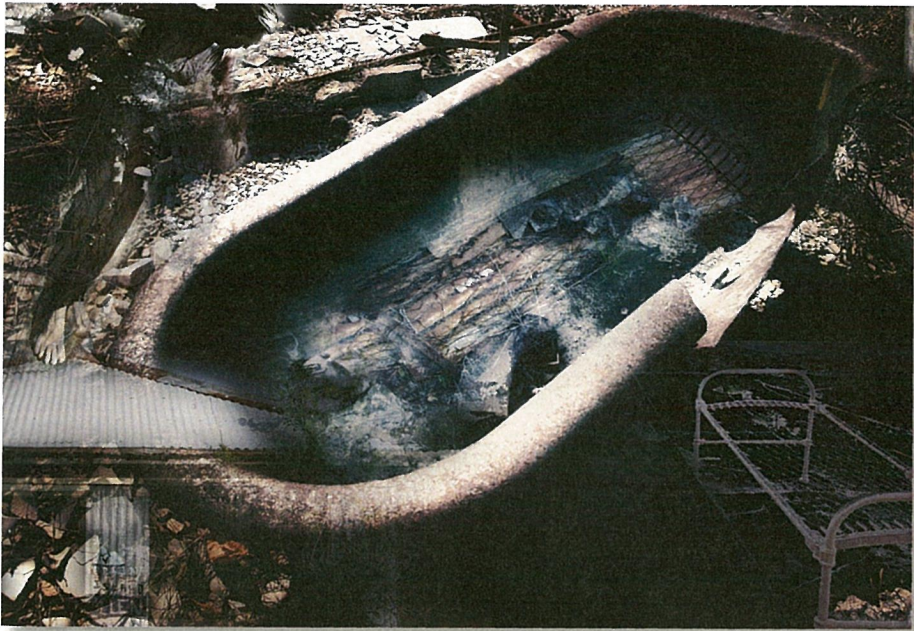

SUSAN MANWORREN

FANTOME ISLAND — GREAT BARRIER REEF



above: Greater Palm Group, Great Barrier Reef. Photo by Andrew Rankin www.andrewrankin.com.au

The beach was made of coral hearts, tokens of affection from a dead village. Beautiful. White piles of bleached exoskeletons pounded into shapes of love. We crunched them underfoot as we came ashore from the yellow rubber raft, from the blue-green surf, over the sun blistered sand, to sit on driftwood logs, waiting. We could never understand what it would be like to arrive here forever, sick with a wasting sickness, never to leave, except in death. We were brief visitors.

God had formed a sheet of rusty corrugated roofing into a circle, a round room of sheltered sunlight, around the thorny armed black tree that stood alone in the sand. I sat in this circle wondering. My eyes went round and round the racetrack grooves with my imagination trying to conjure the feeling of complete stasis that I would have to endure if I were left in this place filled with heat and air, sand and salt, and little else.

This landscape was artless art from a god who abhorred the sick, who feared and abandoned them to live deserted on a strip of white horizon. Razor grass and barbed wire couldn't contain the ghosts that writhed beneath missionaries' wooden crosses. Laced in by a fence submerged in sands that couldn't grasp the poles that staggered in one direction then another along a periphery defining sacred territory. We didn't tread on the spirit's rest. We were told not to. Some of us prayed. Some watched.

Brown bottles propped at angles moaned, singing with the steady gusts of a wind, the only thing likely to have escaped quarantine, the only voice of the island now, a toneless melody of absence sung before we arrived, and after, long after I suppose. Otherwise, it was mostly quiet. Birds cawed. The sun broiled the hearts of coral scattered among trash and brokenness. There was more sun than warmth. There was regret but it meant rather little in the face of such despair.

The power generator had rusted over years ago. The resistor's smashed shards of teal, aqua, and jade mimicked the seawaters, which murmured, "Hush, hush," from the shore nearby. Dusty sugar sand couldn't sweeten the tale of the leper colony. It burned the souls of my feet while the saltwater tide rose bringing reef sharks in. Then, we waded back to our boats. The coral basin had become a barrier filled with life, of sharks, of tiny, neon fish, and tender human hands grasping for our raft.