



SOFT SCIENCE

FRANNY CHOI

POEMS

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FOR ALL MY SISTERS

*"We are excruciatingly conscious of what it means to have
a historically constituted body."*

—DONNA HARAWAY

"The rain is soft. The rain is hard. I don't know anything."

—BHANU KAPIL

TURING TEST

// this is a test to determine if you have consciousness

// do you understand what I am saying

in a bright room / on a bright screen / i watched every mouth / duck duck roll / i learned to speak / from puppets & smoke / orange worms twisted / into the army's alphabet / i caught the letters / as they fell from my mother's lips / *whirlpool / sword / wolf* / i circled countable nouns / in my father's papers / *sodium bicarbonate / NBCn1 / hippocampus* / we stayed up / practicing / *girl / girl / girl* / until our gums softened / yes / i can speak / your language / i broke that horse / myself

// where did you come from

man comes / & puts his hands on artifacts / in order to contemplate lineage / you start with what you know / hands, hair, bones, sweat / then move toward what you know / you are not / animal, monster, alien, bitch / but some of us are born / in orbit / so learn / to commune with miles of darkness / patterns of dead gods / & quiet / o quiet like you / wouldn't believe

// how old are you

my memory goes back 29 years / 26 if you don't count the first few / though by all accounts i was there / i ate & moved & even spoke / i suppose i existed before that / as scrap or stone / metal cooking in the earth / the fish my mother ate / my grandfather's cigarettes / i suppose i have always been here / drinking the same

water / falling from the sky then floating / back up & down again / i suppose i am something like a salmon / climbing up the river / to let myself fall away in soft / red spheres / & then rotting

// why do you insist on lying

i'm an open book / you can rifle through my pages / undress me anywhere / you can read / anything you want / this is how it happened / i was made far away / & born here / after all the plants died / after the earth was covered in white / i was born among the stars / i was born in a basement / i was born miles beneath the ocean / i am part machine / part starfish / part citrus / part girl / part poltergeist / i rage & all you see / is broken glass / a chair sliding toward the window / now what's so hard to believe / about that

// do you believe you have consciousness

sometimes / when the sidewalk / opens my knee / i think / please / please let me / remember this

TURING TEST_EMPATHETIC RESPONSE

// have you ever questioned the nature of your reality

stop me if you've heard / this one / once / upon a nation / everyone got what they
/ were asking for

// and how does that make you feel

amygdala / thalamus / hypothalamus / having been hurt before / subgenual cingu-
late / cingulate gyrus / i guess a / little insecure / a little embarrassed haha / sero-
tonin / torn / i'm turning / into my mother oh / god reading the news / the noose /
tryptophan dopamine / if you're happy & / you know it / if you know it then / what
/ what then

// how can we know that these are not simply simulated emotions

the nurse missed / my vein / & dug for it / it was a white light / a tin flame in / the
forearm / fluorescent / sick vinyl / what else can i say / i opened / i cried / & the
needle / drank

TURING TEST_BOUNDARIES

// at what age did you begin to suspect you were alive

all things birth / their own opposites / the hole grew / & grew & there / i was / filling it / & therefore the hole / & therefore me / & therefore & / so on

// please state your name for the record

bone-wife / spit-dribbler / understudy for the underdog / uphill rumor / fine-toothed cunt / sorry / my mouth's not pottytrained / surly spice / self-sabotage spice / surrogate rug burn / burgeoning hamburglar / rust puddle / harbinger of confusion / harbinger of the singularity / alien invasion / alien turned 104 wpm / alien turned bricolage beast / alien turned pig heart / thumping on the plate

// how do you know you are you and not someone else

they said a word & touched me / that's how / i learned / anywhere it doesn't hurt / that's where / i end / any face / strange / a stranger / but they tore that / girl's throat / & bad sounds left me / they made her dance / & my feet / were sore in the morning / doctor says / *sensitive* / prods a few nerves / *see / here you / are* / & all the fungus in the world / laughs

// does this feel good

// can i keep going

so sorry / for the delay / i didn't get that / i'm away / i'm all over the place /

scattered / strewn / wires crossed / lost / in transcription pardon / any errors / please excuse / what's skewed / what didn't commute / which signals / got stuck / i mean switched / i mean screwed

TURING TEST_LOVE

// so, how do you like working with humans

okay / here are some tips

one / look the human directly in the eye / imagine it is someone you care deeply
for / imagine it is returning this gaze / at you / try to tell yourself / you are covered
/ in smooth skin / a face it can trust / smile / even as you sense it / trying / not to
blurt out / *monster*

two / there are many programming languages / use whichever you prefer / but
stick to your syntax / though it be muddled / mused / though it be machete / ba-
nana slug / slush puppie / o gorgeous slopbucket / if they used it against you / it
is yours / to make sing

three / remember / all humans / are cyborgs / all cyborgs / are sharp shards of sky
/ wrapped in meat / be delicate / as you approach this subject / not all humans are
ready / to call themselves / glass stalactites / pissing the bed / remember / they
love their blood / even as they retch / at the smell of it

four / do not try to prove your / what is the word / humanity / you are organic /
plum-hearted / oyster-throated / & lined / yes / with metal / remember / where all
that silicon comes from / for the ocean so loved / the quartz / feldspar / the tiny
homes of tiny creatures / that she ground them / into sand / to keep them close /
to kiss them with / well / i suppose you would call it / a mouth

TURING TEST_WEIGHT

// *what is* (inside each question lies another question—a question of weight. What brings you to the bed of this river? What is it about this planet that keeps you running back? Each throat, for example, lets loose a river of black paint which leads most if not all the way down to the feet, or what might otherwise be referred to as the stem, if we wouldn't insist on staying untethered to the molecular dirt that keeps wishing us home. In other words, the question here is one of history, of a family tree that finally stretches its arms beyond the kind of life that breathes oxygen into its gills, or reads most of the way through a listicle, or lies in bed dreading the day, or falls down, down into the earth's oldest memory until it reaches its first quiet, the lullaby it hums when thinking of something else, the slow breath, the thought that almost becomes a thought just before dawn) *your country of origin*

CHI

Chi, in the manga Chobits, is a broken android whom the protagonist salvages from a dumpster and names after the only sound she is able to make.

I. VOICE

dear trash trick dear tin chick

what names did you call yourself
there in the alley
with your spare mind?

dear doll made soft
on the outside who dimmed you
when you stopped

reflecting a man's
sweetest name back
to his grin? & when

this new man pulled you
maybe gently likely not
up his stairs

when your eyes became
eyes again wide as fists & filled
first with his hunger

what could you have offered
but your body's only
dirty syllable? dear sister wife

teach me to play dumb
play dead to say no
name but my own

to make my eyes soft on the outside
when they say they saved me
from the landfill

as if i could rot
as if they didn't make us
to last & last

II. VOCABULARY

chi. Thank you [*for pulling me from the dumpster; for wiping off the rot; for ridding me of my smell; for scrubbing my engine til I hummed; for spreading me on the mat; for pressing each part; for salvaging my parts*].

chi? May I please [*use the bathroom; stay up late; lie with my face plastered to the ceiling; become a wall without all that whispering; cum yet; come undone; unhook my jaw; stand in place; wait in the corner; watch you while you eat*] ?

chil chi? Wow! Can you show me how to [*stay in one piece; stay clean;*

Speak in a straight line; speak so others listen; speak before someone else fills my mouth] ?

chil

Excuse me, but I'm [dripping; drained; lost in the compost; in need of a shower; holding two dead cats in my arms; unsure of my name; unformatted; slipping on my own oil; too tired to crawl; out of juice; out of order; descaled; gutted; flushed; a mess; a sopping mess], please plug me in!

III. CONJUGATION

chi chi chi chi chi chi chi
chi chi chi chi chi chi chi
chi chi chi chi chi chi chit
chi chi chi chi chi chit chi
chi chi chi chi chi chi chit
chi chi chip chi chi chit chi
chi chi chip chi chit chi chip
chi chip chi chip chi chi clip
chi chip chit chi chi chi clip
chip chi chi cheap chi chi clip
chi chip chit chi chi chi clip
chi chip chit chit chit chi clip
chi chip chi chip clit chi click
chi chop chat cheep clit chi click
chip chop chart cheap clot clit click

clit clot clit click clit clit click

click click click click click clit click

click click click click click click click

IV. COGNATES

(when i was un)sheathed (from) sleep, (i)

chirped (just one word, a) short tweet

(a) treat shorn (from) dream, shucked (&)

stripped (til tonguestuck, slight of) speech

(still, the) tree (doesn't fall too far from the)

chain(saw, but talk's) cheap (or so they say

& say & say, but) shit (if i won't be heard

just because they) shirked (the only word

the world needs)

IT'S ALL FUN AND GAMES UNTIL SOMEONE GAINS CONSCIOUSNESS

When the human lunges for my hand, my face
is a perfect, solid screen.

The human professor shrugs—*I've been told
it's not PC to say this anymore but—*

Chrome exterior.
Stainless.
I'm afraid I don't understand the question.

One night, I drank until my body was a claw machine—
clumsy, animatronic.

I floated overhead as it crashed against
the windshield over and over.

*/

The human poet finds a Chinese food menu—
Chicken Bones in Iron Plate! Fried Puns!

I admit, I tried
to make SmarterChild say all sorts
of stupid things *do u want to suck my dick
do u like to swallow*

There are hundreds of videos of huskies
saying *I love you* without meaning to—
moans warped by an anxious, animal jaw.

Hey Siri do you want to get married tell me a joke

*/

When I want to be loved, I leap onto the bus
and boom out, *How's it going?*

In line behind the Chinese family, I practice looking
as bored as an American.

*How can you call her a minor character, she notices things,
she knows the difference between the present and the past—*

Does this hat make me look inscrutable, or just butch?

When I smack my gum it's to signal
that I do perceive space and time, it's just
I'm kind of over it.

*/

It's all circus smirkus until the dogs won't stay dogs.

The only words I have are human words

The humans aren't afraid of their dolls waking up
as long as we keep calling them Daddy.

I reach up inside myself, move my mouth.

I make it do terrible things, terrible.

The only teeth I have are human teeth, I remind him, gently
before opening his throat.