letter from the editor

lineage  oriana tang

the news  oriana tang

notes from a nondescript building  stephen williams-ortega

mujer  annie f. cheng

soap  julia gourary

ghost town  mariab kreutter

against an arachnid  patrick shea

okay being multiple selves  an interview with aidan koch

dirty revolution  annie f. cheng

grand moulin  dimitri diagne

turning  rachel kaufman

consiglio  griffin brown

wanderlost  sunnie liu

unsweet tea  sarah pearl heard

the ethics of martyrdom  annie f. cheng

simchat torah  eve romm
letter from the editor

This fall the Lit has been clearing out its office, a small room in the basement of Welch Hall that, for as long as I’ve been here, has looked like a hoarder’s den. Magazines dating back to the late eighties fill boxes stacked up to the ceiling. In an effort to revitalize the space — and because Yale threatened to revoke our access unless we did something about the mess — we’ve shelved ten of each issue, and plan to recycle the rest. The task has given us a chance to reflect on the magazine’s history, particularly its design evolution: in the last few decades it’s gone from a standardized, saddle-stitch format to its current style, where no two issues are alike and anything goes. The Fall 2009 Lit unfolds into a giant poster. Another, from the spring of 2012, takes the form of an Air Mail envelope, each piece tucked inside. The one you’re holding, created by Julia Ma and just 4” x 6”, calls to mind a design dummy. Flipping through you’ll see hidden characters — the symbols used in layout — appear and disappear.
Julia’s design celebrates the process of assembling a magazine like this one, and it led me to think about the hours put in by each of the writers and artists whose work appears in these pages. In our culture, with certain kinds of productivity prized above others, it’s common practice to defend art-making as a worthwhile endeavor. It’s our belief that the pieces in this issue justify themselves. We hope that they will serve for you, as they have for us, as an affirmation of the ability of writing, drawing, painting, and photography to move and inspire.

tom cusano  editor-in-chief
I make hot chocolate the way my mother does: heating milk on the stove until it develops a skin.

It is summer. Slow rain slaps the asphalt. I live on a quiet street no one enters unless they’ve lost their way.

In the apartment next door, two girls split a bottle of prosecco. I watch them through the window: the color of the wine changing green to yellow as it spills from bottle to glass, their faces serious as they pour.

I had a grandmother who died of lung cancer. The cancer came from cooking fumes, the hours she labored in the cinder block kitchen behind her apartment.

That was two years after our first meeting: her face immense before my own.
I was five. I had a velvet dress. 
She gave me sweet oranges she plucked from a tiny tree.

Then I went home and forgot her: her smell, bars of light sliding into the bedroom at dawn, the neighbor’s docile rooster.

I was young. She lived three thousand miles away and I had school, and boxes of new crayons, and chapter books worn at the edges from children’s thumbs.
I was young and everybody loved me. From the windows of my bedroom at night you could see nothing but your own reflection.
We husked corn by the farm stand,
the sweet tug of green loosing
from the rind into our hands.

Later, in your kitchen,
we eat peach pie with our raw fingers
and discuss politics:
Charlottesville, the white
supremacists, the mowing down
of innocents.
It is late summer, the time when not much matters.
School will begin again, the whole cycle —
an old crispness descending upon the air.

I want to talk about the corn: the raw beads
gleaming hard stripped from their husks.
What joy in such small violence! The sun
yellow and high above our necks,
our palms laced red with effort.
From the car, the long fields of central Jersey rolled past the windows: an endless sequence of lushness and death, lushness and death.
Listen: there’s a story sometimes repeated in my field about a torture device from antiquity. It was called the Brazen Bull, where “brazen” here means, I think, brass or bronze. The story goes that a particular inventor in Ancient Greece built this Bull for an awful tyrant king, felt proud of it for all its engineering and technical worth (it was a profane and stupid time when you had to do everything by hand), and, so offending the king with his hubris, got himself thrown into it. The ending’s flexible, then on out. Sometimes he died inside of it. Sometimes the king pulled him out just before he died and then threw him off a cliff. I don’t know. I’m not enough of a philosopher-critic to parse the significance of that particularly Spartan act.

But if and when the story gets shared — and rarely between two journeymen, since we’re not of a fraternal sort — the details (such as they are portioned, oddly) are lavished upon the mechanics of the Bull itself. That’s what you care about too,
isn’t it? It’s okay — you don’t have to feel guilty or squeamish about wanting to build out the grisly details (they’re grisly, too, I promise) — it’s a very human instinct to want to shake off the horror of not knowing by coming to know. Right now you’re hearing the words “Brazen Bull” and practically quivering, right? Because you’re not sure of anything about it except for its name, its presumed complexity, and the fact that one is put “inside of it.” That’s a scary prospect, to imagine for yourself — rather than only observe — the horrors and rigors and tut-tut-ta that we impress upon one another.

It was a large hollow statue in the shape of a bull, cast, one assumes, from bronze or brass, big enough to put a man inside — and you would, you’d put a man inside, and light a fire underneath the bull which, being metal, would heat up more and more, charring the skin, sure, you think, ah, a contact burn, but I think the real horror is to cook within a boiling pocket of air, to try to breathe but only inhale pure broiling heat. It’s a real horrorshow: consider now that, according to apocrypha, the thing’s head was full of tubes and horns that, somehow, induced the inevitable screams into a bull’s bellows. Also, the smoke came out of the bull in great, incense-like puffs. Also, when you removed the bones from the ashes, they were brilliant enough that they were made into noble jewelry.

Scary story. Spook story. Listen: I think we got off on the wrong foot. You were led to understand that, in my profession, we have a field. No, that implies a journal, like *The Lancet*, and conferences, conventions, calls, coming-togethers. There’s really
no such thing, and you don’t, either, come into this line of work (listen to me, I sound like an old man) in any deliberate, Walden sort of way.

Nor do I want to mislead you and sell you the notion that there’s a positive takeaway from this anecdote. There one hundred percent is not. I want to dissuade you from this glamorous Hollywood notion of torture — right there, something to understand, is that, no bones about it, the word for it is torture. I disdain “enhanced interrogation,” “information extraction.” These bureaucratic euphemisms might have done for something in another time, but they’re now branded on our consciousness, aren’t they? Writer-types try harder and harder every year to conceive of the next comedic term for it, because all it’s good for at this point is a joke, a gag. What’s in Room 101? The death knell of coded casual language…

So I call it torture, and you can too. It’s what it is after all, and for every excellent word without euphemism you could use to describe it — I particularly dislike “torment” and particularly like both “excoriations” and “trials” — it is just… what it is. I don’t take a particular pride in it, either. I don’t think you ought to. More on that later.

The fact that torture’s got a Hollywood gloss to it is sort of absurd, no? I was about to say, you wouldn’t conceive of a Hollywood genocide, but then you might — in both meanings of the term: the saccharine bittersweet Boy in the Striped Pajamas wah-wah wah-wah wah-wah pieces and the mass extermination of movie executives and celebrities. Tom Cruise beaten to death with a donkey’s jawbone. Ha-ha.
Dispel first the notion that torture was ever so spectacular. Dispel Pits and Pendulums, Pears of Anguish, Iron Maidens, Iron Trees, and Chinese Water Tortures (we do conceive of the heathen orient as being particularly fertile for nefarious tortures, especially since we might sometimes be a bit squeamish to imagine they came from Paris, London, and just down the road). They’re not going to do you any good. Real Torture (capital R, capital T) is a lot more mundane.

And dispel too the moral posturing and grittiness of your contemporary torture: your Zero Dark Thirties and, in particular, your 24s. They’ll put a man to the griddle with anything on hand. There’s a scene in Taken (okay movie) with Liam Neeson, where he uses some metal chopsticks and bad Eastern European wiring to electrocute a man. Would that we were all so creative.

And if I’ve condemned and smeared the two extremes then you are asking yourself, maybe, what is left? And what is left is something boring and effective. Why is the Brazen Bull so captivating? It has occupied your mind, yes? It has established a little territory in your mind and will not go away tonight or tomorrow, though it might for a while after that, until it most certainly (unstoppably!) occurs again in your thoughts and makes your skin crawl and maybe even excites you sexually — it’s so exotic. Think about — not even certain brands and breeds of internet porn — but just the licentiousness with which Inquisitors supposedly subjected beautiful women (like you) to the strappado; the Judas Cradle; the Pear of Anguish (though the historical provenance is
murky). And think about, how many years out from
the Second World War, the immediate and arous-
ing intersection of the worst humanity’s got to offer
and for better or worse the best: you’re smart and
cultured and must love art, so you’ve seen or at least
heard of Pasolini’s Salò. If it’s got you uncomfortable
in that broader sense don’t worry about it, put this
down and cool off for a minute. You can’t help how
you feel, after all.

So: the chopsticks and wiring are creative; so is
the use of a deep-fryer full of oil. They are grimy and
they captivate.

But there’s nothing captivating about a jerry can.
Actually, even that is sort of high-brow, low-art if you
grasp my meaning. More often we use whatever is
on hand — a watering can, a Brita pitcher. There are
anecdotes about Coca-Cola being used because the
carbonation burns, and I don’t know who came up
with it — it’s variously the Mexican Federales or the
Iranians, but drowning’s drowning, no? Waste of
good Coke, anyways. You can get water out of any
spigot for nothing but the effort of walking for it.

Well waterboarding’s a good test case, litmus test.
You wouldn’t necessarily watch it but everyone, as
much as they might let their hearts bleed and con-
demn it, has that small nagging thought in an occult
corner of their minds: how bad can it be? Because,
coming out on the other side, there’s no scars to be
seen, no flesh rent, no bits of gristle on the grimy
concrete floor (shot low-angle with flickering and
icky-green key lighting). But a lot of tortures are like
that, we clean up well enough. A beating can show
bruises, but bruises don’t really bother people. I’m
not a fan of a beating though; I only meant broadly. I think if you’re trying to put your boots to a person’s neck the beating works, to keep them squashed down flat and dumb quiet, but that’s not what torture’s for. You’ll just as easily shoot a noisy one in the side of the head in front of all their friends, get less sweaty on the other side too.

It’s a little too familiar, anyway. Beating’s a beating’s a beating (Gertrude Stein said that). Easy to steel for. Waterboarding’ll hit so hard because how many people, realistically, have ever drowned and then come out on the other side? Or if they did as a kid, still remember it? It’s got to be absurd and alien to really put the fear of god in you. Chileans used a technique called the Parilla. I won’t go into detail—but I will say, with a combination of detached regard and natural (Christian-raised) human disgust—the Chileans were the masters of torture and no one will ever top them. As a last resort we pull out teeth: you remember that from 1984, which you probably read in high school? Nobody wants dentures before their time, and if they get killed, which they often do, then can’t they at least say they gave up the ghost with a full set of teeth? Pearly whites at the pearly gates, as it were.

Which must have you wondering after what kind of person might take torture as his trade and practice. Was he abused as a child? Did he stumble upon some fetish pornography and have his mind irreparably altered? Does he derive a perverse sexual pleasure from it? Is he a cool and austere and Germanic doctor who merely wishes to understand the extremities of human anatomy and psyche? Oh, and could a woman do it?
I hope you find my answers sufficiently unspectacular. I won’t give you my name, but you wouldn’t be surprised to hear it. You might find me playing golf but not very well, or realistically watching a baseball game (go Giants). I do like movies, have the odd nerd’s proclivity for trivia, and comfortably live the bachelor’s lifestyle. Eventually I may find a girl and settle down, to quote Cat Stevens, but for now I use Tinder and OkCupid and it’s fine. I like to read—you are thinking, Thomas Harris—I like Don DeLillo and the shorter, less dense Thomas Pynchon. But I enjoy suspense novels too: James Ellroy; LA Confidential’s a must-read, and Poe is unbeatable. You might now dispel the notion of the hillbilly butcher from your head and go in the opposite direction, and try to conceive of me as then a sort of Patrick Bateman-type, the sociopath that the Ivies breed, well-monied and made of damage. Listen: I went to the University of Florida, and then Johns Hopkins. There’s something to respect there in my degrees but not too much since I did not graduate cum laude or into Phi Beta Kappa, etc.

I work for the government, of course. And if not, I work for the institutions adjacent and identical to the government, the multinationals three filters deep who need a Band-Aid for their scabs, etc. But there’s no conspiracy there. It’s exactly what you’d expect would go on in a place like Myanmar, or Somalia. No I was not at Abu Ghraib, no I was not and am not at Gitmo. CIA and Army go big on these things and it’s stupid. You pull out one person’s teeth, whip the soles of his feet with jumper cables, shoot him in the back of the head after a dozen mock executions?
You bury him in the backyard? No one will ever know. You rape and torment five hundred fucking Iraqis and take pictures posing with thumbs up and big smiles, you rope college kids who wouldn’t be out of place at an FSU (Playboy’s number one party school in America) function into doing it for you? Yes of course you’ll get caught, pictures on the cover of The Economist. It’s literally all over Wikipedia. I’m certainly not.

I’m writing this in my free time — I have a lot of it. If I torture someone and they’re let go, I almost never see them again. If I torture someone twice, there’s a good chance they don’t leave. I’m not a hundred percent certain what is done to the bodies, but I’ll tell you that I’ve never killed one myself. And I don’t mean that you should feel I’m redeeming myself by saying that, as though murder is the furthest transgression possible, further than torture, because it’s not, and on that sliding scale that occurs to you, what I do is undoubtedly worse (except for the aforementioned niggling thought which says that in fact of course death is worse, that torture is something you can surmount if you’re excellent enough, up until the moment in which you yourself [and I mean that generally, not you specifically you] are tortured). I don’t take pride in my work, or pleasure in it — I get that it’s not just like any other job. I don’t keep, like, regular office hours and my payment comes from a dummy company of course. But baby, come on, what do you expect?

I’m writing this from the nondescript building you walk by every day, and I am writing it to you because I’ve seen you walk by it every day, with your
earbuds in and wearing your backpack, headed to class, probably, or work, or wherever it is that the little smile on your face it feels like only I can see is taking you. And on occasion I have seen you glance up at the building which has no signage and is probably not residential, you might think, but sure could be — and I have seen that thought form niggling in your head that you are curious, and because you are the sort who is impulsive and artistic (you have dyed your hair blue, since I have first seen you; it looks good, by the way), I have imagined and I think rightfully so that you might one day knock on the front door or find it open and come inside, and look for a secretary, and try to find someone, just to ask in your bright and cheerful way, what is this place, anyways?

As a favor to me: don’t. I don’t think you will come inside and hear strangled pleas very softly through the ventilation, I don’t think you will see the lights flicker with the odd sapping of power from the converter, I don’t think two nondescript men will grab you (you are small, petite, and this is beautiful but not necessarily violent, you see) by either slender arm and bundle you into a tall windowless room. I do not think I would have to visit you. Instead, I think you’d either get bored, unsatisfied, or get bored, satisfied — you would leave. You’d never come back.

But: just think: what if? And I won’t go beyond that.

Listen: this isn’t a love letter, okay? I have no fantasies that you might find a sensuous mystery in my words (because I know they’re off-putting and mundane) and come running to me and desperately throw yourself almost moaning up the narrow concrete
stairwell, and come upon me brooding like the alchemist himself over my table of medieval implements, chrome and darkly erotic for their curves and needlepoint spines. Nor am I a Gothic romantic: I am not sending this to you because the agony of knowing that this letter will be our only contact is so exquisite that I must enact it though it will destroy me, darkly chivalrous, and doomed though I may be, occultly dismantled by hooded acolytes of a red-robed inquisition. That poetry stuff’s bullshit.

I have sent this to you because I felt that I must, you understand? And if you do not understand, then know that at least I do, and know that in this regard — the sphere of torture — I must determine what things must and mustn’t be done. And so I’m asking you to just trust me here and stay away, and not go poking your nose in anywhere you might be curious about the featurelessness of a certain structure, its total unimportance in the grand scheme of things.

I am in the gray office building on your way to work. I am in the house at the end of the street with the curtained windows but the neatly raked yard. I am in the back storerooms of big-box retailers. I am in the unlabeled janitorial structure on campus. I am in the places you ignore because, beautiful creative type though you are, they do not in any meaningful way impact your existence, not even to inspire the artistic impulse of supposedly finding beauty in anything. There’s nothing beautiful about my stucco mediocrity. That is okay. Preserve that ignorance like it were a virtue. You and me both. I may be there in the morning and I may not. It depends on if they bring me another one to torture. But that’s all up
in the air and always will be. You never know about these things, right? Ha-ha.
Take care of yourself.
mujer  annie f. cheng
He had four brothers and they lived in a house with cigarette smoke in the walls and they were always running out of soap. At the end of his honeymoon he filled half his suitcase with little bottles of pale green soap he’d stolen from the housekeeping cart. The day he finished the last bottle his wife smoothed out a wrinkle in her skirt and said, “I don’t want this anymore.” He’d been drinking a glass of water, it was too cold, and he felt it in his teeth. He plunged his hands into a snowdrift until they were numb and splotched with red. He hosed off his father’s car and drove it wet through great swaths of cornfields until the sun touched the horizon and popped like a soap bubble, spilling sunlight into his eyes. As he pulled down the sun visor he realized his hands were unwashed, still chalky from the dust that had risen from the gravel road. He slept in the graveyard that night, under the shadow of an angel statue, and the air was cold. He woke up on a camping trip with his brothers, woke up in snow that hadn’t been there.
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before, and his shoelaces were frozen and he felt the
cold in his ears. On the day his mother told his father,
“I don’t want this anymore,” it was sunny, even though
the weatherman’s pale, veined hands had warned of four feet of snow. He noticed that his hands were wet, though not soapy. He heard music playing from somewhere, perhaps from the red radio on the window sill of the smoky house, and it sounded wet. A brother shook out two pills shaped like blood cells onto a spoon and swallowed them dry. When he woke up the second time he looked for rips in the sky. He had a thought that he wanted to bottle up all the unfallen snow, enough to fill half a suitcase, or maybe that he wanted to sail through the cornfields with a great wooden oar into the rip he found at the bottom of the sky. His wife had been wearing a skirt when he first saw her, and he was wiping down tables with a soapy rag at a diner off the highway. The tables were red with silver flecks and she said, “You missed a spot.” He found a spoon in his pocket, and it occurred to him that the weak stair that cried out in the night might have been a brother, the one who had weak veins. He looked at himself in the reflection and realized that he had missed a spot shaving. He found himself leaning against a cool headstone with silver flecks that said simply, “Husband,” and he could feel the cold in his fingertips. On the television in the house without soap he had watched a man slip on a bar of soap in the shower and laughed until a husband who was also a brother slipped on a bar of soap in the shower and the part of his artery that was too weak bulged out and burst like an overfilled balloon. He had never liked bar soap. The rip in the
sky widened into a mouth and sprayed out small, clear droplets. He opened his mouth and swallowed. It tasted silver.
ghost town  mariah kreutter
solely forging a pattern
in a net, cast onto my frame or
maybe i created it.

dawn pushes light into
the workshop, and now it is clear
that my fingers still move.

within the twined matrix they warp
clothesline into rhombuses and star-
shapes, deep night and day.

turns of hand recall a tide, ankles
in the roll of waves, half of me
grows gray and automated.

i dream i’m in a salt-worn boathouse,
sewing lounge pants for us to wear
among the lurching mangroves.

in the workshop, dusk traces
an outline — committed, wrists down,
to the proliferation of the web.
solely forging a pattern
in a net, cast onto my frame or
maybe i created it.

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in the workshop, dusk traces
an outline — committed, wrists down,
to the proliferation of the web.
okay being multiple selves

*an interview with aidan koch*

Aidan Koch is best known for her comics. Her works have found a home, among other places, in the pages of *The Paris Review* and *The Best American Comics*. Koch is also a jeweler, a sculptor, a painter, a keeper of many blogs and a soon-to-be novelist. Sitting out in the yard behind her Brooklyn studio, we discussed her process, the relationships between her practices, and archive-building.

*One of my first questions was whether you start with drawings or with words.*

Basically, it’s totally integrated. It depends on what I’m doing, like for short stories I’ll usually start out just drawing and see where it goes. And then for longer stories, I’ll usually map out a loose narrative to follow and then I start drawing based on that concept. So it really is totally cohesive. For me, at least, it’s important to have those things develop together, or else it’s like I’m illustrating words or I’m like… you know, it’s just like an illustration job. And I find there are so many ways to fulfill language through image or vice-versa, so I feel that having it build intuitively back and forth, for me, is really the joy of doing it.
Do you usually start working with one idea in mind and then build to see where it goes from there, or do you do any storyboarding beforehand?

I don’t do any visual storyboarding at all. I let that just feed off of itself as I work. Visually, I try to find patterns as I’m drawing and then start repeating those patterns and repeating certain images, certain cues, that will usually end up working throughout the story. But I’ll do — I should show you my notebook — usually just on a page in my notebook I’ll do the loose plan for a story, which, for longer stories I usually work in chapters, or sections. So I’ll have it divided up and then loosely say what’s supposed to happen in that part. Kind of just setting it up but letting it visually evolve on its own — like in this chapter I need this one thing to happen, and it can happen however it does.

When working on something larger, do you start out linearly and then let it morph, or do you sometimes start in the middle of something and then work forwards and backwards?

I’ve only done, what, four longer stories? Three? And they’ve all kind of worked in different ways, where, with the very first book I did, it has a particular linearity to it, but when I was drawing it I only knew what certain things were going to be, so as it was coming together, I did the parts that I knew and then filled in the rest. And I will move things around. With “The Blond Woman” I knew I had the beginning done, and then I had what I wanted to happen at the end, and then I just kind of had to figure out
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how to get there. So it was concrete start and finish, and then just a random intuitive process in between.

*Looking at your work as a whole, where you release stuff like “After Nothing Comes” which is earlier work, there’s this sense of building your progression as an artist and writer. Overall, do you see a linearity within that, or is it more of a rippling outwards?*

I think that book, even when you just look through it, visually you see the linearity. It’s very obvious, weaning away unnecessary elements. I used to use a lot more gestural strokes, or more detail in certain aspects, and then slowly, even just stylistically I decided those things are unnecessary, or not visually interesting to me anymore. So there’s an aesthetic movement throughout that, and I think an aesthetic maturity that happened. And yeah, the same with the books, too. Things just got sparse, or got sparser. And so did some of the stories, or those things went hand in hand. How much detail or information something needed, to work the way I wanted it to.

*One of the things I noticed in your work was that sparseness, or this idea of fragmentation that comes up. You have these moments that are illustrated that are suggestions of a larger narrative but you don’t give the reader the whole thing, just the little moment. At the same time, you have things like the archive on your website, and you keep multiple blogs that are different archives.*

*Koch’s different blogs exist as various archives of source material, photographs, articles, and more. Her website contains both an archive of her own work and also a “Research Archive” where Koch includes links to scholarly articles, films, other digital archives, and other materials that she finds compelling.*
look at those things in tandem, there seem to be these two opposite forces, where one is pushing towards fragmentation, and dissolving, and then the other is a stitching together of everything, bringing it all under this same larger constellation. I’m wondering if those are things that you think about in your work, this pushing apart and pulling together, or if it just happens.

I see those things as not being as combative, as being these complementary forces, especially with collecting images. Part of that is being really specific — defining my aesthetic through this curated assemblage, similar to drawing, where it is like this developed craft and assemblage of specific colors, details, types of composition that I find aesthetically intriguing. I feel like collecting images has been a way of training myself into this extremely aesthetic eye. And of understanding what I’m drawn to, and why I’m drawn to those things that inform the visuals that I work with.

It’s interesting then, that you put that out to the public, because a lot of artists are protective or defensive of what their influences or sources of inspiration are. But then there are artists or other figures that work with this idea of the archive, like Adrian Piper, and her “Adrian Piper Research Archive” —

Sick, I want to look at that!

— So I want to know how you think about building this archive that’s not just for you, but for other people to view as well.

I maybe egotistically think that if I find it pleasing, other people might find it pleasing. Like I printed
books for myself of all those images, just for the joy of having it where I could flip through it. I think that having access to those things, via the internet or physically in books is so valuable, and part of what is the best part of the internet. Getting to revel in that is exciting. And doing it in a way where you’re not just jumbled in the chaos of Instagram and Tumblr and all these other platforms that are so multifunctional. Those platforms drive me crazy because it’s people doing everything on it, where it’s like, personal lives, it’s activism, it’s nice-looking photos, it’s all these things jammed together and I can’t handle it. So just as a calming way for me to divide that stuff up, it’s really valuable and satisfying.

Do you feel that these archives that you’ve built give some greater insight into your work in any way, or is it just that you can see the two and see what the connections are? Is there a secret key?

[Laughs] No, not really. I guess there’s probably something where you can see what was going through my head. And I started that other thing on my website, the resource library section, which is literally just things I think people should read and look at. Just encouragement. There’s so much incredible content on so many subjects available for free on the internet. And so having that curated down a little is maybe helpful. I don’t know if anyone looks at it, but sometimes maybe they do.

Within your work, you have a literary side of things that’s the comics and writing, and another side that’s more sculptural, with metal work and things like that. Do these
all fall under the same practice for you, or are there divisions you make?

It depends on what it is. I used to have five Tumblrs, three Instagrams. Like I said, in the way I like archiving, it helps me to manage myself and manage my work better if I have things subdivided like that. And I’m okay being multiple selves. I think I’ve always done that. Having done comics for so long, so many people in my life had no idea I did comics, because they’re not part of that community. I feel like I had this self that was a social self and then I had a self that was doing comics.

Are there any projects you’re working on now that you’re particularly excited about?

Maybe. Yeah, I’ve always got some weird things going. Like technically I have two novels that are partially written. I don’t know if they’ll ever get finished. But I’m trying! It could happen.

When you go to write a novel, say, versus when you go to draw, is there a different sort of impulse where you’re like “I need to go write, I have this feeling that I need to go do this?” I know personally, sometimes I get this feeling where I’m like “I need to write something” and I can only write when I feel like this, and I’ll go with it while I have that impulse and then leave it.

I don’t know yet because I’m really trying it out, kind of for the first time other than super short stuff. So I’m having a hard time figuring out how to do it. It feels similar to comics in that, in order to keep it going, I have to really immerse myself mentally.
I feel like I have to play it out as a movie and then I write that as it’s playing out. So I definitely have to have the proper focus. The progress is slow, but it’s a real goal.

The short comic that I finished for Kuš! is actually part of a narrative that I want to be longer. I still have to figure out the logistics for the rest of the story, but it’s getting closer. But it’s something new, because it’s Sci-Fi, and with Sci-Fi it’s so much more complex, figuring out the dynamics of that situation, so I have to think about that more. But that’s a goal, to work on.

And then I’m starting to publish some stuff for other people, and that is part of this concept, this project I have that’s “the institute for interspecies art and relations” which would all be facilitating work that deals with human-animal relationships in various contexts, and promoting that sort of proliferation in intelligence and conservation efforts. There are so few artists that deal with environment, conservation, animal ethics, but I think it’s so important right now. You know, we’re set to lose what, like 60% of biodiversity or something — it’s so brutal. I don’t know what I can do for that but I think this is maybe a launching point to at least think about it, and work with artists that I know are kind of cross-ways and also try and start working with more biologists and people within the science and genetic and intelligent conservation backgrounds.
dirty revolution  annie f. cheng
The storm passed without trouble across the coast.

About the interior, I know nothing.

Whatever rain fell there has not reached our country.

Marshy and green, flat as a dry lake,
as the ocean tomorrow, skies clear,
will be. Now I go to the mill
for tomorrow’s bread.

First I’ll grind the wheat
Then, some leisure time
before I make the bread.

Maybe a swim, since the storm has passed. But that too is for tomorrow.

Whose pitch pines are more quiet
whose mill has been cleared of vines
and set spinning again
The storm passed without trouble
across the coast
About the interior, I know nothing
Whatever rain fell there
has not reached our country
marshy and green,
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Maybe a swim, since the storm
has passed. But that too is for tomorrow
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And then there were peacocks and purple daisies and a labyrinth with walls half my height; tiled rooms and castle turrets and the flowers in the garden matched the crown on the peacock’s head. And the sky was outlined by leaves and then terraces and then women’s hats against the sun. And I was telling you about feathers and about orange walls with green windows. And then I was singing in a curved room and telling you my worries and watching the scurrying feet nearby. And then you were turning, quietly and surely, blending in with the blue tiled floor, and I lost you in the crowd of yellow sunflowers and children in caps. And then it was only me, flowers to my neck and fountains drowning out the seven different languages and the whisper of you being absorbed, or
of you leaving, for then, it was you leaving and me letting you go, losing myself and your outline in patchwork ceramic and oiled marble, our backs turned towards the walls.
Upon reaching the palace of the Venetian Doge, my father genuflected, the soft part of his hat clasped under his arm, leaving my mother alone to handle the pigeons and high season crowds.

To pass the time, she asked the vaporetti drivers which part of the lagoon was deepest. She stayed for hours at the boat depot, the delta of four canals, culling opinion. When she felt she’d heard enough, she paid one to ferry her there, into the center of the estuary’s northern half, out past Murano and Sant’Erasmo, past Luigi Nono’s resting place, the glass museum, and the Lido Sea Wall, to the latitude where Madonna del Monte meets San Francesco del Deserto.

Here, she lingered, watching the islands sink lower, or, if you prefer, the water rise.
wanderlost sunnie liu
When she walked in the locker room, I knew she wasn’t a scholarship kid. I can’t help it but every time I see a rich ass black person I wonder what their parents do. Everything matched, the way rich people’s gear always does. She had a pink Nike sports bra; she had two bras actually, and she needed both of them, even though I was doing my best not to notice. I always felt guilty staring too long in the locker room. Her bras matched her white basketball shoes, and socks, which both had a pink Nike checkmark. Her hair was expensive, too; you could tell she’d had it done in a salon. Nobody else could wear a blond curly weave and pull it off that well. Tonya, the only other black girl on the team and my best friend, threw me a look. It was no secret the rich black kids didn’t want to be seen with the scholarship kids. Nobody did.

We were shocked when after the coach introduced us — told us Kyla’s mom just got a job teaching at ECU, and we ought to take her out with us after practice — Kyla walked right up and took the locker next to mine. Her smile caught me off guard. She
was one of those girls that got prettier the longer you looked at her.

“I’m Kyla, I’m from D.C.,” she said, sticking out a hand with pink painted nails on the end of long thin fingers. I shook her hand and Tonya started talking.

“I’m Tonya, and this is my friend Shakira. We call her Shak though. She’s the best player on the team. The school really. She’s already being scouted.” Tonya talked too much when she was nervous and I could tell she regretted that last bit.

Kyla was cool about it though. She laughed and looked impressed at all the right parts and congratulated me. We all talked stats for a bit until it was time for practice. Kyla was not friendly on the court. I have to confess I figured there was no way a petite girly-girl could keep up with our really big team, especially since our coach is from D.C. and grew up playing street ball. Despite the fact our team is mostly white, our style is pretty aggressive and far from polite. We never get through a game without at least a few fouls. Kyla, though, was quick and slippery. She used her small frame to weave between all the tall players, including me. She even got past me by getting the ball between my legs once, and catching it on the other side before I realized what happened. It was clear she came from the same D.C. street ball scene my coach did.

For me, it was my older brother who taught me to play. He’d whoop my ass all day long every summer and after school. Duane never went easy on me even though my ma told him to ’cause I was her “baby girl.” He always said in response that the world ain’t easy on girls, and he wouldn’t be either. Back then
our driveway wasn’t paved, so we had to borrow the neighbor’s down the road. The wife was all right but the husband was from Appalachia and racist as all get out; he even had a Confederate flag. The wife would let us drag our hoop over to their driveway and use it while he was away — he was a truck driver. That all ended when one night he came home early and chased us away. As we were leaving I saw him try to shoot the stand of the basketball hoop. The bullet ricocheted off the metal and caught his window.

That was when my dad was still around a lot. He came out with the shotgun we have above the man tel, and told the man to go back inside before he called the cops. Turns out Ms. Faye down the road, my ma’s best friend, had already called. He got a fat fine for shooting while in the presence of three children. The sheriff that showed up knew my dad ’cause he delivered packages to the office often, and he told him to be extra careful because Mr. Johnson used to be a skinhead. We weren’t supposed to know that, but he told my brother ’cause he was seventeen then, and my brother told me. I was only fourteen. My dad really only ever took to my brother — he didn’t know what to make of me. I got his height and his big bones, but I was dark like my mama, and my hair had to be permed every month. The sister above me and my brother was light like daddy, with those big pretty teeth my ma has. She kept to herself, and kept her self to her boyfriend like he was gonna die any day now. She dropped out before graduating, after she was made manager at the Walgreens. My ma was angry, but in a quiet way. She couldn’t say too much ’cause she never cared about school either.
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After all that mess with the Johnsons my daddy worked real hard and figured out a payment plan with the cement guy to get the driveway paved so I could play. Even in the winter when there’d be ice, he’d lay down the salt real early, when he got up at five, and then he’d brush it all off before he drove to work. He got one of those aluminum roofs people put over their cars, so that the cement would stay dry and clean. He was thoughtful in that way. In the morning he always brewed this black tea that my ma liked so that later, when she got home from work, all she had to do was pour it over ice. She loved unsweet tea at the end of the day.

I’d come home late and need an hour or two before I was able to sleep, what with all the adrenaline after a game or a late practice. He’d make the two of us sweet tea by heating some of the bitter stuff he made for Ma in a pot with some Sweet’n Low, and while he stirred it, he’d tell me about his day, and some of the gossip around town. He knew almost all of it—he was handsome and charming, the kind of person people couldn’t help but tell too much. He delivered to just about everyone at some point or another, and everyone wanted to make small talk. He was real sweet, in an unexpected way. Didn’t have to look far to know that most smooth-talking, light-skinned niggas would give you trouble if you let them.

You know how some bad things move so slowly you notice them far off, but you still don’t ever believe they’re gonna hit you? My ma has some family from Oklahoma, and she said there was a tornado that almost wiped out her town. She remembers as
a little kid seeing the yellow sky, and the people running and screaming, but when they went to the church basement, she didn’t really think anything could touch them. I guess that’s what happened with me. I noticed my dad started picking me up later and later, especially on game days. His car smelled like cologne, like he was covering something up. He stopped making Ma her tea in the morning. Tonya’s mom started taking me to Ma’s job after school, even though it was fifteen minutes out of her way. No matter what time my dad got home though, he and Ma would fight. The youngest kids would start crying as soon as they heard my parents raise their voices. They’d come to me and crawl in my bed.

My ma sings in the choir at church, and you can tell when she yells. Her voice is real deep and real low, and it’s the same when she cries too. My dad stopped staying for that part even, and would just leave after the fight.

Not sure why it started. I know business was tight, ’cause most people ordered off Amazon. I know men had mid-life crises and shit. I heard girls talk about it on the team. Still I always thought it was like most white nonsense — fun to laugh about on bad sitcoms, but never a reality at home.

He was still around a lot though since Ma didn’t have a car and rode to work with Ms. Faye. He’d still take me to the dumb prep school I went to two towns over. I think I realized he wasn’t trying to come back when he worked on getting Ma a car. It was kinda like he was trying to give us everything we could ask him for so he didn’t have to answer to us anymore. That was always hard to deal with,
but used to be me and Duane would talk about it and make up plans together. The summer before Duane’s senior year, though, things got bad for him.

I was about to be a junior. Recruiting starts around that time and basketball was picking up. After practice I’d come home and play in the driveway with Duane. Ma was always saying Duane should treat me better and go easy on me when we played basketball ’cause I was a girl, and he was telling me again that there ain’t any difference between a woman and a man, despite what’s in TV and magazines, and other stuff people say.

“Just like how all of these white folk around town talk about how lazy black folks are, that’s what people try to say about women. Black folks are poor ’cause they want to be, and women are weak ’cause that’s how they were born. There ain’t no truth in any of it.”

Duane was like that. He ain’t say much but when he did it was the kind of thing you remembered and thought about later. The kind of thing you could tell he had kept in for a long time before spitting out. I worried about that though. Everybody knew something was a bit off about him. Even Daddy, who thought the world rested when Duane closed his eyes. I wondered sometimes if that wasn’t why they were so close — he wanted to look after him to make sure nothing would happen to him. Everybody needs somebody I think. Daddy didn’t have many friends and Duane was a friend before his son.

Least that’s what it seemed like until Duane started acting out. Dad had never been hard on him, the way he was with Brianna. He’d never needed to
be. Duane used to be the biggest nerd — one of the only kids that actually used the small town library aside from the old folks from the nursing home down the road. He’d still hang out with the track kids sometimes, though, especially when they had their basement parties down in the Square — that’s what they called Section 8 ‘cause the houses were square and arranged in one too, like a trailer park. Ma didn’t like him going down there. Dad didn’t care. Normally he’d be down at the pool hall off the highway on Saturdays anyways.

Duane and I were watching TV one day, *Will & Grace*, when Daddy came home from work. He saw the show, sat down and muttered, “That’s some white people shit,” then changed the channel. I noticed Duane was quiet at the cookout later that evening, and he had that look when he was thinking about something over and over. I was too. Later that night there was a Fourth of July party at the Square and he was supposed to go out with some kids from his team.

Daddy never let me go with him, even though I knew most of the kids. Whenever I asked why he said, “Girls are different. Much trouble as Duane could get in, he ain’t gonna come back with no kid to take care of. I know what y’all do at those parties, y’all ain’t just dancing.”

Still, I’d sit with Duane while he picked out clothes, and we’d listen to J.Cole. He’d try on things and I’d roast him until he found something decent. He was a nice looking kid, light-skinned like Dad, with them light eyes too. Tall and quiet. It was no secret most of the girls were crazy about him. The fact he didn’t really pay them any attention just drove them
crazier. Everybody figured it was ’cause he took after Ma and was real religious. He told me he just hated the drama, especially after Tammy, the team captain’s girl, drunkenly came onto him at a party a few months ago. Lamar was still pissed about it.

He finally settled on this bright purple polo that was just a smidge too tight. I don’t know if it was the color or the fit, but it looked off. I roasted him — “Look at you in that tight ass shirt. You sure it ain’t one of Carl’s onesies?” — but he said he was wearing it. Nothing else, just got real serious and told me to get out. Ever since he got older, he started getting into moods. I ain’t think nothing of it right then.

On the way out, he picked a fight with Dad about the curfew, saying he’d come home when he wanted. “Well ain’t no son of mine going out looking like that! So you can just sit your pretty ass down,” Daddy said, shoving him.

Outside, Duane’s friend honked the horn. Duane just said “Fuck you,” and walked out.

Ma was at Faye’s playing cards, and it was right around the time he left to go to the pool hall anyway, so Daddy downed a beer, finished the game, and left.

When Duane came back that night, he was stumbling and crashing about the living room trying to find the light. I was up on the phone talking to Tonya. I came to help him, and when I flicked on the light I saw he had the worst black eye I’d ever come across. I didn’t even know a black person could bruise like that. His purple shirt had blood all over it.

When I got him to his room he started crying. I went to go get ice, and I was in such a state of shock
at all of it. At the thing with Dad earlier, at the blood, but I think most of all at his crying. Duane was always so collected. After I got him ice, I asked him if he wanted me to stay, and he said no, told me get the hell out.

The next day I found out what happened from Faye’s daughter, Mae. She always came over while Faye and Ma worked at the amusement park. Her boyfriend was at the party. Apparently Lamar tried to roast Duane for the shirt, and he was in such a bad mood he snapped. Lamar wouldn’t let it go. Finally Duane said that he should have fucked Tammy that night. Lamar said he didn’t fuck her ’cause he couldn’t, and then he punched him. The team members tried to stop him at first, but Lamar egged them on, saying they’d been sharing a locker room with a faggot and maybe they were the same. Soon they’d all joined in. They were trying to keep their reps.

“Men are stupid that way,” Mae said. “Especially black men. Feel like they gotta be tough all the time and then beat up one of their own. Tryna prove they’re something ’cause the world say they ain’t nothing. ’Sides, how a nigga that handsome gonna be gay anyway?” She cackled, then got quiet. “But I hope he’s okay. I’ll pray for him.”

After that it wasn’t unusual every now and then for Duane to have a black eye. Most everybody in town knew that it was Lamar and his crew. Duane was too proud to hide anything, and he kept on the track team when spring came. He started having more fights with Daddy, too. The worst one was about a month before he graduated. I was coming home from a game, and was surprised to find just
Daddy at home. I had forgotten that it was employment appreciation day at the park, and Ma and Faye took the kids to celebrate. I was so tired I just went straight to my room. Anyway Daddy and I never talked about much except TV shows nowadays. We watched the reruns on Nickelodeon. I was so exhausted though, I couldn’t get up to take off my shoes and gear and shower. I was just lying on my bed, waiting for my dad to leave for the pool hall so I could get some ice cream without him making some kind of joke about how I’m almost bigger than him. Ain’t no secret Dad wished I was pretty the way Brianna was. Just pissed me off ’cause apparently I was too pretty to be let out to any parties. I never really wanted to go anyway — they always got awkward whenever everybody started making out. I snuck to one once but I hated it. Duane’s teammate kept hitting on me and Duane was nowhere to be found. He always hides out when shit goes down.

I didn’t even realize he was home that night until a door slammed loud enough to hear over my headphones. This time Duane was tryna borrow the car. Dad was yelling, saying he shouldn’t be asking for shit he ain’t contribute to, talking about how he spent all his time at Trey’s house, why didn’t he just get him to take him.

“You know damn well Trey’s mom away this weekend, ’cause you and Tina are awfully close, aren’t you?” Duane said.

I heard a slap. “You watch your fucking mouth. You better not talk anymore about shit you don’t know nothing about. Now sit your sorry ass down before you get beat up again.”
"If you’re gonna run around on Ma why don’t you just fucking leave? Ever since she was sick you been around less and less. What the fuck is wrong with you?" ¶

"You listen here. You better not spread shit you don’t know nothing about alright? ’Sides, Trey’s mom told me some stuff. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to get out."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I told you for the last time I’m not smoking any shit."

"You know what I mean. You need to stop spending all your fucking time there—people are talking. Everyone knows why Lamar beat the shit out of you. Can’t say I blame him."

Next thing I know I heard a thud, and then some scuffling. I should have gone out, but I was just too tired. Plus what the hell could I say or do? I always kinda knew about Duane, but with Daddy? I noticed he was around less but so was Ma. I just figured they were going through something and they’d come out of it soon. And to say those things. Much as everyone else thought that, it was different to actually hear it. I heard the front door shut, and the screen door flapped for a few seconds with how hard it was slammed. I came out, and Duane was sitting there, nose bleeding, black eye blossoming. He started yelling at me, but I couldn’t hear it really. I knew I should have done or said something. I just kept saying sorry, even as I got the frozen vegetables from the fridge, and put the towel around it so the cold wouldn’t burn his face.¶

In July, Duane left for the army. He always did ROTC and it wasn’t no surprise he left as soon as he
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could. I guess what was surprising about it, was well, ain’t no way to put it but plainly, as my ma would say: Duane wasn’t a man’s man. He was too tall and too handsome to get picked on, but everybody knew something was off about him, especially after that night at the party with Lamar and all the time he’d been spending with Trey.

The night before he left is when he finally told me. He called me to his room, all serious and sad. I thought he was gonna lecture me on looking out after Ma, and Carl and Jerome. Or maybe say that he’d miss me and that he loved me. He’s only said that twice in our life. His face was wrinkled up and his voice came out rough and low. “Shak, I don’t like girls. I just never have. I always try to and I think they’re pretty and all but I just never could be married to one. I just always knew since I was a kid Shak, and I feel guilty sometimes, but I know who I am.” I asked him about the army and he said it was an escape to different places, even up North they were better about it. I could tell that he was uncertain but mostly hopeful. His face brightened at the mention of travel.

I just laughed and told him I wasn’t surprised at all. But I was surprised he asked me when I knew what I was.

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Listen Shak — I just wanted to explain myself. I felt like you should be the first to know. You’ve always been there. I took that for granted but now that I’m leaving — All I’m saying is — I mean I didn’t want to assume — ”

I’d already started crying, though, and Duane just hugged me real tight. He said even though he was
going, and couldn’t have phone calls at basic training, that he would write me, and that I better do the same. I said I would.

But the truth was he never called or wrote much. Once I stopped waiting it hurt less when the letters didn’t come. I worried about him, especially ’cause I heard basic training was hard. I knew, just like that night he told me to go away as he was bleeding and crying on the floor, that’d he do just about anything to hide himself if he felt like he was being weak. Just worried about how much he could do that in the army when the whole point was to break you down.

Round that time is when I was talking to Kyla more and she started hanging out with Tonya and me. I was surprised at first ’cause she was rich enough to fit in with the other kids. Remembering back to her first day though, it made sense. Kyla had sat with the team, but next to me and Tonya towards the end of the table. She seemed totally at home, even though it was her first day. We chatted about teachers, or rather, Tonya and Kyla talked about government class, while I tried my best not to notice that she was wearing just one bra at the moment. I might have imagined it but I thought she noticed me staring and glanced at me, smirking a bit, even while she and Tonya were talking about how much the three-page paper we had to write was gonna suck.

Kyla was rich enough to be able to relate to the white girls on the team as they worried about their cotillion dresses, and etiquette classes. I noticed though when she talked to the white girls she had that strained smile my ma gets when she’s at church and the old ladies start asking about my dad. I
I understood why she walked straight up to me and Tonya that first day. Even though she was like those white girls in a lot of ways, she knew they could remind her how different she was real quick.

The first time Kyla and I hung out without Tonya, we went to the drive-in movies. Brianna let me drive her car to go pick her up. I told my ma I was sleeping over at Kyla’s ’cause she was scared in her huge house by herself. I got to her house a bit late ’cause it was one of those gated suburbs. Only other time I had been in one was when the coach had us over for dinner one night. His house was about the same size as hers. She wasn’t ready when I got there and I had to wait a bit. Her ma was at a teaching conference, so I didn’t bother going in. When she came out she was looking prettier than I knew possible. Everything she had on, from her tank top to her heels, was pink like her fingernails, and her hair smelled like coconut and Pink Sheen. Her lips were glossed a deep brown, the exact shade of her eyes, much deeper than her skin.

“You gotta be mixed with something,” I said.

She frowned. “Nah, it’s just that way back I got a great grandparent that’s Native American or something. All my mom’s cousins are real light, but she isn’t, and neither are her sisters.” I could tell it bothered her, that I thought she was part white.

I made her laugh later though, when I was at the movie, and we were making fun of how white people always go in the house that might kill them. “They always taking dumb risks ’cause they ain’t at church for five hours. They don’t know what’s coming for them in the afterlife,” I said.
Kyla thought that was real funny. She didn’t show her teeth when she laughed. She put her hand in front of her face, and gasped. I mimicked her, making gasps high pitched and hiccupy, and she punched me in the arm, hard.

I went back to her house that night, and we stayed in the same bed. I was awake long after she fell asleep. Since that night we’ve been inseparable. Tonya happened to get a boyfriend (poor white kid down the road from me) around the same time so she’s never seen us together or suspected how I feel. I guess it’s hardest hiding it around the team, especially when the scouts come. I really want us to end up at the same school.

Kyla doesn’t know where she’s gonna go. Her mom really wants her to find a school in the Northeast, ’cause that’s where she went for her Ph.D. and she’s sure that Kyla would like it there. Kyla loves the South though, and Greenville especially, plus most schools scouting her are around us so she’s thinking about staying. She confessed to me that she doesn’t even want to go to school, but her mom is forcing her, and at least she gets to play ball for a bit longer.

I’m not too set on the idea of school either, but my ma is. She’s afraid I’m gonna be just like my sister, graduate and shack up with a “no good nigga” as soon as I finish. Or, even though she doesn’t say it, disappear like Duane. She knows I admire him, and sometimes I even lie to her about how we talk so that she won’t worry.

Still, I know if I stick around and end up playing for ECU, I’ll be close to the family and the little ones, and I can play ball. That’s what’s really important
to me. I like Kyla, but she can’t really understand everything that’s going on. I told her about my dad leaving but she didn’t get what the fuss was — having been raised on her own with just her mom, she knows all about how shitty men could be. Her family isn’t religious at all, so she doesn’t get how quiet the house now feels on Sundays and Wednesdays. She doesn’t get how my ma still loves church but can’t avoid the stares and the whispers and the extra long hugs, how each time she comes back, she sits on the couch staring at nothing for a bit before going into her room. That leaves me to make dinner and get the kids to bed.

Now that I’m moving out, and Dad, Duane, and Brianna never stay anymore, Ma wants to sell the house and move somewhere smaller. She’s worse now. Ms. Faye comes over and makes all the meals Sundays, and my ma only works three days of the week even though we need more money for the mortgage. Thing is I haven’t decided if I’m gonna stay in the house or live on campus. No one knows if Duane’s coming back now that his nine months are up. What-ever he decides, I think we should keep the house — we have just another seven years till we pay it off — and I know if Daddy wasn’t acting crazy he’d back me up. If Duane would just contribute a bit each month we could make the payment, along with a bit from my financial aid refund. I don’t know where he’s currently stationed, but I found his sergeant’s name and number in Ma’s files, and I called him, telling him Ma was sick, that she might have breast cancer. He was real nice, and told me he’d get my brother to call me back right away. “Ok, make sure he calls this number, not Ma’s, its canceled.”
I swear to God I thought God was gonna strike me down right where I stood for lying like that about Ma. For everything really, the nights I spend with Kyla—

“No, Duane it’s Shak, look—”

“How is Ma, is she okay? What happened?”

“Look Duane, Ma isn’t sick, I just really needed to talk to you about the family.”

Silence stretched longer, it felt, than the spare time in all of our conversations together.

“Shakira what the fuck.”

I swallowed. Duane had never cussed at me before. Ever.

“Look Duane, you haven’t been in touch at all and I don’t blame you, I’m not mad I just need help okay—”

“Shakira. Listen. Don’t ever call my sergeant again. You could really get me in trouble. I love you guys and I hope Ma gets better but there’s nothing I can do. I’m sorry I haven’t called or wrote much but I’m really busy. I think of you guys all the time. You want my advice on what to do? Get the fuck out while you can. Got that Shakira?”

His words hung in the distance between us. I hung up. He’d never called me Shakira before. He was the one that started calling me Shak.

I called Kyla right after and told her we needed to talk. When I picked her up she was wearing a miniskirt and halter-top. I wondered, again, if she dressed this way for me. She must have known by then I liked her in skirts.

I always did my best to hide my need to see her. I knew I wasn’t always successful because on those days she was smug. Today she sensed my seriousness
and grabbed my arm after I pulled into the far back corner of the Sonic parking lot.

“What’s going on?”

“Just family stuff,” I said. “Trying to decide about scouting, figuring out a way to keep the house. I talked to Duane—”

My voice cracked.

“Shh. Come here.”

She pulled me in and looped her arm behind my neck, bringing my head to her chest. My whole body stiffened. The thought was like a battering ram, pressing the inside of my skull: kiss her.

I didn’t, of course. I would never. Not as long as I stayed. I pulled myself from her chest. She let her hand slide down my back as I moved away.

“Kyla, do you ever think about leaving Greenville?”

“What do you mean?”

She looked annoyed. Her lips were bunched slightly, like she was waiting on someone.

“I mean do you ever think about getting a U-Haul and driving all your stuff to Louisiana. Just leave everything in the rearview, you know?”

“Even me?”

“Of course not. I just—”

“I get it.” She paused. Her long false lashes were cast down, giving her the appearance of a pouting doll. “We’d still be tight. Even if you left—”

I wanted her hand but I grabbed her elbow. She looked at me.

“I won’t.”
the ethics of martyrdom  

_annie f. cheng_
It can be compared to a queen who desires to marry a man, and writes him a generous contract, saying: to you I will give this many sheep, this many cattle, this weight in silver. I will build you a house with this many rooms and this many windows, and this many doors, and this many women to tend to the household, and this many men to work in the fields. And the queen goes away, and after a year the girls of the city come to him, saying This bride of yours will never come back. She has certainly died, or married again. Be sensible — marry one of us. If doubt ever entered his thoughts he’d return home and take out the contract where she had promised him measures of silver and vast flocks of cattle, and a house made of cedar with great iron doors — his contract, written on skins from a number of cattle, in vivid dark ink, its letters crowned as if each were a queen, stretched between mahogany handles, and wrapped in velvet, embroidered in gold.
It can be compared to a queen who desires to marry a man, and writes him a generous contract, saying: to you I will give this many sheep, this many cattle, this weight in silver. I will build you a house with this many rooms and this many windows, and this many doors, and this many women to tend to the household, and this many men to work in the fields. And the queen goes away, and after a year the girls of the city come to him, saying This bride of yours will never come back. She has certainly died, or married again. Be sensible — marry one of us. If doubt ever entered his thoughts he’d return home and take out the contract where she had promised him measures of silver and vast flocks of cattle, and a house made of cedar with great iron doors — his contract, written on skins from a number of cattle, in vivid dark ink, its letters crowned as if each were a queen, stretched between mahogany handles, and wrapped in velvet, embroidered in gold —
he’d seize the handles and pull the scroll open and read from it with wondrous precision, and feel as if he’d embraced his betrothed. He thought, *even if you never come back and I have been longing in vain all this time for a queen who arrives to drive out my sorrow, whose face is so bright it drowns out all doubt, even if I will never discern any mark of your life in my life — even so, I would rise to meet your contract as one meets a bride and adorns her with silver to set her apart from all other women. With your permission, queen of creation, and with your permission, contract of perfection, I will arise once the reading is finished, to begin the reading again.*
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