

In this short script, I chose to adapt a pivotal scene in Yu Hua's *Classical Romance* for the screen. Chapter 3 is filled with excruciating violence. Even amidst the slew of horrifying images, the scene in the tavern when Willow discovers that his beloved, Hui, is being chopped alive for consumption is still one of the most horrifying moments in the story. By choosing to write this scene of unimaginable violence into the format of a screenplay, I sought to tackle the very thesis of how to represent the unrepresentable. Using the exterior landscape to convey the stifling sense of futility and barrenness burdening Willow's agency and the interior mise-on-scène in the tavern to reflect Willow's interiority and psychological neurosis, I used various visuals and cinematography to represent the temporality, shock, and absurdity of violence.

By using various film techniques such as close ups (in particular, shot reverse shot), montage of images (to convey flashbacks and other deeply disturbing, violent images through abstract expressionism), various camera angles (especially Point of View shots, to immerse the audience into the character's subjectivity), natural lighting (since the story takes place before the invention of electricity), and various diegetic and offscreen sounds, I sought to avoid any explicit gore (never showing Hui's wounds or missing leg), and to focus on *implying* violence with the full power of emotional trauma.

EXT. ROAD - SPRING - DAY

Silence.

The sun is white hot, almost blinding. PAN DOWN to a yellow, dusty road that disappears into the horizon. There are a few pairs of footprints embedded in the dust, but none from livestock.

We hear the low, steady sound of footsteps, uneven panting, and a rhythmic clatter with every step. The camera is slightly shaky. We realize that we are in the P.O.V. of a trudging character.

REVEAL: WILLOW (20), dressed in a faded, old dark green cotton robe over coarsely woven pants. His features are faintly handsome, in a classical scholarly way. Pale face, sad eyes, and a gentle countenance. He is carrying a gray bundle that swings with every step. The rhythmic clatter comes from within.

PULL OUT: We now see that the road he is walking on is a highway winding between earthy, barren fields that stretch as far as the eye can see. Strewn sparsely on both sides are remnants of bamboo fences, now twisted out of shape, and the dilapidated remains of thatched roofs. Bits of thatch shudder with the onslaught of a sudden WIND.

CLOSE ON: Willow, his face is covered in a sheen of sweat. He is tired and thirsty.

HIS P.O.V.: Yellow road ahead. Sweat drips into his eyes. Everything becomes slightly blurry.

CLOSE ON: A slow despair creeps across Willow's face.

HIS P.O.V.: Amidst the blur, emerges an outline of a weeping willow.

The IMAGE of a green, blossoming weeping willow swaying in the breeze. We hear a girlish giggle and the sound of gushing water.

CLOSE ON: Willow's eyes seem dilated. He scrunches his eyes shut and then opens them.

The IMAGE fades...

There is a willow tree by desolate stream bed. It is withered, shorn of its leaves.

Slowly, from behind its gnarred trunk, we see tendrils of smoke.

REVEAL: a thatched cottage.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Willow enters and sees that the cottage is a tavern. A few plates of white boiled meat are laid out on a counter.

A small and thin man, who is the PROPRIETOR, spots him. He beams, eyes lighting up.

PROPRIETOR

Welcome, welcome! What is it that you'd like? We have meat too if you want.

The proprietor ushers Willow to a table. Aside from one other table which is occupied by a party of three, the rest of the tables is empty.

The party of three is a MERCHANT and his two servants. The merchant is dressed richly in brocades, drinking from a cup of wine. He looks up and slaps a few ingots of silver on the tabletop.

MERCHANT

Good! I want some meat.
(a beat)
Not the ones on the counter, I want mine fresh.

PROPRIETOR

Right away!
(Turns to Willow)
Any for you?

WILLOW

Just tea and cakes for me.

PROPRIETOR

Coming right up!

The proprietor brings Willow the tea and cakes, and then disappears into an adjacent room.

Willow drains his tea in one swallow. He begins to eat.

SUDDENLY, a horrific, gut-wrenching SCREAM slices the air -a protracted sound coming from the adjacent room. The scream is

indisputably human.

CLOSE ON: Willow, frozen. His eyes widen. He looks like he just got punched. Slowly, stiffly, he turns his head to look towards the source of the scream.

SQUEAK. The sound of an ax being wrenched from bone.

Steady sounds of hacking fill the tavern.

EXT. ROAD - SUMMER - DAY

Sunlight washes over the thatched cottage. The air is still and taut, but the cottage looks almost picturesque in the calm.

And then... Shreds of screams punch their way outside from within the cottage, like a sustained tide of sound ebbing and flowing. Nothing flutters outside.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

Inside, the minced cries continue with the loud, rhythmic sounds of the axe bearing down. There is a symphony of sounds, the hacking and the screams rising and falling in unison.

CLOSE ON: Willow, quietly transfixed but his body betrays him with shudders.

Willow turns to look at the merchant and his two servants. They are nonchalantly drinking wine. The merchant glances impatiently up at the door.

The sounds from the room begins to taper off.

It is now a woman's MOAN.

Ugly pause.

CLOSE ON: Willow, as a sledgehammer of realization hits him. He abruptly stands up.

The moans fade...

START FLASHBACK:

FLASHBACK - EXT. GARDEN - DAY/NIGHT

FADE IN: Soft murmurs of chanted poetry, like pearls delicately dripping on a plate, or like a zither being

plucked. The flow of sound eerily similar to the moans.

AN ARRAY OF MEMORIES AND IMAGES DISSOLVE ONE INTO THE OTHER: Willow, three years ago, in a beautiful garden in full bloom, a beautiful maiden's face peering out of a window in a tower, a gathering thunderstorm, Willow climbing up a rope into the tower in the darkness of the night, a flickering candlelight, clasped hands.

DISSOLVING ABSTRACTLY: Through fragments of conversation...

WILLOW
(passionately)
My name is Willow.

MAIDEN
(shyly)
My name is Hui...

WILLOW
(sadly)
Today it seems we must part... Though
we may never meet again...

MAIDEN
(outburst)
Please remember this... Leave soon,
but return soon.

The IMAGE of Willow on the yellow road in the gentle light of dawn. He is proud and buoyant. A spring in his steps and greenery all around him.

CLOSE ON: his hands. A lacquer-black lock of hair, stark against a pink handkerchief embroidered with mandarin ducks.

END FLASHBACK.

EXT. ROAD - SUMMER - DAY

Beside the thatched cottage, the withered willow tree casts its shadow on the brown earth. The tree's shadow on the ground looks like flailing limbs.

Suddenly, a gust of wind. CRACK. One of the withered branches falls to the ground. THUMP.

INT. TAVERN - DAY

CLOSE ON: Willow's feet, stumbling across the tavern towards the adjacent room in SLOW MOTION. The now delicate moans

suffuse the room, like the purling of flowing water.

We explode through the door, into:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

SPINNING, NIGHTMARISH, EXPRESSIONISTIC IMAGES of the Kitchen coated in red: An axe left half sunk in the ground, the excruciatingly loud sounds of dripping, a bucket placed beneath the table full of blood, and then from the window...

A hard, dusty shaft of sunlight that spills onto a female FACE. It is HUI (18), the maiden in the flashback. Her face is contorted in absolute agony and coated with beads of sweat. Her long black hair fans out behind her head like a HALO.

The moaning continues.

CLOSE ON: Her dull and lusterless eyes. We see Willow approach her from the reflection in her eyes.

WILLOW (O.S.)
(sharp cry)
Maiden Hui!

No sign of recognition in Hui's eyes. She doesn't even blink.

Willow looks squarely at her and pulls out the pink handkerchief with the lock of hair and puts it before Hui's eyes.

WILLOW
Hui! It's me, it's Willow.

The moans come to a sudden HALT.

CLOSE ON: Hui's eyes. She blinks. Her eyes grow soft and luminous with tenderness, and reddens.

Willow begins to sob.

HUI
(hoarsely)
They've taken my leg. Please, please
get it back for me. I don't have long
to live, but let me be whole.
(with a burst of intensity)
And I beg of you, kill me in one
stroke.

Willow looks at her through his tears. A look of determination sweeps over him. He nods.

CLOSE ON: Hui's face. She now looks serene. Her gaze is tranquil, remote. We stay FIXED on her face through the remaining fragments of speech:

WILLOW (O.S.)
I've brought it to you.

Hui's lips curl into a smile.

We hear Willow's heavy breathing.

WILLOW (O.S.)
(sharp cry)
Farewell!

Hui's face spasms, recoiling violently for a moment, and then settles into a look of placidity.

A shadow obscures the light on her face. Willow picks her up and cradles her in his arms.

We drift, in HIS P.O.V., through the door and into the tavern, and then as he walks out of the wine shop, into a dazzling burst of sunlight.

EXT. ROAD - SUMMER - DAY

DISCOVER: The withered willow tree swaying in the breeze, flanking the desolate little stream.

PUSH TOWARD: The viscous, clouded stream.

As a sad, sweet moan plays, blending with the gentle sounds of the purling stream, we DRIFT, as if by boat, down the surface of the water.

The overhead sky is REFLECTED in the water. As we continue drifting, like a TIME LAPSE, the water slowly transforms from muddy to glitteringly clear.

CLOSE ON: A white fish, ambling back and forth.

As the sun sets like a red disk, the water takes on a sheen of RED that swallows the white of the fish... There is an almost milky veneer, as the red grows thicker, like blood before fading into BLACK.

THE END.