

DECK OF DEEDS. By Rodrigo Toscano. (Counterpath, 2012)

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Rodrigo Toscano is the author of six books including the National Poetry Series winning *Collapsible Poetics Theater*, a “score” acclaimed for body movements, polyvocals, shanghaied poets and the road as stage. This is Toscano’s MO: live-voice, (body) language and performed engagement. In his latest tour, *Deck of Deeds*, by contrast, there’s a page-centered “reshuffle”; but back-on-the-road, gestic play still courses through his work. Listen and watch, Toscano reminds us in “Las hermanas,” sister gesture speaking to “sis” word, “I’m sending this/ poetic prose piece to you because I know you’ll really perv out/ on it, especially given that she’s your *actual living, daily practice*.” Not unlike Jackson Mac Low’s “gathas,” where interpretation of score is up for grabs, *Deck of Deeds* shuffles the stack sans table of contents or sectioning. In “El refugiado,” he invites us to chance a card, as a guest at an inn “recommits to confront-/ing his toiled-over ‘writer-ready’ texts, looking to ‘flip’ them/ (hard) into ‘reader-ready’ fables, squeezing a few last drops of/ transpersonal nectar onto each of them.” The provenance of their language is part corporatocratic canard part scientifically found text part diary of itinerant labor organizer. Toscano interrogates deeds and received language/speech in all its voluble *antinian* paradox: face up reportage, blurbs, bios, travelogue and epistles. Several poems are personified or outsourced, relating misdeeds with “a kind of GLOBAL POP CULTURE fuzzy feeling”: others fly-in to Denver for a weekend of PG-activism; some sleep with “globalistas”; others “doctor EPA reports,” fantasizing positions as “motivational vocabularists” for touring Russian oil execs. The book’s mostly a uniform deck: prose poem blocks within a page, long lines alighting on tension-deflating-subject-shifting envois often quoted speech as at the end of “Los exploradores,” where sell-outs look into resignation’s mirror: “We’re such... sluts.” Still there’s divertissement of form to synthesize the word/deed perversion. Take “El lector,” where you’re addressed as “you,” a four-line poem sentence: “This being your one ‘casual’ perusal too many, the one that tipped / this ‘mildly’ perverse book over the mountain ledge into a vio-/ lent tumble, splintering pines, scattering birds, the pungent odor / of pitch all around.” Josh Billings cuts Toscano’s metapoetic deck in an epigraph: “Life consists not in holding good cards, but in playing those you hold well.” Perhaps in this deck life is stripped of its abstract suit, a creative gesture self-actualizing our increasing “unpersonhood.” Toscano is invested in the immediacy of voiced, gestic poetry as a community-building-consciousness-raising open mic. Whatever card you play is the name of Toscano’s game. David Antin speaks to this, the poem as transcription of voice like “a man up on his feet talking.” Save for the title of the book, the titles in Spanish (mainly cognates) are no code switching tchotchke; they perform a slight estrangement between the English reader and a poet active in internationalizing (avant) US poetic discourse. Titles further raise the text’s pot if the poetry “nerd” is bilingual and versed in La lotería: “Sometimes all the deflected desires/ psychosocial subterfuge, private intrigues, and deep-seated anxiet- / ies of trying to understand the complex world they live in gives / way to the pleasures of reshuffling those stresses when thumbing / through a new nerdy book of poetry.” Still, inward pleasures must fold; the stresses creep back in poems vivisectioning US/Mexico tensions where narcos, migrant workers, and refugees transmogrify into a journalistic or governmental abstracted *vocero*. Self-reflexive in “La galerista” Toscano lampoons author bios, replacing tired words with a whiff of oulipian chance sounds that prove knee-jerk and noisome in their unforeignness, “I’ve recently earned a kenooki-cooki-/pooki-fanooki award from Stanford University, and my work will/ soon be presented in Chiuuuu-shrrr-hiphiphip(hip).” Several poems are interrobanging wildcards of microscopic detail in right-side-up-side-down Orwellian doublethink/newspeak: simple obfuscation at its finest. Many poets ante up but few trump Toscano’s witty, unnerving dealing of word and deed, where even art pimps its for-profit self. *Deck of Deeds* is the real deal, “unperson” necromancy, a walking-talking finger flipping unflinching tour de farce.

--Juan Manuel Sánchez