TITLE PAGE

The Torch Collector

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PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
SUMMARY

The Torch Collector is a Magical Realist novel set in Sydney. It is a story of non conformity, history and hope.

The story moves between three recognisable but not clearly identifiable spheres. A past, a present and the non identified other, which could be called the unreal, magical, other-worldly or third-dimensional.

The genderless protagonist collects torches which enable him/her to transgress the boundaries between the spheres of existence. S/he moves freely across filling the gaps in her/his identity created by her/his cross-cultural background.

The novel examines life on the fringe of contemporary Australian society. The TC’s position appears to be voluntary, defined by his/her relationship to the torches. This vital relationship prevents the protagonist from fully engaging in conventional life.

It is also a story of Sydney. A city which hides its cross-cultural spirituality underneath a highly urban and technological facade.

Acknowledgments

The content of this thesis contains only my own original writing and it had not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution.

Sue Kucharova 13 August 1999
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END
Fire flies and glow worms

I was a glow worm at the Royal Easter Show. Freshly ironed school uniform, torch in hand. Feet mirroring those in front shadowed by others following. The outdoor arena was surrounded by hundreds of invisible spectators, the darkness pierced by the carefully choreographed harmony of lights. “One two three on, one two three off. One two on, one two off. One on, one off.”

Where my mother comes from, fireflies swarm through summer nights. Flickering green lights playing hide and seek. Find me, follow me. Lost forever are those who heed the silent call. The unsuspecting traveller, lost in the game of lights, is unaware of the ground softening under his dancing feet. The ever hungry marshes and swamps wait patiently for their victim.

Glow worms are different. No treachery, no deceit. Colonies of wingless beetles in anticipation of the mating ritual. Clustered inside an empty cave, they imitate the starlit sky. Here the weary traveller is perfectly safe, wrapped in the blanket of lights, lulled to sleep with a glimpse of other worlds.

I enjoyed being a glow worm. The unseen star of the night, the bearer of light. My quest started there and then.
I am a collector

I am a collector of hand held torches, rescuer of discarded lights. Old trunks and forgotten memories inhabit my landscape. Cobwebs, dust and mould are my frequent companions.

My house may be a double-fronted cottage, separated from the life of the street by an overgrown front yard. It could be found standing in any of the suburbs of this sprawling city, sharing a street with an Egyptian Coptic Church or a Buddhist Temple. Next to sewing workshops disguised as shop-fronts, choking on dust and diesel fumes during summer months, assaulted by the noise booming down from the sky all year round.

My neighbours arrived from different parts of the world. Large families proud of their children’s achievements. During the hot evenings the front yards become village squares, the concrete path a promenade. Home-grown produce is exchanged together with the latest news from the old countries, traditional stories retold to the sound of ghetto blasters and the revving of cars.

My house is invisible in its ordinariness. It is so unnoticeable that even the neighbours would find it difficult to recall its colour, as they would find difficult to recall me. “Yes” they’d say, if anyone thought to ask about me. “Quiet and polite. Never any trouble but distant, the way Australians are.”

Alternatively, you could find my house hidden in one of those suburbs which have undergone a revival over the past couple of decades. Open spaces surrounded by glass and timber decks, native gardens replacing the prickly buffalo lawns, rubinia trees where hills hoists used to spread their arms. Tasteful but often too bold in their use of colours. Such colours are not for me. I have mastered the art of blending in, the pre-requisite to complete disappearance.
The owners of the corner shop may recall me, their regular customer. "Solid basics. Not one for the weekend croissants or the best Italian coffee. Always buys black or sweet and sour bread, never sliced white. A neat and orderly sort, not bad looking either. The kind that stays unmarried looking after parents and then suddenly, all alone. A pity really."

My house could also be a red brick bungalow in any one of the beach suburbs. A family house identical to others. White wood trim against the ageing brick, a concrete path joining the gate and the front entrance. The covered carport an essential part of life near the ocean.

Overlooked by the recently built blocks of flats, the row of family homes squat their opposition to the developer's offers. The proximity of a large shopping complex negates the need for a corner store.

No matter where I may live, the inside of the house resembles a museum. The torches and lanterns have long ago invaded all of the rooms, regardless of their discreet identity and history. They demand to be displayed and admired. A dark hall separates the two front bedrooms.
I stood in the doorway

Some days I stand in the doorway, observing the sleeping bodies. I am aware of the chill on my bare feet and the familiar smell of the brown bear I am clutching. I am waiting for her to wake up, her eyes to open and her finger to cross her lips in a conspiratorial manner followed by a corner of the blanket lifting to reveal a small cave. I accept the silent invitation and soon re-enter the dream world, feeling secure and warm.

Other times the shut door bars the way, impervious to my pushes and kicks. Muffled groans and cries escape from underneath. I continue to wait, sitting in front of the door. Finally she emerges, adjusting her dressing gown. Her outstretched arms and a smile ask forgiveness. Through the gap in the open door I catch a glimpse of my sleeping father.
The best of my collection

The best of my collection is housed in the display room. Initially, I stored the torches on open shelves, built for the purpose. Such an arrangement proved unacceptable to them. Their bodies soon lost their shine and the accumulated dust choked their switches, I was soon forced to provide more appropriate accommodation. Dust-proof cabinets, a combination of oak and brass.

Each torch is displayed alone, exhibiting its best feature. The colourful, slim and sleek body, the round cap securing the batteries inside, the rippled metal grooves to ensure a good grip. Some stand, some recline. Others are acrobats suspended on invisible wires. All of them are numbered, the whole seven hundred and seventy three of them. Not two of them are the same. Some of them have taken me places no one else I know had visited before. Others have stories which I am yet to discover.

I regularly acquiesce to their demands, polish and shine their bodies, rearrange their positions. Some, like ballerinas, love the mirrors. They shimmer their best when they can admire themselves simultaneously from front and back.

I am convinced that they move about. I never seem to find them in the same position I left them. On occasions I mark their exact location on a sheet of paper placed underneath. Sooner or later, the markings fail to correspond with their latest location. So far their movements have been limited to the inside of the cabinets, but will they always be satisfied with that?

I spend nights awake, hoping to catch them unawares. I desire to see their movements. Do they gracefully transport themselves or do they roll around awkwardly? Is the light beam their mode of transference or do they slink around in the dark?
I wait patiently, setting one trap after another. Their indifferent poses are my only reward.

I have engraved names on their bodies. Tattoos embellishing their true personalities. To boost their egos when I am no longer around to satisfy their demands. When the rust finally devours their contact points, the batteries leak and eventually loose their charge.

Initially I named them after the characters we became when huddling under the blankets, late at night. Pinochio, Captain Hook, Pooh Bear, Sleeping Beauty. The smallest one Thumbeilna, the largest one, Gulliver.

Robinson was the last of the earthly heroes. My explorations have consumed most of my time after that. The names I have given them since, reflect the destinations they reach, the places they explore.
I waited every night

I wait every night till the others are asleep. Being oldest has its advantages. I can last longer, demand that their games stop, then pretend to be asleep, as they doze off.

In the complete darkness of the room the beam of the miniature pocket torch explores the undercover world. The folds of the blanket, the workings of the body, the black ink of the print.

With the help of the torch I move beyond distance and time. For the time being I am contented. Enthralled by meetings with the likes of Robinson and Captain Nemo, thrilled to share their adventures. After a while though, the undercover universe grows smaller and tighter. Constrained by the blanket, even the weak beam of the small torch becomes too strong for the printed page. The letters dissolve in front of my eyes. The light demands quests of its own. Soon I am gripped by the inexplicable desire to perceive that which others can't, to unravel secrets and mysteries still unknown, to answer questions which have not yet been formulated.

There isn't really a first time. Not a recognisable one anyhow. One that would imprint in the memory, the way first love and first sex do.

I have never been afraid of darkness. She hides all who seek her protection and She is the one who permits the light to find its path, to travel through her on its way to elsewhere. Only She can present the light in all of its brilliance, in all of its radiant variations.

The darkness recedes into the far corner of the room. She has withdrawn behind the wardrobe, retreated under the bed, chased by the yellow particles. When the light chooses another direction, She'll slip back unnoticed, reclaiming her territory.
The streak of light scans the room. It trips over the slippers on the floor, slides over the pages of an open book. It is on the prowl.

It finally settles on the sleeping figure of my sister. Curled up on her side, the dishevelled blankets pulled tight against her chin. The torch and I have already discovered her secret. Quiet and proper by day, she battles demons by night. Arms and legs striking in all directions, the convulsions of her body reverberating through the bed. Her breath is that of a runner finishing a race.

Behind the beam of the torch I don't feel a compulsion to calm her or to help. I observe her face contorted by fear, the sparkling drops on her forehead. I wish to observe the monsters she fights and the demons from which she flees.

Next, the beam settles on a cardboard box found on the floor. Tied with paper string it contains the private life of my younger brother. He protects it during the day and sleeps with it at night. Silently I take my chance and unravel the string, the beam unsteady with expectation. An Ovaltine tin, holes in the lid. Probably the home of a lizard or a silk worm. I shake the tin. A distant scratching sound is the only reply. A couple of rocks, a nut and a bolt, a padlock without a key. Used postage stamps, pictures of ships and motor cars. Kids stuff really, nothing to hold my attention for long.

Night after night I watch, mesmerised by the translucent invitation. The more I watch it, the more solid the beam becomes.

It takes me a while to realise that I am in control. The wish to investigate the darkness of the room comes first, followed by the need to construct a light path connecting the floor and the ceiling to reach the galaxies waiting beyond. The beam illuminates the Universe, brings it within reach. The light particles become steps to
walk on, an escalator to move along. The torch is the bridge between here and there.

For months I watch the beam and wish I could reach the other side. Like the end of a rainbow it holds a promise that the ceiling is not the end of the journey, but only its beginning. The hum of the fast flowing particles of light is a song inviting me for an adventure.

When it finally happens I am only a step further from where I was the previous night. One step in the right direction.

The real explorations come later on, purely by chance, when focusing on an imperfection on the ceiling. At first there is no excitement as there is no anticipation, only a fear of falling.

In the end, the curiosity is stronger than the fear. Curiosity, coupled with a desire to attempt the impossible. To let oneself be one with the light particles, beaming into the unknown.

By the age of eleven I am proficient in distinguishing my dreams from the reality of the flights.

To live with an unwanted secret is a terrible affliction. I want to share my newly found knowledge, I wish for others to enjoy my experience. I often invite school friends to visit my house. "Come and explore the worlds that exist on the ceiling above my bed. Share my adventures in the distant lands. Hold my hand, travel with me."

I choose my words carefully, hoping that by describing it as precisely as possible, others will be able to see it too. In the beginning, they take my hand, shut their eyes and wait for magic. It never works. In the end they lose interest and stop visiting. I continue searching for a fellow traveller.
I invite my parents to share my knowledge. They listen attentively but refuse to try. Instead, they talk about me in bed at night as I listen behind the door, visualising my mother's tears. "Must be searching for something," My father, as usual, appears unperturbed. "It is only a stage. They all go through it."

I wonder why me? Maybe I'm adopted; left on the doorstep of an orphanage. Maybe my real father is a scientist with whom my mother had fallen in love long time ago. One glance in the mirror dispels any doubts. My mother's dark hair, my father's green eyes, a different combination of my brother's and sister's features, the similarity is unmistakable.

Next time I listen, they discuss doctors and hospital appointments for me. There and then I sense the danger in telling the truth. I stop discussing my "flights" with anyone. When they ask I simply deny their existence, talk about my dreams instead.

From then on, I become a lone traveller, the keeper of unwanted secrets.
Item 1-Starter

This is the one which started it all. After all these years, its simplicity still makes it one of my favourites. Each time my fingers encircle the tubular case I am surprised at the lack of seams, joints or indentations. Nothing but the silver smoothness of its body. The nickel-plated brass case becomes a true mirror when polished, the cylindrical shape small enough to fit 2 AA cells. They call it a pocket light, not much bigger then a cigarette lighter. Mine is slightly worn near the switch, the brass starting to show through. Maybe this is an indication of its active past life, or its true age. I have been told it comes from the twenties or even earlier. A circular glass dome reflector protects the globe at one end, a simple clip lid reveals the batteries at the other. Even the switch is simplicity incarnate, a pea shaped button tightly fitting within a small circular opening. I can not even remember where or how I came to own it, it must have been around for a while before I found it’s secret.

The light beam is diffused and unfocused, hardly a beam at all. The light particles move slowly enough to be almost visible in their struggle against the encroaching dark. This beam mightn’t travel far, but it knows where it’s going. The song of the beam is almost inaudible at first, easily mistaken for more common sounds. However, once identified, it remains in my mind’s repository of the most beautiful sounds ever heard.
A secret place

A secret place defined by the folds of the stiffly starched tablecloth. Feet, calves and knees move in and out of the white curtain. Unsuspecting actors entertaining a concealed spectator. A shower of voices lands on the roof of the hideout, silver cutlery scraps against my mother’s best china plates.

My father’s outstretched legs claim territory by their inactivity. Black socks encased in solid shoes, the creases on his “Sunday best” are as dangerous as his words. “It’s not natural. Not surprising that the kid has weird dreams. Obsessing about rusty old torches; a trip to the tip would make a world of difference.”

The colourful Cinderella slippers across the table fidget, tap their toes and shift back and forth. Their constant motion is unnerving. Intent on avoiding collision I pray for the movement to cease. It does. Her naked skin is suddenly only inches away from my face. I breath in the familiar scent, reminiscent of my mother’s bedroom.

My fingers tingle with desire to touch the well-defined shin bone, past the visible scar, past the crossed knees and higher still, toward the unexplored regions beyond. The temptation to flick the switch is so intense, I am afraid of loosing control. Only fear of the consequences keeps my hand still. The Cinderella slippers are now on the offensive. “It is no different from collecting stamps and less hurtful then collecting butterflies.”

Next to them, the solid presence of my uncle Vlad. His feet are disappointingly small in comparison to the large body they support. Outside his shoes the sock clad feet sniff the ground in a hound like fashion. They chase one another, rub toes against each other and generally enjoy their
freedom. After a while they separate. One remains pillar-like, the other already stalking a familiar scent. Stealthily it moves across the floor, pausing at aunt Lena’s slender foot. Startled by the contact first, she nevertheless accepts the invitation.

Off comes the shoe, her toes massaging the under-belly of the hound in a silent gesture of complicity. But the hound knows no respite. Soon he scales the steep incline of her shins, working hard against the gravity. At the level of her knees he disappears into the entanglement of fabric and flesh. The horizontal leg is an arrow marking the location of the disappearance. The space between aunt Lena’s feet widens, her knees swaying gently. His calf muscles alternately bulge and recede with ever increasing speed.

The Cinderella slippers re-enter the stage accompanied by the clinking of the coffee cups. “It is the intensity of the imagination that I am concerned about. A new adventure story day after day. The vividness of the dreams.”

The knees and the calf muscles have found a mutual rhythm. I feel flushed, my nose assailed by the pungent smell emanating from somewhere nearby. Hands enter the stage, gripping the edge of the chair. A clutter of dishes directly above my head reduces the frenzy of movement into a series of visible shudders. Finally, the knees and the leg are engulfed in a moment of stillness.

Uncle Vlad’s voice resonates with self-satisfaction and confidence. “A bit of imagination has never done any harm.” Aunt Lena’s response is dream like. “A gift, really, a pure gift. You must nurture it at all cost.” Her legs have given up all pretence and are splayed out in the most unladylike fashion. His feet are back in their cages, unexpectedly making a hasty
retreat. In the space left by his exit I snatch a glimpse of my cousins' back yard cricket game.
The High Noon Witch

When the bareness of the kitchen cupboards finally offends my sense of propriety and the growl of the hungry fridge disturbs my sleep, I finally consider the obvious. A shopping trip is always a distressing experience and I prepare carefully.

Thursday nights and Saturdays are out. My hands develop a tremor at the mere thought of being condemned to shop during those hours. Brown and Clary’s auctions are on Mondays and Tuesdays, only Wednesdays and Thursdays are therefore worthy of my consideration.

On the chosen day, I construct a shopping list. I struggle with it, wishing for a regular delivery service which would allow my mind to focus on the more challenging aspects of the job. In the end I am left with a list which gives me a sense of purpose and control. No panic attacks will threaten me amidst the boxes of discounted washing powder or the discarded specials of the day.

When my car slots into one of the prescribed rectangles of the underground car park, I feel already rewarded for my efforts. Above my head, where the milk bar of my childhood used to be, stretches a magnificent expanse of dark concrete ceiling. Like the cloudless night sky of the outback, it seems to go on forever. Imperfections magnified by the uneven treatment of the concrete, present a myriad of possibilities.

I take my time to admire the view, transfixed by its promise. I am hopeful that the shopping complex will extend its trading hours into the night. Weaving my way through the subterranean traffic, I shiver in anticipation of a night here with my best ones by my side, exploring the unimaginable.

The luminosity upstairs assails my eyes. The entrance retreats in silence. Treasures are piled high on the tables, waiting to be discovered, a spell is cast over
each visitor. Eyes are captivated by the dazzle and shine, the mind is lulled by the sound of seductive voices. Glamour and prestige are only inches away.

It’s so easy to succumb. My feet sink into the plush carpet, my fingers are already exploring the softness and smoothness of the display. The voices are now more insistent, cajoling. “Go ahead, indulge yourself. One and only chance. Don’t let it slip away.” The brush of my hand against folded shopping list breaks the spell. I run out of the store, leaving others in the snare of the enchantress’s song.

I run directly into the supermarket ignoring all other stores. The supermarket is a place without shadows. Eliminated by the merciless white light it is a land forever condemned to midday.

It is the empire of the High Noon Witch from the stories my mother used to tell. A translucent apparition, she stalks the isles. Squeezes herself between the shelves, wraps around corners, folds her ageless body into empty trolleys. Unnoticed by most, mistaken for a reflection. Her whispers turn shoppers into shop-lifters, she jeers as others lose their way amidst the isles. She jumbles the contents of unattended trolleys and scatters trails of colourful sweets to attract children. When they hide behind the boxes of soap powders to eat their finds, she is there; with a sack in her translucent hand.

While waiting for her next prey, she rests in the cold air emanating from the open freezers. It is here that I find her most frequently. A white plastic bag under her invisible feet is a telling tale. Impervious to other forms of detection, she cannot escape the wide beam of my hand held lantern. Her body crumbles under its impact, breaking up into light particles themselves. Though indestructible, it will take many hours of midday light to reconstitute her body. The first time I have encountered her
was a long time ago, in stories my mother used to tell. I have been pursuing her ever since.

I move swiftly from aisle to aisle, efficiently crossing items off the list. I hear no enchanting voices here.

While I manoeuvre the cart carefully, I mentally calculate the total. I hope the final figure will correspond with that given at the check out. I do detest being labelled a difficult customer. At the same time I must challenge the powers we have given to the machines. I feel it my duty to ensure that the technology doesn’t silence the human mind.
I collected them all

I collect them all. Through genuine swaps sometimes, pleas and threats at others. In the school yard, behind the shed, outside the shop, down by the river. I have an endless need to possess each and every one of them. Devon sandwiches, postcards and stamps are exchanged for another torch and yet another. When others play sport or practice music I visit fetes, markets and junk shops, searching for new specimens. Some times my friends come with me, but often I go alone.

On occasions when my sister has a ballet lesson and my brother is in Scouts my mother and I go together. We stroll across the park to Mr. Barnaby’s shop. Old furniture and antique lights in the window, a brass bell by the entrance. Inside the shop smells of furniture polish, wood shavings and pipe-smoke.

Mr Barnaby welcomes us like old friends. He takes the pipe out of his mouth and shakes hands with my mother. Within minutes the two of them are examining his latest acquisitions, leaving me free to explore at the back. Half workshop and half storeroom, it contains the less desirable of Mr Barnaby's collection. Each week new items are added on the shelves, new boxes crowd the benches. Covered in dust, oil and grease, old tools and bits of machinery wait out their time before the last journey to the outskirts of the town. Occasionally, I find others browsing, determined to find use for a rusty saw or a grease covered axle. More often then not, the treasures are all mine.
I poke my fingers into the wooden crates and gingerly lift each item, remove them one by one, searching for a glimpse of a familiar shape. If the find is worth it, I give it a good polish before taking it to the front.

With Mr. Barnaby on my side, I beg my mother to buy it. She refuses at first, regardless of the price. I never know if her deliberation is designed to bring the price down or to torment me. Some days she is unmoving. No matter, how much I beg, she shakes her head and pretends to be frightened by my father's reaction. "Oh no, not another one! Your father would be mad." Even Mr Barnaby's attempts to practically give it away, fail.

At other times, only a little persuasion is needed. She hardly looks at the torch, agrees instantly and reminds me not to show it in front of my father. When I walk beside her, fingerling the new torch in my pocket, I believe myself to be the luckiest kid alive.

On the way back we stop in the local milk bar. Sitting inside the orange plastic booth we share a caramel milk-shake. The cake-shops of her childhood rise out of the sweetness of the caramel and the vanilla scent of the ice cream.

The round marble-topped tables, the elegantly curved chairs. Glass dishes filled with multi-flavoured balls of ice cream for the children, a black coffee for the adults. Sitting next to her, I taste the marzipan cakes served on the silver platters, listen to the subdued conversations, note the well-made dresses and the pure gold jewellery. More often then not, the vision disappears suddenly, when the wall clock strikes six and we have to rush towards the Dance school.
Occasionally, I visit Mr. Barnaby's shop on my own. When he is busy with another customer, he just waves me in the direction of the back room. Not even bothering to take the pipe out of his mouth. Other times he walks with me full of excitement.

"I may have something to show you" he says, knowing only too well what might interest me. Out of a drawer or a newly arrived box he pulls out a torch of one kind or another, setting my heart racing only by looking at it. He winks and suggests a price, knowing only too well, it would be far too high, but I know better and usually negotiate the price down. Failing that, I promise to bring my mother. Occasionally I beg him for the torch but he never relents and lets me walk out with it.

He never gives me the impression that my collecting habit is odd in any way. I wish for my father to be more like him and sometimes I wish he was my father instead.

I spent many nights discussing with myself the wisdom of telling him about my flights. On numerous occasions I decide to do so, but change my mind at the last minute without really knowing why I did so.

The last time I venture into his shop, I am alone. No customers are around and Mr Barnaby motions me to the back in his usual manner. When he opens a desk drawer, I find myself looking at the most dazzling specimen ever. A fisherman's or a hunter's torch, probably imported from America.

Fully encased in dark rubber, it feels uncommonly soft in the palm of my hand. I know instantly that I have to have it. It seems that Mr Barnaby knows it too. He smiles a knowing smile and moves closer. His tobacco breath is suddenly on my face, making me feel uncomfortable and wanting to leave. I
try to step back, but a large chest of drawers, digs into my back, there is nowhere to go.

"I am sure we can arrange something" he says with a smile. His hand lands firmly on my shoulder, his fingers start rubbing my neck. Another step and his other hand reaches for my hip.

I may be only ten, but I am not naive. Unlike the picture movies, my flights are not censored. I have already seen more than most other kids of my age and indeed more then many adults. I realise that I must get away before his hands get a grip on me, before it's too late. The only advantage I have, is the element of surprise. I hit with the torch in his face and push hard against him. He staggers backwards, his hands releasing my body for long enough to run past him. Through the main shop and out on to the street.

Once outside I turn around. He is nowhere to be seen. It is then that I realise that the torch is still in my hand. Beautiful and sleek, but I don't want it any longer. I'd be too frightened to fly it and so I drop it into the dustbin just outside his door.

On my way home I resolve never to tell anyone. Despite my mother's invitations and enquiries I don't even walk near his shop again.
A large abandoned hospital

A large abandoned hospital site is the subject of my latest explorations. Having lost my tonsils there some thirty odd years ago, I have waited patiently ever since the red emergency lights went out. The nostalgic documentaries and the stories in the papers kept it alive for a while longer, but in the end even the night watchman was pensioned off. I kept on watching.

Overnight a high cyclone fence sprang up along the property's perimeter. A security guard and a large dog became the only occupants of the walled-in compound. Relatives of those who died and those who were cured here accepted the move in the name of progress.

A year later only the rumours keep returning to the site, circulating in ever decreasing rounds. "Medium density residential development" is the favourite one, appearing again and again in various transformations. Others include a new shopping precinct, film studios and even a University campus.

After weeks of intense observation I am ready to venture beyond the high fence. I have sensed an activity inside, undetected by both the guard and the dog. Restless in my pocket, is my latest, gleaming and beautifully restored. Rectangular in shape she is a reminder of years gone by. The emerging light is soft and dispersing, incapable of casting a sharp edged shadow. It gradually fades into the darkness, penetrating discreet layers, searching for that which wishes to communicate.

I select a spot where the hospital grounds meet the strip of inner city bushland missed by the developers. A favourite spot for morning joggers and dog walkers. Overgrown with shoulder high fennel plants and weeds, it is an
ideal place to commit an offence. As I struggle through the tall weeds an unexpected sound reaches my ears and I follow it to investigate. Only a few steps away, hidden inside a pile of discarded tyres I discover a brand new feline family. Mother’s eyes are narrow with fright, the young ones are still blind. I accept her plea and observe them from a distance before I move on, finding a way through the fence.

With the help of a pair of pliers I create an opening large enough to squeeze through the fence and the lantana undergrowth on the other side. When I emerge into the open only the silent playground structures welcome me. To my right is the large concrete square of the now deserted helipad. A driveway links the pad and the abandoned Casualty. As I watch, the air fills with the whirling sound of the rotor blades, the calls between rushing doctors and nurses, the clanging and rattling of the trolley beds pushed into the building. A moment later, only the empty helipad looms in front of me, shadows of the past playing games with the already fading daylight.

I hurry across the open space, aware of the presence of the dog somewhere on the grounds. The side entrance into the building is difficult to open although I am reasonably competent at picking locks. I work fast, keeping watch on the corners of the building at all times. Only when I finally secure the door on the inside, does my heart finish racing. Resting at the bottom of concrete stairs I hear the guard’s voice in the distance. On the way up, the echo of my footsteps slices the icy cold emptiness.

A glass swing door meets me on the first floor landing and I contemplate an entry. Unable to read the inscription in the dark, I imagine the grey green colour of the institutional paint, now yellowed by years of disinfectant
scrubbing. After a moment of hesitation I continue upward to another
landing, another swing door. This time I push through without hesitation.
The long dark corridor extends its invitation and I accept, feeling privileged.

Making my way through the corridor, the thick black weave of the
darkness gradually unravels into translucent grey. The light of the solitary
street lamp outside is making its presence felt through the window at the end
of the hall. The large empty room is strangely reminiscent of my old school
hall. The lino tiles underneath my feet uneven and broken, instead of the
pictures of the Queen, the walls bear scars where machines once stood
attached. Curious contraptions hang half way between the floor and the
ceiling. I contemplate their function without success, until I notice a remnant
of a white curtain. I now recognise the essential feature of all public hospital
wards, the “privacy cubicle”. A convenient repository of all private pain,
which, like nakedness, is not revealed in public.

Continuing to walk around the room I search for a suitable location. In a
corner, a pile of old papers, a ready made nest. As I settle in I sweep some of
the pages into my pocket. A souvenir.
The life of a school principal's child

The life of a school principal's child is not easy. You can't miss school too often or chase others along the corridors. Under no circumstances can you throw away your lunch or do things that others do, knowing they shouldn't. To be the principal's child means you have to set an example at all times.

Believe me, I know what I am talking about. Being an example doesn't come easy to me.

My sister doesn't seem to have the same problem. Although younger than I, she is constantly held up as an example, to me and to everyone else. She accepts her role without hesitation. As my mother says: "She's a natural." Her uniform remains spotless and without a crease the whole day, her hair never sticks out and the tops of her shoes shine even on a rainy day. My uniform is already crushed by the time I arrive at school. My hair is unruly with a life of its own, my shoes show scuffs and attract a constant layer of dust.

She brings first prize ribbons from school races and carnivals, I get "Competitors". At lunch times she is surrounded by those who wish to be her friends, I often eat lunch on my own. Where she excels, I just get by. Her days are filled with dance and music, I spend my afternoons rummaging in junk shops amongst the rejects of life.

Contrary to general expectations though, my sister and I are great friends. Being perfect also comes at a cost and she and I console each other about the positions in life we have been allocated.

She is my diary into which I record my journeys and discoveries. Each night before falling asleep she begs for another chapter. Does she believe they come from
my dreams, my imagination or my travels? She craves them so much she even tries to join me on my flights.

Night after night, we experiment, torch in hand. No matter which one I chose the beam doesn’t sing for her. It refuses to succumb to her charm, to become yet another one of her successes. Her feet never leave the bedroom floor.

Still, she supplies me with the money to buy new torches, to keep the flow of stories going. From her I receive the best birthday and Christmas presents. She already has a bank account of her own from which she can draw at will. Mrs Monk’s Dance school is often asked to perform in public and of course Becky is one of their star performers. She gets paid for dancing and shares her money generously, to the constant dismay of my father.

Sometimes I am convinced I have two fathers, each occupying a discreet part of my life. One who lives at home, sings in the shower in the mornings and grows tomatoes and spinach according to sound scientific principles. He makes pancakes for breakfast on Saturday mornings leaving mother with the mess to clean. He watches ABC News each day and takes us fishing and camping each school holidays, to give mum “a bit of a break.”

The other’s name is Sir and he never smiles. His usually severe expression grows even sterner when I move into his field of vision at school. Without a word his eyes focus in the direction of a particularly offending arrangement of my uniform or appearance. I know better than to ignore the look, so I immediately seek to correct whatever has raised his ire. There never seems a shortage of improvements that I can attempt. When my appearance adheres to what he considers appropriate, nods his head and walks away without a word. I am convinced he searches for me in the school crowd each day, determined to discover a blemish of some kind.
When I forget my lunch, I am expected to ask him for money to buy it at the canteen. Truthfully, I'd rather go hungry if it weren't for the trouble I'd get in to from mother. She can't stand us missing even one meal.

Often, when I find myself just about to knock at his office door, I retreat at the last moment. Rushing back to the bottom of the stairs, feeling the need to rehearse my request over and over. Two simple sentences take on gigantic proportions by the time I stand in front of his door once more. He can never just wave his hand and pull spare change out of the pocket. There is always a pause, as if he has to carefully consider the request, requiring all of his concentration. After that, his answer is always the same: "If it weren't for your mother, I'd leave you without lunch. Your attitude to responsibility is appalling. Take heed of your sister. She never forgets anything."
Item 212-Lantern

This compact hand-held lantern fits perfectly into my hand. Its odd shape combines the rectangular base with an arch at the upper part around which the thumb curves while holding it. Its body seems insignificant due to the giant bull’s eye reflector made out of hand-blown crystal glass.

The assemblage is completed by two sets of brackets. One to carry it around, the other for hanging it. The combined effect of the battery and the heavy crystal reflector results in a heaviness unexpected from such a small torch.

Its peculiar design gives this lantern a definite "home made and clumsy" feel, when compared with other torches of the same period. Even the surface treatment resembles a hand paint job of not particularly high quality. Unfortunately, the presence of rust in most parts of the body makes it impossible to judge its appearance when new. This is the only torch that always discovers the whereabouts of the High Noon witch and destroys her body.

Inside of the reflector, the funnel shaped silver lining encourages the widest possible spread of the beam, it creates the effect of the wide angle lens in camera. Once released, the beam spills out wider then any other torch I own, yet it is still contained by definite boundaries. It spills over the entire ceiling of the large bedroom, the biggest room in the house. Indentations at the base of the funnel create a flower like effect at the centre of the lighted circle, its delicate petals overlapping each other, the play of shade and light unmistakable.
I focus my mind on the flower again and again but so far, the beam has not issued me an invitation. I am eager to hear its song, but only silence welcomes me so far.

Just about everything about this torch makes it one of the most mysterious pieces I possess. With no markings or engravings of any kind, its origin—eventually its approximate age is impossible to determine, its full potential yet to be discovered.
My brother David

My brother David appears to be uninterested in my travels. I am positive he hasn’t even seen the torches I collect. Never stops for long enough to notice anything. Constantly on the move he runs, jumps or skips usually with a ball of some description attached to his foot or hand. He bounces through his days at a pace which makes the rest of us look like we are merely plodding.

Even his speech races ahead of his mind. Always pre-empting and responding to yet unspoken words. Not being very good at taking in instructions he doesn’t always endear himself to the teachers or to my father. However, his cheerful disposition and constant mobility makes it difficult to track him down to complain. Always smiling and polite he always manages to disappear before they say anything to him.

Our meals at home are constantly disrupted by his inability to sit still. He unexpectedly leaps from the table making it sway and shudder, the drinking glasses, candle sticks and vases are his casualties. We all suffer in silence. When he finally settles down again, he swings his legs so vigorously, that I flee to the edge of the table escaping an injury.

My father is not pleased by David’s behaviour, but by now has run out of ideas about how to curb his endless activity. He seems exhausted from simply watching him.

My mother believes that he will grow out of it soon and as long as his appetite doesn’t suffer she is happy. Occasionally though, I catch her hiding his soccer balls in the broom cupboard and placing books in his path instead. He ignores them completely and continues to bounce through his days unaware of the impact he has on our lives.
Only at night time he stops. And when I say stop, I refer to a total collapse. The moment his head reaches the horizontal position, his eyes shut on cue and he falls immediately into a deep sleep. No time to wait for me to tell the stories, no time to wait for my parents to wish him good night. Gone completely and without any chance of waking up until six am. When his eyes open, his feet are already getting out of bed. Seconds later he is bouncing about in the backyard.

Some nights I watch him, when I return from flights. He lies in exactly the same position he was in when falling asleep. On his back, arms straight alongside the body. His breathing regular and soft, his face relaxed. He is at peace with the world, no doubts or fears manage to keep up with him, no nightmares disturb his sleep.

So far I haven’t discovered a torch which would help me to explore his inner world. Perhaps his world moves so fast, even the light beam can’t keep up the pace.
The silence of an abandoned hospital

The silence of an abandoned hospital ward is far from comforting. Emptied of human voices conveying re-assurance and hope, the darkness weighs heavy with pain and sorrow. I focus on the windowless wall in front of me and adjust my breathing to a steady flow, emptying my mind with each outgoing breath. The large expanse of blackness gradually draws me in. Under my gaze the evenness of the wall begins to recede, my eyes register variations in depth and colour previously unseen. It is at these cracks that I finally aim the torch. The emerging yellow light spills across, rushing to make acquaintance with the shadows of the ceiling fans and the empty light fittings. Formalities behind, the light continues its search. Only when an entry is found the beam remains still. Now is my chance.

As usual, my toes dissolve first. Their dark contours disappear entirely. I am left with only a tingling sensation, a warmth spreading through the rest of my body. The dispersal of my physical body, however, does not correspond to that of my mind. On the contrary, my mind is focused and clear. It is an arrow in search of a target.

I surrender completely to the yellow light engulfing me, it lifts me up and carries me along. Once again I am riding the light, I am the light. Leaping from particle to particle, extending in all directions. Propelled into the unknown.

Seconds later I may be millions of light years ahead or alternatively, only millimetres could separate me from where I originally started.

The exhilarating journey ends suddenly as I impact against a solid rock face. Huge granite like boulders surround me. Not a tree, a plant or a blade
of grass to be seen. This could be a barren island rising out of the sea, atop of
a mountain or a meteorite flying through space. Absorbed by the light I can
still feel the sensation of heat and cold and I notice that this place is bitterly
cold. Colder then I have ever experienced. The cold seeps through every
particle of my dispersed body.

I follow the beam exploring one boulder face after another. After a while
I become conscious of a sea of movements surrounding me, despite the
apparent bareness of the rocks. A blanket of invisibility and silence does
very little to hide the restlessness underneath. The movements are slow and
languid at first, followed by brisk ones, leaving a breeze-like current in their
wake. Unable to see them, I imagine them edging closer and closer.

Immediately, I feel crowded in. My quickly extended hand grabs nothing,
only yellow light flows in between my fingers. This silent game continues
until I finally glance a shadow on the periphery of my vision. Long enough to
see it dart behind the next boulder. Invisible bodies flee from my path as I
follow in pursuit.

I find myself inside a chamber-like opening. Rock walls so smooth they
could have been washed by the sea for millions of years. My ears now
register the first sound since my arrival. Almost imperceptible at first, it
continues to grow in volume, from a quiet staccato sobbing into a long-
drawn cry.

It is unmistakably a child’s cry. I hear a sound shaped by the knowledge
of physical pain never experienced before, sharpened by anger and the
disappointment at those who did not stop it. A cry propelled by the grief of
leaving and the fear of the unknown. Within all of its modulations this cry also carries an element of forgiveness and the concern for those left behind.

It enters the rock chamber, echoes off its walls in all directions, multiplying on each impact. A single child’s cry becoming many. Cries of those who could not yet speak, as well as those who spoke in a multitude of languages and accents. Those who came in for treatment over a long period of time and those who were brought in at the last moment. Whispering cries accepting their fate, others loud and fighting, unwilling to go. Each invisible body is accompanied by its own voice. I listen for what seems like an eternity. Absorbing each cry, visualising each fragile body.

After a while a new sound enters the chamber. It squeezes amongst the crowded bodies, filling the spaces in between with a sweet voice and a soothing harmony. Like the cries before, it echoes and multiplies against the rocky walls. It hangs suspended in the air, a glimmer of hope, a shining light showing the way. A bridge between the known and that which is not, a path guiding the first steps into the beyond. Each song is a lullaby. A lullaby comforting each cry. The last and only gift a parent can give to a dying child.

By the time the beam decides to return no cries are heard, no movements are detected. Only huge granite like boulders devoid of life.
The moment I opened my eyes

The moment I open my eyes I remind myself of the importance of the day. Seeing that Becky and David are still asleep I decide to take the opportunity and check on the gift for my mother.

I have saved for weeks, determined to give her something different - because school made cards and presents aren't good enough any more. I bought it yesterday on the way from school, it took a long time. Finally I decided in favour of a white one just like those advertised around the shops.

I haven't told my father, this is a special surprise just from me.

I hear him already in the kitchen, preparing the breakfast. Leaning over the edge of the bed I stretch my right arm as far as it will go underneath, beyond the boxes of games stored there. My hand reaches nothing. I stretch further. Nothing. I am seized by fear. Has someone removed it overnight?

Did they see me hiding it and took it away after I went to sleep? I grab a ruler from my bedside table and push my left arm down into the gap between the wall and the edge of the bed. Swaying the ruler frantically, I try to reach as far to the other side as possible. After a while I hear the crunching sound of the cellophane in which the florist wrapped it, fastening it with a pink ribbon bow.

Relieved now I slip out of the door heading for the kitchen. A proper continental breakfast in our family is not an easy task. My father makes the dough the night before, letting it rest and rise overnight. On Mother's Day, no ordinary toast will do, only freshly baked bread rolls sprinkled with salt and caraway seeds are good enough for the occasion.
He is reading the Sunday papers, surrounded by the smell of the freshly baked bread. On the table in front of him sits a basket of the most delicious looking rolls. “Thank goodness you are here. Are they up to our usual standards?” he asks with a grin, handing me the basket. I don’t need further prompting. The roll tastes exactly as I remember. Crisp and salty on the outside, doughy and warm on the inside. “She will like them all right,” I assure him with my mouth full, hoping to sneak another one before anyone else arrives. Pleased with my judgement he sets out to organise the rest of the breakfast.

By the time Becky and David arrive with their cards and presents, the tray is ready. Two soft-boiled eggs, bread rolls still warm and already buttered, freshly brewed coffee. Overflowing with plates, cups knives and forks, it threatens to overturn. In the end it is my father who takes the lead carrying it.

There is just enough time for me to rush back to my room and pull out the potted plant before they reach her bedroom. The large white blooms dangling like giant pom-poms.

We enter; she is waiting for us, propped up by the pillows. I watch her face break into a wide smile as we shout our greetings. She feigns surprise, but I know she’s been up since my father left the bed.

Her smile however changes into a grimace the moment she lays her eyes on the plant I am carrying. I know something is horribly wrong, she stops mid sentence and gazes at the plant.

The look in her eyes says it all; full of pain and sadness.
“What have I done?” A knot is tightening inside of my stomach, threatening to dislodge the rolls. I want to run out, never to return.

Then I see tears filling her eyes. I wish they were tears of happiness but I know they are not and I am not sure how I can stop them spilling out. Becky and David are fighting over the space inside her bed, unaware, but my father notices. The look he flashes in my direction is usually reserved for the school and it warns of danger but it changes once he notices the present.

She tries to hide her reaction, only making it worse. “I brought you proper Mother’s Day flowers,” I stumble over the words in an effort to explain. “Proper Mother’s Day flowers” She’s heard me. “Thank you my darling, they are truly beautiful.” The words hang limp between her and the white pom-poms. Her lips releasing the words, her heart already walking away. I have already seen enough.

I don’t like the flowers anymore. I want to smash them right now! Just drop the pot and run out. Before I succumb to the temptation, my father’s hands take it away. His voice is soothing and gentle. “Let’s put it away, so you can get inside the bed as well,” he pretends, taking the offending plant out of the room.

My mother is already making a space right next to her. I climb in still confused. Later on, she feeds me bits of her roll dipped in soft boiled egg.

“You couldn’t have known,” she explains, when only the two of us are in the room. “White chrysanthemums are the funeral flowers back home. We put them on the graves in cemeteries when we remember the dead, can’t believe they give them to mothers here.”
Back at the hospital

Back at the hospital ward I use the torch to check my watch. Two am. With the tune of the lullaby still on my mind I decide to go home. When I am collecting my bag I hear footsteps in the darkness. Not in the distance but directly in front of me. When the light of a torch exposes my face I expect to see the dog, wondering what the guard may have seen. But the dog is nowhere around only a stream of light hurting my eyes. Not a bright light that I'd expect out of guard's torch either. This light is pretty weak, a puny streak really. More like one of the two dollar jobs disguising themselves as torches. Cheep and nasty. By the time the voice speaks I am convinced that behind that beam, is no security guard.

"Hey man!" he says in a voice which had not yet lost its youth. "What's your game? I watched you for hours. Sitting on my bed, shining a torch to nowhere. Inviting the security to come right in."

He sounds genuinely puzzled and annoyed, obviously as afraid of the guard as I am. What can I say to him? Tell him the truth? Tell him about the child spirits? He is only a child himself. No way. After all these years I know better so I make up a story. About having been treated in this hospital in the past and coming back to see it before it is demolished. Falling asleep with the torch on while waiting for the guard to go inside for the night. I don't think he believes me, seems the cautious type.

He turns the light off and walks to the window. Motions for me to follow him, no one is immediately outside the building, but there is a light in the distance behind the trees. The guard and the dog are probably there, sound
asleep till their next security walk. In the light of the street lamp I realise how young he really is.

"You are lucky," he concedes in a voice older then his age, sounding now less worried.

"And what makes you the sole owner of this place?" I challenge him to change the subject. Surprisingly enough he offers me some of his story, one I have heard before. Trouble at home when father remarried, so he split. Was lucky to come and live here, instead of living on the streets. Didn't just come across the place by accident though. He knows the guard, even knows Billy the dog. The guard lives next to his parents' house. They have been friends for years before the trouble started. He overheard the guard discussing his new job, the place just sounded too good. Has been here now for three months and knows of no one else living here. A smart little kid. Didn't buy my story, but obviously doesn't care; once he knows that I have a home to go to and I am not about to usurp his territory, he grows positively relaxed.

"I'll show you something," he says as he walks back through the dark corridor. At the end of a narrow side passage, he unlocks a small door. A cleaner's cabinet. The light reveals shelves packed with camping gear. A water container, a green backpack with a Scouts badge on it, a folded sleeping bag. Spare clothes and a cooking stove, reminder of better times. A candle holder and a photo in a frame. I don't get to see the photo, the light moves too fast. He pulls out a bar of chocolate and shares it.

"The only problem," he says "is water. They turned it off. But I found the only tap left operating. Outside, right at the back of the property. The workers must have forgotten it."
“How do you get food and stuff?” I ask. He seems so small, so vulnerable.

“I get by.” His face closes shut. I get a sense that there is no point is pursuing this question any further, so we talk bit more about the future of the hospital, he is worried how long he’ll be able to stay.

The first hint of dawn appears as the birds in the large trees around the hospital grounds begin their morning ritual. Suddenly I feel tired and sleepy.

“It is time for me to go,” I decide, remembering the dog. “Just be careful,” he says. “I can’t afford to be found. Not just yet.” I leave him there, without even finding his name.
So was your mother a bloody refo

"So is your mother a bloody refo or not?" He asks, sinking his white teeth into the piece of dark rye bread with salami and dill pickle that my mother packed for my lunch. "Don't know," I shrug my shoulders, preoccupied with unwrapping his white sliced filled with Kraft cheese and vegemite. We swap our sandwiches most lunch times. Ham and cheese, baked beans and tinned spaghetti for me, Vienna schnitzels, roast meat or rissoles for him. Monte Carlos and iced Volvos in exchange for pieces of home made cake.

He continues with his mouth full. "You know, sometimes she's hard to understand, isn't she. Her English is not all that good and this food is all woggy food, isn't it?"

I am not at all sure what he is talking about. "I guess so," I answer not knowing what else to say. Then I add as an afterthought. "Can she be married to my father and still be a refo?"

He takes his time, pondering the question while watching the worn out toes of his school shoes. He is smart about things like these, sort of worldly. Finally he passes the judgement. "Sure she can. It's about where she was before she married him."

I know only too well where she was, have heard them talking about it over and over. With uncle Vlad and the others. Never in front of us though. When we ask only silence is our answer.

Funny I haven't even noticed the way she speaks. Well I did, sort of, but just got used to it I suppose. He doesn't waste any time. "I mean all of this food is refo food. I mean it's good and all that, but it's refo. Know what I mean, don't you?"
"Yeah," I nod, not really understanding any more then before. I feel a need to defend her, although I am not sure against what or whom. Definitely not against him, he is my friend, defending me when others may pick on me. He is strong and tough. No one wants to be on his wrong side.

"She was in a camp when she was our age. One of those death camps." I hasten to add, in case he thinks I am talking about a holiday camp. He acknowledges this information but continues his previous line of argument.

"That's exactly what I mean. A refo running away from there. Just like my father said. She should make more of an effort to become like us, that's what he said."

Self satisfied, he wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt. "Catch up with you later. See if she can give you another one of these tomorrow. I'll bring one with peanut butter if you like." Then he is off.

I am glad I have never told him about our Sunday afternoon trips to the coffee shop at Kings Cross, where everyone talks in her language. Of the holiday pilgrimages we make to a hotel in the Blue Mountains. People come from all over for the taste of traditional dishes, the "civilised service" and the "cultured environment" which usually means that someone plays classical music while someone else recites poetry.

"In these places I feel like I am at home," she replies when I question her about the need to go there. "I can hear my language, meet people who used to be like me."

Are these trips making her a refo? Is it her insistence on buying the dark bread and making us take our shoes off when entering a house? Is it her fear
of germs and the panic she gets into when any of us get sick? Or the stories she tells us before we fall asleep? Those about her life “back there.”

A place like no other in the world. Ruled by regular seasons, populated by talented and highly cultured people dressed in clothes and shoes that lasted a lifetime, celebrating life with food and music.

But the place she calls “home” also has another name. A name by which everyone calls it at school. Littered with graves of millions, bombed and burnt out cities and villages, disease riddled population waiting in queues to get their food rations. It is called a “Refo land.” A country lacking the health giving sun and the sea or the decent government intent on prosperity. A country no travel brochures ever refer to, no travel agents advertise in their shop windows.

The most recent arrivals from there sit at the last row in my class and huddle together in a corner of the playground. Their impossible names and accents provide classroom entertainment every time they open their mouths.

“How come the refo kids.”

On special occasions they outshine everyone else in spite of their unfashionable clothes and their accents. Their eyes shine and their shoulders straighten up when seated in front of a piano or a chess board. The glory is short-lived. Lasts only until they open their mouths.

I feel grateful, I am not one of them. Saved by my father. “Born and bred here” as they say. And what about my mother? Well she does make excellent refo cakes. She always wins first prize at the school fete.
The cat

Early in the morning I hear her prowling around. Through the gap in the open window, just above my bed. When the day is not fully awake, but the night has given up its claim on the world. The time when dreams finish telling their stories and insomniacs receive respite, when babies wake for their first feed and lone council runners dump garbage bags in the middle of the road ready for collection by early morning trucks.

The low murmur of the freeway increases its pitch, encouraged by the first growl from the still dark sky. Like vultures waiting for the living body to turn into a corpse, the planes circle above the city. Forbidden to land by the curfew, they circle nevertheless, severing the sleeper’s heavenly connection.

The sound of her collar bell passes through my not yet awakened consciousness, one sound amongst many. The dream finally dissolves into the distance. Too far to recall its original shape, yet close enough to recognise its contours. The ringing of the bell doesn’t belong there, it rises above the dreams, too loud to be ignored.

Morning after morning, she heralds her arrival through the side lane filled with discarded cardboard boxes and piles of garden refuse. When I finally encounter her, it’s like a meeting an old friend. No introduction is necessary, one takes up where one left off previously.

Her fur is smoky grey, a cut above the tabby population prowling the back alleys of the inner city. She sits patiently by the back door, silently demanding entry.

I am not overtly fond of her kind. Not a hater either. Occasionally I donate money to those who feed the strays, as well as to those who advocate
their total annihilation. As I pat her I enjoy the feel of the soft fur, the supple back arched against the palm of my hand. Having acquainted herself with me in a perfunctory manner, she immediately makes her way inside the house. Once in, her interest in me vanishes completely.

She finds her way into the display room, sniffs around and takes up a position just inside the door. Remains there despite my calls and caresses. When I carry her away, she keeps returning with the persistence of a hunter convinced of success.

Alarmed by her determination I check the room for signs of mice. I test the soundness of the skirting boards, the invisible spaces behind the architrave. The thought of my precious ones being attacked by mice propels me into a frenzy of searching. She watches my efforts with a knowing look, refusing to share her secret. Unable to find the cause of her behaviour, I finally decide to leave her alone. She leaves, when called for dinner by the young girl from next door.

She becomes a regular visitor behaving always in the same manner, statuesque once she enters the display room. I am in awe of her determination and patience, learning her ways although I can’t see the movements her eyes register, can’t hear the sounds that penetrate her ears. I watch and wait for her next move.

The leap which follows accomplishes nothing, only a thud against the side of the glass cabinet. Stunned by the impact she waits a little and then leaves my house as unhurriedly as she arrived. I never try to stop her, I recognise hurt pride when I see it.
Her behaviour puzzles me. Does she react against her own reflection in the glass or does she fend off enemies visible only to her? Could it be, that some of my precious ones may be the source of her frustration?

After weeks of her daily visits I conceive of a simple plan. A plan which will either confirm or refute my lingering suspicions. On my next trip to the supermarket I purchase some of the food that cats are supposed to adore, full of vitamins, fish oil and God only knows what else.

On the night in question I shut the back door after she enters, and turn the music on loud. I choose Vivaldi, hoping that the vitality of his music will engage her interest. I should have known that it won’t work. Not with those sensitive ears of hers.

She hears the child calling her, grows restless, paces the hall. The tasty treats I place in her path remain untouched, the basket lined with a discarded yellow frock from my mother’s cupboard is ignored. I debate with myself the wisdom of my plan, but in the end I decide to carry it out at all cost.

I remove her collar, giving her the opportunity to stalk in silence and as a final gesture, before retiring to bed, I unlock the glass cabinet doors ensuring that they will stay fully opened. By the time I fall asleep, she is in her customary position by the door.

Some time later I am woken up by the din of shattered glass and a piercing mewl reverberating through the walls. My initial confusion gives away to swift action as I head for the display room.

When I open the door, the cat hurl itself out of the darkness with a force which leaves me paralysed. The frightened mewl echoes through the dark
emptiness of the backyard, but by the time my hand reaches the wall switch, all is silent. I carefully survey the room.

Broken glass of the cabinet, empty shelves. On the floor my precious ones are wounded soldiers lying helplessly amidst the glinting shards. The devastation is complete. Unwilling to cut my feet I survey the battleground from a safe distance, mentally assessing the cost of the repairs. The final figure is high enough to make me retreat back to my bed, unwilling to deal with the reality till morning.

I hope to return to the more satisfying world of dreams, but no matter how hard I try, it eludes me. Instead a steady stream of images invade my mind. Round metal bodies, shards of glass. A combination of shapes and colours, a pattern far too disturbing to ignore.

I get up once again and face the destruction of the display room. With the light flooding the room a wave of panic washes over me. What I had previously taken to be only a random scattering of wounded bodies, appears to be a more symmetrical formation.

The torches are laid out evenly along a circumference of an almost perfect circle. Their glass ends pointing to the centre.

The door slams behind me as I follow the cat’s trail into the backyard and I spend the rest of the night pacing, till the first rays of sun break through the nightmare. Only then I venture back inside.
It was cold and rainy outside

It is cold and rainy outside. It rains the moment we wave them off in the car. Now it is only my mother and I marooned on a Paradise Island of warmth spreading out from the big bar heater.

My sore throat is feeling better already, our game of Monopoly stretches on and on. The only interruptions are trips to the kitchen for yet another cup of cocoa. There are no appointments to keep, no meals to prepare. The flow of Paradise Island time is disrupted only by the throw of the dice.

After a while the properties of Mayfair, Oxford Street and the Piccadilly Circus transform into the prestigious properties of another city. Properties, whose names roll easily of her tongue, but are impossible for me to pronounce.

She talks about the city of a hundred church spires, the magnificent bridge lined with statues and the castle from which the city was ruled for centuries.

In between the throws of the dice I hear about its famous inhabitants. Its kings and queens, the alchemists, the cooks and the ghosts.

I patrol the Old Jewish Town walls with the giant Golem created by the Rabbi out of clay and dark magic to protect his people. I hear the strikes of the clock whose inventor was blinded to prevent him from making another one like it, and run home at noon to escape being caught by the High Noon Witch. Hand in hand we ice skate on the frozen river, stopping to warm ourselves at the hot chestnut stand.

Day slips into night, the unfinished game is completely forgotten. When she finally plants her nightly kiss on my cheek I hold onto her, unwilling to let go. She laughs and lingers for a while but in the end leaves, closing the door firmly behind her.
Our bedroom is my own for tonight and I take long time to chose a torch for tonight's adventure. In the end I decide on the one made in Hong Kong.

Its metal body opens into a wide funnel like reflector. The glass piece seems oversized compared to the body. The chrome case is covered in minute grooves to provide a better grip. I have polished it carefully. Now it is ready.

I position myself on my sister's bed, slip under the cover and focus the torch on the ceiling. Slowly, incredibly slowly, I push the switch forward. The translucent beam scans the ceiling. My heartbeat quickens in anticipation but my steady breath calms it down. When the invitation comes I am ready. The instant I enter the yellow beam I feel myself dissolving, starting on yet another journey.

The trip seems to go on forever. I surrender completely to the yellow light engulfing me. It lifts me up, it carries me along. No weight, no pull of gravity. Only the joy of being one particle in millions of others propelled outward by the light source. The colour of the light changes abruptly, I have arrived.

In front of me, as far as I can see is a silvery stretch of water, reflecting the full moon. A perfectly still surface reveals the absence of even the smallest of waves, I can't smell salt or sea weed; I have landed by a fresh water lake or a pond.

My feet tread the soft squishy grass as I move forward, catching up with the beam. It winds along the edge of the water and finally rests at the base of an old willow tree, leaning dangerously over the water.

The trunk is cracked into elongated grooves creating hollows. The beam carefully investigates each one before proceeding upwards. The crown of the tree is fully obscured by its long branches. The particular angle at which they fall, creates a curtain which even the beam cannot penetrate. Unable to get through, the beam
decides to climb the gentle incline of the trunk. I follow. From above, the almost
perfect disc of the moon dispenses enough light to weaken the beam's glow.

The rough bark scratches the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands.

I am not surprised to hear singing from behind the leafy curtain. I have heard
that the full moon brings out all sorts of behaviour. When I part the branches, the
singer appears.

A slender figure dressed in a suit of a style my grandfather wore on his wedding
photo. He sits on a branch extending above the water, legs swinging to the rhythm
of the tune, the coat tails hanging down. Drops of water from the tails hit the
surface below at regular intervals. In the light of the moon I can not clearly see the
colour of his suit, but I am positive it is green. I watch him, mesmerised.

His face bears no signs of age, but the bulging eyes and the size of his mouth
betray him. Not quite frog, not quite human. He is Vodnik, the Water sprite, another
character from my mother's stories. On top of his head sits a shapeless green hat.
His body sways to the tune which he repeats over and over.

Then I notice his hands and my grip on the branch tightens, goose bumps rise on
my back. His fingers are joined by a membrane found in frogs and other water
animals and birds. Webbed hands.

Despite their shape, they are deftly performing all manner of cutting, snipping
and stitching. Pieces of red leather, scissors and several spools of cotton are spread
out on the branch next to him.

Swapping briskly one implement for another, he rushes his task. The snipping of
the leather shears and the swishing of the cotton accompany his endless tune.

Unless the beam moves closer, I can't see what he is working on so frantically,
but the beam remains still.
A cloud drifts across the sky and shades the moon. In the ensuing darkness the
song abruptly stops. All sound ceases until I hear a splash below the tree. When the
moon re-appears the branch looms empty. A small pair of red shoes is all that
remains.

The beam now closes in, examining the handiwork. The stitching is delicate, the
seams neat, the shape perfect. I feel an urge to touch them and I pick up the shoe
closest to me. It feels soft but firm.

Suddenly, the gentle purr of the beam becomes a roar. In an instant a total
darkness surrounds me. Tremendous pressure is pulling me in all directions. I feel
like I am being pulled apart without the boundaries of the beam. Totally dispersed.

When I come to, I see her worried face in front of me. In her hand is the torch,
dark and mute. She gently directs me into my bed. "You must have fallen asleep with
the torch on," she explains as she tucks me in. On her way out she hesitates. "Where
did you go?"

I tell her about Mr Vodnik's green coat and red leather shoes. She smiles.

"You remind me of my mother. She shined a torch onto the ceiling. Telling us of
places we could visit when life gets too hard. I can still hear her voice:

'The beam will help you to find a way into other worlds.' "It was the night before
they took us away. The night after they caught my father salvaging books destined to
be burned.

I didn't really understand what she meant, but I tried to reach these worlds. I
would have done anything to get away from the fear and pain which I was soon to
experience, but it never worked. In the end I decided that it was only imagination
she talked about. That's all it is, believe me."
I think I can see tears in her eyes, but she quickly hugs me, rearranges the bed cover and disappears behind the door.

I wish it had worked for her then, I would have a fellow traveller now.
Item 131

A handsome well-made tubular model which, as the engraving specifies, was manufactured in Hong Kong. It stands 7.5 inches tall and is chrome plated. Three design features make this torch exceptionally good-looking, without being ostentatious.

First, is the way in which the tubular body is longitudinally grooved from the end cap to the middle of the switch. These grooves are very fine, giving the body a sensuousness of its own. Half-way up the switch the smooth polished copper creates a contrast, emphasising the delicate nature of the corrugations.

The sheer size of the reflector head is a second feature worthy of mention. It rapidly widens to become the double of the tubular body. Surprisingly, such an expansion is not disturbing at all, the proportional balance between the body and the head is perfectly maintained. The reflector emphasises the potential hidden in the body of the torch itself, the total effect is a dignified and majestic appearance.

The reflector glass is flat and fastened to the head by a hexagonal fitting. The whole assemblage is completed by a series of grooved rings, engraved at the widest point of the reflector, and the circumference of the reflector’s head.

The third remarkable design feature is the switch itself. It is a combination of a push button safety and sliding switch. Even on the switch the fine groves are present on the safety button, while the slide switch is of plain polished copper.
The beam emerging from this beautiful torch, is wide and well proportioned. It carries itself with a sense of dignity, moving at a measured pace. It strives for perfection without engaging in competition. It loves attending to historical events and maintains an observant and purely scholarly attitude. I enjoy travelling it, its patience and sense of proportion, though I also miss the irreverent attitude others may display in similar situations.

Its song is like the rest of it. Delicate, well harmonised, never repetitious. As self-possessed as the torch itself. Not living in the future, nor dwelling on the past but quietly enjoying the task at hand. When I hear it, my soul fills with peace.
Have you ever been

"Have you ever been across the sea to Ireland and stood upon the shores of
Galway Bay"

My father’s voice soars through the open window, propelled by the hot wind and
the movement of the car. At times it is drowned by the roar of the car engine,
labouring a particularly steep hill. On the passenger seat, is my mother, barricaded
behind freshly ironed clothes, towels and supplies of food and drinks. Every now
and then I catch a glimpse of her hand sliding across the gap between the seats, to
join my father’s.

I have flattened myself against the side window of the back seat, attempting to
create as large a gap as possible between myself and my brother. I have every
reason for doing so, for I believe I am in grave danger. I recognise the signs. I have
experienced them often enough.

The coolness of the cheeks, the bends of sweat trickling from icy forehead. The
sudden blurring of one’s vision, forcing one to squint in an effort to stop the world
spinning round while holding onto one’s floating insides. With each bend and a dip,
the sensation grows until it becomes a giant wave ready to break. I recognise the
signs in David and I push myself even further away.

The cool of the morning in which we have set off, has given away to the familiar
midday heat broken by patches of cool rain forest, as we ascend the escarpment
away from the coast. Once on the top of the Range, we will have another half an
hour before we reach our grandparents’ house.

My brother groans loudly. A sign that the wave has finally broken, threatening to
engulf everyone and me in particular. My father realises it too. The brakes screech
as he manoeuvres the car to a sudden stop at the side of the road. Becky and I leap
out of each side the moment it stops. The book she had been reading all the way
since home, falls from her lap, her patent shoes test the roadside gravel for the first
time. Only a split second separates her exit and the heave with which David brings
up his breakfast. Some of it lands on the seat, most of it, splatters over the book
outside. "Yuck!" Becky, screws up her face in disgust. "You'll have to buy me a new
one." she adds without mercy.

Having completely emptied his stomach, David sits on the gravel, his head on his
knees. I share his misery, only too aware that it could be me. So far, I have been
miraculously spared. Our sister is never car sick, no matter how far we go. She has
no sympathy for us. "You are just weak. No stamina, that's your problem."

The smell of sick evaporates into the heat, mother ministers to David with the wet
washer, always ready for the occasion. Becky, another book in hand, is already
propped up against a tree stump, oblivious to us all. Father wipes the sick from the
seat and spreads a clean towel over the bed sheet already covering the cream
upholstery. He knows better than to take chances.

The pale green Holden glistens in the sun, the polished chrome fenders and lights
inviting to touch. I do so. The heat of the metal burns the palm of my hand. I yell in
pain, but no one seems to notice. Mother distributes orange cordial. She hovers over
David's slumped figure, encouraging him to drink. That is the good part about
being car sick. She is always there with the washers and drinks.

She wears a yellow sleeveless dress. I remember that there are no white marks on
her shoulders, no swimming costume shoulder straps breaking the even tan. How do
I know? By accident of course.

Came home early from school one day and almost stumbled over her in the
backyard. There she was, a couple of yards in front of me, spread out on a banana
chair. The top of her swimming costume pulled down to her waist, her breasts fully exposed. Must have fallen asleep, the book lay by her side. I watched, mesmerised by the dark circles against the soft flesh. Then I realised she would not be pleased to find me there so I tip-toed back into the house, silently closing the door behind me.

Through the house into the front yard and out on the street, turned around and back again, pushing the metal gate with as much force as I could muster. Instead of unlocking the front door as I did before, I rang the bell furiously. When she appeared in the doorway, she was decent.

Her tanned shoulders contrast sharply with the pale yellow of her frock. My father also notices it. One hand on David's head, he reaches for my mother's waist with the other, pulling her to him.

In the blazing sun, we wait for David to recover. When we finally pile back into the car, the Galway Bay of my father's song stretches from one road bend to another.
Liam

When the front door bell rings I am not pleased at all. I have just finished re-glassing the display cabinet’s door after hours of amateur glazing by trial and error. Since the cat experiment I lock up the display room at night, but still, I don’t feel safe. I hope that the reinforced glass will return to me the sense of security I used to have, it should keep them inside in the future.

I wipe my hands and wonder who it may be out there in the pouring rain. An eager charity worker or a market researcher out in spite of the weather?

Generally I try not to offend people, so I wait politely till they finish their introductory speech. The market researchers are smooth and slick, their presentations rehearsed during training days. Those from charities are different. Their eagerness and their enthusiasm often stand in the way of their presentation. Despite their unprofessional deliveries, I enjoy those performances better. The occasional stutter, the fast pace and the eager look in their eyes always gets me.

Unable to say no I contribute to Boys Town, House without Steps, orphanages in Rumania and an array of other charities.

Contrary to the general myth though, my donations fail to make me feel charitable and warm on the inside. Instead I resent every cent I throw into the plastic bucket or a canvas bag. As they walk away from my front yard, I grit my teeth determined never to open the door again.

Even those who peddle their merchandise from door to door can easily succeed if they find me at home. I believe that each one should be given a fair go and an opportunity to put to use what they have practised, so I find myself on endless mailing lists, my answers filling market surveys about
products I never buy. The "no, thank you" phrase finds its way to my lips only at the very last moment, saving me from endless expenses and possible debts.

Aware of my weakness only too well I generally keep the door shut.

Unfortunately not this time.

When I reach the door I see a young boy, too young really to be used by charities. His clothes are soaked through and the lack of the obligatory bucket puts me immediately into a suspicious frame of mind. These days youth are far from innocent. Even small kids can't be trusted, but then again he did ring. Could have just run in and grabbed what he could find. A pitiful sight really. Wet and probably cold too. I decide to give him a chance.

"So what can I do for you?" I ask, eager to get back to work. His performance is the worst I have seen. Obviously not a charity collector, he is not even trying to recall his lines. Just staring at me, a disbelieving expression on his fine boned face. "Sorry, I must have got the address mixed up" he stammers, already turning back. It's fine with me, I am not interested in little boys' troubles. As I watch him move away, ready to shut the door, his words stay with me just that little bit longer. A trace of an accent lingers in my ears. More like a tune accompanying each correctly pronounced word. I have heard that accent before.

The realisation strikes me as he is about to walk through the gate. "You are the hospital boy, aren't you?" I shout, unwilling to let him disappear into the rain. As I call after him I realise, that these words will be my downfall. Once released, I will not be able to retrieve them, I will not be able to turn my back on him. Not now, not in the rain. The door will remain open.
He turns back, his eyes full of hope. Of course it is him. The image formed in the daylight obscures the knowledge acquired at night. Neither of us resembles the one we have met in the dark.

I invite him inside. After he settles down in my armchair, wrapped in dry clothes with a mug of hot chocolate in hand, his story unravels. Told with no consideration to propriety or manners, in a way that only eleven-year-olds can tell, straight and to the point.

On the previous night the guard arrived with a new dog. Liam, for that’s his name, only narrowly avoided being discovered. He managed to escape, leaving all of his belongings behind, spent the night in an empty garage but got wet, nevertheless. Has nowhere to go and is desperate to get back to the hospital as soon as possible, to collect his belongings and, as he delicately puts it, to complete some unfinished business. He offers no details and I get the feeling that I’d be better off not knowing.

“And how did you find me?” I ask, puzzled by his sudden appearance.

“Easy. I followed you that morning. In case I needed to contact you later on. We have something in common, haven’t we?”

His smile is all innocence, yet I am far from convinced. Can’t but wonder what drove him out of his home. He should be watching TV and doing his homework. I also wonder how he managed to keep in money, not many jobs are going for eleven-year-olds. It seems that this is another thought to be pushed to the back of my mind and just leave it there.

“OK” I say to him.”These are the conditions. You can stay till we get your stuff but I am warning you. The first sign of trouble and you are out. I want no trouble with the law.”
I should have saved myself the trouble. When I finish, he doesn’t respond, sound asleep, the empty mug carefully placed on the floor next to him.

The first thing I do is to put all my precious ones back in the cupboard and lock it; then lock the room. I place the key in the jar, hidden away on the kitchen shelf. After that I clean out the spare bedroom which doubles up as my workshop/study. The last time it was used for visitors was when Becky and her children came to visit. I decide to ring her, she has the experience. She should be able to advise me what to do about my young visitor. While cleaning up the room I can’t make up my mind about my grandmother’s collection of Toby jugs on the shelves. In the end I decide to leave them there, accepting the possibility that they might disappear into a pawn shop.

When I finally transfer Liam into the spare bed it is one am.
When the car finally entered the driveway

When the car finally enters the long driveway leading to a backyard paddock, we are welcomed by a headless chook flopping its wings in a death dance. Like every year, my mother’s face hides behind her hands. The stream of exclamations ring with unfamiliar sounds. My father’s comforting words fall on deaf ears.

The lifeless body collapses in front of the car at about the time a second headless chook emerges, following the same path. "Does death choreograph the steps these bodies take?" I ponder in silence wishing I could ask aloud.

Unfortunately there is no time. A figure carrying a bloody axe in hand appears from behind the shed. The figure is my paternal grandfather. Ignoring the still twitching corpses under his feet, he places the axe next to them and approaches the car, courteously opening the door for my mother to alight. His hands leave bloody marks on the polished chrome door handle. Mother alights smiling, slipping easily into my grandfather’s embrace. I shudder at the thought of a red stain against the yellow of the dress.

My grandmother appears simultaneously, untying the apron draped around her. She is a large woman and in her hug I feel drowned by the smell of fresh onions, sweaty flesh and mixed spices. Released from her embrace, she appraises me from the head to toe. "Still the same. We better fatten you up a bit while we can" she says with a smile. I blush in response, recalling her efforts from last year. Endless flow of treats produced with the sole purpose of adding extra pounds onto my skeletal body. She rushes back to the kitchen, having issued instructions to both of my parents. I follow her as
far as the living room, hoping that alone and undisturbed I can examine her collection.

Grandma and I understand each other’s collecting passions. The shelves of her living room are lined with all kinds of Toby jugs of various sizes and shapes. I discover new additions each time I visit and every Christmas holidays grandma and I perform the annual cleaning ritual. She, overflowing on her small stool, me up and down, handing her each piece individually. A bucket of soapy water and a few flannel cloths complete the cleaning essentials.

Each jug is carefully washed and dried by her, the fragile china, susceptible to cracks and chips, is handled with extreme care. Every piece has its history, from its birthplace, to the time of acquisition. I hear these stories over and over and it doesn’t matter if they are true or not. The pieces themselves fascinate me. The jolly looking face of the old king, warty nose of the witch or Robin wearing a green cap. Regardless of the name of the makers, each piece is equally valuable to her.

This is the time I tell her of my new acquisitions, but, of course, not of my flights. Whilst she understands the collecting passion, she is too earth bound to believe my adventures.

Replacing the washed jugs, I dream of the time when I too can display my collection, when the cardboard boxes under my bed and inside my cupboard are replaced by open shelves for all to admire. In the meantime, I still need to protect them and hide them, especially from my father.

Later on I walk through the house looking for a spare bed and a space to place my overnight bag. The bunks on the enclosed veranda are taken
already, I recognise some stuff pouring out of the open suitcases and bags.

When a figure lunges at me from behind I jump in fright.

"Gedday, how have you been. Long time no see!" My cousin Brad, pleased with himself for scaring me. He lives in town and his family is the only one that will not stay over tonight.

Not waiting for my response he continues "What did you get for Christmas? I got a bike; do you want a ride? Its outside, come and have a go, hurry up."

He is out before I can reply. Right now I need to get my room organised. I investigate each bedroom and find them filled with extra beds already, but the one next to my grandparents has only two additional mattresses. This is a good sign indeed. I recognise our suitcases and decide to leave my bag there.

Before I do anything else I need to speak to my grandmother again, she is the one who makes the most important decisions around here. She allocates the beds. I know only too well where to look for her. In the kitchen, in the company of my aunts, orchestrating the Christmas dinner.

Her kitchen at this time of the year must be the hottest and the steamiest place on Earth. The wood fuelled Agar's two ovens are filled with the roasting remains of our welcoming dance party, a whole turkey and an assortment of other dishes. On top a large pot of boiling pudding releases steam giving the kitchen a positively hellish feel.

They chop and peel vegies to accompany the roasts, make a sauce to pour over the pudding. Despite the heat, the atmosphere is relaxed and full of cheer. My mouth starts watering the moment I enter the room. Hands deep in
a large mixing bowl, my grandmother turns to me as if on cue. Her voice sounds little abrupt and matter of fact. "Well, you may as well have it, it seems that no one else is coming now."

I catch the almost imperceptible wink of her eye. It tells me, she had kept it for me all day long; it assures me that I am still her favourite. All is well. I am certain of my place in the scheme of things. She believes that being the oldest deserves a privilege of privacy. I kiss her fleetingly as I run out of the kitchen to collect my bag and immediately retreat to my private kingdom.

The Pantry. For years filled with garden produce, bulk supplies and preserves. I can still smell the smoked hams, stored apples and even grandfather's stores of tobacco.

In recent times some of the shelves came down, making space for a chest of draws, a narrow bed and a wall mirror. The remaining shelves are filled with books, old magazines and games which the numerous children and grandchildren left behind. Each holidays I browse through the Boys and Girls own Annuals from years ago finding volumes that my father was given as a young boy.

The first most important feature of the room is a window opening directly onto the backyard allowing an easy escape at night. The lockable door is its second most important feature. This is the only private space in the whole house and I feel privileged to have it.

I unpack, placing two of my torches on the top shelf, hoping that I will have the opportunity to use them during my time here. I lock the door and hide the key behind the large claw-like leg of the old-fashioned bathtub in the bathroom across the hall. The white enamel surface is chipped in places
and yellowed with age. I like it though, it reminds me of the stories from the past that grandmother some times tells. Through the stained-glass window of the bathroom I can see Brad riding his new bike through the paddock towards the curly tops of the eucalyptus trees in a distance. “Time to join him.”

I can’t decide if I should just climb out of the window or walk out through the house the way I am expected to do. In the end I decide to honour the Christmas Day and stick to the conventional exit.

While the women are in the kitchen, the men are outdoors, crowded inside my grandfather’s shed, which has always been out of bounds to us.

A cracked, cobweb-covered window allows us the only glimpse of his kingdom. Large glass jars, suspended upside down, filled with a dark liquid. On still nights we can hear the distant rumble of bubbles rising to the top of the murky stuff. A trail of sweet stench occasionally drifts out, sending my grandmother into spasms of despair, convinced that it attracts blow-flies and cockroaches to the house. All enquiries about the bubbling dark liquid are just waved off. “Your grandfather’s brew” is all any of us are ever told.

Christmas though, is the time for tasting and soon the jugs of dark brew will grace the dinner table.

I find Brad easily. Surrounded by other cousins, he deals out favours.

When I arrive, I am offered the bike immediately, a sure sign of friendship. As I ride across the paddock he runs along excited about another gift he has been promised. “A real collector’s item. Signed by Bradman himself.” When I don’t respond he adds. “I am not getting it from my parents but from a
friend." I am not a cricket fan so I change the subject hastily without even enquiring about his friend.

"I will go to the orchard tomorrow night, do you want to come?" I ask, positive of his reply. Unexpectedly he declines. "I am doing something every night already," and then he adds: "with a friend." I shrug my shoulders and pretend not to care, but I do. Over the last couple of years we have spent lots of time together in the dead of night, exploring. I feel hurt and without a word I turn around. By the time we return to the house the dinner is ready.

Beyond the shed the backyard stretches infinitely, a paddock occasionally occupied by a cow or a goat on agistment to keep the grass down. When asked why he still keeps the land, my grandfather's reply is always the same:

"Don't work it these days, but it kept all the family alive during the depression. The way the government is heading, it could be useful again one day. Lots of rabbits in them paddocks."

These days only the distant boundary of the land is lined with fruit trees. Lemons and oranges, apples and peaches for us to pick in summer. Beyond the trees, a high stone wall stretching across.

The outside boundary of the land belongs to a private boys school whose buildings are invisible even from the top of the wall, only unused stables can be glimpsed through the thickly covered bushland. The school's main entrance is long way away along the busy road, lined by ancient elm trees, marked by a large iron gate bearing the school's emblem and the motto. Sometimes the boys in their uniform and boater hats, can be seen walking along the main street. According to my grandfather "They like to keep to themselves."
The Christmas dinner over and done with, the adults have spread out in chairs, hot and too full. Like each year, they'll spend the afternoon resting and falling asleep in their chairs, some retreating into their bedrooms.

By late afternoon the house reverberates with snores of various pitches and textures. The children settle underneath the large gum tree near the shed. New toys and games are put to test first, but are slowly abandoned when the temperature climbs to the high thirties. After that even the bush flies beat a hasty retreat.

The afternoon inertia breaks just before half past four when my grandfather emerges transformed into a State Railways employee. His blue uniform is pressed, his black shoes shiny. The 4.55 pm from Sydney arrives even on Christmas Day and the Station Master must be there to see it safely depart. Each year one of the grandchildren accompanies him to the station, a treat which each of us guards carefully. This year it is my turn.

By half past we are on our way. The distance between the house and the station passes quickly, despite the heat and my grandfather's shortness of breath. On passing through the town, the streets and the houses transform their shapes, colours and layout. The surrounding paddocks become sodden with rain, heavy with the dark clay. We have entered the war-torn Europe of my grandfather's youth. His memories unravel and in no time we walk hand in hand through burnt villages and towns, into fields criss-crossed by trenches and dug outs. Before we reach the railway footbridge, I experience the mud filled trenches and the absence of what my grandfather calls "personal hygiene." By the time we enter the Station gates, I long for a hot
bath and a “square meal”, have become proficient at ducking the shrapnel and lighting cigarettes in the dark without being spotted by the enemy.

The names of our fellow soldiers change constantly. Each story starts with a different name and finishes with a long pause, nothing else is said. New name marks the shift, until that one too evaporates into the silence.

The station office smells of his tobacco, engine oil, grease and a strong black tea. It is a dark room despite the windows facing the steel tracks and the platform.

Today, the platform is filled with parcel-laden families dressed in their best. The temperature reaches its peak and lethargy abounds, even the kids are still, silenced by the heat.

When the bell inside the office rings, the grandfather examines his watch carefully, consults the large open log book and with precise movements he repositions two of the four enormous leavers which take up most of the room. I am told, that they connect with the train tracks some distance from the station. When moved they make it possible for the train to switch from one track to another, bringing it into the station on the correct platform. Collisions are avoided in this manner.

Once he sets the leavers down, he leaves the office, his cap on, the rolled flag under his arm.

While he is outside I take the opportunity I have been waiting for. As fast as I can, I shin up the shelves lining the walls, reaching for the top one. Placed next to each other are the old fashioned oil lamps which were in use until replaced by the electric lights. I have been curious about them for a long time, waiting for my time to visit.
I carry one down, surprised by its weight. In front of the window I admire the round glass openings, the highly polished brass case. I visualise the pale glow spreading through the dark. Not a focused torch beam, more like a glow of a lighthouse, spreading in all directions. To my relief, I don’t feel any desire for it. It doesn’t hold the promise that an ordinary torch does.

By the time grandfather returns I am browsing through the entries in the log. He makes his entry in precise and neat writing, then repositions the leavers. The hat and the flag return to their place by the door and before we brave another night in the trenches, grandfather rolls one of his own on the wooden seat of the now deserted platform.
Liam and I

It is now two weeks since Liam's arrival. Rain has been falling on and off most of the time, making it difficult to send him away. I can't honestly say that he is no trouble, because having an eleven year old around is always difficult. And if that eleven year old is actually on the police missing persons list, problems are bound to arise sooner or later.

I live in fear that someone will notice him or track him down here, I don't want any problems with the law. I have spent most of my life perfecting the art of invisibility and his presence threatens all my achievements. I want him out of my life as soon as possible but I can't sent him out to the wet streets without his gear.

I have not been able to attend to the torches since his arrival. His inquisitive nature stops him from leaving things alone, so I keep the display room shut when he is at home but I don't open it when he is gone either; I am never sure when he'll be back.

I must admit, he is as good as they come and probably better then most. Tidy and neat, not expecting anything, only a roof over his head. Of course the less he demands, the more I am convinced that he needs looking after.

Falling asleep in my armchair was the best self-preservation move he could have made. So small and vulnerable; it worked then and it works still.

How could I turf him out now?

Instead, I make sure he has breakfast before he leaves in the mornings although I don’t know where he goes each day. When I ask, he just shrugs his shoulders and tells me not to worry. He is scrupulous about paying me
the board he insisted on. I don’t want the money, I am more concerned how he gets it. What kind of a job can an eleven year old get?

After he came back late at night wet and cold for the first time, I laid down the law. “You want to stay here, you’ll get in before seven p.m. I am now responsible for your well-being and I am not going to wait till someone will have a go at you, it is in at seven or you are out!”

I didn’t even know I had it in me. He knows he doesn’t have many options, so he keeps his time now, often returning in the early afternoon.

During the second week after his arrival we decide to go back to the hospital. The rain has eased off although the dark clouds still threaten to dump their cargo, but the afternoon turns out dry. I wish it would rain, it may lessen our chance of meeting with the guard’s dog.

The trip to the hospital is uneventful. Cobwebs stretch across the opening in the fence, the weeds grown taller. The only surprise are the large machines parked on the helipad. Big movers usually seen on new constructions, giant yellow caterpillars eating the earth.

Liam’s demeanour changes perceptibly from the moment he notices them, grows silent and morose. He wants to know how long it will take before the buildings are demolished; which ones will go first. As if I knew, as if being an adult gives me an immediate access to information. When I fail to have the answer, his eyes grow large in panic. I wish he’d tell me what it’s about; he doesn’t, all I can do is to wait.

With no dog in sight we steal in, using the entry with which I am familiar. It takes only seconds to unlock. Once inside, Liam takes the lead. I can hardly remember which way to go, but he moves confidently from one floor
to another, one corridor to the next. In no time he locates the cleaner’s cabinet and unlocks it; nothing seemed to have changed since I saw it last. The green backpack is ready and waiting, the neatly sewn round badge is a peephole into his past.

Liam pulls out each item, carefully assessing its usefulness. He is far too methodical for a kid his age, instead dumping it all in and hoping for the best, he makes his decisions carefully. I am not in a hurry, I just wait, recalling my last visit.

The piece of paper I collected as a souvenir on the night I first met him hangs in my kitchen now. A child’s drawing depicting a girl with long dark hair tied with a red ribbon. Underneath in large letters is the message:

"Dear Santa, could you please bring me a new lots of hair this year. My old is all gone. This is all I want. Thanks."

The signature is smudged. It may say Samira, Sasha or perhaps something else. "Has she got her wish or was she among the spirits I have met?"

Suddenly I wish I was here alone and could explore some more. Where are they now, have they managed to leave the freezing place? What stops them from moving on? What will happen when the caterpillars have their fill? Where will they go?

I have no answers by the time Liam finishes packing. A backpack and a carry bag, not a lot considering it contains all his life.

Our way out of the building is fast and silent. As we step outside, the rain comes down once again. I am about to lock the exit door behind me, when he asks me to leave it unlocked, he is planning to come back.
"But why?" I ask incredulous. "Haven’t you got all your stuff? Haven’t you taken enough chances? Do you want to be found and returned home?"

He mumbles something about unfinished business that he must attend to on the 15th of July, just about a month away. His eyes acquire the watery look I saw on the first day at my door. "Talk to me," I say, knowing the futility of my voice. "I want to know what’s going on so I can help." instead of an answer his shoulders hunch and his whole body shrinks in front of my eyes. There is nothing more I can say or do.

I leave the door unlocked and hurry across the concrete towards the back fence already consoling myself with the fact that one month is only four weeks.
I decided to go out at night

I decide to go out at night without Brad but waiting for everyone to fall asleep is more difficult when one is alone. I wait for the night silence to settle in instead I hear my parents and my grandparents talking in the lounge. The clinking of the tea cups, other sleepy voices asking for water or stories, the opening and closing of the door. I smell the smoke of grandfather’s cigarettes drifting in under my door.

The next sound I hear is the whistle of the early morning train pulling into the station. Another bright sunny morning and I have missed my opportunity.

With only a couple of days left, I must devise another plan for tonight.

At the breakfast table I complain of a sick stomach and volunteer to stay in bed. Visitors come and see me all the time and their concern is making me feel uneasy. My mother comes to straighten out the sheets and the pillows, the grandmother brings in slivers of vegemite toast and tea. My father arrives with the newspaper comics for me to read and grandfather offers a game of cards. My cousins and my siblings run in and out of the room so often that in the end I beg for some peace. By the late afternoon I am dead to the world catching up on my sleep before dark.

When I wake up for dinner I feel refreshed and convinced that finally I will outlast them all. My grandparents have a habit of going to bed early because grandfather must be up for the early morning train and even the television will not keep them up. By ten o’clock the house relaxes and falls into a rhythmic breathing. I bolt my door on the inside and prepare myself for the occasion.
I select grandma's Christmas gift for me. "Picked it up at the Ladies Auxiliary shop, thought you might like it," she said, handing it to me in the kitchen, when no one else was around. It is a beautiful brass bodied model, waiting to be polished and shined.

By the time the moon appears from behind the hill, I am on the way to the orchard. I admit I am scared. I do not really enjoy being out at night alone, but it seems to be the price I pay to explore. Anticipation and fear propel me through the darkness further and further away from the house.

It is not an easy journey. Unable to use the light, I am guided by memory and the light of the moon. The tufts of grass under my feet make me stumble; invisible movements are snakes ready to strike. Each time I hear a rabbit beating a hasty retreat I take a deep breath and consider retreat in the face of so much nocturnal activity, only the feel of the cool metal in my hand propels me forward once again.

Yet again, I wish I had a friend to share my adventure. A mate who would join in my flights, who would now laugh at my fear. Unfortunately I am alone, as I have always been, not even the light to communicate with.

Finally at a safe distance from the house, I point the beam at the fruit trees and the open space beyond. To my surprise it refuses to stay it keeps returning to the top of the stone wall, no matter where I direct it.

When I finally obey, it runs along the contours of the wall, expecting me to follow around the corner, further away from the orchard. Finally it settles on the section of the wall closest to the old stables.
I am more then happy to follow the beam should it decide to go over the wall because I don’t expect anyone to be around during Christmas holidays. The front gate was locked as we drove past on Christmas Day.

The beam of this torch is pale and short not even reaching beyond the wall, instead it looks for a way between the rough sandstone blocks. When I hear the song, I focus onto the pale light.

The light particles hum in their flight as I watch the movement inside the beam. This is my reward for the solitary walk through the paddock, the moment I have been waiting for. Just before I step in I notice a sudden change in its pitch. From a comforting purr into an irritable buzz of a swarm of bees. I hesitate for a second, but the desire to fly is too strong. As I dissolve into thousands of light particles my hesitation is quickly forgotten.

The flight is surprisingly short. When I land I can find nothing to orient myself. The beam is nowhere near. I move my arms but can not reach anything around me.

No stars, no moonlight, only an empty darkness. It has a dense, compressed feel to it as if made blacker by being packed tight into a confined space. When I try to move it becomes denser still like a black cotton wool, pushing against me, resisting an entry. I try few steps then turn about and walk in the opposite direction. It is easier. The darkness folds back on itself as I walk through.

I wonder where the beam is, I have not experienced a flight like this before. I miss the well lit path and wish I had listened to the buzzing of the bees. Underneath my feet the ground feels firm and hard, nothing particular about it. I continue to wade through the darkness and silence.
After a while I hear sounds that become human voices when I approach closer. Whispering voices at first, followed by louder and more recognisable sounds. My hands start to sweat, my legs refuse to move. A clamp tightens around my chest when I hear grunts and groans accompanied by whimpering sounds.

A sense of danger overwhelms me; soon after I am caught in a wave of pain so intense I am swept by it, a misery I have not experienced before. Suffering approaching me from unseen corners, seeping through the floor, descending upon me from the top.

I scream in fear, in my own cry I hear the echo of another. I want to run but cannot, my legs refusing to function. Am I going to be stuck in here for ever? With pain and hurt, trapped by evil?

Suddenly I catch a glimpse of light under my feet. The beam. I don't question its appearance or where it had been. It tugs at my feet, releasing me into its embrace. I let myself be carried away, sobbing uncontrollably.

The cry still rings in my ears when I turn off the switch. The dark stone wall looms in front of me. Without another thought I run across the paddock ignoring the nocturnal sounds. The early morning mist washes the sweat and the tears from my face.

Completely exhausted I reach my bed. Before I fall asleep I promise myself that I will never accept another flight. In the dreams that follow I ache with ripples of intense pain experience by the other.

Banging on the door awakens me. My mother's searching look concludes that I am still not well and she directs me to stay in bed. I hug her, attempting to explain the terror of the night, she talks fever and
hallucinations. After a while I believe her. I am given a pink medicine, more toast and fall asleep again.

The news reaches me later in the day when I wake up. There had been a phone call from Brad's family. Brad has disappeared. His bedroom was empty in the morning, but no one thought anything of it. He often goes out early, especially during the holidays.

When he didn't turn up by lunch time, my aunt started to worry. Rang all his friends and us. No one had seen him since the previous evening.

When I get up, the adults are gathered in the lounge. Later on, the news arrive that the local water holes were searched but nothing turned up. My father and my grandfather join the party to search adjoining bush. It is then that his push bike is discovered near the road; just propped up by a tree, as if he were planning to return to it soon.

The police come and ask me questions, but there isn't really much I can tell them. Except that he was really excited about getting his new bike and the cricket bat. That I really didn't get a chance to play with him at all these holidays. That I didn't think he would just run away like this.

When the police dogs arrive, they trace his smell from the bike straight onto the road. Fifty meters of his scent and then, nothing. They say a car must have picked him up. "Must have hitched a ride. Probably run away. Wouldn't be the first one," the sergeant announces with an air of authority. I am convinced he didn't go away. Without his new bike? Never.

I spend the rest of the holidays avoiding the torches, the memory of the flight too strong. I try to tell my mother about the dream I had. I beg her to ring the police and tell them to search behind the wall. She refuses to listen
and when I persist she threatens me with telling my father. I have no other option but to keep another unwanted secret.
**Item 157-Poxy**

One of the most handsome models I own. The body is made of brass and shines beautifully when polished. Between the end cap and the switch, the body is covered in irregular pock marks like dents caused by hammering of the brass body. The resulting effect imbues the torch with a rarefied sculptural quality no other torch in my collection possesses. I suspect the hammering was yet another way of ensuring a solid grip, but as a result, this piece has a unique feel to it. Like other pieces of art it demands respect and careful handling from the first glance. I am also convinced that this is one of the torches capable of secretly moving about, especially in the presence of mirrors. The switch mechanism is of the sliding type. When pushed, it stays in ensuring a continuous flow of energy to the globe. The head fitting of this model is not much wider than its body, but several other features make it exceptional. There is the focusing ring of cross hatch design, encircling the case above the switch. It allows for widening or narrowing of the beam by repositioning of the reflector head. The glass reflector itself is fitted within a hexagonal ring which seems to have no other then decorative purpose. Two "D" cells are used to power this torch and the resulting beam is focused and strong. The density of the beam is simultaneously comforting and intimidating. The space in between the moving particles is so crowded it is almost impossible to step into but once in I travel fast and without any fears. The resonance of the beam's song is as impressive as the beam's density. Its hum reaches a pitch so high, I feel afraid of attracting attention each time I use it.
The plants on the other side

The plants on the other side of our fence grow gigantic in comparison to those in my father's patch, regardless of the attention he lavishes on them. When the dark green tentacles of the tomato plants climb above the top of the fence, I privately admit that his "scientific cultivation" has lost yet another round. The pH soil testing kit, the water soluble fertilisers, specifically bred disease resistant hybrid seeds and the mould and mite elimination sprays have been again outmatched by the "one remedy for all ills" measure which our neighbour applies generously twice a year.

"A bloody good load of genuine horse gold" he calls it as he spreads it over his plot. My mother retreats in despair keeping the windows shut for days. The manure is the tangible evidence of the racing horse he owns but stables elsewhere. I can't speak for the horse's prowess on the track, but the manure he procures wins against science each time. Apart from tomatoes he grows rock melons, honeydew and watermelons. "Melone" his wife exclaims each time she passes them to us over the fence.

While his gardening technique is dismissed by my father for its lack of scientific rigor, the bowls of ripe tomatoes bring cries of delight from my mother. "Home grown!" she exclaims, the ruby red juice dribbling down her chin.

When we are told that we could all do with a few extra pounds of flesh, my mother takes these comments as a slight on her culinary skills and in the privacy of our lounge she rallies against our neighbours' tendency to overeat, predicting a sticky end for them.
Their is a large family. Four married daughters and their husbands and children. Weekend lunches are loud affairs sending my mother indoors where she complains about the smells and the noise. On occasions however, I catch her looking wistfully at these family gatherings shrouded in memories of her own. I never approach her then, leaving it to my father to bring her out of the past.

Whilst the large family gatherings of our neighbours leave me cold, I am intrigued by the statues of the Holy Mary in their garden. A grotto built of rocks and overrun with deep green ivy hides a large one carved out of stone. Through the crack in the fence I watch them lighting candle in front of a small one, carved out of wood, mounted on the wall of the back porch. Right there in front of my peep hole. I am fascinated by the peaceful expression on her face, noticeable despite the weathering of the wood. She seems to possess a secret of her own, one I vow to discover.

After weeks of watching her, I get an idea. After a particularly noisy Saturday evening dinner, I climb over the fence. All is quiet, the lights in both houses are out. Once inside I take care not to leave footprints on garden beds and move swiftly across the lawn.

In the stillness of summer night I shine the beam on the statue on the wall hoping to attract as little attention as possible. The song is almost inaudible, but the beam responds instantly. It settles inside one of the folds of a blue coloured robe, faded by weather and age.

The tingling sensation in my toes moves upward, the familiar warmth spreads evenly through my body. We move faster than I realise and the trip is over before I fully appreciate it.
Once we find it difficult to maintain balance, the place of our landing is in continuous movement. Up and down, front and back, side to side. I look around. Flashes of red and white move underneath my feet. When the movement slows down, the colours spread out into perfect squares, a checkboard of red and white. When it stops altogether, I realise that the checkboard underneath my feet is a red and white cloth spread over a wicker basket. The beam and I have landed directly on top of it. When the movement resumes, the beam balances precariously on the rim of the basket, afraid of falling. The basket swings in a rhythm of the bearer’s steps, the beam and I balancing precariously. After some time, the beam finally manages to change its position. The moment of danger passes. We are now directly beside the bearer’s hand gripping the handle. The view from here is rewarding.

The basket bearer is a woman whose age I can’t judge although she seems a lot younger than my mother. Her skin glistens with perspiration, long dark hair is plaied and coiled. She wears a dark coloured summer dress, the skirt falling to her mid calves, solid boots complete her attire. She is carrying us along an uphill path through forest. The sun streaks in through gaps in the canopy contrasting sharply with the shadows inhabiting ground level. The air I breathe is fresh and damp, scented by the pine resin released into the air by the branches and twigs broken off during recent rain.

On reaching the top of the hill she rests for a moment, catching her breath following the steep climb. Ahead of us the path leaves the forest and
winds into the green fields and orchards, heading towards the rooftops showing in the distance. Back on the path she is in a hurry.

Instead of entering the village proper, she turns on to a path towards a cottage set apart from the rest by an orchard grove. At the gate a small dog's bark scatters the scores of chicken and geese resting in the shade of a large tree. The woman stops and calls loudly whilst the dog demands her attention.

A black dressed figure emerges through the front door at the same time as the beam decides to investigate the interior of the house. An old woman, eyes squinting in the glare of the afternoon sun. I get the feeling that she was disturbed from her afternoon sleep. She hesitates, but immediately a smile replaces the puzzled frown. She embraces the young woman leading her inside. The beam and I follow closely as they retreat, chatting.

A narrow hall opens onto a small dark room, cluttered by furniture. A sofa, a wooden cupboard, large table and chairs, shelves with plates and jugs and a number of smaller pieces of furniture. Weaving amongst the various pieces of furniture they finally reach a long wooden seat underneath small windows facing the garden.

The beam is already investigating a set of cards on a small table close by. The design, the pictures and the markings don't resemble any cards I have seen before. Old and well-worn their pictures read like an illustration from a historical book. A king, a skeleton, a hangman. Leaving the beam to the cards I focus my attention on a painting above the table. After only an initial glance I realise I don't like it. A picture of a man exposing a cavity inside his chest. A red glowing heart, its glow illuminating everything in sight. I feel it
pulsing, the blood flowing in and out, it makes me queasy just watching it. I am afraid it will fall out any moment, so I decide to cross the room towards the women now resting side by side on the seat.

There is a familiarity in their behaviour; they know each other well.

"Let's start" the older one suggests, closing her eyes while staying still for a moment. The ensuing silence is comfortable, broken only by a fly trying to get out of the window. The young woman's quiet voice breaks the silence.

"My dearest husband. I am talking to you like this again, because there is no other way possible these days. Your letter and the money had reached me, unfortunately too late. With the war on, no one except soldiers are allowed to leave. Not even the letters are possible because you are with the enemy. We must wait before we can join you. Don't worry, I have hidden the money well so we'll buy the ship tickets when the war finishes. Your four daughters are missing you. The little one whom you have not seen is five this week. She looks more and more like you each day. She has your black curly hair. My heart breaks each time I look at her. Your mother is well but your father's back is giving him trouble. The crop has been good this season especially the tomatoes. I pray each day for your health and our fast reunion." She stops, her voice choking with emotion.

Silence reins. After a while the older woman finally opens her eyes.

"Don't worry, he'll get your message."

Her voice is soothing and reassuring. I am waiting for more but the beam is suddenly ready to leave.
Surrounded by the fast flowing stream of yellow particles I question what I have seen, I don't understand what I have just witnessed. I expect to land back in the neighbour's backyard, but to my surprise I find myself elsewhere.

Under a clear cloudless sky on a freezing cold night. I glance at the stars above. The clearly recognisable five star constellation conveys a sense of comfort and security. I can't be too far from home.

Directly in front of me are the outlines of low rectangular buildings, beyond them a high fence topped with coils of barbed wire.

The complete darkness is broken by a streak of light emerging from small open door, the beam rushes in to investigate. A room with two tables and chairs in various stages of disrepair and a lit wood heater in the corner. The only occupant in the room is asleep, his arms splayed on the table, body slumped in the chair.

The beam settles next to an ashtray full of ash and cigarette butts, I wish it would find another location. It acquiesces and moves onto spread out newspapers near by.

The sleeper clasps in his hands a carved wooden statue of the Holy Mary, resplendent in a bright blue and gold robe. I detect a smell of paint still hanging in the air and I recognise the statue, despite the dilapidated state she is in these days.

I leap in fright as the door flies open and a figure hidden behind a large pile of wood enters noisily.

The sleeper reacts in a similar fashion, woken up by the sound of wood falling into the box next to the stove. He turns about to face the newcomer.
Despite the intervening years, I have no doubt that the man in front of me is our neighbour. Younger and leaner, his hair thick and curly, his facial features dominated by thick eyebrows and a prominent nose. His unshaven face looks about with a sleepy, confused expression.

The pile of wood safely in the box, the newcomer warms his red, callused hands. After a moment, he deals him a friendly slap on his back. “What’s going on in here? Are you up already or haven’t you gone to sleep yet?” In his fifties, his face is wrinkled by outdoor work. Speaks with the strong country drawl, difficult for a foreigner to understand. The look on the younger man’s face reflects his confusion, so he focuses on the paper and the open book on the table.

“Good God” he exclaims now with a solicitous tone.

“You poor bugger, trying to work out what is happening back at home, are you? Well I’ll tell you. Your mob has backed the loser. The Gerries aren’t gonna win. Our boys are going to thrash them, believe me!”

His voice drops a tone. “Got a family there? Familia understand?”

The neighbour nods his head. “Si. Signora and children. Quatra.” He lifts four fingers on his hand. “Girls. Mi Signora come this night in dream. Says. Girls missing you. No see smallest, she five this week. My father sick, his back bad.”

Again he lifts his hands. “She telling me tonight. No coming till war over. No travel. She hides money, she waits till war kaput.”

The local looks amused. “What a dream. Listen, your wife there, is she a looker? Pretty? Must have been, having four kids and all.” He adds with a
sly smile "is she big mate? You know what I mean don't you? His hands are now drawing a voluptuous figure out of the air. His listener understands.

"She big." His own hands are now upturned as if to support an invisible bust. "Mama Mia, she good"

The local is now ready to leave. "Well better be off mate. I am sure you'd be outa here in no time. The Gerries will get done and you'll get your wife soon."

With the door slamming behind him, he is gone. The other one stretches and disappears behind another door. In the glow of the stove I notice the Madonna's expression. The peaceful and detached expression is gone.

Replaced by a knowing slightly crooked smile.
Auction rooms

On Monday I decide to attend the Auction rooms at Browns & Clery's. I haven't been for a while and so I set out soon after Liam walks out of the door.

The Auction rooms are housed in a large warehouse filled with furniture and bric-a-brac. Sizeable items are displayed on the concrete floor, the smaller ones packed in cardboard boxes on long benches. Each box is overflowing with anticipation and hope. On entering the building my nose responds to the smell of fried bacon, eggs and coffee served in a makeshift cafeteria. For a split second I am torn between the hunter's sense of urgency and the desire to feel the hot dripping egg and bacon roll warming my cold fingers. The food wins.

When I finally set out to explore, I listen to the subtle voices pointing me in a particular direction. Some call it the sixth sense, I call it the eye of the unconscious. So many possibilities; over seventy boxes, each promising a surprise.

Torches are not generally highly prized and appear rarely. I need to search hard. Even the vaguest of promises is an enticement which sees me coming back, more often than not leaving empty handed. Still, my rarest finds came out of boxes filled with worthless junk and someone else's memories.

With the roll in one hand and a polystyrene cup of steaming instant in another I walk among the tables, waiting for the call. Like a blood hound I wait for the scent of the prey. Drifting in the air, it eventually ensnares in the web of my sensors.
I am not sure which part of my body is the radar; all my organs are in a
state of acute awareness. Open to signals radiating from the piles of junk.
Not unlike the imperceptible body language or a scent drawing one potential
lover to another.

While waiting for the call I cautiously avoid the other hunters. Bodily
contact weakens the reception of the signal and I don’t wish to lessen my
chances.

Each one of us is attuned to a particular signal. Books, jewellery or fine
china don’t excite me, but I recognise the hungry looks on faces of others.

Torches are not likely to be included with these items. It is out of the
boxes of tools, kitchen appliances and general odds and ends that my signal
might come.

Box 76 catches my attention. A tubular nickel plated body is shining
through the pots and pans, chipped china and glass jars.

My blood quickens as I move towards the box. Slowed down by others
blocking my way, I reach it only to see large hands already investigating the
items one by one. A bundle of over-polished silver cutlery pieces, a plastic
jug, set of mixing bowls and the cord of unused telephone hand set, choking
a battered specimen circa 1969. The kind used for family camping holidays.
Not too big to carry, but large enough to locate easily amongst the other
camping gear.

My heart beat returns to normal; not interested. My collection includes an
identical one in far better condition. I watch the hands move it aside in
favour of a silver topped set of salt and pepper shakers. I recognise those
hands from other visits. If I follow the line of the well cut sleeve to the broad
shoulder and above, I encounter a familiar face. Enlivened by a set of teeth so perfect, the mere sight of them encourages me to smile in response. His strong accent and his dark looks betray his heritage; his effervescence is contagious.

But now I am in no mood to socialise. I feel a pull but I am not sure - where it is coming from. Like the ocean’s undertow it disappears with each wave, only to emerge once the wave breaks. The constant movement of bodies around me interferes with my ability to identify the source. I wander about hoping for a clearer signal.

At box 36 I am greeted by Dorothy, another one of the regulars. We have developed a sort of professional friendship which, despite its longevity has not extended past the roller door. She lives above a second-hand shop in Surrey Hills. Upmarket china, lace, glass, light fittings and unique pieces of furniture. A nice place, with a regular clientele, from what I’ve been told. I have passed it a number of times, toying with the idea of walking in but always changed my mind at the last moment.

“Long time no see,” she calls out referring to my temporary absence. We have shared a few cups of tea in the past and keep an eye on each other’s business interests. In a place full of sharks one always needs an ally.

“I think 413 may have something of interest for you,” she calls already swept by a crowd rushing to a newly opened exhibit section. “Don’t bother about 76” I respond, aware of the importance of sharing.

413 is on the other side of the hall, where more expensive antiques are exhibited. An area I rarely visit. The numbers of perusers dwindle here; not
everyone is prepared to spend thousands of dollars for a tea pot. This is the serious collectors’ and antique dealers’ patch.

Box labelled 413 contains an antique camera. A dark wooden tripod, a black concertina like box and a heavy black cloth. Packed alongside is a set of jars filled with chemicals and a wooden box presumably containing the silver plates. In between the concertina and the wooden box squeezed into the corner is something else. Something completely unexpected.

My heart does an invisible feat of acrobatics when I recognise the familiar shape. Exquisite in design, immaculate in upkeep. A tubular example of workmanship common in the last decade of the last century. The black fibre body is unmistakable by its switch, the original flashlight. The one I have been searching for over twenty-five years since I saw it at the first and only Collectors’ Convention I attended. It bewitched me then and I have dreamt of owning it ever since. I wipe my sweaty hands on my jacket before I carefully lift the torch to feel its weight. Heavy enough, the battery must be inside. The acrobatics inside me continue. There is a remote possibility that it might produce a current, a hope that a light would emerge. The battery of course wouldn’t be the original, they lasted only couple of weeks in those days.

I look around carefully. A couple are examining the camera. Stretching the concertina, extending the foldaway legs. Inconspicuously I push the switch.

My heart lands with a thump. No response behind the reflector glass, the large globe is refusing to light. Is it the globe or the battery which is at fault? When I push a lever the battery is revealed.
“What a pristine condition!” No corrosion had taken place, no leakage of the content. Before I have a chance to investigate further, other hands reach for the torch. I hope that others don’t realise its true function and value. This one is in a league of its own.

As the torch exchanges hands I control my impulse to grab it back. It is important that to all others this item remains a piece of camera accessory included in the case. Watching from the corner of my eye, I observe a shark carefully examine the content of the box. First the camera, then the torch. Contemplating its use.

I want to shout, but my mouth is so dry no sound emerges. Hidden by others, my hands push the box to the edge of the bench. It slides across easily. I push it further. It is now almost toppling over the edge. I am prepared to sacrifice the camera to secure the torch. I push again. The shark drops the torch in a move to stop the box from moving. Too late. The box topples of the bench, only to be caught by the waiting attendant. The shark must feel guilty, he apologises and moves away. With so many bodies crowding the space, the real culprit remains invisible. With the box safe on the bench again, the attendant is now keeping everyone at a distance. “No touching please.”

The saliva again flows freely in my mouth. I am convinced that in front of me is the oldest and best preserved piece of torch history I have ever laid my eyes on. The possibility of seeing a beam of light emerging from the thick glass is tantalising beyond reason, I resolve to acquire it at all cost. The desire to own it is overpowering, only the knowledge that each table is carefully watched by attendants, stops me from stealing it. I need to know if.
the battery and the bulb work. Without them, the torch is only a lifeless shell useful only for an industrial museum.

I recall the day I saw it for the first time. I was given a globe of identical size and a shape, the original torch must have the original globe to light it, I still have it, well protected inside a box at home.

After only a moment of hesitation I resolve to return before the closing time, to see if the precious one could be coaxed to work.

The fact that it may be attained only at the cost of bidding for the expensive camera is conveniently slotted to the back of my mind, overshadowed by the desire to see its glow.

The notice board at the office states, that items 300 and over will be auctioned tomorrow morning. I breath a sigh of relief. I have enough time to put my plan into action. Rushing out I wave to Dorothy, not even bothering to explain. Professional friendships cope with such behaviour; I'm sure she'd understand.

By the afternoon I am back. The auction is in a full swing, items exchanging hands frantically, the attendants full occupied by the auction stand. Dorothy is nowhere to be seen, obviously having not found anything worth her while. By the time I replace the globe, Item 265 goes to the highest bidder. A fast wipe of the contacts and 289 is gone. When the 300 is called, I am getting a glimpse of pale orange light of the most exquisite glow. I switch it off, the moment the beam leaves the globe and hide it under the dark cloth, hoping that no one will find it now. Having whispered good bye, I move slowly towards the exit. Suddenly I feel exhausted, realising I need solitude to think carefully about my strategy for tomorrow.
The auction is finished for the day and everyone is in a hurry. The over-vigilant attendants are now, rounding up everyone towards the exit. Those with purchases are crowding the small office, boxes under their arms, bigger items are being moved towards the trucks at the loading dock.

I slowly weave my way amongst the cupboards and wardrobes waiting to be auctioned next day. Without a prior warning a temptation springs to mind. I quickly glance around; no one is watching me, the large wardrobes and shelves are blocking the view. Invisible voices are shepherding others to the exit.

Item 625 is a large oak wardrobe with a door slightly ajar. I step inside and silently close the door behind me. When the semi-darkness engulfs me, I realise the full impact of what I have done. Too late now to worry about the secret cameras and the shame of being led away by the police. I hear steps close to the robe and voices discussing the timetable for the morning delivery as they move away on their way out. The roller door rattles when shut, followed by a complete silence. Frozen by sudden panic attack I take a long time to move. By the time I emerge from the wardrobe the warehouse is surprisingly light. Scared of the hidden cameras or infrared lights I crawl at a snail’s pace back towards the box 413. The scuttle of mice at floor level assures me that any infra red beam would aim higher. I quicken my pace, still staying close to the ground. Hours pass. When a car stops outside, I quickly slide into a space underneath an antique writing desk, convinced that a silent alarm had been activated by my movements. The lock rattles at the roller door and then all goes silent again. A couple of minutes later, the door slams as the car takes off, back into the night, only a regular security check.
When I finally hold the torch some time later, I know that I’ll need to hide its glow inside one of the wardrobes, to evade the next security check. After another floor level search I find an old linen press brought in from one of the homesteads isolated by distance. Even in the dark I can feel the gritty red dust which remains in the crevices despite the best efforts of the restorer; driven in during the dust storms so common in the outback. I wait for another hour or so, ensuring that nothing will disturb me.
It was that time of the year

It is that time of the year again. Each year the signs leading to it become more recognisable. The cake she usually bakes once a week is replaced by the bought variety and soon it is forgotten altogether. The dinners which normally appear with reassuring regularity are replaced by the frozen kind, Chinese take-away and fish and chips. Given that usually my mother is highly critical of the nutritious value of fast foods, the sudden change is welcomed by us in the beginning. Now we can fully participate in school yard discussions on the best places to get chico rolls and hamburgers.

On our arrival from school, we'd find her in the lounge, the blinds drawn, a tired look on her face. "Don't feel too good, darling," she'd say with a smile so distant it sends me rushing to our bedroom without further questions. After a few days, even father starts leaving his school early, knowing she'd be locked up in their bedroom most of the time. Like Christmas or birthday time, it comes up each September.

"She is very sad," my father repeats patiently when we complain about yet another Chinese. "Dreadful things happened to her a long time ago. Remember, all of her family were killed; just give her more time; she'll come around."

In the end we consume one fish and chips dinner after another, help with washing our clothes, iron our uniforms and wait for her to emerge from her hiding, wishing for her old self. Sooner or later our patience is rewarded.

The evening comes when the dinner table is once again dressed in the white starched tablecloth, the best china laid out, the candles lit in the seven armed silver candelabra. The dinner awaiting us is our favourite; an
apology for the recent neglect. She is back, from a journey I can't comprehend.

During the dinner she talks about the day in September 1942 when she last saw her parents. She and her twin brother were pushed into another queue; one that did not lead to death; not immediately anyhow. Once again she shows us the scars. The one on her arm, above her wrist. She still remembers the number, even now. The one below her right knee is much larger. Experimental surgery performed on a small child in the name of science, testing the limits of the immune system in twins. She recovered and survived, her brother lost his leg and disappeared. She never saw him again, most probably he died like other unsuccessful experiments. Uncle Vlad then became her new brother.

We listen to her story, glad that she is here despite her past. In bed later that night, I am unable to let go of the images created by her. With Becky and David sound asleep I resolve to break the golden rule of not ever interfering with the nocturnal life of my parents.

The torch I select is Becky's present for my last birthday. The card said that it was made in Germany, I reckon it should make it easier.

A small tubular with a flat reflector and a reddish brown plastic body. It is almost invisible in my hand as I test it under my covers. I wait for a long time until everyone in the house is sound asleep. Once outside I listen carefully in front of their door, rehearsing silently my story of feeling sick should they wake up. When I finally enter I slip silently beside her side of the bed. Luckily, she clings to my father's back, making it easy for me to direct the beam to the back of her head without disturbing either of them.
I cannot believe what I am about to do. If caught, the punishment would be unimaginable, I can't think what they would do to me. My hands start to shake at the mere thought of it, I have to turn the beam off and sit down by her side. Despite my fear, I feel that I cannot give up now.

I have no pictures of my grandparents, none have survived. No photos to see what they looked like, where they lived or the clothes they wore. I have no baby pictures of my mother, nor of the solemn rows of children facing the school photographer. The only images left are inside my mother's head, accessible only through her dreams.

I hope she is dreaming about them now. The peaceful look on her sleeping face gives me hope. I am desperate to catch a glimpse of their faces, to see them as they were during her childhood. I want to meet my maternal grandparents of whom nothing else but dreams remain.

Resolved once again I turn the torch on. The beam shivers and shakes in an effort to penetrate the dream world. Is it too small? Would a torch with a larger beam have been better? I am getting so anxious, I have to check myself for not trying too hard; it scares the beam away from singing. I force myself to breathe slowly in and out. In time I feel the beam relaxing with each outgoing breath, when the familiar sound reaches my ears, I know I have succeeded; I am on my way.

To fly a narrow beam can be difficult. Often they are too fast reaching too far. The quality of this light is different. Although narrow, it appears to be hollow in the middle, the fast moving particles create a tunnel of light. I am wrapped by the orange light, all I need to do, is to travel inside it.
When I feel the ground beneath my bare feet again, I register a soft but firm surface. A familiar feel. A rug, I can even distinguish a floral pattern of some kind but the colours are impossible to judge due to a poor quality of light pervading the room. It is too bright for it to be night or evening and too dark for broad daylight. As I ponder the nature of the light a rattling and clanking sound attracts my attention somewhere outside a double window.

It belongs to an old-fashioned street tram pulling out of its stop directly outside the window. The height from which I observe the street tells me that I am on either a second or third floor, the window looks strange with its double-glazing. The beam settles on the window sill also fascinated by the view below. Not particularly busy, it has a Sunday feel about it. I can not help but notice the hats and scarves and long overcoats which the people are wearing and my toes feel thankful that the beam had chosen an indoor destination.

A familiar sound from somewhere on the other side of the room interrupts my thoughts. I turn away from the window and follow it. A sound of snoring. I'd recognise it anywhere, having heard my father night after night behind the wall of my bedroom. Instead of finding it disturbing or even repulsive as many do, I am comforted by its familiar pitch.

I often wondered if the particular sound changes with the quality of the dream. Is the slow and long drawn out snore an outward manifestation of a pleasant and relaxing dream? Or are the dreams in fact chased away by the intensity of the snore? The sounds emerging out of my father's open mouth have a variety of their own. Sometimes the long uninterrupted snores are replaced by a series of short grunts, almost coughs. One follows after
another so fast that I wander if enough air actually enters his lungs. At other times his snores are wheezy, giving the impression that he is an asthmatic.

The snoring in this room has a shallow quality about it. Hovering in space between wakefulness and deep sleep, the sleeper's throat is constricted slightly, resulting in a low chortle instead a full blown snore. A sound which may cause the sleeper to wake at any moment, surprised.

The divan on the opposite side of the room is the source. As the beam moves across the floor cautiously, I follow. The sleeper is on his back, his mouth wide open. His chest is covered with opened newspaper, sections of which lie on the floor next to a pair of slippers. An up and down movement of his stomach accompanies each snore, a fine rimmed pair of spectacles balance precariously on the paper, threatening to slide down with each movement.

He appears younger than my father, but in the wintry light it is impossible to tell. A dark moustache gives his face a distinguished look despite the open mouth. His hands folded across his stomach are clearly not the hands of a worker, a solid watch chain hangs from his vest pocket.

The beam settles comfortably on the moving paper which I cannot read. Uncertain what to do next, I look around the room. A large glassed in bookcase, filled with volumes bound in leather and embossed in gold stands next to a carved sideboard with silver candelabra and a large leafed potted plant. A solid wooden desk and a leather swivel chair face the room from another corner.
As my eyes adjust to the dark a movement of the door catches my attention. It proceeds to open hesitantly, stopping and starting with each snore.

I can hear giggling and squabbling from behind and wonder if the sleeper will wake up. When the giggles cease a boy and a girl of about eight years old cautiously enter the room. Despite the semi-darkness of the room I am struck by their likeness. The features of their faces are identical, the cut of their dark hair the only difference between them. His is short and brushed sideways, hers into tight plaits ending with a ribbon tied in a bow.

Hand in hand they slowly approach the divan. The sleeper’s fit of coughing sends them fleeing back behind the door, only to re-emerge seconds later, when his breathing returns to normal. Mouth shut now, he continues unperturbed. I suspect, he has now reached a deeper, a dreaming state of sleep.

The beam has left its previous position in favour of being closer to the children. They are so near I panic. “One unpredictable move and they will crash into me.” I remind myself in time. “I am a particle of light and therefore undetectable. As the light beam disperses over distance, I too physically disperse.”

Observing the children I see in their faces a likeness to my brother. I am starting to realise the significance of this visit, but as always, the light’s focus is on seeing rather then contemplating. It is difficult to analyse what I am seeing; my role is only to observe.

In the meantime the children reach the sleeper. It is impossible to say which one of them is the more courageous, they hold hands at all times.
taking turns to be the one making the next step. When one hesitates the other
takes the lead. The girl now crouches down next to the divan and carefully
pulls at the white handkerchief sticking out of the sleeper’s pocket. It comes
out slowly, I am intrigued by her persistence. Once out completely, she
passes it to the boy. Out of her own dress pocket she draws a small paper
bag, and offers it to the him. His fingers take a pinch of powder and with
utmost caution he leans over the sleeper’s head. Depositing some of it
directly underneath the sleeper’s nose, he leaves immediately, his sister
already pulling him backward. They flee behind the door, shutting it in their
flight.

Within seconds of their departure, the sleeper’s calm is disrupted by a
giant heave. The spectacles and the papers finally dislodge from his stomach
sliding to the floor. His body is racked by violent sneezing, each sneeze
driving him into a more upright position. The sneezes shatter the stillness of
the household. The first followed by a second, third and fourth. By the fifth
he is frantically searching for his glasses, calling out for help.

The door flies open and my mother rushes in. The moment I see her I
realise that the woman in a knee length dress, pulled up sleeves and dark
hair piled on the top of her head could not really be my mother but at the
same time I feel confused by the likeness. The eyes, the shape of her nose and
the mouth are all hers. She even has my mother’s familiar gesture of despair,
arms high up, palms upturned, a loud stream of exclamations. She picks up
the glasses from the floor, hands them to him, waves her hands and rushes
out again as another bout of sneezing follows her. Within seconds she is
back, white handkerchief in hand. She stretches her arm to pass it over, the familiar scar is missing.

The children re-appear, their faces full of concern but the corners of their mouths are tight with effort, their eyes full of mischievous laughter.

A whiff of vanilla, cinnamon and baked apples trails behind them from behind the open door. I'd like to investigate there, but the beam won't let me go. It pushes me in the opposite direction, indicating its readiness to leave.

"I haven't had enough, I belong here and I don't want to go!" Not to be deterred the beam is already moving on. I have no say in the matter. A light particle flashed into a darkness, I go wherever the beam goes.

My mother and father are still asleep by the time I find my way back. The clock on the side of the bed shows two a.m. giving me an idea. With my back against the side of the bed I contemplate my next move in the darkness.

Having now seen my grandparents I want more. I resolve to wait till my mother moves from one dream into another and then try again. I am sure that this particular night she will not stop dreaming of them.

I feel elated by the glimpse of my mother's childhood, yet I have to fight the temptation to fall asleep here and now. The slow and regular duet of breathing is inviting. My own adjusts to the same rhythm; the warmth spreads over my entire body. A flash of awareness propels me back into wakefulness. "Tonight is not for my own dreams." The desire to see my grandparents once more is stronger then my need to sleep. I become watchful despite the sleepy atmosphere. Finally I point the narrow beam at my mother's dark hair. She has moved, facing in the opposite direction from
my father. The peaceful expression, which enthralled me so much before, is gone, she now looks pale and tired in the light of the beam.

I hope the beam will let me travel again. I have never tried it so close together. I talk to it, explaining my need. It doesn’t seem to listen. It skips from one part of her head to another unwilling to settle. It explores her thick hair, revealing a silver thread here and there. Moves across her forehead as if to erase the furrows etched by age and memories. When it reaches her eyebrows and dark eyelashes I almost push the switch in alarm. Alerted by my reaction, the beam realises the danger; it slips sideways to trace the curve of her earlobe and finally settles directly behind it. I cannot believe my luck, my toes are dissolving for the second time tonight.

On arrival, the beam is almost immediately extinguished by the deep glow of a large blazing fire. Its flames shoot high against the night sky. Scores of figures rush about throwing in fuel from two large heaps near by. The intensity of the heat is allowing them to haul the fuel only from a distance. The thud and the roar of the fire’s up draught is interspersed with shouting and laughter from the fire feeders.

Although still at some distance I am drawn to the fiery spectacle. Surprisingly, the beam hesitates in its approach. It inches forward, moving far too slow for my liking. Despite my efforts to hurry, we approach the inferno at a tedious pace. As the distance between us and the fire grows shorter, I realise, that the fire keepers are youngsters, some not much older than I, all dressed in identical uniforms. Their sweaty faces reflect their efforts and determination to get the task done. Jostling and shouting, they repeatedly return with armfuls of the fuel. Those who slow down are
reprimanded by adults dressed in identical uniforms, apparently in charge of
the burning.

The closer we approach, the stronger the realisation inside me, that their
efforts are not driven by the warmth and the spectacle of the fire, but by a
need to burn. A need driven by much darker and more sinister sentiments. I
am starting to understand the beam's reluctance to move closer.

The speed with which each armful catches on fire and the hunger with
which the flames devour it is not consistent with a wood burn. The block
shaped objects of various sizes are hurled into the fire from the distance.
Some explode on impact, the core of the flames devouring them instantly.
Others open fan like in flight, offering no resistance to their brutal death. In
exposing their pages they voluntarily participate in their own destruction.
The defenceless pages curl in the heat, the white and black replaced by red
and brown. By the time their bodies actually hit the red coals, only the
burning covers remain. Thousands of words are instantly transformed into
bright sparks illuminating the dark sky.

Others make an attempt to flee. They land beside the fire, entertaining
ideas of rescue and survival. Instead, the falling sparks and ashes slowly and
painfully devour their bodies. In agony they writhe until a gust of wind
ignites the sparks into a full flame or a black boot kicks them back into the
fire. Small or large, bound in cardboard or leather, none are spared. Written
words gagged by the blaze.

I observe the frenzy of the fire feeding my skin burning with the words.
The pale light of the beam illuminates a line of uniformed guards
surrounding the area. Policemen or soldiers, their guns are at ready. Do
they believe the books may disappear or do they fear an attack on the fire feeders?

Past the line of the guards, the beam directs its attention to the darkness beyond. In the dark, other shadows reside. Shadows filled with trepidation and a concern for what is yet to come. They watch silently, hoping to catch a glimpse of any face revealed in the glow of the fire. Observe and commit to memory for the future although for many there will be none.

When the guards move closer to the fire, the shadows move forward. When they retreat, the darkness absorbs them.

Back at the book heaps the army boots stomp over fragile bodies. The steel toe caps produce a crunching sound which drives the guards into a frenzy of action. They kick and stomp incited by the roar of the fire, their own righteousness, power and immortality.

The beam passes from one to another, staying long enough to get a glimpse of the action. It finally stops at the one furthest away from the light of the fire, half shrouded by the darkness. His loud shouting and yelling seems at odds with the action of his boots. Insults flying high and frequent, the boots hardly connecting with the books, scarring the earth instead. When the boot finally connects, it dislodges each book with a force making it fly through the air into the darkness behind an old tree nearby. He repeats the action over and over.

After a while the beam follows the trajectory the books have taken. It lands on the top of the last dislodged book, now lying at the base of the tree.

A shadow moves within a shadow. A pale face appears from behind the tree trunk. I recognise it immediately despite its gauntness and lack of
moustache, making his spectacles look too large. His hand grabs the book and disappears immediately; the pale star on the back of his jacket claimed by the darkness. I am left with a sense of sadness knowing that there will be no other time.

By the time the beam carries me home I am barely able to find my way out of my parents’ room. The distressed look on my mother’s face enters my own dreams as soon as I fall asleep.
The genetic code of hand held torches

The genetic code of hand held torches is embedded in their light. Its colour, its strength and its ability to communicate.

Where others see only white and cold, the Inuit distinguish many types of snow. Where others see only light and dark, I differentiate. Between the shades of luminous white or yellow and the solidity of the light column. I appreciate the fine texture of the shadows created on the wall by the imperfections in the glass of the reflector. My fingers caress the light beam, memorising its weight and density. My ears are tuned to the hum of the moving particles. No two torches sing the same song nor reach the same corner of the universe.

A long and narrow beam. Its illumination is precise and sharply defined. Its efficiency to reach distant galaxies never fails to impress me. It is cold searching light. The particles are compacted together, forming sharp edges. To join this beam is like being swept into the Bullet train. It takes you far, it takes you fast, it almost crushes you in the process of delivery. Efficient to the point of cruelty. There is very little joy in this travel. It is the sense of long distance exploration that propels me to join in. It takes me further then any of the other beams will.

It reveals little of the places I reach. The sharp edge of the beam carves an island out of the universe. A cold blue light in the sea of darkness finding its target millions of light years away. It is not important whether I reach a star a planet, a moon or a just a meteorite making its way from nowhere to nowhere. No communication is possible. I never stay long enough to know
the difference, nor do I re-visit. The blue white light cuts the darkness with razor-like precision.

The short and less defined beam is different. Its scatters its particles far and wide rather then extend itself over long distances. I always feel comfortable in its warm and welcoming glow of yellow and orange colour. Not predisposed to hurry by nature it gives me plenty of time to explore most of the time.

Whilst the fluidity of its particles ensures that the travel is always comfortable, it some times lulls me to sleep by its wave like rocking motion; back and forth, back and forth. Its relaxed nature sometimes resists exploration, satisfied with the illumination of the obvious.

Then of course there is the short and stocky beam, carving a definite path in the darkness over short distances. This is the deep searching light, the beam which illuminates all, finding that which seeks to be hidden. The strong yellow light enmeshes itself into the warp and weft of which darkness is made, revealing one layer upon another. Nothing remains hidden for long from this beam. The travel on it however can be hazardous, due to its unpredictability. As each layer is reached, the beam expends its energy on moving through to the next one, often not having enough strength to continue.

There are of course many other variations of the light, each one distinct in its composition, colour and ability. The differences are often too subtle for the existing lexicon to describe. Unlike the Inuit, we have not yet learned to even recognise them and often I have to create terms of my own to distinguish them from each other. The relationship between a particular
variation of the light and the type of torch from which it emanates, remains a constant source of mystery to me, even after all these years.

Is the torches’ ability to reach the unknown akin to the distribution of talents and gifts amongst humans? Many have the potential, but only few become exceptional.

Does the gift belong to the torch, the battery or the globe? Has it developed through the manufacturing process or has it somehow passed down from the torches’ owners?

Does the illuminated object give a permission for the beam to pass through? Is the torch only a vehicle transporting the beam? And what is my role in the process? Do I bring together the beam and the location which may allow itself to be explored? Am I only an introduction agency with a difference? A stage manager rather than a principal player?

Not every torch opens up a new world, not every attempt is successful. More often then not, I don’t succeed, no matter how hard I try. The light beam is mute. Self-contained and distant, like a disapproving parent or an unsatisfied lover. Right in front of me but refusing to interact; only a cold white light.
The auction flight

Some time later I squeeze myself inside of the linen press, it is a very tight fit. I don't know how long I can wait before the cramp in my twisted legs will force me out but I push the switch. A soft orange light engulfs the space. I wonder if I receive an invitation, can't even guess when the beam was released last time. Most likely a long time ago. Like a genie woken from sleep, the beam leaps about savouring its freedom.

The bulb inside the torch seems disproportionately large to the size of the crystal reflector, but the combination produces an orange-coloured ethereal lightness I have not witnessed before. It refracts wide in passing through the glass, creating moveable patterns not unlike the oil and dye filled lamps of the nineteen sixties. I watch the ever changing pattern, waiting for the song.

When I hear it, its beauty and strength makes my spirit soar. I accept the invitation and as my body starts sinking into the warm pool of light; the song directs my steps all the way.

In the first instance I notice the way in which the darkness is cramped inside the space. Pushing against me in all directions, not allowing me to breathe like a cushion cover overstuffed with filling, ready to burst at the seams.

The second most noticeable thing is the scent. It conjures up memories of my bedroom at my grandmother’s house. Underneath the layers of freshly ironed pillow cases and sheets of the chest of drawers, I would always find a small bag filled with dried petals of lavender, roses and lilies. “To keep the moths away and to induce good sleep,” she said.
As a child I took the bag out each night and clutching it, I convinced myself that it would help, should giant moths attack me while asleep.

Identical scent pervades this space and when I look around for the bag, I discover carefully folded sheets and towels filling each shelf. The scent is overpowering, it is making me sick. In the meantime the beam investigates every crack in the wooden walls in an attempt to get us out. When it finds a streak of day-light coming in through a gap, it searches around it until a simple metal catch releases the door, allowing me the gift of fresh air.

I push the door cautiously, uncertain of what may lie behind. The light on the other side is pure sunlight, filtered through a partially opened stained-glass window. The air is full of steam escaping through the opened window. Having left the linen press now, the beam settles on what appears to be a large cat’s claw. It is held in position by well defined muscles, in turn supported by a strong calf. Fortunately for us, the claw is a product of a designer’s imagination, attached not to an equally strong and dangerous body, but to an extremely comfortable looking bath tub filled with hot water.

I follow the beam, heading straight for the tub. Dissolved soap and dirt are settling on the creamy white sides of the tub. No one is about, the bather must have left only moments before our arrival.

Wet towels and night clothes lie scattered on the floor of green and red tiles. Pools of water soak up the white powder scattered carelessly on the floor. A wash basin underneath a mirror is a jungle of brushes and combs choked with long hair. Half a dozen opened bottles and jars of various oils, creams and powders stand about. The overall effect would have sent my mother into a tirade of complaining. Even I feel uneasy at the sight.
Having made our way across the messy floor, we settle on the window sill. It opens onto a well-established English-style garden. Past the green lawns and flower beds stretching into the distance, loom the curly tops of gum trees.

We are interrupted by the arrival of a young girl. The dark skin contrasts sharply with her white apron worn over a pale blue dress. Dark stockings and solid black shoes complete her uniform, her age is impossible to guess. A slender, childlike figure with the face of an adult. She pushes a wooden trolley filled with cleaning implements in one hand, a metal bucket full of hot water in another. Having manoeuvred the trolley to the bathroom with some difficulty, she puts the bucket down and stretches with a sigh of relief. On the way towards the window, she picks up the towels and the clothes avoiding the water puddles and the powder. With a sweeping gesture she throws the window completely open, breathing in deeply.

The fresh breeze rushes in chasing the steam outside. She spends a moment or two looking out towards the hills, then she pulls up her sleeves and with a determined movement she plunges her arm into the tub. Her contorted face betrays her dislike of the task. The water rushes out with a gurgle, the residue of dirt, oil and soap forming a dark ring on the sides of the bath.

The girl is already attacking the wash basin. Pulling hair out of the brush, screwing the lids on bottles, wiping spilled grease and powder. When closing a colourful tin of powder, she hesitates. Pours a minute amount on the inside of her arm and proceeds to rub it in with her fingers.
A movement so gentle, she must regard it her reward for the hard work. Her arm lingers in front of her nose and a pure childish smile lights up her face. A moment later, she is back in action, polishing the brass fittings. When the wash basin sparkles clean, she kneels by the bath. Stretches over the rim and with small and circular motions proceeds to scrub the scum, round and round, she works her way about the tub, occasionally taking a break to rinse off the sides. She checks and rechecks, bringing the cloth back over the already cleansed area. The beam and I watch from the basin in awe of her diligence.

A knock on the window pane startles us all. She straightens up and rushes to the window, her voice filled with excitement. The voice outside is whispering, her body responds to the language of secrecy. Her eyes constantly scan the bathroom door, waiting for steps in the hall. When a brown hand appears in the window passing to her a small parcel, she grabs it impatiently and hides it in the pocket of her apron. The barking of a dog in the distance brings the visit to an abrupt end. Without warning the voice disappears.

She gazes out towards the horizon once again and then closes the window. Cautiously, she transfers the parcel to underneath a pile of cleaning rags before returning to the bath. Her slow moving hand rubs the falling tears into the shiny clean surface of the tub.
On the day of the Mushroom Feast

On the day of the Mushroom Feast everyone arrives with food and a determination to indulge in an orgy of mushroom eating from morning till late at night. Casseroles, pies, soups and fritters. Mouths and hands grapple to secure their fill; common table manners are dispensed with for the day.

Mushroom pirozky are the favourite, yeasty dough, baked to golden brown. I hear them say that the filling of mixed mushrooms, herbs and garlic is a reminder of the summer walks in the coniferous forests back there.

The risotto on my aunt's plate is rich in sauce and grated cheese. I know that she'd like another serve, but the waistband of her skirt is already cutting in, so she chooses the vinaigrette pickles made last year.

Pots and pans are passed around, leaving greasy stains on the heavily starched cloth. The table groans with each wave of food arriving from the kitchen.

People from my father's side of the family refuse politely: "Must be an acquired taste." They don't show up, obviously frightened of being poisoned.

Wild mushrooms. Forest mushrooms. Toadstools. Inedible. Unpalatable. The making of magic and murder. The most misunderstood and malignled cousins of the white button commercial variety. More flamboyant in colour and shape they are credited with sinister and deadly deeds here, but command a culinary respect elsewhere in the world. Red, velvety brown, grey, purple, bright yellow or green, found in clusters or alone. Some umbrella-like, others, small grey pebbles hugging the ground.
In the absence of conifer, oak and birch, even the most common mushrooms reinvent themselves in colour and shape to suit their new landscape.

Pale-fleshed Amanita Verna is a mistress of disguise. One slip of the picker’s concentration and the many stories of painfully slow death become a reality.

“Whole families gone after partaking of a single meal. Bottle-fed babies the only survivors. Brutal husband killed by his toadstool-wise wife, her action escaping detection.” I am told these stories year after year, aware of the increasing numbers of victims each time the story is told. Still, with each bite I take, I imagine the severe stomach cramps, endless retching culminating in kidney failure and the final paralysis of the respiratory system.

With the feast over the topographic maps are unrolled in the afternoon. My father, as usual, assumes charge. Red dots with initials mark the sites where mushrooms are found each year. Foreign names reclaim the unfamiliar landscape, the distant hills and forests made familiar by the process of baptism; spilt red wine adds contours to the final map. The date for the next feast is set, it must go on regardless of droughts or bush fires. Previous sites of plenty are revisited year after year, new ones are identified as the map grows each year.

No site is ever marked with my mother’s initials. She never reveals her favourite location, never lets anyone know the places she visits. Yet her finds are some of the best. Large orange mushrooms of an unfamiliar kind and tantalising aroma, made into a dish everyone adores. The size of the heads is
the talking point for the day, but the location is her secret. She keeps it from everyone including my father.
Item 74-Bakelite

A one piece Bakelite model made in Germany during the Depression. Its tubular body is moulded out of plastic without visible seams or joints. The Bakelite comes in a red, brown and green marble pattern, the kind favoured also by bookbinders of that period. Apart from the reflector ring which attaches the flat glass to the case and the end cap that keeps the batteries in, there is no decoration whatsoever.

The Bakelite feels smooth in the palm of my hand and I know that it offers no resistance to wet or greasy hands. Even the switch is the most simple “on and off” kind. This truly is the “back to basics” Depression model. It is powered by two D cells, producing a strong orange coloured beam, capable of some remarkable travel. The orange colour conveys the feeling of warmth and comfort each time the invitation is issued.

The beam itself is strong and dependable. There is no uncertainty about the direction it will take or its ability to get there. I feel absolutely safe and confident when travelling in its glow.

The invitation song is resonant but it doesn’t present itself as often as I would like it to. I get the distinct impression that this is not due to a lack of generosity, but rather to a considerable shyness from which it may suffer. The invitation usually comes, after I have polished or shined the torch. Maybe it is a form of gratitude, or perhaps its due to a sense of obligation to return a favour.

Whatever the cause, once I accept the invitation I am engulfed in an orange wave of hospitality and care.
The kitchen in the middle of the night

The kitchen in the middle of the night is no longer my mother's undisputed territory.

Gone is the intimidating whiteness of the refrigerator, the relentless shine of the stainless steel sink. The gleaming white tiles simply disappear into the darkness and the soldier-like jars and canisters on the shelves become shadows blending into the wall. The invisible floor invites each footprint and the furniture does not shrink away at the mere thought of a human touch. In the black of the night the kitchen is my domain.

I have been waiting for this opportunity for some time. I am fifteen years old and she drives me insane with her constant demands. “Clean your bedroom. Do your revision. Turn the music down. Don’t tease your sister. Don’t mope about. Do something.”

Last week she discovered my cigarette lighter, I had found in the park. “Never even used it. Honest.” She told my father and I am grounded for two weeks. “Can’t trust you,” was all I was told. Boring, both of them.

Tonight, the night before the yearly mushroom feast, is my chance for revenge, tomorrow I’ll tell them all.

The all-too-familiar smell of washing liquid has been driven out by the peppery aroma of the wild mushrooms. Large orange caps, unusually firm and fleshy. When cut they release exquisite orange milk with a peppery aroma and taste.

She closely guards her secret, never revealing where they come from. Like every year she left early in the morning, by late afternoon she was back.
large orange heads poking out of her bags. Now it is my time to find her secret.

Cleaned of any soil, grass or pine needles they wait to be sliced and cooked. The torch beam scans the platters, selecting an appropriate specimen. It illuminates head after head contemplating each imperfection. The blue coloured cuts and bruises, the bites taken out by an inquisitive animal, a final wound which severed their link with the earth. The orange sticky sap still oozes, attempting to heal.

When the beam finally stops my heart jumps in anticipation but it resumes its search almost immediately, unhappy with what it sees. It moves around for a long time and despite my frustration I coax it with soothing, gentle words, encouraging its efforts. If I fail tonight, I'll have to wait another year. I am driven by a sense of betrayal and the need for revenge. Finally the beam settles, granting me my opportunity to enter.

I concentrate on the yellow light, visualise the moving light particles. It is not easy tonight, I sense unwillingness and resistance all around me. In an effort to overcome some great obstacle, the beam alternatively narrows like a needle point and then widens again. When it narrows the compression of the light particles is immense. I feel frightened of being squeezed out, left halfway to nowhere, forgotten by the beam.

It is not the usual joyful ride, full of energy and speed. Progress is slow and laborious, my mind slipping out of focus, my body experiencing a tremendous pull back throughout the whole journey. When all pressure ceases I finally arrive.
Tall trees in the distance, a fine layer of dried pine needles at my feet. A slope covered by struggling native grass, the kind which survives on the sandy soil of unprotected windswept hills, top soil washed or blown away a long time ago.

As I move towards the trees, the big orange clusters on the ground attract my attention. Soon I am in awe of their perfection. Large circular caps balancing delicately on slender stalks. I wonder why my mother did not pick these, the perfect versions of even the best of her finds. Had she not seen them? They vary in colour, from orange to ochre. I have no doubt, I have found my mother’s secret picking ground.

When I return my attention to my surroundings, I notice the stones. Roughly hewn sandstone blocks, finely cut grey speckled granite, highly polished black and white marble. They are not freely scattered but laid out in orderly rows stretching to the horizon. Dates etched in gold and black telling stories. Some from a long time ago, others more recent. One, from only a couple of weeks ago.

When it finally dawns, the realisation churns my stomach. I retch over the grave stones, the flowers and the bright orange heads. Sweat drips from my forehead as I struggle to compose myself, I am too shocked to believe it, I look around once more.

A glance at the orange clusters reveals a metamorphosis occurring right in front of my eyes. The flesh of the mushroom heads is starting to bulge here, dip there. It lifts off from the edges of the umbrella shaped heads, growing protrusions of their stalks. The flesh is rearranging itself. Becoming a familiar shape, a human ear. A whole cemetery of human ears conveying
sounds to the bodies below. Small and large, swaying almost imperceptibly in an attempt to catch any sound I make. The imminent scream stays locked behind my lips, I force myself to remain silent.

Within minutes, the scenery changes again. Ears become noses, twitching nostrils, sneezing out big clumps of dirt. Others are open mouths silently gaping. Pink and black gums, teeth in various stages of decay. Fingers and toes too are emerging out of the ground, waving and pointing in my direction. The bodies surfacing, their orifices coloured orange.

I am horrified, desperate to flee. The earth itself is now moving, heaving large sighs. When it opens directly under my feet, the beam sweeps me away. I don't recall much from the homebound journey, the images still cluttering my mind. When finally at home I sigh in relieve and on the way from the kitchen into my bedroom, I resolve not to tell anyone.
The Auction

To get out of the linen press and mingle with the morning crowd is easy once the smell of bacon and eggs awakens my nostrils. Nothing to it really. I listen carefully for any steps or movement nearby, then very slowly open the cupboard door and step out. After a bit of tidying up in the toilets I ponder my options over the breakfast.

There are none really. “I must have it”. All of my torch collecting life I have waited for this moment. All the years of searching and collecting were only a prelude to this day. My options concern the “how” not “if.”

Although small, it is impossible for me to just walk away with it. The electronic turnstiles at the exit were installed to catch thieves. I am not prepared to take such risk. The only way is to bid for the box, regardless of its price.

When the auction opens, I am waiting, cheque book in my pocket. Items 400-412 move faster then I expected. I observe the buyers, guessing who may compete for the next one. I make sure to sit next to Dorothy for she tells me how each of them operates.

The black beard and shiny teeth is Franco. She knows him well. I am not to bid against him, but make him an offer afterwards.

A large man and his equally large wife sit next to us. They are also regulars. He carefully records their interests on a sheet of paper, consulting it, criss-crossing and rewriting. It appears that the activity of checking and rechecking is a preparatory ritual. An athletic warming up exercise prior to a race.
According to Dorothy he uses the auction room to control his gambling addiction, the risks he takes often bring good fortune to their business. When his luck starts to fade she is there to steady him. “Do not bid against him. He’d sense the desire in you and will do anything to secure the item.” Dorothy warns me and promises to talk with the wife. It is she who manages the sales once he has done the bidding.

A couple of identical twin brothers, dressed in stubbies and thongs are other hopefuls. Harry and Bill from “Harry and Co, established 1921.” Their father still runs the “Ancestral Antiques” shop in the Eastern Suburbs. Not cheap, but good place to find that little something which a serious collector may be searching for. I have been there a number of times in the past, never seen the sons, but dealt with Harry senior himself. A dapper dresser best known for his selection of bow ties. The sons must have turned out after the other side of the family or react against his particular taste.

By the time Dorothy and I discuss the knowns and the possibles, at least a dozen unfamiliar faces eagerly await the start of the auction. The faces are facades, emotions and intentions safely hidden away, the auctioneer’s call a key to the door.

“Item 413. A truly superb example of the craftsmanship of a bygone era. A photographic camera in an exquisite condition. Excellent investment and a piece of history that any serious collector would be proud to own. Comes with a box of accessories, all in mint condition. Come on, give me a starting price. Come on, someone start off. Thank you, on my left.” The starting price is high enough to immediately cut me out of the race. All I can do now is to await the results and pray that Dorothy will know the buyer. “1,500 to
begin. 1,700 to Harridan on the right, 1,750 in front. 1,750 first, 1,750 second.”

Her hand clamps his arm. She is definite in her decision not to proceed any further, despite the hungry look on his face. At 1,750 they slowly fold their papers and walk away from the table, leaving me with only one more chance. Harry and Co.

“Thank you, 1,800 at far right. 1,850 in front 1,900 Harry & Co. 1900 first 1,900 second and here we have 2,000 in front. Show me your name Cole is it? Cole 2,000 first, 2,100 far right.”

Far right is a young woman. Dressed in jeans and jumper, a short dark hair. Most likely a student, acting on her parents behalf. Her name on the piece of paper is ineligible.

Harry & Co 2,150 Cole 2,160 2,180 far right. 2,180 first 2,180 second.

Thank you Harry & Co 2,200. The race is on the price is moving. 2,200 first 2,250 far right Harry & Co 2,300.”

Harry & Co give up at 2,300 Cole at 2,400 and the far right claims it at $ 2,450. Suddenly it’s all over.

Box 413 is going to the young woman about whom we know nothing except her determination to get the camera at all cost.

I race to the office to get her name but my hopes of discovering, where she is taking the box are dashed by the clerk. “A confidentiality clause” he announces, the determined line of his lips silencing my objections.

By the time I return, she leaves through the front door, not even waiting for the paperwork to be completed. Dorothy’s hand signal attracts my attention. Item 413 is still on the table, obviously to be collected and
delivered at some later stage. Seeing the box there, my hopes rise again.

Walking back I change my mind, I am prepared to steel it. Yes, I am going to do it. I virtually run to the box, ignoring Dorothy's puzzled face. My heart topples over the bench's edge, I rub my eyes, in an attempt to see better, it doesn't help. The box and the camera are clearly visible inside but only empty space looms where the torch had been a moment earlier. It is gone and with it the one and only original light bulb which I have left inside it.
Light is electromagnetic radiation

“Light is electromagnetic radiation in wavelength range extending from 0.4 micron to about 0.7 micron.”

The chalk scrapes the blackboard making my hair stand on end. I wish he’d stop writing and ponder why I haven’t noticed such an effect on me before. In the end I must admit to myself that my reaction is not caused by the scraping of the chalk, but by the topic he is dealing with.

“Character and quality of the radiation is designated not only by the wavelength, but also by frequency (in hertz) and by wave number in inverse units of length.”

I look around me. They are all taking notes, having been told that the “Properties of Light” will be one of the test areas during the exam. His delivery of the information is fast and non-compromising. You miss the thread and you’ll need to spend extra hours revising, it makes sense for everyone to pay attention.

I have been waiting for this lesson for weeks. Ever since the subject of Physics became a regular item on my timetable and since I spotted the chapter in the textbook, I have been hoping for a scientifically based explanation for the behaviour of the light beam. Unfortunately, so far, his treatment of the subject is cold and detached, unrelated to my experience. I can’t hide my eagerness to hear what he has to say, at the same time I am already suspicious of what it may be.

“Light is characterised not only by wavelength, essentially a temporal quality, but also by a state and degree of polarisation geometric and directional quality, and by intensity, essentially a physical quality. The
visual response to intensity is brightness. In human visual system, there is no counterpart response to the degree and state of polarisation.” He draws a wave-like pattern of diminishing intensity in order to explain his theory.

My experience of travelling the beam has taught me nothing of radiation patterns. When I travel, I don’t surf the waves. The particles and I travel in a direct trajectory delineated by the beam. The path of the beam is its trajectory. No electromagnetic waves criss-cross or form the path of the beam.

“Light is transport of energy. It can be regarded both as a particulate flow and as a wave phenomenon. These two apparently diametrically opposed views have been brought together in a theory that combines the best features of each. The particulate unit is Photon, which is associated with a central frequency or wavelength that determines (or is determined by) the amount of energy it contains.”

Particular flow is certainly something I can identify with. A particle moving within a stream of light. Propelled together with thousands and millions of others. Racing each other to reach the destination first. My body even now feels the lack of gravity, the freedom which comes from dissolving into the stream. I pinch myself as a reminder that I have not gone this time, that in fact there is no beam to take me away.

“Light results either from an accelerating electric charge or a nuclear fusion and fission. Except for Sun and starlight, however, light is usually a result of change in electric structure of atoms and molecules as they absorb and readmit energy. The incandescent electric light has as its source the
heat that results from the ohmic resistance of the filament to the electric current."

There is no sensation of heat or cold when I fly. Only a movement contained within a coloured light moving in one direction. So where does the energy, he talks about, go?

A picture of a glass bulb is now being drawn on the board. The outer glass shell, the vacuous inside. The filament, a thin wire suspended on two fine posts reaching out into the middle of the bulb.

Is it the nature of the globe rather then the nature of the torch, that allows me to fly? Is the manufacturing process of the globe inside the torch’s head the reason behind the beam’s ability to carry me? Is the secret of transportation vested in the miniature globe, present in each torch?

Deceived by the appearances, have I not paid enough attention to the small glowing eye?

"As a ray of light passes across the surface from one medium to another (air to glass) its direction is changed by a phenomenon called refraction."

He draws a straight line, the path of the light beam, changing its direction upon hitting a line perpendicular to the path. The angle at which the path changes is subject to some complicated formula which eludes me.

Once again I am trying to find the relevance of the statement to the workings of the beam as I know it. If the beam changes by the intervention of the glass reflector placed in its way, then maybe the beam’s ability to communicate depends entirely on the nature of the reflector and not the source of it. Is it the glass that directs the beam? Do the impurities in the glass signpost the destination of the flight? I recall the variety of reflectors
attached to some of my pieces. From large bull’s-eye, hand-blown glass pieces with small bubbles of air actually visible to the naked eye, to the highly polished thin discs of faultless glass of the most recent models. Is the refraction formula the answer I am seeking? And where does the beam’s song originate? A way of communicating with a chosen person. Who does the choosing? My mind filled with questions, I raise my hand before I fully consider the consequences. He seems pleasantly surprised. No questions have been asked during the lesson. "What makes the light beam sing?" The question comes out without even being phrased properly.

“What do you mean by saying the light beam sings?" He is cautious, expecting a trap. Before I can salvage the situation, he continues.

“The frequency of the light waves is different from those which produce sound. Sound waves travel slower. No light wave ever produces sound."

It is obvious, that despite all of his textbooks he doesn’t understand one iota about the properties of light. I realise that it would be wiser to sit down, but something inside me rebels against it. The eyes of the class are upon me, the lesson is almost over and everyone is ready for a bit of fun. Undaunted and unwise I am too frustrated to take the warning. “Of course the light beam sings. How else would I know that it’s all right to step in. How else would I receive the invitation to travel?"

Before I finish I hear the first sniggers, soon growing into a roar. My red face will give them yet another reason to carry on until the bell rings. His words are drowned by the roar. “I suggest you carefully revisit the properties of sound as separate from those of light. They are covered by two different areas of physics. It will not do you any good to get them mixed up.”
The sound of the bell is my salvation. In their haste for lunch, they rush out of the room, leaving me behind, forgotten. Well, for the time being. No doubt this incident will be dredged out at the earliest possible opportunity, when the need for something amusing will arise. They will repeat my questions word for word, delighting their audience. I can already hear the high pitched voices, the imitations echoing through out the yard. I only hope I will be far away when that happens.

He waits at the door, looking genuinely concerned. “Are you all right?” I am tempted to explain myself, but something in his look warns me off. This time I take heed of the look. “Sorry sir, I wasn’t really paying attention, was thinking about a science fiction show I saw recently. They travelled on a light beam that talked to them. That’s all.” It is done now, he looks positively relieved. A kid with a science fiction imagination is an easy problem to handle. “Make sure it won’t happen during exams!” His smile is forgiving and he walks away, his arms embracing books filled with theories.

A little later, the darkness of the store room is sliced in two as I push the switch. The beam is narrow and sharp. Betrayed by scientific theories I long for the familiar sound as I envisage eyes searching for me at the playground. My hands start to sweat when the beam settles on the concrete ceiling of the store.
The loss

To witness the most wonderful piece of torch history walk away from me is a terrible experience; to not even know where it has gone is akin to a devastation of my soul. All I can do is sit in front of the camera box and gaze at the spot where just a short time ago the torch was waiting for me.

“She paid $3,000 for the box and took out of it what she thought was the most valuable item. She must have known its real value or something else about it.” It is then that the realisation strikes. “She must have been a fellow traveller!”

The office is no help to me in finding her address. I am not a regular customer and they’d risk their licence by giving me the information I need. Maybe they are even telling the truth in claiming they don’t have it.

There is not much I can do so I walk home. The house is empty, Liam is out. For the first time since his arrival, I unlock the display room and open the cabinet. I feel a need to talk to them about my loss, but I must do so without arousing their jealousy. They don’t want to feel replaced in my affections, so I only tell them that I have lost an addition to their number. No more and no less. I feel their empathy and sense that their curiosity is growing the longer I talk.

I also apologise for neglecting them over the past couple of weeks, explain about Liam, reassure them that the arrangement is only temporary. He’ll be going away soon.

I handle each of them individually, polish them with a soft piece of flannel. Each stroke is an apology for neglecting them. I feel their discontent dissolving with each stroke and my peace of mind returns. Only an
inexplicable sense of sadness remains. A sense of loss which sinks deeper with each breath, a lead weight buried inside me. I don’t understand the intensity or the heaviness of the feeling.

When I hear a gasp from behind, a sense of premonition and dread invades me as I turn around. “I have not been careful enough.” He is standing in the open doorway. Mouth open, his eyes that of a child admiring the Christmas windows display.

“Man, this is rad. You got yourself a museum here,” he exclaims walking towards the cabinet. “Look at all the torches! Do you have the Fish here? I saw one at the Museum. They told us that it was designed here in Australia, it floats and glows in the water.” He walks around unable to keep his hands off the display.

What a question. Do I have a Fish? Of course I do. And what’s more, I have the very first one which rolled off the conveyor belt, followed by thousands of others over the years. Waterproof, excellent for boats and fishing. A rugged design, one for the “real” men. Indestructible, reliable and chunky.

I found it when the factory relocated some ten years ago. It was sold with the general office furniture, no one paid much attention to a torch hidden in one of the filling cabinets draws. A torch which made the factory famous and of which thousands were produced during its time. Only the engraved end cap revealed its true identity. What a find! I got it for the price of a filling cabinet.

“By the way” he says half way through my explanation. “Thanks for letting me know that you were not coming home last night. Not that I
worried or anything, but it would have been nice to know, since you insist on making up rules of this kind.”

I have blown it he is absolutely right. Now it is impossible not to tell him, just as it was impossible to shut the door on him a few weeks earlier. And who knows, maybe it will be a relief to share the story.

So what is there for me to do? I sit him down and tell him all. Well, almost, I leave out the flights, don’t want to scare the kid out of his wits. Just emphasise the collecting bits. The excitement of the chase, the satisfaction of finding a particularly special piece, the anticipation of seeing a new light emerging for the first time. I tell him about the Auction and the unsatisfactory ending. He is a good listener, encourages me to tell more and more. I have to check myself constantly not to go too far. But how far is too far, once you have started? I tell him that I feel they watch me all the time, I even tell him about their restlessness. I stop there. It feels wrong to reveal their secrets to a child whom I don’t really know. I am loyal; I’d never want to betray them.

“I saw a man on TV once, collecting old bottles.” he says when I stop.

“All shapes and colours. He could tell where they were made and also their age from just looking at the glass. Made up stories about each one of them. Must have seen in the glass something that no one else did.”

His hands touch the torches in a manner I’d not expect from an eleven-year-old. Gently, almost reverently. I am sure they also enjoy his caresses. I sense their bodies stretching luxuriously under his touch. They may start enjoying his presence far too much, better take him away. On the way out I lock the room once again, it feels safer that way. For all concerned.
Faraway Galaxies waited on the ceiling

Faraway galaxies wait on the concrete ceiling of the darkened storeroom. Each torch opens a different corner of the universe. Bright quasars, the hearts of other galaxies, new planets shrouded by swirls of the intergalactic mist. Black holes too frightening to enter and too exquisite to ignore.

Unknown worlds are at my fingertips, metal casing feels cool against the palm of my hand. A tiny gland releases its content into the blood stream, the heart quickens its pace, sweat beads on my forehead become rivulets driven by gravity. The last moment of hesitation, a pause before the final step.

Fingers on the switch waiting for the moment when the mind is ready.

"Roger to Earth, receiving!"

Way above the atmosphere, past the Solar system, beyond the Milky Way is a space where only the strongest of beams will ever take me. A space containing every word ever spoken on Earth, their final resting place, the words' acre.

Phonemes, synonyms, etymons as well as paronyms and the rest arrive broken beyond their original meaning, stripped of their power, de-vowelled. Fused by the journey, they arrive in long chains of meaningless sound, the original cosmic chants, recycled words. During their movement through the space, when the time ceases to exist, they may become the building blocks of yet unrecognised life forms. Embryos of civilisations built on foundations of fragmented wisdom and beauty, also of hatred and love. Surrounded by these emerging life forms, far away from home I pause and question. Will they be more intelligent then their original forms? Will they be wiser?
He starts talking at breakfast time

He starts talking at breakfast as if to repay me for confidences shared on the previous night. The trickle of information so frugally released until now, becomes a torrent. I don’t ask any questions, just listening seems to be enough.

His earliest memories come first. A large family, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins. The celebrations filled with smells of food and specially prepared sweetmeats. Memories of childhood interrupted by the war come next. Relatives disappearing one by one, some found dead, others never found. He remembers fear pervading their life. Fear of soldiers, dying and a lack of food. The constant moving from place to place, the sounds of gunfire, hiding and the sight of blood. Bright red streaming down the faces of those knocking on the door at night, deep dark patches covering the bodies of corpses found by the children when playing in the bushes. He vividly describes the nightmares that still invade his sleep.

A lucky escape brought his family across the border and into refugee camps. The dirt, noise and overcrowding felt like a paradise by comparison. People kept on dying from lack of food, medicines and fights, but the everyday fear had disappeared, replaced by waiting.

He recalls the rains which drove water into their makeshift tent and destroyed their few possessions. The rains that also created a wonderful playground for him and other children to play. When the water receded, only deep mud remained.

He talks about the death of his baby sister. Like other children she died covered in skin blisters. He still lives in fear of spots appearing on his body.
and recalls his father’s absence during the funeral and his mother’s tears.

Funerals were a daily occurrence, he thought that he too would die soon, but somehow survived.

Instead they moved again and again and each night his mother would tell stories about a place where they would all be happy together. Then his father returned. There were celebrations, everyone was telling him he was lucky. “Accepted for migration to Australia”. The farewell party is one of his last camp memories. Endless wishes of good luck and offerings of scarce food. They left soon after to join an uncle who escaped years before Liam was born.

The trip itself was too exhausting for him to remember, only his mother’s songs stayed in his mind. The camp on their arrival was different. A separate room for his family and food different from what he was used to. Not very nice but plenty of it. Hot showers, medical examinations, glasses of milk and school to learn English. They all went, except for the father. He knew English already. He was gone again, looking for a job.

Liam talks of having new friends. When he mentions them he becomes animated in a way I haven’t seen him before. Child-like and carefree. “Serge and Rahul.” He rushes out and returns with a dog-eared photo. Three boys similar in age, their smiles as uncertain as their futures.

When his father finally landed a job, they moved away. First with his uncle and aunt into a big house with a swimming pool. His uncle, the father’s brother, runs an import business. He travels a lot, leaving the wife behind in a large empty house. She liked having them there, had no children
of her own and looked after them well. Bought him new clothes, books and
toys, took him to school.

But his mother wasn't happy. Ever since his sister's death she stopped
laughing. "Mama," he used to remind her, "this is the land you have been
telling me about. We will be happy now."

When his father found a better job, they moved into a flat of their own. A
new suburb, a new school. He had just joined his first soccer team when his
mother got sick. Really sick. She was in and out of the hospital so many
times he forgot to count. Then she died. June 15, two years ago, in the old
hospital.

Sitting by her bed during her sickness, she told him over and over about
the rituals he needed to perform to send her spirit to the other side, to join
those who went before. Rituals that must be done at the site of death. If not
properly appeased, the unhappy spirits will claim another victim. His mother
was convinced that it was the spirit of his baby sister claiming her.

She made him promise to perform these rituals after her death and he
agreed. Not really believing she'd die. Other kids' mothers fell sick, had
babies and recovered just fine, not his. One day she was gone and he was left
with the promise to fulfil.

His father worked even harder following her death and looked after Liam
and his younger brother. In his view, the spirits belonged to the old country,
better left there. "This is the country of reason and technology, no
superstition here," he responded when Liam mentioned the rituals.

By the end of the first year his father had found himself a new wife. A
nice enough stepmother for the boys, but Liam knew he had to go. By the
time he found out that his father was not going to hold the annual ritual, the old hospital was already closed. There wasn’t much he could do; he had a promise to keep.
The water spurting

The water spurting out of the fish’s opened mouth falls back into the oyster-shell pool in a graceful arch. The carefully positioned lights transform it into a fountain of gold; liquid gold forced down by gravity.

The thick glass prevents me from hearing the splash of the falling water, I wonder if they leave it on all night or, like the leaking toilet cistern at home, it gets turned off each evening ceasing the flow of gold.

The enormous shop window is positioned next to a revolving door more commonly seen in banks and the ritzy hotels of New York or London. Only the bell boys are missing to ensure that the chauffeured limousines discharge their clientele in complete comfort and safety.

Beyond the gold fountain is a world of precious stones, gold jewellery, silk tapestry and exotic wood furniture crafted a long time ago.

I observe this world from the outside, fascinated by the silent movements of shop assistants who attend to every newcomer but I also find their subservience intimidating. Having learned from past experience that a rehearsal is a key to success, I watch carefully the reaction of each customer. I observe their confident smile, the impatient wave of their hands, their purposeful walk through the exhibits. A direct gaze into the assistant’s eyes and a touch of distracted smile is all I need. “No thank you, just browsing.” I repeat over and over, directing my gaze to my own eyes in the gilded mirror.

Finally I am ready to enter. An elderly couple who could easily be my grandparents, enters first. I follow directly behind, stepping out of the door
just as they dismiss the attention of the attendants. I shrug my shoulders and point at their backs. "It's not up to me, I just follow them."

The attendants smile at the sulky teenager and leave me alone. I move closer to the couple, making sure I don’t alarm them. Already engaged in the investigation of a jewellery cache full of gold neck pieces they don’t take any notice of me. I hover near, paying close attention to a black and gold tea set.

The plush carpet underneath my feet silences all footsteps. This is not my usual haunt and I feel distinctly out of place. No dusty boxes, cobwebs or rust here, high gloss, expensive taste and good breeding. I am here to see the "real collectibles" as Brian from the market stall suggested. "Go to the Antique Galleries" he said when I asked him where I could find more torches. "They have customers who can pay for real collectable items." Just before I left he added: "Don’t forget to ask them about the date for the Collectors’ Convention. It’s held at the Show-ground. That’s where you can meet other collectors. They all attend."

My heart stopped there and then. "Are there others like me? Am I going to meet them after all these years?"

For years I have tried to see if my friends could travel with me. Gave up in the end. Maybe those called the "serious collectors" may have the answer; maybe they can hear the beam sing.

The attendants safely occupied with the latest newcomers, I feel free to separate from my adoptive family. Two floors of expensive antiques. China, furniture, cut-glass, paintings and gold-embossed leather-bound books. Reflections in the mirrors multiply the offerings as I walk around slowly, savouring the look of wealth. Some of these objects I find ridiculously ugly.
Others I find irresistible in shape and colour. Again and again, I find myself drawn to a particular object, lured by the glitter and shine. I linger on completely forgetting my original purpose.

I am fascinated by a dark mahogany dresser with carved elephants for legs and ivory drawer handles. Mesmerised by its smoothness. My hand slides back and forth over the polished wood until I remember the reason for my presence here. I move on till a huge ceramic urn in the shape of a lion catches my attention, in turn replaced by a jewellery musical box and a large volume of bound newspaper from the turn of the century.

At last I stand next to a glass cabinet containing what I have been looking for. I am unable to move on, smitten by the beauty of the displayed piece.

A more affluent cousin of those in my collection, it flaunts its wealth and breeding mercilessly. It reclines on its own matching stand, displaying the gleaming switch of unusual design. The metal parts of the reflector, the switch and the stand glint of pure gold, the push button is a dark precious stone. Its body is intriguing not only for its sleek design, but for the material out of which it is made. It doesn’t convey the metallic feel of most of my collection, nor of the plastic bodies made more recently. This one exudes an animal-like softness I have not encountered before. The stand and the torch are pale blue in colour, the gold embossed insignia highlight the design. My fingers itch with desire, to push the switch, to press the dark button. I have never imagined them to be so handsome, so beautiful. A true piece of art. Brian’s words "real collector’s items" ring true in my mind and I wonder what else I maybe able to find on the convention’s stalls.
To my surprise, however, the desire to touch this piece is recognisably different from the intense longing I have experienced so often before. I am intrigued by its design and its ostentatious beauty, but I have no desire to own it. Could it be true, that this piece, no matter how pretty and well made has nothing to offer beyond its display quality? Not a hint of adventure, nor promise of exploration?

I am still contemplating the idea when one of the shop assistants catches up with me. Dark frizzy hair tied at the back, white shirt, dark skirt. Keen to do her job, she doesn’t wait for my questions.

"This torch is made of plated gold and is covered in specially treated pigskin. Circa 1920." I smile at her, seizing the opportunity to ask for the date of the Collector’s Convention. "September seventeen" she answers, launching immediately into a conversation. "And what do you collect? I collect wooden cooking spoons and wooden whisks. Have some beautifully hand painted Russian ones, but all in all they are hard to come by these days, too much plastic around. May have to change into something else."

Wooden spoons and whisks. My father should hear this. Talking about bizarre.

Her openness puts me at ease. For the first time I am not cautious about revealing myself. "I collect torches, I am a torch collector," I say pointing at the pig skin covered piece inside the cabinet.
**Item 95-Bullet**

This is an inspired product of the post-war era. Its sleek, bullet shaped body was manufactured out of heavy aluminium. The only decorative element is in the contrast between the high polish and matt effect of the metal. The bullet-shaped end cap, the switch and the head only marginally wider than the sleek body, are highly polished; the body itself is sand blasted matt.

While the focusing lenses of the previous generations came with bulky designs, this one's ability to focus is achieved through a movement of a translucent tube around the globe. The movement is controlled by a two-way switch with “spot” and “flood” settings. The lens itself is a bifocal lens. The torch heralds the new age into which the post-war society entered. Technologically superior, but cold and without soul.

The beam doesn't have the time for niceties either. A cool white light with a tinge of blue, hurting the eyes with its sharpness. It moves fast, reaching into distant parts of the Universe. It is impossible for me to judge how much it concerns itself with what it sees.

At times I have the impression that speed and distance is all that matters. The destination is a consequence to be endured. The speed with which the beam moves makes it uncomfortable to travel and often I accept the offer to encourage future generosity. It makes its offer in a pre-occupied manner, letting me know, that carrying me will impede its progress.

The song resembles the blipping sound frequently heard at traffic lights; an announcement for the pedestrians to cross. When first introduced to these intersections, I kept waiting for someone to appear with a torch in hand. The
uncanny resemblance of the signal to the song, made me ready to dissolve each time
I crossed the street.
I felt swamped

I feel swamped by bodies crowding every stall. When a guy pushing his way through the crowd spills a cup of hot tea over my shoulder, I wish I hadn't been so pig headed and brought Becky along. She wanted to come but I felt I had to do it on my own. I had been waiting for this day since my visit to the Galleries.

Waiting to find fellow travellers, to share the burden of knowledge I have accumulated over the years.

"Tell me about it," each one of them suggested in the past. They listen attentively at first, the questions start later. Gradually my own stories become transformed in their minds, mutants emerging through their words.

In the beginning they labelled it "precocious beyond my years." A need to be the centre of attention. "Don't get me wrong," I heard the doctor say, "This child is highly intelligent, but with an extreme need to express it through exaggerated fantasy and imagination. Not something you'd want to encourage, I am sure."

Later I become familiar with terms like pathological imagination, inability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, overactive creativity. I stopped talking about my experiences, no one around me could share the burden. Even the stories I told Becky were chosen with the greatest of care. Now she is becoming more interested in long phone calls, has no time for my stories. I feel more isolated then ever before, I am here to find others like me.

With my shoulder still warm from the hot tea, I struggle through the crowd toward the pavilion. The stalls with most popular collectibles like
coins, stamps and china are clustered in large numbers, impossible to pass without loosing direction. People stop and discuss their finds, swap items and just look around. Not unlike the card swapping days back at primary school.

Bodies jostle around me, many of them much taller. I can hardly see ahead. Like a sailor I keep my eyes turned up toward the stars. I navigate my journey with the help of the ceiling roses spreading diagonally from the centre piece. When the attendant on the information desk waved his hand across the hall in the direction of “South East corner,” the fifth rose from the distant right hand corner instantly became my Morning Star. A navigating point in the ever-swelling sea of humanity.

An island of stalls displaying lighting equipment await me when I finally cross the sea. Novelty candles and candle holders, ceiling lights and lamps, old gas light fittings, oil filled glass lamps and kerosene lanterns. I recognise the brass oil lanterns from my grandfather’s railway days.

There are scores of torches. Displayed in neat rows, packed in boxes, falling out of laundry baskets. Where do I start? Which one do I examine first?

I can’t see any that can truly compete in luxury, design and the price with the one I saw in the Galleries, though many are beautifully made and in a mint condition.

From the miniature pocket flashlights to a giant brass light which takes at least six cells to operate. Highly decorative Art Deco pieces, bedside lights in the shape of dogs; lighted watch stands projecting their dials onto the
ceiling. Glass, wood and brass combined to provide a bedside light at times when household electricity was still only a dream.

I move from item to item, checking for rust and weak spots, adjusting focus, polishing the switches and assessing the strength of the beam. Many have cracked reflectors or missing parts. One stall offers boxes and boxes of batteries and globes. Old and new. Different sizes and fittings. No torch needs to go out unfitted, leave the convention without being in working order. All it takes is some time rummaging in the boxes.

Whilst others collect torches, George collects batteries and globes. Within minutes of our introduction he shows me various fittings and methods of attaching batteries inside different models. Unusual sizes, fittings and shapes of “bulbs”, as he persists in calling them. On hearing him, light globes of all sizes and shapes immediately sprout in my mother’s spring garden amongst the tulips and the daffodils she plants each year.

George’s brown hands deftly dismantle and re-assemble the torch bodies giving them a new gift of life. Not one he gives “the treatment” to fails to respond.

As I mingle among the collectors, I decide on a direct approach. I purchase a handsome 2 “D” tubular with brass body and rotomatic switch from a man everyone calls Colin and engage him in a conversation. After a while I ask the question.

He looks at me incredulous, then he laughs. “Why do I collect these little blithers? Because they are nice to look at and because I can use them as well. I started collecting waist-coat watches but I can’t fix them. Ended up
with a house full of watches and not knowing the time of day. These are
different. I can fix them; I can see the light coming out of them in the end."

Here it is. He mentioned the words I have been waiting for. Here is
someone who appreciates the light. I take a deep breath and ask again, this
time directly.

Already preoccupied with a man who walks in leaning on a stick, he
considers my question with undisguised sarcasm. "Sure kid. I watch the
light. I listen to its song. Are you talking poetry of some kind? I don't have
time to scratch myself. Let alone watch the light or listen to it. Some of us
have to make living."

I don't like his laughter and feel better when he turns back to his limping
companion. "Did you hear that Milo? Do you listen for the torch's song? It
looks like right now you could do with a song or two. Is it bad?" He gets up
from his chair offering it to him. I wait, uncertain what to do, his words
stinging my ears.

Milo sits down heavily. "It's bad. The weather must be change. I am glad
I go to the hospital soon. Hope the operation will fix it." His accent is strong
and difficult to understand. I contemplate asking him where he comes from,
when he pulls a small gold plated torch out of his pocket and passes it to
Colin.

"Is someone hearing torch? Who talks with it? I know singing makes her
happy, not my sons, only my daughter."

Before I can reply, Colin draws his attention back to his new acquisition,
I feel he will not allow further conversation on this subject. The man's
speech resembles a puzzle without the directions. Did he say what I heard or
did I hear what I wished for? Can I interrupt their conversation? What will I ask? How many times will I make a fool of myself only to realise that of course singing will make his daughter happy? Oblivious to my presence already they continue their conversation? Surely I must have misunderstood his question. If he'd heard the song, he'd be more excited about someone asking about it.

In the end I leave them to it, trying my luck at another stall. After a few hours, three new torches and a heart of concrete I come to a distressing conclusion.

Not one of them understood my questions. None of them came anywhere near the answer I so desperately want. They were all similar. "Something to do." "The challenge of fixing them." "Extra money." "Like the look of them when polished." "Reason for going to junk shops." "Not expensive to collect."

Downhearted I find myself back at George's stall. Surprised at seeing me still around he offers me his thermos of tea. Strong and full of sugar it restores my spirit. Slowly seeping into the bloodstream, the warmth of it eventually comforts my heart. I show him my new acquisitions, tell him about my collection. I stop short of telling him of my disappointment. Instead I tell him about my new aspiration. "I want to own the oldest one of all. One I have just seen at another stall. The original, first flashlight. A tubular narrow body made of a black fibre, a bull's eye reflector made out of thick hand blown glass." I was told that occasionally some of them still find their way to the collectors' markets despite their priceless value.
George listens intently, sipping his tea, nodding his head. When I finish he gets up and rummages in one of his boxes. Hands me a small red box, the colour faded with age. When I open it, a peculiar large filament bulb with a pointy end lies inside a tissue nest. “This is a carbon filament bulb. They used it in those days. Replaced them soon with a tungsten one, I don’t have much call for it these days, but you’ll need it when you find your number one.”

I take it from him together with his phone number. His shop is way out in the suburbs, but one day I may even get there. He tells me about the Collector’s Association to which many of them belong. I promise to join but my heart isn’t in it. When I finally go I feel sad at leaving him behind and promise myself that I will come back next year to see him.

Passing the makeshift coffee shop, I realise that I am famished. With a piece of pie and a coke in front of me little while later, I watch them mill around, bags filled with bargains large and small.

Her hand lands on my shoulder with a friendly punch. Out of her black and white shop assistant’s uniform she is unrecognisable. The dark curly hair is now unrestrained and out of control. She cradles a large parcel of odd shaped proportions in her arms. “What a surprise,” she exclaims sitting down next to me.

I am pleased by her sudden appearance. Not the fellow traveller I hoped for, but someone funny enough to enjoy and share my bargains with. Her face is flushed. “I have sold them all. Every one of them. The whole collection. No more wooden spoons and whisks for me; besides, I have found what I want to collect next.”
She pats the parcel in a proprietorial way. "This is the founding stone of my new collection." The paper crackles in her hand. "Want to see it?" She sounds like an excited child although I am positive she is older than I.

"Sure." I am already curious, wondering what it will be. Just from looking at her I guess that her new collecting mania is something unusual, maybe even outrageous. What else could one collect after giving up collecting wooden spoons and whisks?

She unties the knots one by one, taking her time to do so. When she glances in my direction I realise she is stretching it out as long as she can, to keep me in suspense. I smile in response.

The paper comes off with one big heave. In front of me, mounted on a metal stand a few inches above the table top is a figure of a flying pig. Complete with wings and front and rear legs outstretched in the effort of flying. When I touch it, the skin of the belly feels almost real. Only the heat of the blood filled body is missing.

"Isn't he gorgeous? I got him from an artist who made him herself. Out of silicon. From now on I am collecting only flying pigs."

To my surprise, there is something appealing about the flying creature. Is it the slightly upturned snout or the open mouth, giving it a positively blissful expression? The longer I look the funnier I find its expression. I burst out laughing. She joins in. "Can you imagine? Stories, statues, pictures, ornaments, even poems. The first Complete Australian Flying Pig Collection."

By the time we place one of my new torches inside the porky's open mouth, I realise I have found someone special. Outrageous and funny and
what's more, she also works in a cinema only few streets away from my house.
Liam’s obligation

I have thought constantly about ways of protecting us against the guard dog when we’ll return to the hospital. I have now completely accepted that I will help him with his task, but about the dog there isn’t much I can do.

Guard dogs are trained not to pick up any food so I can’t make it go to sleep and I am definitely not a killer. In the end I decide that I have only the canine primal instinct to rely on and so I re-visit the stretch of bush land adjoining the hospital in an effort to find our secret weapon. When the day arrives I am equipped. A tied shoe box is the only package I will carry apart from two of my most reliable torches.

Liam has been preparing for days. He carries a backpack, but doesn’t reveal what is inside.

The only item he shares with me is a photo in a silver frame. Serene eyes that in the end refused to believe, a sweet smile which deceived all around her, including Liam. I don’t know when this picture was taken, but I sense that she knew she’d not have long although this is not a picture of sickness. No sunken eyes, bad skin or thin hair. It is the look in her eyes. Already enchanted by the other side. Seeing it already, while she is facing the camera.

The size of his pack makes me worried that we’ll be staying there for days, but he assures me it won’t take long.

When the sun sets we are once more, and I hope for the last time, struggling through lantana undergrowth, watching for the dog. The run between the nest of yellow caterpillars and the entry to the building becomes a run for life when the dog comes bounding from around the corner.
I fly through the doors, grateful for leaving them unlocked, pulling Liam in at the last moment.

The dog hits the door with a thud, barking furiously. Having seen us, he will continue barking, until the guard opens the door. Then we will be in serious trouble.

Our secret weapon has been deployed immediately. Before I lock the door from the inside, I release the black kitten through a small opening. The tone of the barking changes immediately, and I am not worried about its ability to defend itself and when the dog yelps in pain, taken by surprise, I know my assumption was correct. Through the crack in the door we can see the tiny kitten swiping its paws at his nose. Arching its back and hissing in fright, it protects itself well. It is also unlikely that this is their first encounter. The dog’s preoccupation leaves us safe behind the locked door.

Shaken by the experience we rest on the first landing, listening to the inter-species negotiations outside. Liam, in whom the responsibility for pacifying the spirits is vested, is now a little boy frightened by a dog. I extend my arm to comfort him but he withdraws immediately. By the time we start up the stairs his confidence is restored, can’t afford the luxury of being a small child for too long.

By the time we reach the second floor he is back in charge. Makes it clear he wants to be alone. We agree to meet on the landing after midnight.

"By the way," he says as we part, "If the guard should follow us here, there is no need for both of us to get caught. After I finish my duty here, I’d be ready to go back home anyway." "OK no heroics on my part," I promise,
hoping dearly that I will not need to make any such decision. The swing door creaks, the darkness claims him.

I continue to the next floor and the one above, making sure I visit the one I have missed previously. The dark hallways seem identical to those below, but the rooms are smaller, single and double rooms only. No large wards as far as I can see. The familiar smell of disinfectant lingers on even here. I imagine that if they ever built it, the cinema will also reek of it.

Tonight I am in no hurry. With a few hours to fill I can take my time. I am certain that each one of these rooms has a story to tell, a destination to visit.

When I release the switch in a dark narrow room, I sense a great resistance immediately. The beam leaps from side to side unwilling to settle. After a period of waiting I turn off the switch and move elsewhere.

When I open the door to the next room, I am welcomed by a sharp aroma which pervades the florist shops and stalls one day per year. The disinfectant, emptiness and mustiness, to which my nose has now became accustomed, is driven out by it, it is so strong I know I must search the room.

In the light of the torch I discover a large bunch of white chrysanthemums propped against the wall. The discovery leaves me breathless. Where did they come from?

They cling to the darkness the same way bunches of flowers hug telegraph poles, trees and rocks along the roads. In the city they grace the traffic light poles or street lamps, more and more of them appear each year. Some sites bearing more then one bunch, marking out more then one tragedy.

The flowers are replaced regularly, when the grief is strongest, with the passing of time the gaps in-between become longer, until only the
anniversaries are noted. The flowers and wreaths just appear, a ghost delivery. Do they come at night? Are they afraid of being charged with defacing of public property? Lately, I have seen even crosses, to permanently mark the site.

Where did the custom originated? Who placed the first wreath? Were flowers used to mark the sites where horse-drawn carriages crushed and riders fell? Or has the custom arrived more recently? From lands where the roads are lined with shrines and offerings are plentiful?

Is it an attempt to humanise the destructive power our roads have assumed? A spontaneous expression to identify the place where the soul takes leave of the body, amidst sirens and petrol fumes. A new ritual for a society driven by speed.

The flowers in this room are fresh, could not have been placed here more then two days ago. That means that Liam is not alone, others come to share their grief and communicate with the spirits of their loved ones.

When I point the beam on the white petals it finds an entry so fast, I don’t even have a chance to focus my mind. By the time I realise what is happening my body is dissolving, my mind has already moved on.

A woman-like figure in front of me wears a long white dress and floats above the ground with the ease of those unburdened by gravity. A white shawl covers the head and shoulders, her face is obscured by the shawl and by the way she moves. Even when turning around to beckon to us, her face is not revealed, only a hint of fine features and long hair.

The beam clings to her heels, afraid she will drift away at the first sign of a breeze. She, however seems to have no intention of going without us. On
the contrary, she stops, waving for us to follow. It takes time for me to realise that the gestures can't be intended for us. She can no more see me then she can see an individual speck of dust floating in the ray of sunshine, the encouragement must be intended for someone else, someone behind us. I wish the beam would stop and step aside, but it continues to replicate her movements. When she stops, we stop. She sets out again, we follow.

After some time I hear steps behind us. They stop each time we do, linger on when we start again. Stop and wait. Wait and start. In the pauses I hear their uncertainty, their lengthy deliberations. No matter how long it takes for them to re-start, the guide waits patiently. Her gestures become more sweeping and expansive, embracing not only the follower but the whole countryside. Making it impossible to escape her reach.

Shrouded from head to toe, the figure incites a sense of mystery. I imagine her offering knowledge beyond the ordinary. It may be this promise that keeps the steps behind us following.

The path we follow contours a grassy hill. Neither climbing to the top nor descending to the valley below. It is rocky and hard to find amidst the tufts of grass and rocks. In due course it disappears altogether. The guide never wavers her direction, heading down the hill across a treeless plain. A winding river at the bottom of the valley appears to be our destination. Dark and slow flowing it inspires a sense of awe and possibly fear.

Her movements change their rhythm. Becoming more impatient, her steps now move faster. She is almost running, the beam and I are having a difficult time to keep up. The steps behind us grow more hesitant and soon disappear altogether.
By the time we descend to the riverbank she has reached a wooden boat tied to a tree. Watching her deftly untie the rope, I realise that her ethereal quality is gone, replaced by determination and purpose; she can't wait to cross the river.

The beam finally steps aside, not prepared to board the boat. From the distance, the sound of the steps re-emerges. By now they are fast, loud and unquestioning. They too are eager to board the boat. With the sound coming nearer a young man appears. His eyes are fixed on the figure stepping into the boat; the expression in his face is ecstatic. It is the expression of a runner who has achieved his goal after a gruelling race.

She pushes the boat into the stream with a long pole; he boards with a leap from the river bank. When he rushes by me I can see his face, to my surprise I recognise it.

His photo appeared on the front pages of all of the newspapers for so many days it etched its way into my brain. Almost two years ago. A story of a young man whose great grandfather arrived four generations ago to work the Gold fields. Didn't strike gold, but established a traditional herbs and medicine business. Cured many of his countrymen and anyone who trusted his knowledge. Never returned to his native land but continued the trade; the business prospered.

Four generations later, his great grandson was studying to be a doctor when he was assaulted in the park. Stayed in coma for weeks, the whole city awaiting his return. He never came back, just slipped away in the end.
His attackers were younger than he, but greater in numbers. Their defence aroused as much debate as the murder itself. "Protecting this country against people like him."

I watch him accept the outstretched hand as he precariously balances on the fast moving boat. As the guide's arm extends toward him, the sleeves slide up, revealing strong muscular forearms. Within seconds the boat is only a white speck against the dark expanse of the water. We leave soon after.

On my return to the hospital, I search each room, looking for further evidence of secret lives; I am not disappointed.

Here is spilt candle wax, there a dried posy of miniature yellow roses. A small tray filled with fine sand and white pebbles, china bowl containing the remnants of rice. Burned bits of red paper money, a forgotten incense and a floor sprinkled with white crystals which on closer examination turn out to be salt.

If illuminated, each one may tell a story of illness, a grief, and a way of coming to terms with it. A store of rituals this city never came to terms with, although they form an essential part of its daily existence. The most convincing find I make, is a string of yellow amber beads on the floor of one of the hallways, the kind that some priests use during service.

How many people journey here in spite of the security, the fence and the dog? How many more wish to but don't dare?

By the time I hear the tune and see the light of candles playing hide and seek with his shadow, I am not surprised. The photo frame on a small makeshift altar, a bowl of food and numerous carefully wrapped packages. In
the centre of it all a small kneeling figure, eyes closed, a tin whistle at his lips.

He plays one tune after another, broken only by an occasional short speech. I can’t understand the words. It may be a prayer, a poem or just a chat about the people she knew. When his words stop, his music starts.

Unnoticed, I sit myself in a doorway, drawn in by the haunting quality of the tunes. The music, like smooth coloured silk encircles me, layer upon layer, each one more enchanting. Soon, I find myself unable to move, wrapped in a silky cocoon, separated from reality. The music promises to carry me elsewhere. I am not falling asleep; I am not flying the light beam. This is a new experience and I gladly surrender to it.

The layers of the silk thicken. Time ceases to exist. When a thought manages to slide through the silky inertia I respond in surprise. Persistently nagging it succeeds in awaking my conscience. In order to resist the temptation I must shake off my drowsiness and take a firm stand. “No, definitely not!” I push the torch further into my pocket and resolutely walk away, leaving Liam to finish his task unobserved.
My father's orange backpack

My father's orange backpack in front of me bobs up and down in the steady rhythm of his carefully measured steps. The incline is steep with yet another wall of rocky cliffs ahead of us. Thankfully, the afternoon sun now bathes the tops of the cliffs, leaving us in the shadows. I suspect that before we will be able to stop for the night we must descend into the gully to find a flat ground to pitch the tent.

The predatory branches snap their prickles at my bare legs and arms, punishing me for intruding into their territory. They shouldn't bother, I am not happy about being here either. Having lost our track a couple of days ago, we have climbed up and down deep gorges, scaled rocky outcrops and struggled through some pretty dense scrub. It is clear that we will not be back home by the end of the weekend as planned.

The vine digs its thorns into my skin every time I get entangled in its snares; I am bruised and scratched all over. I alternate between being scared by my father's inability to get us out of here and being strangely elated by the thought of dying here. No one is likely to find our bodies, for ever.

My pack gets heavier as the day progresses despite the fact that all our food is gone and my father had taken out most of the heavy stuff. My legs are aching and I am desperately waiting for our next break. "Can we stop?" I shout. The orange pack continues moving on.

Until he gave up smoking, the breaks used to be called smokos. He'd pull out a pouch of Drum tobacco and carefully roll one of his thin cigarettes, inhaling deeply and slowly.
These days we share a bottle of water instead, but the breaks are further apart and much shorter. It doesn't take much time to have a drink, does it?

In his patched up khaki shorts, old Volley sand shoes and threadbare flannelette shirt, my father is a sight not to be missed. I know many of my old school mates would kill to see him like this.

Every time he pulls his gear out of the wardrobe my mother falls into fits of uncontrollable laughter. The transformation from a school principal into rugged bushwalker is not complete without his floppy canvas hat and an oilskin jacket which fills the room with a mixture of campfire smoke and linseed oil each time it is unrolled.

I stumble behind my father and wish Becky did not have her rehearsal and David did not pike out at the last minute. My father might have chosen another part of the wilderness area to explore, and maybe we would not have become lost.

Our simple camping and fishing trips had become more adventurous and demanding since I entered the high school. These days he chooses the wilderness instead of the safety of nearby parks and reserves. Becky and I usually accompany him on these trips, David prefers to stay at home.

My mother never comes with us. She finds the Australian bush a scary place, still pining for the orderly feel of the European coniferous forests. Filled with prickles and thorns, cobwebs, bull ants and the ever-present silent snakes, the bush is as alien to her as when she arrived. She loves to listen to the birds from the safety of her rubber backed picnic rug spread out not far from the car.
The orange pack at his feet, he finally stops when consulting the map. I am sure he won't tell me the truth, but I can read it in his eyes. Lost as we can be, failing once again to correlate the map contours with the reality surrounding us. He takes his time. Finally he pin points a spot on the map. The cliff line to the west, the blue line of the river in the south east direction. In between lines and lines of gullies and creeks to cross. With a pen he draws a small circle directly below a cliff line.

"We are here! If we make it through this gully and follow the creek to the river, we should be able to get out tomorrow."

I am dumbfounded by his announcement. Two days of navigation and the only way out he can find, is to follow the most rudimentary rule of bush craft. "Follow a watercourse no matter how small. It will eventually lead you to a river, which in turn will end up flowing through a farm land, and civilisation."

A basic theory which doesn't take into account the difficulties of scaling down waterfalls, crossing gullies and inaccessible ridges which are unavoidable. We could be still looking for the river in weeks to come. My stomach is empty and I know that the only food left are a couple of tins of baked beans for dinner tonight. He watches me carefully. "Can you think of a better way out?" Maybe I should have taken more notice of the map, consulted the compass, maybe. I look at him and shake my head. He smiles back. "Cheer up, we'll get out!"

"Sure dad." I comfort myself with the thought that when we fail to return tonight, my mother will raise the alarm and eventually we'll be rescued. How embarrassing!
Back on our feet, the backpack is once again ahead of me, skipping above the prickly bushes, oblivious to their thorns.

We are heading down a steep slope, to the gullies below. The dry eucalyptus giving way to more lush and less prickly vegetation of the shady gullies. Protected from the heat of the summer sun, they thrive in the cool and moist air.

When I finally climb over the mossy boulders which separate me from the creek, I realise that my spirits have already risen to the cliffs above us. By the time I catch up, my father is already resting by a water hole. Not deep enough to swim in, but I wade in nevertheless. Only knee high at its deepest, the icy water provides instant relief to all of my scratches and sore feet.

Reading the map once again, my father is visibly pleased with the progress we have made. As usual he tries to explain his strategy. He believes that these trips to the bush will develop our basic survival skills. I am far too tired to concentrate and only pretend to pay attention. Finally he concludes. “Let’s follow downstream. At the first suitable spot we’ll stop and call it a day.” As we set off again I take a glimpse at my watch. Four o’clock sharp.

Two hours, one waterfall, a fall from a slippery boulder which left me with a nasty gash on my leg, and five red belly black snakes later, we stop.

The deep canyon into which we have descended via the waterfall, suddenly widens, and a grassy flat comes into sight. This is our campsite for the night, looks pretty, certainly one of the nicest I have experienced so far.

Too tired to move I watch him set up. He seems positively happy, not a care in the world. I hear him whistling as he drives one tent peg after another into the ground. Isn’t he worried about not seeing them again?
Scared of dying here of hunger and exhaustion, snakes crawling over his body? Obviously not, but I am terrified.

Thinking about it, this is not the first time we have been lost. It is the first time though that we won't return home at all. I recall one trip last summer, when we were saved from walking in a wrong direction by a chance meeting with another walking party. Or the time when his short cut added a few extra hours to our return. I chuckle to myself at the story my mother repeats at every opportunity. My father missing my first day at his school due to his delay on his solo trip to the mountains.

I understand why my mother looks relieved each time one of us decides not to go. At least some of us will have the chance to survive.

His happiness is contagious. Having taken a short rest I offer to collect some wood for the evening fire. Eucalyptus all around, I have no problem finding small sticks, but I am after some bigger logs that would last us for a while. Without a saw or an axe, my quest is not an easy one. I find myself moving further away from the clearing, following the creek further downstream.

The flat camping site is contained by the stream on one side and a rocky outcrop on another. In the fast fading daylight I notice a peculiar shape of one of the protruding rocks. A large overhang which would provide a shelter from rain, should we need it. When I turn back towards our camp I resolve to return tomorrow and explore the rock.

The camp fire roaring high, my spirits now reached the clear sky, mingling with the stars. Apart from the tin of baked beans and some crackers
my father also found some packet soup and a block of chocolate. All in all
not a bad dinner for those who are supposed to be lost.

When I ask my father if the school is going to miss him tomorrow, he
takes his time to answer. Chews on the beans as if they were a tough piece of
steak, needing all of his attention. “I took the day off.” He finally mumbles
through yet another mouthful of beans. “Had so much time in lieu, they
asked me to take some of it now.” I take a deep breath. “How convenient!”
In the end I decide not to confront him with my suspicion.

Not much talking goes on between the two of us. A word or two and then
silence. It is a comfortable one though. One which comes from knowing that
in this place, we hear exactly the same whistle of the whip bird, screech of
the black cockatoos as they swoop over the valley and the evening breeze
prowling through the tops of the trees. No commentary is necessary.

The rest of the world is far away. Only the rocks the trees and the sounds
of the bush matter here. The evening chorus of birds has finished and only
those disturbed by their dreams or by a possum setting out for its nightly
forage, screech into the night. The crackle of burning wood and the gurgie of
the creek accompanies my father’s humming. Above the trees I watch the
stars, each one an opportunity to explore. As tired as I am, I decide that yet
another adventure is waiting for me.

Hearing his humming and seeing him poking the fire, I wish I could tell
him about all I have seen. Instead, I join in with the songs until the wood is
all gone and we retreat into our sleeping bags. In no time he is fast asleep.

Later on, I silently slip out of the sleeping bag again. One careful
movement after another, I stop in between, making sure he won’t be
disturbed. Luckily, the old canvas tent's door flaps tie with strings rather
then a zipper, making it possible for me to get out quietly. With one of my
oldest friends in hand I make my way through the dark in the direction of the
rocks I noticed earlier on. Far enough from the tent, I turn the light on,
relieved. The scattering sounds at my feet are only small lizards and not the
snakes I have already been bitten by in my imagination.

When I turn the light on, another starry night flashes through my mind.
My hands tremble recalling the pain and the misery I experienced then. My
legs refuse to move. The scream ringing in my ears finally breaks the
paralysis. I run back, tears streaming down my face.

He mumbles in his sleep as I shake him, to wake him up.

"Do you remember Brad? Whatever happened to him?" He is awake
instantly. In the light of torch he wipes my face, manoeuvres me back into
the sleeping bag; his arm around my shoulder is warm.

"Yeah, they found his body some time later, after another boy
disappeared. In the old stables. A guy from the school was charged. Will be
in jail for life. Your mother thought we should not tell you until you asked."

When he is asleep again I try to conjure up Brad's face but can't recall a
single feature. Sleep offers me a rescue from the confusion my father's words
created; my dreams discover the images I have unsuccessfully searched for
while awake. I see him again riding his bike laughing when I warn his about
his new friend.

A full sunshine and the smell of the camp fire greet me when I wake up. "I
thought you'd be asleep the whole day," my father jokes dishing out the breakfast.
A while later, with my stomach full of beans, I head for the direction of the rocky outcrop I had noticed the day before. The shape of the overhanging rock bears an uncanny resemblance to the lizard's head with an opening underneath its chin. I enter a dark cave. Bats, not pleased by my visit, fly out in force.

I pull a torch out of my pocket ready to investigate the interior of the cave. When I push the switch, a wall of hands confronts me. Varying sizes and shapes, fingers spread out, the thumbs of some, the most prominent. The outlines of the hands are the colour of earth, some barely distinguishable from the colour of the rock, others solid and clearly recognisable.

The spread out fingers have a mesmerising effect. Holding up this ancient rock, pushing against it, pressing it firm, moulding it into the shape of the open palm. Making sure it will not slip through the gaps between the open fingers.

There are no other pictures. Only the marking of the relationship between the people and the land.

To whom did these hands belong? How long since the last ones were added?

Where are they now?

I wonder if the beam will provide the answers. So far it does nothing to help me. It rests on a clearly identifiable print of a right hand, unmoving. I suddenly feel like an intruder. This is not an adventure, this is here and now. The law which dictated the position of each hand and determined whose hand was suitable, has laid a claim on this land. It is here unchallenged by the flow of time, waiting for the rightful owners to return. Obviously they do, given the clarity of some of the hand prints. A question driven by sudden concern enters my consciousness. What am I doing here? Have I broken some sacred rule by my intrusion into the cave? Will I be punished?

The hands supporting the rock suddenly seem to reach towards me, attempting to
pull me in. I step back to avoid their grip, step back and scream. When I see a dark silhouette against the light of the entrance I scream again. It rushes towards me, it is my father. I am frantic with fear, pointing at the hands; his words are reasoned and calm. “This is a public place, safe to visit.” When I calm down he carefully investigates the hands with his own torch and shakes his head. “We should be paying them rent, instead we don’t even give them a vote.”

When we walk back to the camp, he tells me about the referendum and the demonstrations he attends. Offers to take me one day, if I promise not to tell mother. “It is not that she disagrees, it is just that she is too afraid of any action, no matter how right it may feel. Goes back to her childhood.” I agree with him, thinking how strange that I do not recall ever meeting a real living Aboriginal. Don’t know any.
The solution

"The spirits are waiting for us to do something," Liam repeats each time he opens the fridge. Samira’s letter to Santa is a constant reminder.

After our last visit to the hospital I realised that Liam, more than anyone else I know, would understand about the spirits I have discovered there. I have told him the very next day and he was not surprised. His mother is there, so why not others but he is concerned for them. He helped his mother to move on but he thinks that many others are still waiting for the necessary rituals to help them along. That’s why they are there, he repeats over and over. "They have no one but us to help them. They will not be able to find their way to where they belong once the hospital is demolished."

We discuss our options constantly, but neither of us can come up with a suitable solution. Maybe we should just accept that these rituals happen in private and that’s where they should remain. Like my flights or Liam’s communication with his mother, some of them will continue regardless of the public acceptance of them.

"But what about the city?" we ask each time. "Shouldn’t it wake up to its spirits? To the private manifestations of the cappuccino, laksa and sushi cultures it now claims. They are part of its life now and will be so in the future. Something has to be done."

Some nights I wake up, my bones resembling solid blocks of ice. I know then that I had dreamt of the children trapped in the cold. They are reminding me that they are still waiting for my help.

The knowledge that there are others who watch the bulldozers with dread convinces me even further.
So who would seriously consider what we have to say? To whom can we turn for help? The Local Council? The Council officers and the elected representatives?

They approved the development of the site in the first instance. They’d do nothing which may delay or jeopardise the development. Hide behind their ordinances and regulations, claiming the need for housing in the inner city.

What about the State Government, would they consider anything we have to say? Most probably not unless a strong public pressure or fear of losing votes drives it. It seems so fashionable to close public facilities these days, the revenue gained from the sales of these sites alone keeps the books balanced.

The developers remain our only other option. But, are they really? One look at the medium density developments appearing all over the city and we know that we’d better look in a different direction. “Who else is there to help?”

When Liam suggests the media I feel that we have a chance. For a moment only. Until I visualise the headlines.

“A middle aged torch collector and a runaway schoolboy meet spirits in a closed down hospital!”

What an opportunity! The media would have a field day with us. Dig into my past and they’d discover things even I know nothing about. I hear the innuendoes, the accusations and the concerns. “No go!” I respond. “Not unless we are prepared to be someone else’s idea of a thrill.”

Each discussion ends up with the same arguments and no solutions. The yellow caterpillars grow hungrier with every passing day.
The answer presents itself to me one day when walking in the City.
Carried by a fast-moving stream of lunchtime shoppers along Pitt Street
Mall, a stationary crowd attracts my attention. “How curious.” It is not often
one sees so many people anchored to one spot at this time of the day.

This crowd appears spellbound. Like the characters from an ancient fairy
tale, they appear frozen inside a magic ring. The incongruity of the situation
attracts others, who in turn become statues.

“What’s going on?” I ask, already squeezing between the motionless
bodies. Closer to the middle, the crowd thickens. My polite requests
unheeded, I find myself shoving and pushing to get through. No one
responds.

The wall of frozen bodies creates an eerie silence, unheard of in this part
of town. Broken only by the sound of a tin flute, I have not heard since the
night in the hospital. The tune is joyful and lighter in mood, but equally
engaging and mesmerising. It fills me with a joy rarely experienced in the
middle of a working day.

I recognise the musician without seeing him. Struggling to get closer I too
become a statue. Like the courier on his push-bike, the public servants
caught in their flight to the midwinter sales or the legal pin stripe suit, her
arms brimming with papers. The broadcasting personality on his way to the
fitness studio, a group of Japanese tourists and a short order cook caught by
the spell while smoking outside. Even the parking attendant is here, the pen
and pad still in hand, oblivious to the passing of time. Statues of the city’s
life, frozen by the power of Liam’s music.
He is dressed in his usual way, the baseball cap is upturned awaiting donations. With his eyes closed, he seems unaware of the effect his music has on others. No one moves while he plays. "Which plane of existence is this music coming from?" I contemlate briefly before I too succumb to its magic.

When he finishes and places the flute on the ground next to him, our mobility returns. We stretch, awakened from a pleasant sleep. The shower of yellow coins fills the cap within seconds; he smiles and thanks in small bows.

The crowd disperses. Refreshed by the break, they continue on their journeys, he empties the cap and lifts his flute again. The passers-by, stop when the first bars reverberate in the midday air.

I hurry away, without him seeing me, realising that his music is a key to any action at the hospital. On the way home a strategy begins to take form in my mind.

Later on in the day I come up with a plan. He agrees to take a part. There isn’t much time left, the yellow caterpillars are already devouring the helipad.

We need people to come to the hospital site and send the spirits off in whichever way it may be most appropriate. It is as simple as that. Once we realise what has to be done, it takes us two days to come up with a workable plan.

Firstly we need a phone connection with a number by which we can’t be identified, a state of the art answering machine and access to a photocopier. We also need others to give us a hand on the day.
Liam takes care of the phone connection. He knows places where answering machines can be plugged in without being noticed. I buy the answering machine. When the time comes to get hold of the photocopier, we visit a charity helping homeless youth across the City.

We make an appointment with the Minister. Liam knows her, having helped there before. She is pleased to see him. In no time we feel safe to ask for help. She deals with the spiritual every day, we hope that she’d be more understanding then others in her profession. She listens with the skill of someone who does it often and well. As we predict, she is not surprised to hear about the spirits and she takes our side. “Those who secretly come and visit the site should have the opportunity to do so openly. They should be able to say good bye to those left behind.” However she is concerned that our plan won’t work. I am convinced she doesn’t believe we can organise it all. We discuss our plan, take her through each of the steps, explain what will happen. In the end she agrees to help and promises to spread the word once the time is right and of course she will come on the day.

We spend the following days researching the phone books and community directories covering Sydney and the suburbs.

Piles of addressed envelopes take over the living room. The mainstream press, the ethnic press, the suburban papers, the country papers. Ethnic radio, community radio, community organisations. The churches, mosques, temples and all other places of worship we can find. We search out doctor’s surgeries, health centres and nursing homes.

When I get overwhelmed by what we are trying to do and doubt the plan, Liam continues undeterred.” We can’t let them down” he persists with
determination and wisdom beyond his years. I feel ashamed by him and decide to continue.

I also realise that all of this activity is keeping me from brooding about the lost torch. A loss which seems more difficult to deal with, than I would have ever expected before.

Once we agree on our official name and photocopy hundreds of invitations, there is no going back. The night before the big mail-out we place the answering machine in an abandoned warehouse and go back to the hospital.

The bags heavy with candles and tools to pick the locks would make it difficult to run; luckily the dog is nowhere in sight.

Inside I memorise the most direct route to each of the side doors and to the front entrance. The front door is massive in size, but the locks are surprisingly easy to pick. I re-check the time and practice, getting faster each time. Precise timing is the essence of our plan. Having memorised the combinations, we leave all the doors as secure as we found them.

Liam distributes the candles along the window sills at the front of the building and along the main staircase making them as inconspicuous as possible. We hope that the few who visit these days will not notice them.

As a parting gesture we enlarge the lantana entrance; I don’t want to struggle through when we come next.

Once the invitations are distributed, our answering machine receives many calls. I am diligent at clearing it a couple of times a day, but the response is overwhelming. I return all calls barring those from the Local Council or the police.
I find myself repeating: “No, we are just a group of local citizens...yes, whatever ceremony is important to you...no, we are not planning to go inside... only on the front lawn...yes, there has been some interest shown... it is just a way of saying good bye... it is definitely not a demonstration about the hospital’s closure...yes, candles, incense, prayer, that sort of thing...only a small commemoration....”

Two letters stand out from the hundreds which we send. They set out in detail what we are attempting to do and ask for a specific help. One goes to a retired politician who still commands a great respect and vision. The second to the family of the young man whose journey beyond I have witnessed.

An invitation to talk on a radio show throws me into a state of panic. “Definitely not. We’ll be exposed as frauds and reduced to being perverts and cranks.” I explain to Liam again and again.

His response frightens me even more. “If you are scared, I will do it myself. I will tell them what needs to be done, I don’t care what they think.” He is adamantly and I feel obliged to reconsider. In the end, I change my mind completely, when he points out that the show may reach some of those we would have missed. His reasoning is alarmingly simple. “The more people we reach, the fewer spirits will remain unhappy.”

In the end, the Farewell Hospital Committee appears as reputable as the local Neighbourhood Watch, when I talk about it on the show. “In particular I’d like to thank the local butcher for being such a wonderful chair and a prominent writer being one of our most ardent supporters. I won’t mention names for obvious reasons, of course.”
I manoeuvre through the rest of the interview with the skill of a land mine detector, anticipating an explosion at every move I make.

To my surprise I am still in one piece at the end of it and judging by the reaction of the show host, my credibility is intact. I do hope that the numbers will increase because of my award-deserving performance and the local butchers
There was an excitement in my mother’s voice

There is an excitement in my mother’s voice that I haven’t heard before. Each morning she rushes into the news agency at opening time. When we get up she is already at the breakfast table reading the papers. Not one edition, but all of them. ABC radio is on at the same time so no news will escape her.

“It is spring there now,” she explains, showing us photos of people underneath the blossoming trees, listening intently to those speaking from podiums or makeshift platforms. Other photos show crowds dancing in the street, hands clapping, faces glowing with excitement.

“Things are changing very fast,” we are told one afternoon when we arrive from school. She is tuned into BBC broadcast of current affairs, recording it on our tape recorder at the same time. In front of her, spread out on the kitchen bench is a magazine she especially subscribed for. It arrives each month filled with the latest developments. Apart from her, none of us can read it, although I am becoming familiar with some faces on the photos, as she points them out to us over and over.

“This is the First secretary of the communist party, that one is the president, and here a member of the Parliament. This one is behind the reforms, this one needs to be watched, can’t be trusted.”

When the magazine arrives, my mother translates each article to my father. They spend night after night in the living room, she flushed with excitement, he cautious. Then comes an evening when she surprises us all.

“I may be able to go back. Back home” she adds making sure we fully understand. “They want exiles to return.” Her voice breaks with emotions,
eyes shine in a way that I have seen only when she told us about the good parts of her childhood.

My father's response is measured. "Let's not sell the house just yet. Big brothers don't give up easily."

I am concerned. Concerned, confused and feeling insecure. What does she mean by going back? Going alone or taking us? Going for good or just holidays? What if she likes it there and wants to stay?

I tell her I don't want to go. Her face loses its glow immediately. "It will be good for you. Need to know where you come from, it gives you strength."

My father's eyes warn me, so I leave it there. No point in getting into an argument. I know Becky is keen. She believes that they have the best theatres and dance schools. David is prepared to go if he can learn to ice skate and play ice hockey. I just can't see the point there is nothing in it for me.

On the other hand, what if she decides to leave us behind? And whose big brother is my father talking about? Her brother is dead. Died as a kid during the war.

I thought she'd left it all behind. It never occurred to me that she might consider going back. Not after what they did to her and her family.

A vision of a bonfire glowing savagely in the dark, flashes in my mind and I am suddenly scared for her to go. After all these years, surely her home is here, with us.

When I ask her about it some time later, she smiles. "You can't understand it my darling, one day you will. Just remember, I'd never leave you behind." She means to reassure me, but I remain concerned.
The piles of newspapers take over every kitchen surface. She spends every evening in cutting and pasting. Articles in both English and her language fill one scrap book after another. The number of recognisable faces and funny sounding names grows each week. "We are witnessing a historical event," she repeats each time I dare to question the point of it all.

My father too gets carried away by her enthusiasm. Twice a week on his way from school he detours through the Town Hall station to collect the Guardian in order to "get a balanced point of view."

I truly wish she'd give up this latest obsession and go back to piano playing and cake making.

"Why are you so excited about some demonstrations thousands of miles away? There are no different from the demos happening here. And you never attend those!"

I argue with her but the difference is already obvious to me. I don't really need her explanation. I have experienced it already. Without her knowledge of course.

One day after school I saw a crowd in the streets and decided to have a look. People marching down the street with banners and slogans. "No more Vietnam! Down with conscription!"

I was feeling quite excited until the police started to beat up everyone and panic ensued. Being on the edge of the crowd, the police got to me fast. Next to me a man with long dark hair and a placard in hand made an easy target. Three of them went for him. Hands yanking his hair, batons bouncing off his body. All happening so close to me I am not sure how I escaped. All I know is that I ran my personal best while they dragged him away.
That night, I watched it on the news. Petrified that any moment my face
would be there, for everyone to see. Felt sick from the fear of being
recognised. Nothing escapes my mother.

I closed my eyes to hide the fear. My mother leapt to her feet and placed
her hand over my eyes. “Do turn it off. Just look at the poor child. Trembling
all over and as white as a ghost.” To my relief, the TV was switched off and
no more was said.

Demonstrators and police are on the opposing sides here, ready to collide
at any time. Back there, the photos and news clips show the police and the
demonstrators on the same side. Clapping their hands, singing songs,
shouting slogans. They are all supporting something mother calls “Socialism
with a human face.” A better way of government.

My father remains unconvinced. “This is a political experiment and it is
likely to fail. Just remember the big brother.” She chases him around the
kitchen with a tea towel in hand. “You disbelieving Thomas. Just give them a
chance.” She is happy and he lets himself get caught easily, demanding a
fair trial. When they adjourn into their bedroom I feel more concerned.

With all of the scrap books and the newspaper constantly around me, I
decide to use them to research my History project. Mr Simmonds wants us to
work from lessons learned through history into the present. The scrapbooks
and the cuttings are the perfect resource, saving me time in the library.

What is my hypothesis? Where is all of this activity going to end up? Will
it be a success or a failure?

I cut out a map of the country. It seems so insignificant in comparison
with its bigger and more powerful neighbours. But its central position makes
it strategically important. No wonder that one empire after another tried to grab it, wanting a piece of it.

My mother is pleased when I ask for help with the historical information. She starts with the first King. His statue on a horse overlooks the main square in the capital city. She tells me an old legend. “When the nation falls upon its hardest times, when it is overrun by enemies and there is no fighting spirit left, the King will ride out of a nearby mountain with an army by his side. An army so powerful that the enemies will drop their weapons and surrender.”

I laugh and tease her. “Where was this King during all previous wars? Where was he when you needed him?” She shrugs her shoulders and continues with her history lesson.

There is no way I’d ever mention the sleeping king in my project. I can see my classmates really appreciating it. Guess who’d be called the “sleeping king” forever after?
Item 117-Dazzler

This one is clearly marked “Australian made”, while so many others have no identifiable place of manufacture. As a general rule, I am not interested in their origins only in their ability to travel.

My collection has developed from information gleaned from the junk stall holders at markets and garage sales, rather than books and collectors manuals. Occasionally my torches have their country of origin or the name of the manufacturer engraved on their body. It is than that I accept it as an important aspect of their identity.

“Dazzler” is one of those. The name is not actually engraved, but still visible on a red label attached to it. It is a war torch, used during the blackouts. Its metal body and switch are painted black to become invisible in the dark, even the reflector has been hidden behind a black rubber shade. Unfortunately, I believe that as a result of years of disguising its true personality, this is not a happy light.

The beam is troubled and self conscious, pale yellow, with a weak flow of particles. Some may call it “laid back,” but I feel that the years of hiding have permanently damaged its self esteem. No amount of encouragement will make it stronger. The beam is narrow and is capable of reaching long distances, but its weakness doesn’t make for a great travel. It takes a long time to reach its destination and will not be hurried.

At times I get worried that we will end up stranded between here and somewhere else, unable to return. That the flow of electrons will cease, our return route cut off. So far we have always made it back but I worry nevertheless.
I use it, when a situation calls for caution, and for as little light as possible. Although Dazzler is a purely utilitarian piece, I admit that I also find its simplicity and austerity aesthetically appealing.

This is the only torch I received as a present from my father. Before he decided that torch collecting was a vice he should discourage.

He claimed to have used it during the war, but with so many of his war time activities happening overseas I doubt that he would have carried it with him from here to there and back again. I asked my grandfather. “It looks like the one I used on the railways during the war” he said shaking his head.

This is the one I always take along for walking trips with my father. Hoping that one day, sitting by the crackling fire, he’ll notice it and I’ll be able to tell him about my flights. So far it has never happened.

The song of this beam reminds me of the bell birds one hears while travelling in the car through the bush and surrounding Sydney. Elusive. Their songs ring strong and clear over the purring of the car engine but when one stops on the side of the road to listen, they all disappear. Dazzler’s song is the same. There one moment and gone the next. It doesn’t present its invitation twice.
It was August

It is August and the winter winds blow hard from the South. Outside my window the trees sway in the cold providing welcome distraction from the History project. So far I have covered the historical background, the current political situation and only the conclusion still remains to be done. I grapple with it for some time and finally I decide that I should try to carry out my own investigation.

Luckily, soon after I make the decision, David and Becky stay out for the night leaving me the bedroom all to myself. Such opportunities are still rare and I must take an advantage of them when they arise.

During the day I have secretly collected a few items which I hope may provide me with an entry point to the "old country." A cut crystal wine glass, a hand painted plate and half empty bottle of herbal liqueur. A doll dressed in a traditional costume and my mother's magazines complete the collection. I pile them all on the bed, hoping that they will entice the beam to explore.

To select the torch is easy. A gift from a friend of my mother; I hope it will be glad to return for a visit. It may be homesick and ready to go back. I haven't used it yet. Tried, but it won't invite me. I am prepared to give it another go.

When I push the switch, the yellow beam proceeds slowly and cautiously. It follows the contours of the objects, hides in dark recesses in between. It doesn't rush as others do; it seems to lack the strength to travel anywhere at all. I wait for it to make up its mind, afraid of scaring it by my impatience.

The familiar sounds behind the wall let me know I have plenty of time at my
disposal. I surround myself with cushions and blankets, prepared for a long wait.

Some time later, my attention is aroused by the beam's sudden effort. It is all but hidden underneath the magazine pages. I focus my mind. Most beautiful song reaches my ears. I am so eager to leave, I step into the yellow light even before I am fully dissolved. The beam also seems in a hurry now. We move fast. After a short time, I feel the ground beneath my feet again.

A clear summer night, the dark is punctured by the stars above. I search for the familiar constellations, this is not a southern sky. The darkness surrounding us has a flowing and an expansive feel, stretching on forever.

The ground feels hard and smooth, the way a concrete floor or a bitumen surface is. The beam explores open space in one direction and then another. After a moment it locates a row of reflector lights and white lines on the ground, the expanse of darkness is divided into wide parallel strips, stretching ahead towards a glow in the distance.

We follow the lines until dark outlines of buildings appear on the horizon and the markings on the ground diversify; lines now appearing on both sides.

When we stop to decide what to do next, a terrible noise interrupts our deliberation. I am paralysed by the speed with which it bears upon us; accompanied by a blaze, the intensity of which immediately annihilates the beam. With no time to react, we are swept into the centre of the blaze by what appears to be a sudden gale. We are thrashed in all directions, sucked inside of a giant wave.
As suddenly as it appeared, the roar and the blaze start to abate; without warning we find ourselves spat onto firm ground. The roar and the blaze continues ahead.

Stunned, I watch the roaring shadow disappear into the distance, barely aware of small red lights marking the outline of the beast. Before the vague idea has a chance to become a fully fledged thought, we are once again swept into the vortex of another wave. It rolls over us, swallows and digests us only to spit us out moments later, more battered than before.

I am not sure how much more I can endure. My concern is shared by the beam and as we hear another wave approach the beam takes decisive action. It leaps to our right, way beyond the stationary red lights, out of the path of the roaring beast. I follow. We are still lifted off the ground by the gale force updraft, but the beast passes by rather then rolling over us and sucking us in. Only now, seeing it from the sidelines its nature becomes apparent.

A large aeroplane landing and heading toward an airport terminal in the distance. For the next while we witness one plane after another bearing down from the night sky at precariously short intervals roaring past us and disappearing in the distance. Once our confidence is restored, we too approach the terminal, making sure we stay off the currently used runway.

When we are close enough, the level of activity in and outside of the terminal is surprising. Each landed plane is directed onto a side lane by a soldier. A jaw like opening drops from the plane's belly the moment it stops. A row of armoured cars and tanks descend the ramp onto the tarmac. They are efficiently moved behind the terminal and out of the airport. Each landing and emptying of cargo is executed with astonishing precision.
The cars and tanks are filled with soldiers, their guns at ready. They leave the airport only minutes after their planes land.

The beam is twitching to investigate further. Beyond the confines of the airport, into the city itself. With the lightening of the sky on the horizon, the city's skyline is becoming clearly visible. A sleeping city.

Having resolved to move on, the beam hitches a ride on one of the armoured carriers. As it scans the hard carapace of the armoured car, it reveals a red five pointed star. Upon seeing it, I immediately recall my father's comments. Now I have the answer to my questions. I know who the big brother is. The five pointed star, each point a dagger to pierce the hearts, to deflate the spirit of freedom which so excited my mother.

But what am I doing here? Why am I participating in this collective nightmare? I have no doubt that this is a nightmare. The inhabitants will wake up with relief, glad that their capital city is still free and their national borders are intact. May be the dream will spur them on to fight harder to keep their freedom during the day.

The carrier, on which the beam and I are riding, passes through the last check point prior to leaving the airport. A grey suit steps out from the group of soldiers standing by and climbs into the car next to the driver. Words are exchanged in a military barked defying any language. The doors shut with a bang as we move out into the street, following closely behind the tanks.

Our convoy negotiates its way through the outskirts of the city. Occasionally some carriers separate at an intersection to head in a direction of their own.
Three and four story blocks of flats with balconies strewn with washing are interspersed with family villas surrounded by gardens. The outline of a castle overlooking the city reminds me of my mother's stories. The street lamps are still on, but the daylight is already imposing its will over the city. Shadowy figures behind the curtains of lit windows are getting ready for the day ahead.

Those on the streets witness the progress of the convoy with puzzled looks but no alarm. "Just another army exercise," I hear someone say.

I am rattled by the constant jerking of the car and wish the beam would decide to abort the journey.

The day fully breaks by the time the convoy enters the city centre.

Progress slows considerably now as the streets here are filled with people. Many carry the look of those not yet ready to be here. Others are fully awake; awake and angry. They line the streets gesticulating profusely, some shake fists, others make obscene gestures. Their faces reflect fear, confusion and hatred.

I almost lose my grip when a group of onlookers leap toward the car and bang their fists against the metal panelling. They grip the slippery steel, shake the car from side to side. The engine stalls, the growling ceases.

The soldiers inside cower, their guns on the floor beside them. The grey suit is hiding his face, frantically attempting to communicate over the radio system. The angry hands search for an opening in the smooth steel; the officer from the tank ahead barks orders. His voice is cutting. An order to move the carrier. The driver re starts the engine and shifts it into a gear ignoring bodies clinging to its sides. Those lingering in its path flee within
seconds of being crushed by its wheels. I hear the first shots fired; they step back initially, then stumble hastily over the fallen bodies. Those close to the vehicles try to retreat but others are pushing forward from the streets behind. Panic and confusion reins. From my position at the top of the carrier I see the soldiers ready to fire again. "Run!" I shout at those closest to the car, forgetting that none will hear me.

Despite the gun-fire, the soldiers themselves appear unwilling to follow orders; I can read in their faces my mother's history lesson.

They expected a different welcome. Their fathers liberated this city a quarter of century ago. They don't want to be the enemy; their ears are not shut to the sounds from outside, voices speaking their own language, questioning their presence in the city. They hesitate when the orders come and only reluctantly follow after the officers yell again and again.

By the time we reach the centre of the city, the crowds are everywhere. They carry placards and national flags soaked in blood. When I notice the statue of a horse-rider surrounded by burning candles and wreaths, I feel that I too belong here.

As I look around I am amazed at the sudden change. The contorted faces of the onlookers say it all. They are different from those captured by the photographers only a short time ago. Faces from which my mother read the hope of return. Now they reflect hopelessness and despair.

What can I do? What can anyone do? How do bare hands stop a tank or divert a bullet? Surprisingly, they do. They push themselves against the metal bodies in their hundreds, climb on, rattle the steel and the nerves of the soldiers. The officers shout orders and wave guns in their faces; more
rounds of fire follow. In the middle of the ensuing chaos, the beam decides to leave; I find myself crying as I follow its lead.
The event

From the top window of the hospital I can see them gathering in the fading light. Families arriving with bundles of food, candles, children in strollers, grandparents on walking frames. Some are dressed in their Sunday best, others casually with picnic hampers in hand. They are filling the open spaces fast, spreading their rugs, stools and shrines of all description.

From my elevated position I can see the guards standing where the boom gate used to be. Increased in numbers, but friendly enough. The tall figure of an orthodox priest is in a deep conversation with a similarly black coated Rabbi; an elderly woman wipes her eyes as she lights a tall candle she’s brought. Some of the large pepper trees along the walls have already been transformed into miniature ancestry shrines with families gathering in front of them. The sound of clapping sticks and the smell of eucalyptus smoke drifts past my window. More people are making their way into the hospital grounds through the main gate. The turn up is exceeding all of our expectations.

It is then that I notice her face. Walking from the direction of the car park, she enters the glow of the candles. Despite the shadows and the dark I recognise the face which I have seen for the first time only recently. Dark short hair, eyes squinting in an effort to place a correct bid. I’d recognise her anywhere. Now she looks relaxed; smiling while chatting to her companion; he is walking in the shadows, I can’t see him clearly.

My immediate reaction is to drop everything and run downstairs; she is my only lead to the torch. A second later, my rational mind asserts itself.

“Calm down, can’t leave the business unfinished.” I watch her slowly move
out of my field of vision, memorising the cut of her white striped shirt and the shape of the large beads in her necklace. I hope to find her in a little while.

I check my watch; 2 minutes to 6 pm. Without seeing the main entrance I know what is about to happen. The sudden stillness of those visible in the reflection of the many candles, tells me that Liam, dressed in white pants and shirt, has started his performance. I have exactly ten minutes to complete my task while everyone is spellbound by his performance. I run down the stairs, strategically placing flowers and candles. I remember the "visitor’s book" and place the stand directly behind the main entrance.

Next I deftly pick the locks of the front door; all is going according to plan. When I ascend I light the candles lining the stairs. At last, with only a minute to go I light the candles on the window sills and inside the empty rooms. When the music stops, I know the people will come forward. The guards will be surprised and uncertain but they will not take action, not after his music.

With Liam’s help the big door swings open. There is no pushing, no hurry. Just a quiet determination to do what has to be done. When I hear the first footsteps reaching the top I know it’s time for me to retreat. I run downstairs through the hallways and back corridors and out into the lantana undergrowth. Liam is waiting there already, unable to hide his excitement.

"Did you see them when they saw the candles on the stairs?"

Changed into his ordinary clothes he is ready to go back. I have another news for him.
“She is here” I shout impatiently. “I’ve seen her on her way from the car park. I am positive its her.”

He doesn’t understand at first, but once I explain he listens carefully. When I describe her shirt, the beads and the fact that she is not alone, his excitement grows; he rushes ahead of me propelled by the same urgency to find her.

Within minutes we re-enter the scene of our crime. People are still arriving from all directions despite the dark. Old, young, whole families, couples and singles. As we enter the front lawn, TV crew stops us for an interview. I want to push past them, but change my mind on the second thought.

Surely extra five minutes won’t make that much difference. When I talk to the camera I feel like a seasoned actor. “Yes we heard about it on the radio. Yes our relative died here. So many people are obviously attached to this place. Maybe a small public garden should be created here, to remember those who died here.” The crowd around me agree and clap their hands by the time I finish.

After the interview we separate, agreeing to look out for each other if either of us finds her. I practically run up the stairs to search all of the rooms and halls. I rush through them and soon I find myself lost in the labyrinth of the shadows and the patches of light.

Each room is occupied by people performing a ceremonies of one kind or another. I hear chants and prayers in different languages, songs and recitations echoing through the halls. The glow of candles, incense and small
lanterns reveal flowers and presents brought as offerings. Some cry, others laugh or just sit silently with their memories.

Many white shirts glow in the dark, each one igniting a glimmer of hope, only to be extinguished by reality. I revisit room after room, floor after floor. I search downstairs, walk outside, return inside. The shadows grow thicker as the candles burn out and people start to leave. Four hours later I am ready to admit defeat.

She might have been a mirage, created by the power of Liam’s music; only another spirit belonging to the site. Finally I concede to myself that the time has come to go home. I am not concerned about Liam, I know he’ll be back when he is ready.

On the way downstairs, for the last time, I sign the visitor’s book. While doing so I feel a burden lifting.

Outside, crowded by television crew the retired politician speaks to the media.

"Years ago my government opened the gate. Since then people from all corners of the world called this country their home. We have become a nation of many. But numbers are not enough for a nation to grow. We have not yet come to terms with the owners and the spirituality of this land. A public acknowledgement of pain, grief and sorrow is as important as are the victories we publicly celebrate. What we are seeing here tonight is a reminder of the issues we have been neglecting so far..."

I don’t need to hear any more. My job here is done. I am certain that the spirits will not flounder after tonight.
When I reach home I am not surprised that Liam has not yet returned. I imagine he’d be busy communicating with his mother, so I decide to go to bed.

Her face appears in my dream. She walks hand in hand with a young boy whose face I recognise, but can not place. They laugh and run away from me.

I wake up calling my mother's name and wandering about the significance of the dream. The picture of the boy's face keeps me intrigued and awake. The clock shows 4 am when I get up. To my surprise the door into Liam's bedroom is opened and the room is empty. His bed strewn with the clothes he left behind before we left. I wait till the morning. He doesn't show up.
I was lifted and carried away

I am lifted by the beam and carried away from the deafening sounds of gunfire. The flight is short, hardly a flight at all; more like a short detour. The ensuing silence makes me wonder if my trip is over and I am back home.

Instead I find myself standing inside a dark tunnel illuminated by burning torches mounted on the wall. The floor is slippery where the water seeps through the rock. The dripping of the water is the only sound permeating the silence.

Behind a bend the tunnel widens into a cavernous hall, it is far from empty: the floor is strewn with bodies. Some lie on their backs, others are half sitting propped against each other. The empty silence is replaced by the palpable sounds of sleep.

The beam scans the bodies, revealing their various stages of undress. Scattered around is the sort of clothing I have seen only in historical books and films. Swords, helmets, breast plates and iron gloves, chain link vests and undergarments of various kinds.

I wonder how many they are. Where are the horses and who is their leader? The beam is also curious and we move through the hall avoiding the sleeping bodies until we find another opening on the opposite side. Without hesitation we walk through only to enter another hall. The picture is identical; so is the next and the one after that. By now I am looking for the King, convinced that he must be somewhere near.

After a while even the beam doesn't bother any more. It moves us directly from one hall to another, ignoring the sleeping bodies. We have seen thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of the sleeping soldiers; bodies
oblivious to our entry and of the historical occasion they are about to participate in.

I hope that this collective nightmare I have been drawn into, will end with the intervention of the good King, once we find him and the nightmare will transform into a happy dream.

The beam is growing frustrated by our search; its movements grow less co-ordinated as it scans one hall after another. It rushes in and out, not even searching any more.

"We are wasting our time here. Let's go back to the streets." My suggestion meets with no response. The beam doesn't even slow down, if anything it moves faster.

Soon after, the hall we enter next is recognisably different. Free of soldiers, it houses a couple of pieces of furniture and a stretcher. A carved wooden chair, a table covered with armoury, clothes and wine goblets. On the stretcher a figure covered by a red cloak bearing insignia embroidered in gold thread.

The beam proceeds to investigate the figure beneath the cloak. A grey beard, grey wavy hair. His undershirt is made of soft material embroidered on his chest. The King. He sleeps silently, his breathing slow and regular. When I notice his eyelids flicker, I wonder what he dreams about.

The beam settles on his face, shining directly into his closed eyes. It moves quickly back and forth attempting to wake him. No success. It follows his gaunt cheeks, saddles under his nose and in the last effort it focuses on his partially opened lips. No response. I stretch my arm to tug at his sleeve.
but remembering the futility of such a gesture I yell instead. “Your majesty, your highness, wake up; your nation needs you.”

It doesn’t matter what language I use; it never occurs to me that he might not understand. I shout again, this time even louder. No response. I am just about to give up when he opens his eyes. They are blue grey. He stares directly into the beam.

A moment later, he stretches his arms above his head and finally sits up. Rummages inside of the cloak’s large pocket and pulls out an oval shaped mirror. The gold frame is studded with coloured stones the handle intricately carved. The beam immediately settles on the mirror’s frame urging me to follow for better viewing.

Warmth engulfs us as he breathes on to the polished surface, fogging it completely. With the sleeve of his undershirt he lovingly wipes the mist away, gazes into its clear glass, waiting for an image.

Our view from the edge of the mirror is unrestricted and clear. A familiar street scene appears. Burning tanks, wounded people, bodies wrapped in national flags, statues and walls draped in slogans, poems and cartoons.

With a frown he blows and polishes again, recalling another image. His statue covered in snow, surrounded by wreaths and burning candles. A banner underneath the horses hoofs proclaims: “Freedom won’t be killed!” The tanks are gone, the daily life of the street is back to normal. Warmly dressed passers-by rush past.

The view focuses on one particular figure. A young man walking unhurriedly towards the statue. His slow movements contrast with those of others sharing the winter street. Next to the statue, his movements become
brisk. He empties a container full of liquid over his jacket and strikes a match. No one has the chance to act before a wall of flames engulfs him. A human torch illuminating the statue.

The King drops the glass in shock; the beam and I jump in fright. In the mirror people rush in from everywhere; fighting the flames, assisting the arrival of an ambulance.

With shaking hands, the King again wipes the mirror surface. Rows of police dressed in riot gear confront lines of people shouting slogans. The atmosphere is explosive. The police step in, their truncheons swinging high. The King instinctively covers his head. Desperate for a different view he wipes the mirror with a fast motion.

We are back at the square. The statue of the king overlooks crowds chanting and singing. Bunches of keys in their hands dangle, the church bells toll. “Vaclav, Vaclav!” A man on a balcony waves his hand.

The King smiles, obviously relieved; he puts away his glass. He yawns and stretches back on his bed, mumbling to himself “Plenty of spirit left yet.” With his eyes shut he adds: “It will take a while though.” Seeing him sound asleep few minutes later, there is nothing left for us to do but leave.

At the breakfast table I tell her about the dream. She listens with the air of an adult indulging a child’s fantasy, not taking it seriously. She jokes about the lazy king, asks about his appearance. Humouring me in the annoying way that only adults can do. I leave for school wishing I hadn’t told her.

In the early afternoon my father turns up unexpectedly at my school. He chats with the teacher and then motions me out of the room. “Go home
straight away, your mother needs you." he says without an explanation. "I'll be home as soon as I can. Look after her," he adds in a whisper. I run all the way home.

She sits amidst the TV news and two radios blasting simultaneously. The latest issues of the paper are scattered on the kitchen table. Photos so familiar I find myself crying out loud. My mother is silent, her heart pierced by the red stars.

"I was hoping to go back and find him." Each word releasing a wave of tears. Pain seeping out of the open wounds. "Deep down I know he is still alive. I hurt his pain and sensed his fears but never did I felt him die. I know he is alive, despite all that they say."

Who is she talking about? "Look for who mum?" I ask, certain she won't even notice me there. Through the curtain of tears she could be talking to anyone. After a while she answers. "Your uncle Milan. Everyone said he died, but I never believed them. My soul mate, my brother."

I swallow hard as two angelic faces identical in shape, size and expression flash in front of my eyes.

"I've never had the chance to look for him. First I was too sick and your father took me away. When I got better I couldn't go back." The tears are flowing again, shallow sobs racking her body.

I wish my father would come home. A glance at the kitchen clock tells me otherwise. I put my arm around her. I have seen her like this before, but he always took care of her. Surprisingly, she seems so much smaller then me now, fitting easily into my embrace. My hand starts patting her back in a slow rhythm I recognise. She used it when putting me to sleep as a child. A
long-forgotten tune accompanies the beat; the foreign words made familiar
by nightly repetition. I still remember every and each one of the words; the
words that her mother sung to her as a child.

She relaxes, long deep breaths replace the sobbing. In the ensuing calm, I
remember the dream. She must know that I have glimpsed into the future.
She won’t believe me. No one ever does. But I must try, to save her the pain.

When my father arrives, he finds me repeating to her over and over.

“Remember what the King said. It will happen. Trust in the King.”
The Hospital makes the headlines

The Hospital makes the headlines in the morning paper, as well as the morning news. Suddenly everyone seems to have something to say about the demolition of hospitals. Now there seems to be a debate going on as to the best way of dealing with the issues raised, no one even questioning the existence of the spirits. I am pleased, hoping that others will finish the job Liam and I have started, but where is he?

It seems that everyone left the hospital by sunrise. So, why isn’t he at home? Immediately after the thought crosses my mind I have to retract it.

“This isn’t his home. Maybe he indeed gone home; where he belongs. But what about his stuff? Wouldn’t he picked it up? Is he all right? Has he met up with some of his mates? Has he come to some harm?

I have no one to ring and ask about him; no names of friends I could contact. I feel helpless and guilty for letting him go on his own last night.

Still later on my concern for him is replaced by a flash of anger. I am already feeling responsible for his well-being, am I now going to feel guilty about losing him? I berate myself for having given in at the beginning.

Should have just let him walk away, my life was just fine without him. With his business in the hospital finished, he may be back to his homeless mates.

In order to re-focus my attention I spend the day tracing the new owner of the torch. I even ring Dorothy and badger her into promising me to look into it. She doubts that she’ll come up with anything. “People with a mania for collecting old cameras are rare. Often outside the usual collectors’ networks. Some are photographers who gave up the game but love the equipment;
different from the collecting folks,” she concludes leaving me a very little hope.

My next strategy is to try the Yellow pages. I pretend to be the clerk from Auction rooms, tracing a lost invoice. Apart from a few answering services the proprietors are generally helpful, but none have attended the auction or bought the camera. By the time my fingers have dialled full two pages of numbers moving from Abraham’s Antiques to Miller’s Corner I feel I have finished for the day. The remaining pages will have to wait till tomorrow. When I finally get off the phone I realise that the day had passed and Liam had not returned.

Unable to settle for the night I decide to ring the local police and inquire about any incidents at or near the hospital site. The constable is helpful but not enlightening. “All entries have been sealed after the last person left. Extra guards and dogs are on site. No incidents recorded whatsoever.”

When I dispose with the idea of the hospital, there is only one other place I remember him mention during his stay. A coffee shop run by a charity at Kings Cross where he bought breakfasts after nights spent at the hospital.

Kings Cross. A name synonymous with the plight of homeless Sydney kids and a Mecca for runaway youth from all around the country.

I realise how unlikely it would be to find one eleven-year-old amongst hundreds of others, but I must find out if anyone had seen him. Without a second thought I head into the darkness.

It is the middle of the week, but the place is in full swing. All night clubs are open, bouncers promoting yet another live show. The neon lights of the entrances fall sharply into the shadows of alleyways and doorways.
They step out of the dark. Short skirts or pants, high heels, tops designed for the balmy summer nights not for the winds of midwinter. Their ages are indeterminable, their hair pure blond or black. Eyes that have seen too much far too early and now view reality through a screen of chemicals. "Looking for a girl, love?" they whisper in a voice considered sexy. "Looking for a boy? Two girls or one of each?"

Each shadow makes an offer. I'd like to further investigate the darkness into which they return, but driven by a sense of purpose I rush ahead. I am surrounded by a world of which I am ignorant, inexperienced as I am in the matter of vice.

There are others who don't bother to offer me anything. I am deemed to be of the wrong sex or age. I hear them sniggering as I pass by, feel insulted that they should consider me beyond that which they offer to everyone else. Confused by my own reaction I hurry even faster toward my destination.

When I finally locate the cafe I understand its attraction to Liam. Tucked away from the main street it is basic and cheep. A cup of instant is fifty cents, a piece of toast and bowl of soup a dollar fifty. The prices are kept low by donations of food and labour. Everywhere else the soup and the toast would cost at least four dollars. Probably couldn't get ordinary toast anyway. Rye sourdough, foccacia, wholemeal this and mixed grain that. Oatmeal and honey, corn, linseed and Soya grits. Each choice pushing the prices up.

Here there are no cappuccinos, machiatos, lattes or mochas. A mug of instant with lots of sugar, to warm up after a freezing night out.

On entering, those inside are already appraising me. I read their verdict in their faces. "An information seeker. Not one of the regulars, not a cop either."
Someone visiting for a specific reason. Maybe a journalist, a writer looking for a story, a social worker keen to do a good deed."

They have my game before I even order a drink. They know the questions before I ask them.

The woman behind the counter is helpful when I finally come out with it. "Yes," she knows him. "Is he all right? Hadn’t seen him for ages. Used to come nearly every morning for a while." She is obviously concerned so I tell her he’s been staying with me. The look she gives me makes me realise that no matter what I say will be re-construed so I don’t bother. "That’s nice," she says with the air of someone who’s seen it all. "Some of them take care of each other. Don’t always do a good job of it, but they stick together. Help each other, that kind of thing. He seemed lonely. Always by himself. Not that he put on airs or anything like that, just alone. Things get more dangerous that way. Especially for someone so young."

I get a sense that she is actually pleased by my concern for him. Becomes more sympathetic, "I know what you mean. Had to go through all of that with four of my own. Eleven is a terrible age."

She walks to two youngsters of undetermined gender. Short bleached green hair, silver rings through eyebrows, nostrils and lips. Their glazed eyes suggest that the Coca Cola in front of them is the least damaging substance they have had for a while. They take their time. "The wall," one of them finally answers. "Why don’t you check it there. If he is young and cute, he’d be there."

The logic of the statement is unquestionable, although I don’t want to admit it. His basking would have provided some money, but still nine
months is a long time to survive on just that. But why would he need to do it now?

In the end I drive towards Oxford Street and reminisce about my own childhood. It seems unreal in this setting. I feel inadequate. A childhood spent with a book or TV, a mug of cocoa and always a home to go to.

Maybe I heard of other realities but had denied their existence. To know that some kids came to school with bruises or “moved away” was not comfortable. It felt safer to pretend they didn’t exist. The only time I couldn’t pretend was when my cousin disappeared. The outside world reached far too close and claimed him.

On Oxford St I line up to turn at an intersection which will eventually bring me back towards Kings Cross. When I move to turn right a green family car sidles along. The driver in his fifties or sixties, his fingers drumming a tune on the steering wheel. He appears in a hurry, I let him push in front of me. When the lights change we both complete the turn. On the left an old stone wall stretches ahead, on the right the lit windows of a hospice built by a private hospital. The car in front now slows down to a walking pace. Attracted by its slow pace, shadows peel off the wall stepping forward into the light; one after another they present themselves. Some are not much older then Liam. With each slender figure I fear that I will recognise the red baseball jacket. I am undecided what I’d do if he suddenly appeared in front of me. The shadows pose expectantly, faces mirroring those I have seen earlier at Kings Cross.

The car in front comes to a stop as another shadow moves into the light. My foot steps on the brake The driver stretches across the passenger seat and
opens the door. After a few words, the shadow slips inside. The car now takes off in a hurry, leaving me behind. I continue at a slow pace till I reach the end of the wall.

It finishes suddenly with a cross road and a set of traffic lights. On the other side, typical terraces. Family TV screens flash their late night news through the partially-drawn curtains and blinds, the lives behind undisturbed by the activity along the wall. I am simultaneously pleased and disappointed at not finding him and slowly make my way back.

When I reach home, the house is empty and feels too spacious for one person.
To get outside the house at night

To get outside the house at night is always difficult. I am convinced that my father invented the evening curfew with the sole purpose of interfering with my secret life. How can I explore without darkness? She is the clay out of which I shape my experience. The torches and I. They illuminate only that which is hidden. In the ever-egalitarian daylight all is available for inspection. All is observed, nothing revealed.

Banished inside the house each night, I view the black window of my bedroom as others view the television screen. Excited by the possibilities contained within. Night after night, the not so distant backyard alleys extend their invitation. "Come and become one with the walls and dark corners." The backyard alleys. Repositories of all that the city rejects by day, they become sentinels of secrets at night.

Garbage bins pregnant with unfulfilled desire and lust. Guilt-torn sofas relegated to comforting the homeless and strays. Sharp implements of oblivion and destruction rusting amongst the discarded tools and the disembowelled TV sets. Broken down respectability leaking through the holes in the back fence, the carefully groomed front entrances flashing their ugly behind.

I wait for the house to grow silent. Shoes in hand, I finally slip out of the door. My father's meticulous attention to detail guarantees my silent exit through the back gate.

Tonight I wish to explore the inner world of the works stored in the public library down the road. I am not interested in the individual volumes or the minds of their creators, tonight I am fascinated by the idea of a collective consciousness and a collective mind. "Could a collection of books be an
expression of such an entity?" Would an exploration amongst the thousands of volumes provide me with an answer?

I am convinced that approaching the library from the outside may be the best way to try.

A small side lane where the garbage bins are stored is perfect for the occasion. Hidden behind the wheelee bins I am unnoticed by passers-by. The beam is almost invisible in the light of the street lamps. I point the torch towards the wall behind which the books are shelved, I move it from side to side. Try another angle, illuminate the dark windows. No success. I take my time, but no song is heard.

After a couple of hours of refusal, I leave without finding the answers.

Disheartened I slowly make my way through the dark lane. Outside our back gate I jump in fright. It opens unexpectedly, giving me barely the time to step into the shadows. From the safety of the dark, I witness a dark figure entering into the street. "My father!" I am shocked by seeing him out in the middle of the night. I envisage my mother's sleeping face unaware of the empty bed beside her. Immediately I decide to follow.

"Is he running to a mistress no one had ever suspected him of having or is he out in the middle of the night due to some more sinister reason?"

Before I left, his snoring had given an impression that he was not likely to get up again. Have I been mistaken at other times? Does he have nocturnal secrets of his own? His confident movements indicate that he is all too familiar with the dark shadows and the pale yellow lights as he rushes towards the main street.
Dressed in a coat I have never seen him wear before, he carries a bucket in one hand and a parcel in another. The coat is a long one, the kind fashionable right after the war. It has been hanging in his closet for years. There is a photo in a family album.

Taken in Europe, the sky looks low and dark. My father wears this coat, long scarf and a hat. My mother by his side appears lost inside hers, the colour of her face matching that of a fine dusting of snow covering the ground and the ornate entrance into a building behind them. A sign behind them reads: UNRA. The rest is ineligible.

When I asked her she said that the letters stood for a relief agency providing food and supplies to people in post-war Europe.

I remember the picture well. It is the only picture of her before their marriage. She also said that when she met him for the first time she thought he was a spy. Seeing him wearing this coat I am not surprised. “He saved my life,” she smiles when I ask about the picture. “Brought me extra food and medicines.”

I suppose she needed them. Looked like a ghost in that photo, much less so on their wedding ones.

They never talk to us about those times. Even my grandmother would tell stories about her and granddad, but not my parents.

Dressed in his long-forgotten coat, my father makes his way to the main street. In the dark, he stops and stirs inside the bucket. I am puzzled over his behaviour and follow him at a safe distance. My father, the Primary School Principal, sneaking about the streets in the dead of night.
The clock on the top of the Town Hall chimes one am. The street is empty except for an occasional car. He stops in front of a telegraph pole. A few strokes with a brush and out of his parcel comes a poster. All executed so fast that only someone watching him as carefully as I do would realise what’s going on. He pulls out another and another.

I notice that he is covering posters already there. Re-painting someone else’s effort. Always the same shape underneath. I am getting so curious, I decide to take the risk. I move right next to him, startling him in the process.

“What’s going on Dad?” I inquire, expecting him to go wild at seeing me. Instead he acknowledges my presence with a nod and hands me the brush.

“They think that everyone agrees with them. But some of us still remember what they did in Europe. Someone has to stop this rubbish being spread. It poisons young minds.”

In the light of the street lamp I read the new message. “Asians are welcome in this country.” I realise what is on the leaflets underneath. I have read these posters before. Some of my high school mates agree with their sentiments, even talk about joining them. “To keep the jobs for ourselves,” they say when challenged.

Without further talk, we move from post to post, wall to wall. Not once does he question my willingness to help. The pockets of his coat bulge with the leaflets. I am positive I recognise the light blue paper they are printed on.

“Who made them? “ I ask, already suspecting the answer. “Elaine from the Arts department,” he replies, sounding rather pleased. “We’re all on the same side, you know. Exercising our democratic right to speak out,” he adds.
after a moment. "Just think what they did to your mother and her people. No
one objected loud enough until they became too strong. Then it was too late.
They are thugs, will stop at nothing."

Over the next two hours we hide in the shadows when the cars pass,
repasting the posters when the coast is clear. By the time we get home the
streets of our suburb carry only the welcoming message.
Item 54-Baterka

For years this has been the only item in my collection carrying the name of my mother's homeland. It was given to me by her friends as a present after their short visit there in 1963. I still remember pleading with them when they came to a pre-trip lunch.

Rectangular metal case with rounded corners, providing a comfortable feel in hand. The reflector consists of a flat piece of glass mounted inside a ring raised only slightly from the case. The whole torch is only marginally deeper than the depth of its square battery. The case is silvery grey. Three vertical grooves connect the reflector with the bottom edge. The fan-like arrangement of the lines is the only attempt at decoration.

I was told that this was the only model available, although an upmarket version featuring inter-changeable green and red glass was also on sale. The actual present was a second-hand one. At the time of the visit, no torches were available in the shops at all.

The previous owner donated it happily, convinced that sooner or later there would be glut of them, while another item would be in short supply.

Although it gives an impression of strength and reliability this torch is not well-made. When I first opened the torch to clean it, a small folded piece of cardboard fell, I didn't pay any attention. When I finished, it wouldn't light up. Despite all of my skills it refused to work. In desperation I rang my benefactors and soon discovered the reason. The cases have been manufactured a fraction bigger then they should. To maintain contact between the points of the battery and the switch, every torch needed a folded piece of cardboard to fill in the gap. Once re-supplied with the missing link,
the torch performed well, releasing a translucent yellow beam of perfect proportions.

Not a long-distance runner, the beam scatters widely. It carries itself in a manner I have not seen elsewhere.

It doesn’t flood everything in its path, the way other torches do. Even within its field of illumination, some patches are always left in the dark, never subjected to the scrutiny of light. I have examined the reflector, repolished the glass and changed the bulbs in an attempt to correct its behaviour. Nothing made the slightest difference. In the end I had to conclude that the beam simply refuses to illuminate certain areas and nothing will sway its decision. Having accepted its behaviour, I have made a friend for life.

The emerging song tugs at the very core of my being. It evokes images and melodies I don’t recall seeing or hearing before, but which I recognise as being unmistakably a part of myself. A sense of deja vu overwhelms me each time I hear it. It is a song I call my very own.
Liam’s return

In the morning I continue my investigation. By lunch time I have no response from any one I called. The camera and the torch have disappeared from the face of the earth. By the time I call the last antique shop in the phone book, I admit to myself the unlikelyhood of ever seeing it again. I hope not to conclude the same about Liam.

Sitting by the phone I face a large hall mirror and catch glimpses of the display room through the open door. With each progressive call I develop stronger feeling of being watched, I realise they are observing me intently, their bodies stretching to overhear my conversation. Their interest is disconcerting and I feel uneasy about having told them of my loss.

I'd swear that the one displayed on wires has rotated a full 180 degrees in an effort to catch my conversation, but as usual I can’t actually see the movement. It occurs in the fraction of the time it takes my eyes to blink; at the precise moment when the focus falters, prior to regaining its full sharpness. Their positions change imperceptibly. When I keep my eyes from blinking, all movements cease. But mounting tension on the inside of the eyeball and a vague sense of impending failure persists. When the relief of the eye movement finally comes, the positions have altered again.

Unable to confirm my suspicion I resolve to test my theory. I lower my voice to a whisper while observing them carefully in the mirror. I am convinced that their light pieces are pointing in my direction, their necks straining to hear me. Now is the time for the next step. In the mid sentence, I turn and leap through the open door, leaving the proprietor of the Golden Oldies hanging on line. A flutter of movement accompanies my entry into
the room, followed by stillness. My mind recognises the movement initially but seconds later, doubt creeps in. The pulsing of my heart and sudden gasping for air is the only sound I hear. Walking out of the room I am glad no-one has witnessed my behaviour. On the way out I apologise to them. The phone line is dead when I hang up the receiver.

Liam arrives around six that night. When he sees my face in the open door he doesn’t give me a chance to ask the most obvious question.

“I know where they live!” he shouts with one of his contagious smiles. “I know who has your torch!” he repeats, uncertain if I have understood. I stand there slightly dumbfounded. What can I say? He succeeded where I had failed.

I hug him pleased about his return as much a I am about his news. “Where is it? Does she have it?” Of course I want to know all about it, but from the look of him it seems that a bath and a meal must come first.

Warmed by the bath, his mouth hungrily devouring the cheese on toast and the full story emerges.

Having left me in the hospital, he decided against looking for her inside, afraid of missing her in the crowd. Instead he waited at the edge of the car park. Luckily his intuition proved right. He recognised her white shirt and the beads. Her companion was an old man walking with a stick. They slowly moved towards a utility car and after little while they climbed inside. Instead of taking only the plate number Liam decided to act. “I couldn’t just let her get away, again,” he explains, his mouth full of food.

He slipped under the canvas cover stretched partly over the loading tray. For the rest of the journey he battled for the space with a large tool box and
some loose tools. When the car stopped some time later he heard the buzz of the roller door going up and then down. The drivers left immediately after, leaving him behind. After some time he ventured out. A two-car garage, the usual benches and cupboards, outdated sports equipment and furniture in need of repair. He stayed till the morning, squashed between the cupboard and the bench. No one came down when he woke up feeling cold.

He let himself outside through a small side door, carefully noting the house number and the name of the street. At the nearest shops he realised he was in Baulkham Hills.

At the train station he realised he had no money. Didn’t want to take chances riding without a ticket, so he walked. Tried every phone box he saw, hopping for a free call but had no luck. By the afternoon he was so tired, he climbed into one of the Good Samaritan clothes bins.

“They are everywhere. Once you know how to get in they are kind of miniature hotels. Only less comfy.”

He had to open some of the bags to put some clothes on at night but still froze. He was glad to get up in the morning and continue walking. In all he must have walked over fifty kilometres.

“But why?” I ask incredulous. He offers one of his innocent smiles. “You helped me to get in and out of the hospital, I found the torch for you. We are even now.” I am struck by the simple logic of it. “Sure,” I say, realising that having repaid his debts, Liam will undoubtedly return home soon.
The best part of the job was when they arrived late

The best part of this job is when they arrive late. At times I wait in vain. In complete darkness by the big double door, as far away as possible from the action in the front.

When I'm lucky, the door opens silently from the other side. Only a crack, not letting the light in. I spring into action upon their entry. Ready before they adjust their eyes to the darkness. Getting a glimpse of their faces whilst keeping mine hidden in the dark is my reward. I savour this moment of anonymity, before I whisper directions. They are eager to follow.

With the switch on, the beam guides our steps. Across and down the carpeted stairs, towards the flickering images and booming voices. When the occasion demands it, I move in between the rows, sending the beam across their faces. They all do their best to ignore it, but I know they feel scrutinised.

At times the temptation is irresistible. I let the beam linger just a moment longer than necessary. A minute streak of light against the Goliath of the cinema screen.

I am tempted to let the beam sing, to let myself dissolve right in front of their eyes. Most probably they wouldn't even notice, so preoccupied they are with the screen action. Maybe they'd complain about me obstructing their view.

In the face of temptation, I always turn the beam off once everyone is seated. As required of me, I return to the back door wishing for more latecomers.
I don't want to jeopardise this job. I enjoy it far too much. All different aspects of it. Besides, not many places would give me a job without questioning my age. It's a good weekend job.

Some time they call during the week, but my mother doesn't like me doing it. "Your job is to study, to pass your exams." I am not sure why she insists on me finishing the school, I am not really the studying type. Have seen too much without it. I am not like David or Becky, don't want to go to Uni. When I get out of the school I want to go up North, that's where the action is, everyone here says so. I have even extracted promise from my mother, if I finish the HSC I can take time off and go. So I study during the week and work on weekends; saving money for a car.

The old building in which the cinema is housed is full of surprises. It used to be a theatre. The basement and the top floor are lined with rooms and spaces no longer used. They are locked but I am learning to pick the locks one by one. I have some very good teachers here. When I can unlock them all I will be ready to explore, may stay the night. Me and my torches. In the meantime I take whatever opportunities present themselves.

The boss, who is a dentist by profession, inherited the cinema from his uncle. At the moment he operates it while waiting to sell. According to what the others say he is an easy boss. I can't compare, having never worked before. I think he likes me, flashing his perfect bite each time I pass him, joking about my age but paying me the same as everyone else.

It is hard to see how this cinema can compete against the large complexes which are being built. They get more people in one night then we get over a
whole week. Still, I hope there is a demand for an odd one like this, at least until I finish school.
A surprise

With the address in my pocket, I set out for Baulkham Hills, still unsure what I intend to do. I consider my options. Will I ask about the camera first? Or the torch? Should I perhaps offer to buy the torch? How much am I prepared to pay?

No answers come to my mind as I leave the inner city behind. For a second time in as many days. Yesterday to take Liam home, today to fill the gap he left behind. He said he’ll come and visit as soon as he works out stuff with his father, he knows it won’t be easy. I made him promise to call me if things don’t work out; instead of him just running away again. Then I left, his small figure waving in front of his railway station.

The houses and the blocks on which they stand grow bigger in this part of the city. The trees lining the streets of the established suburbs are old, survivors of the city’s expansion.

Still further, the gardens are replaced by tracts of land given over to new developments with not many trees left. Large family houses filling small blocks. Back to back, side to side. Second-storey windows overlooking each other’s backyards. The older suburbs are muted colours and brick, the new ones shine with bright colours and modern materials.

Still untouched by developers are the five acre lots. Orchards, market gardens and executive houses on landscapes of horse paddocks, artificial lakes and ponds. In between the acreage where the train station meets the local shops are a few streets of the older development again.

Nestled amidst ornamental deciduous trees and berry bushes is the house I have set out to find. Liam’s description was accurate. I am surprised by the
ordinariness of it. A brick bungalow, surrounded by a garden, the double garage visible from the street.

When approaching the front door I realise that I have chosen a difficult time for the visit. Not many people are at home on weekday morning. I ring the bell nevertheless. A woman of my age opens the door.

Visibly relieved that I am not trying to sell her anything, she listens attentively to my tale.

"I am looking for some items misplaced during the last auction, last seen in the box with the camera." She is co-operative enough.

"You need to talk to my father, he’s the one who goes to auctions. He’s in the shop, you’ll find him there."

When I locate the shop, I am not surprised to find a photographic studio. "Ryba and Son Photographic Atelier" Squeezed between the Newsagency and the Chemist on the main Street. The shop window is filled with wedding shots, children’s portraits and pictures of graduation ceremonies.

The man at the counter puts aside his paper when I enter. He is too young to be the father, he must be the son. His speech carries the same trace of accent I noticed in the woman. Indiscernible, unless you have learned to adjust your ears to it all your life. I repeat my story. He knows nothing about it but is happy to take me to his father, motioning me behind the counter to the studio. Filled with enormous lights and props of all different kinds, it feels overcrowded. We walk through the house to a small kitchen, complete with stove, fridge, kitchen table and chairs. He rings a buzzer on a door with a red "No Entry" on it. "The Dark Room" he explains pushing the button.

"Someone from the Auction Rooms to see you," he calls once the intercom
responds. "He won't be a moment," he assures me, when the bell announces a new customer.

Left alone, I look around. No traces of any collecting activity are obvious; enlarged photos occupy all available wall space. Eyes trained at the camera, lips parting in smiles for the occasion. Two-dimensional records of multidimensional lives.

The only item that attracts my attention is a faded blue statue of the Holy Mary. Her smile is knowing and I realise I have seen it before. The blue robe is of almost non-descript colour, but her smile is still noticeable.

He emerges in due course. His movement is slowed by a noticeable limp as he leans on the walking stick, extending his hand in greeting. It is the limp I recognise, even before I hear his accented voice.

"Milo," he introduces himself, unaware that I have heard his name before. The intervening years have been kind to him. A few extra pounds, less curly hair. A grey Saturn ring encircling his head.

"Where did you get this one?" I ask pointing at the statue.

"A wedding present from my daughter's in law parents. The father says he carved it during the war. He swears it procures miracles." He laughs heartily. "It fell from their second floor window sill just when my son happened to walk underneath. Almost killed him, but instead he fell in love with their daughter. Love at first sight, as they say. My son brought it here to repaint it, but hasn't done it yet."

He reaches one of the chairs. "The weather must be changing," he adds with an apologetic smile as he struggles to sit down. Once again I tell the story. More convincingly this time, adding a few details. "Some items were
mislaid during the last auction and were last seen in a box with the camera. A mistake made by the less-experienced assistant. Now we’re trying to recover them.” He waits till I finish, appraising me carefully. For some unknown reason I feel uneasy while telling the story. Maybe it is because I still remember George’s kindness from all those years ago, maybe it is Milo’s searching look or I am just not a very good liar.

Obviously my story sounds plausible enough for him to cooperate. “Yes, I got the camera, but don’t recall anything else with it in the box, just plates and chemicals. I haven’t gone to the Auctions myself,” he adds as a way of explanation. “My granddaughter goes when my leg plays up.”

“She bought well,” he chuckles at some private joke. My questioning face encourages him to elaborate. “I have a serious, shall we say rather well disposed customer who collects old photographic equipment. For a long time he was after one of the old French models. She bought it and has already sold it to him.”

He will ask the granddaughter when he sees her next. Apart from giving him my number, there is nothing else I can do.

I should leave, but there is something in his mannerism that keeps me here and so without any reason whatsoever I play my trump card.

Not surprisingly he doesn’t remember me; his face shows no sign of recognition. When I mention the convention though, he is only too pleased to revisit the past. He offers me some coffee and I accept.

“Oh yes, I’d only arrived in Australia earlier that year. Left the old country after the tanks rolled in. Didn’t want the children to endure what we had to. Came here for the sunshine; they said it would be good for my leg.
Met up with Colin almost straight away in his shop in Stanmore. Being unemployed, I helped him here and there until I got established myself. He got me into re-selling old wares and collecting torches. Well, he and my daughter really, she was wild about them for a while. Said, that the light talked to her, said the torches were her friends. Got us worried senseless. She had no English, no-one to talk to at school, so she made up stuff instead. Wanted friends, but with a torch light?”

I sip the hot drink and return to our first meeting. “I was about fourteen, asking if anyone could hear the song of the light beam. You responded but I couldn’t work out what you said.”

His eyes light up. “Yes, now I remember. I wanted to talk to you, because of my daughter. I didn’t know if I understood correctly. My English was still very bad then. I thought: This is Australia, everything is so different, maybe here the torches talk. By the time I looked out for you, you were gone. No one knew who you were. No one else ever mentioned anything like that before or since.”

He is amused by the memory. “So many things are different when one arrives, one starts off believing everything one is told. It takes a while to realise what really goes on.”

I need to probe further. I have missed my chance before, I am not giving up now. “What about your daughter?” I ask, maybe too eagerly. He studies me for a second as if deciding on an answer. “Oh she turned out all right. Fell in love soon after, forgot about all that nonsense.” He sounds casual and dismissive, but the look in his eyes tells a different story. Less adamant and filled with concern.
For the time being, I decide to go along with his explanation and not give out anything else either. Deep down I know he is not telling me all he knows. Not yet anyhow. I decide to steer the conversation to a safer shores.

"Your leg was giving you trouble way back then, you remember?" He shakes his head. "When I arrived I had an operation to fix my knee. At the recently closed-down old hospital. They fixed the knee, but they couldn't do anything about the leg. It can't get any better. Nothing here to get better."

He laughs and pulls up the trouser leg. To my horror I see a shoe and a sock covering a pink artificial leg. He chuckles, obviously used to the effect he has on unsuspecting listeners. "A memory of wartime childhood."

He must have explained it so many times, he masters it with a mixture of nonchalance and just the right amount of drama to make an impact. "When they amputated it, they botched up the knee as well; it never worked properly afterwards. Got worse with age. After the operation it got bit better but now it is up and down.

So much for a safe harbour into which I could steer the conversation. I am feeling like a ship striking an underwater reef no matter which direction I turn. The only information I found is why he visited the hospital.

Nothing else is left for me to do except to depart. I do so, leaving my telephone number behind.

Four days later I receive the call I was hoping for. "Please come and visit me, I have something to show you. Come to my house."

I agree readily. Soon, on my way through the outer suburbs I am again contemplating the price I should offer.
He is alone. When he ushers me inside I notice the shoe rack and the spare pairs of slippers. As protocol demands I take my shoes off. The completely carpeted hall and the living room makes the use of the slippers unnecessary. The living room is filled with cabinets displaying cut crystal glass, paintings of the bridge, magazines and books my mother could read.

The familiarity of Milo’s accent suddenly makes sense. This man and his family must be my mother’s countrymen. The brass menorah on the sideboard tells me another story.

I follow Milo to a box sitting on the top of the glassed coffee table. Inside is a collection of torches of various shapes and sizes. Right on the top is the object of my desire. My hands shake as I pick it up.

“Sit down,” he points to a velvety lounge. I sink into the softness, unable to speak.

“My grand-daughter had it.” The words are more accented then on my previous visit; he is finding it difficult to talk. The search for the right words takes time, the pauses grow longer. “Don’t get me wrong, she is a good girl. A University student. Born here, doesn’t lack anything. Can’t understand why she is doing it. She hears voices coming out of the light. Like her mother did before, but her mother was smart, she didn’t listen. This one is different. I want to ask you. Is that what you heard? All those years ago?”

What should I say? A long time ago, I would have eagerly shared my experience, pleased that some one else might know the feeling. Now I am cautious, not only for myself but also for my precious ones. I can’t predict his reaction, if I openly admit to hearing the light beam sing.
My response must be guarded, not particularly revealing. "In a way," I say, not giving out more then is absolutely necessary. "Something happens during the manufacturing process. Causes the electrical current to produce a sound as well as light. Not all of them do it, only some."

As I speak, I know that adherence to truth would be stupid. I lie to the old man to protect myself from his ridicule and potential anger, to protect them and also to protect her. He observes me silently; it is obvious that he doesn't believe a word I say.

"Her mother didn't think much of it at first. Imagination, she called it, remembering her own experiences. She hoped it would go away. Later on she noticed the girl getting paler. Not looking well. Always tired and sleepy. Started falling behind at school. We suspected drugs, so much of it is around, you can't be too careful. Now we were told that hearing voices is a mental illness. Just don't understand."

He waves his hand at the box on the table. "I'd been thinking about giving them to her as a birthday present. She always liked to polish and fix them up. Months ago she started to take them into her room, then she'd take them out. Wouldn't tell where."

He stops, waiting for me to react. "Now I feel that her problem is my fault, that I have introduced her to it. I don't know what she does with them, but it's interfering with her studies. Now we found out that she'd been buying them at the auctions. Please, take them away; out of my house. If you don't they go to the tip. I can't have them here any longer."

This is it! A Lottery winner! I want to grab the box and run away before he changes his mind, but I also feel sorry for the young woman whose
friends I will be taking away. Knowing exactly how she feels about them, I feel like a traitor. All I can do is to let her know that they will be safe with me, that I understand.

"Tell her to call me. Tell her I have also heard the sound. We may be able to help each other." He nods almost absentmindedly and I realise that he’ll forget about me the second I leave his house. I suspect he is of the school that believes problems will go away if you ignore them, if you remove the temptation. It worked once for his daughter, maybe it will happen again. I leave with the box under my arm.
The fingers touched my face

Fingers touch my face even before my eyes can search out the shadows sharing the dark room. They stroke my cheek and then spread out like the wings of a butterfly, land fleetingly on my eyelids and eyelashes, my nose and the tip of my upper lip, before venturing inside my open mouth.

My tongue is ready to explore their shape and their delicate taste one by one. My hands are already exploring the possibilities of the body. They press, encircle and caress, guided by response and reaction. By the time our mouths finally find each other, the boundaries containing our separate bodies are all but gone.

Skin against skin, a slippery heat generating more of the same. In no time our bodies are engaged in a timeless dance to the symphony, only the two of us can hear. The allegro and adagio, the short pauses in between. Crescendo leaves me completely exhausted, but wanting more.

A glimpse of the luminous dial of the watch makes us both jump. Only ten minutes to spare. The uniform is on in less then a minute; with the torch in hand I unwillingly take my leave.

Before I open the door, I listen carefully for sounds in the hallway. No one is about when I emerge out of the old dressing rooms in the basement. Minutes later I am ready at my post, by the door.

In the foyer, by the counter surrounded by the smell of chocolate and a pop corn I catch a glimpse of blue eyes smiling in my direction. I return the smile, ready to open the double door to let the viewers in.
New collection

The moment I open the door into the display room, I realise I have made a terrible mistake. The box under my arm grows heavy, sweat beads form on my forehead. The air inside the room is dense with tension and hostility.

I recall the glass shards and the fact that the cat never returned. Unless I quell the hostility at this point, it will end in factional warfare. A situation in which someone could get hurt, it could be me.

I place the box near the door and walk towards the cabinet. They crane their necks to catch a glimpse of what is inside it.

“We have visitors,” I say as loudly as possible, making sure my voice sounds relaxed and firm. “We are offering a temporary refuge to some of your kind, who by no fault of their own have found themselves homeless. Please note, that I stress the word ‘temporary.’”

While not quite true, peaceful co existence is my ultimate goal and I will say whatever will preserve it. Realistically I have no idea how long it will take before Milo’s granddaughter will claim them back. I doubt that she will accept what he has done. My strategy must include the short and the long-term possibility.

While I talk to them, I unlock the glass door and reach for the flannel cloth and a round soft brush I keep handy. I know that the faintest smell of mineral oil is irresistible to them and it will encourage them to relax and listen with an open mind. I handle each one lovingly, giving them a brush and wipe with the damp flannel. I can’t rush the job, can’t give them a reason to be jealous. When I finish, I place them either on the middle or the
bottom shelf of the cabinet. My voice continues to be reasonable and matter of fact.

"The situation is made all the more difficult because one of your elders, in fact one who truly deserves to be called the mother of all torches, is amongst these unfortunates."

By the time I finish handling them, I am sure I have captured their imagination and eased their anxiety enough to push the message all the way home.

"As is customary in every civilised society," I continue, knowing they’d like to think of themselves as being at the top of the evolutionary tree, "the elders are given the utmost respect and hospitality. She and her entourage will make a temporary home on the top shelf."

Unbelievably, they accept my words without a murmur or a flicker of anger in their reflectors. I reach into the box and pull out one newcomer after another, placing them immediately on the shelf. No checking on their condition, no dusting or cleaning.

I realise now the exceptional value of the collection, though, some of them are no more then shells without batteries or globes. My heart quivers at the variety and the potential they hold.

When at last I hold the slender body, I have to take control of myself. For a moment my fingers linger on the switch, unwilling to let go. I check my behaviour. I must give no indication of the intensity of my interest so I place her on the shelf with the others, silently promising a treat at the earliest opportunity. With all of them settled and accounted for, I lock the cabinet door and walk out. When I return later on at night I simply unlock the
cabinet, pull out the torch and lock it again. I walk out of the room without a word, locking the door behind me. Only when I am back in my bedroom do I relax sufficiently to seriously contemplate an adventure. Suddenly I can’t wait.
Having eaten some of the cookies

Having eaten some of the dope cookies that Elise brought out with our lunch we are having a rest. The packing shed at the bottom of the banana plantation is a good place to shield from the afternoon sun. It also gives a good view to the road, should any unwelcome visitors arrive.

I am drifting away when Chris’s laughter brings me back to the shed. I struggle with my eyelids. Like most of us he is stripped down to his waist, bead necklaces dangle against his sun-tanned torso. His shoulder-length blond hair and scraggly beard are complemented by darker curls covering his chest.

He lifts his feet gracefully in the middle of the shed, to avoid other bodies. “He is dancing,” I decide, wishing to return to sleep. Nevertheless, I continue watching his movements. His tanned skin glows with sweat. I suddenly want to feel his skin against mine, to brush my fingers against his lips. It could be easy. Everyone else is sound asleep.

Then I remind myself of the numerous love affairs he is constantly embroiled in. The desire vanishes in the midday heat.

He is spinning around now, bathed in the golden glow of his hair.

My body feels heavy and incapable of any movement. Arms and legs are disjointed pieces of steel, pinning me down to the ground.

After a while the glow begins to fade. His movements are no longer those of a graceful dancer I have just seen. Merely side-stepping the lying bodies, he is walking towards the large pile of packing crates in the corner.
His mouth expels words I can’t catch at first. The lip movement is too fast for me to decode. Completely unconcerned about the lack of response, his delivery is directed at no-one in particular.

To focus a spilling and overflowing mind is a task of unprecedented proportions. It transgresses all boundaries and all attempts in corralling it, thoughts are propelled away even before they can be fully realised.

I concentrate on the shapes his lips are forming, willing my ears to hear them. After a while my efforts are rewarded.

“Just think man, all of these packing cases. Every shed here is full of them. No one is using them anymore. We are sitting on a gold mine, man. Could make furniture out of them. Can’t you just see it? Shelves, tables even armchairs. Add bit of colour and here it is, ’the rainbow furniture’. All we need are few cans of paint.”

I imagine the rainbow colours and once again I drift off.

He laughs at the ingenuity of his idea. The sound of his laughter brings me back to the shed. Celia’s head comes to focus first. She sleeps on her back, hair splayed over my thighs. I notice her nipples clearly visible under her yellow singlet within my right arm’s reach. I wonder why she bothers at all. It is far too hot. Oblivious to Chris’s laughter and his shouts, her chest rises and fall in a slow, regular rhythm.

Chris elaborates on his plan, oblivious to the lack of listeners. “We’ll get them for nothing. No one uses them anymore.”

Now in front of the pile, he pulls out one crate after another, checking their condition. “This one is good, this one is crap, here is a beauty.” Even from my position across the shed I can see the danger and feel alarmed.
“Hey man, cool it. It will topple on top of you. Leave it alone.” He ignores my voice completely. I contemplate getting up to help him, but Celia’s head is pinning me down.

I feel dubious about the irrationality fuelled by dope at best of times. Quite unnecessary really. Not at all satisfying when you have the real stuff. Places to go where no dope can ever take you. Places that are real, not only the product of a chemically altered brain. Places that present themselves at the flick of the switch.

The life on the farm is easy. People come and go, some stay for weeks others for months. No questions are asked. Well that is not true. Many are asked, but the answers evaporate easily in the smoke of the next reefer.

There is love and lots of it too. The vegie garden, the plantation, the water falls up in the hills, the makeshift bedrooms and the tree houses witness it all. But contrary to my original expectations, even here the love is never free. Sooner or later, the excitement and sense of freedom is replaced by resentment, jealousy, gossip and manipulations, not unlike everywhere else. Falling in and out of lust is not any easier here than back in the city.

All kinds are here. Some are gurus others the followers. Some squabble over the use of toilet paper in the makeshift latrines, others expect clean sheets on the beds each week. For some even the radio is an evil; others built complicated solar generators to power televisions in their shelters.

It is not all lust, love and compassion. Desperation and self-centredness follow close at heel. Sometimes I wish I could just up and leave as so many have done before, but I have reasons to remain. A love interest has been keeping me here ever since I finished the high school. Couple of us came up
here once the cinemas finally closed. For a short stay at first, but I never went back despite my mother’s pleas and my father’s threats. I have managed to extend my collection considerably. The local markets and bazaars turn up most delightful specimen, often in pristine condition. Only yesterday I have paid very little for a beautiful Arts Deco piece, complete with a leather case to keep it in. Apparently it used to belong to a local parish priest back in late twenties and was kept at the manse until that went at auction early this year.

A loud crash and clatter of falling crates makes me jump, dislodging Celia’s head, only to have it fall with painful thud back on my leg. She continues sleeping. Across from us, Sheila is up looking startled and confused.

Loud groans are emerging from somewhere underneath the avalanche. Sheila is already at her organisational best.

“What’s going on. Look what you’ve done.” Her robust body moves into action. She digs into the avalanche, removing the crates, finally releasing weeping Chris. She helps him to his feet, cradles him in her arms. “Come on, its not so bad. Let’s have a look.” She treats him as if he were a child. He is hurt, bleeding from a gash on his forehead and a large cut on his arm.

“Will someone give us a hand!” she cries out with an electrifying effect. “Coming” I shout and move into an action. I roll a T shirt and prop up Celia’s head, her hair is beautiful and shinny; I watched her washing it with the camomile in the garden last night. Leaving her asleep, I rush to the accident, kicking crates strewn in my way.
Chris’s arm is bleeding profusely. I pull a hankie out of my pocket. It is not clean, but probably the cleanest thing around here. In Sheila’s arms he is a baby whimpering at the sight of blood.

I am finding it difficult to keep up the pressure on the wound. The blood steadily soaks the handkerchief. Chris continues weeping.

The red pattern on the white background grows the longer I watch. I detect a movement and the spots became red spinning wheels, moving with increasing speed. The shape starts to change. Red amoebas extending their tentacles in all directions. The growing protrusions become pink at first, slowly replaced by green. The green areas extend towards me. A three-dimensional amoeba. Its protrusions roll closer to my face, developing folds and wrinkles at the same time. They contract and shrink, pulsing in and out.

I watch fascinated but scream when the shape in front of my face becomes a large toothless mouth-like cavity. I scream again when I feel a pressure on my shoulder. “Gee, don’t you start on me now. You’re suppose to be looking after him.”

Reassured by her voice my mind returns to the task at hand. Chris appears to be asleep. Sheila is brisk and business like. “Let’s take him down to the cars.” I make a move to wake others but she dismisses them with a sweep of a hand. “Don’t bother, I couldn’t cope with more then one useless body.”

She ties the hankie over the wound, directing him to hold onto it. Then she lifts him off the ground. Once on his feet we half drag half walk him outside the shed. His feet sink into the pot holes in the rough track and trip over loose stones. Each time his feet lose balance, the body becomes a dead
weight pulling us down. After a while I find our slow descent rather comical. I burst out laughing. Sheila does not like it at all. She wouldn’t would she. Never smokes or takes anything, the ultimate square. Without her though, this place would have folded a long time ago, as many others have. Her parents own the place, so she feels more responsible I suppose. Initially, she and Chris were an item; things changed later. She and Boro are an item now.

Half-way down the hill with Chris tripping next to me I realise I have stayed too long. It hits me like a bolt out of the summer blue sky. I stop in my tracks, almost tripping Chris over myself. “It’s time for me to go back to the city. I will be leaving tomorrow.” I tell Sheila. She nods her head as if she’s heard it all before.

It was the Festival that brought many of us here. After that it seemed like a good idea to stay.

At the beginning I was excited by the lifestyle, tinged with an element of danger. Later on there seemed not much on offer, that I couldn’t reach by the flick of the switch. Their trips are uncontrollable, some frightening, increasingly repetitious, and in the end plain boring.

Yet again, this was the first place where no-one questioned my flights. They all experienced plenty of their own. They didn’t understand, not really. They accepted me the way they had adopted the Tibetan Book of Dead and undertaken purification fasts for days on end. In the same manner in which they rejected their previous lives and names and took up new ones.

Yes it is a time to go back. Maybe to Uni, after all, or take up the job of a postie that mother wrote about. Unpack all of my collection that has sat in
boxes all this time. I realise I am eager to see them all again; shined and polished, their faces smiling with well being.

Under the mosquito net that night the words lay heavy between us. Like an impenetrable sheet they separate us, preventing the two becoming one.

“What next? Where to? How long?” seeps out of our every pore, spreading friction where only ease and smoothness existed before.

“We can leave, new choices can be made.” I say it, believing this is my opportunity. In the darkness I can not read the facial expression but I can feel the tensing of the body. An animal aware of danger, in complete stillness, waiting for another signal.

One more question remains still unanswered. “Will you come with me or will you stay?”
Item 57-Arty

This six-inch tubular design is Art Deco inspired. Chrome plated with red and black painted highlights it is one of the most handsome ones I own. The perfect smoothness of the polished chrome is enhanced by the sculpted arrow shaped switch. In itself a piece of art. Each time I use it it exudes a sense of youthfulness and brightness, despite the fact that it is almost a quarter of a century old. It feeds on two C cells, held down by a well-crafted matching end cap.

The streamline sleek design produces an equally sleek beam. It covers long distances, not by its exceptional strength but by its playful attitude and a love of movement. It’s beam moves constantly, unable to settle. To get on it, I must leap on it the way one boards an open-sided street tram. It almost comes to a stop but it never truly does.

This beam is full of joy and excitement. The sense of weightlessness which the light conveys is a welcome surprise and easy to travel in.

It takes its time to arrive but instead of landing in the middle of any action, it hovers on the edges, observing. It is strategic about where to move next, should the trip turn out to be far too serious or just plain boring. It is the only light that may change the colour of its beam from one trip to another.

One trip I travel in white, the next I’m surrounded by purple, only to be welcomed by green when I try again.

In contrast to its good looks and the flamboyance of the beam, the song of the beam is unremarkable. Easily missed unless one knows what to expect. It
took me long time to recognise it, mistaking it for the buzz of an annoying fly.

Unfortunately its preoccupation with having a good time and its constant search for activity, makes it unreliable. It procrastinates before issuing an invitation, but once it does, it guarantees excitement and a good time.

I believe that my own ageing process could be halted by frequent trips in this beam. It forces me to keep up the pace, partake in its joy; it won’t let me lag behind.

On return from each of these journeys, I feel I have been vaccinated against the drearier moments of daily existence. I see the sunshine and brightness, where others talk of depression and doom.
I couldn’t wait for the opportunity

I can’t wait for the opportunity to release the beam again. The night at the Auction rooms has left me with a sense that this light can reveal other mysteries and I am only too eager to try. I have been waiting so long for this moment. Finally I am ready to press the switch.

After only a few moments I realise that this time the beam had decided to behave in a most peculiar manner. When aimed at a target it doesn’t search for an opening as usual; it doesn’t stop and start or scamper about nor does it stay still, refusing an invitation.

On the contrary, it offers its services constantly. The point at which it reaches a target becomes immediately the point of reflection. It bounces off returning to its original destination. To me.

No matter where I aim it, like a boomerang, it returns, settling on one or another part of my body. Never outside of my person.

When I hear the familiar sound, I am filled with trepidation, hesitate to make the step. Where will it take me? What will I see? The beam awaits patiently as drops of perspiration slide down my back.

A revelation enters my mind. “I am scared to follow the beam, scared to explore the direction in which it is determined to go.”

Its tone rises a pitch.

My mind is refusing to focus, it is blocking my way. What will I find? Instead of the familiar sensation of dissolving, I feel I am drowning in fear, gasping for air, searching for a way out.

The beam now chooses a more cajoling tone. It spreads out in all directions bathing me in a soft yellow glow. Like a baby after a bath I feel
lifted, patted dry and soothed in its glow. The sound is now calming and comforting.

Despite the beam’s assurances I continue to sweat profusely. My body’s internal sauna is stoked by fear.

In the end my fingers make the decision. The switch slides to the other side, the flow of electrons is severed. All light disappears immediately. Only me and the darkness laden with the smell of perspiration remains.
A fellow traveller

I find her on my doorstep one afternoon, long after I had stopped waiting for her. I recognise her immediately, although it is some time since I had seen her at the hospital. Her pale face must be a signal that things are not going well. When I walk through the gate, she introduces herself.

"I know you, only your grandfather never mentioned your name." I cut in, hoping to make her feel at ease. From the look on her face, it's not working. "Hannah," she says looking worried and suspicious. "Spelt with double n and h."

"What a coincidence," I cry out. "My mother's name. Must be more common then I thought. Only hers spells without the h and only one n."

The ice is broken. By the time we enter the house I find out that it was her grandfather's favourite name and that his leg is playing up again. He relented and told her where to find me on one of his bad days.

She wants to see her friends immediately. Surprisingly, I feel no compunction about opening the room for her. In fact, I can't wait to see her face when she inspects my collection. Her torches have become a part of it. Polished and groomed, filled with batteries and globes, they glow with well-being and health. In the middle, resplendent in her status of a venerable senior, shines the dark fibrous body of the original Eveready. To my delight, her seniority prevented a rift amongst the two collections. She keeps them in check by her presence alone.

Hannah is impatient to see them. Only when she notices a picture of the old bridge does she break off her single-minded pursuit. She stops immediately. "How come you have it? Are you from there?" I have no
alternative but to explain about my mother and my second hand relationship to the country.

I tell her that I have never officially been there and that my parents have now been there for over a year, looking for any survivors of my mother’s family.

Hannah has been there twice already. The first time immediately following the revolution. Milo couldn’t wait. He took the whole family for a couple of months. She didn’t like it much. Couldn’t wait to get back here. The second time was only a year ago. The place had changed dramatically.

“I can imagine going again,” she says when I open the door into the display room. “Brought some great torches from that trip,” she adds with a smile.

”Pop didn’t know about those.” Before I can respond, she rushes towards the glass cabinet, forgetting me instantly. Her attention is on her friends. “Just look at you. Shiny and good looking. What about you? Where did the rusty spots go?” She handles each one and talks with them in a way which only one other person I know would; compliments them on their looks, strokes their bodies, admires their sheen.

Feeling that I should leave them alone, I quietly withdraw into the kitchen.

When Hannah finally emerges, I see questions in her eyes, but she is too shy to ask. She skirts about instead, asking about my collection. I recall the fifteen-year-old trying to find answers from strangers at markets; she doesn’t need to go through the same agony with me. Before she picks up enough courage I volunteer: “Yes I hear the song, I always have. Ever since I was
ten. I have become friends with the light. I have accepted invitations to travel.

No one ever took me seriously or believed me. Not even now, after all these years.”

It feels liberating, saying it just like that. Not hiding the true words, not worrying about the consequences. The effect on her is astonishing. By the time I finish her eyes fill with tears.

“They tell me I am hearing voices and talk about mental illness. I myself don’t know anymore what is real and what is not.”

In her voice I hear the resonance of my past fears. “When I turn the torch on, the beam talks to me. No, not in words. More like a sound or a tune. Somehow I know it is directed at me and I understand that it is inviting me along.”

She looks at me pleadingly, my own past desperation reflected in her eyes. “Milo said you may be able to help me. Can you? Do you think I am going mad?”

Before I can respond she continues, excited. “All I have to do, is to focus into a beam. It starts to draw me into itself, the moment I hear the song. It singles me out, it calls me to follow it.”

Hearing her description I am unable to contain myself any longer and jump in. “Yes I believe you. I told you I know about the song, I also know about the trips. Tell me where did you go? What did you see?”

As fast as my words find their way out, her excitement drains from her face. “Nowhere. I never took up the offer, felt too scared.”
The edge in her voice warns me not to pursue it further. I don’t listen and step past the edge. “Not taken up the opportunity? Why not?”

When she finally answers, she is upset. Maybe with herself for not accepting the offer, maybe with me for asking. Suddenly I wish I had waited longer, I wish I had not asked so directly. I am afraid she may decide to leave.

Her answer is so faint I have to strain my ears to hear.

“It started about three years ago. Occasionally I’d get the feeling that something will happen if I shine a torch. I’d try it at night, in my bedroom. Again and again with different ones. It took a while to discover the song. Had to learn focus into a beam. Once I mastered that, the rest was easy. Suddenly a door opened in front of me, inviting me to step through. All I had to do was to cross the threshold.”

Her voice trails off, she sits silent. When I ask the next question, the tears are back in her eyes. “How could I? Not knowing where it was going to take me. How was I to know if the required step was the first one into insanity or the last one out of control? After all this time I am still waiting, unable to make the move. It is destroying me, I need your help.”

She waits for me to respond, but there is nothing I can do. I am not about to promise anything, I don’t want to be involved. Before she can ask, I find an excuse to send her home. Even as she walks out, her eyes plead for my help, ignoring the crushing silence. “I will think about it,” I promise whilst accepting her phone number.

Having closed the door behind her, I am simultaneously relieved and distraught. I lean against its frame incapable of walking away. I question the
wisdom of my decision, listen for her footsteps to return. Instead, I hear the squeak of the badly-oiled hinge and then only the sounds of the street.

Why did I send her away? Why didn’t I say: “Stay, let’s travel together. Here and now. I have been waiting for you all my life. Hold my hand and step into the waiting light.”

Why do I hesitate? Why now? Has she come too late? Am I afraid to share the knowledge? Do I feel threatened by someone else having the gift?

Surely, the reason for my hesitation must lie elsewhere. The destinations she’d visit would be her own. It is unlikely that we’d ever tread the same path of the Universe.

Do I fear the loss of affection from my precious ones? Do I believe that they could transfer their affections to her? Would they find her more interesting and alluring? I have witnessed their growing attachment to Liam. I have also witnessed my own reaction to that. Is it jealousy? Plain and simple. Will this feeling prevent me from ever sharing my experiences with anyone else? Will it forever prevent me from having a fellow traveller?

Am I afraid that the numbers of flights are limited? Like a bowl of offerings capable of running out if not used judiciously. Will my flights in future be jeopardised if someone else will fly? Is there place for more than one flier? Each time the beam refuses me an invitation, I consider the finality of the travel. In the past the offers have always returned sooner or later. I have no reason to assume that with two of us flying, the offers would cease.

All of the possible answers are equally frightening. In the end I am not convinced that my hesitation is due to these reasons. It seems that I must explore further, to find the reason for my behaviour.
The ability to fly the light, like the gift of riches or fame has its darker side, filled with secrecy and loneliness. It makes one withdraw from the everyday life; the flier is unreachable by those who share one's life. No lovers or friends tolerate the preoccupation with the "other world" for long. They try to share in it but when unable to do so, they drift away. No one wants to be the second best in their lover's affections, especially not to a torch.

My nocturnal life has interfered with the commitments of my relationships. I chose to be alone. I have not given up looking for a relationship which can sustain both lives, but with passing years the options are fewer.

To give up the flights is unimaginable. The pull of "other worlds" is stronger than the feelings of loneliness. In reality there is no choice after the first flight.

To introduce Hannah into the delights of the flights is to sever her link with the mundane for ever. Is it a gift or a burden I'd be passing to her? Who am I to be left with a decision so final?
Item 367-Queen

The black slender body of this torch disguises the true age of this piece. Over 100 years old, the fibreboard material from which it was constructed stood up well to the ravages of time. The tubular body is nine inches long with a bull’s eye reflector at one end and a nickel plated end cap at the other.

This is the very first model manufactured. It can be identified by the lack of thread on the end cap; its bayonet fitting was replaced by a screw thread in the subsequent models. There are no markings on the cap, the only marking appears on the barrel band which attaches a ring onto a metal tab. By pushing the ring and the tab together electrons flow between the large carbon filament and the inch long battery pack.

The original battery was so weak that it was incapable of producing a steady stream of light, only a flash lasting a few seconds but it gave a name to all future torches manufactured in America.

The currently used battery is strong enough to create a steady light beam. It is not the well defined light column which some other torches form, nor does it scatter in the ever diminishing pattern of others. This beam hangs in space like a soft curtain, conjuring up images of weightlessness and immateriality. In reality these images have nothing in common with the true quality of the beam. There is nothing fragile or immaterial about it. It is steady and strong, ready to spread out in whatever direction it chooses, bathing its subjects in pale orange translucency. Having been the subject of its explorations recently, I am only too aware of its determination and strong will. It won’t let go of an investigation once it has set its course of action.
may be its seniority which embues it with determination and authority to
which all succumb in the end.

The chosen subjects bathed in its light stand out immediately from their
surroundings, and like the 3D pictures appearing suddenly out of a jumble of
lines and colours, when one's eyes discover the appropriate focus, they move
into the forefront of the beams investigation. This light doesn't penetrate into
depth to reveal secrets, instead it brings them up into the open, bathed in the
pale orange glow.
Self illumination

Having considered all the options my advice to Hannah could take, I am unhappy with every one of them. Without acceptable solution in sight, my life is disrupted by my indecision. Each night I wake up in sweat, dreading the unavoidable. When the phone rings my outstretched hand stops short of lifting the receiver, paralysed by the responsibility.

I realise only too well that my reluctance to answer the phone is only delaying the inevitable. Sooner or later I will find her on my doorstep, questioning my intentions and my unwillingness to act. Unable to come up with another solution, I decide to face up to my greatest challenge.

I wait till the evening. Following a hot summer’s day the southerly makes it comfortable to linger outside while the house cools down. Waiting on the back doorstep I find myself engulfed by the evening chorus of recently hatched cicadas.

To my left, behind the Morning Glory covered fence, a family lingers over the dining table. The earlier sounds of cutlery and the children’s demanding voices are now replaced by the occasional murmur and a tinkle of glasses.

Directly behind the back gate, across the lane, a regular splash betrays the solitary swimmer of mindless laps in his backyard pool.

On my right the automatic sprinkler dispenses water where the giant tomatoes used to grow. The ever-widening gap in the fence reveals rows of shallots, mint, lemon grass and chilli bushes covered in ruby red pods. Some days I observe the cat, promenading amongst the plants. Tonight only the sound of the falling water disturbs the stillness behind the fence.
I wait until the full moon rises above the rooftops, when I can’t postpone it any longer. Even the cicadas fell silent, recognising the solemnity of the occasion.

With the most venerable elder in hand I settle myself in the centre of the display room, leaving the cabinet door wide open. I turn the lights off and hold my breath in anticipation. Am I only imagining the scrambling sound coming from the inside of the cabinet? Gradually the barely audible rustle encircles me. Their presence grows stronger, I feel surrounded. A memory of the cat’s frightened leap pushes the metal ring on the side of the torch.

An ethereal glow fills the room. The beam explores the cabinet and each one of its shelves. They all appear where I have seen them last, but I am not easily deceived. I am convinced that, had I taken my time to record their positions, I would without any doubt, find discrepancies now. The beam doesn’t stay still while I dwell on these thoughts. As previously, it’s not interested in my surroundings. It is interested in me.

I am the sole object of its exploration. Arms first, then abdomen, legs and even my toes. Up again over my shoulders, the back and the top of my head. It finally settles at the back of my head where the neck and the skull meet. When the familiar fear invades me, I don’t give in. I force myself to breathe evenly in and out in order to quench the fears. I open myself to beam’s explorations.

I don’t hear the song, nor do I recognise the familiar sensations. Instead I feel exposed by the light burrowing under my skin; searching one layer after another, moving deeper and deeper. Despite all of my good intentions, a sudden wave of panic engulfs me. My fingers find the switch, ready to cut
the investigation short. I am tempted to follow their lead, let the hands do their job. At the same time I am determined that on this occasion I must let the beam have it its way.

Forcefully I draw in another slow breath. My lungs fill. As I control the even exhalation I feel a warm sensation at the base of my skull. It frightens and comforts me simultaneously. Memories start to crowd the surface of my consciousness.

Without warning, curious images appear in the glow engulfing me. Like rewound video scenes they proceed in a reverse motion. Set at a fast pace most of them pass by before my mind recognises them.

I watch myself walking backwards out of the room and out of the house. Within moments I disappear out of the picture altogether. Two naked bodies poised in the height of passion untangle themselves in well practised motions before they too are replaced by other retreating images. Each one chases after another and more distant past, sparking off even earlier memories.

Unconsciously, my fingers search for the remote control; finding none I have no choice but to continue watching the parade of retreats.

A splash of red colour catches my attention. I recognise the backpack I used to don each day distributing mail from one gate to another. I catch myself running backwards into the entrance of the post office.

By the time my mind catches up again, I am confronted with my mother’s back emerging backwards from the airport departure lounge. Her expectant face glows when she turns before retreating to the airport hall.

I feel exhausted already. The unfamiliar sequencing plays havoc with my brain patterns, my concentration lapses. I find it necessary to shut my eyes. I
wish I had never started. When I open them again I am looking into a face of
a new-born baby moments before my sister’s face appears contorted by pain

The ashen face of my grandmother laid out in the coffin brings memories
of the funeral and my father’s grief. By the time I focus once more, a
swimming costume clad family crawls backwards in the sand. The elaborate
sand castle diminishes bit by bit, leaving the children’s buckets empty.

waiting for their first spade full of sand. My father’s face looks youthful and
happy sticking out of a sandy burial.

I must be forty years back and the kaleidoscope of retreating images
continues. An ocean liner moving backwards into the cloudless horizon, a
couple un-huddling on the top deck.

Houses burning and exploding only moments before the upward moving
bombs disappear into the underbellies of the warplanes. The planes fly out of
sight now; a factory-like complex appears, surrounded by watch towers and a
high fence. A gaunt face of a sleeping child, its shaved head glistening with
perspiration is replaced by a line of soldier-driven motorbikes and an image
of a farmhouse situated on the edge of a forest. After that, only darkness,
darkness and silence.

Like many times before I expect the beam to appear and guide me but I
wait in vain. When I extend my arms, a prickly sensation on my hand makes
me retreat on reflex. After a while I try again, this time more carefully.

The same prickly sensation; sharp, but yielding to pressure. The
overwhelming smell of cut grass gives me another a clue. As I extend my
arms up, my hands scream in pain, hurt on the solid ceiling only a couple of
inches above my head. Cautiously fingering the cold surface I discover stone
shapes and the mortar in between. Mounds of hay surrounding me, stone ceiling above my head. Impenetrable darkness all, I wish the beam would help me out.

The wish intensifies when I realise, I am not the only one here. Initially it is only a sense; a recognition of laboured breathing somewhere near by. Like the invisible currents at the markets it leaves me disturbed and watchful. A faint groan moments later sends me scrambling through prickly hay. Crawling on all four little while later I move slowly in the direction of the muffled sound. During my struggle with the dry stems and leaves the faint groan changes into audible sobbing.

Simultaneously another sound shatters the near complete silence. A roar of motorbikes entering within the hearing range. Not the powerful growl of modern machines, but their more coughing and splattering yesteryear versions. The roar grows stronger while I am trying to locate the source of the sobbing.

Directly above me the darkness explodes under the impact of the engines. The tyres screech to a halt; shouting and pounding of heavy boots commences even before the engines stop. I am terrified, my breath is frozen by fear, my limbs refusing to move. The chaos above my head continues. I hear military bark issuing orders, doors slamming, a volley of gun fire.

It is all happening so close, yet the layer of darkness seems solid enough to protect me. Having completely lost the direction of the sobbing sound, I am not sure where to move next, I feel lost in the midst of the noise and the fear. When the beam appears suddenly by my side, I know that I will be safe.
Ignoring the noise above, the beam moves efficiently through the, now visible, mounds of hay, which completely fill the space from the ground right up to the stone ceiling. Squeezing through the tightly packed straw we finally locate what we have been searching for.

In the corner, wedged between two sides of the stone wall, hidden behind a particularly thick bale of hay is a small makeshift bed. A blanket spread over the hay, with a cushion and a warm looking quilt surrounding a child’s body.

The beam moves so close I can almost touch the little figure. I think it is a boy, his head is showing the first signs of hair re-growth, his eyes are closed. Hands are pushing a gag into his mouth, the knuckles white with effort.

I am so close I can feel the heat his feverish body generates, see the sweat forming on his forehead. By his side is a jug of water and a piece of bread on the plate. A small white pill lies next to the bread. I pull out a handkerchief and wet it. With the noise upstairs reaching its peak I wipe his face, his skinny arms and neck knowing well that he can’t see me. I hope he might just feel a little breeze cooling his feverish face. When his eyes open, they are wide with fear. He stares directly above his head, into the centre of the terrifying noise.

My mother’s voice suddenly rings clear in my mind. “I can’t understand how they can built houses here without proper foundations. Back at home each house has a cellar built into the foundations. To store food, fuel or to hide from the enemy. Some are craftily designed and secret. Here they built everything above the ground.”
Now I know where we are hiding. Somewhere there is a secret door, leading to one of the rooms upstairs. From the sounds above, a full search is underway. Are they looking for him?

Unable to sit up properly, the boy turns himself on his side when he notices the jug. With an effort he drinks the water and after a thought he swallows the pill. The voice upstairs booms more orders. Sounds of moving furniture and pounding of boots come frighteningly close to our heads.

The boy now reaches under the cushion and pulls out something hidden underneath. With an effort he rolls over, facing the wall. After a moment a tiny light beam illuminates the stony face of the wall. A minute streak of hope, offering an escape from the fear and the pain. I move closer to watch his face. Perfectly still, his eyes focus into the tiny stream of light, his breathing slows down, a smile appears on his cracked lips. Tentative at first, it grows. It transforms the frightened face into a cherub I have met before under very different circumstances.

I realise that for a time being he is happy and safe, I hope that the builders of the house were smarter then the soldiers are now.

The beam indicates his readiness to leave. I cast a last glance at the boy. He is relaxed and peaceful, removed himself into another world. His body looks fragile in its thinness. With the quilt on the side now, the body also seems incomplete. I look again, more carefully this time.

Where his right foot ought to be only a big swaddle of bandages hangs from just bellow the knee. The full recognition dawns on to me as the beam carries me home.
Back inside the display room, I turn the light off. In the cool of the night I contemplate all that I know. About our ability to fly and our identity. There are no major decisions to be made after all. Like one’s identity, the gift of flying the beam is something I can’t ignore or interfere with, not when the gift is passed down the family tree.

The only decision I have to make is the one regarding the long distance call.

I check the watch, subtract ten hours and dial the number. The international tone rings, unfamiliar.

She answers almost immediately. “Hello mother how are you? You can return home. I have found your brother, uncle Milan.”
The last flight

"Hold my hand," she whispers standing next to me. "I still don't believe its going to work," she adds, nervous but determined to go ahead with it. I feel like a child again. I have uttered these words so many times before, hopping for a fellow traveller. "Hold my hands, come and explore with me."

Now she is here and I am her guide. I know that an excitement must not interfere with our ability to focus on the beam, I wrap my fingers around her slender wrist wondering how it became so thin. "Empty your lungs completely. Let the air come in and leave freely, do not force it. With each outgoing breath let your mind focus on the point where the beam meets the ceiling. Wait till the invitation arrives." I feel a tremor ripple through her hand and hear my voice repeating over and over. "Relax, just relax your mind."

It has been some time now, since I have worried about sharing and passing on my knowledge. Once the link between our families became known, it was the only reasonable thing to do. Hannah is obviously another chosen one; she represents the next generation of torch collectors. I must help her to fulfil her potential. After all these years I am happy to share the burden of knowledge, to talk about my adventures.

It had taken a while for the family excitement to die down. My mother’s joy at finding her brother was so intense, it took days for them to separate. After that they kept seeing each other so often, we had to drive them back and forth constantly. In the end my parents decided to move closer to Milo’s house. "I don’t want to lose any more time, I have lost too much already," was my mother’s reasoning, my father was happy enough with the decision.
Their new home has a big garden and he has once again taken up gardening. Having rejected his previous scientific approach, he uses organic methods instead. His garden beds are full of manure, his tomatoes reach the top of his fence.

In addition to my two siblings I have acquired four cousins and their families, twelve nephews and nieces in all, Hannah being the eldest.

She insists on coming and living with me, but I prefer my privacy and intend to keep it that way. She visits me regularly because her torches are with me and it would break our hearts to separate them, so happy they are in each others company.

I become once again aware of my own voice. “Relax, it may take time to receive an invitation. When the beam is ready it will let us know. Explore the play of the light and the shadows, let yourself be drawn into it.”

Surprisingly, both my mother and uncle Milo recalled other occasions and memories of their mother’s flights. “Stories” they called them; too vivid to be true and too exciting to be forgotten. Milo also remembered “hallucinations” he suffered when hiding after his escape from the camp.

“Brought on by fevers resulting from an infection acquired during the amputation of his leg,” he insists on calling them, but Hannah and I silently exchange looks; we know the difference between a flight and a dream. A look is all it takes, we won’t argue, there is no point. Despite the common knowledge of the family discovery, no one accepts the role the torches played. Everyone still prefers to talk coincidence and good luck.

Since her first flight some time ago, Hannah has become much happier, she knows who she is and what she can do. On that very first flight, as well
as on all subsequent ones, the beam left me behind. She went alone, I was
waiting for her return. Surprisingly, she had not become pre-occupied with
the flights the way I was. By now flights are part of her life, but not all of it.
The beam has never taken us together, may be it will not be possible for the
two of us, ever.

Even now, standing here with my mother I wonder if we will be allowed
to go. Yes it is my mother standing next to me and for the first time, I am her
guide. I hear her breathing slowing down, she is ready to go. I give her the
torch I have been holding. “It may be better for you to hold it, it may give
you a better chance.” She nods her head, calm and serene.

How did she end up being here? Just appeared unexpectedly one day.
“Don’t tell your father,” she said “I want no arguments and he is too old to
change. But I want to try it out. If it managed to find Milan then it must be
worth while.” I just stood there, a big grin spreading from ear to ear.

So here we are on a beautiful sunny afternoon, hiding behind drawn
curtains inside a darkened room. The torch I have chosen is stocky and short,
the beam is wide and solid. I am convinced that it is capable of carrying us
both. It is a dependable beam and I trust she’d be safe even if I am left
behind. All is silent around us, even with the cabinet door open, I don’t sense
any movement in there. They must all realise the solemnity of the occasion, I
am positive there will be no trouble today.

The orange light investigates the ceiling, follows the walls and finally it
settles on the top corner of a window. It sits and waits. the pattern of
shadows growing more intricate. When it stretches right across the whole
window I recognise the familiar song in the distance.
My heart quickens as the warmth spreads from my feet to the rest of my body. I wonder if she feels it too and I stop to wait for her. "It's time to go," I say, looking directly at her, giving her the chance to quit. Instead, a smile brightens up her face, there is no fear or trepidation, only eagerness to explore.

When the light beam opens up to us we wade hand in hand into the orange pool of light.