

Circular Storytelling

An international creative writing project

Three Engineering students from TU Delft and three French students from Université Lumière Lyon 2, Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3 and Université Paris 8 explore the world from the animal perspective while becoming first-time authors. An exercise in storytelling, creativity and empathy. Here are their stories.

Creative Writing Workshop held during the **International Forum on the Novel** (Lyon) by Matthew Neill Null, author of *Honey from the Lion* (Lookout, 2015) and *Allegheny Front* (Sarabande, 2016)

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The Ghost
by Connor McMullen (TU Delft, engineering)

He can't actually see the leaves change. The extra rods in his eyes wash out almost all semblance of color, a small price to pay for being able to see at night. It is no matter. Long before the first leaves shift from green to gold he knows the seasons are changing. Night falls a little sooner every day. The grass, before a plush blanket of vibrant bedding, now crunches as he beds down for the night. Itchy long strands scraping at his hide, digging into the stubbly hairs of his thick winter coat, just now growing in. He swings his head around and scrapes at his hip, dragging up and around his back, finally catching the bristly bramble that was causing all the trouble.

A shot calls out in the distance. A supersonic crack, whistling a million miles an hour across a courtyard, thwacking a can off the fence post and into the darkness. Someone lets out a whoop, two more erupt in hearty laughter. Three more cracks follow in short succession, each ending in short hisses that cut under the din. They would have been imperceptible if not for the cones-shaped ears atop his head. They swivel back and forth, subconsciously searching. Individual vigilantes, ever vigilant, ever watchful. A second crack, sharp as the first but unending, whizzing through the night for all of eternity, searching for a soft place to land.

That was enough. In a flash he is up, stotting from his bed and into the night, noiselessly bounding down the valley in search of a new place to sleep. Soon. Soon the cracks will come in the day. Not for empty beer cans or road signs but straight at his chest. Men with guns will chase him through the early parts of winter. Each of them would literally kill to have his head hanging in their den, his backstrap on their plate, his blood on their hands. Every one of them wants to be the one to bag the ghost.

He bounds west, away from the men and their drunken chaos. Through wheat stubble, over one busted road and then another. He slips into a sorghum field, nostrils flaring as he pulls in deep breaths of the malty aroma. He stops to nibble on one of the plants. The burst of movement from earlier had not been in plan. Winter is coming and he needs to keep all four of his stomachs full. He chokes down as much as can fit, not bothering to chew most of it, there will be time for that later. He munches as he moves, tracking north, away from the big city and towards a place he knew when he was young.

Millennia of rain have carved great furrows in the earth, ripping the thick soil from the blocks of limestone, scarred with brilliant patches reds and black, magnesium and iron corroding in the shrill midwestern wind. He pauses at the confluence of the three draws, ears turning down under his antlers as the clouds slip over the horizon, leaving the last slivers of the harvest moon hanging among the stars. The light glints off his rack, the fuzz of the summer long ago worn off on tree trunks and fence posts. The mass of bone, knotted and branching, a heavy testament to his luck and resourcefulness. They'd all love to get at it, the massive set of antlers. The score of a lifetime for most of them, they all want to see him in their sights. For now, none of them watch as he scrambles through the maze of shoddy fences, across the oil field and towards the river.

He clammers up a short hill, hooves the size of salad plates cutting deep tracks into the soil. The ground is barren and blacked, raw crude, belched from deep within the earth has ensured that. It squirts from busted seals and drips from the trucks that run around the countryside. A giant mechanical vampire sits below him, the endless seesaw movement sings a squeaky sound as it slurps the economic lifeblood from way down below. Thick clumps of the oily sludge sticks to his hooves and when he kicks them up to clean them it matts in his hairs.

His ears and head swivel, searching down each of the canyons in turn, still needing to find a home. He takes each in turn. A coyote yips from somewhere within the first one. No worry to a full grown buck, but not worth the trouble. The rest of the world around him is not so self-sure, and for a moment

everything around him stops. Except the well of course, this song only stops when something breaks or the earth is empty. In the brief reprieve his ears catch the echo of the harsh melody bouncing back out of the second draw. One way in and one way out. No escape. That is where animals go to die.

The third draw is quiet. No echos, no howls. He trots down the hill, shaking loose the last of the tar from his hooves as he works along a freshly paved road. The first glint of morning light touches the eastern sky as he rounds the bend into the hovel. Footfalls slow from a trot to a walk, and then a standstill. Something is different, not as he remembered. Old trees are gone. A new stench, one only the animals can smell, has invaded the valley.

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“It’s perfect, isn’t it honey?”

“Yes. Perfect. The boys will love it.”

That was two years ago. Piles of paperwork have passed through countless hands by then. Deeds signed. Loans undertaken. A design commissioned. Contractors hired. They had to hurry, the foundations need to be poured before winter sets in and the cold makes the concrete too stiff to work. The doctor and her husband had found this little spot some time before that, and dreamed of making their home here. Away from the hustle and bustle of the city. A place in their nature where they don’t have to lock the doors and their boys can spend their days tracking mud and sticks and all sorts of dirty things in and out of the house. All that time no one ever thought to ask the current tenants of the valley if they were using this space.

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The construction site sits opposite a small pond. Spring fed the real estate agent had said. Won’t go dry. A good place to stock fish once the construction was finished. He sinks into the mud, halfway up his knees. He scans the valley once more before dipping his head to drink. This is when he’s most vulnerable, head down and ass up. Every time a risk, but a necessary one. The long walk had dried him out.

The first sip elicits a snort. The water’s changed too. Unnatural. Bitter. A swirl of blues and orange floats across the placid mirror. Grease and oils and microscopic pieces of plastic, blown from the construction site down to the watering hole. They weren’t even living here yet and already they’d changed everything. He whips his head side to side, shaking the taste from his mouth. He snaps up, balking at the taste, warily watching the sun creep ever forward, beckoning in the new day. A second snort. There isn’t another choice. He leans in once more, choking down mouthfuls of the fouled water, sating his thirst and stinging his throat. Sufficed, he treks to the far side of the valley to bed down for a nap.

The crunch of the gravel jolts him from his sleep. Without thinking he pops up, bounding further out of the valley and away from the noisy men and their dirty machines. The sun has barely moved. Work starts early and he’s barely gotten any sleep. He keeps moving, winding his way up the backside of the hills, finally nestling under a cedar tree, bent over from a lifetime of fighting the wind. He plunks down for the third time in a day, hungover from the half sleeps and constant interruptions. Darkness takes hold underneath the cedar as the sun crawls into the sky.

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Time passes. The rest of the leaves turn and then fall, the evergreens and moss are the only living things left in the brush. He gleans what he can from the fields and troughs of the farmers, every day

hunger forcing him closer and closer towards their homes. The men encroach on him as well. Men with sticks and glass, setting trail cams and check tree stands. They come at dawn and dusk, checking his habits, forcing him off the paths and into the brush. Locust trees cut at his back with their vicious needles and barbed wire grabs at his hide, tearing off little tufts of skin and flesh as he slinks by.

The killing starts. Silent at first. Patient men. Up well before dawn, trudging out into the black with bows and arrows. Pretending it is a simpler time. But only pretending. Technology and tools have surpassed wit and strength as the key to a good hunt. Only the best will do. Double compound. Triple-bladed hardened-steel tips that expand on impact, plunging deep into the flesh, blood spouting from the newly made holes like a fountain of death. The air along the creek is filled with its iron stench, the forest adopting a sober tone as the first of his kin falls.

He treks outward. Away from the trees and valleys where the hunters hide. The land flattens out as he trades the draws and valleys of the river for slow-rolling hills. He drops his head and pushes on through wispy flakes of snow. Winter has come early. Killed the last of the greens that were fighting for the last of the summer's lift. He skips over a three wire fence and towards a stock tank, brimming with water. The sun glints off the top as the shrill wind flips droplets over the edge and into the wild. Water. Finally.

His ears pick up the sounds of the farmer and his family as they tend to the morning chores. The roar of the tractor and the braying of cattle drown out everything else. He lowers his head to the tank and pulls in a long drink. It's stale and metallic, better than before but still unnatural and foreign. Thirst takes over. He doesn't hear the jingle of the collar until it's almost right on top of him. He jerks up, instinctively swinging his head around to look, but also already knowing what is in store.

His movement more than enough to set the hounds off, and the pair of them explode in a flash of tooth and muscle. The collie outpaces the old doberman, yipping and nipping as she starts the chase. Their prey jolts from the water tank and prongs across the barren grassland. The dogs are relentless, the three of them course up and down the pasture, skipping over gopher holes and around rusted farm equipment. He gains separation but not closure. Every time he slips out of sight the dogs drop their noses to ground, scenting him out, just as their ancestors once did. By the time the sun has fully crossed into this world the dogs finally relent, their interest piqued by a new scent that they happily run off to follow.

He turns back, looking at the landscape. The race took him back to that first place, the beaten down farm house and rotten junkyard where the boys pass the time drinking beer and shooting shit. The buildings are quiet now, everyone is off working. He shakes off the chill and heads into a windbreak, hiding from the snow and the sun, searching for a new place to sleep. The chase sapped his strength. It is too early to start burning fat instead of food. But he hadn't a choice. Every day it seemed he ran into something or another that forced him away from his habits and back to his instincts. Survival demands he move first and eat later, a choice he's been forced to make time and time again. Darkness takes hold once more.

The snow turns to drizzle as the sun slowly scrolls across the sky. He rolls back and forth, occasionally standing to stamp his hooves and knock down the branches and brambles of the undergrowth. The fog amplifies the sound: every car rambling down the highway, every door slamming, sounds as if it's just behind the next tree. The noises jolt him from his disjointed rest, jerking his head up, ears swirling and nostrils flaring, searching for the source of the sound. It's never there.

The morning is still. Nightfall brought a much needed reprieve from the cacophony of sounds that filled the wind break. First light burns off the last of the mist, the sun struggling to keep grip on the weather, even as winter takes over. He rises with it, nibbling at a cluster of mushrooms at the foot of his bed. His breath slows as the sounds return, no longer amplified by the moisture in the air the human world

recedes as his world returns. Two birds sit at either side of the windbreak, trading snippets of songs as a family of mice emerge from their den, wary of the fox and the badger that also make this hideout their home. Even the trees are full of life, unseen ants and beetles and all sorts of other creepy-crawly things coursing underneath their thick skin. The still morning is busy with their work. Everything busy, honed in on their own little worlds, making ready for the winter. For a moment this world was theirs and theirs alone.

Five grams of lead rip it all apart. Screaming across the field, shockwaves ripping off the tip, crackling over the barren fields until it reaches its destination. There it drives into the flesh, the soft tip crumpling on impact, driving a hole twice the of the original diameter, ripping through muscle and organs, glancing off a vertebra and coming to rest on the other side of the young deer's body.

The ants and the beetles and the mice and foxes and old buck snap to attention. The little ones can duck and hide, diving into burrows and under logs. He cannot. He turns and crashes through the trees. The branches grab at his antlers, trying to hold him back. He wrenches forward, straining his neck and fighting against the untamed growth. He bursts out the other side and sprints up the hill, away from that ugly, death knell. He bounds up over the crest of the hill, hooves clawing for traction as the grass gives way to asphalt.

The moment rips all focus from him, instinct taking over. His ear swivel at the last second, almost too late. He plants his feet and whips his head around, stopping in his tracks, halfway on the road and halfway on the ditch.

The car is strange. A contrast of heat emanating from the hood and cold plastic of the bumper. In the first second it gives way, but the machine is too much. Momentum is a powerful force. Unyielding. It snaps his hind legs first. In three places, tearing the femur from the socket and leaving shredded ligaments in its wake. Bursting his intestines from start to finish, thousands of little fissures opening up and down the track. His head swings around, antlers wrapping up under the wheel well, the spinning chunk of rubber crushing them in a thousand tiny pieces and scattering them along the highway. He flops over into the ditch as the car screeches forward, horn blaring incessantly, grinding to a halt a dozen paces away.

He lays in grass next to the road. His tongue hangs from his mouth and eyes gloss over. Every breath is a labor. He gasps for air, his lungs suddenly shallow and watery. He coughs, once. And the twice. The last bringing with it bile and blood and phlegm, black and thick and bitter. It reminds him of the water at the lake. Blood leaching from unnatural places, dripping out of him with every second. He rolls back, his head prematurely free from their winter burden, the early sun driving straight into his eyes. He gurgles, struggling to stand or at least sit up, but nothing works the way it should. He shakes and shudders and coughs again, little droplets of life leaking from the side of his mouth and the corner of his eyes.

A car door slams shut and a shaky hand grips the cell phone as the woman takes it to her ear.

"Honey."

"Babe. What's wrong?"

"I just hit a deer."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay, but I think the cars' totaled. Oh baby, what are we going to do about the car now?"

"Just stay put. I'm on my way."