Early Saturday morning was an odd time for dad to be mopping the porch. Stranger still was the fact he had the front door closed. I was scratching sleep from my eyes when I opened the door to see the yellow sponge swipe through a thick pool of blood. I remember it as a perfect circle, the radius of a hula hoop. Initially the blood looked like an acrylic red disc — hard, like you could pick it up and use it as a painter's palette. Then Dad carved through the centre with the mop and the edges of the pool descended into madness, desperately wanting to fall back into order, to that perfect circle, expanding and contracting like an exposed human heart.

'Don't come out 'ere,' Dad said. 'Go back inside.'

It was 1989 and I was ten years old. We'd been living in Bracken Ridge, in Brisbane's northern suburbs, for less than a month. We had a three-bedroom home in the heart of the suburb's Housing Commission cluster, a brief series of intersecting streets that you could find yourself in if you took the wrong exit off the Bruce Highway on the way to the Sunshine Coast.

The suburb seemed raw then — like a frontier — full of promise and dread. Only later would I be privy to its secrets: the boy who injected a syringe full of heroin into his girlfriend's belly to abort her pregnancy; the man who died alone in the toilets of the local tavern, choking on a piece of steak that he was still chewing as he did his business; the mother who stabbed a school bully in the eye with a steel ruler; the man who burst into my friend's lounge room with a bloody tomahawk, screaming, 'Hide this, hide this!' News reports that evening said the man had tied his father to a chair and tortured him with a tomahawk.

I remember the streets were named after the knights of the round table: Arthur, Lancelot, Gawain, Percival, Geraint and Pelleas. I once pondered the streets being named in honour of lesser known legends of the area. Goon Man Street, in homage to the guy living two doors up who sat on his porch every afternoon drinking from a cask of wine until it put him to sleep, his head slumped forward so awkwardly that blood ran to his forehead until he was
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the colour of a red onion. Goon Man had tried to kill himself once by feeding a
case from his car muffler through the driver's side window and locking him-
self inside. KGB Close, in honour of the Russian who ran the newsagency. He
made of being ‘connected’ back home, and was our very own double (news)
gent. Ibis Terrace, in honour of the one-legged bird that hopped around our
backyard, searching for insects. It lost its left leg to a length of fishing line.

I could see dad's shadow through the curtains in the lounge room, mopping
the blood and wringing it out into a bucket. I remember walking outside on
the ramp at the back of the house. Every ramp looked the same in a Hous-
ing Commission home, a long slab of concrete sloping down to a side gate with
no horizontal hand rails, coloured maroon. You could navigate through any
Housing Commission home blindfolded. Laundry off the ramp, kitchen off
the laundry, lounge room off the kitchen. Everybody had the same lounge: the
200 sofa bed from Super A-Mart in your preferred floral pattern. The hallway
always had two rooms on the left and one bigger room at the end, enough for
single parent.

At a time when the Australian economy was about to hit a recession and
unemployment in Queensland would peak at 10 per cent, it cost less than $150 a
night for a single father to house his four sons. We never had a bad word to
say about the Housing Commission. In the next decade, the Queensland public
housing portfolio would double to 49,300 dwellings. We had a brick one: practi-

cal and ugly red brick, as opposed to practical and ugly fibro.

The Housing Commission mostly left you alone. In the nine years I lived in
the house, I only saw a commission officer once, and that was when they sent
a man out to inspect our kitchen. One week later, we had a brand-new kitchen
with drawers that slid on rollers. When something needed fixing – a hole in the
glass, a busted hot water system, fleas, cockroaches, another hole in the wall – it
would be fixed in days. Santa Claus was unreliable in Bracken Ridge. But you
could depend on a Housing Commission officer.

From the ramp, I noticed several drops of blood running along the patch
d of grass at the side of the house. I followed the blood drops like they were
red crumbs. They led to the black wheelie bin. I opened the bin lid and hoisted
my skinny frame up so my belly was balancing on the bin’s edge. At the bot-

tom of the bin, inside a large knotted yellow plastic bag, was a pig’s head. The
head filled the width of the bin; tilted on its side so its big dumb eye seemed to
look up at me. The pig’s neck still dripped blood, which gathered in pools at
the corners of the bag.

We were told later that the pig's head was placed on our porch by a local thug,
nicknamed Boo, who worked at the meatworks. If it was Boo – we never found
out for sure – I never understood his motivation. I could understand if, say, my
father was the local police chief or if my family name was Bacon. But the act had no connection to anything else. It was such a graphic, random act. So hostile. So full of hate. But there was a secret I'd learn later about Bracken Ridge: there were a million reasons to hate the place and none at all. Boo was introducing us to the neighbourhood, his own version of a neighbourly sponge cake.

One afternoon some weeks later, while playing cricket in the backyard with my eldest brother, I was struck in the shoulder blade by a flying piece of manure. I turned around to cop another piece of manure on the cheek. Boo was laughing with his friend, Sharpie, who lived in the house directly behind us. My eldest brother – my own King Arthur – immediately leapt the rear fence and drove his right fist into Boo’s mouth. A following left to the chest sent Boo falling back on to the manure pile. We left Boo there spitting blood into his cupped hand.

I spent the following nights fretting, pondering the monstrosities Boo planned for retribution.

Then I was confronted by Boo and Sharpie in the frozen foods section of the local Foodmart. I would often lose myself for ten-minute periods standing at the frozen food bay, running my hands along frozen meat pies, party pies and party sausage rolls, picturing myself before the television watching The Wonder Years while feasting on Birdseye fish fingers and various pastries dipped in tomato sauce.

I felt a presence close in behind me. I turned to find Boo smiling. I'd never seen him up so close. His hair was brown and stringy. He had homemade tattoos on his arms. When he smiled, one of his two front teeth jutted out like a garage door halfway open. He leaned in close. 'Tell your brother he's got a good punch,' he said.

Boo laughed and patted my face, then walked out of the frozen foods aisle, his thongs flip-flopping towards the cashier’s counter. A knot untangled itself in my stomach. There by the Black & Gold bags of frozen peas, the message was clear: in Bracken Ridge, violence was respected.
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trains of travellers who have become accustomed to the Taipan brown of Central Queensland. By the time you have torn the sleep from your eyes, Sarina is vaporising into your rear-view and there is nothing but a vast emerald sugar plain that seems to stretch for hundreds of miles before you (and it does). The ethereal outline of the Eungella Range creeps into view, but at this distance its modest peaks are bathed in a dark blue hue and hang like pockets of textured sky on the horizon.

The Bruce Highway shrinks under the two metre-high cane and closes a little, as an ever-increasing volume of sugar and beef steams down on you in the brutal twin-trailer semis that shift the land. Diesel and tortured chain-link joints grind and rend the atmosphere as the trucks hurtle through the air-stream jetting past your eardrum. A gust of industrial-strength produce ignites an olfactory bomb-blast in the front seat of your car and the gaudy highway signage reads ‘Welcome to Mackay’.

This place is, after all, the northernmost tip of Ross Gibson’s land gone wrong from his book *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (University of Queensland Press, 2002). What he doesn’t know is there’s no ‘badland’ here — just bad people. This may be the tip of Capricorn, but it’s also the arse end of Cancer; it’s not what he thinks it is.

This is my spiritual home, the home of my people, and when we aren’t whining about ‘getting out of this shit-hole’ we love the place. To me the ‘badlands’ are the bedtime stories of Dengue fever, oppressive heat and catastrophic cyclones that we sold to the toga party set last time we were at St Lucia and wanted to freak them out. Generations of Mackaysians have made the long migration south for study or work, and each one has done their small part to make sure they didn’t come here. Only in the bullet train years of 2000 and beyond have canny tour operators and Virgin Blue marketers begun to spoil the mythology that kept this Capricornian badland safe — safe from all but a few hardy trailer travellers migrating up the Cape.

The Capricorn that graces our signs, stamps and stationery is the half-goat, half-fish of Greek mythology. After waging war on the elder gods, the young immortal Pan shape-shifts to fish-form in order to escape the immense and far-reaching tendrils of Typhon. The beast is sent to ensnare the rebellious Pan but fails to locate the mischievous god who now bears the form of the sea-goat. This place has always attracted sea-goats of a sort — hardy people, rebellious and defiant; hedonistic drunkards in times of plenty and adaptable shape-shifters in times of adversity.

From Typhon we get typhoon, the cyclones that stalk our coast. But even after the near-obliviation of 1918, this town re-emerged on the banks of the Pioneer River and grew steadily in the sun. This is not an easy place to
live sometimes, and maybe in the early days it really was a 'badland', but it's only the outsiders who can't roll with the punches, only the outsiders who make it the 'badland'. Then again, maybe in the early days that's how we were too.

The streets are wider up here, the traffic emptier. There is little interest in the goings on of down south. This is not the Brisbane that despises Sydney and secretly yearns for Oxford Street. This is the Mackay that knows it is better than Rocky and couldn't give a shit about Paddington. Mackay is a city that insists on calling itself a town, in a state full of towns that insist on calling themselves cities.

Things happen a little differently here, and the glaring weekend sun bids me drive down Town Beach. The pitted grey asphalt leads me past Mackay’s answer to an industrial zone. Shitty mega-fencing warehouses, mechanics’ workshops and wreckers’ yards languish below rust-stained signage while vast expanses of corrugated iron panels and concrete retaining walls strategically block the unwelcome distraction of the million-dollar riverside views. These are the city centre’s only absolute waterfront properties, close enough to the river mouth to funnel sea breezes into the back streets and close enough to the café district to get iron filings in your affogato. Minutes away, the beach is deserted. Despite a balmy twenty-two degrees and the stinger-free tides of winter, the weather is deemed unfit for human recreation. One of a small throng of pre-teen skater boys sees me eyeing the break.

‘Farken’ too farken’ cold fa’ swimmin ya’ mad cunt.’

Smiling, I toss my boardies back into the car.

I crawl through the central business district at a slow idle. ‘Up town’, the strip of shops is busy with the lunchtime rush as scores of townies scour the outlets for their singular most important dose of retail therapy for the week. They shuffle up and down the mall, they complain about the cold, they scrutineer a million products that they have all scrutineered a thousand times before, and they leave as unfulfilled as when they came. Cane-cockies and cow-folk join the throng, pushing prams, ogling windows and sizing up new frocks. Even as the threat of ‘coppin a floggin’ looms, their hyperactive children scream and run, fight and play. Hurling themselves between the massive primordial palms that line Main Street.

Meanwhile, on every street corner the significant spend of miners and fisherman brings the pubs to a rowdy chorus. A cacophony of voices engaged in their own personal brand of obnoxious, self-righteous bullshit. Though the visitors tend to lack a certain je ne sais quoi, the weekly excitement and bustle of the Saturday crowd seems to draw even more locals. Many of them are returning.
from netball courts and footy grounds across the suburbs and seeking little
more than a Mars bar and a cold pot, but like good sea-goats they adapt and
stay for hours, just to feed off the energy.

By mid-arvo, my old crew is half-cut. They line the veranda, well supplied
with Jimmy’s and VBs (the nectar of the gods). Even as the afternoon storm
athers, they belt out melodies on detuned Matons and one badly abused
ender. Pink Floyd and Bob Dylan are the order of the day, as they were in the
mid-’90s. Despite this, someone has picked up a bit of Pete Murray from watch­
ing Max Sessions on Fox and is belting out ‘Beautiful’. The infectious chorus is
recognised and duly butchered by several melodramatic voices that can best be
credited as untrained. From the strained humming and half-guessed lyrics of
the verse, they erupt into a howling, chest-beating rendition of the chorus that
soon being repeated incessantly. Strangely, the irony is not lost on them and
the brooding afternoon air buckles with laughter. The only recess comes when
the maestro ditches his guitar to answer the phone. He immediately begins
acing the steps, loudly organising the night’s festivities with an unknown
complice.

No one even makes mention of a dense blanket of purple and black clouds
lling the horizon. A storm’s not a storm until it has lasted two days. A sheet
of rain moves visibly across the suburbs but leaves the veranda bathed in
sunshine.

I stare across at the crew, a veritable microcosm of the Mackaysian demo­
graphic – black to white, poor to rich, hard times to good times. The Solomon
slander is in his element. His dextrous finger-picking composition echoes the
fluence of B.B. King, his heartfelt blues, his pain in verse. Schoolin’ never
at well with him and he hasn’t been able to keep down a job since his cousin
opped himself years ago. He dreams of starting a covers band and belting out
’howlin’ Wolf’ for unappreciative pub crowds across the country. It’s not easy
when you only work the cane-haul – especially when you have a four-year-old
feed.

The red-headed boys own the house – or at least they might as well. It’s their
um’s, of course, but they’re not here for lack of funds. She loves their mates
and they love her. Why would you leave? Mum does a round of party pies and
ning prawns then disappears up the hallway. The older brother is getting fat
ese days, but he’s happy. He’s an ambo driver and I ask him what it’s like.
’ll of goat-speak and swagger, he laughs and tells me about ambos in Brissie.

‘Narsty, those poor fucks spend almost as much time in the emergency
oom as I do in the fucken’ Macca’s drive-thru … And that’s a fucking lot now­
days, let me tell you.’ He stares gingerly at his paunch.
The younger brother wanders back, still on the mobile.

‘Nah mate, nah mate ... come out you sly-dog ... come out or I’ll smack ya one, ya sly-dog. Faaak yeeeah.’

He’s just come back from the mines and is fucking loaded. Materially there is little that gives away his new-found wealth. Wife-beater, boardies and double pluggers, still the style of choice. Only the freshly bought bottles of Bundy Black are a dead giveaway.

I stare out across the dying embers of the day as I scoff down my third piece of steak (no rabbit food). The rain has stopped in time for sunset and now the light snow of cane ash wafts in from the west. Tiny black butterflies adrift on thermal updrafts. No time for contemplation. The sea-goats and I prepare for the festivities to come. It’s a simple formula; a fool-proof path to self-fulfilment. It involves gettin’ smashed, gettin’ into fights and maybe, just maybe, gettin’ laid. Like I said, there’s no ‘badland’ here, just bad people.

All hail the sea goats.

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Not so long ago, I was informed that the house I was staying in was a brothel. Pulling up in a taxi outside the busy Vulture Street driveway, the driver had cocked his head towards the house and remarked: ‘I know this place. Used to be a brothel.’ In fact, he continued, swinging around to hand me my change, it was the brothel that had sparked the Fitzgerald Inquiry. He told me with no uncertain authority that sex and fake IDs were sold from within our very rooms, that police officers frequented the premises for pay-offs and pro bono appointments, and that when the structures of corruption had come crashing down in the late 1980s this was the establishment to blame.

‘D’ya know about Fitzgerald?’ he asked me and I nodded, less as confirmation than as an invitation for him to tell me more of what could only be unofficial (and unverifiable) information about the watershed judicial inquiry into Queensland Police misconduct.

Nevertheless, the driver’s suggestion was not so outlandish that when I relayed to my housemates what I had been told we became smitten with the possible truth of the claims. Too easily, we imagined our sprawling bungalow on Vulture Street East playing host to all manner of vice. The dirty glamour
Scratch the surface

f the cabbie's story, coupled with the strange romance that our house may have been a feature of Queensland's sexiest history, was too attractive to resist. The image of prostitutes performing tricks in our bedrooms was particularly piquing for all its incongruence with the house's present occupants: fiverown men dividing between them what was probably the cheapest rent in Brisbane in what would eventually become their last share house. Then there was me. I had moved in the midst of writing a dissertation with nothing but a laundry basket's worth of clothes and a bag of library books. Everything else I owned was in storage. I shared the back bedroom, and felt I had as much claim to the household as a guest or a stay-over girlfriend.

For these reasons perhaps, my own interest in the house's history soon exceeded the fleeting amusement of my housemates. I found myself immersed in local research, questioning its place in history and, on reflection, my own place in the house's elusive past. Was the house on Vulture Street East once a cententious bordello? What was its role in the events that led to the inquiry into systemic political corruption in Queensland? This was what it was to live in a house with secrets, with a hidden past entangled with the state's history.

I became fixated on the goal of validating the cabbie's story. Walking up and down the hall, I would try to imagine each of the rooms as a brothel boudoir, enhancing the existing décor with shag-pile carpet, red velour, dim lights, swirls of cigarette smoke, and lipstick-smudged glasses. The house is divided into nine rooms: the front living room, the back kitchen, two bathrooms side by side, and five large bedrooms with high ceilings. Incidentally, the current legal limit of servicing rooms in a licensed Queensland brothel is five – although, the house was ever used for the purposes of prostitution, it was in the days before an official brothel licence was ever required.

Trawling through old media references to the brothels of pre-Fitzgerald Brisbane, I am amused by the descriptions of multiple self-contained rooms and 'plenty of showers and spas', such as those reported in the Sydney Morning Herald upon notice of the sale of a Kangaroo Point brothel called Pinky's. My housemates and I have all wondered about the twin bathrooms tacked on at the end of our house, installed with cheap toilets and showers. They were designed for a family; they are functional in the way that public toilets are utilitarian, intended for a sole purpose. Yet the bathrooms also boast some odd features – ancient audio-visual plugs, now clogged with dust and cockroaches' wings. These plugs are dotted in odd places throughout the house. I try to match these and other details of the its interior with the reported characteristics of 1980s brothels.

Phil Dickie, the Courier-Mail journalist who doggedly pursued the proprietors of Brisbane's illegal sex-for-sale industry on 'the road to Fitzgerald' summarises
'80s-style prostitution thus: 'In the new parlours the massage benches had gone and double beds had come in along with locking doors, deep pile carpet, spa baths, fully stocked bars, mirrors in the ceilings and videos in the rooms, as well as piped music and blue movies. The charade of the $10 compulsory massage fee had also disappeared - now the customer chose his delicacy from what was quaintly termed a menu before choosing the girl to provide it. One such menu, for Bubbles Bath-House, turned up as a talking point in state parliament.'

Mirrors dangling from the ceilings and blue movies in the bedrooms? In spite of the random hooks, cords and plugs scattered throughout the house, it is difficult to picture it playing hostess to anything so sordid; the imagined details seem unlikely within these ordinary Queenslander walls, all pinstriped planks and chipped grey paintwork. In any case, the house sits on the crooked corner of two very busy streets. Although a few trees shade the house, the lot is neither secluded nor secure. The crumbs of concrete scattered around the front yard suggest that numerous vehicles have driven in and out of the rusted gate. Surrounded by constant traffic, I cannot imagine how any licentious activities could have remained discreet.

Yet these features I have described are not atypical of many inner-city Brisbane homes. Queenslanders, it seems, are comfortable with the lack of intimacy that accompanies the style of half-indoor, half-outdoor living particular to the state. In an essay assessing sexual identity in colonial Brisbane titled 'A Practised Place: Sex and Citizenship, Brisbane 1850-1890', published in *Culture and Policy* in 1992, critic Kay Ferres describes the designs of early Queensland cottages as 'the architecture of exposure', the unlined weatherboard walls as porous barriers between private and public life. Conventional domestic arrangements were turned inside out during those early settler days, Ferres writes, and as a consequence so were the boundaries of gender relations. Social life was now 'an out of doors affair ... courtships were conducted on the verandas and in shadowy arbours as new arrivals embedded themselves in community networks'. Reading this it is hard not to recall my experiences of living within the permeable walls of our Vulture Street residence. The house breathes in rhythm with the outside world; she sweats through the extremes of heat and her floorboards creak during the rain like an elderly dame suffering from rheumatism. The flow of traffic vibrates through every room, day and night, betraying an auricular illusion of feeling at all times both inside and out: a consistent, humming blur of two spaces.

Dickie hints at such a blur when he describes the Bubbles Bath-House menu circulating as Queensland parliamentary gossip, but I wonder whether prostitution is not always, in some way, political. Although prostitution is the world's oldest and most persistent profession, the ways in which it is enacted, perceived
Scratch the surface

and governed are relative to social, cultural and political factors. The structure of the sex industry – in particular, its visibility – shifts according to a moral mood that is usually entwined with the caprices of governance. Changes to the edifices of the sex industry in Queensland have since been under the control of state governments. The most recent significant change in legislation regarding sex work has been the *Prostitution Act* 1999, introduced to regulate the hidden operations of a largely invisible portion of the community. By contrast, before Fitzgerald, the criminalisation and concealment of prostitution enabled organised crime to flourish and the associated abuse of police power.

Hidden/exposed. Secret/accountable. Invisible/transparent. Private/public. These are the distinctions which define discussions of pre- and post-Fitzgerald inquiry politics and prostitution in Queensland, yet they fail to take into account something which seems essential. At the very least, the act of prostitution obfuscates what exactly is public and private: sexual intimacy is performed by strangers; a private transaction is regulated by government legislation and commercial law. In terms of its public visibility, prostitution remains a hidden aspect of Queensland, but its essential structure is more akin to that of a rambling Queensland home: double doors flung open to a wrap-around veranda; a sub-tropical breeze idling through each of the rooms – the architecture of exposure.

In spite of my investigations, I began to reason that the house on Vulture Street East was not going to give up its secrets easily. A paper trail through official documents and old *Courier-Mail* articles would not confirm the claims of taxi drivers – those storehouses of unverifiable, unaccountable information. Sitting on the edge of the block, the house has no neighbours to probe for eyewitness accounts of activities in the 1980s. The only neighbouring dwelling was unoccupied: a duplex Queenslander that bore a sororal resemblance to our house with its horizontal weatherboards, portrait-sized frosted windows and other flourishes in keeping with the architectural fashion of another century. Both houses rest on tired stumps in spacious lots, although there is barely a metre and a half between their adjacent walls, suggesting that they may have shared any number of secrets. But the last known occupant, a senior man who kept mainly to himself, had not been seen in over nine months and with him had gone three decades of knowledge that only a neighbour could know.

A survey of the house's design suggested that, if not a brothel, the establishment was certainly once used as something other than a home: the large, closed-off bedrooms, the roomy car park of the front yard, the tacked-on kitchen and bathrooms might be features of a boarding-house, for example, but the truth has become less important to me. Proving that the house was the brothel that sparked the Fitzgerald Inquiry was in the end not the point;
Hidden Queensland

the story drew me in – the house sparked my own investigation into Queensland’s murky history of vice and corruption and the shifting boundaries of domesticity and public life.

Afterword: A few weeks before I moved out, a lot of men in green shirts began to show up each day next door, removing anything with roots and dismantling the vandalised outhouse. One morning, we woke to the sound of a chainsaw tearing through the trees shading our house, separating the front yard from the street. When we asked the men what was happening, they replied that they were under orders from the owner who was keen to knock the old place down. They informed us that our landlord and the owner of the condemned house were the same person.

‘So what’s going to happen to our house?’ I asked.

‘Dunno, love. Might have to ask your agent.’

We did. She informed us that the owner was planning to redevelop once he had the permits. ‘But your place is heritage listed. The worst they can do,’ she said, ‘is lift up the entire house and swivel it around so that it faces the other street.’

Boarded up, fenced up and left to crumble, the house next door seemed to represent something of the future for our house. After I had eventually left, there were only three remaining housemates and the boys all had similar plans for travel, marriage, and moving on. Vulture Street East has since become a kind of halfway house – but then what? If the real estate agent is wrong and the house is not heritage listed, it eventually may have a similar fate to its sister. Or else it will be spun around on its stumps and given a new address, a new identity, making the paper trail more difficult and its secrets harder to crack. With no neighbourly or resident reminiscences to support it, the idea that the house was once a brothel will remain a secret – that is, until one night a taxi driver with a long-term appreciation for sordid detail chances to drop somebody off on the corner. Until then, the story will have to suffice as the house takes its place in my history of Queensland.

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If I tell you I am sitting on a balcony typing these words in the glorious Queensland sun, you will possibly be envious. If I tell you I am nude, you will probably think me deviant. I wonder why? The difference is a few grams of cotton or, worse, polyester. As I am, I must ensure that I am hidden.
Scratch the surface

Since its inception in 1920s Europe, the naturist movement has had to hide. The first nudist communities were built on islands or secreted behind converted chateau walls. Medical doctors Caston and André Durville established the original French naturist camp, Physiopolis, on an un-bridged island in the Seine an hour upriver from Paris. The Durvilles went on to start their first permanently nude residential colony, Heliopolis, on Le Levant island in the Mediterranean, a one-hour boat ride off the French Riviera. It flourishes still, seventy-seven years later, an entire town with hotels, bakery, supermarket, post office and local police station. I've been there twice.

Isolation allowed early naked communities to survive. In the 1930s, Kienne de Mongeot's popular Sparta Club relocated from its founding Paris gymnasium and hid behind the walls of a Medieval castle in Normandy. The Berlin movement started by Adolph Koch, Freikörperkultur (Naked Body Culture), hired a Berlin suburban swimming pool (the biggest in the world at the time) one night a week to the exclusion of costumed users. The Nazis eventually shut Koch down, but attendances on naked night reached a thousand. In Europe now, the largest naturist community is Cap d'Agde on the Mediterranean coast near Montpellier – a gated nude resort city of fourteen thousand permanents and vacationers.

These thriving clubs and communities form the background to the naturist movement in Queensland. Today there are twenty-five resorts with permanent sites and ten further clubs which hold sudden events in a variety of sunny places. You drive past these resorts and don't know they exist (there are two at Caboolture and several on the Sunshine Coast). You can be engaged in a quiet family boating trip on Moreton Bay when a chartered ferry full of naked merrymakers zooms by. They too are on a family-oriented outing.

In selected newsagents you can rummage through the magazine stand to find copies of Tan - a sixty-eight-page glossy naturist lifestyle journal published quarterly from the Gold Coast – hidden among the less wholesome magazines, but classified 'Unrestricted'. You can Google 'Nude Queensland' to find a list of unofficial naked beaches along the Queensland coast (but remember, nude bathing is still illegal on all beaches in this state). You can Google 'Naturist resorts Queensland' to discover a place to live permanently nude or just holiday. These resorts and clubs are also in the phone book. What is hidden takes only a short time to find.

Nude Queensland sites are dotted the length of the coast and inland as far as Toowoomba. Let me take you by the ungloved hand to one of them, on the outskirts of Brisbane, the resort closest to the CBD. I'll call it Sun Worshippers. People commute to work in Brisbane from here.
Sun Worshippers is a big place. There are fifteen hectares of picturesque lawns, shady palms, orchard trees, natural bushland, tennis and golf facilities and creek swimming. All accommodation is in caravans; the park could take four hundred people at a time but council laws don't permit it. There are thirty-five permanent vans on the site paying cheap rents. This beautiful parkland is one of the old-style resorts in Queensland, established thirty years ago. The newer resorts are B&B-style, typically set on a hectare of well-screened land with rooms in the main house or cabins with the social focus being the in-ground swimming pool or the undercover activities/chat/bar area. The newer places lack the 'plenty of space for bushwalking' which used to be a must for old-style naturism.

The owners of the Sun Worshippers park are a couple, Jill and Ken. They built it from nothing back in the hippie drop-out era of the late 1970s. They are respected regulars at the local RSL club now, and say they've never had trouble from the local textiles. Their resort is close to a sleepy bayside town of working-class retirees and young low-income families - a backwater about to explode because the outreach of Brisbane suburban expansion is almost upon them. A local-area Save our Lifestyle campaign is trying to fight off rezoning and big development. Naked protests, however, won't help this cause in the current climate.

Unlike some hippies who wasted the 1970s self-absorbed under trees and sunlight and high on grass, Jill and Ken built a lifestyle and pleasure haven for others. They erected the main house, along with the recreational and toilet facilities, with help from volunteers. They did not link to the government grid: the Sun Worshippers community has its own solar heating and electricity system and a water system fed by a windmill. A recent storm knocked down the solar array and the nudists rebuilt it.

Everything at Sun Worshippers is beautifully maintained. Toilets, showers and vans are spotless, better than you will find in places where people stay with their clothes on. Naturists think of others when they sit on a public surface: the 'bum towel' and 'lap-lap' are ubiquitous. (Take a closer look at the bus, train or cinema seat you are about to use to discover how clean the textile world is.)

The sense of space and open air at Sun Worshippers is delightful. Fruit trees to eat from, eucalypts and exotic plants to arouse the nostrils, vistas to excite the eye and relax the brain. This is truly a paradise – no wonder volunteers arrive happily to help the proprietors mow the vast lawns, clean the toilet facilities and fix the equipment.

But Jill and Ken need to retire. They created this place back when Nimbin-style dreams gripped many in the nation, especially younger people. With the
number of naturists falling in Australia, there is a crisis in membership. No new-generation representatives want to take over. Jill and Ken have a contract with an Asian buyer who says he will keep the resort going but he is drilling test-holes searching for extractable sand ten metres below the surface.

Why aren't young people interested? Is naturism too simple? Is fresh air out of fashion? Is it a problem that there is no modish dress statement involved? No technology hanging off the concept? No pockets for the mobile phone? When the young want health now, they get it indoors and clothed in a gym.

Has prudishness rubbed off too successfully on the young generation? Even previously topless public beaches have reverted to far stricter practices in Queensland (the Gold Coast provides several examples) but in Western and Eastern Europe the funky, up-market nudist beaches and resorts are pulsing with new membership and are full of young people.

Jill and Ken say they have always catered to oldies. And nearly all the people I see here now, as I type away, are the big, old, fleshy variety of sun-lovers identifiable from the Tan magazine pictures and advertisements. Good salt-of-the-earth types. Good, solid, naked Queenslanders. For relief, a young woman rides by nude on a bicycle. Ah, beautiful. More typically, an old woman and man struggle by nude at their walking frames. Ah, beautiful too.

Eventually, this park will be swallowed up by suburban advance. How can you have, in the middle of a suburb, a sprawling nude domain? The naked in their walking frames will be thrown off. As will the young ones.

Naturism is about nature itself. This is the movement’s central tenet. It’s about healthy activity (exercise, food, social interaction, friendship) in an open-air, natural environment. Sadly, in Queensland nature is being pushed back rapidly, forced into fewer and fewer corners. And as nature is subsumed and eradicated by development, so too is naturism. Soon nude Queensland may not be hidden. It may not exist at all.

But I hear there’s a public pond beside the council chambers in a major Queensland city where a group of naturists skinny-dip late at night. Sometimes they look in naked, through the windows, at the council meeting in progress, but the councillors can’t see them because of the tinted glass.

Watch out for the white towel hanging over a tree bough at this municipal pond at night. It’s the sign that the naturists are present. It’s not the white towel of surrender – it’s an indication that the nude revolution in Queensland is still on.

Nigel Krauth is a writer who lives in Queensland and teaches at Griffith University. ‘Ithaca: Home’ was published in Griffith REVIEW 6: Our Global Face.
A recurring dream had run throughout the half-century of her life—
a dream where the foundations of the house she was living in were
being washed away by high tides. The dream was not unusual, she
knew—and was no doubt tied to subconscious fears of some kind. The details
didn't interest her—they were all bound to be bad. Who needed reminding of
their insecurities these days?

The night she'd driven past 33 Earle Street—past the first old weatherboard
home the family had moved into when they'd come to Australia—and watched
unfamiliar urban profiles looming high over where the house stood, it had felt
a lot like being in that dream—except different.

She'd been on her way to a party when she'd passed the house. Social occa­sions
were becoming rare enough to call for some attention to detail but on
the way, in the car, she'd felt awkward and overly prepared. It occurred to her,
travelling across the Story Bridge, that there was a good chance she'd got it all
wrong, that the car might be a kind of delivery vehicle that had got the orders
mixed up, and that she might in fact be some kind of human croque en bouche
on the way to a minimalist sushi do.

The fret about appearances and fitting in continued the entire snaking route
past the familiar gothic sprawl of the old museum, the vacated dish of the Ekka
Grounds, the meiotic annexes of the hospital. By the time she'd reached Wind­sor, the spectre had wrenched her out of her self-focus.

In the slow crawl of early Saturday night traffic, strange shapes loomed
to her right—unfamiliar silhouettes that seemed to have come from another
place, another time. Their indistinct outlines might have been apparitions from
an H.G. Wells kind of future—a future predicted so long ago it was already
out of date. But the river of lights carried her past the house before she'd had
a chance to determine what she'd seen, and all through the night, in between
passages of practiced pleasantries, she'd pondered just what it was she might
have passed through. The house had been a site for her subconscious rather
than a place she'd frequently visited, but the fact that it was there—that it had
remained as proof of her having lived—seemed somehow important. At the
dinner, she couldn't wait to leave.

On her way home, she took the detour off Lutwyche Road, stopped the car
and slid a little deeper into the wash of disconcertion. Away from the hum of
traffic, the domestic quietness blanketed the scene in a layer of unreality. It was
as if her old home had been teleported into a crepuscular de Chirico piazza
and dropped in between tall, blank-faced towers and silos—looming, anony­
mous shapes that seemed totally out of place and time in the humid Brisbane
night. Only the ribbon of mangroves survived as a familiar umbilicus—their
dark, brooding conspiratorial shapes huddled shoulder to shoulder all the way.
Scratch the surface

along the snaking banks of Breakfast Creek. But right next door to the house –
the allotment where ‘the Italians’ had lived, and all the way down to where
the cement works had been in the elbow-bend of the creek – the land seemed
to be occupied by massive structures from another time, another place. It was
difficult to tell what these structures were in the dark, so after sitting for
while parked in the quiet dead-end of the street, she’d started the car and
urned back home.

On the drive, she tried to collate any shards of memory about that first home
in Queensland. But the memories seemed strange and far away. Uncertain, fal­
ering – the ice-man arriving, a huge block of green dripping solid wetness
dipped between iron pincers. She remembered her mother wrapping it in tow­
els, like a giant frozen angular baby, before putting it to bed in the chamber
of the freezer, a metal box in chipped duck-egg green paint with cold metal­
ic handles that stood in the corner of the kitchen with scraps of lino wedged
nder its feet to keep it even.

She could recall the local produce store, right across the road where the
creek turned and ran down to Northey Street. The shop had been dark. An
old man with white hair and quiet manners; meal and produce, legumes and
our served out of sacks, delivered portion by portion in big metallic scoops;
ook mash; oats and mix for horses that must have lived somewhere near­
that so close to the city. Right on the tramline that ran into the Valley. The
thing-ching of the leather-strap-tug-stops all the way through to McWhirters
where an infinite range of city pleasures were housed in caverns that seemed,
at the time, completely measureless. And among those wonders, the vitrine
of the doughnut maker, where fat circles of pale mix dropped with mechani­
cal regularity into the shallow amber vat of fat and on tanning were turned by
mechanical spatula into sticky trays of sugar and cinnamon. A world within a
world. As good to peer into as the offerings were to eat.

Her own backyard had seemed bucolic enough: a chook run and a rickety
rellis that every year lurched nervously to one side with the weight of an abun­
dant harvest of thick-skinned, sour grapes. Heavy and tightly packed, each
unch dusted with a fine coating of semi-transparent fur. Further down the
ack there’d been a mango tree – not a Bowen, but a mango nevertheless, every
summer ringed with the half-eaten remains of its stringy fleshy fruit aban­
donned by drunken bats from the night before. Like the bats and the possums,
er newly arrived family tried everything, mesmerised by the fecundity. Even
he pale, segmented interior of the *monstrosa deliciosa*, where tiny claws clung
like invisible demons to those who dared to sample that wet flesh.

The land had proven fertile. Potatoes and a lemon tree and tomatoes held
upright on thin sticks. And over the bleached wooden palings of the fence the

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produce was even more fascinating: the alarming blue-black tumescence of the
aubergines; vines that ran thick with runner beans; the strange unfamiliarity
of okra. Another world again. She’d known the neighbours ate olives with their
lunches.

Her yard was long and thin – starting at the cool dark concrete under the
house where the bitch had whelped, right up where she couldn’t be reached,
where the wooden pylons were shortest, where the redbacks lived, where the
cement gave up and the damp wetness of the forever-soil took over. The yard
ran all the way down to the silver metal chain-wire gates attempting to mark
the perimeter where the unchannelled edges of the street swarmed with fat
taddies after rain. Beyond the fence, an uneven tarmac, and across from
that again, the sullen oily banks of the creek.

There was no knowing that waterway, even then. A place of ancient dark­
ness, where hessian bags of kittens were drowned, and where they’d buried
Skipper after he’d died of a glass bait. A place where the mud was as thick and
sucking and stinking as a bog; where the mangroves were as mute and uncom­
promising as foreigners. Except that they weren’t.

Throughout the night, the far howlings of trains and the clank and clatter
of Slessor-esque station filtered through the black lace of their leaves from the
train lines beyond. Sounds of shunting. The final exhaustion of big engines.
The sense of others working on through the night; the house cloaked in a thin
shell of family.

He’d mentioned her apparition to her family, and on one unusually wet
Saturday she’d found herself driving the four of them back there. In the
wet, flat light of midday, the scene looked no less strange. Half the street had
indeed been flattened, and the huge concrete slabs were just as other-worldly
as they had been in the moonlight. Makeshift fencing ran right up to the edge
of the house, warning signs and keep-off notices strung at regular intervals.
It was easy enough to get through though, and the house doors had been left
open. A tunnel-world of pipes piled down the length of the yard. The concrete
edges of the original garden remained, but all else lay flattened.

Inside, the house hadn’t changed. Like so little of the rest of her life, the pro­
portions of its rooms all seemed to fit with how she imagined they had been.
The placement of windows, the edges of the veejays, the height of the ceilings
seemed to obey, to be compliant to her memory. A little shell. Only the views
from the windows had altered.

Later on, she realised that the enormous structures and silos marked the
end of the proposed under-the-river tunnel. That the house had been left, for
the moment, as the last domestic structure to stand in the way of the freeway
Scratch the surface

and was being used, probably, for smokos and storage for the workers on the
job.

She wasn’t sure how to feel about the entire process of coming across the
house in this way. She imagined it felt a bit like coming across a family mem-
ber who’d fallen on bad times and wondering whether one should have taken
more time. Taken more care. All of which she knew was all so irrational. What
he was watching was a marker of her own short life being erased.

As she pulled the car away, she followed the street along the bend in the
reek, up past the long grass where kids used to gather together to burn Guy
’awkes every year. How strange that celebration had seemed – somehow chill-
ing and out of place, and as macabre as the dark hand-made body twisting and
ontorting in the dancing heat of the flames. She recalled the way the light of
he fire had reflected back off the waxy dark green of the watching line of man-
groves, sullen and slow and forever.

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The first sight from the air is a glint in the distance, a hill, an impression
of water, a scattering of buildings. Then the plane banks and skims
across a stretch of mangroves and an arc of river the colour of rust.
Cooktown. Outside, the air is warm with its own particular tropical smell:
weet, like a touch of coconut oil, but spicy too. There is the faintest whiff of
at shit.

The knoll known as Grassy Hill rolls down to the river, houses hidden on
its slopes. On the track to the beach, waist-high grasses grown in the Wet are
rrowning off as the Dry settles in; sand squeaks underfoot. Lushness and
arshness jostle in this part of the world. It’s a place that both draws people in
and repels them.

Captain Cook beached the Endeavour here in 1770 to repair a mighty gash
in her keel, caused when she struck the reef. Cook and his crew were stranded
or seven weeks. Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander roamed the slopes and
hores of the river, collecting specimens and taking notes. But when the Endea-
avour sailed away, it was another century before outsiders set foot beside the
endeavour River again. Gold brought them – thousands of them – clambering
ff boats and heading inland towards the goldfield. In the early 1870s, more
han twenty thousand Chinese arrived in Cooktown on the trail of gold. Some
ound their fortune, some died, some became merchants and market gardeners

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and eventually moved further south; most went back to China. Hardly any traces remain: a few names, a few small biographical notes, a memorial in the town cemetery and a backpackers' hostel called Louey's.

For half a century, Cooktown shrank and shrank. Since the road south was sealed, it has started to grow again. Now there are million-dollar blocks of land for sale overlooking the river mouth, and yachts moored near the wharf. Tourists in shorts and sandals wander the riverside path, map in hand, following the 'history trail'. As the tide runs out, people come to fish, black and white, family groups, old-timers. There are plenty of Indigenous people about but not a Chinese face to be seen. What if? What might the story have been if the gold had lasted? If there hadn't been cyclones and prejudice, war and evacuation? If the place hadn't been quite so goddamn far from anywhere else? Cooktown may not have been better, of course, but it would have been different.

I think about what makes certain people go to certain places; what makes them leave or stay. And I wonder, too, about the traces we all leave — how easy or difficult they are to follow, or how true. And in the midst of this wondering, I wind up at the Cooktown Botanic Gardens and that's where I find Vera.

In the old botanic gardens, now brought back to life and lovingly nurtured, is an interpretive centre and art gallery. The gallery contains the flower paintings of Vera Scarth-Johnson, an English woman who came to live in Cooktown in 1972 and spent the next twenty-five years documenting, championing and painting the extraordinary plant life of the Endeavour River area.

Her paintings are exquisite in their detail and composition. There is something fine and robust about them that makes me think she may have been this way herself. The descriptive notes beneath each painting are brief, to the point, but also very definite in tone. I can hear her speaking the words. Of the pretty red-berried tape vine she writes: 'The flowers are inconspicuous, but the bunches of berries are most attractive. Grown easily from seeds. Be careful because it can become an annoying weed. The root of this plant is bitter and an extract of it is extremely poisonous to frogs.'

There are dozens of her paintings on the walls; more than 140 colour plates in her book National Treasures. A remarkable body of work. I ask the woman in the bookshop where I might find more information about her.

'It's there in her book,' she says, pointing to the few slim pages of biography I've already read.

A photo at the front of Vera's book depicts a group of three women and two men taking a break from their work in a vegetable garden, somewhere in rural England. It must be hot because the women are in shorts and skimpy tops, their hair tied up in scarves. 'Nursery group, 1943' the caption says. Vera
sits to one side, beautiful and long-legged and slightly pigeon-toed. In the foreground is another pretty young woman, Dorothy. Dorothy is mentioned in the acknowledgements: 'Dorothy Cook, Vera's friend for nearly 60 years.' It sets me to wondering ... but what first piques my interest when I see this photo is how that lovely, leggy young woman from Yorkshire came to end up in Cooktown.

Vera was from a well-to-do Yorkshire family. She was sent to finishing school in Paris in the late 1920s and when that didn't work out (the only thing she liked about it was the garden), she attended art school in Leeds. She didn't like art school all that much either. What she really wanted was to be a farmer – not a pursuit I suspect her family would have wanted. A Cooktown local tells me her father was a concert pianist and her mother the daughter of a wealthy textile manufacturer.

The young Vera was tall and very beautiful. To raise money, she worked as a model, modelling hats and jewellery. Perhaps impressed by her determination – or scandalised by her modelling – her maternal grandfather gave her two thousand pounds to buy a market garden and piggery. He insisted that she add his name, Scarth, to her own, and so she became Vera Scarth-Johnson. She retained that name all her life, through three unsuccessful marriages.

During World War II, members of the Women's Land Army helped out on the farm – enter Dorothy Cook. Dorothy was from a very different background to Vera – one of eleven children of a poor family. Wartime provided welcome jobs for women, but Dorothy didn't want to work in a munitions factory, so she ended up at Vera's farm.

The photo from Vera's book was taken during the war. One of the men – Jim – is Vera's first husband, left behind when Vera became a ten-pound Pom and emigrated to Australia in 1947. Vera was stylish and impressive and a hard worker; she wore shorts, drank, smoked and swore. Clearly she did whatever she damn well pleased. She and her brother Sid ran a cane farm near Bundaberg where they built a modernist house and hung the walls with contemporary paintings. These are things I learn from people in Cooktown who knew her.

Vera had been painting since she was a child, but the wealth of new botanical stimulus in Australia focused her energies on painting flora. In the 1960s she became one of Kew Gardens' band of international volunteers, sending drawings of specimens she had found. She began making far-flung trips – from the Snowy Mountains to Cape York to the Kimberley and Pilbara. As well as collecting for Kew, she also collected for the Queensland Herbarium, providing in the end some 1,700 specimens. Her travelling expanded to Tonga and Tuvalu. A second husband came and went. Then a third.

Then she came to Cooktown.
By the time Vera arrived in Cooktown, she was sixty but not slowing down. She set herself a daunting task: to paint all the plants of the Endeavour region, some two hundred of them. She was inspired by the work of Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander. Often in her accompanying notes, where she advises of a plant’s medicinal qualities or its possible uses in a domestic garden, she adds where appropriate, ‘Collected by Banks and Solander, Endeavour River’.

Vera went on expeditions with local elders of the Gamay and Waymbaarr clans, on either side of the river, and became their respected friend. They gave her the name Wauru Ngui-gu-rathan – ‘Innermost Beauty’. When there is a proposal to mine silicon on the banks of the river she urges the locals to action, which eventually results in the declaration of the Endeavour River National Park. ‘My river’ she calls the Endeavour – and no one seems to mind. Such is her devotion to the area.

In 1989 Vera gave her paintings to the people of Cooktown and the same year the Vera Scarth-Johnson Foundation was formed, with the intention of establishing a centre that would highlight the preciousness of the region’s environment and plant life. By the mid-1990s, Vera was slowing down. Parkinson’s Disease had taken hold. Her old friend Dorothy Cook, with whom she had been corresponding for fifty years, was widowed and decided to move across the world to care for her friend. It seems an extraordinary decision but it was one she never regretted. By the time she arrived in 1997, Vera was in a wheelchair. Dorothy quickly became a much-loved part of Cooktown life. People remember her sitting in the main street, selling raffle tickets to help raise money for the publication of Vera’s book.

In 1998, the year before Vera died, the first sod was turned for Nature’s Powerhouse, the interpretive centre and gallery where I first came across her work – the last grand dream fulfilled. Such are the traces of a life: three illusive husbands; a beautiful, important but almost unknown body of work; a strong connection to community and the devotion of a true friend. Dorothy stayed in Cooktown until she died in 2003.

Anne Coombs is a writer and social activist. Her essays have been published in Griffith REVIEW 3: Webs of Power and Griffith REVIEW 10: Family Politics.