



# LOCATING SUBURBIA

MEMORY - PLACE - CREATIVITY

EDITED BY

PAULA HAMILTON & PAUL ASHTON

Locating Suburbia  
Memory, Place, Creativity

Edited by

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton



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# INTRODUCTION

## *THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS*

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.<sup>1</sup>

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysalis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,<sup>3</sup> and more recently loved,<sup>4</sup> by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as ‘being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants’.<sup>5</sup> This was the ‘half world between city and country in which most Australians lived’ that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.<sup>6</sup> Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also been reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that ‘the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist’s pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives’.<sup>7</sup> Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: ‘What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

Lakemba? Sure that’s where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the ‘enclave of Little Lebanon’. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been ‘turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge

of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

### **What is Suburbia?**

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs... It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.<sup>9</sup>

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.<sup>10</sup> Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.<sup>11</sup> But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.<sup>12</sup>

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

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This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.<sup>13</sup> We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.<sup>14</sup>

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.<sup>15</sup>

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.<sup>16</sup> Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

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**MEMORY**

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01

THE PERFECT GARDEN

Kay Donovan

# THE PERFECT GARDEN

THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS

Kay Donovan

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*Standing in the shade of the house, I feel the ground cool and dry underfoot. Blades of grass tickle my soles. I want to rub them into the ground to scratch the itch. I'm looking at Dad sitting on his hessian bag in the shade of the huge jacaranda, methodically weeding the lawn; between us an expanse of grass burns in the harsh mid-afternoon sunlight as I contemplate how to get across it in bare feet.*

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In the Queensland provincial towns where I grew up, the lawn was king. Open spaces of green turf flourished along footpaths and in the gardens of almost every home. Regardless of whether it was a Queensland colonial style bungalow or a tropical villa, a workers cottage or an inter-war chamferboard, high-set or low, with an open verandah or enclosed, each house had a bright green, neatly clipped lawn that spread around it like a skirt embellished with decorative plantings of flowers, bushes and great spreading trees.

My father's idea of a perfect garden was one that featured a perfect lawn and in his mind the perfect lawn was like a bowling green. He spent his weekends toiling away to produce a carpet of perfectly smooth, weed-free, thick and springy turf. He favoured Queensland Blue Couch because it could handle the dry summers when the scorching sun and Council water restrictions combined to shrivel any exposed grass. In the heat, when gardens and parks were transformed into dusty brown spaces, blue couch grass would keep its colour for longer than the other popular varieties. As the hot dry days continued through summer, those others not only browned; they often died completely. It took only the slightest bit of water to see a blue-green blush return to the couch.

During the dry season, the weir holding the local water supply would shrink to alarmingly low levels and the Council would gradually impose restrictions on water use. First up, they would ban garden sprinklers. Then they would cut back the number of days each week when gardens could be watered with a hand held hose. Then the number of hours would be reduced until watering was allowed for only a couple of hours in the late afternoon on two or three days of the week. People's lives revolved around the watering schedule as they competed for the trickle of water that could be squeezed from a supply so heavily in demand. As lawns and parks dried up and the town was caste in brown, the small allowance of water would be given over to the more precious ornamentals and the hardier plants were left to fend for themselves.

In our first home, we had a neighbour who rented a house with a big straggling backyard where her large brood could spend the day playing. Joycie managed a tight household budget but she took pride in having a spotless house and the whitest of washing. After breakfast she shooed the children out to the yard while she scrubbed her house

from front to back. She worked so hard that the bare wooden floorboards gleamed from the copious amounts of beeswax she rubbed into them by hand. She had no time for decorative garden beds. The yard was the children's space and all she wanted was some grass to keep the dust down.

The dry season progressed and the grass withered. The children tore around the yard, trampling the brittle stalks until untidy dust patches started to appear. The grass desperately needed a long, long soaking but the cloudless sky gave no promise of rain. That was when Joycie came up with the brilliant idea of giving her lawn a good drink after dark by hiding the hose nozzle under a hessian bag on the ground and leaving it run for a couple of hours. The next night she did the same and on the next she left it for longer, moving the hose and the bag to other spots in the yard. Joycie was pleased with her cunning ploy, oblivious from inside the house to the soft hiss of the running tap that every passer-by could hear. After a couple of weeks, a Council inspector appeared to investigate the tell-tale patches of green around her yard. Luckily Joycie was a fast talker. She escaped the fine for flouting the restrictions but the hessian bag disappeared from the lawn and the grass soon turned as brown as the rest.

In the suburban utopia, a lot could be told about a man from the state of his garden. The suburb's promise that each plot of land, each quarter acre block, would provide a haven for the common man, conceals the complexity of social relations in small communities. Historians of the Australian suburb have identified 'distinctive cultural virtues' such as 'privacy, self-sufficiency, respectability, [and] uniformity' that imbued these supposedly individual spaces.<sup>1</sup>

One subject of strong opinions was the type of grass chosen for the lawn. Some preferred Buffalo for its very wide leaf blade and its inviting lushness in damp or shady spots where the surface runners were protected from the sun. But its stalky thatches caused an allergic reaction for many people. Kikuyu was another popular choice, soft underfoot and bright green. But it was a fast grower and needed a weekly mow where the others could last a month.<sup>2</sup> It is also an invasive species, now banished from suburban gardens though it can still be found choking local waterways and bushland.

Dad's favoured Blue Couch is also invasive – not as much as others but enough for it to be now listed as a noxious weed in New South Wales where bushland regenerators frequently come across it as they clear weeds from the bush fringing its suburbs.<sup>3</sup> In parts of Queensland, though, it is so prevalent that it is considered a naturalised plant. Thick cushions of blue couch are often found in paddocks

around settlements, perhaps the last vestige of an old lawn or perhaps a chance settling of seed. This thick carpet of soft trailing stems makes a comfortable place to stay for a few moments and contemplate the great shifts in our attitudes to the natural environment – our attempts to control and shape it, to force it to bend to our whim and our will – that this small patch of grass represents.

Queensland Blue Couch is the popular name for *Digitaria didactyla*, a native grass from the Mascarene Islands of Mauritius and La Reunion, east of Madagascar.<sup>4</sup> It was introduced to Australia in the early 1800s and is different from the popularly named Couch or Green Couch, which is *Cynodon dactylon*, also known as Bermuda grass, although the blades of the two are very similar. The importation of this grass variety is a small example of an international trade in seeds and plants that during the 1800s developed into a vast mercantile enterprise, fuelled by the beliefs and ideas of the Enlightenment and engaging nurserymen, botanists, politicians, explorers, rogues and gardeners on all continents.

Joseph Banks opened the eyes of the European world to the abundant horticultural treasures of the Australian east coast. But the collection from Cook's exploratory voyage was a fragment of the riches to be uncovered as explorers and botanical collectors made inroads into the country's natural environment. As Richard Aitkens notes this activity 'was generated by private interest and by commercial initiative of the nursery trade.'<sup>5</sup>

There was a long-held popular belief that gardening was a concept introduced to Australia through colonial settlement. This was well supported by scholars. Paul Fox argues that beyond the wilderness that so many European settlers saw was their vision of an ideal landscape, '[b]ut first the land had to be cleared. And to make a clearing in the colonies was to erase what existed in nature in order to write a new narrative.'<sup>6</sup>

John Gascoigne puts forward an argument that the European view of change and improvement was not just different to that of Indigenous Australians, but antithetical to their beliefs:

[It] ran counter to their respect for the land and its rhythms: the imposition of human agency in reshaping the land and the introduction of foreign animals and plants meant disturbing patterns of growth and migration hallowed by time and given ritual expression through dance, song and art.<sup>7</sup>

Further, he argues, the individualism inherent in Enlightenment thinking and evident in notions of private land ownership was in complete opposition to ‘the communal identity of Aboriginal culture.’<sup>8</sup>

Bill Gammage’s recent work, however, challenges the foundational view of gardening in Australia by arguing that Aboriginal knowledge was much more extensive and interventionist than previously understood. He claims that the wilderness, that romanticised notion of the ‘untouched forest,’<sup>9</sup> did not exist until colonial settlement because Aborigines were already regulating the countryside using sophisticated land management practices that included methods of controlled burning:

As in Europe land was managed at a local level. Detailed local knowledge was crucial. Each family cared for its own ground, and knew not merely which species fire or no fire might effect, but which individual plant and animal, and their totem and Dreaming links... Mere sustainability was not enough. Abundance was normal.<sup>10</sup>

The results created a landscape of ‘trees planted as if for ornament, alternating wood and grass, a gentleman’s park, an uninhabited and improved country, a civilised land. Much of Australia was like this in 1788.’<sup>11</sup>

This house still smells of sawdust and paint. I sit on the patio at the top of the front stairs, watching Dad carting topsoil around the yard. The wheelbarrow squeaks as if complaining at yet another load. When he has enough to cover an area, he takes his home-made spreader, a flat piece of timber attached to an old broom handle, and patiently pushes the soil this way and that till it covers the earlier layers of sand and ash. Then he sets it with a light sprinkle of water and it’s ready for planting.

In the late 1960s, my Dad’s job took us to live in different provincial Queensland towns and, with each move, we found ourselves in a new house in a new suburb where the streets were lined with similar looking timber houses set on quarter acre blocks surrounded by lawns. Most residents tended their patch with pride, mowing and watering it regularly. Occasionally there would be a neighbour who didn’t care much about the garden but even they took care to ‘keep the grass down’.

Weekends in our neighbourhoods were filled with the harsh sound of lawn mowers and the smell of freshly cut grass drawn out by the warmth of the sun. Lawn mowing was an involved task that men like

my Dad raised almost to the level of a religion. It started early in the morning when Dad wheeled the mower out onto the back lawn. Sitting there in his wide-brimmed straw garden hat, he pulled the motor apart, soaking the spark plug and cleaning the carburettor meticulously with an old toothbrush and some sharp pointed tools that could reach into the tightest corner. When the motor was back together and the tank filled with Two Stroke, Dad would pull on the starter cord, but lawn mower motors are the most difficult beasts. If he were lucky, it started straight off but more often it needed coaxing to stagger into life. This was a delicate job because a flooded motor could easily frustrate the whole exercise.

Discussions about the benefits of different motor mowers mostly revolved around how easily they could be started but there were also debates about the height of the cutting blades. If the grass were cut too short, the exposed runners would dry out quickly and shrivel in the sun but grass that was cut too high grew straggly and lost condition. In wet weather the older stalks created a straw-like understory that could trap moisture and kill the roots. It was a tricky business growing and maintaining a good lawn and there was no shortage of advice and critical opinions.

The science of growing the perfect lawn owes much to the work of landscape designers such as ‘Capability’ Brown who were responsible for the fashionable parklike estates that emerged in England in the mid seventeenth century and flourished through the eighteenth century. These estates were the provinces of the very wealthy whose substantial benefits from growth in foreign and domestic trade and often slavery provided the resources to employ the scores of workers needed to maintain such vast domains. The industrial revolution changed that with inventions like the mechanical mower putting the costs of maintaining a patch of turf within the reach of a much larger section of the population. At the same time, the increasing wealth of the British middle class created a demand for suburban developments where every family could have its own house and garden.

Into this space stepped John Claudius Loudon, the British landscape designer who developed the gardenesque style for the suburban and villa gardens of the emerging middle classes. His principle was to use artifice to produce beautiful and productive gardens where exotic trees and shrubs were placed to enhance the distinctiveness of each. In his designs, garden beds were laid out around the edges of beautifully manicured plots of grass that harked back to the parklands of the wealthy. These design ideas were adaptable to any size plot of land, which made them achievable for enthusiasts from all social classes.<sup>12</sup>

Loudon's ideas of the suburban villa and its garden appealed greatly to the free settlers, many of them from his native Scotland, who were migrating to the colonies and who were keen to establish comfortable homes and gardens that asserted their material success and position in society.<sup>13</sup> His theories were well circulated through his writing as he published an extensive range of material for a mass readership, from 1826 until his death in 1843. These publications, including encyclopaedias and gardening guides, were readily available and sold well in the colonies, where his popularity not only ensured a wide readership but also secured him many correspondents whose articles he also published.<sup>14</sup>

With the popular uptake of Loudon's ideas, the principles of the gardenesque style became so firmly established in the Australian aesthetic that they have 'enjoyed continuing relevance from the 1830s to the present'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1979, Victor Crittenden highlighted the cost of the Australian preoccupation with replicating the English lawn in a dry climate when he observed 'Australians spend millions of dollars each year keeping lawns alive and green.'<sup>16</sup> Where English lawns had the benefit of plentiful and regular rainfall, the vagaries of the Australian climate meant lawns had to be watered for more than half of the year – and mowed, and fertilised and generally fussed over.

This distinction between the parklike landscapes and the manicured garden is an important one in the discussion of lawns. As Peter MacInnis notes, 'a mere patch of grass is not a lawn, because it has not been sufficiently cultivated, cultured and venerated.'<sup>17</sup> The attention that people like my Dad gave to his lawn reflects the degree of importance it was attributed in the public consciousness.

Sweat gathers under my legs and trickles down the vinyl cover on the backseat of the car. The low setting sun still has a sting and its glare burns its way into my eyes but the window is wound down to let in the breeze as we cruise through the suburbs where children squeal as they chase each other around the front yard.

Late on Sunday afternoons, after Dad had finished tending to the lawn and we were washed, brushed and polished, we piled into the car for the Sunday afternoon drive. Our route would take us through older suburbs with their well-established gardens where roses and hydrangeas peeked through wire and paling fences and out to the new estates of flowering bottlebrushes and wattles. Our Sunday afternoon drive was a chance to enjoy an outing and to see how our front yard stacked up against the rest.

The front lawns ran right out to the kerb, without fences to demarcate private land from the public space of the footpath. The repetitive appearance of the post-war building boom had given way to 1960s streetscapes of flowing lawns that were vaguely reminiscent of the eighteenth-century landscape gardens. To Michael Pollan these unbound spaces ‘reflect one of the foundations of the suburban experiment, which Lewis Mumford once defined as “the collective effort to live a private life.”’<sup>18</sup> Occasionally a strip of concrete marked out the pavement but these were neighbourhoods where people drove not walked, and the aesthetic of the space could truly be appreciated through the car window.

We were struck by the openness of these new suburbs. The ‘complete devastation of land before it is offered for sale’<sup>19</sup> left treeless spaces scraped bare by graders as they levelled the ground for the subdivision.

Freed from the confines of the front fence, the lawn in these new suburbs became a site where each owner’s commitment, or surrender, to the collective vision could be gauged. Children played cricket on the road but never on the front lawn. It was not the place for parties or family gatherings or other events that were part of a family’s private life. Those activities utilised the backyard space where you could do what you liked:

It was here in the front lawn that ‘like-mindedness’ received its clearest expression. The conventional design of a suburban street is meant to forge the multitude of equal individual parcels of land into a single vista—a democratic landscape.<sup>20</sup>

Ian Hoskins, however, argues that rather than the residents shaping the social mores of the suburb, ‘the suburb with its constitutive elements, the quarter-acre block, the cul-de-sac, the garden and its plants, is a spatial form shaped by social forces within and beyond the control of its inhabitants.’<sup>21</sup>

In conforming to social norms, the inhabitants of the new suburbs were replicating the ‘new domestic ideal [that] had been successfully implanted in the culture during the first two decades of the twentieth century.’<sup>22</sup> Just as Dad’s vision of the perfect lawn as a manicured, weed free lush expanse of green reflected his ‘middle-class virtues and values: respectability, individualism, order and material success via hard work and thrift’,<sup>23</sup> so too the rolling front lawns of the new estates showed that these values were sustained. Like my Dad, these people were proud and respectable citizens, hard-working and orderly, who believed firmly in the importance of getting along with others, fitting in and being a part of the local community. Like him,

they volunteered their time to Church groups, progress associations and public activities. They looked after their lawns as they looked after their lives and their families, doing what society told them was right and constantly seeking self-improvement.

I lie on the grass next to Dad looking up at the jacaranda leaves; small and speckled against the cloudless blue sky. I wait for a breeze to dry the film of dampness that coats my skin. It's no more than a light puff, gone as quickly as it came. The jacaranda leaves barely move and the only sound is the footy on the transistor radio:

Maclvany gets the ball, throws to Clarke, on to Warwick and over to Carmichael and it's a knock on and the ref calls a scrum...

Dad spent Sunday afternoons sitting in the middle of the front lawn on a hessian bag, wearing his lawn-worker's blue drill shorts and a singlet. He would take his tools, some purchased and some that he made especially for the job at hand, and he would sit for a few hours on the lawn teasing the nut grass from the thick cover of blue couch. This nut grass was his bete noir. Once it invades an area, it is almost impossible to eradicate. It's resistant to drought and herbicide and pulling only removes the leaves, not the underground nuts from which new plants can grow. The best way to control it is to slip a knife into the soil, loosening the chain of tubers that run sometimes quite deeply and for quite a distance, and unravelling them from the tangle of grass runners. It is painstaking and particular work, with little chance of removing every last nut to prevent the weed from spreading again.

There is something about this repetitive and meticulous work that quietens the mind and calms the spirit. Dad was not always a patient man and perhaps this quiet struggle with the nutgrass gave him space to reflect on the disappointments and achievements in life. It is possible that Dad's passion for the perfect lawn disguised some of those inner battles that men of his generation were unable to articulate but he enjoyed

the spiritual benefits of gardening [that] could be found in the experience of growing things and working directly with creation. It was a peaceful soul-satisfying occupation, which led to 'uplifting thoughts' and more refined sensibilities.<sup>24</sup>

It kept him physically and mentally fit and, in the end, his gardens brought him happiness and a sense of fulfilment and belonging.

Dad's last garden was built in the 1980s after he retired to the family's holiday house in a bushy seaside area. The old hut, with its lean-to kitchen, water tanks, thunderbox and verandah across the front where we all used to sleep, were replaced by a neat kit home with a septic toilet, town water and an electricity supply. Paperbarks and bloodwoods and Moreton Bay ash trees still surrounded the house and the ground underfoot was gravelly with granite sand.

Dad finally had the time to tame this small piece of wildness. Out came his lawn making tools – the spreader, the different sized rakes for working the ground, and a tiny digger for planting the grass. He cleared the gravelly sand and laid the topsoil and eventually green threads of Blue Couch spread across the yard. He worked away steadily til there was an ordered front garden rimmed by rock enclosed garden beds and a back garden with a mango tree and hibiscuses. The old yard where I had played hopscotch with a shell tor on the rough sand and swung in a hammock stretched between two gums, gave way to colourful ornamentals and green, green lawn.

Like his earlier ones this garden reflected the gardenesque influence with its colourful ornamentals laid out to their best advantage in garden beds that fringed his neatly laid grass. The garden beds were bordered with rocks set in concrete, each one meticulously positioned with a plumb line. The lawn took pride of place and reflected those principles of respectability, a self-contained expression of civic pride and love of order that it had also represented for him. At the end of each of his days spent mowing and digging and raking, Dad would stand watering his thirsty lawn, and taking pleasure in his achievements. I like to think that he also took a moment to enjoy the feel of the grass beneath his feet.

## Chapter 1: The Perfect Garden

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