

## Get to Know Franny Choi

by Abby Wheeler

Welcome to our monthly series, *Get to Know!* Here, we'll turn the spotlight on contemporary poets and writers, with the goal of amplifying under-represented voices in literature. These writers' books are currently available in the Women Writing for (a) Change library.

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Photo by Jasmine Durhal

A queer, Korean femme, Franny Choi knew from the get-go the challenges awaiting her. And, as we so often do, she channels at least some of her experience into writing: “in fourth grade / i wanted to be a writer & worried / about how to escape my surname — choi / is nothing if not korean.” Much of her work explores ways to exploit challenging

identities. As she says to [The Paris Review](#), “the ability to alter our images and to play with the way that we present our bodies is a fundamental queer and femme superpower. The book dives into that and says, if we continue down that line of thought, then what other possibilities are opened up?” The book referenced is Choi’s most recent, *Soft Science* (Alice James Books, 2019), in which she uses artificial intelligence and technology as the tenor for navigating aspects of identity. She goes on: “Race and gender profoundly affect the way we engage with technology, beyond phones or social media or military apparatuses. English, for example, is a technology that many of us learned early to use in order to help our families navigate spaces. There are the many technologies of the body, how we alter it in order to pass, infiltrate, become ourselves, move, survive. People who have, for a wide range of reasons, been called not-human, have always learned to use and bend tools of survival to their will. In the process we might morph with them, which is sometimes terrifying and often beautiful.”

And Choi certainly has experience with the terrifying. In her poem, “[The Cyborg Wants to Make Sure She Heard You Right](#)” (the poem’s published title), she collects a slew of terrible things said to her on Twitter—be they racist, sexist, homophobic, or all three—and runs them through Google translate until they sound absurd. We see Choi toying with language in other ways in the poem, “Hangul Abecedarian” (an abecedarian being a poem in which each line begins with the following letter of the alphabet, starting, in English, with A): “Genghis Khan, my father says, using a soft G, / Never saw our peninsula with his own eyes. / Don’t quote me on that— / Recall isn’t my strong suit. I’ve convinced myself / Memorizing dates, for example, is outmoded. / Better to learn the overall movements, / Social conventions rising and falling, / Empires and their changing mascots. / Genghis sired so many, they say, his children’s / Children’s children’s genes sowed an entire / Continent of grasslands. If you press your ear / To my blood’s topography, you’ll hear hooves / Pounding, though I can’t remember when it started, or / Whose king it is coming in the distance.”

In reading Choi, one gets the feeling that she approaches her writing from many directions. As

her identities intersect, she sees herself trying “to shift and evade and play outside of expectation—the desire to be slightly uncategorizable. And the form of a poem, after all, works out somewhere between the ‘organic’ and the structure you impose on it. There’s a push and pull between structure, meter, the tools of the poem and that weird organic spooky part” ([The Iowa Review](#)). It makes me wonder which identities of my own can be subverted, how I can un-categorize myself, to find that “weird organic spooky part” that’s so elusive, so thrilling.

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Franny Choi earned a B.A. in Literary Arts and Ethnic Studies from Brown University and an MFA in Poetry and postgraduate Zell Fellowship from University of Michigan’s Helen Zell Writers’ Program. Choi is a two-time winner of the Rustbelt Poetry Slam; has been a recipient of Poetry magazine’s Frederick Bock Prize; and a 2019 Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Fellowship.

Choi is co-host of the Poetry Foundation’s [VS podcast](#) and was Co-Director of the award-winning Providence Poetry Slam.

Her work has appeared in *Ms. Magazine*, the NPR show *Code Switch*, PBS NewsHour’s *Brief But Spectacular* series, the *Angry Asian Man* blog, and *The Abolitionist*, a newspaper that distributes to over 7,000 incarcerated people. She is the former Senior Editor of News, Politics, and Social Justice at *Hyphen Magazine*.

In addition to two plays, she has published three collections of poetry: *Soft Science* (Alice James Books, 2019), *Floating, Brilliant, Gone* (Write Bloody Publishing, 2014), and *Death by Sex Machine* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2017). She lives in Northampton, MA. [Read her complete bio.](#)

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[@frannychoir](#): Every Friday during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (#apahm), Franny posts

a prompt exploring what the world might look like if/when we #StopAsianHate.

[Franny Choi's Periodic](#): “Every month, [Franny] writes a short column on the first day of her period—a check-in that might cover issues of gender, queerness, writing, health, and/or love. This series is an experiment in occasional writing and an exploration of what it means to write about menstruation with a queer imagination.”

[Franny Choi](#): Incredibly generous teaching tools provided by Franny, free for non-commercial use