

# FAKEFURCRAFT VERSUS STATECRAFT: TOWARDS A BARDO POETICS

ELISABETH WORKMAN

Something about recent debates circulating around poetry, including the merits/evils of kill lists, the merits/evils of conceptual poetry, the question of the point of poetry at all, the heightened self-policing of poets in declaring what poems cannot or shouldn't do—these as a microcosm of a greater machinery of binaries and hierarchy and control—has me thinking of Bjork freaking out on the paparazzi disguised as welcome committee in the Bangkok Airport.

An instinct so embodied it lashes out in a spectacular violence. I say to a friend, “I am trying to access tenderness in my poetry but I feel more like a mother bear at the world.” For a long time I have felt a latent anger, nebulous but adamant.<sup>1</sup> Not until I gave birth to my daughter did my own ferocity feel somehow born, too—as animal in me and other than me at once.

In my memory of the airport freak out video, the reporter touches Bjork's child, who she's pushing atop bags on a luggage dolly. In the actual video, as I consult it now, the child is never physically touched, and so there is an illogic at work here and a vulnerability in that illogic. Perhaps this is similar to the affection I felt for Zinedine Zidane in his head-butting fall from grace. In both cases, their illogical ruptures were “wrong” but they were also *true*—disruptions in our demand for the maintenance of spectacle, a sudden ferocity in which I hear feral city and in feral—a corresponding fear of the untamed.

In her essay “On Fear,” Mary Ruefle offers, “The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott believed artists are people driven by the tension between to desire to communicate and the desire to hide.”<sup>2</sup> I want to think about that tension as one of ferocity.

CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

My fortune cookie from the fake magical wonders of the Manchurian buffet complete with waterfall tableau of tiny plastic bears and equal-sized plastic dinosaurs overlooking relatively mammoth living goldfish in a penny-littered pond, reads: “If you want to win anything—a race, your self, your life—you have to go a little berserk.”

According to my desktop dictionary, berserk derives from the noun denoting an ancient Norse warrior who fought with wild or uncontrolled ferocity. Berserk is offspring of the Old Norse *berserkr* (noun), probably from *birn-*, *bjorn* (see bear) + *serkr* “coat,” but also possibly from *berr* “bare” (i.e., without armour); see also Bjork.

It is this paired possibility of bear-coat with bareness, the co-imagination of costume/artifice with nakedness/vulnerability, the co-incidence and multi-faceted possibility of bearing (a child, fruit, the burden of, in mind, a resemblance, witness to) with baring (i.e., flashing, exposing, uncovering) the source, and these gestures contingent to a mechanized teleology, a creative magic contingent to a destructive magic—that describes my hunger for poetry. In this radiant space of contingency, I propose a fake fur poetics.

In “I Am Vocal and the Salt,” Alice Notley writes, “Momma he won’t shut up. They don’t even know / how to speak they understand each other / saying nothing words. I’m tormented because / I can’t find someone with an ear. God has an ear / but there’s no god. There must be someone / who can hear delicacy and fierceness mixed / All they say are words they heard someone say, / they can’t play the language.”<sup>3</sup> *Play* is the operative word here.

While this moment might be read as a child’s disillusionment with her peers, it can just as easily be applied to a certain frustration with poetic tradition and climate, a hunger for complex improvisation and investigation in the face of formula, trend, and institutionally sanitized, if not smarmy, verse.

It’s fair to make such a leap because Notley herself has said, “For a long time I’ve seen my job as bound up with the necessity of noncompliance with pressures, dictates, atmospheres of, variously, poetic factions, society at large, my own past practices ... It seemed one had to disobey the past and the practices of literary males in order to talk about ... the pregnant body and babies for example.”<sup>4</sup>

In *The Descent of Alette* Notley’s protagonist journeys through a subterranean world in darkness to destroy the tyrant who is everything—normative order, form, patriarchy, enlightenment, tradition<sup>5</sup>—in order to arrive at alternative forms of being, or rather a sense of truth being one of infinite becoming.

At one point in Alette's journey she encounters the tyrant in a dream, then wakes up and thinks "He owns enlightenment" "all enlightenment" "that we // know about" "He owns" "the light."<sup>6</sup> Later Alette encounters a woman who is a "dark shining" whose body reveals "a grotto" "of diamonds" who tells Alette:

"His great failure—" "the tyrant's failure—" "& yours too?" she said, "' is to think that" "achievement" "must be evident," "in the light—'"<sup>7</sup>

"To win anything ... you have to go a little berserk." I take this fortune in the world of light to mean "you have to be willing to go into darkness, you have to be willing to fail," for achievement in darkness must be a kind of failure in light. Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*: "In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false"<sup>8</sup>—winning in loss, achieving in failure.

My wandering in Alice Notley's glittery darkness is to find a way to talk about craft. This is supposed to be a craft paper. But which craft? I want to think about craft as a circulation of power inscribed by certain values. In this case I want to explore the values of the berserk as a poetics of becoming in the face of a statecraft invested in pigeonholes: i.e., the foreclosure of transformation.

At the end of "I Am Vocal and the Salt" Notley suggests (to anyone reading and willing to listen and to an iteration of a self), "Your tone of voice isn't complex enough."<sup>9</sup> We are animals bound in the artifice of written language. How can a voice transcend captivity using the tools of its containment? How do we hear the fierce with the delicate, the abject with the ecstatic, the feral with the fabulous? That last line spurs us; it salts our poet tongues; our mouths get wet with something else to say.

To complicate tone in this moment is to trouble the distinction between ferocity and play, the animal and ornament, and to dissolve the border separating poetics from life. My point of inspiration, in this case, comes from my daughter's preoccupation with *The Muppet Show* and my willing facilitation of that preoccupation. I'm a child of *The Muppet Show*; it was one of my first encounters, as I see it now, with a remedial poetics.

The magic of *The Muppet Show* is that it is a kind of bardo realm or liminal state between human and non-human of fakefurcraft that privileges alternative ways of being and a more capacious sense of affect that queers the sublime. Muppets, how do I love thee? Let me count some ways and means to an ever-deferred end.

1) THE “I” IS ONLY EVER A GUEST STAR AND THAT GUEST STAR IS ALWAYS CHANGING.

The human, the lyric “I,” as manifested by the industrial entertainment complex, on *The Muppet Show* is complicated by encounters with the non-human, the near-human, the monstrous, and/or the adorable. The human is only human by virtue of what it is not, its difference from the fur-flying fabulations of a rowdy, emotional tribe of soft misfits. The “trappings” of the I get parodied—e.g., Rudolph Nureyev dances with an obese Odette pig in *Swine Lake*; Milton Berle’s stand-up confidence disintegrates in the hands or rather heckles of Statler and Waldorf; Steve Martin shows up to find the show he’s supposed to host has been canceled in lieu of auditions and now he himself has to try-out for his part; even Julie Andrews is not immune—her pretty brown cow (a real cow) gets sold off to a family of human cannonballs and its fate is heard going off in the background at the end of the show. Humans are so self-important! So predictably penned in by their own brands. What if instead we took “I” as an access point to a bardo realm of alternative joy and (dis)order? A lot of Flarf poems would say okay, because here is a poetry in which the stability of an imperial/lyrical I is troubled in favor of the shapeshifting subjectivity of the demotic, unruly hive.

In Katie Degentesh’s *Anger Scale*, each poem is titled with a question (in the form of statement) from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. “Once I had access to all the questions, I began to use them to write the poems themselves by feeding phrases from the statements into the internet search engines and piecing the poems together from the results pages,” Degentesh says of her process. Take the shifting I of the beginning of the poem, “I See Things or Animals or People Around Me That Others Don’t See”:

I am a ghost maniac boy who doesn’t like to work.  
I am an animal with a halo.

My cat comes to visit regularly and I’m so very content  
when it thinks I’m going to hit it with a rock!

I see animals and me standing up for peace  
Listening to whales sing

I pretend I have a German Shepherd.  
A black dog, head held high, standing under a tree.

When the dog owners have a conversation about the dog  
I see the ghost of Monty Python

And I can’t tell what is serious and what isn’t<sup>10</sup>

Alternately haunting, playful, lyrical, funny, swerving, and associatively limber, the “I” here is a kind of ghost antenna navigating the complicating terrain of subjectivity and receptive to the affects and effects (as per the last line) of that process.

Flarf frolicks in a Whitmanesque campy orgy in which the “I” contains multitudes, any and all in a radical inclusivity, including those reflective of misogyny and ~isms we may not want to be confronted with in poetry, but—thanks to the canon—receive with a familiarity many resist. From *The Front* of the uncanny, K. Silem Mohammad’s “Fly Like an Eagle”:

some Arab girl who dreams of potential futures  
comes and takes my hand and she’s hot and stuff  
she’s like, gonna guide our way toward a poetics  
of Asian-American wall clocks  
I wish she wouldn’t spend so much time talking

the hottest Arab doesn’t all money  
doesn’t glance periodically at the Gilmore Girls’ piñata  
the pilot on the space station . . . lawnmower  
all of which are random  
and don’t let the poster girl spice film gecko  
to Jainism that wolf, nice

I have an Isreali friend who had sex with a panda  
I think somebody ought to hit you over the head  
as you probably have guessed by now, I’m a unicorn

sexy Arab girl dance happily  
serious girl play crazy levitating bubbles  
fly eagles fly<sup>11</sup>

A bastard-child of collage or “google-sculpting” as the Flarf process is often described, the “I” here is mutant, “not-okay,” and reflective of a culture rife with anxiety of difference and fear of the random, the accidental, i.e., trash.

In *Trickster Makes This World*, Lewis Hyde, in discussing the importance of accidents, offers the example of John Cage, who “defines modern art as art which cannot be disrupted by non-art. It is permeable, open at its edges,”<sup>12</sup> and points to Cage’s own anecdote from his book *Silence*:

George Mantor had an iris garden, which he improved each year by throwing out the commoner varieties. One day his attention was called to another very fine iris garden. Jealously he made some inquiries. The garden, it turned out, belonged to the man who collected his garbage.<sup>13</sup>

Hyde continues:

Every category must have its rubbish heap. For the classic sensibility the problem is to keep the rubbish at a distance, for difficulties will arise if it returns, especially if it comes back with a plausible claim to having been falsely excluded to begin with. If the irises in the garbage are beautiful, then beauty itself is contingent, and not some still point in eternity.<sup>14</sup>

George Mantor's garden is a limited notion of poetry, regulated and refined. Mohammad's poems and many Flarf poems challenge the border patrol of poetry, in terms of what can and cannot be admitted. The effects are often ribald, clumsy, and joyfully terrible, and by granting access to uglier voices, they interrogate which "I" we were expecting, and which "I"s have come before.

In her satirical poem "Song of Myself" from *The Virgin Formica*, Sharon Mesmer cunningly presents the lyrical cliché of then defies expectations—with a sonnet-like turn—often attached to the "I" of female poetry:

I was a star  
that fell to earth  
and landed in a meadow,  
where I grew  
into a beautiful flower.  
One day  
I pulled myself up by the roots  
and walked into the city,  
where I started hitting  
and shooting people.  
This is the Song of Myself.  
Now die, you fuckers.<sup>15</sup>

Of course the death and myriad reincarnations<sup>16</sup> of the "I" in contemporary poetry is not at all limited to Flarf, but the borderlessness of Flarf processes is so anarchic, it challenges the idea of permissions at all. Every time we sit down to write, Dodie Bellamy has written, we are voting on what's permissible. In a grotesque state of surveillance, border control, and security checkpoints—literal and figurative—the question of permission is heavily charged.

## 2. IN THE BARDO REALM OF MUPPETS, SOUND IS PRIVILEGED AND GRANTED SPACE AS A MODE OF COMMUNICATION IN AND OF ITSELF.

I'm thinking of Beaker, Animal, the chickens Gonzo covets, the Swedish chef, the scattling of Dr. Teeth, the Koozebanian creatures—all seem to be tapping into alternative traditions from Inuit and Tuvan throat singing to glossolalia to Gaelic canntaireachd to scattling—spells, incantations, chanting, battle cries—and drawing upon a fundamental human impulse, instinct even, that is poetic. And magical.

“Magic,” Jerome Rothenberg suggests in his introduction to ethnopoetic soundings on UBUWEB, “is the first key and from this the idea of a special language or series of languages, extraordinary in their nature and effect, and uniting the user (through what Malinowski called “the coefficient of weirdness”) with the beings and things [one is] trying to influence or connect with for a sharing of power, participation in a life beyond his own, beyond the human, etc.”<sup>17</sup>

In the example of Indonesian *ketjak* performance, David Lewiston observes, “While the *ketjak* is a creation of this century, it is descended from something much more ancient — the trance dance, the dance of exorcism.”<sup>18</sup> Such an impulse is evident in Dada as a movement and its sound poetics in particular—take Kurt Schwitter’s “Ursonata” as an exorcism chant in the face of the horrors of the first world war.

The Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk carries on in the Dada tradition and performs works by Schwitter and Ball with a virtuoso zeal in addition to his own vocable formulations, including “The Prime Minister Finds That Utterance Entirely Inappropriate,” which consists solely of the incantatory repetition of that sentence into a vocal turbine of progressive erosion and mutation so that by the end of the performance the sentence<sup>19</sup> has become a cluster of illogical sputters and spurts and phonetic spasms. When Blonk visited Minneapolis two years ago and was asked how he would defend his work, he positioned his poetry as a kind of negative dialectic in response to “poetry [that] is a dictatorship that tells people what they are supposed to feel, think, see at any given moment.”

THIRD RULE OF THE MUPPET BARD: PUNS AND WORDPLAY—  
INCLUDING MISHEARINGS AND HAPPY ACCIDENTS—ARE DIVINE.

Muppets are champions of the downtrodden and the “low.” In their realm puns—often referred to as the lowest form of humor in ours—rule and they *move*. Take this instance from their serial skit “Veterinarian’s Hospital”:

DR. BOB: Prithce Nurse, who beeth our next patient?  
NURSE JANICE: Why this little piglet, sire.  
DR. BOB: Not piglet, Hamlet! Remember, we’re doing Shakespeare here.  
NURSE JANICE: Hmmmm...sounds more like Bacon!  
DR. BOB: Say this patient needs a transfusion. What’s his blood type?  
NURSE JANICE: Well, I think it’s 2B, but I’m not sure.  
DR. BOB: Well, make up your mind. 2B or not 2B?  
NURSE PIGGY: These people have no shame.

This is a shame-free zone of jouissance in gaucherie. And the invocation of Shakespeare here is fitting, because he too was a lover of puns and used their resonances to often stereoscopic ends in his work. In the twentieth century Gertrude Stein’s puns operate, as Bruce Andrews has observed, in a “machinery of words” that is “productive, affirmative, transformative”; “instead of pretending to offer an unmediated picture or vista of what’s outside itself, it operates on us, sounds and resounds us, unmediatedly itself, publicly.”<sup>20</sup> Her puns and wordplay comprise a poetry that is an experience—A FORCE—rather than a description of an experience.

Harryette Mullen deploys puns and cultural detritus to magical effects. She comments in her introduction to *Recyclopedia*, “If the encyclopedia collects general knowledge, the recyclopedia salvages and finds imaginative uses for knowledge. That’s what poetry does when it remakes and renews words, images, and ideas, transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected.”<sup>21</sup> From *Muse & Drudge*:

if your complexion is a mess  
our elixir spells skin success  
you’ll have appeal bewitch be adored  
hechizando con crema dermoblanqueadora

what we sell is enlightenment  
nothing less than beauty itself  
since when can be seen in the dark  
what shines hidden in dirt<sup>22</sup>

This accumulative punning on Enlightenment as a literal and figurative *whitener* in its exclusionary hegemony is simultaneously playful and indicting. And it is her acts of reclamation and recombination that rhythm and rhyme in a transformative power, not unlike Adeena Karasick whose poems so often are her poetics, such as this moment in *The House That Hijack Built*:

#### FEcuNd idiOM

a libid ibid, itty bitty id a  
ditty DAY-O logical  
machine of ipseity illeity titillate labial  
oh, a hegemony hey nonny nonny  
squeegee ouiza ousias haute über ergo  
machine of inveigled réglès, regiments, ruptures  
nacreous trough naysay!<sup>23</sup>

Karasick's macaronic riffing ruffles, at once a Rabelaisian concentrate and a bathos machine set at warp-speed, sound-driven and cunctic, fecund idiom phenomena, or "mahna mahna" as the muppet song goes.

#### 4. LASTLY, THE MUPPET BARDO REVELS IN THE "QUEER ART OF FAILURE."

I steal that phrase directly from a book of the same name, by Judith Halberstam, in which she proposes "low theory" or expression that "revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion, and that seeks not to explain but involve."<sup>24</sup> The muppets are constantly messing up while also revealing, by giving us backstage access, their processes of mishap and confusion. Even on-stage we meet a baroquely framed performance of failure; take, e.g., "The Rhyming Song," in which the muppets repeatedly fail to rhyme, or the Muppet Labs skit featuring Gilda Radner, in which Dr. Honeydew's demonstration of his new super-glue goes horribly wrong and by the end of the show all of the muppets and their guest star are literally stuck to each other, together. That's consensus building. And evidence of jouissance in the abject too, because only by inhabiting that space can we re-learn our edges, or rather, un-learn the illusion of our separateness.

"I chose to be a poet ... not to rise above it!"<sup>25</sup> Chelsey Minnis declares in *Bad Bad*. Poetry is already so off-the-radar and in a darkness; it's a bardo realm or mode in itself. And perhaps this is the threat of it. Plato wanted poets *out* of the republic altogether. In *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard says, "Poetry puts language in

a state of emergence,”<sup>26</sup> and therefore resituates reality as an immanence, not a prescription. This requires a stray’s sensibility and receptivity to abjection and failure. “Bring that into the piece,” a poem in Dodie Bellamy’s *Cunt-Ups* begins, “a writing that can know pus as come. You don’t understand the emotions. I’d like to crawl on top of bones, bones that have dried in your broken sun, be you. Look at me instead of the ceiling. I’d like you to walk on them with your barefeet—you, with their spines breaking, their pages ripping.”<sup>27</sup>

Death of the author does not mean a death of affect—more and more I think of a poem as a site of voracious anxieties and complex, often conflicting emotions, whether exposed in a rupture or silenced beneath a lacquer. The anxiety within Enlightenment, after all, is the anxiety of discovery and the threat that these discoveries might evade category, fixity, or diagnosis and ultimately, possess powers of their own. Rob Halpern:

Attention to affect allows us work with the improper material of social feeling before that stuff gets hardened in foreclosed identities and voices. I want to think that prosody—as a technology of organized stress—can participate in the work of loosening that affective material from its ‘proper’ ends, which often materialize and reproduce linguistically. I want to believe that a poem can help undo the capture of our own embodied positions in social space, positions whose ongoing reproduction aids and abets the obstructions in our own utopian longing for a habitable world.<sup>28</sup>

What if this world is the bardo? According to new findings<sup>29</sup> in quantum physics, that this universe might be “just one giant projection,” a hologram contingent to a more ideal cosmos of “harmonic oscillators” of attachment, “bardo” as a space between death and birth seems a fitting term. When I think about this I feel compelled to be braver, more honest, more absurd, and adorn myself in horns, shimmery ornaments, faux furs. If this is the bardo the death of the author becomes moot; parties, confusion, paroxysm, and failure become really important; and poetry becomes a threshold for the para-human, where the fixity of terms set forth by the illusion factories of statecraft can be vexed by our ornate, wildish chimerae. Utopian longing in itself is a kind of emotional creature between bodies, something para-human, and, what the muppets might mean by (*write it!*) the rainbow connection.

## Notes

1. “Anger is an enrgy. Anger is an energy. Anger is an energy.”—PIL.
2. Mary Ruefle, “On Fear,” *Madness, Rack, and Honey* (Wave, 2012), 114.
3. Alice Notley, “I Am Vocal and the Salt,” *The Boston Review*, November 8, 2013. <http://www.bostonreview.net/poetry/notley-i-am-vocal-and-salt>.
4. Alice Notley “The Poetics of Disobedience,” written for a conference on Contemporary American and English Poetics, King’s College London, Centre for American Studies, February 1998, [epc.buffalo.edu/authors/notley/disob.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/notley/disob.html).
5. “I am not writing poetry to uphold a tradition...”—Chelsey Minnis.
6. Alice Notley, *The Descent of Alette* (Penguin Books, 1992), 37.
7. *Ibid*, 40.
8. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Black & Red, 1977), [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm)
9. See note #3.
10. Katie Degentesh, *The Anger Scale* (Combo Books, 2006), 28.
11. K. Silem Mohammad, *The Front* (Roof, 2009), 58.
12. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 98.
13. From John Cage’s *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961) as quoted in Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 98.
14. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 99.
15. Sharon Mesmer, *The Virgin Formica* (Hanging Loose Press, 2008), 91.
16. “Y.A.L.A. (You Always Live Again)”—M.I.A.
17. Jerome Rothenberg, “Introduction to Ubuweb Ethnopoetics: Soundings,” [www.ubu.com/ethno/soundings.html](http://www.ubu.com/ethno/soundings.html).
18. David Lewiston, “Ketjak: The Ramayana Monkey Chant,” [www.ubu.com/ethno/soundings/ketjack.html](http://www.ubu.com/ethno/soundings/ketjack.html).
19.
  - noun
  1. A set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command, and consisting of a main clause and sometimes one or more subordinate clauses.
    - Logic: a series of signs or symbols expressing a proposition in an artificial or logical language.
  2. The punishment assigned to a defendant found guilty by a court, or fixed by law for a particular offence.
20. Bruce Andrews, “Reading Language, Reading Gertrude Stein,” presented at the Gertrude Stein Symposium organized by Bevy Rosten, New York City, October, 2001, [www.ubu.com/papers/andrews\\_stein.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/andrews_stein.html).
21. Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia: Trimmings, S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T, and Muse & Drudge* (Graywolf Press, 2006), vii.
22. *Ibid*, 132.

23. Adeena Karasick, *The House That Hijack Built* (Talonbooks, 2004), 80.
24. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 15.
25. Chelsea Minnis, *BAD BAD* (Fence Books, 2007), 17.
26. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1958), xxvii.
27. Dodie Bellamy, *Cunt Ups* (Tender Buttons Press, 2001), 23.
28. Rob Halpern, “On Somatics”—an interview with the author conducted by Thom Donovan, posted on The Harriet Blog, 2011. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/rob-halpern-on-somatics/>
29. Cowen, Ron, “The Universe Really Is a Hologram, According to New Simulations,” *Scientific American*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/universe-really-is-a-holo/>.

ELISABETH WORKMAN is the author of the poetry collection *Ultramegaprairieland* (Bloof Books, 2014) and numerous chapbooks, including *Opolis* (Dusie, 2007), *Megaprairieland* (Grey Book Press, 2010), *ANY RIP A THRESHOLD* (Shirt Pocket Press, 2013), and with Michael Sikkema, *Terrorism is What Whale* (Grey Book Press, 2014). She lives in Minneapolis with the designer/typographer Erik Brandt, their daughter, and two cats of the tuxedo variety.