

Transitory Poetics: October 2016

written by Toby Altman | October 31, 2016



Transitory Poetics is a monthly review series by Toby Altman focused solely on current and upcoming chapbooks. You can read the introduction [here](#).

This month, I reviewed two chapbooks by poets who work in New York—Marisa Crawford's *Big Brown Bag* and Chialun Chang's *One Day We Become Whites*. Crawford and Chang take the city as the material of poetry, a formal principle. There's probably no more over-determined place in the imagination of American poetry (especially for poets, like me, who live in the blasted hinterlands beyond the five boroughs). But Crawford and Chang write against this fecundity of fantasy, working to name and describe the city as a space of boredom and commercial panic, a place where gender and race are tightly policed. Yet their work also explores spaces of possibility and escape, spaces poetry is uniquely qualified to name.

In this month's final review, I take a step back to look at a chapbook from 2012, Alexander Dickow's *Trial Balloons*. I hope to do this more often. Chapbooks represent pockets of possibility within contemporary poetry. Because they are so disposable and plentiful, lots of this possibility is overlooked, forgotten as soon it is produced. Dickow's chapbook is deeply engaged in the culture of contemporary avant-garde writing, but his work suggests avenues of expansion and dispersion, which fracture the limited consensus about what constitutes the priorities of the avant-garde, in 2012 or now.



***Big Brown Bag* by Marisa Crawford**
[Grazing Grain Press](#), 2016

Appropriately enough, the cover of Marisa Crawford's new chapbook, *Big Brown Bag*, is printed on heavy-stock brown paper. The chapbook seems to be on the verge of becoming a bag itself, a container of commodities. Reading this book, holding it in your hands, entails a continuing, tactile contact with the material life of bargains and sales, shopping and department stores. *Big Brown Bag* establishes an affective relationship with the mundane rhythms and spaces of capitalist consumption. Then it proposes to interrogate those rhythms and spaces, to make them the matter of poetry. The speaker of *Big Brown Bag* works, "for a major department store in New York City, the name of which is replaced with the fictional name 'Goodie's' in this book," Crawford writes in an introductory note. With its suggestions of childish glee and overflowing commodities, the word "Goodie's" becomes a kind of refrain across the book. "Sometimes when I'm walking in the woods I think about Goodie's. / And I get weak in the knees"; "At Goodie's all the women say, / keep me away from the cupcakes. / Keep the cupcakes away from me." As it reoccurs in these moments of self-surveillance, appetite, and affect, Goodie's becomes less a place than a restraint. As Crawford's speaker says,

The only way I could get to work was
to turn off my brain and be dumb, dumb, dumb.
And then my brain got stuck there.
I'm texting in the middle of the street I'm so dumb.
I'm slamming against the hoods of cars I'm such a dummy.

Goodie's requires the self-negation of its workers—and maybe its shoppers too. And yet, as Crawford observes with bitter, biting irony, it also promises self-negation as a kind of reward. "I'll go there & I'll be invisible," Crawford writes: "My body will levitate / with wonder. It won't have to exist at all." This is either death or a state of ecstasy. Why not both?

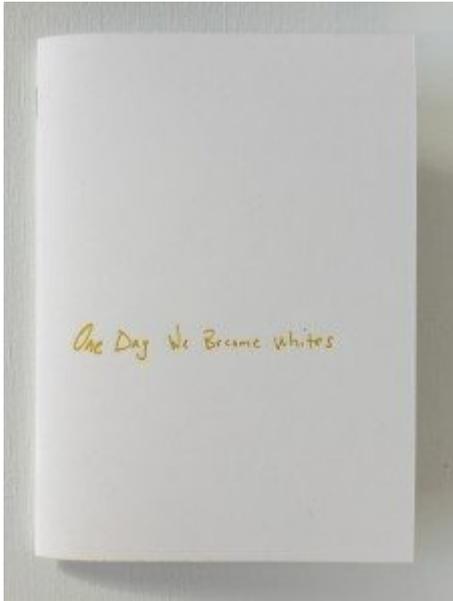
Untitled, each about a page long, the poems in the chapbook flow into each

other, their borders unstable, creating a continuous scroll of details, objects, and actions, which ebb and move without congealing into a narrative. Narrative is for other people, for lives that are not organized by seasonal styles and shopping patterns. "We're all 30 / we're all dying / we all were born yesterday": life at Goodie's compresses and disarticulates time and the people who live inside of it. Crawford's writing is marked by its temporal transgressions, the way that it steps into the past without leaving the present:

	In high school I'd try to go
the whole day without eating.	Then I tried being
the cool girl who knows she isn't fat.	I had a stack
of Seventeen magazines.	A quart
of Phish Food ice cream.	Smear of vanilla
lip gloss where my mouth should be.	My whole horrible life
in front of me.	Row of manila folders.

There's a jolt of temporal dissonance in the line "lip gloss where my mouth should be." Just where we expect a litany located in an adolescent past, the poem returns, suddenly, to the present. The past does not offer a refuge and the present does not offer relief. Instead, Crawford works to implicate the store, to mark its place in a chain of objects that constraint and shame the female body. "Everyone at Goodie's is watching their weight. And I'm / no better," she writes. If Goodie's is a space of gender control and surveillance, it also encircles and embraces the lyric intelligence that diagnoses its pathology. It is a scene of submersion in gender with all the limitation and violence that implies, a submersion without recourse, which shapes the very experience of time, desire, and speech itself. Yet Crawford's speaker locates points of escape, temporary and contingent, from Goodie's. At these points, these nodes of pleasure and contact, her writing opens in a lyric rush to other, uncharted, maybe unnameable possibilities of being with objects and being with others:

I hate going into stores on my lunch break because
the thing that I want is something I can't buy in stores.
Maybe it's the hot rock gold ring that's shaped like
a skeleton key or maybe it's the black on your arms
when they're around me.



One Day We Become Whites by Chialun Chang
[No, Dear / Small Anchor](#), 2016

"Living in the city is not easy," writes Chialun Chang early in her new chapbook, *One Day We Become Whites*. Like Marisa Crawford's *Big Brown Bag*, Chang's chapbook is a record of New York, a record that punctures New York's myths about itself. "You don't sound like a New Yorker at all," complains the interlocutor in Chang's dialogue-poem "Gypsy." "I know and I'm fine with that," the speaker replies. The interlocutor fantasizes about a New York of romance and plentitude, pleasure and celebrity: "I want to go party!" she says. "Go to fancy restaurants, wear my Gucci shades and hang out with Woody Allen." She fantasizes about a New York that is all lower Manhattan, a place stripped of its racial and economic complications. Chang's poems puncture that fantasy, occupying, through careful observation, the everyday New York, the New York of boredom, racism, and poverty. Chang points to the way that such fantasies perform acts of racial violence, forced assimilation:

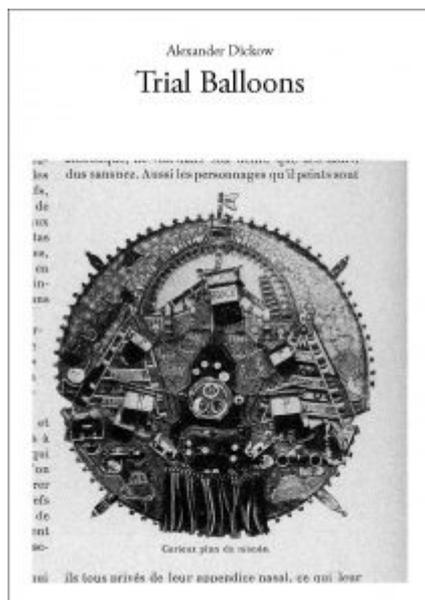
-This is my petty feeling
when they say
Taiwanese are Chinese
Taiwanese are like Chinese
there is do difference between us
we are the same
Taiwanese were Chinese ethnic anyway
we are just cows

Chang stages this as a moment of parabasis, turning away from her interlocutor to face the reading, implicating us in our own failures of racial compassion and imagination, unfolding her relationship to her identity as a Taiwanese woman living in New York in a cry of anger and disillusionment. In fact, these are the last lines of the chapbook: in its final moments, *One Day We Become Whites*, loops back to its title and its threat of forced racial assimilation. It is a threat disguised as a promise. Chang's writing disrobes that promise, discovers its threat in everyday acts of language and urban life.

In this sense, Chang sounds very much like a New Yorker, laying hold of a rich tradition of writing about and through the city, its mundane, everyday life, in order to engage with questions of aesthetic and political freedom. Chang's tradition includes, on the one hand, Bernadette Mayer's *Memory*, with its quotidian photographic and poetic record of the humdrum downtown life of the 1970s, and Cathy Park Hong's descriptions of impossible cities in *Engine Empire*. Chang's poems are often anecdotal, even prosaic: they describe ordinary experiences and things. But Chang is a characteristically patient and focused writer: working through her material until it unfolds into something grand and unexpected. In "Dear Jie," she recounts an everyday moment of domestic intimacy:

I watch Cyclo while she was sleeping
next
to me. Mid-May was wet. Mosquito net
covered us. I asked her about her
brother. She
turned over and said, "Nothing has a
full
freedom."

In "Post Cities," by contrast, Chang imagines a series of impossible cities, along the lines of Park Hong and Italo Calvino. Here too her interest guides her to the mundane: what would it be like to live in a city where "you wake up every morning and you are on a cable car passing the ocean with two open windows"? "In the city," she concludes, "the most essential element is to preserve the path that we have been walking on." Nothing has a full freedom.



Trial Balloons by Alexander Dickow
[Corrupt Press](#), 2012

For this month's final review, I'd like to revisit Alexander Dickow's 2012 chapbook *Trial Balloons*. In a way, 2012 feels almost like a different

generation, a piece of the present which has already become historical. This sudden distance, this cut that separates *now* from *then*, might be a site of possibility. Maybe you spent a lot of 2012 worrying about conceptualism. I know I did. It seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the room for a minute or two. I want to go back to that moment and ask bigger questions. I want to expand the claustrophobic amplitude of that debate. I want to investigate other possibilities, possibilities we overlooked. What else could—can—avant-garde writing be?

Dickow's chapbook is a good place to start this inquiry, in part because Dickow begins in the same place many conceptual writers did. Dickow's writing is steeped in the modernist tradition: he works to expand that tradition, to develop a radical modernism. His canon, however, is situated at a slant. He bypasses the usual touchstones of the Anglo-American avant-garde, in favor of Francophone figures: Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Oulipo. (It's worth mentioning here that Dickow writes in both French and English, and has published widely in France, including a recent scholarly book on 19th and 20th century French poets, *Le Poète innombrable*). Like Mallarmé, Dickow pluralizes language, cutting and chopping syntax to open strange multiplicities of meaning. In the final lines of the first section of "Rumpus," for instance, he announces,

Before you know it,
the surrounding toes
within the few feet of you
are buffeting to and forth,
your ground is deafening with blows
and your knees will pucker
the underneath of you.

Dickow makes a number of minor but alarming changes to the syntax of this otherwise lucid English sentence: "forth" instead of "fro," "the underneath" instead of "underneath," etc. One might stubbornly read through these syntactic derangements—or one might treat them as an invitation into a cubist world, a world in which multiple meanings overlap, jostling for space. In this poem, your knees are puckered, and they transfer that collapse to the space beneath them. In these ludic moments, Dickow opens the possibility of a different kind of reading, a reading which circles and retreats, which bends with syntax, giving itself to the pleasure of disturbance. As Dickow writes in a footnote to his poem, "Intaglio Suite": "[O]ur recipes for reading may require some reinvention."

Elsewhere, Dickow stimulates our appetite for reinvention by pluralizing the space of the page. His self-translates "Literature Exam" into—or from?—French: moving back and forth between the two versions of the poem, the reader loses track of which poem is the original, taking pleasure in the capacity of translated poetry to be in two places at once. The poem asks us to "Circle the correct answer"—a paradoxical, impossible feat, as Dickow acknowledges. The correct answer, he announces, is "False." Or, in "Trick Sonnet," Dickow supplies a series of definitions for the poem's key words, a task that resembles marginalia but defies the subsidiary character of the marginal: the long string of definitions becomes its own poem, intimately invested in linguistic possibilities which branch away from the original

poem. "A gathering describes a kind of sore," Dickow writes in the sonnet itself. His poem represents just such a sore, collapsing the Oulipian interest in the sonnet with the conceptual obsession with lists and found language. These avant-garde resources collide rough and raw: without quite synthesizing, they coexist as a delicious mess of possibility. Dickow's writing thus rides the seams of 2012, that fraught year. He is at once deeply aware of contemporary avant-garde writing, but he invests that writing with charges of forgotten practice. And he calls on us to do the same, to look beyond the narrow consensus of our moment, whatever that moment happens to be, for a broader horizon of possibility.