

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

dominant mode. She writes with a discerning eye and an especially sensitive ear. The poems register stone and wind, such prominent elements of Lessing's Provence, as audible atmospheres. Consider "Moraine," the title of which names both piles of debris deposited by glaciers and flowerbeds made of stones:

Through  
thyme  
  
braided  
to thyme  
  
followed  
the scent that  
  
tumbles,  
breast-  
  
high, dream-  
thin.  
  
Un-  
thinking,  
  
saw;  
blinded,  
  
heard  
how they lie  
  
cluster and  
stray,  
  
sometimes  
seem to float.

Its title insists on heaviness, but the poem works like a spell to levitate stone. The solidity of rock is quickly paired with the airiness of scent, and the profusion of long vowel sounds in the opening lines plays gravity against the suspension of the words by careful line breaks. Lessing's auditory deliberations yield not only intricately balanced sound structures but also new meanings: broken across two lines, "Un- / thinking" becomes not a folly but

a process of undoing, a kind of thinking against thinking. Mind gives way to eye, and eye gives way to ear. By translating stones into audible syllables that “cluster and / stray,” Lessing’s poem lets earth take to air, just as, from a certain distance and angle, the stones of a moraine may seem to float. The poem thus carries out a paradoxical kind of abstraction. It vividly evokes the Provençal landscape, but in its lyric flight, particularity of place is swept up into the generality of language. The poems of *The Fountain* attain remarkable material definition on both page and tongue, but again and again, that materiality nearly vanishes into the white of the page or dissipates into air as the poem is pronounced. And although she seems resolutely embodied in a particular landscape, the poet herself becomes just a written voice, emptied of personal content so that the elements may become audible in her syllables.

In *The Winter Dream Journals* (Shearsman, 1991) Lessing exchanges the hard lines of stone and wind for the ambiguities of dreams. The book’s first section consists of prose poems, such as “Twilight World Visions,” which begins:

Reading the twilight world visions.

The rock as a gentle shoulder. They were all saying the same thing while clouds gathered to cirrus. This was older than stone, lighter than grass and yet like grass. I cried out in my sleep.

In “Moraine,” each word and line seems bound to the others by tensile force, but in these poems, sentences rest and jostle against each other more loosely. The poet who listens to landscape has become the poet who reads her own dreams. While the principle units of Lessing’s earlier poems are the syllable and the word, here the principle unit is the sentence. Lessing’s prose affords the grammar and tone of direct statement even as her sudden swerves and obscurities subvert clear communication; the poems, like dreams, feel familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Missing antecedents remain missing; images wobble and slip into others. The question of contiguity comes to the fore in the second section of *The Winter Dream Journals*, which consists of thirty four-line stanzas, each a separate poem:

To the farthest edge of sailing  
I who deploys  
Distance surpassing tide obliterates  
Hard by horizon like a flocculence

The initial capitalization of each line, unusual in Lessing’s work, accentuates their independence from one another, and while the four lines clearly hang together, they are neither clearly end-stopped nor clearly enjambed. Like the thirty poems placed next to each other, these phrases hover in indeterminate

relation. Is distance something deployed, or is it the force that obliterates? Or does distance surpass and the tide obliterate? What is obliterated? In any case, the poet holds the first person at some distance: there is an “I who deploys,” but as a “floculence,” it is dispersed and suspended.

Lessing’s fourth book, *In The Aviary of Voices* (Shearsman, 2001), returns to the landscape mode of *The Fountain* but retains the tonal breadth of *The Winter Dream Journals*. The book’s title seems an apt figure for Lessing’s work as a whole: a chamber in which voices, only tenuously attached to bodies, resonate with one another. Its title sequence is perhaps the most dispersed of Lessing’s poems, but now the poet seems harrowed by such dispersal:

Someone

it wasn’t you

said

Hello!

Hello!

I could have killed  
you

invisible, invisible  
you

•

in the aviary of voices

we speak the language

the same

in and out/between staves

that

never touch

we

tear

Lessing’s *Collected Poems* is a strangely unpopulated book. The poet usually seems isolated in the landscape. We glimpse ghostly pronouns in her dreams,

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

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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