

**Power
to
Yield** and
other
stories

BOGI TAKÁCS

POWER TO YIELD AND OTHER STORIES
by BOGI TAKÁCS

Published by
Broken Eye Books
www.brokeneyebooks.com

All rights reserved.
Copyright © 2023 Broken Eye Books and the author.
Foreword by Ada Hoffmann.
Cover illustration by Galen Dara.
Cover and interior design and editing by Scott Gable.

Content notices and publication history of individual
stories can be found at the end of this volume.

978-1-940372-66-2 (trade paperback)
978-1-940372-67-9 (hardcover)

All characters and events in this book are fictional.
Any resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	3
Four-Point Affective Calibration	7
An Errant Holy Spark	11
And I Entreated	25
Folded into Tendril and Leaf	41
The Third Extension	63
On Good Friday the Raven Washes Its Young	65
Volatile Patterns	71
The Ladybug, in Flight	85
The 1st Interspecies Solidarity Fair and Parade	89
A Technical Term, Like Privilege	113
Power to Yield	127
Content Notices	181
Bonus Notes	183
Publication History	187
Acknowledgements	189

FOREWORD

HOW MANY DIFFERENT MINDS CAN THERE BE IN THE WORLD? How can information pass from one mind to another when we're all so different? What does it cost us to breach the divides that make such communication difficult—and what does it cost when we refuse to try?

If these are the questions that interest you, then allow me to introduce Bogi Takács.

Bogi and I have been friends and colleagues since the dark ages of LiveJournal—2010, I think? The internet moves fast enough that some of the details are lost in the caverns of time. I've known em since before either of us had a professional-level story sale or a book out—also before e moved from Hungary to the US. In all that time, we've never met in person. This is the paradox of the internet, bringing people together across impossible distances while in other ways keeping them just as far apart.

What's always impressed me about Bogi is the flexibility of eir mind, leaping into the guises of aliens, machines, spiritual beings, plants, animals, monsters, and humans alike. Bogi is a multiply neurodivergent, multiply disabled, queer, trans, intersex, Jewish immigrant from a non-Anglo country. If you think that living at the confluence of all these axes of marginalization might require some creative code-switching, you are correct. Autistic people get told that we can't

imagine other people's minds, but everything in Bogi's work is perspective-taking, usually several perspectives at once, usually including some perspectives so unusual that others wouldn't think of them at all.

These perspectives are significantly different from each other. The characters are constantly trying to communicate across impossible gulfs of difference—whether those differences are science fictional or the results of privileges and marginalizations that humans have always had. In “The Ladybug, in Flight,” a member of a space hive mind speaks to a child, who may be the only survivor of a spaceship disaster whose seriousness the hive mind isn't quite equipped to understand. In “Four-Point Affective Calibration,” a marginalized narrator tries to have their emotions read by a machine learning system and wonders if the way they process emotions is normative enough for the machine. In “And I Entreated,” a Jewish woman is transformed into a houseplant and tries, with increasing frustration, to communicate with her family through a telepathic translator who is only somewhat reliable. In “Volatile Patterns,” a group of people appropriate another culture's magical designs into their clothing, only to reproduce the designs incorrectly and with disastrous results. In “The 1st Interspecies Solidarity Fair and Parade,” humans and aliens are trying to collaborate in a post-apocalyptic world—but the difficulty of getting different groups of humans to cooperate proves almost as great as the difficulty of talking to the aliens. When the groups do come together, it's a hilariously chaotic, joyful mess.

There is a lot of pain in this collection, but also a lot of playfulness and a lot of awareness of more than one kind of power differential. Characters with contrasting forms of neurodivergence try to adjust their approaches, so they can work together. Jewish families navigate nuanced differences in their individual approaches to religion and gender while also navigating the development of AI and telepathy or being turned into a houseplant. In “A Technical Term, Like Privilege” a person with inborn magical talent is turned away from a community of revolutionaries, on grounds that their magic makes them privileged—(I winced in recognition so hard at this scene that I had to take a break)—but the reality of what their magic does for them is more complicated and grimmer, and they find a way to use it for a revolution of their own.

While there is a lot of successful work to bridge divides, some can't be bridged—especially those created by bigotry and cruelty, as in “On Good Friday

the Raven Washes Its Young,” or by willful dismissiveness. When human society cannot be endured, the characters facing these divides often ally themselves with aliens or other powerful presences. Or they turn into plants for safety, as in “Folded into Tendril and Leaf,” only to find that something of the plant way of being stays with them permanently. “Power to Yield” itself is in some sense a story about this kind of alliance, with Aramīn—distrusted by everyone due to his neurotype—finding meaning in the inhuman System he maintains. These inhuman presences generally aren’t sinister, though there’s always a human somewhere who has reason to view them that way. They are just different and not to be ignored.

I should talk a little more about that title story, which is the longest and last in the collection. (Though there’ll be a few spoilers, so if you’d rather not have them, you can skip the rest of this foreword.) It’s a challenging but fascinating novella, in which the magical planet Eren—a setting Bogi has written about before, here and elsewhere—would be unlivable, full of monsters and uncontrollable expressions of magic, if not for the System that keeps it in order. The System is designed by Aramīn, who is a Falconer—a neurotype that seems to resemble antisocial personality disorder. He has little innate sense of morality, but adheres strictly to moral rules that he’s consciously learned, knowing no one will forgive him for a misstep. A young autistic woman named Oyārun develops a special interest in Aramīn, eventually meeting him and volunteering to participate in the System herself. Aramīn worries that her special interest compromises her ability to consent, but he agrees.

It turns out that magically talented volunteers maintain the System through sadomasochistic practices that allow them to join their intelligence to a structure larger than themselves. It’s an ecstatic experience, and occasionally a terrible one; it’s also addictive. In a way, the System is the ultimate form of connection: it not only keeps Eren physically safe but also holds all the community’s knowledge, all their networks, and all their ways of communicating with each other. Neither character, as their relationship develops, is portrayed as a blameless victim or a monster. Both of them are trying to balance their inherent interests and the needs of the community, knowing that these efforts will always be questioned and always flawed.

Maybe there’s never a form of communication that is ever not flawed, that doesn’t twist someone’s meaning or leave someone out, by mistake or by design.

Maybe it's morally incumbent upon us to keep communicating anyway. Or maybe it's not moral at all, but merely what we need to do to survive.

To judge for yourself, turn the page.

—Ada Hoffmann (July, 2023)

FOUR-POINT AFFECTIVE CALIBRATION

Prompt: Anger

OF COURSE, I CAN BE ANGRY.

But I wear a headscarf. The moment I'm angry, you put me in your mental box labeled "TERRORIST" in neat, tidy small capitals. You store me under "POTENTIAL DANGER" in the warehouse of your mind.

When I cross the parking lot to the grocery store, sometimes people hit the gas, not the brakes. And this is a university town, supposedly liberal—or is it?

I'm not a Muslim, but it's not like most people around here can spot the difference. I allow you to guess my religion, my level of observance, my gender. You will probably guess wrong.

Let's start over. I can be angry, but I won't.

I won't because it would not have gotten me out of secondary screening, immigration detention, hostile interrogation, and all the other abstract concepts that need at least two words to describe. I lived to learn.

But you know? Maybe I'm not angry because I'm not.

You expect me to be angry—or at least be silent but simmering with rage. And sure, I can work myself up to it. But right now, I'm mostly just annoyed, sitting here under the helmet and asked to contemplate various emotions supposedly basic, supposedly universal across cultures. I have my doubts about this last part.

I hope next up is sadness because thinking about anger makes me sad.

Prompt: Sadness

I wish my thoughts were tidier. A complete stranger will be examining these transcripts. I keep on going off on tangents.

I have a succulent on my living room table that keeps on trying to grow out of its pot and downward, forming a fringe of thick green bundles. But its branches are not strong enough to support their own weight, and they keep breaking off, wasting away. The plant does not give up, and I water it dutifully, try to rotate it so that it occupies various positions with respect to the north-facing window, the evanescent sunlight.

It only wants to grow downward, toward certain harm.

This is not a metaphor; this is straight-up life. Plants have personalities—the balsam gourd in the office is feisty, rapidly growing tendrils toward all the other pots, seeking to reach out and tickle. Possibly smother.

Maybe you chose me for this task because I'm so observant.

Is this enough for sadness? Can I get a different one? Impatience is not a basic emotion, I am told.

[Pause]

Disgust is apparently a subcategory of anger, but I really don't want to redo that segment. They should've briefed me first—this is not my field, and I only know about Ekman's six basic emotions from undergrad. Happiness, surprise, fear, anger, sadness, disgust. People refine their models all the time.

I threw out all my models—and again and again. *Extraterrestrial communication* is also an abstract concept that needs two words to describe. It doesn't sound much friendlier than *hostile interrogation*.

Prompt: Fear/Surprise

Fear and surprise fall under the same heading, emotions evoked by “fast-approaching danger.” I'm trying to scrape my brain for citations: Jack et al., I don't remember the year.

I didn't sleep through the initial briefing; I was just so anxious that nothing they said registered. Sure, I can tell you about the amygdala, fear response, interactions with short-term memory. It's not really an excuse though. Does it matter? I feel like I'm in my comprehensive exams again, being interrogated

by my committee, even though it's just my thoughts being transcribed. Even though this is just the calibration phase.

I feel like I am looking at the immigration officer again.

Deep breath. I can upset myself with great alacrity and skill.

The research team think aliens will probably not understand the substance of my thoughts as much as the underlying emotions—at least at first. Everything needs to be precisely calibrated.

Am I too scatterbrained? I'm told that everyone has messy transcripts. Mine feel worse. I'm put on the spot. There are plenty of backup people standing by if my calibration fails, if the factors won't converge—if, if. Plenty of people to take my spot.

Who wants the person in the headscarf? They made me take it off to put on the helmet, they made me take it off on the border, even for my driver's license, my ridiculous student ID photo, my clip-on work ID stating my name and my surprisingly senior position. It's not the right name either, but at least, it doesn't have a gender marker, and it's not like people can spell my name anyway.

In the past two decades in this country, I have amassed a variety of ID photos with uncovered-head me. Maybe I should make an installation. Very artistic.

I'm supposed to produce fear and surprise on command, not anger. I don't think my emotions segment into four neat categories. Boxes in the warehouse. I can try again—I do think I had the fear component. As for surprise, I would need to be surprised.

When I got this assignment, I was surprised.

It made me rethink that moment back over a decade ago in undergrad when in tears I confessed my diagnosis to my biostatistics professor, when he dragged me to Disability Services. If I'd stayed in my country of origin—I refuse to say home country, this is my home country now—if I'd stayed, I would never have experienced that moment. Disability Services wasn't particularly a thing back there. I'm told now it's different.

Surprise. Focus. When I'm nervous, I fidget, constantly readjusting my clothes, my scarf—and I'm clumsy, so I sometimes pull it off my head altogether. I've never seen anyone else do that, but most of the other autistic people I know are staunch atheists. Secular people are horrified on my behalf, and I feel embarrassed, but I don't think [uninterpretable] minds much—after all, [uninterpretable] is supposedly all-knowing and [uninterpretable].

I pull at my clothes and [uninterpretable] [uninterpretable] my fingers even now, but I'm reprimanded that this produces motion artifacts.

I really want to talk to aliens, so I try to sit still. Just one more emotion to go.

Prompt: Happiness

I know why they saved happiness for last—it's because of the priming effects. If I finish with happiness, I will remain a bit happier for a little while. They didn't tell me about this, but I do work with human participants in my own line of research.

I'm glad I transitioned from purely quantitative to mixed-methods. Extraterrestrial communication needs all the methods we can throw at it. Of course, it's my quantitative-minded colleagues who will read the transcripts. Stop with those thoughts, I don't want to lose my job. Am I expected to think of sex? I generally don't think of sex.

Happiness. Happiness is a vast spacecraft, reminiscent of alien-invasion movies but accompanied by a feeling of elation and relief. Happiness is change.

I'm sure the people in the lab next door chose me for this assignment because they have these ridiculous stereotypes that being neuroatypical makes me better at understanding aliens. But you know, one tiny part of that is true: I want to talk to aliens because I'm fed up with humans sometimes. When I was compared to space aliens as a kid, I probably internalized the wrong message—I decided that aliens must be really cool.

Happiness is love. Happiness is change and aliens are change and love is aliens—I move along the chain of associations. I don't care about formal logic. Love is aliens.

They want to talk. Not shoot, destroy, evaporate, invade—they want to talk. I want to talk. They don't know how. We're working on it.

I used to be an alien—of a different kind: a resident alien, and before that, a non-resident. And inside me, a warm feeling bubbles up as I'm told that the calibration has finished, concluded, I am ready, I have passed.

I know with the certainty of joy that I can help the newcomers with settling in.

AN ERRANT HOLY SPARK

I HAVE NEVER BEEN KIDNAPPED BEFORE.

This is the first time I'm threatened with a firearm, dragged into an unmarked white van, deposited into a windowless basement after a long drive. All the standard steps of kidnapping, played out one after another.

A bullet to the head would destroy me just the same as it would kill you. I'm not going to risk it.



I know that gaze—you are trying to catch me out. You watch me closely to find those moments where I betray my supposedly true nature. You listen to the slightest changes in my tone of voice.

You stare like this at trans people to guess their birth assignment or confirm it to yourself. You frown as you read articles by people with obviously foreign names, trying to pinpoint each turn of phrase that would mark the writer as a non-native speaker, to find an expression that would be sufficiently un-American. But when you stare at *me*, you are trying to prove to yourself that I'm really artificial—a construct, a robot, what have you.

The underlying concept is the same: you're trying to find the telltale signs

that would enable you to exclude me from the human condition. And you need to do this in order to be able to do your job.

Are you interrogating me for the government? I work *for* the government. Or is this some clandestine, black-ops faction, operating largely without oversight? Is this about the extraterrestrials, again?

It has to be—otherwise why would you ask about my family?



I have two mothers and another parent.

This is a trap: if I minutely, meticulously explain my feelings, this in itself will prove their artificial nature to you. If I don't bother, you will simply disregard their existence.

I cannot win, so I might as well talk. It is a form of stalling, after all.



Shoshana Cahane is my designer. I call her Mom. I think of her as Mother, because I feel *Mom* doesn't express enough deference. Saying *Mother* out loud would feel too formal, even though it rings right to me. She is my mother, but she is also my designer, which is a different position somehow.

In my first memory of her, I'm sitting in her car, looking at a small glass vial filled with tiny white snail shells. The doors are open, the AC not on. It is the heat of summer, and everything has that vaguely unreal feel in the blatant glare of sunlight. I stare at the shells and think the vial was a gift from someone who left. I realize I have memories that stretch back quite far. I remember being given the vial, and I know it is now mine.

Mother sits down next to me and leans toward me to ask what's on my mind. Her thick, dark curls fall in front of her round face, but I know she's smiling at me. I know even without looking. I tell her about my memories, and she is pleased.

There is a strange metacognitive twist here: I no longer remember the memories I told her about.



I know you want to hear about how Dani Blumenfeld can talk to the extraterrestrials. I suppose you also want to hear about the secret of teleportation. But you'll need to be patient. We are all related.



Nurit Tzipora Cahane is my developmental model: in a sense, my mother almost as much as Mother is. I call her Tzipi. She is two years older than me.

I read about Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in one of Mother's books—when I was still in kindergarten but when I could already read. One can divide all possible human activities into three sets: some the child can do, some the child cannot do at all, and the zone of proximal development. This third set holds the activities that are possible through the aid of another human. To help children learn, you need to provide activities that fall into this zone.

Hence, Tzipi.

Mother tells other people Tzipi is my sister—and certainly older siblings can provide great potential for learning. But with Tzipi, it is more than that. I *am* her, in a sense. She was my initial template.

My first iteration has a set of four clumsy actuators connected to a central globe, the actuators further subdivided.

It is a model: a model of humans. A model of Tzipi specifically. All models are wrong.

My second iteration, I develop myself: rolling after Tzipi, my actuators held out in parallel, my sensors alert to every little change.

Mother is in her office, working.

Tzipi picks me up with great difficulty and drops me. I'm shaped like a ball, but I don't bounce.

I don't feel pain yet.



I can see the incredulity on your face. Surely you weren't a heavy metallic ball with spokes sticking out?

No, my casing was made of polypropylene.

And why is your first memory of Tzipi so much earlier than that of your mother?