

Lost Stories

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To everyone, everything that has been in my life.

## Abstract

The owner of the laundromat by the corner of my temporarily sublet room in New York once told me his life story randomly on the last day I went to dry my bedding. We had never spoken before because we both weren't sure if the other spoke Mandarin.

It's a long and intricate one, so long and intricate that he could write his own book and become the protagonist of a realist novel. If one word could describe this world and the life we all live, it should be "Wuchang." According to various authoritative Chinese-to-English dictionaries, it could mean unpredictable, uncertain, transient, and phantasmagorical.

It's the phantasmagorical nature of the world that creates our stories and makes everyone the protagonist of their life, including objects. When I open an old cabinet, I see the two faces of its life. One side is the perfect paint, with some careless scratches and carefully replaced knobs and locks. The other side is the unfinished drawer cases, filled with dust and emptiness. Every object lost in time is a capsule of stories and memories about living, making, observing, and experiencing.

This is a story about the afterlife of objects, as well as encounters and memories. I trust the randomness of life and serendipity to meet these objects and leave my own marks on them. I rewrite their stories based on who they were and who I am.

I wander in the river of time, flowing with pieces of memories, and seek the goldfish that could swim in the gully between the forgotten and now.

## Collection Statement

Lost Stories presents a collection of furniture and objects featuring a deconstructive reimagination of antique furniture with the aim of passing on the stories of people and objects lost in time. Encountering furniture that has outlasted the unknown lives of those who created them, lived with them, and left marks on them, the collection intends to evoke a sense of humanity by delving into objects' encapsulated stories and memories. By deconstructing thrifted antique furniture into components, Lost Stories returns furniture to a raw material state and liberates narratives and puzzles of the past from their preconceived forms. The new materiality includes elements such as dirty paint, scratches, glue marks, and dust. By collaging the deconstructed materials into a minimalistic form and adding the illustrative silhouette of the original object back to the new design, the collection continues the reincarnation of an object as well as the story of life behind it in a sustainable way.

# I. Lost Stories

1.

I had spent months thinking and finally writing this story, but when it happened last summer, it was as short as twenty-eight minutes.

During my short stay in New York for an internship, I lived in a little old apartment between Ridgewood and Bushwick by the L train. Before moving in, a friend informed me that it was a neighborhood of mixed people—mixed culture, mixed ethnicity, and mixed language.

My landlord was an old Latino lady living with her giant dog, who disliked one of my roommates. My favorite second hand furniture store happened to be only four blocks away from me. The owner of my temporary room was coincidentally the childhood friend of my teacher.

On the corner of the house was the laundromat that I usually visited once a week. Like many laundromats in New York City, this one was owned by an old Chinese man who didn't speak English well. I never tried to talk to him when I did my laundry, partly because I was too introverted to speak to a total stranger, and partly because I wasn't sure if he spoke Mandarin.

He had the face of a southern Chinese man—dark skin, big sagging eyes, and wrinkles. As I tried to recall his face, the image of him fused with that of my high school PE teacher's. I could tell he was a hard worker in his early life even before we had our conversation.

2.

He was always at the counter or somewhere around the laundromat. Most of the time, he sat in the cramped space behind the counter, watching TV dramas aloud in Cantonese. Sometimes he would be outside the shop, chatting with his friends in broken English or a southern Chinese dialect that I couldn't recognize. It seemed he lived in the basement of the building, as I always saw him coming out from the low staircase with a huge bag on my way to the train station.

We had only talked once, on the day I was going to leave the city and do my laundry for the last time. I couldn't remember what triggered the conversation, but I remembered he tried to talk to me kindly in Minnan, and I responded with, "I'm sorry, do you speak Mandarin?"

He spoke Mandarin fluently. He came from Fuzhou, a city rich with the sea in southern China, where people are famous for being loyal to traditional culture and hustling.

As I could tell from his face, he had a hard life in his early years. He was born into a poor family and quit school early to become a railway worker in the 1970s, during the golden age of the government-operated railway company at the end of the Cultural Revolution.

He went to a mountainous town in the far southwest, which happens to be where my dad originally came from. After years of sweat and hard work, he became a small leader in his team.

3.

As his narrative unfolded further, the mystery deepened about how he ended up living in this tiny laundromat in New York. There was a blank space between his earlier life and his current situation, like two ends of a thread that had yet to be woven together, intertwining with numerous other threads.

Finally finding the right moment to ask, "How did you come to the United States?" I noticed a smile spread across his face.

For a moment, it seemed as though old memories had momentarily pulled him away from the present. He remained seated at the cramped counter of the laundromat, sorting quarters into detergent caps as he continued to speak. He carefully placed ten quarters in a cap, which could buy 25 minutes of washing machine time and 28 minutes of drying.

Then, he spoke: "I have two wives. One in America, one in China."

4.

He always managed to make a lot of friends wherever he went. He believed that friendship was the key to learning, and it was through these connections that opportunities came his way. He started a business with a friend in a small town in Sichuan, following the trend of selling natural building materials from the mountains to the city. As his business grew bigger and bigger, he eventually owned four factories by the year 2000.

It was during this time that he met his first wife. Introduced by a matchmaker, he married a young girl who was considered the flower and butterfly of his hometown. At the time of their marriage, she was still an 18-year-old post-teenager, who accepted the union under her mother's suggestions.

"My wife didn't like me, I knew that" he recounted. "She was seven years younger than me. So pretty and young. I didn't even dare to stand next to her because of how unmatched we looked— I didn't look good when I was young."

"We have a son. He's a few years older than you. Now he's a policeman." With pride, he showed me a picture of his grandsons on his phone. "Our marriage started off well, even though she didn't like me."

The divorce occurred ten years later. His wife had developed a gambling addiction, forcing him to sell all his businesses to pay off her debts. "I paid all her bills, and then left her. After so many years of hard work, I went back to my beginning point."

Emotionally, he found himself back where he began at the same time.



He and his first love had grown up together and fallen in love in high school. She was the daughter of a government officer who wished she could marry a decent man. He had left home to find his own path in the railway company. However, upon his return with success and wealth, he discovered that she had married a captain arranged by her father.

"She became my second wife," he recalled, his eyes betraying a mix of emotions every time he spoke of her— delight, pity, yearning, appreciation, and much more that I couldn't quite grasp. "She was a smart woman but also an unlucky one."

5.

On my cab ride from Bushwick to the bus station in midtown, the lingering warmth of the story I had just heard continued to rewind in my mind. In our last ten minutes of conversation, he told me how he had decided to come to the United States to reunite with his first love, despite not knowing how to speak English. Together, they opened the laundromat before she tragically passed away from cancer. Despite the sadness, they had shared many wonderful moments together.

As I sat in the backseat, gazing at the passing scenes outside the window, I suddenly noticed the white hair of my Latino taxi driver reflected on the glass. It swirled out from his semi-bald head like growth rings on a tree. I remembered the moment he had greeted me when I opened the door of the old yellow cab. If he were willing to share his life with me, it would offer a different version of the ups and downs that have been flushed out by the flood called "Time" and "Oblivion".

"Rosebud. Rosebud. Rosebud."

In the journey of life, we all walk through it equally. If there were no gods in the world, we would be the only ones able to remember our own stories.

## Afterword

Since childhood, I've harbored a deep empathy for the lives of strangers who pass by me. I feel grateful for their ephemeral existence in my life and recognize how mere seconds of crossing paths could potentially alter the trajectory of my destiny. I find myself wishing for something or someone that could remember all the liveliness that has existed in the world and eventually faded away.

A Unnamed Poem By Kanoko Okamoto

Aging, as years pass,  
deepens my melancholy

But my life, day after day,  
growingly glows

Written by Kanoko Okamoto, in the tone of an anonymous old geisha in the short story *The Old Geisha*. Translated by Yuxuan Huang.

## II. Telling Stories Through Objects

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### *Cabinet I*

Paint, wood

L 26" - W 14" - H 53.5"

Cabinet I is made from the deconstructed materials of a found dresser. Reversing the original dresser inside out, and maintaining all the marks of usage, Cabinet I is a tale of the unknown craftsman, the life of an old object, and a time capsule transformed into a cabinet of curiosities. This piece is part of the artist's ongoing series, Lost Stories, featuring a deconstructive reimagination of antique furniture and passing on the stories of objects that have been lost in time.









*Cabinet II*

Paint, wood

L 28" - W 15" - H 59"

Cabinet II is made from the deconstructed materials of a found dresser made between the 1870s to 1900s.







*Table I: Dear Frances*

Southern Yellow Pine

L 44" - W 40" - H 14"

Table I is made from the deconstructed materials of a 1800s found pine dresser with hand cut dovetails.









*Chair I*

Wood, Paint

L 17.5" - W 17.5" - H 34"









### III. My Story

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#### *Pieces of Memory*

It is a vague but vivid one. It's my impression of summer before eight, starting with the light coming through the shadow of trees, a swing bed, and my grandma.

My grandma used to take me to a village in the mountains for summer when I was a kid. I think most of my connections with nature were built by then. The story of those memories is vague, the passing of time only left me with some fragments and sensory impressions.

*Swing*

*Light*

*Run*

*Smell*

*Coolness*

*Shadow*

*People*

## 1. Swing

We loved to hang a swing bed between trees in a small forest at the top of the mountain. The trees and mountains in Sichuan are different from everywhere else in the world. They're so tall and have barely been disturbed by the existence of human beings because of the high altitude.

As I was a little one, those trees and mountains seemed even taller than they should be. Lying in the swing bed, when my grandma took a noon nap, I would keep my eyes wide open and stare at the light coming through the leaves.

## 2. Run

My aunt told me a fun story which I don't remember at all. When my aunt and uncle visited us in the small village during weekends, my uncle would always carry me on his shoulder, bringing me up and down the mountain. My grandma was quite surprised when she discovered this, because when they were not around, I always ran up and down the hill freely like a small rabbit. I guess I was a little liar and pretended I couldn't walk by myself to my uncle, so I could be on his shoulder and in the middle of the air.

### 3. Smell

As I grew up and became an elementary school student, my annual trip to the small village in summer ended. My grandma started to travel by herself in summer, and I became busy with summer courses.

When I revisited the little village in 2021, it's already been 14 years since the severe earthquake happened in Sichuan in 2008. Everything I see becomes so different from what I remember. People from the village had moved to the town at the bottom of the mountain, and trees were no longer tall and big.

But the smells of the mountain hadn't changed. So does my old habit of sniffing everything.

The mountain air is as moist and cool as it was thousands of years ago. The mist still brings the smell of mud, ferns, and all the unknown to the midst of air, like the one I enjoyed when I ran through the narrow uphill path and sat on my uncle's shoulder.

I used to pick all the sprouts of bamboo on my way home from the riverbank and bring them to my grandma. I believed the sprouts of bamboo were tea because their fresh smell and greenness were better than any bitter tea I've sneakily tasted from my dad's delicate teacups.

#### 4. River

The little town where the village is located is named after the river that runs through it. Translating its meaning directly into English, the river is called the white water.

The river is clear and shallow. I don't know exactly where it comes from, but all the rivers in Sichuan are branches of ice water from the mountains in Tibet and keep the coolness of their origin.

I liked to stand in the middle of the river, let the water flow through my legs, watch it glittering under the sun, and see the tree shadow swinging on its surface.

I liked to build "dams" on the river, picking the heaviest and biggest rocks I could carry and lining them up across the river. It was my "A Line Made by Walking"[1]

I liked to walk and jump with bare feet on the giant rocks on the riverbank, scare small crabs out of their homes, and force them to the light from the shadow of rock gaps.

I liked to watch my mom sitting on top of the rock; she was still young in her flowery dress. When my dad was playing in the water with me, she would be on one of giant rocks, having a book in her hand, but never really reading it. She still has this habit, and she could fall asleep easily after reading a page or two.

## 5. People

I grew up surrounded by a lot of people. I have a large close family and family friends. My grandma is a very energetic and sociable old lady, and I was always popular among her friends.

In the white-water village, my grandma quickly made a lot of friends, including the hosting family of the large country hotel we stayed in, summer patrons of the hotel like us, new travelers, and local people. It's a true mix of people. They're Kungfu masters who have been showcased on TV and taught me to play swords, a retired nurse lady who loves to tell horror stories, the "cow grandpa" who runs bullock cart as transportation in the town, "sisters" and "brothers" from the hosting family who like to trick me and once tricked me into the dunghill of a pig hole...

The mix of people like this is an epitome of society and human beings. They're normal, they make mistakes, but they're lovely and warm. I think the biggest driving force, which is never a clear logical topic in my work, but intuitively led me to make furniture and objects, is my love for this world and the people who live in it. They make me feel this world is still hopeful, and light will always come to me as it did when I lay in the swing bed under the tall, tall trees.

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These slices of memory of White-Water River have come up to me countless times after I started art making. I'm an oblivious person and something like this doesn't happen often. I have never lived in the countryside again after eight years old, but my connection and closeness to nature remain and subconsciously influence my choices of material, concept, and imagination.

I'm still this little girl when I'm making art, who loves to ponder and wonder.

My grandma liked to chase me around for feeding me because of my bad diet habit. She chased after me in the courtyard of the family hotel. Outside of the gate is the tomb of the host's grandpa. They grow daisies on the tomb; in summer, it's a small hill full of blooms. I remember we ran endlessly in the courtyard, like how I ran into the river, and how I ran into adulthood.

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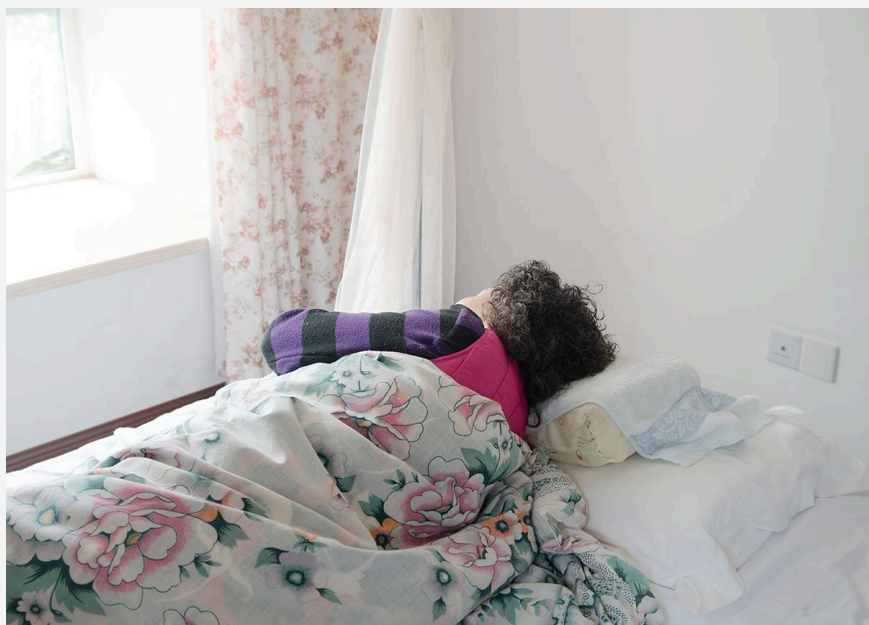
[1] A Line Made by Walking, 1967, Richard Long



*The Grave that Grows Flowers, 2020*

A Photo Collection inspired by my memory living in  
White-Water Village







## *How I Write, How I Make*

### Part I: Poems

I write in a language called “design.” Not for fantasy or romance, but the world around me—the life I observe, ponder, and love. I switch between the fields of design and fine arts, but regardless of the medium I work in, delivering my thoughts about the world through my poetics and stories is always my theme.

I understand the word “poetic” to mean “having an imaginative or sensitively emotional style of expression.” To clarify, I don’t write poems in my work, but I discover the poetics that already exist in the world—through materials, simplistic forms, light, and shadows. I believe poetics is the world, and I have a sight for that.

The sense of poetics is always highly related to nature because of its beauty, vagueness, constant change, and the atmosphere or aura it shapes. In the realm of furniture making, all the beauty of nature is embedded in the subtlety of materiality—the substances we gather from nature and manipulate through our human minds. I intend to find the right forms and techniques to bring out their hidden poetics and deliver these messages to living spaces through my objects.

### Part II: Stories

I write stories—stories about people, humans, and lives. Stories not only about the beautiful poetics of the world, but also about sorrow, the unpredictable, and sighs. Since childhood, I’ve harbored a deep empathy for the lives of strangers who pass by me. I feel grateful for

their ephemeral existence in my life and recognize how mere seconds of crossing paths could potentially alter the trajectory of my destiny. I wish for something or someone who could remember all the liveliness that has existed in the world and eventually faded away.

I tell stories through furniture. I see furniture as a capsule of faded memories and an ongoing witness of time and life. Through the stories I tell, I seek a care for humanity in furniture making beyond form, functionality, and materiality. Furniture is life itself.

Stories belong to people, and I'm a person—a very normal person. I live a mundane life and appreciate each normal day's sunrise. Life is life. We're in it; we can't leave it; so, we love it. If there's something that can break the rigidity of life, it should be its own uncertainty and chaos. If there's something more beautiful than life, it should be its own unwritten story and poetics.

That's why I make furniture.

# Afterwords

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## *Time*

A constant theme in my work is time—the present and the past. It's never a topic that I consciously try to pursue, but the end results always reflect my concern for this fourth dimension of the world. I began my art-making career with photography, a medium that captures time, through the preservation of fleeting moments and making them eternal. Although many philosophers have argued about this, I believe, by its nature, photography is a medium of nostalgia. It can only document what has happened in the world, whether staged or real. The photograph is evidence of what has existed.

It's also a medium of storytelling. Part of my study involved sequencing, using a series of photographs to shape a concept or an ambiguous story. The presence of time becomes vague in those stories—they're about the past but composed of images made in the present. Then, when printed on matte or semi-glossy paper and seen in an empty white room, the eternal quality of photography turns them into stories for the future.

After studying photography for two years, I moved on to installations and designed objects. For me, they are more "real" than

photography. I love seeing people interact with what I create. I use functionality as a trigger to allure people to touch and spend time with my works. For me, objects become the present—a living thing that keeps rotating its arms with time. It will age, be defeated by endlessness, and decay, but that's also why it's so real.

When the idea of “Lost Stories” comes to me, it throws me back to my earliest dream. I wanted to become an archaeologist before dreaming of being a writer and then an artist. I obsessed over pieces of bones and ceramics buried under the earth. I like watching documentaries about how archaeologists trace the story of a forgotten era or society through fragments of objects. How did people live in those times? We all know the history of those prosperous dynasties through the macro historian lens, but I'm curious about the lives not documented in the big pictures. I want to see the well-protected historical buildings back to when they were just one of the houses people normally lived in.

After making objects for years, I finally went back to the process of creating my photography work in design. Enchanted by materials from the past, I build the story through a perspective of here and now. I capture the past in the objects I create. I don't make them eternal, and neither did the photographs printed on the paper. What makes them eternal and real is how you remember them, perceive them and live with them.

## *Sustainability*

I thrift a lot for my clothes, but I never expected I would thrift furniture for my projects. I like to go to vintage shops and bookstores in the afternoons after leaving work early. In those cluttered shops, organized by the shop owner's personal logic (sometimes it can be messy), you can smell the thickness of information — information from different times, different visuals, and different touches. It's like a messed-up oil painting that has been retouched by skilled or amateur painters from different eras for different reasons. The original has been covered by layers of paint, but you know it's hidden somewhere underneath the cover.

Whenever you buy a dress from a vintage store, it's a chance to give it a rebirth. A new owner, a new body shape, a new way of dressing, and a new life. With a hint of aging and empathy for something that has been abandoned and left behind.

Recently, a lot of people have mentioned the sustainable side of “Lost Stories” to me. Although making this project sustainable was never my intention, it is something I'm doing and would love to explore. I love this world and the people around me; that's why I always care about the environment. However, I have never been persuaded by biomaterials or all the man-made new materials.



When I see these materials, I feel they lack a touch of humanity. I never loved the scientific side of them. Creating a new material is a human behavior that tries to mimic a process that only belongs to nature. The core belief of this practice is that humans are still in power and can do what nature can do.

I want to truly embrace, appreciate, and coexist with the power of nature. While most people look for something new, I prefer to look at what is here and now, something that has been marked by time. I believe this is where care for humanity can be addressed through materiality for sustainability.