

The Boy in Babylon: Recollections from Childhood of Brisbane in the late 1950s

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In this piece, Roger Allen provides some poetic reflections on his childhood days in Brisbane.



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 1950s Ballina. For a while we stayed in Brisbane 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". And so suburban names for me became people, and cooking smells with 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 and her tinkling glass chimes at the front door - crystal cutting the thick Brisbane air.

Mum said Brisbane tap water was hard and awful and she was right as it had a strange muddy taste of calcium and chlorine, compared to the cool clean taste of water from a country tank, and created a grey scum on the chipped bathtub of white enamel with curled legs where we floated in the foam, blue and yellow plastic battleships that came in big Corn Flakes packets.

To this day the sound of doves sends a haunting discord resonating around the sound box of my mind and of sad memories of relocation and unease, voices, smells, hot Christmas dinners with pale gravy and giant-clam shells on the front steps, brimming over from the cracked black rubber garden hose cooling the dipping and fluffing up of the morning's birds.

There was the noisy sway of palm fronds from two grand palms guarding the front steps where the sentinel steel foot scraper, forged round and ready to cleanse any miscreant shoe which dare ascend the wide grand stairs with a slight lean to an eloquent Queenslander that was later demolished and the space became filled with the ignominy of a brick monstrosity that still stands. To this day there is a brick box of flats with anonymous tenants, coming and going like the flying foxes that fought for palm nuts outside my bedroom window with multicoloured patterned glass that slid open in case a sea breeze by chance cool a long summer's night.

Twice each day Grandfather fed his hens and one fearsome, rowdy rooster with pollard and wheat that he had soaked over night. This was long before Council regulations exiled hens to gulags for "commercial" hens "de-beaked" in wire cells and "no roosters allowed". Nearby was a fecund fig whose milk-white sap turned clothes black behind his wooden shed leaning to the north where there was a rat hole in the back left corner where the concrete was cracked. There were piles of empty wheat bags and tarnished milk pails of

fresh fowl feed; a giant meal for the odd cockroach. The shed housed a dark-blue Ford with a worn wood tray and wheels of wooden spokes, a rusting washing mangle, an untouched workbench, dusty with a grease-coat smelling of old linseed, and unused tools from a bygone age like brace-and-bits and awls, borers and planes all dusty with disuse, a testimony of a lost art and a former century.

I heard muffled mention of dead family voices I had never heard but knew from the folklore of our family. There were names like Auntie Minnie and Auntie Madge, "Chappy" Childs, and Uncle Bob who won the Military Cross in Flanders and Pompey Porter, the French Master from the Grammar School with his medal from the Sorbonne and his sepia photo in the hall near the pantry. My cousin Malcolm had come down from a place called "The Gums" in the Maranoa for his "education" while his Dad, my Uncle David, tamed brigalow on a soldier-settler ballot block and Auntie Mona made home-life in a hot tin shed with a dirt floor to the tune of drought, dust and an overdraft.

Malcolm was my soul mate exiled too in his own Babylon ... by those waters of Babylon; a name I had heard my Auntie Queenie talking about when she came home one morning from the Baptist Tabernacle carrying her worn black Bible in her white gloved hands and with a tract by Spurgeon in her handbag. Malcolm was like an older "brother" who told me tales at night of the bush, and "out west" and of the wily ways of wild pigs and guns. After school we dug fools' gold from the crushed granite of Hewitt Street while one eye watched for cars and the evening milkman whose bottles clinked and his motor's stop-start always gave him away long before we saw him. We used cold chisels and old hammers to dig the glimmering gold much prized and kept precious in small glass bottles with screw lids. This was our Gold Rush and we revelled in the story of the "Welcome Stranger" that famed nugget every boy knew from Social Studies at the Wilston State School a hot walk up the hill.

In the afternoon, steam-trains came and went with their blue and black or dark green livery, with smoke, acrid-sweet hanging long in the evening air. Our soot-eyes smarted with admiration and occasionally here was that rare joy of a smoke ring to the quick slip-slip of steel wheels on wet steel tracks.

On the front lawn by the garden of Grandfather's neat red roses we sailed paling ships with sharp prows and superstructures of wood off-cuts; funnels of bottle tops and 303 shells (once spent on wild pigs) as torpedos and guns fired though storm swells and Artic convoys on a grass sea. From the high veranda of green and white railings peeling nephrotoxic of lead-paint that tasted sweeter on young fingers with the morning dew and only two houses from the Wilston Station my secretive 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 by 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.