

"BRILLIANT . . . TO READ THIS BOOK IS TO BECOME MORE HUMAN." —CLAUDIA RANKINE, author of *CITIZEN*

# MINOR FEELINGS

AN ASIAN AMERICAN RECKONING

CATHY PARK  
HONG

## PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

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ON THE FIRST TRULY COLD day of fall, November 5, 1982, thirty-one-year-old artist and poet Theresa Hak Kyung Cha left her job at the textiles department of the Metropolitan Museum. She wore a white angora sweater, a red leather coat, and a maroon beret. She also had on leather gloves and a double layer of socks. She rode the subway downtown to Artists Space, a nonprofit gallery on Hudson Street, to drop off a large manila envelope of her photos for an upcoming group show with the curator Valerie Smith. Cha's photographs were of hands in various gestures, cropped and reproduced from a range of sources, from ancient Chinese prints to modern French paintings. Smith, when she testified at the New York State Supreme Court House, recalled that Cha looked tired and tense; she stayed for fifteen minutes, signing promotional material for the show. She said Cha left Artists Space sometime around four. From the gallery, Cha walked northeast.

From here, I see her in my mind's eye like I'm watching an old sixteen-millimeter film. Her shoulders are hunched from the wind as she hurries past abandoned boarded-up cast-iron buildings and old Chevrolet Caprice taxis trundling over steel road plates. The red of her leather coat is washed out in the film's faded granular light. I imagine her passing the office of her publisher, Tanam Press, on White Street, where she spent hours editing her book *Dictee*. Then she turns left on Broadway where there is a white cast-iron building that once manufactured textiles for ship sails. Twenty-five years later, I will live in that building with my husband in a rent-stabilized sublet. There, I will lug two huge bags of poems, from a contest I screened, to be picked up for recycling, and overnight the bags will split open. Poems will be everywhere on my block like a ticker-tape parade, poems papered to car

windshields and the storefronts of jeans stores, poems crumpled around bike racks and teepeed on trees and scattered at the feet of old Chinese women practicing their tai chi in front of the apartment across from my building. But that day, there are no poems—just trash collecting under empty loading docks.

Cha was already sick of New York. She had moved to the city two years earlier, in 1980, with her husband, Richard, to be part of the conceptual art scene. But the underground art world was already dead, taken over by a gilded era of art stars like painters Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente and David Salle. In a letter dated June 25, 1982, sent to her eldest brother, John, Cha writes that to be successful is to embrace the “dregs of morals, money, parasitic existence,” which she finds “in all honesty, disgusting.”

That night, Cha planned to meet her dear friends Susan Wolf and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis to watch a Straub-Huillet film at the Public. Despite her unhappiness with the city, her career was now going somewhere. She was in the group show, which was going to open in December, and her book *Dictee*, which she had been working on for the last few years, had just been published. In that same letter to John, she writes, “It is hard to say what I feel, how I feel, except that I feel freed, and I also feel naked; the manuscript never left my body physically, even when there was no time to work on it. I carried it around everywhere, I practically slept on it, and now, it is finished....I am always surprised when I see a completed work of something that I have done, all done piece by piece, and between jobs and breaks, in sleep, between arguments with Richard, all the maniac frustrations of these jobs, joblessness, poverty states.”

But before the movie date with her friends, Cha had to meet her husband at five in the Puck Building on Lafayette Street, where he worked as a photographer documenting the building’s renovation. The Puck is a massive red-brick landmark that covers a whole block in SoHo. Reaching nine stories, the building has arched windows and bright teal trim. At the building’s front entrance sits a gold cherub statuette of Puck in a top hat and a frock jacket, unbuttoned to expose his potbelly. Puck holds a fountain pen as his staff and a mirror in which he gazes lazily at his own reflection. Right after sundown, Cha walked into the back entrance of the Puck, on Mulberry Street, and saw Joseph Sanza, the security guard.

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I first discovered Cha's *Dictee* when I was a sophomore at Oberlin in 1996. I was in my first poetry workshop, with a visiting professor, the poet Myung Mi Kim, whose intellect I admired and whose poetry I tried to imitate. Kim assigned *Dictee* and I was more intrigued by how *Dictee* looked than its content. Although it's classified as an autobiography, *Dictee* is more a bricolage of memoir, poetry, essay, diagrams, and photography.

Published in 1982 by the now defunct Tanam Press, *Dictee* is about mothers and martyrs, revolutionaries and uprisings. Divided into nine chapters named after the Greek muses, *Dictee* documents the violence of Korean history through the personal stories of Cha's mother and the seventeen-year-old martyr Yu Guan Soon, who led the protest against the Japanese occupation of Korea and then died from being tortured by Japanese soldiers in prison. In other chapters, Cha invokes Joan of Arc but as a character re-created by other women, such as the French nun Saint Therese of Lisieux.

Cha avoids traditional storytelling in favor of a structure that I can only describe as a script for a structuralist film. Scenes are described as stage directions. Poems are laid out like intertitles. Film stills are interspersed with blank pages that are meant to look like a refulgent white film screen. Cha doesn't ever direct your reading of *Dictee*. She refuses to translate the French or contextualize a letter by former South Korean leader Syngman Rhee to Franklin D. Roosevelt or caption the photo of French actress Renée Jeanne Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. The reader is a detective, puzzling out her own connections.

At the time, I couldn't relate to some of the Asian American fiction and poetry I came across. It seemed, for the lack of a better word, inauthentic, as if it were staged by white actors. I thought maybe English was the problem. It was certainly a problem for me. English tuned an experience that should be in the minor key to a major key; there was an intimacy and melancholy in Korean that were lost when I wrote in English, a language which I, from my childhood, associated with customs officers, hectoring teachers, and Hallmark cards. Even after all those years since I learned English, I still couldn't shake the feeling that to write anything was to fill in a blank or to recite back the

original. Cha spoke my language by indicating that English was *not* her language, that English could never be a true reflection of her consciousness, that it was as much an imposition on her consciousness as it was a form of expression. And because of that, *Dictee* felt true.

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I first heard that Cha was raped and murdered by a security guard in New York City in Kim's class. I don't remember how Kim presented it. I just vaguely remember the facts. Since then, throughout all the years that I reread *Dictee*, or taught it, or presented it for a talk, it never occurred to me to find out what happened. And yet, Cha's death saturated my reading of *Dictee*, gave the book a haunted prophetic aura—*Dictee* is, after all, about young women who died violent deaths—although I would never admit to that interpretation in class or a talk.

A few years ago, when I was writing about Cha in a review, I decided to check on the date of her rape and homicide. Digging into Cha's bibliography, I was surprised that no one wrote anything about the crime. If her homicide is mentioned at all, it's treated as an unpleasant fact, acknowledged in one terse sentence before the scholar rushes off to write about narrative "indeterminacy" in *Dictee*. More disturbing is that no one admits that Cha was also raped, an omission so stubborn I had to consult court records to confirm that she was also sexually assaulted. Did they not know? Were they skittish? *Murder* has been desensitized to a crime statistic, but combine it with the word *rape* and it forces you to confront her body.

It's difficult to find reliable statistics on Asian American women who've been sexually assaulted. The Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence found that 21 to 55 percent of Asian women experienced physical and sexual violence, which is a rather broad range. Another survey discovered that among all ethnic backgrounds, Asian American women reported the lowest rate of sexual assault. Yet another excluded Asian women altogether because the "sampling size was too small." I have a hard time trusting any of these findings. When I was dating, my mother used to ask, "You're not doing anything bad, are you?" That was her euphemism, if you can call it that, for sex, which was otherwise never mentioned.

Growing up, I overheard stories of women who disappeared or who went mad. What happened? I would ask. Nothing, my mother would say, and then I'd be hushed. In every Asian culture, stories abound of women disappearing or going mad without explanation. The most that would be revealed was that something "bad" happened. In psychoanalysis, the pain that trolls your nerves detaches from your body once you talk about it. Naming that pain takes the sting out of the incident, makes it mortal, manageable, even extinguishable. But I grew up in a culture where to speak of pain would not only retraumatize me but traumatize everyone I love, as if words are not a cure but a poison that will infect others. How many Asian women would then feel bold enough to report sexual assault in their cultures of secrecy and shame? Denial is always the salve, though it is merely topical, since the incident mushrooms back in dreams and other deadlier chronic forms. I asked a friend who's an Asian American scholar why he thought no one has written about Cha's death. "They probably don't want to retraumatize the family," he said. After he said that, I couldn't help but see Cha's critics, including myself, as part of her story.

I think of Sylvia Plath, the titan of tragic female poets. A cottage industry of biographies has cropped up around her. Everyone, from the casual reader to the most devoted scholar, is a sleuth, trading gossip, poring over letters and journal entries to find that one stone left unturned about her life. Legal battles between her estate and scholars have been protracted. Casual friends have offered sniping perspectives in their own memoirs. But much of Cha's personal life has remained sealed. The length to which scholars will argue how Cha is recovering the lives of Korean women silenced by historical atrocities while remaining silent about the atrocity that took Cha's own life has been baffling. There has been important scholarship about *Dictee*, such as the compilation of criticism *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, edited by Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón, and essays by scholars like Anne Anlin Cheng and Timothy Yu. But more often, *Dictee* is used as long-winded validation of the academic field of study the scholar happens to be in. The more I read about her, the less I knew. And the less I knew, the more I couldn't help but regard Cha as a woman who also disappeared without explanation.

Cha's friends and family remarked that her voice was her most distinguishing feature. It was like breath; ethereal and serene, drawing them in like she was about to tell them a secret. Cha used her voice as both subject and instrument in her poetry and video art. In her 1976 video *Vidéoème*, her voice-over translates the French text that appears onscreen. "To see," she says in a high, fluted, and feminine voice that is both fragile and chilling, tranquil and eerie—like wetting the rim of a water glass and rubbing the rim until you hear the glass sing.

Another Cha video, *Permutations*, which I managed to find online, is a flickering sequence of black-and-white headshots of her younger sister Bernadette made in 1976. Each frame of her sister lasts a few seconds. Her sister wears no makeup; her long, thick hair is parted in the middle and hangs loosely around her face. Her solemn expression is unchanging. Her features are classically Korean: dark defined eyebrows, narrow eyes, a nice-shaped nose, a mouth that is pursed and full and sensuous.

After six minutes of watching frames of Bernadette's unvarying expression, I'm a little bored. Time is unforgiving on video, dating it faster than painting or photography. As technology ages, the medium thickens, taking over the subject. I notice the ambient white noise, the graininess of the optical texture. The artist Hito Steyerl writes about the "poor image" as a "copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. It is a ghost of an image...the poor image tends toward abstraction: it is a visual idea in its very becoming...it often defies patrimony, national culture, or indeed copyright."

Bernadette "tends toward abstraction" in that there's something unspecific about her headshot. Her expression is unreadable; no ornament modernizes her; she could be anyone, anywhere, during any period, in Seoul as a war refugee or in the United States as a Bay Area hippie. I read an account about how one man saw *Permutations* at a museum and, mistaking the sister for the artist, fell in love. He bought *Dictee* but then fell out of love because he thought the book was unreadable. I myself saw *Permutations* at the Centre Pompidou and at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, where it was part of a feminist exhibit. It's always startling to come across Cha's videos in the company of other artists, as if I'm seeing a relative whom I

haven't seen for years in a bright public space. But what are you doing here, I want to ask, where have you been?

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Cha was born in March 4, 1951, in Busan, South Korea, at the height of the Korean War. She was the middle daughter of five children. Her family, along with thousands of other refugees, had fled south to Busan from Seoul to escape the North Korean invasion. Her family, remarked her eldest brother, John, "was always on the run." Their parents first went to Manchuria to escape the Japanese occupation, then to Seoul to escape the Soviet invasion, then to Busan to flee North Koreans, and finally to the United States to escape the South Korean dictatorship. Her parents hoped that in the United States, they would finally find peace.

For a little while, the family had peace in Songdo, a tiny fishing village west of Busan, where they lived in a hut along the beach during the Korean War. Unlike Seoul, there were no bombs falling in the distance, no screams nor soldiers ordering them to lift sandbags. John remembers that time fondly, recalling the crash of waves, the crooked pine, and his parents talking softly amongst themselves while peeling sweet yellow melon on the wooden veranda. His first memory of Cha was in Songdo. At three, Cha was a withdrawn child who always frowned, who preferred to observe rather than play. She used to sit on the fence and watch naked boys dive into the gray surf and roughhouse on the sand. Singing to a tune of a nursery song about a rabbit, she changed the lyrics so it was about them: "Hey, naked boys, where are you going, hop hop—there you run away."

John said that Cha and her mother were extremely close. Her mother wanted to be a writer too and told Cha and her siblings stories that are retold in *Dictee*. She taught them to love books and care for them by lining the covers with butcher paper. *Dictee* is primarily a book about her mother. In the chapter "Calliope," Cha writes the history of her mother, portraying her as a homesick eighteen-year-old teacher in Manchuria. In other sections, Cha retells her mother's shaman tales, like the story of the princess who was disowned by her father because she was not a son. The princess won back his affection by descending into the underworld to fetch the father medicine to



heal him. But in Cha's version, it's the mother who's sick, the mother for whom she fetches medicine.

When Cha was twelve, in 1963, her family left Seoul and immigrated to San Francisco, and there Cha found her calling for art and poetry. Just two years into learning English, Cha won a poetry contest in school at the age of fourteen. No longer the withdrawn middle child, Cha opened up. She was caring and generous, and easily connected with people. She attended Convent of the Sacred Heart, a Catholic French girls' school in the Bay Area, which she later used as a subject for *Dictee* and for a photographic series in graduate school.

Cha had a tenuous relationship with her father, who, having once had the ambition to be a painter himself, opposed Cha's desire to pursue the arts because of the hardships involved. As a graduate student, Cha often fought with her father, who couldn't understand why she had to be in school for so long. In her poem "i have time," there's an unattributed quote that John Wagers is probably from her father: "all the years you spent here all the literature courses you studied is this what they taught you I can't understand a thing my dictionary has no translation of this."

At Berkeley, where she acquired two bachelor's and two master's degrees in comparative literature and visual arts, Cha studied with Bertrand August, a dynamic and garrulous scholar who introduced her to French and film theory. Concurrently, Cha, mentored by the artist Jim Melchert, dove into performance and multimedia art. All were new fields back then, and Cha embraced them wholeheartedly. She loved Marguerite Duras and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, and Carl Dreyer, whose *The Passion of Joan of Arc* had a profound impact on Cha. She was also inspired by Samuel Beckett and his use of "voix blanche," which later inspired the flat narration in her video performances and *Dictee*. She worked tirelessly, practicing at what were then the formal frontiers of video and performance art, avant-garde poetry and theater, film and literary theory. August said, "Theresa assimilated many ideas to create something totally different, original, and new."

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After Cha died, *Dictee* quickly went out of print. Then, after a decade of silence, critical attention began to trickle in, first from avant-garde film critics and then from Asian American scholars who had initially ignored *Dictee* because it was too formally inaccessible. Now, *Dictee*, reprinted by the University of California Press, is regarded as a seminal book in Asian American literature and taught widely in universities, while her video art, sculpture, and photography, all preserved in the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, have been exhibited worldwide in major museums.

When I teach *Dictee*, I tell my students to approach the book as if they're learning a new language, so that language is not a direct expression of them but putty in their mouths that they're shaping into vowels. I say this because Cha writes as if she were still the Catholic high school girl dictating her story back in her broken English:

First Friday. One hour before mass. Mass every first Friday. Dictee first. Before mass. Dictee before. Every Friday. Before mass. Dictee before. Back in the study hall. It is time. Snaps once. One step right from the desk. Single file.

Cha's use of the period is so aggressive it flattens her voice into a hard robotic drill. These stippling bullet points interrupt us from actually immersing ourselves in the story. If Cha is the driver, she is braking, and braking, the prose jerking forward and stopping, jerking forward and stopping. I find her style, while not exactly pleasurable, to be liberating because Cha—who was actually fluent in French, English, and Korean—made the immigrant's discomfort with English into a possible form of expression.

During Japanese rule, Koreans were forbidden to use their language and even had to give up their names for Japanese surnames. Soon after independence, the peninsula was split in half and occupied by American and Soviet forces. Because of her nation's colonial history, Cha treats language as both the wound and the instrument that wounds; hers is a language that conceals rather than reveals identity. In her art projects, she regards words, whether in English or French or Korean, as textural objects, rigid as a rubber stamp, arcane as a stone engraving, not as part of her, but apart from her.

The critic, schooled in the post-structural pieties of separating text from author, has been careful to emphasize that *Dictee* is a rejection of autobiography, a manuscript of missives washed up on the shore for her dissection. Her family has an altogether different reading. Cha sent a brand-new copy of *Dictee* to her parents a few days before she died, and the copy arrived the day of her funeral. John opened the package and flipped open the book to the first photo, a poorly reproduced image of graffiti by Korean miners who were trapped inside a Japanese coal mine. Scrawled in a childish hand, the graffiti translates to “Mother, I miss you. I am hungry. I want to go home.” Hearing Cha’s voice in his head, John was so disturbed he hid the book from his mother. Two months later, her mother read *Dictee*, and had to stop a number of times because she felt that Cha was speaking directly to her.

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When I emailed curator Constance M. Lewallen of the Berkeley Art Museum, asking if she could talk about Cha’s rape and homicide, she deferred with this short response: “We have always tried to focus on Cha’s amazing work and not to sensationalize her story.” Another scholar responded to my inquiry, saying that she also refrained from mentioning her death “out of respect for her family, not to overshadow the work, and I was trying to accommodate the personal in her work in a different way than a traditional biographical read.”

These are valid objectives. It was essential early on to foreground the importance of *Dictee*, to champion her innovations, while deflecting what happened to her lest the public became diverted by her appalling death. It was as if her minders had to protect the legacy of her art from the sordid forces of her rape and murder. But I wonder if their protectiveness may have been too effective. Right after her homicide, there was no news coverage except for a brief obituary in *The Village Voice*. This lack of coverage, I suspect, is because she was—as the police described her—“an Oriental Jane Doe.” But since then, despite court records that are available to the public, there has been no other story about her rape and murder, enshrouding Cha in mystery and hushed hearsay.

Cha, I should note, developed an aesthetic out of silence, making it evident through her elisions that the English language is too meager and mediated a medium to capture the historical atrocities her people had endured. It was more truthful to leave those horrors partially spoken, like Sapphic shrapnel, and ask the reader to imagine the unspeakable. In a way, the scholar is mirroring Cha's own rhetoric of silence. By disclosing her death in the most abstemious manner ("In November 5, 1982, Cha was killed"), the scholar indicates that her homicide is too horrifying to impart through biographical summary and it's up to the reader to imagine what happened. But where does the silence that neglects her end, and where does the silence that respects her begin? The problem with silence is that it can't speak up and say why it's silent. And so silence collects, becomes amplified, takes on a life outside our intentions, in that silence can get misread as indifference, or avoidance, or even shame, and eventually this silence passes over into forgetting.

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Joseph Sanza, twenty-nine years old, of Italian descent, was a serial rapist who was already wanted in Florida for nine counts of sexual assault. He fled to New York City and lived with his sister while working as a security guard. Puck Building management hired him simply on the grounds that "he knew English."

Cha was one of Sanza's many rape victims but his only known homicide victim. Contrary to common belief, Sanza was not a stranger to Cha. Because her husband worked at the Puck and Sanza worked there as security, he knew the couple enough to know where they lived. He knew the couple enough that there was even a friendly photo of them posing together. Unlike Sanza's other rape victims, who were all strangers, Cha could therefore identify him, which was undoubtedly the motive for him to murder her and remove her body from the crime scene premises.

Cha's body was found a few blocks away from the Puck, in a parking lot on Elizabeth Street, right by her home. Joseph Sanza dumped her body there, using a van that he borrowed from another security guard. After Sanza raped Cha in the sub-basement of the Puck, he beat her with a nightstick and then

strangled her to death. A belt was found tightened around the broken hyoid bone of her neck, and there were lacerations on her head deep enough to expose her skull. Her pants and underwear were down around her knees. She was missing her hat and her gloves and one boot. When police found her at the parking lot after seven, her body was still warm.

Specificity is the hallmark of good writing except when too much detail becomes lurid, gratuitous, and turns Cha, after years of dedicated labor by her critics and curators, back into “Oriental Jane Doe.” Doubt creeps in as I write this. What do I add? What do I leave out? Do I include the rug in which her body was rolled, the straw in her hair that matched the straw in the van? The scrapes on her body that matched the pattern of abrasions on the floor of the elevator shaft? Detail, in this case, is also evidence. There is no room for indeterminacy.

All the forensic evidence—the blood, the hair—was inconclusive, so the prosecutor had to rely on circumstantial evidence. For instance, her wedding ring was missing. A friend of Sanza’s testified that the next day, Saturday, he noticed Sanza wearing a feminine ring on his pinky finger and that “it looked a little gay.” The following day, Sanza stole one thousand dollars from his sister and took the Greyhound back to Florida, where, in the span of three months, he raped two other women, one of whose wedding rings he also tried to steal. It was Sanza’s gruesome trademark of stealing his victims’ wedding rings that helped Cha’s detectives link her case to the cases in Florida. By the time her detectives caught up with Sanza, he was already arrested and in custody for his Florida sexual assault cases.

The Puck housed primarily printing presses until its \$8 million restoration, under way at the time of Cha’s death, in which the interior was updated into condos for commercial use. During the building’s renovation, the police scoured the building for weeks, looking for the crime scene. They even had a bloodhound named Mandrake at the site. But much to the shock and embarrassment of the police, it was actually Cha’s two brothers, John and James, and her husband, Richard, who, after they decided to go on their search mission themselves, found the crime scene in the building’s unused sub-basement.

John, now in his seventies, has written his own memoir on Cha's murder, called *The Rite of Truth: telling/retelling*. It was originally published in Korean and he's now in the process of translating it to English. Much of the book, which I read, documents the murder trials, where he, his siblings, his mother, and Cha's friends were present. John now lives in the Bay Area, where he works as a writer and translator.

Cha writes about John in *Dictée*. In the chapter "Melpomene/Tragedy," Cha gives a dramatic account of the mass demonstration in April 1960 when South Koreans rose up against the authoritarian leader Syngman Rhee, who was appointed by the United States after Japan lost control over Korea. Everyone, including middle school students, was out on the streets, until the militia began to openly shoot at the crowd. Cha writes how John, then a high school student, was eager to join the demonstration but their mother refused to let him out of the house: "You do not want to lose him, my brother, to be killed as the many others by now, already, you say you understand, you plead all the same they are killing any every one."

I interviewed John twice over Google Chat and corresponded with him over email. It's hard to see him now, in T-shirt and bifocals, as that hardheaded young schoolboy. He has a kind, round face and the relaxed, easygoing manner of someone who's spent most of his life in California. Until I talked to him, I felt uneasy contacting Cha's living relatives. More than a few scholars gave the impression that they didn't mention her murder because they didn't want to trouble her family. I was therefore relieved that John was more than happy to talk, although his story on how he found the crime scene complicated my intention to get the facts straight about Cha's homicide.

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For the first trial in 1983, the prosecutor brought in three of Sanza's victims from Florida. One woman testified how Sanza broke into her house and sexually assaulted her with a gun to her head. Afterwards he tried to steal her wedding ring. Sanza was convicted in that first trial but the decision was overturned in 1985 because the appellate court found there weren't enough similarities between Cha's case and the other three rape victims who testified against him. Among their terrible reasons: Sanza was "polite" when he raped

the other women in Florida compared to his vicious assault against Cha. The second trial, in the fall of 1987, ended in a mistrial when the prosecutor Jeff Schlanger referenced a polygraph test that was inadmissible in the New York court system. Finally, for the third trial, in December 1987, the detectives found a key witness, Sanza's ex-girlfriend Lou, who testified that before Sanza fled to Florida, he called her from a pay phone the day after the homicide and confessed he "fucked up" and "killed someone." It took the jury less than one hour to reach a decision. Sanza was found guilty of first-degree rape and second-degree murder.

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When Cha didn't show up later that night to meet them for the movie, her friends Susan Wolf and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis had dinner together instead at Dojo, a cheap vegetarian restaurant right across from St. Mark's Bookshop. While eating, Flitterman-Lewis and Wolf saw *Dictée* displayed and spotlighted in the arched window of the bookshop and were excited to tell Cha her book was being featured at the legendary store. They toasted to Cha's success.

I met Sandy Flitterman-Lewis for tea in Chelsea. She is a small, vivacious Jewish woman in her sixties who's now a professor at Rutgers in feminist film studies. She'd known Cha since graduate school in Berkeley and always admired her work, comparing it to filmmaker Chantal Akerman's work because of the way it transcended category. She was eager to talk about what happened: "People only say that she died young," she said. "They never indicate the horror."

Flitterman-Lewis was there for the last trial. She remembers Schlanger showing a chart with twenty-two pieces of circumstantial evidence, to make it explicit to the jury that all of them pointed to Sanza. Out of all the evidence, she was most disturbed by the scratch marks. The friend who noticed Cha's ring on Sanza also said there were deep scratches all over Sanza's forearms and on his face. Years later, Flitterman-Lewis attended a poetics conference where a graduate student made confusing, pretentious claims about Cha's passivity as rape victim being a kind of performance art. Flitterman-Lewis stood up during the Q&A and told her about the marks.

"Theresa was not passive," she insisted. "She fought back."

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When Flitterman-Lewis told me about spotting *Dictée* displayed at St. Mark's Bookshop, the day flared open for me. Until I talked to her, I could only imagine Cha's New York as a shadowy abstraction of a city, a Gotham of unlit steel and windswept empty boulevards. But Flitterman-Lewis's detail breathed life into the city, animating it to the city I know. I used to work nearby at *The Village Voice*, and St. Mark's Bookshop, which later moved to Astor Place, was my ligament between events, killing the odd ten minutes between drinks, readings, parties, and dinner dates with friends. It was a beacon of downtown cosmopolitanism. When they displayed my second book of poems, *Dance Dance Revolution*, I was ecstatic. I was thirty at the time, a year younger than Cha when they'd displayed *Dictée* in 1982. Comparing yourself at the age when a young writer died drives home how early their lives were cut off, since likely you are thinking, But I was just getting started! I still didn't know anything!

Writing is a family trade like anything else: you are more entitled to the profession if your ancestors have already set up shop. By introducing me to Cha, my professor Kim established a direct, if modest, literary link: Cha, Kim, myself. Not only did they share my history, they provided for me an aesthetic from which I could grow. For a while, however, I thought I had outgrown Cha. I'd cite modernist heavyweights like James Joyce and Wallace Stevens as influences instead of her. I took her for granted. Now, in writing about her death, I am, in my own way, trying to pay proper tribute. But once, when I read an excerpt of this essay in public, someone asked if Cha would have written about her rape homicide in the fairly straightforward narrative account that I'm writing in. "Not at all," I said. "But I'm just trying to write what happened. I found that formal experimentation was getting in the way of documenting facts."

The younger version of me would have been appalled by this opinion and argued that biographical narrative is just as artificial as any other form. The younger version of me would have also been annoyed that I'm now imposing a biographical reading onto *Dictée* as if her life were an answer key to a book that refuses answers. Not only that, I'm imposing myself onto her, filling her



in with myself as if I were some kind of cotton ticking. If her portrait is in danger of fading, I can interject, But here I am, at least, to compensate!

South Korea is such a tiny country that its war and violent uprisings upended the lives of anyone who came from there. When Cha was in Busan as a refugee, my father, at the age of eight, was also a refugee in Busan, scavenging for half-eaten Spam tins from the U.S. military canteen. When Cha's brother John was fighting with his mother to join the protest against the dictator Rhee, my teenage uncle on my mother's side was in that same demonstration. My grandfather, worried sick, traveled to Seoul to search for him but was turned away because the militia shut the city down. My uncle was fine, but the next day, my grandfather died from a heart attack. "Run. Run hard," writes Cha about herself as she ran to fetch the tutor so that the tutor could stop her brother from joining the protest. It reminded me of my mother's memory of running to fetch the pharmacist after she saw my grandfather keel over. If she ran hard enough, she would save him. But by the time my mother arrived with the pharmacist, the white sheet was already draped over my grandfather's body.

Maybe I am just tired of Cha's ghostliness. If she's known at all, she's known as this tragic unknowable subaltern subject. Why hadn't anyone reached out to Cha's relatives earlier? Why hadn't anyone looked at the court records? They're not hard to find. In fact, they're readily available online. But why hadn't I bothered to find out about her homicide earlier? Didn't I also type and then delete the word *rape* before *murder* when I wrote the review where I mentioned Cha? *Rape* burns a hole in the article and capsizes any argument. There is no way to continue on with your analysis, no way to make sense past it. You can only look at *it* or look away—and I looked away. But it's not just because her death was so grim. I sometimes avoid reading a news story when the victim is Asian because I don't want to pay attention to the fact that no one else is paying attention. I don't want to care that no one else cares because I don't want to be left stranded in my rage.

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When you google Cha, the first author photo that comes up is the film still of her sister Bernadette from her video *Permutations*. This still of Bernadette is

often confused for Cha herself. I can understand how someone would *want* the photo to be Cha. With her stoic symmetrical beauty, Bernadette looks haunted in that inscrutable way where the viewer could project any tragic story they want onto her.

Only one real photo of Cha circulates online. Cha has long hair and wears a black turtleneck and tight jeans. She is in profile, staring out the window of her Berkeley apartment in a studied pose. The crook of her elbow rests on that windowsill while her other hand is tucked into her jeans pocket by her hip. Her expression is guarded in the way many writers and artists are guarded when they're aware they are being photographed. While this picture is used as her official photo, most readers imagine Bernadette when they think they're imagining Cha. Even I thought that picture of Bernadette was Cha until a friend corrected me. I was upset. Asians are always mistaken for other Asians, but the least we can do to honor the dead is to ensure they're never mistaken for anyone else again.

At least Cha had a sense of humor about being mistaken for other Asian women when she was alive. She wrote a poem called "Surplus Novel," which she later performed.

*they call me*  
*they calling after me*  
*hey yoko*  
*hey yoko ono*  
*yoko ono*  
*yokoono*  
*I ain't your*  
*I ain't no I ain't*  
*your yoko ono*

—

There was a time, from the late sixties until the eighties, when every East Asian woman with long hair was catcalled or dismissed as Yoko Ono. When I was fourteen, I took guitar lessons, and my teacher's friend, a baby boomer,

remarked that I looked so much like Yoko Ono with my guitar. I was confused (Yoko Ono didn't play guitar, she was the *wife* of a guitar player) and I was insulted (Yoko Ono was *old*). This was in the nineties, when Yoko Ono had already faded from notoriety as the dragon lady who broke up the Beatles.

From invisible girlhood, the Asian American woman will blossom into a fetish object. When she is at last visible—at last desired—she realizes much to her chagrin that this desire for her is treated like a perversion. This is most obvious in porn, where our murky desires are coldly isolated into categories in which white is the default and every other race is a sexual aberration. But the Asian woman is reminded every day that her attractiveness is a perversion, in instances ranging from skin-crawling Tinder messages (“I’d like to try my first Asian woman”) to microaggressions from white friends. I recall a white friend pointing out to me that Jewish men only dated Asian women because they wanted to find women who were the opposite of their pushy mothers. Implied in this tone-deaf complaint was her assumption that Asian women are docile and compliant. Well-meaning friends never failed to warn me, if a white guy was attracted to me, that he probably had an Asian fetish. The result: I distrusted my desirousness. My sexuality was a pathology. If anyone non-Asian liked me, there was something wrong with him.

In her book *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, Bhanu Kapil asked South Asian women she randomly met a list of questions. Alongside pointed questions like “Who is responsible for the suffering of your mother?” she asks the question “What is the shape of your body?” I myself can’t answer the question without betraying traces of dysmorphia that are left over from my youth like arsenic. In a triumphant feminist narrative, a woman reclaims her body, but I still warily regard my body at arm’s length: big head, minimal body, maybe once attractive, in a gamine, androgynous way; now, my body slackens from neglect; breasts a laptop rack while I lie prone on the couch, scrolling.

How would Cha answer that question? She grew up Catholic *and* Korean, so repression doubled down. In videos where she performs, she always wears white, a color that in Korean culture means death but in shaman culture means peace. When her mother was eight months pregnant with Cha, she fled to Busan with her family. It snowed that day, big white tufty flakes, like

angora rabbits, and her mother experienced a rare moment of peace. Cha was less interested in the sensuous presence of her body than its erasure. She was fascinated with women who martyred themselves. But then, to look at it a different way, she was fascinated with women who gave themselves over to revolutions.

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When I asked Flitterman-Lewis why she thought there was no media coverage of Cha's rape and homicide at the time, she said without hesitation, "She was just another Asian woman. If she were a young white artist from the Upper West Side, it would have been all over the news."

I immediately came to this conclusion myself when I searched the news archives and found nothing except for the short *Village Voice* obituary. But I was reluctant to test this theory out loud because I knew that I, as an Asian woman saying it, would be dismissed as being conspiratorial. One can easily argue that hundreds of murders went unreported due to the high crime rate in New York during the eighties. And yet the lack of news coverage of Cha's death was unusual enough for the prosecutor Jeff Schlanger to mention it to me when we talked. I asked if it had anything to do with the high crime rate.

"It should have been notorious because it happened in the landmark Puck," Schlanger said. "And a rape homicide just didn't occur there—even in those days."

"Then why do you think there was there no coverage?"

Schlanger paused to think.

"That's a good question," he said. "I really don't know."

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This is what John told me about how they found the crime scene. Right after Cha died, her mother kept dreaming about her. In one dream, Cha was a little girl who led her to a number, 710. She kept pointing to the number but her mother didn't know what it meant. The day of her funeral, her sister Bernadette also had a vision of three 7s. Cha's mother often had peculiar dreams, some of which are retold in *Dictée*. In the chapter "Calliope," her

eighteen-year-old mother, feverishly ill, dreams of descending into the underworld, where like Persephone she is tempted by food offered by several spirits that she then rejects. In the final passage of *Dictee*, Cha offers a healing vision of her mother holding her up to a window:

Lift me up mom to the window looking above too high above her view....Lift me to the window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping on wood to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky.

The police spent hundreds of hours searching the Puck Building for Cha's missing purse, boot, beret, and wedding ring, but they could not find anything. In December, a month after her murder, John, James, and Richard—fed up with the slow pace of the police—decided to search themselves. The police reported that the bloodhound barked like a “maniac” near the pump room, so they began there. The basement was a dark massive warren of rooms packed with old machinery and rusted sewer pipes. Using their flashlights, they swept the dirt with their feet, as if they could uncover a lost ring like a loose pebble. They came to a stairway that led to three white brick columns marked with the numbers 710, 711, and 713, which stopped John in his tracks. Recalling his mother's and Bernadette's dreams, John said they should search around there. They opened dead-end rooms until they came to a set of old double doors that they pushed open. The first thing John saw were her gloves.

“They looked alive,” John told me.

When I asked him to clarify, John said the gloves looked puffed up, as if there were invisible hands inside them, cupping the ground. There was also her hat, caked in blood, and her other boot. He was in shock. When the police arrived and the space was flooded with light, the gloves deflated back to their natural flat shape. Later, the memory of those gloves would haunt him for years and compel him to write his memoir. “They were her final art piece,” John said.

I was spellbound when he told me his account. But afterwards, I grappled with whether or not to include John's story, since it cloaked Cha back in that

shroud. Of course, his story could be explained away. Grief can trick the eye and bend our perceptions to reassure us that our lost loved ones are near. Of course, their minds will insist that she's still present, leading them to the room, the energy of her hands still in the gloves, in their dreams, in *Dictee*, calling from the underworld. Of course, they must be reassured she's still making art, that her spirit must endure beyond her ghastly death. On the same day they found the gloves, Artists Space had its opening and Cha's photographs of hands were shown posthumously.

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There is one family portrait of just the five children, taken when they were living in Seoul. John writes about it in his memoir:

I am twelve in the picture; Elizabeth is nine; you are seven; James is four; and Bernadette on my lap is a little over one hundred days old. You have cropped hair, the same haircut every girl in Korea used to get, just a simple cut, no hint of shaping, its ends hanging straight and square. And you are wearing a slight frown.

A few times we used to look at the picture together well after we'd become adults, I'd asked you once why you were cranky that day. You laughed and said, "Oh my god, that hair, wouldn't you be cranky with a haircut like that?"

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After nine minutes of Bernadette's headshots in *Permutations*—her facing forward, her facing backward, her eyes closed, her eyes open, a few frames with her hair tucked back to reveal an ear adorned with a simple round stud—the subject changes. Cha snuck a headshot of herself in. The single frame of the older sister flashes onscreen for a second before switching back to the younger sister. Blink and you'll miss the portrait of the artist. I rewind and freeze the frame. Same long hair, but squarer jawline, imperfect skin, slightly broader nose. Her eyes are present, alert, not haunted at all.