In Your Crib
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Do 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, 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.
The 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?
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.

You 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.
But 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?

No 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
captured out of guard, in the new down-pouring of rain that is colder,
and more punishing, in your new surroundings.
You 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.

My 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.
You shall go then, into the storming winter
with no armament of friend nor guide.
The Benz shall, in a miracle of engineering,
drive you clean
into the hands
of the Law.

I have been following, from the silent rear
the deaths and burials of our Elders
cut down with their words of freedom
congested in their lips like un-played notes,
cut down from the sycamore trees in another place;
I have talked with, and walked in lines behind Malcolm X;
shared a microphone with Stokely Carmichael;
bushed shoulders and jokes with Floyd McKissick,
Roy Innis of the Urban League, and on a train
pulling out from Grand Central Station, I have
sat in the company H. Rap Brown. I have walked
in the company of “true-true” Elders:
John Henrik Clarke, with a house bulging-full of books,
under his pillow, under his bed,
like hidden treasure and booze;
LeRoi Jones, newly baptized Amiri Baraka,
leaning across the shaking club car seat,
just as I had raised one strip of sizzling
bacon to my lips, to admonish,
“Brother! Do you eat the piggg??”
This brother, and many more
brothers and sisters too who called themselves
“followers of the Honourable Elijah Mohammed”...
while Malcolm X was weighing the balancing and the
logic,
and America’s choice: “the bullet or the ballot?”
Which is no choice at all.
You have this tired, old Elder singing the blues, mouthing “... and we shall overcome ... someday” ... watching you from my distance, invisible to you, as you climb the ladder to success and suicide, silently rapping you not to forget the words of your true-true brother, Bob Marley, pleading, wailing, painting your past, in words that tell you of the history of this verse, telling you once more, again and again, that this present lies in your history. Is your history. “Old pirates, yes they rob I; sold I to the merchant ships ...”

“Y"es!” But we, the old men wallowed in the immorality of our silence. We remained silent, in our tentative successes, in universities, teaching new dogs old tricks, achieving tentative acclamation that we had made something of ourselves: our lives of acknowledged distance from the black communities, glorying in moderation. Success is measured by where we live, where we take our vengeance on our brothers, where we renounce these Elders and call them old men, outliving their relevance, as they keep their distance, and the role models amongst us. We have lived to our own music, discordant to your native beat and rhythm, it confuses us, trained to listen to a different beat and drummer. And here am I, critic of your struggle to live, live barricaded inside your own “community”, a ghetto not of physical dimension.
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.