

Advance Praise for Algorithmic Shapeshifting

“Bogi Takács is a poet of visceral exuberance and Talmudic invention. Moving as dazzlingly between genres as languages, he makes the reader his kaleidoscope where ancient traditions, unenvisioned technologies, and children’s toys tumble with ordinary, transcendent precision, imagining new ways of being and observing others signally extant. These poems draw blood and spark synapses, make dauntingly familiar and tenderly strange. You should let them change you.”

Sonya Taaffe, author of *Forget the Sleepless Shores*

“Bogi Takács’s poetry is gleefully and unabashedly itself, pulling the reader through surreal worlds of visceral magic, body modification, political wit, and interpersonal devotion. Whether looking back into Talmudic history, forward into a science fictional psychic war, or sinking into the earth and growing flowers from its own eye sockets, “Algorithmic Shapeshifting” presents a voice that is consistently fresh, startling, and sincere.”

Ada Hoffmann, author of *The Outside*

Algorithmic Shapeshifting

Conversation Pieces



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68. Algorithmic Shapeshifting
Poems by Bogi Takács

About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
Volume 68

Algorithmic Shapeshifting

Poems by Bogi Takács





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For R, M and A, with gratitude

*The rock that was cast aside by the builders
has become the cornerstone on high;
This came from the Name
and it is miraculous in our eyes*

Psalm 118: 22-23

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Foreword

As an impatient reader, I hate forewords. Literary speedbumps, I call them. “Don’t tell me what to think,” my mind screams. “I want to experience the author’s work for myself, now!” But, of course, literary speedbumps (good ones, at least) exist for similar reasons as do the speedbumps in front of my kid’s school. They say, “Hey, slow down! Pay attention. There’s something important here.”

Bogi Takács’s poetry is important. I want you to appreciate it as much as I do. Because I’ve known Bogi for many years, I think I can help with that. So, here’s my speedbump.

Slow Down

Turn back to the Table of Contents, please. Did you read every title?

Take a moment to marvel at Takács’s tantalizing intimations: “The Iterative Nature of the Magical Discovery Process,” “The Tiny English-Hungarian Phrasebook for Visiting Extraterrestrials,” “The Bursting Season”.... Takács’s titles are often poems in themselves, suggesting as-yet undiscovered worlds with histories, philosophies, biologies as complicated as our own.

The joy of these title poems is cerebral, but also sensual. Relish the hard Gs in “The Weight of Granola and Gefilte,” the sinuous Ss of “Synthesis: This Shining Confluence,” and the oxymoronic bumpiness of “Continuity Imperative.”

What Takács promises in eir titles, e delivers in the poems. Mind-bending, imagination-expanding concepts are paired with a uniquely kinetic delight in language(s). Seemingly mundane events, like taking out the garbage, turn into epiphanies. And the poems, speculative or not, always blaze with emotion.

Pay Attention.

Bogi Takács is a psycholinguist, which gives em special insight into how we learn, understand, use, and produce language. As you read this collection, note the signs, instructions, testimonials, manuals. These and other modes of communication operate according to specific protocols. Takács's poems ask, what if the writer doesn't use the same protocol as the reader? How can we communicate, even with our future selves, if protocols change?

Takács is multilingual. E speaks three languages, functions in two more, and dabbles in four others (not counting the conlangs or machine languages). E understands, from real-world experience, the precariousness of communication, how a seemingly straightforward sign can trigger hilarity or disaster for readers using a different language or protocol.

By rewriting established protocols, Takács reveals their potential to conceal rather than communicate. A government document may mask torture as interrogation, even if it's a verbatim recording of the event. By exposing the danger of some protocols, Takács prompts us to view others—say, social or scientific—through a sharper lens.

This collection includes at least five different languages, so chances are you too will experience linguistic

uncertainty. Takács “translates” this uncertainty to other aspects of our daily lives. Thus, Takács’s poems abound with emotional pivot points and daily rollercoasters, encouraging our awareness of how changeable existence can be—if not for ourselves, then for others.

Takács is an immigrant. Immigrants encounter moral, social, religious, economic, and institutional differences as they move from one country to another (sometimes repeatedly). Takács hints at fully developed worlds in even his briefest work by providing just the right details. Is this skill due to immigrant experiences? Maybe not; but as observant as Takács is, I imagine that moving between countries honed his sense of what distinguishes one place from another, and perhaps what details we use to construct a meaningful whole.

Distance is a frequent theme in Takács’s poetry: distance between countries, people, states of consciousness, even between hypothesis and confirmation. These poems ache with the desire to connect despite distance. One’s object of desire may be impossibly distant or a hair’s breadth out of reach. Sometimes alienation compounds yearning, as when we want something considered taboo. But Takács’s poems vibrate with hope, too, and the exhilaration that comes when we finally achieve communion.

Takács is liminal. As an immigrant, a trans person, a neuroatypical and disabled person, Takács is accustomed to, if not comfortable, being an outsider. He has had to make space for himself in a world that often ignores his existence—when it’s not actively trying to destroy him. Takács does not take feelings of home, safety, and belonging for granted.

In these poems, family and “home things” are precious, even sacred. In these realms, all possibilities can be accommodated. Science is as wondrous as magic, and magic is as rigorous as science. “Trans love is” is a complete sentence. Mundane and marvelous, spiritual and physical can all coexist. Takács reminds us that when we dream, we can have it all.

This Is Important.

As a fan of speculative fiction, I feel a renewed joy of possibility (what some call “sense of wonder”) when reading Takács’s work. These poems expand my sense of what is already here, technologically, and propel my pie-in-the-sky dreams that much further. For “You Are Here / Was: Blue Line to Memorial Park,” Takács wrote a program to create an animated visual poem. Can the rainbow tapeworm of “A Self-Contained Riot of Lights” be far behind?

For the spec-fic community, Takács’s work is important because it expands our concept of what is possible by highlighting who is already here. As an editor and reviewer, Takács champions trans, queer, BIPOC, and international writers. In eir own writing, e embraces aspects of heritage, religion, and identity that the community has long marginalized. E offers eir poetry as expression and emself as example. If we accept this courageous gift, if we accept and celebrate diversity, we will enrich our present and fuel the future.

These poems, mainstream and spec, exude a “blatantly impossible, rebellious joy” that I consider inherently Bogi. The sturdy optimism, vigorous hope, and gleeful curiosity? That’s how Bogi is *all* the time, and that’s why

Bogi's work matters beyond the SF community. If all of us staggering through the Anthropocene can tap into that irrepressible energy, then surely we will survive long enough to flourish.

—Lisa M. Bradley
Iowa City, Iowa, USA
January 2019

I. Trans Love Is

the one who commands me calls out my name

and thus i move through nighttime layers with wide-open eyes taking in the yellow sodium-vapor lights lining City Park, the last trolley buses turning as the longstaff spins threads itself through my fingers, lightweight metal glazed the primary color of fire;

it has been a joint effort that led me here, to this moment where the plane-trees crowd around me and stars blink through the branches and foliage, where the words carved onto the monument's sides already bind me to the future, just one more step to take;

i turn and gasp with the weight of unmitigated sensation, the hands on my shoulders that press gently but firmly down, knees to the soil and i topple, body cascading forward—i breathe in gobs of earth and blades of grass scrape my closed eyelids;

i stand up and follow the embers on the wind, the words of the one who walks by my side to help me reach the entrance of your home, take my air from your mouth, be surrounded by your light and offer you my gifts;

finally move,
finally live

Outside-in / Catalytic Exteriorization

A lack of sleep lowers the incident threshold;
the mechanism is similar to epilepsy
except the reaction happens outside the skull.
I stagger through a nighttime landscape
of power lines while the light of the full moon
scatters, flickers in pools of groggy dark water
and the grid hums inside my chest cavity;
whenever I turn my head the world lags
behind, my mental representations refreshing
all too slowly, betraying my exhaustion;
and I draw a breath knowing it is close,

the moment

when the catalytic exteriorization process
runs its course over the smooth, tidy pathways
of the neuraxis; my breath hisses in unison
with the heat coming off my diaphragm
and as my limbs tremble ever so slightly,
something inside layers of warm flesh uncoils
to whip across the sky like lashes of lightning
and pain; something whispers a magic spell
to the universe, asking it to bend to the will
that still remains hidden, curled up inside
the patterns of synaptic potential but still
unknown to the acting consciousness,

to me,

and what happens is always unexpected,
always personal, secret and terrifying;
cold and heavy upon my lungs, constricting
my actions, hastening my footsteps
until I break into a run and tears start
to flow with a measured, customary
trickle—and I clench my fists, less in
anger than in a violent, shuddering release
that knocks down walls of memory and
preconception, sends the wind hurtling
to the sky, clashing against the clouds,

calls me by my name,

unravels the world.

The Handcrafted Motions of Flight

The men in suits pay me to remember.
Preceding lives are not always set in the past
and causality traces meandering pathways
upon the manifold surfaces of our world.
I remember the future.

I write it all down; all the fragments
of a tenuous, incoherent lore.
My mind fills in the gaps, unbidden.

There are multiple sets of futures,
multiple lives, multiple selves.
Some are me, some only similar to myself,
and some carry more of me
than my self living and writing in the present.
Hand me another sheaf!



E is the one closest to me
and e is the one who arouses their interest,
with eir memories of weapons and raw power.

They are bothered by the pronouns.
The smallest details can mean the world to me—
that landscape in the future, in a causal past
of smooth beige edges and silence.

I cannot see eir face—
There are no mirrors in the memories.

Eir chest—my chest—is smooth and flat,
eir arms muscular, eir hips wide and round.
I had to assemble everything from pieces
and I could not chance upon a gender
until I realized that was a gender in itself.

They tell me to write about warfare.



E was—is—I am a warrior,
but e remembers only peacetime
and the soundless crashes of training,
eir self surrounded by concepts
I cannot interpret.
E does not dwell on them.

In my mind there is only a firm touch,
a nod, the smile of a comrade,
there is only the air rushing past
and the sense of speed;
all the handcrafted motions of flight.

They ask me if I am a clone (why?)
or if I am inhuman, like a robot
built for a singular military purpose—
not as far as I can tell.
I can sense disappointment
in the voices that urge me to go on.



Obviously this is for the nation—
an imaginary structure of mirrors,
edifices and cufflinks.

Bogi Takács

I cannot share everything.
Inside, I still owe my allegiance
to the people beyond the haze
of imperfect reconstructions.

A moment stands out.
The balding stranger looks at me
with no internal calculations,
sees me for who I am.
Our interlocking thoughts
pass a message of trust.



I smile.
They look at me without suspicion
as I mangle facts with a delicate touch.

They do not sense the vertigo of inversion,
the jarring tactile sensation
of patterns shifting from place.
My hesitation is attributed to fear.
They offer assurances of safety
and I nod, earnest and sheepish.

I safeguard what is my own.
Respect offered without regard to interest,
the steady gaze of an unknown passer-by.
I have to build fortifications.



I am not liked; I am useful.

A firm hand gathers the sheets,
a well-groomed head turns away.
The next day lies in wait,
with carefully misaligned lines
on blueprints more coveted
than treasuries of gold.

Despite it all, I retrieve myself.

A Self-Contained Riot of Lights

My facial muscles contract in preparation
to expel a communicator.
I reach into my nose and pull out a rainbow tapeworm
as a token of goodbye;
you place it in your palm and examine it carefully
—a tiny, jiggling streak of color—
then snort it, playing for keeps.



The worm is a stroke of light in my consciousness
always just beyond my field of view,
sometimes a pale pastel orange, sometimes a ripe yellow
or a tinkling, scintillating green.
It whispers your words in sensations of taste
and delicate touch,
as through threadbare linen.

It tells me you're alive and well and flaring
across a purple sky in your spaceproof cocoon,
leaving beyond contrails tracing
messages to bear-cubs and insects
down planetside.

It tells me you are quicksilver,
flowing through gaps in
the aged monuments left behind by warlocks
of an unknown species,
always exploring, never relenting.

It tells me you're unsatisfied,
seeking to drink your fill
of white-hot glorious pain
and a brash bronze pleasure,
streaming down your throat
as you swallow,
in time with your tears.



What do you see of me?
I live sandwiched in between rectangular walls
painted a nondescript gray,
a hundred stories underground
on a planet without an atmosphere.
I crave these little flares
of information and heart,
knowing I can offer precious little
of my lived experience in return.

Why do you love me, I wonder
as I lie back on my cot
and listen to the nighttime sounds
of the dormitory, the sneezes
rustles and coughs.
Our recycled air is always dry.
Why do you need me?
Do you see all the gray?

Bogi Takács

I can only offer my inside,
where buildings grow like mushrooms
and insect-mobiles race across
fiberglass caverns
lit by crystal clouds
shining from their core,
I can only offer the dreams
where I stumble across walls
and then fall, shouting
not in fear but in the raw
exhilaration of joy
induced by the motion that tears
my flesh apart;
I can only offer my thoughts.

They shine like razor-thin beams
across the deep blue of
conceptual space,
they wrap around at the edges
and enable me to hug myself
in your absence,
they are manifold and mysterious,
of a puzzling origin
somewhere deep down in my mind
where it all turns inside out,
interfaces with the world.

Is that what you need?
The worm shifts inside my head
with a resonance of you,
providing a quiet answer—
a self-contained riot of lights.

Trans Love Is

for D, who asked

Trans love elicits surveillance;
 it distinctly resembles a caterpillar,
 sometimes it raids the bulk aisle.
 Trans love is self-replicating
 and soft-baked; it comes in loaves.
 Trans love is the burning desire
 to do FIVE loads of laundry
 and tell the interrogation officer
 there are no terrorists in Hungary,
 only neo-Nazis—does that count?
 Maybe other people have a
 more orderly, regular trans love.
 Mine is made up of non-dairy items
 and excellently peelable skin flakes,
 on occasion blackberry sage tea.
 Black is the color of leather,
 of my true love's hair as sung by
 Nina Simone and Meshell Ndegeocello
 —preferably at the same time.
 Trans love is a conglomerate of us
 on a pillow-top mattress.
 Memory foam and embroidery.
 A delightful microwaving of hot dogs
 as only a ten-year-old can do;
 the infamous gigglecry.

A User Guide to the Application of Gem-Flowers

You will need the riper gem-flowers,
those that grow on cliff faces
around this time of the year;
they attach to flesh easier.

You can moisten them with your tongue;
this does not start the bonding process.

You need to break the skin before application—
we recommend an obsidian knife.

Gently pull apart the edges of the wound
and press the gem-flower in.
It lodges in a few minutes.
Pain is helpful,
as is a release of endorphins.
Instruct the recipient to keep breathing.

The recipient might experience
exuberant behavior;
good communication is essential.
Do not forget about restraints.

Skin discolorations near the application site are possible;
do not be alarmed by the opaque silver veins.

Bogi Takács

Gem-flowers harden in two hours,
but to ensure optimal attachment,
avoid direct impact to the site for 60 days.

The gem-flowers are immediately ready
for magical use after application.
Purely decorative use is not endorsed
but is not, strictly speaking, disallowed.

Seven Handy Ideas for Algorithmic Shapeshifting

Try it now—guaranteed enjoyment or your money back!

Loss of life not covered under the terms of the user agreement.

The classic original: Shapeshift to a surface color the inverse of your environment [reverse chameleon]

To confuse people: Shapeshift to duplicate a nearby object, then change as others move you around [pulse in rhythm / undulate / who turned the sound off]

For a drinking game: Shapeshift into a weasel for 5 seconds whenever someone drinks a stout [some puns deserve to remain obscure] [mind: wildlife needs to be careful around humans]

To make a somewhat mangled political statement: Shapeshift into an object whose possession is illegal in the state and/or country you are entering [no human is illegal] [weaponize your thoughts / fall under export restrictions] [make sure to read the small print]

To receive blessings: Shapeshift into a monk when in the 500 m radius of a Catholic church, respond to Laudetur [nunc et in æternum—practice] [works well in combination with previous]

For the trickster types: Shapeshift into a set of food items, then change back to your original shape as the first person attempts to eat you [do not change back] [change back after you pass through the alimentary canal / the plumbing / all water returns to the sea]

To satisfy extreme curiosity: Shapeshift into a cis person, at random intervals of time. Cry for 5 minutes. Change back [how did that feel?]

Autonomous, Spacefaring

We are the flesh acceding to demand—

all systems nominal; Deena, you're ready to go

the clash of sensory input, fingernails pushed into palms
for the pain to drown out the noise;
after the countdown

we are up and away

we paint the sky a luminous red;
sending our felicitations to all points of the globe.

Grow

The flowers underneath my skin
struggle to bloom;
unfurl petals and break into sunlight
through layers of tissue
in gleaming red explosions—
I am a container of relentless biological love.

Continuity Imperative

Engineer

hands untying neural tubes tentacles

straps

the ship must fly;

the bindings must hold

clasp together

matching ends;

weep, fingers shaking

unfold flaps

pick out delicately, from the gore

a kernel that remains

biological material

connect; fuse

pray

bite skin on lips

fuss / cuss

pretend to know

improvise a non-

permanent solution

translucent blood flowing

gathering in puddles

smears on the fabric

of coveralls;

a coughing sound
scraping on the edge of
the human—
unqualified
without certifications
make do;

someone else's
field of expertise

but the ship must—

later they will thank
be grateful
yet it is now
always the now.

because the ship must

Gently Chew to Soften the Ridges

Nubs of bone like molars grow inside
my mucuous membranes—
rasp your tongue against my palate, push
fingers inside my mouth, reach inside, trigger
my gag reflex it is the most intimate *please*
click fingernails against nubs—try to tease out
new growth, pinch and pull splinters like
rabbits from a hat, put them in a carefully
padded box with your other treasures, save
my DNA for what will be coming.

Lick my back, gently chew to soften the ridges
ease the pain, I am turning—it is the act that
confers closeness shared across a chasm of species
please do not be afraid of hurting me—you have yet
to reach the part where you will need to wrench
the wings out of my torso in order to
preserve me for further acts of love.

One foot on my back *please* grab hold of
the protrusions, wipe your hands on
your trousers—your grip is slick with
sweat and you cuss *please* words
keep me tethered to existence
yank my bones telescoping
hang me from the ceiling
by my new-formed limbs
please

hold me swear and whisper
that you will keep me close to the
body heat of your exertion, my face
against your shirt sprinkled with my blood—
smear it into curlicues, we are fluid-bonded and
now I know you will stay by my side across
the expanses of space and time, help me through
whichever change comes next.