

***A Song of Brisbane*** ©

Dr. Roger K. A. Allen

The turtledoves,  
Coo-coo-cooed,  
Each afternoon,  
For me, a strange sound  
For a boy used to pee-wees,  
And currawongs  
In my coastal town  
Of a 1950's Ballina

For a while we stayed  
At Grandfather's house  
At Hewitt Street,  
My mother called him "Father",  
And his house, "Wilston",  
The suburb's name,  
Just as my father,  
Called his mother's house,  
"Ascot", and her, "Mum",  
So suburban names  
For me became people,  
And cooking smells,  
Kookaburras,  
On tea-caddies,  
The smell of gas stoves,  
And gas water-heaters,  
Over the kitchen sinks,  
And the one in Grandma's bath,  
At "Ascot",  
With the blue pilot light,  
That sometimes blew out.  
Tinkling glass chimes  
Crystal-cutting  
Thick Brisbane air,  
And Brisbane tap water,  
Strange muddy taste,  
Of calcium and chlorine,  
Compared to the cool pure Tongue-taste  
From a country tank,  
And the grey scum,  
Of hard water,  
On chipped white,  
Enamel baths,  
With curled legs,  
Coated both

Battleships and liner,  
That came  
In Corn Flakes packets.

To this day,  
The sound of doves,  
Is a plucked discord,  
Resonating,  
Around the sound box,  
Of my mind,  
Of sad memories,  
Of relocation and unease,  
Voices, smells,  
Hot Christmas dinners,  
And giant-clam shells on the front steps,  
Brimming water from the morning hose,  
For the morning's birds,  
And the noisy sway,  
Of palm fronds,  
From two grand palms,  
Guarding the front steps,  
And the steel foot scraper  
Round and ready,  
To cleanse,  
Any miscreant shoe  
Which dare ascend,  
The wide grand stairs,  
With a slight lean  
To an eloquent Queenslander,  
Later demolished,  
To the ignominy,  
Of a brick monstrosity  
That still stands;  
A brick-box  
And anonymous tenants,  
Coming and going  
Like the flying foxes,  
That fought for palm nuts,  
Outside my bedroom window,  
Multicoloured  
With patterned glass,  
Slid-open in case,  
A sea breeze cool  
A long summer's night.

There were chooks,  
In the backyard,

Grandfather fed,  
With fresh pollard,  
And night-soaked wheat,  
And a wary rooster before Council

Regulations  
Exiled them to gulags,  
For “commercial” hens,  
“De-beaked” in wire cells.

And a shirt-staining fig,  
With milk-white sap,  
Behind a wooden shed,  
With a lean,  
And a rat hole,  
In the back left corner,  
In the collapse,  
Of crumbly Concrete,  
And empty wheat bags,  
Milk tins of fresh fowl feed  
The odd cockroach,  
And the dark-blue Ford,  
With a worn wood tray,  
And wood spokes wheels,  
A rusty washing mangle,  
An untouched workbench,  
Grease-coated,  
And the smell,  
Of old linseed,  
And tools,  
From a bygone age,  
Brace-and-bits and awls,  
And borers, planes,  
Dusty with disuse,  
A testimony of a lost art,  
Of a former century,  
And dead family voices,  
I never heard,  
But with names,  
Like Aunty Minnie  
And Aunty Madge,  
Chappy Childs,  
And Uncle Bob,  
And his Military Cross.,  
From the Great War,  
And Pompey Porter,  
With his medal,  
From the Sorbonne,

And his sepia photo,  
In the hall,  
Near the pantry.

And there was my cousin,  
Malcolm from the country,  
Come for “education”,  
While my Uncle David  
Tamed Brigalow  
On a ballot block,  
And Auntie Mona,  
Made home-life,  
In a tin shed,  
With a dirt floor,  
To the tune of drought,  
And overdraft.

Malcolm was my soul mate,  
In his own Babylon,  
My older brother,  
Who told me  
Tales by night,  
Of the west,  
And the wily ways,  
Of wild pigs,  
And country stuff,  
And to dig fools gold,  
From the crushed granite,  
Of Hewitt Street,  
While we watched for cars,  
And the evening milkman,  
Whose bottles’ clink,  
And motor’s stop-start,  
Always gave him away.  
We used cold chisels,  
And old hammers,  
For the glimmering gold,  
Much prized,  
In small glass bottles,  
With screw lids,  
Our Gold Rush,  
And the story of,  
The “Welcome Stranger”,  
The famed nugget  
Every boy knew  
From Social Studies,  
At the Wilston State School

Up the hill.

And the longed-for Interruption,  
Of steam-trains,  
Blue or green livery,  
Smoke acrid-sweat,  
Hanging long,  
In the evening air,  
With soot-eyes smarting  
And that rare joy-  
A smoke ring,  
Or the quick slip-slip-slip,  
Of steel wheels,  
On wet steel tracks.

On the front lawn,  
By the garden,  
Of neat red roses,  
We sailed paling ships,  
With sharp bows,  
And superstructures,  
Of wood off-cuts,  
And funnels of bottle tops,  
And 303 shells,  
Spent on pigs,  
As torpedos and guns,  
Fired though storm swells,  
And Artic convoys,  
On a grass sea.

And from high verandas,  
Green and white,  
Railings peeling,  
Nephrotoxic,  
Lead-paint,  
That tasted sweater,  
On young fingers  
With the morning dew,  
And only two houses,  
From Wilston Station,  
My child-eyes watched,  
Through the tall white blur,  
Of the picket fence,  
With points,  
Like church doors,  
As tired commuters,

Strobed past,  
Brown felt hats,  
Crazed Gladstone bags,  
The evening Telegraph,  
Neatly rolled,  
Women in peephole shoes,  
Hats and sometimes gloves,  
I watched the world pass,  
To the coo-coo-coo  
Of turtle doves,  
Bowing to each other,  
On the overhead wires,  
Of Hewitt Street,  
And their plaintive song,  
A measured triplet,  
In bleak repeat,  
To this boy in Babylon