

BOOK REVIEWS

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF VOICES: FIVE NEW BOOKS

by Matthew Ladd

Works & Days, by Dean Rader. Truman State University Press, 96 pp., \$15.95.

The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands, by Nick Flynn. Graywolf Press, 104 pp., \$22.

Mr. Worthington's Beautiful Experiments on Splashes, by Genine Lentine. New Michigan Press, 77 pp., \$10.

Group Portrait from Hell, by David Schloss. Carnegie Mellon University Press, 96 pp., \$15.95.

By the Numbers, by James Richardson. Copper Canyon Press, 120 pp., \$16.

Those who don't read poetry are often surprised to learn that so many people still write it. Those who do write it—and the first decade of the twenty-first century has certainly seen no dip in the number of books published each year—are often surprised, early in their careers, to discover just how large a pool they've waded into. Poetry still has its celebrities and its prize-winners, but these days there are more prizes, more winners, and generally more democratization in a field whose laurels were once reserved for the chosen few. Many poets have responded by widening the field further still, writing poems that act as radios rather than microphones, gathering and then broadcasting the words of others in a dizzying array of voices. In terms of the writing itself, this means works that draw their inspiration—and, to some extent, construct their identities—from a collage of sources: journalism, pop music, theoretical physics, declassified documents, the inscrutable hive-mind of the web. And in terms of the poets under consideration here, it means five books that are similar chiefly in their willingness to speak, not in the authoritative voice of a single poet, but in a multiplicity of voices—some traditionally 'poetic,' and others decidedly not.

I

For the past few years, a lot of people have been anticipating the arrival of *Works & Days*, Dean Rader's first poetry collection. Rader has been a fixture on the literary scene for nearly a decade, publishing poems, co-authoring a cultural studies textbook (*The World is a Text*), writing prolifically on Native American literature, and managing a popular blog, *The Weekly Rader*, that achieved fleeting notoriety in 2008 when Rader, who teaches at the University of San Francisco, 'graded' George W. Bush's second State of the Union address. (He got a C-minus.) Rader is a dab hand at making a name for himself (what's known in the ghastly lexicon of corporate-speak as "building his brand"). From a strictly occupational point of view, *Works & Days* should prove to the academy that Rader is no mere comic-lyric dilettante but a poet worth the reckoning.

Works & Days is, more importantly, a very good book, though perhaps not as good as Rader's fans might have wished for. Its most visible literary ancestor is surely Hesiod, who not only gives the book its title but also inhabits a diptych of poems—"Hesiod in Oklahoma, 1934," "Self Portrait: Hesiod in Iraq"—that contemplate man's apparently changeless fate as laborer and, for a self-selected few, soldier on foreign soil. Yet Rader's debut as chameleon poet also gives us flashes of Rumi ("don't just sing; split us open"), Cantos-era Ezra Pound ("O to carve a path / through the bumm drum // O light tensile immaculata"), Yeats ("To begin, start out, turn. To anoint bone, to rivet dark grammar. To slouch"), John Donne ("Blow, burn and make me new. Make me, it whispers, *Make me*"), and, finally, that other great metaphysical poet, Stevens ("In the reverse burial that is this sky, / We die forward into the nothing that is not yet revealed").

Of all the poets who flit in and out of Rader's work, it is the large, benign spirit of Stevens that inhabits the best of the poems in *Works & Days*, sometimes farcically, as in the poem "Frog and Toad Confront the Alterity of Otherness," but more often simply and grandly, as in the excellent "Einstein":

Einstein thinks:
I know that what we are,

*We have become, and what
 We have become we turn*

*To shadow, and what the shadow
Touches, the present forgets.*

*Memory is the shadow of the present
Stretching backward*

*Forming the equation
To prove Borges was right:*

God is a book.

It may be surprising to see such abstract passages from the hand of a self-professed lover of the earthbound Pablo Neruda, whom Rader once championed as the first of history's "ten best poets" (whatever that means). It may be more surprising to find that Rader doesn't do Neruda nearly as well as he does Stevens and Pound; a poem in praise of the female form, for instance, rarely rises above the level of cliché, which Rader gamely attempts to disguise with creative punctuation (e.g. "the time I drew back your blouse [&] [kissed the light of your skin] . . . the light on your body that says [*this way*]"). Likewise, "Self Portrait: Blizzard," an overt nod to Neruda's "Walking Around," has little of that poem's visionary intensity; it opens with snow "Dropping from the sky / like flakes of soap, / big heavy chunks / like frozen leaves / or pieces of poems." Serviceable similes all, but the growing list seems to suggest that Rader is still searching for a better one.

The dubious comparison of snow to "pieces of poems" brings up another noteworthy aspect of *Works & Days*. Like many contemporary poets, Rader likes to write poems about poems, a habit reflected in such titles as "The Poem You Ordered," "The First Poem," and "PowerPoint Presentation on 'The Sonnet,'" among others. These poems are clever enough, but they tend to rely too heavily on the opening gambit of the title, as if Rader is worried his readers will forget the joke. Claudia Keelan breathlessly blurbs that *Works & Days* "could be a primer for MFA programs everywhere." When Rader's poems make this odd assertion true, they do so to his detriment, by exposing themselves too clearly as exercises or experiments rather than coherent, finished works.

Some of this sloppiness may be the inevitable result of Rader's affinity for imitation. Yet in its best moments, *Works & Days* pays homage to the poets of the past only in order to transcend them. Witness the

central sonnet of “Contingency Triptych: Three Self Portraits,” for instance, entitled “As Robert Hayden to Michael Jackson”:

Even the absent eyes blinking back understand
 that breaking the bone is more than a hedge
 against the delta of the seen versus the known.
 We don't want the trope of skin as map or
 mastery. Nor do we need to be shown
 the body's secret body to know that the door
 to the other opens inward: sight is more than mere
 perception. To see is to look inside what we fear.

These lines may offer a somber meditation on Jackson's addiction to plastic surgery, and they may be written in the studiously not-quite-formal meter of Hayden, but to stand on its own “Contingency Triptych” needs neither a celebrity subject nor a poetic alter ego. If this poem—or any of the many other fine poems that grace this book—is any clue, Rader doesn't need them either.

II

It's been nearly a decade since Nick Flynn published *Blind Huber*, his second full-length collection of poetry. So long, in fact, that many readers now associate his name not with his brooding, confessionalistic first book *Some Ether*, but with two more recent memoirs, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* and *The Ticking Is the Bomb*, that recollect a rather disastrous upbringing that a less resilient child likely would have tried hard to forget. For better or worse, Flynn remembers. In “oh here,” a poem from his new book *The Captain Asks for a Show of Hands*, he glumly offers a chronicle of physical attributes that have migrated from father to son:

his teeth, now
 lodged in my head, oh here

is his scrawl, coming out of
 my hand

& here is a thought
 that passed through his

mind, when I open

my mouth he never
shuts up.

For the most part, however, Flynn keeps his distance. *Captain* is curiously divorced from the poet's former fixation on his alcohol-watered family tree. Instead, much of it is composed of collaborations—both between Flynn and visual artists, whose works serve as springboards for many of the poems, and between Flynn and the poets and songwriters from whom his lyrics freely poach.

The term 'lyrics' is more apt for this collection than it is for most; many of these lines, bereft of punctuation and hanging on the page, tend to sound (sometimes too often) like lines ripped from an album's liner notes:

capt'n this room is on fire
capt'n this body will not stop burning
capt'n oh my captain this burning has become a body
capt'n oh my captain this child is ash
capt'n oh my captain my hands pass right through her
capt'n oh my captain I don't know what it is I'm looking at

The 'capt'n' lines most obviously recall (and attempt to subvert) the exultant anaphora of Whitman's famous poem on Lincoln, but those who are as interested in music as Flynn won't need his endnotes to also recognize that "hey / little girl is your daddy home" is pure Bruce Springsteen, or that a poem appearing later in the book, "self-exam (my body is a cage)," takes its title from a song by the Arcade Fire. Flynn may be over fifty years old, but he doesn't write like it.

Neither does he spend too much time flaunting his indie credentials, as *Captain* is mainly driven not by music but by political protest. When Flynn name-checks Metallica and Britney in the poem "fire," the first of four long, elemental poems around which the book is built, everyone will recognize the names, but fewer will know that their songs were part of a repertoire of music handpicked by the US Army to baffle and madden Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib.

War is not a complete directional shift for Flynn; in 2003, he was already exploring the now-infamous Abu Ghraib prisoner photographs

in the memoir *The Ticking Is the Bomb*. In *Captain*, the author is still denouncing the treatment of military prisoners, but his focus is now on waterboarding, the lens through which many of these poems come into focus. Flynn starts dropping hints in “fire” (“capt’n, we can do as we wish, we can do / as we wish with the body // but we cannot leave marks”) and “air” (“they scream my lieutenant he calls it a song / I want them to sing he says louder”), in which the book’s ubiquitous, unnamed Captain is pretty clearly revealed to be a body double for all the authority figures whom Flynn holds responsible for the use of torture—including the former President, who may be said to represent the moral polar opposite of the one Whitman was writing about. Flynn’s denunciation is most explicit in “water,” the last of the book’s four ‘elements’ poems:

here comes the tub, here comes the board
 here comes the cloth, here comes the bucket . . . something, capt’n, is
 wrong, this one stopped // breathing—they said he wouldn’t
 drown

then he drowned

A good protest latches onto its subject; a good poem transcends it. Readers therefore may find that the best protest poems in *Captain* appear in the short series “seven testimonies (redacted),” which Flynn created by plucking phrases verbatim from interviews, some of which the author attended, with former Abu Ghraib detainees. (Flynn provides the full versions in the endnotes.) Stitched roughly into verse, these phrases capture the terror of abduction with a suitably murky ominousness: “I woke up, I asked why— / my children, my // wife, my leg. Outside / my head—cold, rainy, // a tent—there were others / I heard, // my brother, a pipe, cold / water at night.” Flynn’s redactions void the interview of its context, allowing us nothing more than glimpses, as if the plain injustice of what is happening renders further detail unnecessary. But by chopping the prisoners’ stories into verse, and in effect making them the author’s own, “seven testimonies” also proposes that poetry’s role is not simply to account for the injustices of war, but to make of them something new, even if it means breaking them up. (In this sense, the restored testimonies in the notes constitute a kind of apology.) This argument, which may be discomfiting to some,

runs throughout the pages of *Captain*, and Flynn, already skilled at turning a more personal share of misfortunes into verse, sticks to it.

III

“The Good Arm,” an early poem in Genine Lentine’s first book, finds the sixth-century Chinese Zen Buddhist Huike standing “in the snow / all night outside the door” of his teacher’s cave, until “at dawn, / drift at his waist, he cuts off his arm, / his blood pitting the snow.” As it turns out, self-destruction as a first step on the road to inner peace is not a far cry from what *Beautiful Experiments* aims to capture. Many of its poems take place in New York, but Lentine’s work shows a greater affinity for the Zen-inspired writing born of the West Coast and raised to maturity by Gary Snyder. Lentine shares Snyder’s philosophical touchstone, Chinese Zen Buddhism, and *Beautiful Experiments* is peppered with the names of Zen teachers (Dogen, Ruyuan, Yantou) as well as lines that, when pulled from the page, sound like modern-day koans: “Do you feel that hum / in the sponge / of your bones?”, “Which is the fear? the un- / or the sadness itself?”, or “The absence of the ticking is what we listen for. The bell means nothing.”

There is an awful lot of absence, including several free-floating *uns*, in *Beautiful Experiments*. What’s not there can be difficult to describe, though, and therein lies the conflict at the heart of Lentine’s book: when to write like a twenty-first century American poet and when to write like a Buddhist, and when, if ever, one can write like both. In “*Fifteen Thousand Useful Phrases*,” for instance, one of two long poems that are probably the collection’s best, Lentine writes in the voice of her dying mother, “*Listen. If you want to know I’m there, / just make yourself quiet.*” A few pages later, she writes, “Sometimes I wish for no language; / I want my whole job to be seeing,” and one thinks simultaneously what an admirable sentiment that is, and how it would have been impossible to communicate if Lentine hadn’t gone ahead and written it down.

At times, Lentine’s clear love for the transcendent power of poetry seems to get the better of her patience for the more tiresome exercise of revising it. She has a penchant for the stretched simile (“What *do* you do with the delusions you’ve / seen through? Deliver them to a designat- / ated [sic] site, like a varnish can on hazard- / ous waste pickup night?”). And her more world-weary readers may raise an eyebrow at the awe with which Lentine approaches nearly everything she sees: a handstand

in yoga class is “the new relationship of blood and gravity,” a comma on the page is a “[d]e- / liberate, delicate, / graphite whisper.” These are potentially keen observations rendered in disappointingly weak language. “I imagine you were happy / in your dream of precision,” Lentine writes, with a tinge of smugness, to the hopelessly positivistic author of the hopelessly dated pocket phrasebook that provides the title for “*Fifteen Thousand Useful Phrases*.” Yet precision has its virtues—not least in poetry, where the difference between the right word and the adequate one can mean the difference between a great poem and a forgettable one.

Lentine is more psychologically acute—and, not coincidentally, more fun—when she comes down from the mountain. In “My Father’s Comb,” for instance, she remembers how, as a child, she worked herself into a furious sweat trying to break the comb because its spine “proclaimed it / *unbreakable*.” In “Unseen Planet,” the poet is downright jaded, attributing a famous, anonymous quote about the artistic process to “a painter / whose work I’m not that into, so, having said that, / I won’t mention his name here; // it’s more an indifference than an aversion,” the last phrase of which is just the sort of cocktail-party knife-in-the-back that most of us have probably used before, or at least thought about using (even if Gary Snyder never did). In a book usually given to serene certainty, such passages display a wonderful and unexpected friction, as if we were watching Lentine’s inner sage wrestle for dominance with her inner critic.

This friction comes to a head in “Upon Your ‘[Un]consolable Sadness,’” the first of Lentine’s two long poems, in which she finds herself unable to comfort a depressed friend despite the recent memory of another friend comforting *her*, smoothly and sincerely, and seemingly without the inner conflict the poet herself faces. When she writes of the disconsolate friend, “I want some animal left in you,” she is speaking of the somehow uplifting effect (*schadenfreude*, if you like) of watching an ostensibly flawless person dissolve into tears. But as the poet tries every stratagem she can think of in order to distract her friend—yogic breathing, logic puzzles, oddly touching facts about microorganisms (“*Some possess a thrashing tail / or fine rhythmically beating hairs...*”)—and each in turn fails, the poem dissolves a little too, and we are grateful that Lentine has allowed it to do so.

A similar tension is at work in “*Fifteen Thousand Useful Phrases*,” where Lentine returns to her elusive muse—absence—in a more humane frame of mind. “I want to see my own face in seeing,” she writes, “and disappear into the telling / so that you can see through me.” But she just as quickly suggests that a disappearance so complete will never be possible, and perhaps not even desirable, in the disheveled house of poetry: “And even better if I’m glass / and if what you see is slightly more, / if there’s a little refraction, more heat.” In the end *Beautiful Experiments* is most beautiful, and most boldly experimental, when it attends not to the absences hovering beyond human experience, but to the inescapable presences that give it life and color. As Lentine confesses in that first poem on Huike, “I’m more interested in the / other arm, the one, always off- / screen, that, in one stroke, / steered a carbon edge / through its own / flesh.”

IV

The front cover of *Group Portrait from Hell* bears a small reproduction of the Italian Renaissance engraving “Battle of the Nudes,” a delicately detailed orgy of slaughter, by the Florentine sculptor Antonio del Pollaiuolo. It is a fitting introduction to the first third of Schloss’s book, in which poems such as “Abel,” “Readings in History,” “Against the Bomb,” “Watching the Endless War on TV,” and “Chernobyl” trace our blood-soaked history from Western religion’s first murder to the large-scale disasters of the nuclear age. Yet Schloss soon grows weary of war, and much of *Group Portrait from Hell* calls to mind not Pollaiuolo’s ferocious nudes but rather the avulsive battlefield etchings of Otto Dix, where violence has given way to corrosion and decay. The brief poem “The Academy Awards” offers a foretaste of the author’s concerns for the remainder of the book:

We don’t need to keep death’s heads
on our desks or beside our beds
when we can tune in each year

and see the living former winners
arrayed in each advancing stage
of disbelief at their own decay.

It is Schloss's almost reverent attention to technical detail—the effortless wordplay on 'stage,' the accumulation of soft vowels in the final two lines, and the poem's refusal to repeat the tidy rhyme of the first couplet—that makes a book on such an otherwise benumbing subject such an enormous pleasure to read. There is hardly a word in *Group Portrait From Hell* that seems out of place. Only occasionally does this cause Schloss's well-tuned verse to ring too evenly on the ear; the poems "Ruins" and "Road Paved With Good Intentions," for example, both admirable meditations on the subtle perils of the unexamined life (and both, notably, written in a wooden iambic tetrameter), sound like Schloss composed them with a metronome on his desk.

More often, the author's jokingly self-acknowledged "fine- / tuned set of critical distinctions between / contemporary prosodies" produces poems of exacting beauty. Take the title poem, which, after showing us "mouths with missing teeth mere holes / into greater cavities" and "world-corrupted faces" reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's gaunt infantrymen (not to mention the creaky celebrities of "The Academy Awards"), asks whether the lessons of these *memento mori* are, in the end, worth learning:

But do we need them to apprise
us of the need to lead lives differently?
Beyond such self-abasement, eyes

that yearn for touch incessantly,
we see each hand that reaches for
the next cannot connect, estranged—

until we come to that far shore
where burning leaves the pain unchanged.

These last two lines are enviably graceful; their language is clear, their rhymes unexpected yet somehow arriving with the force of inevitability. They also blow a gaping hole in an entire sub-genre of religious hymns ("Bound For the Promised Land," "I'll Fly Away," "This World is Not my Home") that aim to comfort with the argument that life after death will make up for the shortcomings of life on earth. Not so, says the poet: the end is much simpler. As he puts it in "The Examined Life," "Life teaches violent ways / to undistinguished men—then goes its way."

Not surprisingly, Schloss offers no redemptive theories of his own. As he tells us in the sardonic “An Anthology Piece,” not even good poetry will suffice as a route to immortality. Neither, it seems, will procreation: in “Hospice,” an anxious family gathers to witness the last days of a dying matriarch, who “may be thinking / how best to make her wishes known to us / before we return to the rest of our lives,” but even that uncertain “may” suggests that she wasn’t able to, and that the family returned none the wiser to its business of living.

Yet Schloss still values this search for earthly redemption, to judge by his scornful assessments of those who have chosen to abandon it. Such is the fate of the secular, suburban Faust in “Portrait of a Man,” who has “made a pact with his demons / to give himself up, body and soul, / to whatever privacy possesses him.” Schloss can be wickedly sharp when this mood catches him: “One Man’s Burden” depicts another man “like a solitary monk,” diligently maintaining his holier-than-thou solitude through “the hair shirt that saves him at last, / the one that he gives us off of his back.”

The fourth and final chapter of *Group Portrait From Hell* offers a plausible exit from this madness, though it remains a more tenuous one than its title, “In Love,” might suggest. “In our never-ending yearning for / the other, the object of each search,” Schloss writes, “love’s dying means, *at least, we once lived*, / as just living seems *already dead* . . . // So we’ll make love, if that’s what it takes / to resurrect all the old mistakes.” At first blush, this seems a defeatist way of summarizing physical love, and we wonder if Schloss’s mournful parade of poems on growing old has drained him of enthusiasm. But not quite, as he reveals in these lines from “Conundrums”:

While there’s still a choice of
punishments—your naked face
before me, or your face not—
now all I want is you to come
back to, to come back to myself,
pervading quiet past the quietude.

The poem’s title seems fitting: after several readings, that last line still eludes explanation. But it signifies, at the very least, the resilience of human affection—and, yes, even love—in a world for which hell seems, at times, an all-too-apt comparison. It is the uncertainty of that

comparison, Schloss seems to be saying, that keeps the two realms apart. Or as he puts it in “Inheritance,” whether we like it or not, we are “still straining to find // some kind of purchase / on the earth, the heart- / rending fact that it is.”

V

In his new book *By the Numbers*, James Richardson proposes a solution for David Schloss’s *Weltschmerz*: going senile. “Now that my memory leaks / and my real memory / is my hard disk: / what a relief!” he writes, and cheerfully proceeds to obliterate the accumulated clutter of a life lived imperfectly:

Bad poems, delete.
 Bad friends, bad letters,
 bad days, blunders,
 dumb things said drunk,
 delete delete.

A few more stanzas of this, and Richardson’s *delete* takes on such a charmed, talismanic quality that his more regretful readers may be tempted to try it out for themselves. We should not be deceived, however. By the end of the poem “Songs for Senility,” the speaker’s persona has turned from that of comic great-uncle (“Now that I’m not so good / at things I was great at, / great to do not so badly / things I’m not bad at”) to high-strung Charles Baudelaire (“O Reader, O Future / even you / are behind me! / Delete delete delete!”). Senility, it seems, does not erase anxiety.

Neither does Richardson—whose mind and pen have only grown sharper with age—dwell too long in any one of the many modes of thought that populate his newest collection. The septuagenarian slapstick of “Songs for Senility,” for instance, is immediately followed by “Room Temperature,” a poem so sober and brief that it arrives like an epilogue (or a codicil): “That coffee you forgot to drink, / this light, eight minutes from the sun, / words I thought for a second / the hottest ever written.” This simple quatrain contains a great deal of what makes *By the Numbers* such a joy and a challenge to read. It is as syntactically and rhythmically deft as the work of Paul Muldoon (with whom Richardson teaches at Princeton). The quatrain is a reminder of Richardson’s ongoing love affair with aphorisms, which he first

explored in *Vectors: Aphorisms and Ten-Second Essays*, and which he gives a third iteration here, in “Vectors 3.0.”

More importantly for the present collection, “Room Temperature” also speaks to Richardson’s abiding interest in the solar and sidereal world—the world in which the strongest poems of *By the Numbers* almost invariably take place. Some readers will seek out Richardson’s collection for “Vectors 3.0,” whose 170 aphoristic nuggets range from the clever (“The mirror’s so quick it only sees what’s in front of it”) to the cutting (“Worse than stupidity is intelligence that claims the right to be stupid”) to, somewhat disappointingly, the fortune cookie (“Nothing important comes with instructions”). Yet for all the intermittent fun of reading the aphorisms that Richardson once characterized “more as a questionable habit than as a book in progress,” the true heart of *By the Numbers* lies in three longer poems—“Are We Alone? or Physics You Can Do at Home,” “The Stars in Order Of,” and “Postmortem Georgic”—that provide Richardson with enough space (literally) to apply his lyrical gifts to the larger questions of space, time, and our tenuous hold on both.

Readers who have seen *The Tree of Life*, the most recent cosmic fable by the filmmaker Terrence Malick, may detect some similarities in these poems. “Are We Alone,” for instance, begins by comparing the fickleness of the human mind with that of the physical world—“Ninety minutes is the length of a mood, according to scientists, / and the lifespan of a universe”—before setting each racing toward the other in a sort of Whitmanesque supercollider:

odds say in every breath there’s at least one atom of the breath of
everyone who ever lived
and if to breathe them is to hold them all in mind,
which I hope is true . . . but surely this feeling of a thought being too
big to think

is the accelerating expansion of the universe, which means I should
try less and less
to think it, and be still like a tree letting stars and snow stream through
its branches,
for scientists agree that not to think is to think everything, which is
what the universe excels at . . .

Richardson has a gift for phrasing his thoughts in such a way as to make them seem expendable, the desultory wanderings of a loosened mind, only to pull up short with a line of such stern and emphatic finality that you wonder how you ever could have doubted him. “Postmortem Georgic” performs this rhetorical bait-and-switch numerous times throughout its fourteen stanzas, in which unhurried lists of seasonal chores (“If I die in winter, when there is little to do / but wait till winter is over, keep watch on the upstairs windows, / and if they ghost with mist, turn the humidifiers down”) culminate in lines as clipped and chill as the objects they describe (“open the indoor faucets wide, letting the last water out / lest in a coldsnap some pipe snap”).

Richardson writes here—as he does in the book’s opening poems on Greek deities—from the quasi-mythic perspective of one who has walked the earth so long that it’s impossible to tell whether he is still really living. Death always seems to arrive a few minutes too late, leaving the universe—fragile as it is—to continue expanding. Or as Richardson imagines it in “Shore Town, Winter”:

more than a century,
now, it’s been the end of the world,
and this long, long twilight,
this last *Alas*, has lost its power
either to frighten or console.

“Shore Town” is an unsettling poem—just as unsettling, in its own quiet way, as the darkling plain of “Dover Beach” that it re-envision. It is nonetheless a fitting poem for a book whose author wants no consolation, and no explanations, but simply more time to write.

The popular adjective to describe such shape-shifting books as these used to be *destabilizing*. Yet one could argue that this term has outlived its usefulness, and that the kaleidoscope of voices behind Richardson’s aphorisms, Flynn’s chopped-up prisoner testimonials, or Lentine’s warring versions of herself—as they challenge that tired notion of a rational, isolable speaker with a unified perspective—are more stabilizing than not, because they are arguably more reflective of our experience as individuals in a destabilized world. Such an experience may be troubling, noisy, abrasive or strange. But as these poets show, it is rarely uninteresting, and often quite captivating.