

# In Your Crib



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Austin Clarke



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**In Your Crib**



**D**o you remember when you climbed  
into the shining machine, tugged the shift  
to a forward gear, and went in the wrong direction,  
into the freshly painted garage? The brickwork  
cost you thousands, afforded from hours  
sitting in the sound of jazz, playing Kings and Li'l Ones;  
Coltrane and Miles and Aretha; the card table.  
Miles and Aretha in moaning, tinny disdain,  
the puzzling sheets of Coltrane, and the nervous drop  
of bank notes crisp and trembling, dropping ...  
dropping ... dropping on the tablecloth,  
oil skin instead of linen, to keep the cards silent,  
and the intention hidden.

**T**he Mercedes-Benz,  
statue of wealth and beauty and geometric design:  
an inverted Y? An M? Fresh  
from a carwash, in this neighbourhood,  
with high-powered soap sprays  
like those from a gun ... you know guns.  
And how fast they can travel; faster than the Benz  
in third shifting gear. Bram! The grill smashed dead.  
Crumpled in water-melon fragility.  
I ask you. What you gonna do?  
What you gonna do ...  
words finding no object  
or predicate.  
Again! What you gonna do?

**I** turn my head aside  
and my eyes of disregard  
filled with disgust, I do not want to see,  
to know, to understand.  
For you are invisible to me  
walking in this district, common to me and you.  
I do not hear your anger walking  
on the tidy squares of white cement  
blocks covered with snow,  
identical for me and for you.  
I do not see your plight,  
I do not want to hear your anger.

**I** cannot cut my small room in half,  
to lend you a lodging for the night,  
after you have smashed your only means of  
transportation  
and of escape: escape from this neighbourhood,  
yours and mine. And other nameless, unspeaking,  
hiding neighbours, inappropriate first  
at your birth: inappropriate still  
at your up-and-down-bringing.



**Y**ou are dressed in fashionable “rags” that fall below  
your waist  
sagging your testicles, wanting warmth in this Canadian  
cold;  
multicultural ice touching your heart; wanting to parade  
your strength and independence, and your rights:  
rights to be taken for no granted rights:  
to be rendered guilty before the evidence  
of your state is written down on thick pages  
of the Book of Law and of custom,  
and their trust in assumptions.

**B**ut we're still breathing fumes of German  
architecture:  
engines and oil and symbols; with speed measured  
in softness, in the near disappearance of sound;  
and I stand, looking at this spectacle  
and at the anger that buries your decision  
to change your outfit to one that fits;  
or fit your anger, to make it bright and spectacular  
in these cut-down pants flopping and proclaiming  
your new independence loosed, and imagined  
that it is for your comfort;  
unrestrained by no belt or buckle,  
falling on to your knees, in benediction,  
like your mother surrendering to the religion  
of your black image  
and of your style. Or, should you have changed  
back into the tailor-made suit of black  
and look like an undertaker, undertaking  
a body before it is cold in the dead mud  
and dirt, of everlasting silence?

**N**o policeman should dare interrupt your “walk”  
on this displayed “parade”  
where style and fit are measured  
in a long-lasting clapping that is your applause,  
that it is your clothes that maketh the man.  
No policeman shall punctuate the meaning of your  
“threads”,  
to test the latest style in fashionable “black”.  
For you need neither belt nor buckle  
to keep your drawers from dropping to sweep the road,  
nor the gutter, nor the cold cement of incarcerating  
stone  
caught out of guard, in the new  
down-pouring of rain that is colder,  
and more punishing, in your new surroundings.

**Y**ou see what I'm saying? You, at your stupid-acting  
in the vernacular of your origin?

For your real vernacular, like the colour of your skin,  
is wrapped in this environmental strangeness;  
and you have chosen the wrong punctuation,  
to write your history with a pen that holds no ink.  
No ink of the colour to secure your passage.

**M**y hand reaches out to grab you by the belt,  
to lift you in brotherhood and brotherly-love  
from the swirling cold of slippery fallen snow.  
But you have lost that brown-leather strap,  
the last redeeming tab of raiment.  
My smile of brother and of brotherhood  
was spent long ago, in the witnessing of brothers  
for good and for bad, the un-dying rages  
of rope, of whip, of gun, or of burial,  
witnessing the dead, still stiff, and satisfied,  
sinking in the ground, to turn to dust.  
When I lost these tokens of allegiance  
and walked away from the brink of death,  
left you un-buried on the lip of the grave,  
your un-buried, and un-ploughed grave  
nothing was left in me but the taste  
and the haste of my intention.  
Money was not the problem.  
There was “never no money, man!”  
Bail? Or loan? Or gift? Or dividing-up  
of the stolen loot.  
For there were no Elders.  
Only old men:  
as the Poet said.  
There were no Elders? None?  
Only old men only.

## About the Author

Winner of the Giller, Commonwealth, and Trillium Prizes for his novel *The Polished Hoe*, Toronto's Austin Clarke has published ten novels, six short-story collections, three memoirs, and one poetry collection. Among his other awards: the Rogers Communications Writers' Development Trust Prize for Fiction for *The Origin of Waves*; a Toronto Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature; the Martin Luther King Junior Award for Excellence in Writing; and a \$10,000 Harbourfront Award. In 1998 he was invested with the Order of Canada. In 2003 he had a private audience with Queen Elisabeth in honour of his Commonwealth Prize. *In Your Crib* marks his second poetry collection, following 2013's *Where The Sun Shines Best*, also published with Guernica Editions.