

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."

Lemming Squad
by Aube Mézières (Université Paris 8, Political Science)

A feeling of emptiness invaded his body. Nothing above, nothing below. He looked down: the void. He looked up: the sky. All his landmarks were blurred. His hair was upwards. The air flattened his ears along his face. He tried to slow the movement down with his small paws but only looked like a flying squirrel.

The fall lasted forever. He could see some of his mates in the air, or already spread on the ground. A rain of stones knocked some of them over. How to avoid the rocks? How to avoid the final crash? Everything had gone so fast, timing was running off, he had no time to think, he had no time to understand. No one had ever hunted him like this.

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The film director entered the conference room. An oval table throned in the middle of the room. Around, ten men in suits. These were the men he ought to convince. Financiers, movie producers, Hollywood business executive. Today was the day, his heart already raced.

He repeated his speech once again in his head: « my documentary unveils an urban legend, it conveys a message of general interest ». No, it was not only an Indian rumor and he meant to prove it: lemmings were mass suicidal. He remembered his fist hike in the Glacier National Park when he was 12, where he saw three dead lemmings along the trail. At sunset, his dad had lit a fire and told him about the lemmings. To escape predators they migrated to death in group.

His intern had brought him research too: lemmings offered themselves to predators, they let themselves die of hunger, they dived in large rivers, they collectively jumped off a cliff.

The world had to see this. He already knew how big it was going to be: replays on the National Geographic channel, nomination in the best documentary festivals. For once his talent was about to get recognized.

He shook a last hand and slammed the conference room's door. In two months, he would be shooting in the Hardengar National Park in Norway. Partners agreed to fund his work. He pictured the movie poster on every billboard – “Suicide Squad”.

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It was a long day. He tirelessly scratched the snow, looking for its grass stocks. Everything else had dried around. An incredible heat hovered. The wind and sun had fully raked this mountainous plateau located at 1800 meters. Some patches of snow were still visible, but most of the panorama looked like a faded fresco. He was unused to this weather, his winter reserves were almost depleted and therefore he had to travel miles to feed. However, the grass was not really greener elsewhere.

It had not rained for two weeks. The whole alpine ecosystem did not adapt well to this brutal and sudden climate change. Deer had returned to the forest edge, a few hundred meters below, of the snails were only left their shells, predators like foxes were thinning day by day, even raptors got tired of soaring.

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The movie team painfully climbed the polished rock. Although they carried heavy and fragile materials, the director had refused to charter a helicopter.

Their last trip was a total disappointment; they had not seen any dead lemmings. In fact, the latter had mocked them during the all week of spotting, very much alive.

Once they got back to the hotel, the film director summoned his entire team. He ought to find a solution. No way he could renounce this project and give back the money to the producers. They believed in his talent, in the values he carried out. He could not let them down.

After exposing the situation, his team remained silent for a long time, eyes looking deeply at the ground. Then the first "assistant cameraman" said:

"Why don't we suicide them ourselves?"

"Meaning?"

"Well, first we could capture a bunch of lemmings and create a gloomy scenario that we would shoot. Like, we could release them by throwing them out of a cliff. "

A moment's silence again. Some thought it a joke and sketched a grin. The director stood up abruptly and yelled:

"That's an excellent idea! Yes, yes! Thank you! "

The next day at breakfast he briefed the team:

"I thought about what we discussed last night and I built up a plan. So, I ordered materials to create a centrifugal table that we'll dispose at the tip of the cliff. We'll set up cameras in different angles and leave the cameramen do their job whereas the rest of us will form a hunting crew. We'll rake the tundra in direction of the cliff, with a tight net to prevent animals from escaping. They won't have any other choice than to jump in the void. Ok? Did you all understand? Great! See you in five days. "

He really wanted to soak up the mountain, test his limits by engaging in a trek of tree days, nine hours of daily walking, 13 kilos on his back. His team was not trained; fortunately the four technicians who carried the heavy metal parts of the table were rather sturdy. They closed the march of this slow ascent.

At the end of these three days, the team had established their camp a few hundred meters from the sumptuous cliff. It fell steeply for 200 meters, directly overlooking a small stream. Technicians had set up the table without trouble in a few hours. Everything was ready for the morbid masquerade.

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Holed up in a thin out bush, he witnessed an odd scene. A lizard was facing him. He had never crossed one in such high altitudes. However, temperature had never reached such peaks.

The lizard jumped out of the bush, a snail without a shell in its mouth. He began to devour his prey. It was truly ferocious, carnivorous: the lizard's paws tore out snail parts as much as possible, his whole jaw working on crushing that already soft body.

Sometimes he fed with small insects or mollusks. Though, most of snails he had recently seen were empty shells. He kept staring at the lizard with interest and lust, not confident enough to try neither to steal his prey nor to attack him, although he was about 10 times his size.

Then everything froze. The lizard stopped abruptly, mummified. The ground was shaking. He looked in all directions. Nothing except a whiff of far off smoke. He was now alone.

He could feel something was wrong, so he stayed hidden in the bush, waiting for a change.

The roar grew louder. He heard steps, lots of steps, closer and closer. What could it be? He had never heard such a noise. It ought to be a big animal, drawn to this altitude because of the heat.

Another lemming passed in front of him, running for his life, so scared he didn't even see him. Was it time to migrate? So far he had always felt safe in this tundra. He had learnt how to ruse with foxes, how not to be seen by hawks.

Now, dozens and dozens of lemming, mice and rats ran in the same direction. Then he understood why.

He ran with all his strength through the tundra. He skidded on the gravel, sometimes tangled up in the muddy puddles, but he never stopped. He was on forced exile.

They came from everywhere, filled up all his field of view. About fifteens giant silhouettes hastened, bound by a web of threads. The view tightened. He could read the panic into his fellows' eyes; a huge noise burst all their landmarks. It was not the same grumble as before, when he understood what danger was coming for him. It seemed like an unnatural noise. Strident squeaks mixed with an earthquake. The more he ran the closer he was getting to the monstrous sound. The ground vibrated so much that he was projected in the air. Suddenly, a sort of huge, greyish, creaky rock rose before him. The awful squeaks came from it. He had no escape, the giant predators encircled him completely and he had no choice but to imitate his congeners and jump on the rock. He got immediately swept into the sky by a centrifugal force against which he could not fight. His legs flew off the ground in a split second and he was thrown into space. He understood he was on a high-speed fall. The cliff, his tundra, his natural habitat, his life: it was all behind.

- "Cut! Cut! Ok guys, that was great! I think we're all good! I look at the rushes tonight but I'm pretty sure we won't need to shoot more tomorrow. Let's uninstall the centrifugal table".

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?

INFINITE

by Renee Swinkels (TU Delft, engineering)

'We dance by ourselves, that's why we listen to electronic music'

She felt

insignificant. Infinite buildings rising around her. It struck her every time, the joint feeling of amazement and fear in this big mass. A mass always in motion. Always in a hurry. Where are they all constantly going? The air always damp even if the sky looked clear. It was a sunny morning. It almost appeared quiet and calm. The light turned green, and it started. The buzz, the rush, the chaos: people running, pushing, cursing. A mixed sound of claxons, engines and silence. The pace was fast, people hurrying to their destinations. Everybody seemed alone in their collectiveness. Alone. All together in the crowd. But still alone. The common loneliness.

This moment always

reminded her of the first moments she found herself lost in the city. It represented the city as a massive living organism. All parts interconnected by overcrowded vessels. Continuously adapting to change, to growth. Always wanting more. An unexotic world acting like an ecosystem. A saturated, polluted ecosystem with its own metabolism. An overload of possibilities, excess of interaction made them all act as individual cells in this system. Individuals always wanting more. These kinds of mornings made her long her early days. Days when quiet mornings remained quiet. Where a clear sky was clear. Where she could find something untouched.

She is a worker, she has long days from 9 to 5. Days with only one goal: finding food, surviving. The division in society is clear. Every individual fulfilling their own task, having their own place in the smooth working superorganism: The city. A unified entity carried by women: workers, engineers, scouts, soldiers, nurses and the queen. The work divided, 'A factory with a fortress'. Every day, the same riddle again. The exploration, the search. Diving into the infinite world. She used to be higher up the hierarchy, closer to the queen. Not anymore. The system grew bigger, colonizing bigger parts of the world. Thriving new ecosystems. Thriving and adapting to its new environment, adapting but not disturbing. She grew older and devalued. But there is no problem to risk her life day in day out. She accepts her place in the collective: take one for the team.

She used to be a worker, before she got lost. Before the incident happened. Before They took her away from her sisters. They all walked behind each other, an endless trial, the chain looking for food. Suddenly they felt the earth shaking, something approaching. It was one of Them, one of them but different. Tinier than usual, tiny but still gigantic. It was clumsy, stumbled around making undefinable coo-cooish sounds. A massive fleshy substance approached, it came closer and closer. It tried to grab all of them, tried and succeeded. A dozen milling around on the hand. The surface moving closer to a warm, breathy opening. At one moment, there is a glance, they meet, an encounter. She looks in the eyes of her predator. The confusedly joyful and warm eyes. An overwhelming sound grasps through the air. An

overwhelming sound, followed by an immense shock. 'HONEY DO NOT PUT THAT IN YOUR MOUTH'

The ground beneath her feet disappeared. Launched through the air. Finds herself dazzled and lost. Alienated. No sounds, no scent, no signals. Where is everybody? She needs to get home. She needs to bring back food.

The daily conquest begins. An endless concrete plain opens in front of her. Her eyes on the target, a large pile of resources at the horizon. Close but so far away, distanced by uncountable obstructions. The immense grey surrounding feels hostile, a constant tension is present. The constant roaming sound works disorientating. Spinning objects coming dangerously close. Trying to avoid one, two or four wildly rotating objects. Then there is Them. The human chaos: unsystematic, solitaire and almost without a purpose. Why do they all gather on this artificial grey representation of nature? Instantly the temperature rises, she feels an instant heat surrounding her. She accelerates her pace, trying to avoid the red, smoldering mass. What is this? What is this smelling, burning substance? The mapped out clear path fades, the number of feet rising. Plastics and cans turning up all around. More. Always more. It is impossible. Impossible to see the wood for the trees. The leaves blurring in the sea of plastics, cans and humans. Strayed in the changed ecosystem. The only task seems impossible now, now she is alone. With no one to be warned by, no one to carry the price with. No one. She needs to get home. She needs to bring back food.

A little rest, deserved rest. She always loves the water. The stillness, the straightness, the fresh breeze. But it changed. Changed like the City did. Changed like every landmass after They colonized it. The bright glint waned, when time passed. She just sits here to look at them. To observe them. Them and their way of living together, their strange colony. Their collective of millions solitary individuals. Observing them, feeling them, climb onto their infinite body mass rising above her. Climbing through their hairy legs, arms, hands. Trying to understand them. She finds herself dancing on a slippery screen, a screen continuously changing from light to black. Losing her grip. Desperately trying to find common ground. Trying to find help, she looks in the eye of the predator. Infuriating eyes. A hostile look as if their whole life was centred around this black slippery screen. A huge shock made the screen underneath her disappear. Launched through the air. Finds herself dazzled and lost. She need to get home, away from these infinite creatures. She needs to bring back food.

Finally home. The longing for the scent, sound and structure dominated her. An indescribable force always drawing the ants back. Back to the heap. The smell of pheromones strengthens. The finite building rising upfront her. A highly populated pile. A megastructure above and under the ground level. Legions carrying bits to construct and maintain it the colony. It strikes her every time the feeling of almost a utopian world. A spotless matriarchal society. A unified entity with millions of individuals collectively working together, working to support the colony. Working to make it work. A mass always in motion. Always in a decisive hurry. A structured chaos: carrying

leaves, twigs, nursing, constructing. Women coming back and forth, cringing systematically. Together. All together in the crowd.

Promptly a strong, swirling wind comes in. A cylinder with an incredible blowing force. A force combined with a horrible roaring sound. She tries to hold on. Hold on to her leaflet, hold on the ground. Trying to continue her way back to the leap. They all try to hold on, to protect their home, protect their lives. But it is stronger. Stronger than the individual. Stronger than the society. Stronger than the structure. Leaves, twigs, sister flying through the air. Chaos. They broke it. Disrupted it. We have to start all over again.

We Are Our Own Survivors
by Yaata (TU Delft, engineering)

The Predator

The blazing sun wakes me up. I slightly open my eyes, try to adjust to the sudden light. Where is my shelter? I was sleeping inside it. Out of nowhere, a burning smell registers in my nostril. I quickly raise my body and look around for my cubs. They are still cuddling up together ten paces away from me. I hurry closer to check on them. I nudge my paw to one of them and lower my head to wake them up. One of them opens their eyes slightly and the other is still not moving. I nudge him again. He is not budging, not even the slightest move. Again, I nudge him and lower my body and try to wake him up. He is still not moving. I hold my cry, I lose another one. His only sibling appears to intuitively realize that he loses another one. He widely opens his eyes and wails his heart out. I pick him up and start to walk towards what I believe away from the haze. Am I too cruel to leave my dead cub? Probably.

Our journey to find a new forest started some moons ago. When the forest started to turn black and our prey have become less and scarce. At the beginning, we started our journey with five cubs. However, every time the sun shined, I lost another one. So, has it been only four moons? As I walk along the bush, I keep my instinct on its maximum level. I know we need to eat. I couldn't remember the last time we ate fresh meat. Scrapped carrion that we've found during our trip was not enough for all of us. However, that was the best that we could find as no preys were nearby. I am hungry and so is my cub. I need to find a prey as soon as possible. Otherwise, I would die and I am not sure whether he would make it alive. I cannot die. I need to survive and so does he.

The Prey

One Hop. I stop underneath a crooked tree with colors of black and brown. It does not even stand straight and it is leafless. Thankfully, its branches still provide me with shadow. As I lay down, a sudden surge of heat escapes from its trunk. Ouch. I hope it won't leave a bald spot on my bottom. Even though I am resting, never have I let my guard down. Fear. One word that always lingers in my mind. Being almost at the bottom of the food chain pyramid, fear has always been the biggest part of my life.

Looking back, I have always been by myself. There was a time where I had my parents with me. One day they were there, but the next day they were gone. Nowhere to be found. Sometimes later, by luck, I met my kind of group. They, as well, slowly vanished. Now, I chose to live by myself, use my instinct as my primary mode of survival. And I've survived. Until now.

After resting for a while, I continue my quest for finding a better place. The last place that I resided had run out of food that I fancied. At first, I could easily find green areas with a scent of rain and forest. The last few days, all I could see were black and grey areas with little sunlight. I am not really sure what went wrong. I am only a small creature. I do not eat as much as what a wild elephant eats daily. Maybe only one hundredth. So why did I run out of food?

As I hop, I smell a hint of fresh grass. It is definitely better than the previous one. I hurriedly hop to the direction of the smell. It has been a while since I've smelled something fresh. I do not think of anything else. Just the thought of getting fresh food makes my pace faster than usual. Unfortunately, all good things come with a price tag.

I sense an enemy; its eyes are trained to follow my movement. I run as fast as I can. I blame it on myself for not recognizing it earlier. An empty stomach brings me troubles. It always has.

While running away, I have an epiphany. I was in the same situation a while ago. It was probably the wettest day on my entire life. Rain was pouring throughout the night and did not stop until the next day. I was running out of food supply and was too afraid to go out. When I took a small step outside my shelter, the water level was around my tail. The color was a combination of black and brown. If a

smell could kill, I would have been dead. It was atrocious. Still, I gathered all the courage to start my journey to find food. I did not know where I was during that time. I just followed my gut feeling. Slowly, I saw a patch of colorful land up in the hill. I happily went to that land with my last remaining energy. Hoping that I could get decent food for my empty stomach. Little did I know that it became my first near death experience.

Just like that, my consciousness clicks. I made it out alive last time. This time? I am certainly not a cat which is rumored to have seven lives. Have I exhausted all my luck? I hope I survive this one. I do not want to die on an empty stomach!

The Wrecker

The coffee is tasteless. I brewed it too long. I put my cup next to my only friend, a radio from the 80s with two gigantic buttons to set radio frequency and volume. Its antenna is broken halfway. If I am lucky enough, I could listen to radio broadcast clearly, otherwise there would be an unwanted background noise. Still, I am thankful that I have it. Living alone on the outskirts of town can sometimes drain my energy.

I gaze at the rusty clock laid next to the table on my right. 8.30 AM. I only have half an hour before I need to start working on the forest. I collect all my "must have" items, a spear and a chainsaw; and place those on a blemished cart that I got yesterday from the nearby farm. Today's journey will be a bit longer than usual. And one of the most unforgettable events in my whole life.

I stare at him. Should I call it "him"? I am illiterate; therefore, my knowledge is limited. I do not know how to differentiate the gender of its kind. I remember my father lectured me about this creature, but I was too young to even recall it. I grew up in seclusion based on my tribe's tradition. Deep in the forest where only three of us depended on each other. There was no luxury, I didn't even know books, television, handphone, and even radio existed. Not until both of my parents died and I was left with no choice but to accept an offer from a big shot company. I did not have a choice, I was alone by myself. They told me I would get the world under my feet. So, I agreed and I lost the world.

As I pointed out my spear, I reminisce the past. My greed. My lost world. All mixed up together. Is it because of me that he hunts outside the forest?

EPILOGUE

The Lion and The Rabbit

The prey was in front of me. At first, he did not register that I was nearby. He was busy munching, what it looked like a fruit, under a big oak tree. When he realized I was nearby, time seemed to stop ticking. We stared silently into each other's eyes. He dropped his food and ran for his life. Fortunately, I moved faster. As I prayed for the safety of my child. I ran.

The Lion and The Human

I have never met anyone like the living creature in front of me. He stood on his two feet. He wore something unusual that covered most of his body. He stood straight, unlike those slouchy monkeys. Though, he did not have as much as fur as monkey. And the stuff that he held in his hand, was it dangerous? I dropped the cub and marched to him.

Aftermath, The Human

Should I bury him? That's human tradition, but is it also applicable to this creature?



The Bright Screen
by Lilian Matricon (Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3, Law School)

Finally, their eyes met. Not for a long time, it was more of a glimpse really. From the corner of their eyes, they glanced at each other. And for a moment everything went quiet. Oddly peaceful. It didn't last longer than a second or two, but it seemed lifetime may have been suspended. Yet, they couldn't keep staring at each other.

Soon enough, this moment faded and the race was back on. The barking didn't seem to ever ease. He hadn't seen the dogs, but felt their bloodlust in his guts. Actually, he didn't know what those beasts looked like. Their violent anger filled the air with a sort of electric tension that called for an escape. He never experienced this intuitive calling before. Life had been quite uneventful. Lonely also you could say.

The forest's branches lacerated his body. What was usually his meal was rebelling against him. His sides burnt him. But he knew he couldn't stop. He felt it viscerally. He kept running, and running again, running forever. And finally, he made it to the end of the forest. There, the grass and dirt were replaced by small, warm but rough grey rocks. The squirrel stopped for a bit, assessing the situation. The barking was lessening, but a new kind of roar hit his rear. Steadier and more powerful. As it got closer to him, he hopped back into the bushes. The whirring monster passed him so fast that he felt pushed away from his breath.

What an explosive way to begin your day, or your life for that matter. The young squirrel had been born a week before, but he had been too weak to leave the burrow he had been birthed in. So weak that his mother and siblings decided to leave him there. A few remains of past meals were sitting with him when he strengthened and went to explore this new world. But no notes, obviously. After days of sleeping, this run stretched his numb legs. It gave him the physical ability to take on the unknown but also a fair warning of the dangers it could have in store for him.

The new encounter, however, he was going to make, was of a different kind. The barking of the dogs had indeed been replaced with sharp shrilling noises. Short but numerous/sonorous. He lifted his head up only to see a magpie gazing suspiciously at him:

- Who are you? What are you doing here ?! he vigorously inquired.

- Hum... nothing... I just ran and... I...I don't know, who are you? replied the fearful little mammal.

The bird looked reassured by his trembling tone. "Well, if you're not meddling with my earthworms, I can be a friend to you". His voice was calmer and inspiring trust. He didn't really know how to behave around such a peculiar company, so our squirrel decided to keep on his journey.

The bird's reaction made him realize he was hungry, and swiftly, he climbed the closest tree in search of acorns. A quick look around, a couple of hops and he found himself four trees further savouring the nuts. His belly full, he paused and enjoyed the warmth of the afternoon's sun. Back on the ground, he wandered, exploring the forest, its streams and bushes, swarming of lives he was eager to discover.

He then arrived at a small and peaceful pond. As he was gulping down drops of water, a small mouse joined him. Glittering eyes, a snub little nose and a curved tail like he had never seen before. His heart was pumping fast, but in a much more pleasant way than during the chase. His eyes were drawn towards her and he had to restrain himself from plainly staring and potentially scare her – even if she did not seem frail at all.

- Hello mouse, I am fairly unfamiliar with those woods, is this a good place to live?

- Hey! Sure! She squealed enthusiastically. The pond offers a magnificent view, and people are nice! Some places you should avoid though!

- I am still discovering the world and you sound like you have already done your fair share of exploration. Could you help me do mine? I travelled through a very odd field of rocks this morning, is this one of those I should stay away from?

- I think you have come across one of the human's paths, their "roads" as they call it. It is definitely not the friendliest place, but not the worst either. I found a new spot the other day, it may be dangerous but I would find interesting to have your opinion of it. You in? She asked with her playful sparkly eyes.

He was indubitably. The sun set on the horizon as the two companions began their way to this mysterious place. They ran across the fields and the trees, and the night had come when they finally arrived on the top of a small hill. It was abnormally bright for this time of night. The sun had been gone for a long time now, but its shine was still brightening the field below.

There, dozens of humans were lying on the grass, by packs of 2 to 10 individuals. Their faces were all pointed in the same direction, and our two friends could only see their backs. The humans were watching a huge square sun, and loud sounds were playing. As their eyes acclimatized, they discerned faces of talking humans appearing on what looked less and less like our day star.

Our squirrel stared, dazzled. Almost hypnotized. He did not feel threatened, but he could almost hear the magpie preparing to defend himself and his worms if he too had seen this odd herd. The mouse's presence reassured him, he could tackle anything. He was not sure if they were hostile, but he had to stay on guard.

His mind wandered, and escaped his body, as he gazed into the bright screen. He felt captured, absorbed. He had forgotten his earlier ordeals, and even if he couldn't see the humans nor the mouse, he felt connected to them. As you do when you share a moment with the same intensity. Or a story.