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Round Robin, Spring

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Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 18S and created during the workshop as a writing exercise. The prompt for this exercise: everyone begin a story. After a couple of minutes, writers pass the story to the next person and continue the new story. The authors in this case indicate who began; the brackets indicate where the writers switched.

Round Robin

The prompt for this exercise: everyone begin a story. After twelve 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.

Katherine Carithers

<Her grandmother used to say it all went back to the stars – to the moon under which she was born and to Venus, who stayed through the first blushing of morning to watch her first smile. And so the stars fell into her eyes, kept them dark and wide, breaking away from the blue of her mother. That was why she stayed up until each lamp light flickered on and why she couldn't sleep when they moved to the city. Eventually she learned that headlights could be wished on like shooting stars and sirens were howls at the moon.

When her grandmother died, she waited for the stars but the moon was full and they never came.> <She worried she had forgotten how, when they left NYC and went back to Oklahoma for the funeral. The plane got in at three in the morning because they couldn't afford anything that wasn't a red-eye and she ran out of the airport, hoping it would still be dark enough for her to say hello to something familiar. She looked and looked and looked and looked and all she got was her mother jogging after her to tell her off for slipping away..

I'm not the one who went away, she wants to say. But she doesn't.

Her mother tries her best, in her own childhood home, to cook and scold and love everyone as well as her own mother did. She comes close, the girl thinks with a homemade hand-me-down quilt pulled up to her chin, late at night when she can't sleep. Close in a way that's almost unfair, like being asked to substitute stars for headlights.

Her uncle offers her a beer after the funeral and she takes it. What else is there to do? When her mother sees it, she grabs it and yells, *screams*, as she hurls it against the wall, right outside the girl's bedroom window.

The setting sun, glinting off the broken glass, almost looks like stars in a soil-dark sky.>

<God, how she had missed that setting sun, how the only good place to see it near her apartment in NYC was to take the subway to Riverside Park and find the one bench where the languid New Jersey smokestacks didn't manage to hide it. Hide it. Hide it. Hide the shards and apologize for her mother, which leaves her fuming at the house later "Sorry for her" she says "Sorry? Sorry for the woman who raised you for eighteen years and more? Sorry for the woman who had to deal with> <you and your insomnia and that—*god*—that look on your face every damn day like someone just spat in your eye."

Apologizing for one's mother is like apologizing to the moon because you can't be together always, like apologizing for the fact that the Earth spins—it feels unnatural. And again, everything goes back to the stars. Eyes are rimmed in red and mouths taste like beer and words that haven't been said and hands reach for something that isn't there. Her mother tries her best, but her

mother cannot bring back the stars. Her mother cannot make the moon full again; nothing is full anymore.>

Madeleine Waters

<The story starts “once upon a time,” because that’s how all stories start, really, grounded in place and time and the magic comes from those of us who have never been to Terabithia or Middle Earth or the Stillness finding ourselves in these stories all the same.

Once upon a time, there was a girl, a young girl, because there’s always one of those looking out a window and waiting hoping wishing for more. There’s always one who’s determined to go out and get it.

This girl, this young girl, probably nine years old at the most—had no particular specificity or importance outside of being the protagonist of this very story—other than that, she could have been you or I as easy as she was herself (except that she wasn’t. She was her.)

She liked being outside, and she liked talking to trees. They didn’t always answer back (trees have very different conceptions of etiquette than we, you see, and even if they didn’t, no one is obligated to make polite conversation with you when you barge into their home unannounced for the purpose of walking a few peaceful miles undisturbed by anyone of their own species. You wouldn’t make conversation with a butterfly.)

Sometimes the flowers would wave.> <And of course she would wave back, because she been taught her manners. Everyone knows that if a flower should wave at you, you were to wave back, because regardless of your opinions on flowers it was the right thing to do. She would wave back at the flowers and keep on walking, as while her opinion on flowers was favorable, often she had things to attend to and she knew flowers did like to talk for quite a long time.

There was this one time her window-watching and general hope-having wish-wanting nature got the best of her, as it does us all, no?>

<There was a beautiful bird, as there sometimes is when the wind is not too cold and the sun is that brilliant gold color, and the birds seem to grow more confident. This particular bird wouldn’t have been especially spectacular if it wasn’t that perfect-wind, perfect-sun moment, but it was, so the bird seemed to glow and the girl, as anyone would, needed to speak to it. She reached her ordinary finger out the window and something rather extraordinary happened.

The bird landed on the edge of her tiny fingertip. It quirked its head the way birds do, looking as though they’re asking you a question, staring straight into your soul, daring you to take up their dangerous quest. Daring you to fly, too. The girl, this young girl, wanted desperately to fly with her new friend—and she would have, too, if she sprouted wings out of her back the way she’d always hoped might happen—but she couldn’t, and she didn’t, so she watched it fly off of her fingertip and coast along an invisible breeze. It is often hard to see ourselves only as jumping-off points for another being; it is even harder for a young girl, probably only nine years old, to see herself that way. She asked the trees what more was waiting for her.

For the first time in a long time, and really the only time it mattered, the trees responded.>

<It wasn't that anything she said had been particularly interesting to the trees, her question was nothing that different from what she had said before, because the girl was always asking questions aloud and hoping that something would answer her (which it rarely did because the grass is very used to rhetorical questions). Perhaps it was because the little girl was looking less little, how she had seem to begun to sprout and grow lanky. And the trees know that the less little, little girls get, the less they ask they trees - while this does not bother the trees as it might bother either you or me because the trees do not consider themselves good advice givers as people do, they are wise in a way much older and softer.

The trees spoke to one another first on the matter on whether or not they should reply, and as you already know because I have told you they *did* reply - it took a couple of minutes and which time the little girl was leaning against a certain young, chestnut tree.>

Kevin Donohue

<And the snow fell softly on the piece of ground that hadn't been to since I was nine years old visiting my uncle's house. I had at this point run through the course of quite a many years since I had found myself in the woods behind the house my uncle had owned in upstate New York before he had died of leukemia at my age of eleven, and at this point had gone through many changes, like not adjusting my shirt over my underconfident prepubescent body and not sleeping in the same house or even the house I slept in after that one and not even the one after that. But nevertheless all the same however sitting on the porch of my own house in the woods I had seen emerging from the bushes a fox and was flooded> <by the notion that the fox hadn't noticed those changes. The fox hadn't had time to question whether I slept fitfully in the homes I was shuffled through, or whether I slept at all. Foxes made dens, created their own sanctuaries of dirt and stick, and so were able to dart through the bushes with the confidence that a night of proper sleep can provide. The fox welcomed the snow and the challenges that life might have—it was ready. And the snow fell softly on the piece of ground. I hadn't been here in years, and it had been just as long since I'd slept like foxes did. Perhaps I never had.

The fox's dark, wise eye caught mine before its white-dipped orange tail flashed a goodbye. *Build a den*, it seemed to say to me. I placed my palms flat on the porch of that house in the woods and let the dirt coat the grooves of my fingerprints. I would build a den—not a literal one, but there would probably be dirt involved. I would build a den. Enough of the changes. And the snow fell softly on the piece of ground.>

<It was cold enough outside that I could see my breath and feel how it crept in between the widening seams of my coat and a hole in my glove that no one had bothered to fix and I wasn't going to. It wasn't comfortable, feeling the pinpricks in my thighs as my legs succumbed to the bite of the air and grew numb, but it wasn't uncomfortable either. And in that way it was like sleeping, like a pull I could never totally resist, but didn't ask for. Newly fallen snow is like that. It catches the sound so it is just you and something like oblivion - these woods have never fully changed. How they go through each season and each new cycle of death and life, but in the end it is the same sort of turning.

It is the turning it will keep doing even after I am gone and another nine-year-old or eight-year-old boy will be shuffled from one house to the next, afraid of the changes in his body, in his life, in his world. But the snow will still fall, silently and softly, like the footsteps around graves.

A tree branch breaks and I seem to breathe again. The whoosh of my breath is loud and I remember that we are selling > <maple syrup tapped from these trees last winter and aged to make them seem more interesting to our clientele—these days mostly gentrified assholes who want a break from the city life and their six and seven figure jobs. But if they're willing to pay twice as much for 2015 "vintage" maple syrup, I'm not going to be the one to stop them.

Maple syrup doesn't go bad, of course. Crystalizes, sometimes, but still sweet and sharp and maybe just a bit smoky from the wood fire we boil the sap over. It doesn't change what it really is, it's just a bit more solid now. Doesn't slosh around in an oversized novelty jug.

I appreciate that, in almost anything, but maybe doubly so now because the past has effectively punched me in the gut and knocked the wind clean out of me, and I feel like really I maybe have changed somehow. Everything else has.

I take a few seconds more to steel myself, then go up to the door to knock. Traumatic memories don't buy bread, you know?>

Caroline Cook

<"I don't see it," he said, shoving the telescope even closer to his retina. "It's got to be there. Twenty-nine and one-half arc-seconds north of Ganymede; that's what they said, right?" I didn't answer. "Read the sheet again." The hand that wasn't holding the telescope swatted behind his back at me, like I was a dog that would listen to him. And of course, I listened to him.

"Twenty-nine and one-half arc-seconds... that's what it says," I muttered as I straightened the star chart on the desk.

"Impossible." He spat. "Read it again."

He was a young man, getting older every day, with the confidence and urgency of someone who had seen a lot and yet somehow still not enough. He was certain that tonight we would discover a ninth planet—correction, he was certain that tonight *he* would discover a ninth planet.

"Twenty-nine and one-half arc-seconds."

The night sky is vast. Its darkness holds its depth, its darkness holds its mysteries. There are secrets nestled between stars, some that defy our understanding of science and make us smile in wonder at the complexities of the galaxy, and some that we wish we'd never uncovered and make us afraid to fall asleep until sunrise. The night sky is sarcastic, coquettish, and above all, would rather not be prodded by the telescopes of men like him.

But the night sky liked me.>

<And it wasn't even that the night sky liked me better than him, which it did, but that it had always favored me. Even above my brother, who would sit out with me on the roof at night, our knees curled up to our chest and wait for the shooting stars I would see first.

It liked me enough that in under-grad, it kept calling to me. The moon was watching when I discovered the error in my professor's calculations of the satellite which earned me a spot in his lab. When you're working in a predominantly male field, it sure helps to have the cosmos on your side.

I knew *my* calculations, and there were mine because no one else had wanted to do them, were correct,> <the way I knew the sky couldn't possibly speak only to me— surely anyone could hear if they listened, like anyone could hear my answer was the right fucking answer if they looked at it for long enough to slap them in the face.

I wondered if he blundered into the discovery tonight, whether I would get my name on the paper.

(Part of me wondered, too, when I could sing along to the stars, why I cared about letters inked on paper and the opinions of mere humans)

(But like it or not, I'm human, I suppose. It behooves me to forge social connections)>

<He jerked up. "There it—there it is!" he shouted. "No it's not," I said, "it couldn't possibly be, not in the slightest chance, not in the smallest iota, not if the whole world agreed with you, not if all the billions of stars agreed with you, not if I agreed with you. You are looking at wholly, the entirely wrong region of the sky."

He turned to me, a confident smirk mixed with a furrow of the eyebrows. "This time you're wrong. I've got it this time.">