



THE LIBRARY

INTRODUCTION

If on a winter's day a traveler is a Centre for Stories project for the City of Perth's Winter Arts Season 2017. It references Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* — a book about books, belonging, journeys, love, war, death, ideas, nature, fiction, reading and writing. During the month of July, we positioned ourselves at the City of Perth Library, the Perth Train Station, and the Forrest Chase mall, and asked curious passers-by to read a series of prompts taken from Calvino's novel, and write us a short story. We collected those stories, edited them into three sprawling, collaborative texts (one for each collection location) and have now distributed them on posters throughout the city. You're looking at one now — make sure you watch out for the other two posters!

CONTRIBUTORS

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If on a winter's day a traveler is a Centre for Stories project, supported by the City of Perth. You can learn more about the Centre for Stories at centreforstories.com

#ifonawintersday
#embracetheelements



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The old man sat in the library staring at his hands. The lines and furrows on them reminded him of when he was young and he used them everyday. Surrounded by books, he thought of the garden where he worked, and of when he used to dig, mulch, plant. In their garden there was a pear, a cherry tree, two apricots and peaches, mandarins, oranges, limes, grapefruit. You could see that garden from the hill, see their grounds and house of his employer with its columns and pitched roof. The stables were further away, behind the buildings and closer to the road where the street merchants plied their trade.

They had, like all prominent families, been there for as long as anyone wanted to remember, and they had, like all prominent families, been the subject of gossip for all of this remembered time. The townsfolk told stories of their funeral processions, like when an aunt came to stay but died on the way, and how they played trumpets and lutes and sousaphones to send her to the afterlife.

They told stories too of their family dramas, how the son was not really their son but the unclaimed child of a local falconer; how the wife screamed at night from a ghost that lived in her quarters; of how the daughter kept a greying striped badger as her only companion and had taught herself to talk to the animal in a language that was mistaken for that of birds.

They remember too, things that actually happened, like when the head of the family, fearing a hostile attack from the villagers, created a huge metal monster that seemed to spit fire, always moving, guarding the perimeters of the property and keeping everyone up all night long. How it would zap through the trees, crack

branches, snap limb from limb and rustle the leaves at all hours of the night. He trained it to fight for him and guard his property at the edge of the town and down at the base of the hill. People would watch him at all hours of the night stepping into the driver's seat through its mouth, as if he were stepping into the mouth of a giant silver crocodile. But the attacks never came and people turned their attention to the effects of winter on their crops.

That year, the year when the metal monster was disturbing the sleep of townsfolk, the sleet was thicker than normal, not simply dancing lightly on top of the grass in the local parks, but thick on the roofs of houses and white as snow. It meant that the wheat could not grow, that the corn was stunted, that the tomatoes would be planted later than normal. It was, in a word, unseasonable. The cold reminded immigrants of the cold they were born into. It reminded them what it was to have two homes. It gnarled their limbs as though they were old before their time.

Many crept away, going to where the sun was. They could not remember what the blossoms of gums and pines looked like until they arrived in those towns that boomed when the weather was cooler. The townsfolk stood in lines to buy luxurious fresh fruits that tasted sweet. They wore fine clothes to cover the stains of winter and danced out of the sight of ghosts who were ever on the margins. Their joints, which were knotted like onions from the cold, relaxed and they soon forgot about the work at home and the prominent families with their eccentric children and adulterous parents.

But soon, the rain stopped and the frost disappeared and they were called back to work by the sun itself. And as they returned to their home districts the magpies mewled and the almond trees

appeared to flower right before their very eyes. The district smelled like homemade bread and they soon got to the fields and vegetable gardens and bee hives that had lain dormant for longer than normal. The libraries saw many patrons return and check out books on pickling and preserves, on how to make jams and store honey.

The travellers who followed the warmth came soon enough and behind them the fruit pickers and performers who made their living in one place and then another. The town swelled briefly, with pride and numbers, and people spoke of the prominent families in other districts, swapping stories of horse trainers who ate only carrots and sugar cubes like their charges; new libraries that seemed to contain all the knowledge that had ever been conceived; and blessed new children who had an extra ear or three. They had hibernated these stories in the winter, incubated them for when nature itself would be open to what they had to share, as if the sun itself was an audience that made all the others brighter still.

And so the crops in the district and the pear, cherry and apricot in their garden grew, their trunks expanding with the universe as if all the bees that flew here were on their own journey towards death or space or the neighbours that called this place home. And the man in the library, sitting now and staring at his hands, thought of all this, thought of it as a snow storm arrived outside and the lines on his face told a story of another place, and another time, altogether. And, like the books here that sat on the shelves, he was silent but contained within him the multitudes of a history that was still being made.

THE END

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