

Anna May Wong, Shot by Carl van Vechten, 1932



In the middle of the shot is a lone figure, posing for a portrait. And make no mistake about it, it is a pose. She knows that you are looking. There's something interesting behind her, a backdrop with spaced out circles and geometric patterns. You don't spend long on it. Maybe it's a curtain. Either way, everything that is not her seems to blend into a muted gray. A subtle sepia tint has seeped over your life. Because he beckons. Because, for this fleeting moment, you have his attention, and you're flattered, and you're also wary. You know how quickly it can all go away. But for now, you've caught the eye of a mysterious stranger at a party, and you're intrigued. You've never been this interested in someone, despite not saying a word to them yet. He raises a glass, maintaining his gaze directly at you. For a moment, your eyes struggle to

focus. And then it clicks, that clear picture in your head. You will remember this for the rest of your life.

She invites you to look at her with her gaze. In fact, she's even raising her glass to it. Because why shouldn't you celebrate it? It's something to toast. No, she is forcing you to. You can't turn your head away. Why shouldn't you look? Everything is directing you towards her face, rising like a waxing moon in your consciousness. So just look. Look at the beautiful stranger at the party, and don't think about who is directing your gaze. The more you look, the more you realize how much is a performance. Although the first thing you may notice is the rakish top hat, your eye is also drawn to her liberally applied makeup. Their eyebrows, thin and quite obviously drawn on, extend just past the place where they would naturally be. They pull you in, those dark, uncanny eyebrows, and those lower lashes, clumped together beneath her eyes. And that hat, which had initially seemed to be so carelessly, roguishly thrown on. You are now aware that it has been carefully placed on her head for you to admire. The glass, raised in a toast, now seems like a simple way to manipulate attention to her graceful hand, with her shiny almond nails and dandy ring. Does he want you to know he's married? (She is, and this is *her* performance, even though she allows you to look at it. You don't stand a chance.)

This is Anna May Wong, and it's 1932. She's been working in the industry for years now, over a decade. She's getting tired of the Hollywood rigamarole, made worse by the fact that she keeps getting pigeonholed into roles she doesn't want and rejected from all the ones she does. For once, she wants to be a real All-American Starlet. Just once, she wants to be known as something other than "the Dragon Lady." She pitches an idea to her friend Carl van Vechten, an electric figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Vechten has just recently started doing portraits of his friends, and he thinks that she's a very engaging subject. Later, he will start doing her more in

profile. But all in due time. As of now, she comes up with the premise, glamour shots with a twist. She's inspired by Marlene Dietrich, her costar in *Shanghai Express*. She's in awe of Dietrich and a little in love with her. She also knows that some part of her wants to kill her and wear her skin. The way she moves through the world is so free. Dietrich gets away with everything, and Anna's a little resentful. She wants to feel that way, even if the feeling is only held within a snapshot. Tired of being "othered" based on her race, she takes control and voluntarily chooses to other herself through androgyny. In the photo, her mouth is set in a slight smirk. She looks amused, as if she knows what the future holds. Two years later, she will rise from the barren wastelands of Hollywood and completely reinvent herself as a European film star.

This is Anna May Wong, shot by Carl van Vechten. It's 1932, the year that Carl van Vechten begins taking portraits of his friends, taking advantage of his long-running associations with artists, actors, writers, and other creators of all kinds. He's a controversial figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and he is very interested in "otherness." He knows his friend Anna May Wong is dissatisfied with how Hollywood has been treating her recently. He decides to play with the idea of her otherness by putting a beautiful woman in male attire. What a violent term, to equate the taking of a photograph to a shooting. It implies that art is an act of violence that the artist imposes upon their muse. He takes many more photographs of Wong over the years, many of them in profile. None of them as good as this one. Because in this one, she looks back.