



THE MALL

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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#ifonawintersday
#embracetheelements



THE MALL

The sky is steel, the buildings crowd around, loom and throw shadows, hem and frame the clouds, they channel the rain. Down below the people mill. They look at each other, and smile at the buskers with their signs.

The buskers' signs tell stories: 'trying to get home'; 'playing for the first time'; 'looking for bandmates'; 'no requests'; 'running away with the circus'; 'requests for spare change.' Two people stand and watch a man juggling knives, dressed as he is in a technicolour coat. The coat appears to change colour depending on what angle you look at it from — green to gold to red to black to red to gold to green again.

It is far from the sterile blue of the hospital bedsheets where their father lay. Flat on his back, their father is on the other side of the city. Tubes in his nostrils monitor his vital signs of life after a heart attack. An attack of the heart on account of 'stress'. As he lies there all he can think about is a girl he saw on a train some years before, before they were born and he had met their mother. But this is unknown to them here, watching the juggler in his technicolour coat.

They imagine what it is like to be the man juggling knives. He looks like a fiction, like a fantasy, like he belongs to a land over the sea. They wonder if he has juggled in courts for queens where there are dragon hunters and crystal merchants, where there are alchemists and knights. They wonder if he has travelled through time and space to be here. They wonder if that is because of his technicolour coat.

He stops juggling soon enough, and their fantasies turn to ash as he packs his coat into his bag and becomes just another face in the mall. And just like everyone else,

they turn to look at the windows of the shops that surround them.

As always there are mannequins in the windows. They wear puffer jackets and beanies. They have been dressed so that they appeal to the widest of audiences. But in the process they have wound up appealing to no one. No one will wear these puffer jackets. No one will wear these beanies. The mannequins appear to sweat under the bright lights and excessive heating of the store. You'd think it was snowing outside! The two people watch the mannequins melting. They imagine they are somewhere else, that they have escaped the shopfront window and have gone on an adventure into the wild. They are on a cliff with salt-burnt coastal scrub. They face the shoreline and its brackish wind.

These mannequins are daredevils. And they scamper and climb unaware of the 'no trespassing' sign. Except for the warble of a lone honeyeater, the cliff is quiet. No one else is about. Some may have brighter memories, but nothing equals this for these escaped mannequins. As they climb and roam they forget about their sweaty shop window.

From the sky, a giant's index finger reaches out and pulls them into the clouds. The sky seems luminous and wide, expansive beyond belief for the mannequins who had come from the confines of a city. The giant hands them a tiny umbrella and directs them to another land over another sea. They find an inn where the kettle is on and the marshmallows are toasting. By a small ceramic heater they recall the days when they stood in a shopfront window and strangers would stare at them in their puffer jackets and beanies. In the inn, two people approach the mannequins and begin a story:

'Next to our bed is a river. In that river there is a compass that was dropped by a sailor who sailed up the river to find his companion. The compass came from an island far away where the sun shines every day and the people eat pawpaw and tuna and tell stories of pirates and explorers and their ancestors. The sailor dropped this compass one evening because he heard a bird sing. The light was fading and so he could not dive into the water and find it. Some say the compass shows the way to lost cities, that it will direct you to anywhere you seek be that a friend or a new land or a place for shopping. Some say the compass....'

But then the story stops and the mannequins who were listening find themselves back in the shopfront window staring at a crowd staring at them. The pair of siblings with a father in hospital seem familiar though, as if they too have been at the inn, as if they have also been plucked from the cliff by a giant and placed in a land over the sea, as if they know a story about a compass that shows you the way to whatever you desire. But the recognition fades and people mill past them and move on, thinking that the mannequins cannot see or hear what goes on.

By now, another busker has started to perform. He looks drawn and tired, as though he has been here before and seen it all. The crowd watches him. He ignores them, plucking at his guitar forlornly, hoping he could be far from here, listening to the warbling of a honeyeater and climbing over cliffs. He sings about that place, about nature, about being a sailor who knew his way around the world and back again. And the buildings loom and the rain falls.

THE END

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