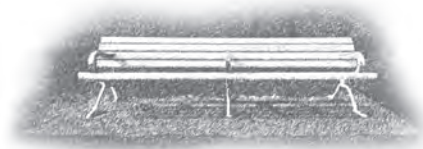


*Where The Sun  
Shines Best*



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Austin Clarke



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This is a work of fictive poetry. Names, characters, places  
and incidents are either products of the author's imagination  
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events  
or to persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

*For Gladys Irene Jordan Clarke-Luke, My Mother. 1914–2005*





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THE YELLOW leaves are trampled over by the black boots of three soldiers from the Moss Park Armouries; in uniform, intended not to be seen, nor identified, for their intention and profession is to kill to shoot from a distance, clean and perfect and wipe their minds clean, erase all imperfection of marksmanship. War. War has been declared. War. It is all that's on their minds. War; and the intention for war declared upon Moss Park.



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THERE ARE three other men standing as if at attention, though they are no soldiers; one man's posture is stooped with old age, another is hampered by Saint Vitus' Dance, uncertain in his balance and his gait, all three men, crippled civilians, taking puffs from one cigarette, from hand to lip, smoking their jewel of luck found amongst the rotting cold leaves that numb their fingers. A cough drop will clear their lungs, after each passed puff, will make them high, will turn Canada into Florida jaunty and warm, for five minutes, the life of their happiness, and clear the head, to unlock the lungs and watch the pure white smoke rise over their heads, precious as the breath they breathe in this crisp December cold.



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THEY ARE passing the stub, passing it, standing under the bodies of maples and the other trees, their names not taught in geography classes in Barbados. They were not names learned by rote and heart, carried here to this wide country of snow and wind and whiteness, to take pause on their daily long journey, their constitutional, in Moss Park, common in its uses, and users, not always swept; condoms, discharged bullet-casings decorating, in silent boasts of manhood, the shooting of anger, desire, hunger after the flesh of women, cheaper rates now that they are east of Jarvis, east of Church and McGill, the prices lower the farther east you go.





I HAVE walked on these artificial, rolled-up leaves,  
long-lasting and long out-living the fall of foot and instep,  
flowers of cream plastic, a patch of two red ones,  
boasting virulence in a man who has lasted longer  
than the red and yellow fallen leaves from the trees  
whose names I do not remember.



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SQUEEZING THE last puff of joy from the joint disappearing like spit on the lips, they move like soldiers in disarray, shaken by the battle, ragged, marching, “Easy!”, coming in my direction. I can see the last spit of marijuana cigarette leave the lips of the man walking in fits, alcohol and broken legs that barely balance him, who laughs and jogs and plays like a doll sculpted from the two stick-spines of a popsicle. He spits a smouldering last blob of phlegm from deep inside his chest and walks in a straight line, leading his two companions, dragging his feet in the thick dying leaves.



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THE LEAVES make the same sound as the poisonous dried black pods of the shack-shack tree in an un-tilled field in Barbados. His head is cut off, beheaded suddenly by my window that is too small to frame his shoulders. No rhythm to their footsteps as they walk like three men on stilts. And I stand and think of popsicles and of men made of cloth dropped from the needle-worker's sewing machine. And I think of walking in the burning sun in Old Havana, in a square, the playground of dictators; once; now an ordinary square for tourists and the poor and prostitutes; turned into a museum of contemporary knick-knacks and dolls, piece-work for Cuba's poor and indigent, the works of artists, and the frustrations of poverty: row after row of golliwogs that stare me in the face, locked eyes of brotherhood, and womanhood. I am embarrassed by my pity, as the whores are following me, sticking to my black skin, like leeches, like moles sucking the pity out of my Yankee dollar bills.



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MOSS PARK Armouries where men just past puberty wait, their heads buried in the silken pages of the Holy Bible, praying for the luck of the draw and the trigger, to return to this park. They come from the ticky-tacky suburbs where identical and monotonous backyards clean as Pyrex bowls after cornflakes, raked clean as skeletons, as if from plague and household germs, and the influenza from pigs, and bacon at the same hour of suspended morning.



YOUNG MEN waiting for the jet plane to Afghanistan  
where poppies are pure and stronger, from Scarborough,  
Mississauga, Don Mills and Brampton and condominiums  
in Pickering, are certain of victory: for luck in war  
is vouchsafed in beliefs, and luck of the dice, the presumption  
that race and place, country and flag, give easier growth  
to ego and hatred of men, and women, homeless and whores  
who sleep on leaves the colour of gold, on a park bench cold  
and damp, under a yellow sleeping bag, colder than raccoons  
and squirrels warm in roofs and attics where they bury  
tomorrow's breakfast and food for the week.



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A MAN without a home, and a whore without a trick left  
in her cold skirt, lie on two benches of cement  
and wrought iron, a half-empty plastic cup of ants  
that frolic on the surface leaving their journey marked  
like lines in the middle of the palm, their horoscopes. They  
foretell  
the beginning of dreams, of warmth, prosperity once known  
and lived: the man was an editor, and printed stories  
of homeless men; the woman remembers days  
when her bed was warm with the body of a man beside,  
her husband.



THREE SOLDIERS in uniform of dark green camouflage, one with three stripes, one with two stripes, the third with one stripe against him; their weapons left behind in a rack in the Armouries with bigger guns, automatic, to kill in the dark, and you don't know you're dead when you are dead. These soldiers walk like the other three men who had left the park before, puffed with pot, puffed with power.



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THREE SOLDIERS, unsteady on their legs, stagger in  
uneven step  
from the bar on Barton Street, where books of Canadian  
fiction once  
were born; round the corner, walking-distance  
from the Armouries. They are spinning and slipping-and-sliding  
from blowing froth from the heads of draughts—more  
than they could count—Canadian Molson's and U.S.  
Budweiser, coming out on George Street dark as a back  
alley, desolate patch of road a few steps down  
from the Mission House which kisses Queen Street East.  
They cross this road singing their favourite march,  
“It's a long way to Tipperary,” as the streetcars rumble; and they  
imagine Kandahar, Afghanistan, and Canada's enemies.





*Austin Clarke*

Their arms become machine guns, and bullets fall  
out of their mouths like a stream of bulbs on a Christmas tree,  
rapid;  
repeating a long line of perfect aim.



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They come upon the enemy: the man sleeping,  
the camouflage of dark and yellow leaves covering  
his body not exposed under the umbrella of the night, still,  
breathing

in the perfection of this black night, happiness  
and fatigue gained from his collection of four empty bottles  
drained to celebrate, and five cigarettes butted to one inch  
of their life. "Let's scare the shit outta this fucker!

Trespassing on our Armouries! Bringing their shit ..."

The first attempt missed. The sole of his boot was wet,  
and it hit the cement, and fell harmless; as the pain whizzed  
through his ankle he lost his balance, and fell in the wet  
freshly-cut grass. "Get-the-fuck off! Fuckers!"

the soldiers hissed, words boiling over like milk  
in an enamel saucepan, like spit rising in small bubbles  
in the fresh snow, like baseballs thrown at deadly speed  
in the nearby empty diamond.



THE SOLDIER with three stripes on his shoulder ignores  
the woman

at Jarvis and Queen, mistaking her limber body for a back-pack  
under a blanket in the half-darkness, in his hurry and his anger  
to land his boots, left and right in the same soft spot on the man's  
chest. She thought she could pull a trick on this night, safe  
on the mowed lawn tucked neat inside the rectangle of fence,  
blackened iron to protect the Armouries from invading whores;  
attacking bloody beggars who cross the Rubicon,  
brown dying grass carved into paths of Xs,  
going and coming during the light of day and the unsafe  
darkness of night, asking for spare change.

## About The Author

CULMINATING WITH the international success of *The Polished Hoe* in 2002, Austin Clarke has published ten novels, six short-story collections, and three memoirs in the United States, England, Canada, Australia, and Holland since 1964. *Storm of Fortune*, the second novel in his Toronto Trilogy about the lives of Barbadian immigrants, was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award in 1973. *The Origin of Waves* won the Rogers Communications Writers' Development Trust Prize for Fiction in 1997. In 1999 his ninth novel, *The Question*, was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. In 2003 he had a private audience with Queen Elisabeth in honour of his Commonwealth Prize for his tenth novel, *The Polished Hoe*. In 1992 Austin Clarke was honored with a Toronto Arts Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature. In 1997, Frontier College in Toronto also granted him a Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1998 he was invested with the Order of Canada, and since then he has received four honorary doctorates. In 1999 he received the Martin Luther King Junior Award for Excellence in Writing. In 2012, he won the \$10,000 Harbourfront Award. Among his other achievements: Winner of the 2002 Giller Prize and co-winner of the 2003 Trillium Book Award for *The Polished Hoe*.