

Transutopia

BRANDEL FRANCE DE BRAVO

There is another world, but it is in this one.

—Paul Éluard

I.

In L. Frank Baum's second book about Oz, a militia of young women armed with knitting needles storms the Emerald City. Their objective: to overthrow the Scarecrow who has governed Oz since the Wizard's departure. "The Emerald City has been ruled by men long enough," says General Jinjur.

As a seven-year-old girl, I adored this book, *The Land of Oz*.

While the female Army of Revolt ultimately surrenders and the men are freed once more from dishwashing, cooking, and taking care of babies, the events of the second-to-last chapter more than compensate for the army's defeat. The young protagonist, Tip, who'd been a boy for 261 pages, finds out he's really a girl, is transformed into Princess Ozma, and assumes the throne—all in the last 20 pages.

The vapor floated away; the atmosphere became clear again; a whiff of fresh air filled the tent, and the pink curtains of the couch trembled slightly, as if stirred from within.

Glinda walked to the canopy and parted the silken hangings. Then she bent over the cushions, reached out her hand, and from the couch arose the form of a young girl, fresh and beautiful as a May morning.

Speaking to his friends the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, the Woggle-Bug, and Jack Pumpkinhead, the boy-turned-princess says:

“I hope none of you will care less for me than you did before. I’m just the same Tip, you know; only—only—”

“Only you’re different!” said the Pumpkinhead; and everyone thought it was the wisest speech he had ever made.

II.

Raised in an apartment downtown by my single mother who loathed “Nature,” I had access to it, other than feeding pigeons from a park bench, only in my grandparents’ backyard. In the apartment, my mother still asleep, I “cooked” perfume on the radiator, mixing soap shavings, spices from the kitchen, shampoo, vitamin pills, and a drop of my mother’s Coco by Chanel. At my grandparents’ house, I could play in the creek out back whenever I felt like it, for as long as I felt like it. When I grew tired of being outdoors, one too many gnats in my nose and not one crayfish to be found, I carried inside with me samples of everything I had seen. My grandmother would lend me her bubble-shaped glass bowls, the kind she used for cut hydrangeas, the blossom floating like a blue eye above the mahogany dining table, so that I could create terrariums.

When I say “terrariums,” I don’t mean many at once: an only child, I cultivated them one at a time, misting daily with an atomizer from my grandmother’s dressing table. I knew nothing about how to make or sustain a terrarium, my experience limited to having seen a couple at school where they appeared on a shelf—after the gerbils and before the hermit crab. In spite of my ministrations, mine always grew clouded, slimy, and brown, so I’d empty their contents in the creek and begin again. But for a few days, in the forest green bedroom that once belonged to my mother, I ruled over twigs, tiny emerald-colored carpet samples of moss, pebbles, frilly ferns, blades of grass, and beneath it all, the clay-marbled dirt shifting almost imperceptibly with ants. So much of the larger world lay hidden from me and beyond my control, while this more perfect one within it, contained in glass, belonged to me alone.

III.

Tip in *The Land of Oz* is raised by an old sorceress named Mombi whom neighbors fear and steer clear of. She is not a loving guardian, and she saddles Tip with the household's labor. Like most children, he chafes against work's tedium and steals time to play and be idle: "When sent to the forest Tip often climbed trees for birds' eggs or amused himself chasing the fleet white rabbits or fishing in the brooks." One day, he creates a man with a pumpkin for a head, hoping to scare Mombi with it. Jack Pumpkinhead gives the old woman hobbling home a brief startle before she decides to test her new Powder of Life on him. Once Jack can walk and talk, he says to Tip, "You must be my creator—my parent—my father!" He is a simple, childlike being who worries throughout the book that his head will spoil. Oz being Oz, it never does. Made of saplings joined together, Jack towers over Tip. "It seemed remarkably tall, even for a full-grown man; but that was a good point in the small boy's eyes, and Tip did not object to the size of his creation."

If I, a young girl, wanted to distill the earth into something I could hold, shrink it down like an enemy's head until its magnificence and threat were manageable, Tip preferred to make something in his own male image, but larger. You could say we were both creators, artists working with spheres: one glass, the other gourd, the contents of one decomposing rapidly, the other forever young.

We were just the same, only different.

IV.

The radiator in my room was more than a perfume factory. I used it to dry puddle-soaked socks and move mercury—even exploding one thermometer. Staying home from school with a fever meant I could read and reread: the Oz books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Through the Looking-Glass*, and the Narnia series, best known for *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I didn't only read fantasy, nor did I embrace all fantasy books with the same fervor. The books I was most drawn to didn't begin in an alternate world the way *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy did, but rather in a world just like this one, or this one a century ago. They opened in more or less familiar territory—Kansas, or England during wartime or in the Victorian era—but by

chapter two, the main character(s) had penetrated another realm with different rules, talking animals, and childish adults.

These books depicted worlds truer and better than the one I knew. Oz even had some characteristics commonly associated with utopia:

Money! Money in Oz! . . . What a queer idea! Did you suppose we are so vulgar as to use money here? . . . If we used money to buy things with, instead of love and kindness and the desire to please one another, then we should be no better than the rest of the World.

It was liberating to believe in these parallel universes. They thrilled me more than a Saturday morning of sleeping adults and comforted me more than all their ideas of afterlife. While I savored descriptions of these between-floor worlds (to borrow from *Being John Malkovich*) along with spoonfuls of Cap'n Crunch cereal, I hungered for details of the journey. I wanted to know how, precisely, the characters got from here to *there*, and how *I* might get there.

Finishing *Alice in Wonderland* to discover that Alice's long, strange trip was only a dream was deeply disappointing. It was a literary cop-out, a Hollywood ending, as in the movie version of *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy realizes she's traveled to Oz and back without ever leaving her prairie bed. And while I liked the immediacy of a portal-wardrobe in the spare room or a magic mirror in the parlor, I was pretty sure, even at a young age, that reaching an alternate and preferable reality was not something I could *choose* to do. *My* utopia would be a land of unregulated joy and extreme but always surmountable danger. Arriving there could never be as easy as pushing past coat sleeves smelling of naphthalene. It would involve relinquishing control, but not to parents, teachers, or anyone in authority. Would it require, as Jefferson Airplane urged in their Alice-inspired song, feeding my head?

V.

What was it about Tip's transmogrification that made a seven-year-old like me read *The Land of Oz* over and over? It was 1967: five years before the album *Transformer*, with its hit song "Walk on the Wild Side," in which Lou

Reed would sing of Holly who “hitchhiked across the USA / plucked her eyebrows on the way / shaved her legs and then he was a she.” Five years before *Pink Flamingos*, starring a drag queen named Divine, would play every midnight for months at the Key Theater, a few blocks from my home. Five years before the birth of David Bowie’s eye-shadow-wearing, alien-to-human alter ego, Ziggy Stardust. And seven years before *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* would make cross-dressing the multiplex equivalent of campfire songs and s’mores.

Was there a boy in me waiting to escape?

In 1973, a year after Holly’s transgender road trip and the fall to earth of Ziggy, the transhuman, a young woman possessed by the devil was being exorcised on movie screens across America. That the movie was shot in my neighborhood made it doubly terrifying. At the end of my street was a very steep set of stairs, down which the devil threw the priest who was trying to expel him.

At 13, I couldn’t bring myself to walk past these steps. To do so would be to court the devil as Linda Blair’s character so obviously must have done.

Twenty years later, traveling with a film crew in Mexico, an angel would explain to me how possession happens:

A remote Mexican village,
 a cult, the rumored stash
 of guns, the leader a defrocked
 priest, the robes they made
 even visiting women wear,
 the halos of tin foil, the angel
 who’d joined from the Philippines,
 who told me how the devil
 gets in, the priest’s Roy Orbison
 hair, *smaller than the smallest gnat*,
 she said, the altar boys on either side.
He sits on the edge of your eyelid,
 she whispered, the priest’s
 ringed hand I was told to kiss,
hides in the treetops of your lashes
until he sees an opening.

VI.

Unlike *Alice in Wonderland* or the MGM production of *The Wizard of Oz*, the Oz created by author L. Frank Baum didn't depend on anyone's REM cycles. It was a "real" place that could not be destroyed by waking up. In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its many sequels, Baum mapped Oz in great detail, just as Tolkien later mapped Middle Earth. The maps sometimes showed neighboring countries, none of them known to us or visible on any globe. Since Oz couldn't be located in our world, it had no longitude or latitude and couldn't be navigated to. To get there, you had to pierce the space-time membrane that separated us from it. Oz existed in the interstitial, like childhood itself.

Here are the ways you could get to Oz, which was surrounded by desert and eventually rendered invisible to outsiders by Glinda the Good to protect it from invasion:

- By air balloon
- By cyclone
- By being swept overboard in the South Pacific
- By being swallowed up in an earthquake
- By someone in Oz putting on a magic belt and wishing you there
- By shipwreck
- By flying on the back of an Ork, "a queer arrangement of skin, bones, and muscle shaped like the propellers used on boats and airships, having fan-like surfaces and being pivoted to its body."

VII.

It is 1994, and I am with a group of 20 friends from Mexico City in the desert of San Luis Potosi, in an area the Huichol people call Wirikuta. If you put your ear to the ground, you can hear the desert's succulent whisper. It is my second visit to this place between place, sacred as a songline.

We got here by taking a train to Wadli, and then from Wadli to the desert by Willys truck. From the sounds of it—Wadli, Willys, Wirikuta—we could be in Oz, home to the Winkies and characters with names like Unk Nunkie. The Huichol, who call themselves the Wixárika Nation, make a pilgrimage to this

area every spring. It is from here that the original members of their tribe spread out, migrating west. Adults and children of the Wixárika Nation arrive from states in the Sierra Madre Occidental on buses. When they get off, they begin their 30-kilometer walk, gathering and eating peyote as they go, toward El Quemado, the mountaintop where grandfather sun was born. We too will chew on the saliva-sapping, bitter buttons and climb to the top of El Quemado, which looks like an elephant on its side. We will spend the night there and choose a few offerings to leave behind.

I start my ascent the usual tortoise way, up the meandering boulder-filled path, friends in front and friends behind. But this time, halfway up the mountain, I lose patience. I see a better way—steeper, sure, but so much quicker. I leave the path and my friends to scale the mountain's lunar forehead. I am feeling proud of my daring, my pioneering spirit, but my mood changes when the loose dirt begins to avalanche beneath my feet, nothing but cactus to grab onto. One step up, two steps sliding down. Twenty minutes of this and I am convinced that I will never leave this place: night will come and I will still be here, or a few meters from here.

Abandoning the idea of up, at least temporarily, I turn sidewise and walk like words across lined paper. Then I try scaling the mountain on a diagonal, as if swimming out of riptide. I try subtle movements, eyes averted from my destination as if the summit were a black bear. Do not make eye contact; move very slowly and deliberately: you can't outrun a bear.

Several hours later, the sun setting, I arrive at the top. Except for a few yuccas, it's flat and barren as a helicopter pad. My friends rush to my side. I'm shaking and embedded with needles. They ask, "Where have you been?" and "How did you get here?" Having surmounted what felt like extreme danger and filled now with unregulated joy, I begin to cry. Far below us in every direction is desert. The tents, backpacks, water bottles, space blankets, all of us: we're small objects on a high shelf. I look into my friends' sunburned and concerned faces and feel the sky curving around us. I want to tell them: I flew. I want to tell them: on the back of a queer arrangement of skin, bones, and muscle shaped like propellers. And then, surprisingly, I am empty of want.

If I dreamed this place, it's a dream I've never woken from. And yet, every day we wake up to face facts.

VIII.

L. Frank Baum married the daughter of Matilda Joslyn Gage, whose cause of suffrage Baum believed in. Baum and his wife lived for a time in South Dakota, on which he later based his depiction of Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz*. In 1891, the couple moved to Chicago and soon joined the Theosophical Society. Baum's mother-in-law belonged and had encouraged them to become members, too. Founded by famed occultist Madame Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society sought "to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color." Did this nucleus, this utopian world inside our own, inform Baum's vision of Oz?



Because of the way we pronounce it, utopia sounds as though it comes from the Greek for "good place," but its real root is "no-place."



In the early 1900s when Baum was writing and publishing the Oz books, the United States was awash with individuals and movements committed to creating a more perfect world—through social reform, labor reform, and revival of faith. In 1905, H. G. Wells published *Modern Utopia*, and the Industrial Workers of the World united. The "Wobblies," who envisioned a democracy based on the workplace, were the first union to accept women and workers of all races and ethnicities. In 1906, the U.S. Pentecostal movement was born, led by a one-eyed African American preacher. In the early years, the churches were racially integrated and women played a prominent role, just as they had earlier in theosophy and spiritualism.



Pentecostals believe in divine healing. They also believe that the Holy Spirit can fall upon anyone, causing a person to speak in tongues. In 1901, three years before *The Land of Oz* was published and Tip was transformed into Ozma, Agnes Ozman from Topeka, Kansas becomes the first person recorded to speak in tongues—a language belonging to no-place.



To change genders and become Ozma, Tip first has to drink an anesthesia-like potion that puts him into a “deep and dreamless sleep.” Mombi then performs her magical operation on him, after which Glinda parts the trembling “pink curtains of the couch” to reveal Oz’s new princess.



Pink did not become the color associated with little girls until World War II. When Baum wrote *The Land of Oz*, it was still considered the color for little boys’ clothing, and blue—the hue associated with the Virgin Mary—the color for little girls. Until the 1890s, boy babies and girl babies wore the same clothing—usually long dresses. In 1910, feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman bemoaned the “premature and unnatural differentiations in sex in the dress of little children,” calling it a “conspicuous evil.”



As U.S. society embraced the idea that boys and girls should be made distinct from one another as early as possible, it also sought to distinguish between the “fit” and “unfit.” In 1906, John H. Kellogg helped fund the Race Betterment Foundation, and eugenicists began promoting sterilization of “undesirables,” “scientific baby contests,” and euthanasia as a means of population cleansing. With their backing, the Immigration Act was passed in 1924.



In 1924, Henry Gerber founded the first gay rights organization in the United States, the Society for Human Rights. Gerber had been stationed in Germany where he was introduced to and inspired by the pioneering work of Magnus Hirschfeld on homosexuality and cross-dressing.



According to transwoman author and academic Susan Stryker, “transsexuality could be considered a form of reality hacking.”



Gender and genre, as has frequently been noted, have the same etymology. David Lazar calls the essay “the queer genre.” To be queer or “to essay,” from French for “try” or “test out,” is to resist the stability of definitions. To straddle or move between “this” and “that.”



The verb in its infinitive form “to ____” has no tense (time), number, or gender. The verb in its infinitive form, as in: to wander, to wonder, to be wobbly and never arrive at a destination, to be no place.

IX.

The other night, I watched *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* with a group of friends. It had been 30 years or more since I’d last seen it, and it was as silly as I remembered. What also hadn’t changed was my attraction to Dr. Frank-N-Furter. Mostly to his glossy red-bracketed overbite as he belts, “I’m a sweet transvestite from Transsexual, Transylvania,” but also to his broad, corseted back, his black-stockinged legs elongated by platform shoes, his commanding height, and his kabuki-like foundation, still not thick enough to white out the charcoal of his stubble. Two genders and no gender, he is decidedly queer and seemingly desirous of women as well as men. Even as a teenager I must have sensed something about him: how he might locate the Janet and Brad in me.

X.

Utopia: a missed flight and an airline-funded night in a chain hotel near the cargo area, in a city I don’t know, in a city where no one knows me. The goodbyes already folded and the hellos and welcomes like a deck of cards, not yet cut. In this no-place, I can stop time, trap it. Here, I can hold it in my hands and feel the darkness curve around it.

or this

: a queering, estranging of what is “natural” to us. I have always loved a certain degree of dislocation. Many children’s books and works of “adult”

literature teach that to grow up, to change—to become who we were meant to be—a stranger must come into our life, or we must go to a foreign place. Have I changed? Have I grown up?

XI.

The Land of Oz seems ahead of its time, an overlooked gem of the transgender literary imagination. That it was intended for children makes it either all the more surprising or explains why it raised no hackles and is seldom mentioned. If the Oz books were banned from public libraries at various times, it was never because of Tip's gender switching. In 1986, seven fundamentalist Christian families filed a lawsuit to keep certain books out of public schools in Tennessee. *The Wizard of Oz*, they contended, promoted belief in good witches.

Here's the thing about *The Land of Oz*, or what I've neglected to mention: Tip doesn't *want* to be a girl. "I want to stay a boy, and travel with the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman, and the Woggle-Bug, and Jack," he protests.

The good witch, Glinda, convinces Tip to undergo the transformation, telling him: "You were born a girl, and also a Princess; so you must resume your proper form, that you may become Queen of the Emerald City."

After stealing the crown from Ozma's father, the Wizard asked Mombi to hide the infant-heir. Mombi did this by turning Ozma into a boy, which he remained even after the Wizard had fled the country, ceding the throne to the Scarecrow.

According to Glinda the Good, Tip must now be righted—reverted to a girl—in order to right Oz, which has been governed by a series of illegitimate rulers: first the Wizard, then the Scarecrow, and now General Jinjur, leader of the all-female Army of Revolt.

In my memory, before rereading it as an adult, *The Land of Oz* was a progressive, even transgressive, fairy tale. But there's a way in which Baum's second Oz book is regressive, insisting on the primacy of the past. In the last 20 pages, the hero is restored not only to the gender he was born but the throne she-turned-he-turned-she was destined to inherit. Tip is no self-made princess, pulling herself up by her pumps.

I was seven when I first read the book, in second grade, my baby teeth usurped by oversized adult ones that didn't fit my face. Did I find the restoration of order reassuring somehow?

But you can also read Tip's "I want to stay a boy" as Peter Pan-like, or as expressing the fear that every tomboy playing in the creek has of her body being replaced. The fear that this new, womanly body will mean the end of play and the dawn of reasonableness' tyranny: doing what is right for "the Kingdom."

Back then, maybe all that mattered to me was—high five—"girls rule!" It wasn't important whether it was General Jinjur or Princess Ozma. What matters to me now, all these decades later, is that *The Land of Oz*, with all its possible meanings, is still a queer book.

XII.

I am at an artists' retreat, and every day I wake up overjoyed, feeling, "At last, I have arrived!" At being a writer or in heaven or . . . ? One day, I get in my car, exit through the gate with the sign that warns "The Real World," to go buy a bottle of wine. I turn right onto Route 29, which deposits me into town two miles away. Errand complete, I get back on the same highway to return to my retreat. I drive and drive—five miles, eight miles, ten miles—but I never see the entrance. Thinking I've somehow missed it, I take the off-ramp, cross the highway, and head back in the direction I'd just come from. I drive and drive and I'm back in town again, never having found the entrance, which this time should have been on my side of the highway, clearly visible. I do this circuit one more time in disbelief before turning on my phone's GPS. The retreat—which sits up on a hill—is located, it turns out, between two Route 29s. The gate I am looking for is on the *other* Route 29, which merges many miles later with the better-marked, higher-speed *doppelgänger* I'd been driving back and forth on. My Route 29—the one I needed to find—wanders through mountains and small towns. My Route 29 has numerous crossings and hidden driveways, including the one that eventually brings me back.