Roberto Montes’s debut collection of poetry, *I Don’t Know Do You (IDKDY)*, is a book of declarations. The collection’s central grammar is declarative. Its central conflict is colonization (wartime declarations). The central politics is queer—bodies that are the sites of the war-zone and are depicted as a series of contradictory declarations. Declarations that are not conclusive, but obfuscatory. The turmoil of border wars. The turmoil of lyric deployment.

*IDKDY* mainly consists of two poem-sequences. The secondary sequence consists of love poems (“Love poem for several feet of snow,” for instance). The primary sequence is an account for “one way to be a person” (of which there are many and of varying permanence). For example: “One way to be a person is to gather yourself in a crowded market,” of which the first two lines inform us: “I am literally a body in the trunk of a car a certain / demographic is searching for.”

The locution of these poems is incautious, with these self-assured strings of declarative statements. They deploy all the trappings of logical validity. The premise being the hyper-lyric recipe for the speaker-self (which becomes a type of colonization, as we’ll see).

…To discover a coast is to make a claim. Another way is to throw a rope into the wilderness. Eventually you understand economics…

[“One way to be a person is to startle explanation”]

Of course, the aim here isn’t to simply clown discourses. Implicit in any desire to put forth an argument is to make sense of things, to test the ground of existing information on which we lay our beliefs. There is much in *IDKDY* that taps a deeply expressivist vein, one that is openly invested in conveying an aesthetic treatise by way of affective but other-worldly properties:

…A lot describes a feeling. A feeling informs where I dial my hands. That is one example. That is four hands
justifying buttons. What arranges the floor
improves circulation...
...What people decide
when they’re in love. Or they enter a station
filled with water. But I repeat myself
against comfort because comfort is there...

[“Love Poem for Things That Turn Your Gaze But Do Not Tear It”]

Here (and elsewhere) Montes focuses on the ineffable moment of artistic inspiration, the “things that turn your gaze.” This poem lingers fatalistically on the speaker’s hands—the “dial,” or the clock, or the (flashback) rotary phone, to then generalize this experience for “four hands.” These evaluations flatten out at an almost deadpan rate, as though the poem has the embedded awareness that it’s been there before, that this territory (intellectually and emotionally) pre-exists the poem.

This adds a troubled undertone to this poem’s title, “Love Poem for Things That Turn Your Gaze But Do Not Tear It,” which works to remain in the present tense. “The gaze” is subjugating. But it’s also future-past. For Montes, “the gaze” is a potential inevitability, one for which the poem refuses to settle and actively works against (“...I repeat myself / against comfort because comfort is there...”).

Jack Spicer’s famous last words, “My vocabulary did this to me,” possibly and matter-of-factly exteriorize what is arguably one of the most bodily of experiences—the act of dying. In the act of dying, his vocabulary (body of words) embodies more fully his own death. There is also a lovely amount of romance in Spicer’s alien poetics. One that broadcasts coded truths as inherently unspeakable (or at least as originating external to the poet).

With Spicer in mind, I want to return to the idea of deployment that I introduced in the first paragraph. The “one way to be a person” sequence can be quantified as multiple, separate (and often contradicting sets of certainties), but have the cohesive magnitude of a single long poem (Pound’s “tale of the tribe,” comes to mind). This sequence, on the one hand, confirms our contemporary ontology (plural, available, destabilized), while on the other is deployed with singular swagger. The poet does not veil himself, but instead frames himself as poet-prophet—occupying the nullity that must arise from a collection of poems insistent on centering and re-centering its own premise (and title) repeatedly.

The result is a lake effect of marginalization. “One way to be a person is to make a map of coasts” is a good example of this. Personhood can be archival (just make a Facebook Timeline, right?), but the archival becomes diffused because personhood is diffusive. The logic is circular, meaning it folds in on itself. But this is not esoteric logic, because it’s the logic of body-politics. And Montes never lets us forget this. It’s the logic of immigration and naturalization. The map-making isn’t just to illustrate an identity. It’s an effort of militaristic deployment around somatic circumferences. It is
personal because it alienates.

“One way to be a person is to make a map of the coasts” ends in contemplation: “Who can offer water to the beach. To enter the kingdom. To be born once again. To end any part of it. This is only an example. But you forget yourself.” The starry-eyed infinitive phrase, “to enter the kingdom,” is a type of access often dreamt about (FOMO), or is a neglected privilege in these poems (“When we colonize Mars I am going to live to not believe it.”). Although on opposing sides of the border, both scenarios are treated with a similar amount of abstraction. Montes’s criteria for reality seem to formulate an ersatz and death-focused reality, which is as devious as it is quixotic.

In “One way to be a person is to call your family to your side,” Montes writes:

Dumb is what is moving but does not know to stop. On the sheets, stupid with cancer, I was a thoughtless glass frosted over…
...On the internet my first reaction is to write death is dumb over and over. In the real world I feel the same. We have no choice we just keep growing. We answer us when they ask each other who to blame

Whether disembodied by dying—“a thoughtless glass frosted over,” or reframing the definition of “disembodied” (“the internet”), it doesn’t matter because you will still be capable of proliferating language in ways that can be terribly painful: “On / the internet my first reaction is to write death is dumb over and over.” It doesn’t matter if you are a human, “stupid with cancer,” or a data process, “we have no choice we just keep growing.” It is our bodies that drive us, but it is an emptying drive.

The drive surrounds us as much as it emerges from us, just as political and industrial processes surrounds us as much as they are self-deployed. And these poems treat poetry as a type of industry, one of definition. IDKDY finds its definition naturally at the end in the residuum: “I swallowed my calling in what / was left. I was the one who answered yes.”

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