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Round Robin

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Round Robin

Cover Page Footnote

*This piece was created in the workshop session for a writing exercise. The exercise was a round robin, where each writer begins a piece. After seven minutes, each writer passes the story to the next person. The new author continues the story for another seven minutes etc. The authors in this case indicate who began; the brackets indicate where the writers switched.

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Round Robin

The prompt for this exercise: everyone begin a story. After seven minutes, pass the story to the next person. Continue the new story. The authors in this case indicate who began; the brackets indicate where the writers switched.

Lily Anderson

<I heard the dogs howling as I ran along the top of the ridgeline. Of course, the headlines started running through my mind: Dartmouth Runner Tragically Devoured by Feral Pack. I howled back loudly to dispel these thoughts. I can't even see Baker tower rising above the treeline this far out- eight miles away from campus and just turning back. It feels like another world, all the stacked firewood along the dirt road. It feels more like home, especially once evening starts to set in and I can smell grilling and fireplaces. I emerged from the base of the trail to a jarring reminder of civilization- loud opera is spilling out of the windows of a home surrounded by a cluster of cars. I can't help peeking inside as I run past, putting myself inside the home. What lives have they led, to be here now, in rural Vermont, singing Opera in a group inside a neighbor's home? Down the road, I hear a bell ringing but the sun is setting in my eyes until I see a little boy ringing a bell at a table in his front yard.>

<He locks eyes with me.

"You should not have led them here," he says in a voice far deeper than should belong in the body of a ten year old. I know I have only a matter of moments before the hellhounds that have been pursuing me break through the treeline, descending upon the unsuspecting disciples of Wagner a couple blocks back.

"Well? What was I supposed to do about it?">

<He shakes his head and motions for me to follow. I step into the yard. The grass is long and covered in wildflowers. I can only think of the tics. His back is rigid, his steps short and stilted. He walks as though with

tendonitis - on his tiptoes - a short tendon in back. His ears prick back and forth as I crash through the weeds to his front door. He turns to face me as we both make it to his house's stoop. His eyes are yellow. The bloodhounds are in close pursuit - we can both hear them coming closer to this strange overgrown yard.

"Mother will know what to do." He knocks in a strange rhythm at the front door, which opens, swaying in its frame. We step into the shadows, and a musty smell hits my nostrils. A watery voice emerges from the gloom.

"Is that you, baby?"

"Yes, mother." The boy turns to look at me as I wipe the sweat from my run onto my glistening forearm, his eyes glinting in the dusty air. "We have a guest. And she's brought some of her own. The hounds are coming.">

<"I know who you are." I call out, my voice meandering weirdly, as though the air were made from ammonia.

"Then you know what I'm capable of." The boy responds, not looking back. "You know the horrors these hands have performed, the madness that I have spread through your nation like Clostridial infection, the people I have eaten as they lay in their beds, unable to move or scream."

"This isn't over." I say, my voice sounding hollow. "The hounds are stronger than you think. They will weaken you. Then we will fight back."

"That's what the others said. That's what they said before they were subsumed. Nine hundred civilizations, all torn asunder and fed to me."

"Why is your mother here?" I asked. "Won't she just get in your way?"

"On the contrary, she's going to help us." The boy still hadn't turned around.

"What do you mean... us?" The boy chuckled softly when I said this.

<“Those who look for more. Those who hear the wolves howl and howl back. You can’t tell me you’ve never wanted to run and run and keep running and leave all of this,” he gestured, “behind.”

Below us Hanover sprawls, pinked with setting sun. It looks like a model train village and I am suddenly, absurdly reminded of the slapstick action sequences in kids movies where everything goes wrong and someone usually somehow gets a pie to the face and it all has this overly dramatic backing track of opera. I can imagine falling, letting myself fall, and knocking over every single tiny house.>

<How the people would roar, cry out, and how the hounds of hell would be let loose. It would be wild. And then, destruction over, I would run. Run.

“Where would I run to?” I asked the boy, and suddenly he is gone. His mother is not there, no one is there and I am left alone, jogging. I stopped to get my bearings and panted softly. I looked at the street signs. I checked my watch. Apparently all on track. And yet, thinking back. And yet.>

Emily Charland

<The sun stumbles through the last days of summer, beating down in a final effort to remind everyone of its presence before they slip away into cars (scarves?) and buildings, long sleeves and the rest of their lives.>

<The light is pale and pinkish, the breeze is cool and the construction workers are finishing their last jobs at Morton. I am in the hammock, face up to the pale lemondrop sky. Soon enough, we will all be gone from this place, like those before us and the ones before them. This hammock, this white house at my back, this campus, will be a part of me, but I just a small part of it. We carry with us this knowledge of the halfway hiker. We know what is behind us, what we have trekked, we know the feel of this trail, the elevation we have covered. We cannot know what is ahead, though we are as prepared as any for the terrain. I am not sure what this summer has brought me. There have been happy robin’s egg blue days

and evenings like this lemonade one. But there have also been sad days, grey ones, suffocatingly humid, pulled taut with anxiety and the tension of what the next day will bring.>

<I've known that this little slice of the world would end since my mother told me six years ago. Though there's been a great deal of strife, I will miss it all when it is gone. I'll miss the people and the birds and that lemondrop sky. I'll miss the dirt and the dust and the gigantic elephant bones on display in Kresge.

They'll be coming soon. They'll arrive, ten feet tall, wearing their mechanical armor and they'll line up on the horizon and hold out their titanium hands and a brilliant flash will illuminate the landscape, like a miniature sun centered directly on the town. The beams will be so intense that you won't be able to look at Hanover for several hours without damaging your eyes. When the dust settles, it will all be gone. >

<They cautioned us that we lived in a bubble, but no one thought to plan for what would happen when the walls came down while the whimpering trumpets of Jericho played in the background. There are a few who know of the inevitable brevity of our time here, and many of them have asked why I-- who have known for so long, long enough to escape-- have never left. I tell them, "I love it here." The pines and the hills and the dignified old buildings limping along with their chipping paint. If you loved someone who was terminally ill, you wouldn't leave them, would you? Even if you risked contamination?

Maybe there are people who would, I don't know. But I've always thought it better to squeeze out every moment you can have, and forget about the ones that will never be.>

<So I sit on this warm summer day and as the sun passes I see too my friends leaving the bubble. But do I leave? When do I leave? I feel the pull, but I have felt it for a while. The anchor of life, of the expectations of the college's "12 terms in residence" tries to pull me down. I had been giving myself more rope, faster than the anchor can pull it away. A medical leave, several Hanover FSPs, a decision to be a five year

engineering student, done everything to delay leaving the bubble. But I could only do so much. The college knows that I cannot stay forever, and it tells me this as it filters the sun through its bubble, illuminating the path before me: leave.

If I were to leave the bubble, the protection, I would leave behind so much. Gone would be the days of pop punk and roaming webster avenue and kayaking down a river of snow. Gone would be my hammock.>

< I've decided that it doesn't matter whether or not my mother is even right. If eventually, the world I know will be consumed in this way, there's even less reason to leave. There's more of a pull to wrap myself so tightly in the world that I couldn't go on without it, practically swim in the days and nights that have constituted this life in this place. And so these lemony skies are all the more beautiful in their mortality, as are my days underneath them.>

Logan Thrasher Collins

<“Here's the deal,” he whispered, drawing his iridescent cloak around himself. “If you don't trade your finger for this USB, we are going to be stuck here for a long, long time.”

“But... this finger has been with me since my wife gave it to me for our seventh anniversary!” I sputtered indignantly. I knew that he was right, but I couldn't bring myself to relinquish the shiny blue digit without at least some resistance. Anabelle had left me over a decade ago, but I still talked to her every day. Telling her that I had given up the finger would be heartwrenching.

“C'mon Ivan. She's not going to know.” “She'll know,” I muttered. “We've been over this. She's gone. You're talking to ghost files. It's not really her. At least not any significant enough part to matter.”>

<“It matters to me.”

“Of course it does. But doesn’t your own life matter too? Don’t knowledge and innovation? Think of what this USB contains. Think of what it means.”

I knew what it meant, probably even more intimately than he did which is why I had shown up in the first place. I knew what was required of me for the greater good-- for his faction, mine, the Programmers, the planet. But love was supposed to conquer all, everyone said so, all the great literature of humanity.

And oh, how I wanted to be human.> <I wanted to do the things that humans do, chiefly:

-> I WANTED TO DANCE. -> I WANTED TO SING. -> I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO EAT FOOD. -> I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO PLAY CATCH WITH

DOGS. -> I WANTED TO LAUGH IN DIFFERENT

INTONATIONS. -> I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO FORGET. I mostly wanted to be able to forget. I wanted to forget my wife, maybe, but I also loved her, at least as much as I could. Which was a lot, to be clear. But some say it wasn’t a lot. She says it wasn’t a lot.

But if I could forget, then I could forget that she wasn’t still with me. I could forget about how I wasn’t human. I could remember the good times and not the bad ones and I could not have to contemplate immortality or becoming obsolete because those things would never stay long on my neuro processors or mind or anything like that. I could be free.

Without another thought I took off my finger. She might still find out, but maybe, maybe what was in the USB could help me. I might be able to live without the digit, forget that it was even there. Forget that the finger had meant something. This was a good thing, sure. But I was willing to give up a good thing in order to get a better thing. A tiny sacrifice.

“Wow. What happened. Normally you bots don’t budge once you’ve

made a calculation,” the cloaked man said.>

I ran my scanners up and down him. Surely he thought that the cloak protected his physical form. While I might be becoming obsolete, I was still far more advanced than any sort of living being. In fact, I knew what he would say before he even opened his mouth. I contemplated saying it in unison with him, but after running through the possible scenarios, I decided against it. This was a party trick that my wife used to think was funny. However the wording of that sentence makes it seem as if she thought it was funny until she died. This was not the case. She did not think it was funny for very long. She made me promise never to do it again. This is because it was rude to assert your superiority over humans and other beings.

->I WANTED TO BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND MANNERS.

But back to the story.>

<I wanted to be able to understand manners. I wanted to be able to understand her. So I studied her. When you love somebody, you want to be with them always, absorb them, become them. I had studied her too deeply - loved her too much. I began to assume her habits, her mannerisms, I began to turn to a shadow of myself. If the idea of “self” can be applied to a bot - we are a series of calculations, an amalgamation of metal, of conductive alloys, a clusters of wires and a program of 1’s and 0’s. We are all of these things, but I was capable of love. Of real, visceral human love. The sex was even good.

I think of the sex as I hand my finger to the cloaked man. I can’t have that with a USB. But I could have the memory of it - forever. The memory of her. The transfer would be painful, the Programmers had told me that. You love somebody in part because you want to share your life with them, to have your own hard drive of memories, of feelings, of tastes and family. I did not have her anymore - but I had the memory. I had the stronger hard drive. Infallible memory. A life lived in memory forever on this USB. I knew what I was giving up, and as the cloaked man smirked and tucked my finger into his holographic cloak - with a jolt I did not know

exactly what I would gain from this trade.>

Tommy Hart

<Below. Do or die. Or don't die. Don't die, and always do. Or do not.
There is not try.

It is not often that I have sat awake and the witching hour seen, And less
often still, so late at night, do I any wisdom glean. Most often I have
found, pondering the night, And looking up to the moon, and seeing its
soft light,

That darkness is not without but burrowed instead inside.> <It comes in
many forms, both in hate and great pride.

Yes, the witching hour, the downfall of persons many, Those who seek
solace there shall rarely find any. Instead I try, come what might, to sleep
these nights away But often find within my mind a darkness black and
gray. "Oh, Sleep!" I cry,> <my mistress scarce - reveal thyself to me- But
only silence is my response, and only blackness do I see.

So when these shadowed moods do strike, a-wandering I shall go, For
only on the road at night shall freedom find my soul. I take to scenic
byways, to scarce-lit urban slums, Always twisting turning, in the time
beyond the sun.>

<And it is only in these wallowing motels that I do see My mistress here,
so she does come unto me. It is there in those mildewed rooms I
hear The truth as to why she pulls me in so near.

Many forms does my mistress take In those blackened nights when only
silence spake. I like her when her hair is dark, her breasts are pale,
When her eyes are blank and tell no tale.

But sometimes she does comes unto me And lays her heart there in the
moon's light for me to see. And in those moments, with her heart out

splayed, I yearn for the silent nights when to only the moon I prayed.>

<She holds her heart in her hand, playing a tune And singing a lullaby for my ears to save She tells me she will see me soon In our marriage bed beyond the grave.

She sings of passion and wandering souls that flit Like sparrowish birds in the blackness of the styx She sings of love and she sings our possession and scythes She sings so prettily, my lovely prize. I lie there, listening all night long And the night goes on and on, for this is the north

Where the sun never rises when the days are cold And the ice creeps into sly hearts, drawing out their scorn.>

<In the witching hour there is empty solace for those who are alone But even false comfort cannot replace the ones who now are gone. Insomnia and love hardly differ in my mind One leaves you sleepless in your dreams and in your eyes quite blind

The other eats and eats and eats and devours all your time.

If I had ever not been left, could I have found the right? But living only in the light of day, I could never have robed myself in night.>

Madeleine Waters

<Golden drops of sunlight, butter-fat yellow and warm. A cup of coffee in a lumpy hand thrown mug, full enough that it spilled a little when it was set down. The coffee is cold and there's a layer of dust on the wooden floors. A cat mews piteously.

There used to be someone who lived here, in this picturesque reality, a fairy-tale cottage on the edge of a storybook meadow, but no one really remembers who. It's been too long, or too strange, or too raw even after all these months or years or days. It hardly bears thinking about, that one can be forgotten while bathed in sunlight, disappear into the ether like motes of dust.>

<Of course, can does not mean that they are. This person hadn't quite made it to the dust stage, but were instead a rotting corpse. Rotting? Maybe not quite rotting. But maybe rotting. Certainly not a fresh body, and it's hard to believe that the cat hadn't tried a few nibbles at its former owner - if cats can be owned.

The real question was not about dust or the meaning of life or the cat or the coffee and an impending sense of death, but about why on earth he'd been sent here, with his kids at home, sleeping in their beds silently. With their noses full of life on the cold fall day, red as a gentle breeze tugged their ears and made them slightly cold, as the birds called them to awaken with those same golden drops that would have, given time, made dust out of the cat's owner. The soft ring of a bell and the sound of a jumping and suddenly the coffee was knocked over into the lap of the person.> <The cat had skittered away into one of the hideaways that it surely had all over the dusty cottage. The golden drops of light were almost tangible, so much so that the man started to suspect the hand of sorcery in the cottage. He cast a charm over the home and his body that he hoped would be enough to protect him from any traps that the old bat might have laid. He wouldn't put it past her. The stench in the cottage had been disgusting and overpowering until he cast the charm. Suddenly, the dust lifted into the air in a great spiraling dance, the light that had been slowly lulling the man into unconsciousness dimmed to normal levels, and an elderly woman was revealed to be pretending to sleep upon the couch.

“Mother, it's time to get up.” He demanded.> <“Really, Mother. You've been sleeping for twenty-three years. You missed the wedding. This is starting to get ridiculous.” He started a heavy, exasperated sigh, but then thought better of it, given all the potentially cursed dust particles still dancing around him - a would- be health hazard even in a mortal's home.>

<The cottage was definitely alive again - shaken awake from its strange slumber. The mushrooms growing through the floorboards were vibrating with newfound life, the walls seemingly oscillating with breath. The house

was alive again - and so was Puck's mother. He had, after waiting three hundred years after Lysander's and Hermia's, Demetrius' and Helena's weddings, finally had a bride, and he wanted his mother to meet her. One of Titania's nymphs, she had breathed life into Puck's mother's old cottage. A witch who had been stoned and laid to die in her own home twenty- three years before - she was resurrected to meet her daughter-in-law.>

<Now, in this coffee blend of life and death, Puck contemplated his mother's still sleeping body. He prodded her unceremoniously with the toe of his boot.

"I know you're in there." He said, snapping his fingers around her ears. "Stop exploring the dreamworld and come back to me." She remained in slumber. This time, Puck did sigh, though he made an effort to mainly breathe out rather than in. It seemed that the time had not yet come. A pity, considering how dreadfully dull this cottage had become. Though death had egressed, sleep still held his mother and by extension, Puck, captive. He twiddled his thumbs. Five years later, he was still twiddling them. He didn't really mind though, considering that he wasn't really human anyway.>