

# 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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A Portraiture of Daily Life in Nature  
by Galadriel Durieu (Université Lumière Lyon 2, Letters)

The oak had been there for many years. He knew all the tree which surrounded him as if they were connected, he knew when they grew, how they grew, which squirrel had eaten their acorns. When you live during a hundred and fifty years in the same place, you built a sense of community which is so strong that every time walkers pull out a leaf on any of them, the other know what pain the other tree feels. They feel as one, and it allows them to live in peace. Being still, in an environment you know and master, makes you feel calm and peaceful. Of course, they see different people going out for a walk every day, but the ecosystem remains the same: he knows every squirrel who lives here, every ant, every worm, every bird, every lime, every maple, every other oak who live next to him. Nature has a constance that humanity would never dare to reach. When the oak saw the way society encouraged competition then created forms of opportunities instead of giving birth again to the ones it had kills, he was utterly sad. He did not understand why one would create a fake freedom after having killed the one in nature. He did not understand why every forest on Earth managed to construct a free and peaceful community but mankind. He lived the connexion between every of his peers, as one great organism breathing out oxygen when the sun was out and breathing it in when the calm of the night came.

Sometimes, he saw human beings passing by. He saw the same old lady every day, reading and relaxing in the peace of his shadow. Even if she never talked to him, he knew they had a special bond and relationship. Maybe he reminded him of someone, something, some event which happened years ago and that he could not remember, having seen so many people getting older by his side. But he knew this special bond was as futile and ephemeral as those which link human beings between them: he will live for many years after the old lady. He will not remember her, and there will be no one to cherish those peaceful moments once she will be gone. He did not think she realised what special moments she had witnessed because of the regularity of these encounters. He felt many buds open at the end of his branches during those springs she spent under him. He felt his shape, his figure change, and had to give so much efforts in order to give birth to those leaves. He felt them thicken, day by day, at his extremities. Then, after all those efforts, he felt their reassuring sugar running down through his sap. And the old lady was completely unaware of this fact, completely unaware of the creation of life and the changing organism who stood still and silent behind her. He had also met some very different people.

Once, he saw this young girl and wondered why she was among those trees. She was not dressed like the others, and could not bear to see the world for itself: she was always holding her phone, looking for the best angle that her lens could give her to photograph a little sparrow looking for food. The oak did not think she even realised that he was here, by her side. She did not take him for granted, she simply did not see him as he never was in shot for her phone. He saw more and more people like her, as this weird love of seeing nature through a camera seemed more and more common among human beings. Human beings love extremes, as they seemed to see in him only what they want to see when it is convenient for them: he also witnessed the opposite. During a sunny afternoon, a man kept hugging him for hours, whispering apologies for the behaviour of his all species toward nature. As the oak was trying to expel pollen, the presence of this unfamiliar body highly disturbed him, as he felt the warmth and the sweat on his bark. He somehow preferred the ignorance of the young lady obsessed by her phone. The man had chosen a very selfish time to make his apologies. But the tree could not understand the importance of them, as the man could not relate to the difficulty of the spring.

At least, this man did not hurt him. Two lovers once came and ripped off his bark to engrave letters and shapes. The process itself was not painful, even if it was not the most pleasant experience you could think of. But the healing process was long and painful: growing bark back is way harder than growing a leaf. And the tree did not have the sweet compensation of the sugar, as his protection had been tore of and needed to be repaired in order to go back to the peaceful normality of his life. He did not understand how human beings and trees shared the same reality. The only perennial element in

humanity seems to be their indifference to other ways of being in the world. He could see some of them making some efforts, such as the apologetic man, but every of those seemed to bring a huge intellectual and cultural pride in them. And they probably were treated like outcasts, or specialists, as this behaviour seemed so estranged for the values of a disenchanted world. But the oak could not care less about that. He lived in the calm among other trees and animals, and focused on the metamorphosis that seasons imposed on him. There are greater forces than human beings.

The oak kept seeing the old lady for months. He kept seeing the squirrels, the sparrows, the humans. He kept fertilising the air with pollen, he kept growing leaves, flowers and acorns, he kept breathing. But one night, this eternal cycle was broken. He would have rather died infected by some bacteria or due to old age, to end his life as peacefully as he lived it. But his death was much more spectacular. A blinding did not manage to stay straight and the car started rushing toward him. He felt his trunk breaking, and all his leaves touching the soil unknown to them. They were now then to his roots, the only part of him remaining alive. For an hour, his world had become massive chaos. He heard human beings screaming, an ambulance coming, he felt an unknown thick and warm liquid pouring on the ground to his roots. Another car removed the car from his trunk then the calm and peace came back. A few days later, lumberjacks came to abruptly remove his dead trunk and leaves. They could have rotten and given him enough energy to grow back. But it probably was not pretty enough for a human landscape. The old lady, the tree huger, the girl disconnected from reality, the lovers and all the other never came back. He had found his peace back, but crippled by humanity, and could not really belong to his own community anymore. If he was in a wild space, people could have cared about it, but who really gives a damn about a dead tree in the middle of Hyde Park?