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Proust used to do his reading up a tree, but the place you grew up in was too hot for that. Even if there had been trees high enough to climb, or leafy enough to afford you shelter. His other favourite place was under the dining room table, which surely would have meant heavy wooden legs to use as a backrest and a white linen tablecloth providing sufficient overhang for concealment from anyone who might want to interfere. Some one with a vacuum cleaner or a broom, for example, who might prefer to see you holding a duster rather than a dust jacket enfolding pages of unsociable print. A Laminex top on an aluminium frame gave no place to hide, and concealed no mystery analogous to what lay between the lines of the books you liked to read.

There were two places that could provide this, at the end of a long wait for a bus and a hot ride into town. One was the university library, where on either side of the aisle awaited a galaxy of worlds, and between them you could browse in peace, free to plunge into whatever universe opened up when you lifted out a book more or less at random and began to read. The right book could take you miles away into a strange new dimension in which your own body, although intensely alive, underwent unfamiliar sensations, as if it belonged to someone else. The mystery of the aisles were that they always seemed uninhabited by any one but you, yet on either side they teemed with hidden life, pulsing with voices speaking in ways you never thought were possible until you fell under the spell of their enchantment.

The other place was the museum whose glass cabinets contained creatures—marine ones mesmerised you most—at once present and incontrovertibly absent. Here they were, looking back at you with blind eyes, on display and yet inaccessible, withheld not so much by the glass cases but by the fact of death which had captured them all and might one day capture—although this was almost inconceivable—you.

But in the museum you had to pick the time and the room, or the spaces between the cabinets along which you liked to wander could suddenly be blocked by a pusher, by a horde of small children, by intrusive excited cries or relentless whinging and the exasperated tones of exhausted adults struggling to reimpose some kind of order on an excursion obviously meant to be educational. The eyes that accompanied these adult voices could pin you down and attach you firmly to the body you had come specifically, if temporarily, to lose.

You liked the semi-darkness of library and museum. The dim light suggested secrecy, but the resonance of sound warned that the rupture, when it happened, was

absolute.

There was a third place that held a kind of mystery somehow amplified, perhaps even made possible, by the other two. On this place is superimposed a memory from a later beach where at the nearby lookout a plaque commemorates men drowned in a shipwreck (perhaps the result of a collision at sea?) before they even had a chance to die in the battle to which they were being dispatched. The inscription tells the story, but only the line of verse at the end remains in memory. 'They are the flowers of the sea.' You imagined their ghosted bodies, swaying like weed in the current as the eyes stared unseeing from their faces.

Let's go back there now, to that third place you are beginning to recall. Under the jetty at the noisy suburban beach the water is cooler than out in the open—sometimes cold. It's suddenly quiet here, and things slow down, like time when you are reading. The light is different too. It's greener, slanted and shafted, seems to show you things obliquely and then disappear them as you try to approach and see.

There are pockets of darkness where you don't want to go, just as there are pages of some books you don't want to open. Illustrations have a terrible power. They look back at you as if they might escape from between the pages—or swallow you into them. The Banksia Men—or worse, because you're in the water—John Dory. The sound of your own breathing is amplified by the snorkel and you grow more afraid as you hear it get faster. You can feel the goose bumps race across your flesh and you know your hands and feet have turned to useless white and wrinkled appendages, vestigial remains of the human form that was once your own. You have lost your peripheral vision, your auditory sense seems to form a closed circuit within your own body and the sense of touch has dispersed from your extremities and relocated itself over the whole surface of your body. You are completely unprepared when a goggled face emerges right in front of you out of the weedy dark, its eyes wide with horror at the sight of you.

Let me get to the point. Proust wrote in bed. And so, in my own way, do I. I am telling you this story of yourself as you once were, now, as we lie here side by side and I exert myself to transport you. Time and transformation was Proust's topic and it is also mine. I want to remind you of the power of stories. They can do more than merely enthrall. Consider it a warning.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Anna Gibbs.*