

but they offer little society; one finally dreams alone. In this third collection, the second-person pronoun appears more frequently, but here the first person struggles to locate the other voice she hears. Was it “you”? Is there a “you”? The “I” is strong enough to deploy its rage, but its voice—again—seems nearly obliterated. To write poems is necessarily to abstract words from the persons who speak them, including the person of the poet herself. This poem dramatizes that abstraction as a kind of madness, the madness of hearing disembodied voices. But the voices disembodied in Lessing’s writing may be reembodyed by readers interested not only in the precise images and complex ideas the poems articulate, but also in the pleasures these poems afford ear and tongue. By giving body and breath to the voices on the page, we may join the poet to become “we” who “speak the language.”

Patrick Morrissey

§

Catherine Mavrikakis, *Flowers of Spit*. Translated by Nathanaël. Toronto: BookThug, 2012. 246pp. \$18

Flowers of Spit is a novel-length monologue of excessive proportions—unctuous, flowering with surprisingly affecting spikes of empathy. Its themes of memory and madness are borne along not by events but by the intensity of its decadent style, phrase by gemmy, gore-slick phrase. As befits a novel with a Baudelairean title, the narrator Flore Forget is a *chirurgienne maudite*, an emergency room surgeon, and the Québécoise daughter of a French woman who fled Normandy after World War II. She is a devastated pill-popper enraged by her mother’s recent death from cancer, which she views as the latest thrust in Life’s offensive against her. Flore Forget, lady sawbones on Life’s battlefield, of course cannot forget. She announces herself on the novel’s first page as an avenging angel, but also, one guesses, one doomed to fall in flight:

A bad mayonnaise. That’s what I make of life. I sack, I ravage, I ruin, I pulverise. I have mad dreams of eradicating ease. Proudly, I swagger, full of myself, looking like a purple soldier with my greedy, smug, G.I. mug. I think desperately of wrenching life from the dung heap on which it grows so abundantly, the whore. I think I’m a gust of wind, a fierce gale, a tidal wave, a north-wester, a tempest. I’m all about the last judgment. I’m pregnant with tactical raids against immensity. I am the justiciary of desperate life.

As this first salvo makes clear, Flore makes war through her textual excesses; their sumptuous expanse marks the fitful field of battle, and Mavrikakis’s

sentences are her valiant, cracked advances. The author and translator create a pitted, paradoxical surface here, by turns rising and falling. The “bad mayonnaise” is certainly a ridiculous place to begin, comically deflating Flore’s sense of epic scale but also introducing a subside of contamination, spoilage, and failed attempts at hybridity. She claims to be a force of nature, a destroying tide signaled by the “tidal wave, a north-wester, a tempest” toward the end of this paragraph. Genders also flex and swirl here. Flore tries on the mask of a “purple soldier with my greedy, smug, G.I. mug”—the rhyme writes a thick swagger into the line—and also announces herself “pregnant” with tactics.

A crucial ambivalence in the passage is its attitude toward life. Flore is a ruiner of life who dreams of smiting it, yet by the final image is the “justiciary of desperate life,” one who still might grant a reprieve, however unlikely. It’s this hair-thin chance of reprieve, this shallowly held breath, that provides the slight aperture into which the battle of the book unfurls. The battle is all the more fascinating and fraught for its ill proportions—the grandly constructed opera house of Flore’s rage versus the slimmest stem of the possibility of human contact. This battle is drawn from the duplicity of Life itself, which is axiomatically death-dealing; birth is the claim check on both life and death. Within Flore’s epic, violence is as valid and prevalent a form of human contact as love. The likely death and the unlikely marriage that fall like axe strokes (or tossed bouquets) at the end of this book capture its contradictory nature.

The floral motif of the book presents a thematic analog to the narrator’s deeply conflicted psychology. Flore’s mother is Violet Hubert; her mentally distressed brother, Florent; her daughter, Rose; her grandmother, the Normandy tobacconist Flora:

She wasn’t easy. She had a tobacconist’s shop and supplied the whole region. Even during the war. But not so much the Germans. The whole region died under a shell or a cancer that Flora passed on for the nation. She killed the whole country.

Although Flore has “amputated” the offending letter that links her to her namesake, it is clear that ruthlessness runs in this family on the female line, a race of murderous flowers, tenacious and fragrant and poisoning the scene with their scent. Grandmother Flora is worse than the Germans, and more ambitious; unlike them, she “killed the whole country.” But that is how she made her living. That is how she lived. That is what it is “to live.” It’s no wonder that when an unlikely (and happy!) marriage in this novel happens on Bloomsday, at an altar covered in flowers, the reader feels not relief but dread.

Within these atmospheres, the task of *Flowers of Spit* is to notice invention, surprise, and delight in one’s doom. The story is drenched with

allusion, to Baudelaire, Duras, and, of course, with its canny names, family doppelgangers, and tragicomic instincts, to Nabokov. The book is rich with both farcical and trenchant episodes, brilliant thumbnail character sketches, nacreous epigrams, and heady bilious torrents of workplace spleen. The narrative's persistent doubling—Flore's hatred for Life and preservation of it; her resistance to and infection by the contact with other humans—meets Mavrikakis and Nathanaël's doubled prose style to configure a radiantly fulgurating novel.

Joyelle McSweeney

§

Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing. Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011. 593pp. \$45

Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's claim that conceptual writing is our contemporary instantiation of avant-garde poetry and that *Against Expression* is its official debut assumes that the manipulation of literary institutions from *within* their centers of power is a vanguardist enterprise. This anthology is therefore an experiment in the mobilization of academic institutions not as patron of innovative poetry but as manager of literary history in real time. As their respective introductions attest, Dworkin and Goldsmith are highly self-aware of the sociological function of the literary anthology. Anthologists typically determine literary value by judging what constitutes good or significant writing; Dworkin and Goldsmith leverage the power of the anthology to determine simply what counts as literature. For Dworkin, the category of the literary is a function of specific publishing histories. "Context is everything," he writes repeatedly. This means that *Against Expression* includes writing previously published by definitively literary presses, as well as "non-literary" writing now constituted as literary by virtue of context. "Even in the case of the few exceptions to our [literary] focus," writes Dworkin, "all of the texts included are presented here, in the new context of this anthology, as literary." One can almost hear Dworkin echoing Robert Rauschenberg's infamous telegram to Iris Clert: "THE TEXTS PRESENTED HERE ARE LITERARY IF I SAY SO."

The editorial focus on the category of the literary is meant to be recuperative, to take upon itself the task of bringing literary history up to speed with art history and restaging the same interventions within institution literature that the historical avant-garde staged within institution art in the last century. In a 2010 interview, Lytle Shaw asked Goldsmith why conceptual writing had become increasingly synonymous with the technique of appropriation.