from her past life. She sucked out all my energy. But what did Chuan give me? Upon closer examination, it seems that she gave me nothing at all. When she came, I felt the joy of being a mother, but other than that, what else did I get out of this? After her arrival, I always thought about going back to work. I liked working. It made me feel like myself. I hoped to have the chance to put my skills to use. Actually, it would be enough if I could just satisfy my own selfish desires. But you told me not to work.

Do you want to know what I really want to say to you? This is what I want to tell you, Ren:

Barely a day has gone by that I haven't thought of you. You must think I'm a huge liar to say something like this, but you're wrong. I'm not lying. I can always find you in my thoughts. It's not that I naturally think of you. I enjoy it, it makes me happy both physically and emotionally. I force myself to think of you. I don't do it naturally. I imagine lying in your embrace, but whenever I do everything turns murky, like I'm dreaming. I can't see clearly. It feels like my body is trembling, like my true self is trembling. Why on earth does this happen? I am indeed grieved. My dreams are full of pain. Are these my feelings for you, or is it simply the pleasure of deep sleep?

Why wasn't I loved? Did I not give you enough? I gave birth to an adorable daughter for you, didn't I? I've never put so much effort into a relationship with any other man.

I feel as though I've come back from another place. As if I had traveled somewhere, but can't quite remember where I went. It must have been a relatively uninteresting trip. Maybe it rained, and I just stayed in the hotel the entire time without actually going anywhere. Maybe I simply looked through the misty window with a mixture of regret and shame.

When I awoke from the haze of my trip, I looked at Mei-Chun. It felt strange. I didn't know why she was lying motionless on the floor, why blood flowed from her broken lips and forehead. Several blood-stained sheets of toilet paper lay scattered nearby. She clutched one in her hand. I gazed at her well-rounded figure. Her skin was sleek and soft, but her hands were as coarse as dried-out sponges, and her palms marked with deep, dense lines. Her hands had always been like that, no matter the time of year. They looked dry and lifeless. No matter how much oil she rubbed on them, she couldn't fix it. What had I done? I had come back from far away, and I was more exhausted than anyone else. Who had gone on this journey with me? Or had it not been a journey at all? I only felt that I had come back from somewhere. Not necessarily a trip.

When I came home from work another day, I could sense that no one breathed on the other side of the door. I was used to that. In the past, Mei-Chun would always get home after me. She was a woman who loved to work. Her job was a perfect match for her skills, and her strongest interests. It feels strange to say it. I can't understand how a woman can love something as dull as statistics. Can one have dreams in that line of work? I opened the door; although the house was completely empty, something felt different. The particles floating through the air felt lighter. Sparser. There were no expectations here. I could sense that the place had slipped into a sort of desperation. Our home seemed to have swallowed the air, an instant serenity filling its confines. Not even the constant sounds of construction work outside could penetrate it.

Then I noticed the paper on the table. I hadn't seen this kind of thing before, of course, but even from far away I could tell that it was an official document. I didn't even have to see what was written on it. The document's aura alone was enough to tell me that "Divorce Settlement Agreement" was typed along the top. I can't even say those words without stammering (can anyone?), but a divorce settlement was indeed on the table. When I walked over and picked it up, I found it as light as a feather. Was this a joke? It weighed as much as an ordinary sheet of paper. I'd expected it to be a little heavier. It should have been some special kind of paper, something with more heft to it. This represented a major life event, after all. It should be made from paper that can last without getting damaged, or at least look a little more official. It should be inside a stern-looking frame – I love anything that's framed – and some heft to accommodate the pain and grief it held.

Filled with determination, I left home. All I could think of was how violent Ren had been to me. In truth, it had only been that one time, but I was so determined that I forgot all about Chuan. You called and kept demanding that I give her back. I was confused. Why did she have to go back, and not me? In a fit of anger, I refused. You would rest easy, anyway. After all, you'd know that I would take good care of Chuan. You had your own issues to worry about, and you couldn't take care of both me and her.

We could gaze upon the city's tallest broadcast tower from inside our home. It was a major tourist destination, and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of fireworks would explode around it on the eve of the New Year. However, you could only see the tower's pointed tip on a clear day. I would often watch you standing in front of the French doors, deep in thought. Apocalyptic clouds covered the sky like a sheet. On the high-school track spreading below the windows, the red and yellow soccer teams scattered away in fear of the coming storm.

You smoked your Japanese Lucky Strikes with the desperate relish of a prisoner clinging to his hard-won cigarette. The butt, which you had flattened somewhat with your teeth, perched between your index and middle finger. You took short, measured drags, only snuffing it out once you caught the stench of burning filter. When I think of a certain place, my worries carry a similar flavor. I wasn't able to go anywhere after getting married. How often was the yearning I felt for places like this (and even if I didn't

consciously yearn for them, I was still compelled to think of them on certain occasions) linked to the passing of time? How often did it actually have to do with the places themselves?

I couldn't live like that, cherishing a nameless grief for a place while wondering what you were thinking as you stood before the window. I had been unaware of what you were thinking for a long time. Perhaps I was thinking of myself too much, but when weren't you? I was a little bit afraid. Even more afraid than I was of your violent tendencies. That violence could be predicted and instigated, and it was also your fault. What I was more afraid of was that gradual feeling of suffocation. It was like the inside of a car, locked and baking in the sun, stuffed with food-encrusted bento boxes, wrappers, empty bottles, plastic bags, and convenience-store magazines, crawling with so many maggots and black flies that they cover the manual windows. But my God, I actually enjoyed that everyday life, that world so small I could touch its borders. The world that surrounded us.

How long has it been since I've gone on a trip? I like traveling, but not with other people. In college I would occasionally travel with my very, very close girlfriend Lo-Sha. Do you still remember her, Nan? She was in our year. Yet I almost always preferred to travel alone. I liked being by myself. I didn't want to be interrupted by anything at all, like waiting before eating breakfast or heading out together, or deliberating the day's itinerary. I had no choice but to travel with Lo-Sha, which eventually led to a few arguments down the road. I fantasized about doing it alone. Now this is all but an impossibility. I can't go anywhere now. I'm stuck inside this room, unable to be alone. The thought I'll never again have the opportunity to be alone strikes fear into my heart. I'll never be alone for the rest of my life, until I finally die.

Would I want to travel with the college-aged version of you? I still remember very clearly what you were like back then. After you came back from touring the country, you showed me a photograph taken in front of a massive temple. In the photo you were wearing a shabby poncho striped with red, blue, and white, and you were sitting on a red motorbike. A helmet hung from one of the handlebars. Your blue jeans were filthy, and you wore a black backpack.

You were very tan in the picture, but you also looked cute, even delicate. The motorbike was too big for you; you could barely reach the ground with your toes. I recognized the high-tops you always wore. You looked the very image of youth – too young to know your own limitations, riding a motorbike around the island without any preparation. You couldn't even afford a proper raincoat, so you wore that red, white, and blue poncho all day. It was covered with raindrops and streaks of mud. I could almost smell the plastic odor clinging to you.

After you came back, I resented the fact that you hadn't told me about your trip beforehand. If you traveled around the island, why didn't you come south to visit me? I was spending the entire summer vacation back home in the south. If you had come, I could have accompanied you for a little while. We could have gone to the peninsula together. I would have been more than willing to spend the nights with you. I was sure that you wouldn't try anything; after all, I was almost twice your size. But why didn't you tell me? And why didn't you try anything with me? Did you have something better to do? And who would want to be with someone as swarthy as you? Did you think about that? Plus, you were a freshman student sporting a crew cut that made you look like a fugitive. Who but someone as odd as I would want to talk to you, spend the entire night with you, stay with you every step of the way? You didn't visit me; instead you went looking for another female classmate. She was so pretty, and her family worked in medicine, but I couldn't care less. I didn't try to compare myself to those kinds of people. I knew that I was worth loving.

Was I right? I don't think so anymore, but I also don't know what became of that girl. Maybe she ended up even worse off than I. If the two of us had gone traveling together, we would have gotten along really well. I'm sure we would never have run out of things to talk about. Just like – do you remember,

Nan? For two years, like clockwork, you would meet me after class twice a week. As we walked across that broad campus, sipping our beverages, all the way to the bus that took us to our cram school, we filled every last second with conversation. It was really unbelievable, because neither of us usually liked to talk that much. Come to think of it, our conversations seem really boring now. Back then we would just chat about homework.

I didn't enjoy riding motorbikes; I didn't know how to. A man should be able to drive, but you still can't – can you still call yourself a man? Would I have been able to ride that motorbike with you back then, and travel around the country? I would have looped my arms around your waist, pressed myself against your tattered poncho, breathing in that sharp plastic smell, and wearing a wet, smelly, suffocating helmet – I wouldn't have been able to stand it. Neither would you, always feeling my chest pressing against you. Even so, we still might have been able to keep talking the entire time. We would have talked as the wind blew against us, as dust and insects flew into my mouth, all the way until we dismounted somewhere and washed our faces. I'm a serious person and a stickler for cleanliness. While I'm far from being "refined", I would never want to travel around this island covered in sweat and dirt. I can't imagine myself being like that before, but now? What right do I have to fantasize about these things now?

...Except for the guard, with whom we occasionally exchange a few words, we don't really know anyone else in our neighborhood. This isn't strange, though. That's how people are nowadays; nobody knows anyone. A while back, I wasn't getting along well with our neighbors downstairs because of a decoration-related dispute. We both issued complaints against one another to the condo authority. However, when I decided to go knock on their door, they just hid inside their home and refused to answer. Maybe they saw me through the peephole and were afraid that I would hurt them.

A community like ours is able to hire decent security. Three guards rotate on morning, afternoon, and night shifts. They all wear grayish-blue shirts, dark blue ties, and black suit pants. In the winter, they add jackets with shoulder insignias, or dark blue jackets. Their shoulder insignias had stars, similar to military symbols. Don't those outfits sound ridiculous, Ren?

I'm not sure why none of their clothes seem to fit. They probably only have a few sizes to choose from, but slap on those military symbols in order to make themselves look professional. They might think it makes them look organized, but nothing could be further from the truth. These guards were all unemployed, middle-aged men. A few are older. Each of them has a permanently bored expression. It's quite a momentous occasion if any of them smile. You remember how one of them used to ask everyone for money. Once I even gave him 60 dollars in good faith. He spent the entire day visiting residents and telling them that he had the day off, but he needed money because his father was sick. He was younger than the other guards, and always smiled at us, so we trusted him, and he picked up one or two thousand dollars from each apartment he visited. Over the course of the day, he amassed at least 6,000 dollars. He didn't show up the next day, and we wondered why another guard had replaced him. After asking around, we discovered he had asked the company for time off, claiming his father was very ill. When the higher-ups asked him when he was coming back, he said never; he was quitting. The company couldn't reach him, and none of the residents knew where he went, so the company had no other choice but to reimburse the residents for the money they had lost. Some people had lent the guard money in the past, and they took this opportunity to try to get their money back from the company.

A red banner hangs above the community activity center (it's actually just a room with a few bookshelves piled with children's books, a couple of broken-down exercise machines, and a bathroom for the security staff). It reads "Conference for Condominium Ownership." In front of it, white pieces of paper had been arranged to spell out "2015." Adjacent to the center was a guard room with enough space for

two people to move around. It used to get horribly hot in there, so they eventually had an air conditioner installed.

There was a fire alarm inside the room, and a security device mounted on one wall. I had never been inside, but even from outside it was still possible to see a long, narrow desk with documents scattered upon it. Behind the desk was a metal filing cabinet. I have no idea what it held. The security device's black and white monitor showed an array of silent scenes: cars soundlessly entering the underground parking garage, residents soundlessly entering and exiting elevators, or opening the doors of their homes. Each scene became very sterile once it had been stripped of its sound. They felt harmless, as though their respective energies would never touch this world. Even if someone were to collapse and die on the monitor, the viewer would still feel detached from the event. These images were all in black and white; with their color extracted, they lost their weight, becoming as light as snowflakes in the wind, as meaningless as actors working against backdrops. But the guards never devoted much time to looking at the cameras, anyway.

While I don't claim to have the best temper, I would absolutely never strike Mei-Chun when she acted out. I would want to, but be unable to do it. My patience only ran out when she started hitting the table. I allowed her to work, as she had wished, because we needed the extra income. My salary as a public servant was not enough to support our family. I wasn't heartless, though. When she became pregnant, I told her to stay at home and protect her health. She wasn't as strong as she looked. It isn't an easy thing for a woman to return to the workforce. My best intentions caused her to leave it. Perhaps delaying her return became my greatest mistake, but wasn't I doing it for her sake? She was always anxious. She wanted to get back to work as soon as possible and wouldn't stop fretting about the matter. What was the use? She was healthy, and our child was healthy. Weren't these the best possible results?

Yes, I did hit her. I really do regret it. I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't vented my anger then, but if you asked me whether I wanted to hit her again, I would say no. I don't want to hit anyone else in this lifetime. If I did, I would have beaten my manager to a pulp a long time ago, and she's a woman too. I don't expect Mei-Chun to forgive me. As far as a woman like her is concerned, I committed the most unforgivable act I possibly could have.

It was more than a single punch. First I pushed her down, and sat on the floor. She looked at me in terror, not at all expecting her usually calm, unassuming husband to act this way. I hadn't either; in fact, I was more shocked than she was. I was the kind of person to grumble about moving my motorbike into a parking space. Over the past few years I had felt myself growing much older. I could feel my body failing. While I wasn't that old, relatively speaking, my strength really was not what it used to be. It was gradually draining from me, so slowly that I could barely perceive it.

When I sat down on the floor, I tried to keep my emotions under control. I felt angry, but wanted to suppress it like before. Yet when I saw her face, I suddenly felt disgusted. I clearly loved this woman. Even though she was three years older than I and neurotic, I loved her. I could tell that the terror in her face would quickly transform into disdain. She would then throw a few biting remarks my way, such as how I was too lazy to do housework (although I clearly did plenty). I put a hand on her shoulder so she couldn't move, but I could distance myself from her wildly kicking feet. At first I had wanted to strike her directly in the face, but I was just too angry. I was clutching my fist so tightly I thought I might burst a blood vessel. I could have just hit her, but I still had my wits about me, and things weren't as simple. Before I could hit her, I felt a stab of regret. I couldn't hurt her. I flailed at the air, but since none of those punches were directed at her, it didn't feel satisfying.

I took one swing after another in front of her. By now, she was utterly terrified, and shrieked like I was about to murder her. I could have choked her, but her neck was too thick. Could I really strangle her to death? I may be just shy of six feet tall, but my frame is slight. I saw tears roll down her face, but couldn't stop. Not yet. I brandished my fist at her, seemingly to flaunt my strength (although that wasn't my intent). Then my fist became an open hand; stretching my palm wide, I slapped her cheek. She probably expected me to hit hard, so she shut her eyes tight and screamed, but most of my anger had already dissipated. I waited until my hand was inches from her cheek before striking her face my palm three or four times. She must have felt the power in those blows, firm and fueled by rage. Suddenly her hands came towards my face. I let go of her shoulder and raised that hand to protect myself. She tried to get up. I didn't want to let her move, so my other hand pushed back against her forehead. The back of her head thudded against the wooden floor, and she screamed again in terror. Realizing that she hadn't fainted, I grabbed her head like a volleyball, digging my fingers into the corner of her mouth, and held her down against the floor. The two of us stayed motionless like statues. For how long, I don't know.