

BRIEF REVIEWS

William Fuller, *Hallucination*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2011. 74pp.
\$14.95

The first section of William Fuller's new collection closes with "Morning Sutta," which reads in its entirety:

flying limpid
bramble drop

verdant nebbe
of two *tartari*

startled bright
concrete stair

With its compressed opacities and conceptual sweep, the piece might serve as an emblem for the poet's procedures throughout this thorny, formidable book. The final stanza revises, word by word, the first: the present act of *flying* seized up into *startled*; the transparency of *limpid* turned to the reflective *bright*; the pastoral *bramble* replaced by the urban *concrete*; and the climactic, potentially tragic *drop* transmuted into *stair*'s cold comedy. Appearing in the mediating role between these vignettes is a deeply recalcitrant couplet. Even after one determines that *nebbe* is a Middle English term for beak (or metaphorically a mouth or the nub of a pen) and considers that *tartari* might find origins in the Mongolian steppes or Argive underworld, the lines are not easily parsed into paraphrase. Perhaps the "verdant nebbe" is that from which the ink of the stanza flows? The "two *tartari*" the separate encasements for each of the poem's images? Or maybe the stanza's function is more purely formal: sonically introducing the "t" that will dominate the final couplet, metrically mediating the first line's trochees and the fifth line's cretic with a third line suggesting either. Are we sure, after all, that the fourth line is meant to modify the third? Sustained attention to such questions seems almost to invite the poem to dismantle itself, to reveal the illusory type of apparent connections. What about the title? Buddhist *suttas*, from the Sanskrit for "thread," pass down the oral teachings of Gautama; Hindi *suttas* are cigarettes. Is this a meditation on what is behind the evanescent threads of human language that binds the world together? Or is it a throwaway smoke, flicked into the brush to land on a sunlit step?

Sonic precision and syntactic ambiguity; metaphysical labyrinths lurking within mundanest experience; a smattering of antiquarian vocabulary: these stylistic hallmarks were evident in Fuller's earlier Flood Editions volumes, 2006's *Watchword* and 2003's magisterial *Sadly*. The relative priority of dissonant sound structure over straightforward sense reflects the author's longtime status as a midwestern fellow traveler of Language writing, particularly in its Bay Area incarnation. (Fuller's initial book-length publications were with Leslie Scalapino's O Books.) At the same time, the persistent impression that sense fracturing offers a means to uncover correspondences occulted by the habits of everyday speech and practice places Fuller somewhat to the side of the linguistic skepticism characteristic of the avant-gardes of recent decades: the negativity of this onetime Renaissance scholar seems very much in the service of a *via negativa*.

Where *Hallucination* diverges from Fuller's other recent work is in the intensity with which it involutes and impacts its particles of perception and reflection. Gone, or at least decidedly underemphasized, are the relatively extended lyric gestures that punctuated earlier volumes like miniature arias, offering the consolation of shapeliness even as they resisted the intellect. (I have in mind such poems as *Sadly*'s "The Later Powers" or *Watchword*'s "Middleless.") In *Hallucination*, gnarled couplets and quatrains predominate, and even the poised sentences of the book's several pieces in prose threaten to "flake apart," in the piquant phrase of "For Dally Kimoko." Trawling through a landscape marked by dead branches, bare trees, black snow, and fog, these distanced and shadowy poems seem consistently disoriented, hung up on matters of scale: "The light in the window is far larger than the earth"; "an entire human being is smaller than a snail." In the background, the inescapable chatter of business hums with its rates and percentages, approval processes, and transubstantiated alpha.

That last detail may offer a modicum of insight into the dour tonality suffusing *Hallucination*. His day job as trust officer and senior vice president at Chicago's Northern Trust Company no doubt afforded Fuller an intimate vantage point for 2008's abyssal crisis in the global financial markets. Unnervingly prescient lines (such as "the property of each occupies its own house") attest to how financialization provides one answer to the titular poem's query, "How is it by occult operation ordinary things occur?" The monetary system that Simmel characterized as "representations not at all identical with objective being" offers a highly salient instance of collective hallucination, one that is intertwined, if not identical, with such other elaborate fictions as the state and the law. Despite their origins in tenuous institutional agreements and unpredictable affective relationships, all these systems can nonetheless have real, damaging physical effects: in the vision of finance (and, at the same time, poetry) proffered by the prose piece "Miwa-San," "there is always the

risk of having your head split open from improper technique.”

While the social underpinnings of exchange and power offer one direction for reading Fuller’s title, hallucination is not just subject but also method here—and all the more so given the poet’s significant investment in etymology. *Hallucinate* descends from the Latin *alucinari*, to wander in mind. Speculation sees in that earlier infinitive a privative *a-* affixed to a form of light, *lux, lucis*. The word shows up, for instance, in a letter of Cicero to his brother Quintus, in which he asserts that their relationship might allow for a letter that digresses without a fixed topic, and goes on to register subjugations and demands discussed in the Senate before turning to poetry. Lucretius, the Roman says, sparkles with genius, despite his laborious technique, but anyone who can read Sallustius’s *Empedoclea* is more than human (all the more so today; the poem is known only through this reference). As *Hallucination* itself wanders insistently and fretfully through evanescent moods, bureaucratic meditations, or semantic drifts and sediments, it, too, labors and sparkles, and seems at times, like the philosopher hero of Sallustius’s lost epic, perched on the volcano’s lip.

Consider, for instance, the peregrinations of the extended lyric “The Elixir,” which occupies a central spot in the collection. The poem opens with a fitful profusion of forms: an italicized voice-over promising relief from unspecified symptoms, in tones that range from the Californian (“from harsh to mellow”) to the Prynish (“tutelary / update deficiency tabs”), yields to a skewed quest scenario, with the narrator accompanied by the mythic and contested figure of Prester John through a space at once pastoral and urban: “steel stairs lead up an embankment.” Most of “The Elixir” unfolds as clipped couplets, which seem to trace out a hazy set of vignettes blending travel narrative, visionary meditation, and glimpses of slapstick. A caravan winds down a mountain, its rug masters bound in nylon; a dead duck proclaims the fatality of consciousness; a leafless tree stands beside a pond in what might be a waking dream.

As it weaves its fragmentary vistas, “The Elixir” calls upon Fuller’s characteristic range of reference. The legacy of Modernist poetics as epitomized by Auden, Williams, and Stevens respectively seems to lie behind invocations of “the classic age // of limestone,” “the red wagon / goes boom,” and the “pure figure” that bleeds through the walls only to begin “strumming away.” These fugitive allusions suggest one understanding of the “consociation / of idiosyncrasies” that doesn’t seem quite up to paying the rent, the ghosts that “ribbon” through the torpor of institutional life. Derivatives and hedges, leases and ground rents may pervasively structure even our contemporary sense of time, so that the question that haunts each day in “The Elixir” is whether it will bring excess or the drop. But the poem closes by insisting

on the possibility of transfiguration, however ironically deflated by the odd yellow vests Fuller's "solemn companions" don as they "wade out / into the heat," whether the brutal sunshine of a Chicago summer or the refining fire that might yield Paracelsus's *spiritum arcanum*.

"Glancing back / without remembering" runs the final couplet of "The Elixir," and this might serve in its own way as a credo of Fuller's poetics, with its prismatic evocations of the literary past and its seeming resolute refusal to generate totalities. The "lightning chain" that binds "The Elixir" to the medieval alchemists functions as visibly in its prepositions as in its scintillant, wayward propositions: the clusters of *ups* and *downs*, *ins* and *aways* create a literary contour rife with meaningful slippages, but treacherous for the unwary readerly foot. In "The Circuit," the prose poem mashing Zeno with Kafka that closes the volume, a hapless office worker bears a report that slowly grows to the size of a planet, even as it remains stubbornly unreadable. If the observing narrator has turned away from that unedifying spectacle to bear his own report, it's one that, for all its extraterrestrial gravity, remains compelling and compulsively readable—and human-sized.

John Beer

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Karin Lessing, *Collected Poems*. Bristol, UK: Shearsman, 2010. 209pp. \$22

Karin Lessing, an American born on the Germany-Poland border and for decades a resident of Provence, is a poet of extreme concision. Although her *Collected Poems* gathers over three decades of writing, the book numbers just 209 pages, many of them bearing but a few exacting words. Lessing has gained little recognition during her long career, but this collection makes it clear that she is an essential poet. Her work draws from a range of poetic lineages and their styles: Objectivist attentiveness, Olson and Creeley's projective poetics of breath, Celan's spare hermeticism, Char's transfigured Provençal landscapes, Mallarmé and du Bouchet's poetics of the page. How might a poem register a place? How might a poem register breath as it emerges into speech? Who speaks in a poem, and to whom? Animated by these questions, Lessing's poems enact small dramas of abstraction: landscape becomes language; person becomes voice; voice becomes writing. These lyrics sound out the limits of such abstraction, perching on the point where landscape nearly vanishes into air and where speech nearly vanishes into silence.

Lessing's first collection, *The Fountain*, published by Eliot Weinberger's Montemora Foundation in 1982, establishes the landscape poem as her