estate with the taste of bile in they mouth and blood in they eye and emptiness in they heart 'cause they hurt so much they couldn't feel pain nomore. So I taking these coconut for all them mute folk who life you squeeze like *simitu* on a vine when you suck out the sap and throw away the skin, them people who grey-hair they life and toil like slave to make oil from you' coconuts-them. Is only Ram and me get away from you; both of we free like the wind is free or a harpy eagle does be in the wide, wide sky, out of your reach. So let you' ashes eat all the land it can eat and never rest in peace!'

The who-you birds called out more insistently, and the estate workers, listening inside their cruel huts, shivered and shut out the moonlight and the shadows and the rusty murmurings of wild palms.

The muscular young Ranger who had succeeded Roberts stumbled upon Ti-Zek's handiwork on his foreday morning patrol, and making sure that his only witnesses were singing birds, he laughed until he cried.

The Man

AUSTIN CLARKE

The man passes the five open doors on two floors that shut as he passes, moving slowly in the dark, humid rooming-house. Slowly, pausing every few feet, almost on every other step, he climbs like a man at the end of a double shift in a noisy factory, burdened down also by the weight of time spent on his feet, and by the more obvious weight of his clothes on his fat body, clothes that were seldom cleaned and changed. Heavy with the smell of his body and the weight of paper which he carries with him, in all nine pockets of trousers and jacket and one in his shirt, he climbs, leaving behind an acrid smell of his presence in the already odorous house.

When he first moved into this house, to live in the third-floor room, the landlady was a young wife. She is widowed now, and past sixty. The man smells like the oldness of the house. It is a smell like that which comes off fishermen when they come home from the rum shop after returning from the deep sea. And sometimes, especially in the evening, when the man comes home, the smell stings you and makes you turn your head, as your nostrils receive a tingling sensation.

The man ascends the stairs. Old cooking rises and you think you can touch it on walls that have four coats of paint on them, put there by four different previous owners of the house. Or in four moods of decoration. The man pauses again. He inhales. He puts his hands on his hips. Makes a noise of regained strength and determination. And climbs again.

The man is dressed in a suit. The jacket is from a time when shoulders were worn wide and tailored broad. His shoulders are padded high, as his pockets are padded wide by the letters and the pieces of paper with notes on them, and clippings from the *Globe and Mail*, and envelopes with scribbling on them: addresses and telephone numbers. And the printed words he carries in his ten pockets make him look stuffed and overweight and important, and also like a man older than he really is. His hips are like those of a woman who has not always followed her diet to reduce. He meticulously puts on the same suit every day, as he has done for years. He is a man of some order and orderliness. His shirt was once white. He wears only shirts that were white when they were bought. He buys them second-hand from the bins of the Goodwill store on Jarvis Street and wears them until they turn grey. He changes them only when they are too soiled to be worn another day; and then he buys another one from the same large picked-over bins of the Goodwill store.

He washes his trousers in a yellow plastic pail only if a stain is too conspicuous, and presses them under his mattress; and he puts them on before they are completely dry. He walks most of the day, and at eight each night he sits at his stiff, wooden, sturdy-legged table writing letters to men and women all over the world who have distinguished themselves in politics, in government and in universities.

He lives as a bat. Secret and self-assured and self-contained as an island, high above the others in the rooming house; cut off from people, sitting and writing his important personal letters, or reading, or listening to classical music on the radio and the news on shortwave until three or four in the morning. And when morning comes, at eight o'clock he hits the streets, walking in the same two square miles from his home, rummaging

through libraries for British and American newspapers, for new words and ideas for letters; then along Bloor Street, Jarvis Street, College Street, and he completes the perimeter at Bathurst Street. His room is the centre of gravity from which he is spilled out at eight each morning in all temperatures and weather, and from which he wanders no farther than these two square miles.

The man used to work as a mover with Maislin Transport in Montreal. Most of the workers came from Quebec and spoke French better than they spoke English. And one day he and a young man dressed in jeans and a red-and-black chequered shirt, resembling a man ready for the woods of lumberjacks and tall trees, were lifting a refrigerator that had two doors; and the man said 'Left'. He misunderstood the man's English and began to turn left through the small apartment door. He turned old suddenly. His back went out, as the saying goes. And he developed 'goadies', a swelling of the testicles so large that they can never be hidden beneath the most restraining jockstrap. That was the end of his moving career.

This former animal of a man, who could lift the heaviest stove if only he was given the correct word, was now a shadow of his former muscle and sinews, with sore back and calloused hands, moving slowly through a literary life, with the assistance of a private pension from Maislin Transport. He has become a different kind of animal now, prowling during the daytime through shelves of books in stores and in libraries, and visiting acquaintances as if they were friends whenever he smelled a drink or a meal; and attending public functions.

His pension cheque came every month at the same time, written in too much French for the rude bank teller, who said each time he presented it, even after two years, 'Do you have some *identification*?'

He used to be sociable. He would nod his head to strangers, flick his eyes on the legs of women and at the faces of

foreign-language men on College Street, all the way west of Spadina Avenue. He would even stop to ask for a light, and once or twice for a cigarette, and become confused in phrase-book phrases of easy, conversational Greek, Portuguese and Italian.

Until one evening. He was walking on a shaded street in Forest Hill Village when a policeman looked through the window of his yellow cruiser, stopped him in his wandering tracks and said, 'What the hell're you doing up here, *boy*?' He had been walking and stopping, unsure along this street, looking at every mansion which seemed larger than the one before, when he heard the brutal voice. 'Git in! Git your black ass in here!'

The policeman threw open the rear door of the cruiser. The man looked behind him, expecting to see a delinquent teenager who had earned the policeman's raw hostility. The man was stunned. There was no other person on the street. But somehow he made the effort to walk to the cruiser. The door was slammed behind him. The policeman talked on a stuttering radio and used figures and numbers instead of words, and the man became alarmed at the policeman's mathematical illiteracy. And then the cruiser sped off, scorching the peace of Forest Hill, burning rubber on its shaded quiet streets.

The cruiser stopped somewhere in the suburbs. He thought he saw Don Mills on a sign post. It stopped here, with the same temperamental disposition as it had stopped the first time in Forest Hill Village. The policeman made no further conversation of numerals and figures with the radio. He merely said, *'Git!'* The man was put out three miles from any street or intersection that he knew.

It was soon after this that he became violent. He made three pillows into the form of a man. He found a second-hand tunic and a pair of trousers that had a red stripe in them, and a hat that had a yellow band instead of a red one, and he dressed up the pillows and transformed them

into a dummy of a policeman. And each morning at seven when he woke up, and late at night before he went to bed, after he washed out his mouth with salt water, he kicked the 'policeman' twice – once in the flat feathery section where a man's testicles would be, and again at the back of the pillow in the dummy's ass. His hatred did not disappear with the blows. But soon he forgot about the effigy and the policeman.

Today he had been roaming the streets, like every day, tearing pieces of information from the *Globe and Mail* he took from a secretary's basket at the CBC, from *Saturday Night* and *Canadian Forum* magazines. And the moment he reached his attic room, he would begin to compose letters to great men and women around the world, inspired by the bits of information he had gathered.

And now, as he climbs, the doors of the roomers on each floor close as he passes, like an evil wind. But they close too late, for his scent and the wind of his presence have already touched them.

With each separation and denial, he is left alone in the dim light to which he is accustomed, and in the dust on the stairs; and he guides his hand along the shining banister, the same sheen as the wallpaper, stained with the smells and specks of cooking. He walks slowly because the linoleum on the stairs is shiny too, and dangerous and tricky under the feet.

Now, on his last flight to his room for the night, his strength seems to leave his body, and he pauses and rests his hands, one on the banister and the other on his right hip.

The cheque from Montreal will arrive tomorrow.

He feels the bulkiness of the paper in his pockets, and the weight of his poverty in this country he never grew to love. There was more love in Barbados. On many a hot afternoon, he used to watch his grandfather rest his calloused hand on his hip as he stood in a field of endless

potatoes, a field so large and quiet and cruel that he thought he was alone in the measureless sea of green waves, and not on a plantation. Alone perhaps now too, in the village, in the country, because of his unending work of bending his back to pull up the roots, and returning home when everyone else is long in bed.

And now he, the grandson, not really concerned with that stained ancestry, not really comparing himself with his grandfather, stands for a breath-catching moment on this landing in this house in which he is a stranger. He regards his room as the country. It is strange and familiar. It is foreign, yet it is home. It is dirty. And at the first signs of summer and warmth, he would go down on his hands and knees in what would have been an unmanly act and scrub the small space outside his door, and the four or five steps he had to climb to reach it. He would drop soap into the water, and still the space around the door remained dirty. The house had passed that stage when it could be cleaned. It had grown old like a human body. And not even ambition and cleanliness could purify it of this scent. It could be cleaned only by burning. But he had become accustomed to the dirt, as he was accustomed to the thought of burning. In the same way, he had become accustomed to the small room which bulged, like his ten pockets, with the possessions of his strange literary life.

He is strong again. Enough to climb the last three or four steps and take out his keys on the shining ring of silver, after putting down the plastic bag of four items he had bought through the express check-out of Dominion around the corner, and then the collection of newspapers – two morning and two afternoon and two evening editions. He flips each key over, and it makes a dim somersault, until he reaches the last key on the ring which he knows has to be the key he's looking for.

Under the naked light bulb he had opened and shut, locked and unlocked this same blue-painted door when it

was painted green and red and black, so many times that he thought he was becoming colour-blind. But he could have picked out the key even if he was blind; for it was the only key in the bunch which had the shape of the fleur de lys at its head. He went through all the keys on the ring in a kind of elimination process. It was his own private joke. A ritual for taking up time.

He spent time as if he thought it would not end: walking along College Street and Spadina Avanue when he was not thinking of letters to be written; looking at the clusters of men and women from different countries at the corner of Bathurst and Bloor; at the men passing their eyes slowly over the breasts and backsides of the women; at the women shopping at Dominion and the open-air stalls, or amongst the fibres of cheap materials and dresses, not quite pure silk, not one hundred per cent cotton, which they tore as they searched for and tore from each other's hands to get at cheaper prices than those advertised at Honest Ed's bargain store. And he would watch how these women expressed satisfaction with their purchases in their halting new English.

And now in the last few months, along those streets he had walked and known, all of a sudden the names on stores and the signs on posts appeared in the hieroglyphics of Chinese. Or Japanese? He no longer felt safe, tumbling in the warmth and shouts of a washing machine in a public laundromat in this technicoloured new world of strangers.

He had loved those warm months and those warm people before their names and homes were written in signs. They were real until someone turned them into Chinese characters which he could not read. And he spent the warm months of summer writing letters to the leaders of the world, in the hope of getting back a reply, no matter how short or impersonal, with their signatures, which he intended to sell to the highest bidder.

He came from a colony, a country and a culture where

the written word spelled freedom. An island where the firm touch of the pen on paper meant freedom. Where the pen gripped firmly in the hand was sturdier than a soldier holding a gun, and which meant liberation. And the appearance of words on paper, the meaning and transformation they gave to the paper, and the way they rendered the paper priceless, meant that he could now escape permanently from the profuse sweat and the sharp smell of perspiration on the old khaki trousers and the thick-smelling flannel worn next to the skin. This sweat was the uniform, and had been the profession of poor black grandfathers. Now pen and paper mean the sudden and unaccountable and miraculous disappearance from a colonial tradition where young bodies graduated from the play and games and beaches of children into the dark, steamy and bee-droning caverns and caves of warehouses in which sat white men in white drill suits and white cork hats, their white skin turning red from too much rum and too much sun, and from their too-deep appetites for food and local women. For years before this graduation, he could find himself placed like a lamp post, permanent and blissful in one job, in one spot, in one position, until perhaps a storm came, or a fierce hurricane, and felled him like the chattels of houses and spewed him into the gutter.

So he learned the power of the *word*. And kept close to it. When others filled the streets and danced in a Caribana festival and wore colours hot as summer in a new spring of life, this man remained in his isolation; and he cut himself off from those frivolous, ordinary pleasures of life that had surrounded his streets for years, just as the immigrants surrounded the open-air Kensington Market. He thought and lived and expressed himself in this hermitage of solitary joy, writing letters to President de Gaulle, President Carter, Willy Brandt (whose name he never learned to spell), to Mao Tse Tung, Dr Martin Luther King and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The few acquaintances he called friends and met for drinks on the eighteenth-floor bar of the Park Plaza Hotel, and those he visited and talked with and drank with in their homes, all thought he was mad. And perhaps he was mad. Perhaps his obsession with the word had sent him off.

The persons to whom he wrote were all unknown to him. He did not care for their politics or their talent. But he made a fortune out of time spent in addressing them. It was an international intrusion on their serious lives: 'Dear Prime Minister, I saw your name and picture in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* this morning. I must say I was most impressed by some of the things you have said. You are one of the most indispensable personages in this western world. This western world would come to its end of influence were it not for you. You and you alone can save it and save us. Long may you have this power. Yours very sincerely, William Jefferson.'

'Look what I pulled off!' he told Alonzo. He held the glass of cold beer bought for him on the account of friendship, and a smile came to his face. The smile was the smile of literary success. He had just promised Alonzo that he would defray all his loans with the sale of his private correspondence. A smile came to Alonzo's face. It was the smile of accepted social indebtedness. 'The university would just *love* to get its hands on this!' *This* was the reply from the Prime Minister: a plain white postcard on which was written, 'Thank you very much, Mr Jefferson, for your thoughtfulness.'

He would charge the university one hundred dollars for the reply from Prime Minister Gandhi. Perhaps he could sell them his entire correspondence! Why not? Even publish them in *The Private Correspondence of William Jefferson with the Great Men and Great Women of the Twentieth Century*.

Alonzo did not know whether to continue smiling or laugh right out. He could not decide if his friend was

slightly off his head. He needed more proof. The letter from Mrs Gandhi, which he did not show, could supply the proof. But it was a man's private business, a man's private correspondence; and not even the postman who delivered it had the right to see it. If this correspondence went on, Alonzo thought, who knows, perhaps one day he may be drinking beer and associating with a man of great fame, a famous man of letters, hounded by universities to get a glimpse of this correspondence . . .

While the man is trying to unlock his door, the urge overtakes him. The key-hole had not answered the key. And the urge to pee swells over his body like a high wave. This urge would overcome him almost always when a porcelain oval hole was not immediately available. It would take him into its grip and turn his entire body into a cramping, stuttering muscle-bound fist. Always on the wrong side of the street, too.

He was on Bloor Street once, in that stretch of shops and stores and restaurants where women wear furs and carry merchandise in shopping bags with Creeds and Holt Renfrew and Birks proclaimed on them, where the restaurants look like country clubs and the shops like chapels and banks, where he could not get the nerve to enter the stained-glass door with heraldry on it, jerk a tense glance in *that* direction and receive the direction to *there* or get a sign to show him the complicated carpeted route to 'wash rooms' printed on a brass plate. Not dressed the way he was. Not without giving some explanation. Not without alarming the waitresses dressed more like nurses and the waiters who looked like fashion models.

Once he dashed into Holt Renfrew. It was the last desperate haven. The water was heavy on his nerves, on his bladder. His eyes were red and watery. He barely had strength to speak his wish. Experience with this urge had cautioned him, as he stood before the glass case of ladies'

silk underwear, that to open his mouth at that moment, when the association of this urge with ladies' panties was in full view, meant a relaxation of his grip on the water inside him. Then it would pour out on to the carpeted floor of Persian silence, perhaps even dribble on to the feet of the young clerk whose legs he could see beneath the thinness of her almost transparent dress.

The young woman saw his stiffness and posture, and with a smile and a wave, showed him the nearest haven. It had 'Employees Only' inscribed on the shining brass. When he was finished, he could not move immediately. The loss of weight and water was like the loss of energy. 'Have a good day, sir!' Her smile was brighter then.

He was still outside his room. The key was still in the hole. He did not have the strength to go down two flights of stairs to the second-floor bathroom beside the room of the woman who lived on welfare.

To have to go down now, with this weight making his head heavier, did something with his hand and the key turned.

He was safe inside his room. Relieved and safe. He did it in the pail. He keeps this pail in a corner, under the table on which is a two-ringed hot plate. In times of urgency, he uses it, and in times of laziness and late at night. He adds soap flakes to the steaming liquid to hide its smell and composition, and when he carries the plastic pail down, the woman on welfare cannot smell or detect his business. He relishes his privacy.

Sometimes he has no flakes of soap, so he drops a pair of soiled underwear into the urine and walks with it, pretending there is no smell; and if the coast is clear, he bolts the lock on the bathroom door and does his business and laundry like a man hiding from his superstition.

He had heard that a famous Indian politician used to drink his own pee. And it overcame him.

He is safe inside his room. He breathes more easily now.

He is home. His room relaxes him. It is like a library of a man obsessed with books and eccentric about the majesty of books.

Red building blocks which he stole two at a time are placed in fours at each end of the white-painted three-ply shelves. And the shelves end, as a scaffold should, at the end of available space, the ceiling. The same construction occupies all four walls. There are books of all sizes, all topics, all tastes.

The space between the bottom shelf and the floor is crammed with newspapers which are now yellow. There are magazines with the backs missing through frequent use. Each new magazine goes into the space which can get no larger. Statements of great political and international significance, the photograph of a man or a woman to be written to, are torn out from their sources and pinned to the three-ply shelves with common pins; and there are framed photographs of writers whom this man regards as the great writers of the world. No one else has heard of them.

He has collected relics of his daily passage throughout the city, in the same two square miles, not going beyond this perimeter. He has never again ventured into that part of the suburbs where the policeman had picked him up. Among his relics are jars and bottles, and one beautiful piece of pottery that looks as if it had been unearthed in an archaeological digging somewhere in the distant world. It is brown and has a mark like antiquity around its swelling girth; and where it stands on an old trunk that could have belonged to a sea captain, or to an immigrant from Europe or the West Indies, large enough to transport memories and possessions from a poorer life to this new country, this little brown jug gives age and seriousness to the other useless but priceless pieces in his room.

In all the jars and bottles, and in this brown 'antique' jug, are dried branches of trees, flowers, sprigs and brambles. Dead beyond recognition.

The man collects dead things. Leaves and brambles and flowers and twigs. And he must like this death in things because there is nothing that lives in his room. Nothing but the man himself. He does not see them as dead things, or as meaning death.

He has five clocks. They are all miraculously set at the same, precise time, with not a second's difference. Every morning, using the time on the CBC radio as his standard and barometer, he checks and re-checks each of his five clocks; and when this is done, he sits on his old-fashioned, large and comfortable couch, upholstered in green velvet that now has patches like sores in the coat of a dog, with knobs of dull mahogany at the ends where the fingers touch, or rest, or agitate (if he is writing or thinking about a letter to an important personage in the world). He would sit here, now that he has set his time, and listen to the ticking, secure ordering of the meaning of time; pretending he is back home in the island that consumes time, where all the clocks ticked at various dispositions and carried different times. Canada has taught him one important discipline. And he has learned about time. He has learned always to be *in* time.

Paper bags are stuffed between books, folded in their original creases and placed there, anxious for when they can be used a second time. A cupboard in the room is used as a clothes closet, a pantry and a storeroom. It contains more paper bags of all sizes, of all origins, from all supermarkets; but most are from Dominion. They are tied and made snug and tidy by elastic bands whose first use he has obviously forgotten. On the bottom shelf of the cupboard are plastic bags imprinted with barely visible names of stores and shops, folded in a new improvised crease and placed into a large brown paper bag.

All this time, he is walking the four short lengths of floor bordered by his books, stopping in front of one shelf, running his fingers absentmindedly over the titles of

books. The linoleum floor is punctuated by the nails in his shoes that walk up and down, late into the night of thoughtfulness, of worrying about a correct address or a correct salutation. Now he stands beside a large wooden table made by immigrants or early settlers on farms, in the style of large sturdy legs the size and shape of their own husky peasant form. This table does not move. It cannot move. On it he has storeroomed his food and his drinks, his 'eatables and drinkables', and it functions as his pantry of dishes and pots and pans. At one end of the table is the gas hot plate, the only implement for cooking that is allowed in this illegally small living space.

On the hot plate is a shining aluminium saucepan battered around its girth by temper, hunger and burned rice.

He uncovers the saucepan. The food is old. Its age, two or three days, has thickened its smell, and makes it look like wet cement. The swollen black-eyed peas sit permanently among hunks of pig tails. He is hungry all of a sudden. These two urges, peeing and eating, come upon him without notice and with no regard to the last time he has eaten or peed. So he digs a 'pot spoon' into the heart of the thick drying cement of food and uproots the swollen hunks of pig tails whose oily taste brings water and nostalgia to his eyes, and he half shuts his eyes to eat the first mouthful.

He replaces the lid. He puts the 'pot spoon' between the saucepan rim and the lid, and pats the battered side of the saucepan the way a trainer would pat a horse that has just won on a long-shot bet.

He takes off his jacket. It is two sizes too large. Then he takes off his red woollen sweater, and another one of cotton, and long-sleeved; and then a third, grey, long-sleeved, round-necked and marked 'Property of the Athletic Department, University of Toronto'.

He is a man of words, and the printed claim of ownership on his third pullover never ceases to amaze and impress him.

Stripped now of his clothes, he is left in a pair of grey long-johns. And it is in these that he walks about the wordy room, ruminating as he struggles late into the night to compose the correct arrangement of words that would bring him replies from the pens of the great. Sometimes his own words do not flow as easily as he would wish. And this literary constipation aborts the urge to pee. At such times he runs to his Javex box, where he keeps all the replies he has ever received. He reads them now, praying for an easier movement of words from the bowels of his brain.

'Dear Mr Jefferson, Thank you for your letter.'

That was all from one great personage. But it was good enough. It was a reply. And an official one at that. A rubber stamp of the signature tells you of the disinterest or the thick appointment book of the sender, that perhaps the sender does not understand the archival significance of the letter he has received from Mr William Jefferson.

'This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter.'

Another reply from a great personage. Even the stamp, print and address are reproductions of the original. But the man believes that some value lies even in this impersonal reply.

'Dear Mr Jefferson, We are very glad to know that, as a Barbadian, you have introduced us to the archives of the University of Toronto, which is considering maintaining a Barbados collection. We wish you every success in your significant venture.'

This is his most valuable letter. It is signed by someone who lives! A human hand has signed it. But he cannot untangle the name from its spidery script. He does not know who has replied to him. For typed beneath the script is only the person's official position: Secretary.

He understands more than any other living person the archival importance of these letters. And he treasures them within a vast imagination of large expectations, in this

large brown box which contained Javex for bleaching clothes before it fell into his possession.

He has been nervous all week. And this nervousness erupted in strong urges to pee, strong and strange even for his weak bladder. The nervousness was linked to the price of his collection. This afternoon he had spoken to someone at the university. Over the telephone the voice told him, 'Of course! Of course, Mr Jefferson. We'll be interested in seeing your collection.' It was a polite reply, like the written ones in his Javex box. But as a man obsessed by his relics, who attaches great significance to their esoteric value, he inflates that significance. He is also a man who would read an offer to purchase in a polite reply from the university. He is a man who hears more words than those that are spoken.

He starts to count his fortune. This letter to him from a living Prime Minister would be the basis of his fortune. His friend Alonzo would get a free round of beer at the Park Plaza roof bar. He would pay his rent six months in advance. He would have more time to spend on his private correspondence with the great men and women of the world.

He holds the Prime Minister's letter in his hand and examines the almost invisible water marks on which it is typed. He studies the quality of the official stationery made in Britain and used by the West Indies, and compares it to that of Canada and the United States. He decides that the British and West Indies know more about prestigious stationery. He continues to feel the paper between big thumb and two adjoining fingers, rubbing and rubbing and feeling a kind of orgasm coming on; and in this trance, he reads another letter.

'Dear Mr Jefferson, Thank you for your kind and thoughtful letter. Yours, Prime Minister's Office.'

Above this line, 'Margaret Thatcher' is stamped in fading ink. Still, it is a mark on history; 'a first' from a poor

woman whom history had singled out to be great.

When he is in his creative mood, he moves like a man afraid to cause commotion in a room in which he is a guest, like a man moving amongst bric-à-brac, priceless mementos of glass and china and silver locked in a glass cabinet. He moves about his room soundlessly, preparing his writing materials and deepening his mood for writing.

His stationery is personalized. 'William Jefferson, Esquire' is printed in bold letters at the top of the blue page. And below that, his address. He writes with a fountain pen. And when he fills it from the bottle of black ink, he always smiles when the pen makes its sucking noise. This sucking noise takes him back years to another room in another country when he formed his first letters. And he likes the bottle that contains the ink. It has a white label, with a squeezed circle like an alert eye; and through this eye, through the middle of this eye, is an arrow which pierces it. 'Parker super Quink ink. Permanent black.' It suggests strength and longevity. It is like his life: determined and traditional, poised outside the mainstream but fixed in habit and custom. Whenever he uses this fountain pen, his index finger and the finger next to that, and his thumb, bear the verdict and the evidence of this permanent blackness. This *noire*. He sometimes wishes that he could use the language of Frenchmen who slip words and the sounds of those words over their tongues like raw oysters going down the throat!

'What a remarkable use of the tongue the French have! That back of the throat sensation!' he told Alonzo one afternoon, but in such a way as if he were speaking to the entire room in the Park Plaza Hotel bar.

Noire.

Many years ago, in 1955, the minute his feet touched French soil at Dorval in Quebec, the first greeting he heard was *'Noire!'* The sound held him in its grip, and changed his view of ordinary things, and made him fastidious and

proper and suspicious. The only word he retained was *noire*. It was not a new word to him. For years even before that greeting, and in Barbados on a Sunday afternoon after the heavy midday meal, he used to sit at the back door looking out on to the cackling of hens, one of which he had eaten earlier, inhaling with the freshness of stomach and glorious weather the strong smell of Nugget shoe polish as he lathered it on his shoes and on his father's shoes and his mother's shoes and his grandfather's shoes. So he had already dipped his hands into *noire* long before Canada.

He had known *noire* for years. But no one had addressed him as *noire*.

He likes the *noire* of the ink he uses, as he liked the *noire* in the Nugget which gave his shoes longer life and made them immortal and left its proud, industrious and indelible stain on his fingers.

Tomorrow the University of Toronto is coming to buy his papers. He runs his hands over his letters in the Javex box, hundreds of them, and thinks of money and certified cheques. He empties all his pockets and puts the papers on the table. He picks up each piece like a man picking flesh from a carcass of bones. Who should he write to tonight?

The silent books around him, their words encased in covers, do not offer advice. But he knows what they would answer. He finds it difficult to concentrate. Tomorrow is too near. The money from his papers, cash or certified cheque, is too close at hand. He spends time spending it in his mind. And the things contained in tomorrow, like the things contained in his Javex box, have at last delivered him, just as his articulate use of pen confirmed the value of the word and delivered him from the raving crowds of new immigrants. He has gained peace and a respectable distance from those aggressive men and women because of his use of the word.

'Should I write to the President of Yale University?'

The books, thick in their shelves around him, and few of

which he has read from cover to cover, all these books remain uncommunicative and have no words of advice.

'Should I write to President Reagan?'

His five electric clocks continue to keep constant time, and in their regulated determination, refuse to disclose a tick of assistance.

'The Prime Minister of Barbados?'

Barbados is no longer home. Home, he had told Alonzo ten years ago, 'is where I pee and eat and write.'

He gets up and turns on the flame of the hot plate under the saucepan. 'While the grass is growing, the horse is starving,' he tells the saucepan. He smiles at his own wisdom. The heat makes the saucepan crackle. 'While the grass is growing . . .' The thin saucepan makes a smothered crackling sound. The hot plate seems to be melting the coagulated black-eyed peas and rice and pig tails. The hot plate is crackling as if it is intent upon melting the cheap alloy of the saucepan and turning the meal into soft hot lead, and then spreading its flame over the letters on the table, and then the table itself, and then the room. He lowers the flame.

'Fire cleans everything,' he tells the hot plate. The saucepan stops laughing with the heat. His meal has settled down to being re-cooked.

But he is soon smelling things. The nostalgia of food and the perspiration from his mother's forehead as she cooked the food, and the strong, rich smell of pork. He smells also the lasting wetness of flannel shirts worn in the fields back on the small island.

He gets accustomed to these smells. And he thinks again of new correspondence since all these on the table before him would be gone by tomorrow, sold, archived among other literary riches. A hand-rubbing enthusiasm and contentment brings a smile to his face.

'I'll write the Prime Minister of Barbados!'

The smell comes up again. With the help of the smell, he

is back on the small island, witnessing spires of blue smoke pouring out from each castle of patched tin and rotting wood where his village stood. He can hear the waves and the turbulent sea, so much like the turbulence of water he boiled in the same thin-skin saucepan to make tea. As he thinks back, his eyes pass over used tea bags spread in disarray, an action caught in the midst of an important letter when he would sometimes drop a used tea bag into the yellow plastic pail.

'Dear Prime Minister . . .'

He reaches over to the hot plate and raises the flame. He sees it change from yellow to blue, and smiles. 'The horse is starving . . .'

'Certain important universities have asked me to act as a liaison to encourage you to submit your . . .'

The fragile aluminium saucepan is losing its battle in the heat of warming the food. But it is the smell. The smell takes his mind off the letter, and off the great sums of money, cash and certified cheques. He is a boy again, running home from school, colliding with palings and dogs and the rising smells of boiled pork reddened in tomatoes and bubbling over rice like the thick tar which the road workers poured over a raw road under construction.

He can taste his country now. Clearly. And see the face of the Prime Minister, greedy to make a name for himself in a foreign institution of higher learning, and obtain foreign currency for his foreign account.

'. . . I have lived a solitary life, apart from the demonstrations and protests of the mainstream of immigrants. I have become a different man. A man of letters. I am more concerned with cultural things, radio, books and libraries, than with reports . . .'

Something is wrong with his pen. The flow is clogged and constricted, just like when he's caught with his pants up in a sudden urge to pee, and having forced it inwards, cannot get it outwards. And he gets up and heads downstairs. Just

as he's moving away from his door, still on the first three or four steps going down, he turns back. 'My pen is my penis,' he tells the door.

He picks up the yellow plastic pail. He throws a shirt and underwear into the brown stagnant water. It looks like stale beer. Before he goes through the door again, he picks up the unfinished letter to the Prime Minister of Barbados, and in his long-johns, armed with pail and paper, he creeps out.

The stairs are still dim. And he smiles. He moves down slowly, hoping that when he reaches the second floor the woman on welfare who occupies the toilet longer than any other tenant would not be there.

The saucepan has now begun to boil, although there are more solids than liquids within its thin frame. Popcorn comes into his mind. He doesn't even eat popcorn! He doesn't even go to the movies! The saucepan is turning red at the bottom. If he was in his room, he could not tell where the saucepan's bottom began and where the ring of the hot plate ended.

He thinks of roast corn as he reaches the closed door of the only bathroom in the house. He stands. He listens. He smells. He inhales. And he exhales. He puts his hand on the door and pushes gently, and the door opens with a small creak. He stands motionless, alarmed to see that the bathroom is indeed empty. Where is the woman on welfare?

. . . at night, back home, in the crop season when the sugar canes are cut and harvested, they burn the corn over coals . . .

Right then, above his head, the saucepan explodes. He doesn't hear it. The black-eyed peas and rice burst out, pelting the cover before it, and the table top is splattered like careless punctuations marks. It falls on his fine blue stationery.

The explosion comes just as he holds the yellow pail at a

tilt, over the growling toilet bowl. In the same hand as the pail is the unfinished letter. The urine is flowing into the bowl and he stands thinking, when he sees the first clouds of smoke crawling down the stairs, past the open bathroom door.

The smoke becomes heavier and makes tears come into his eyes. He is crying and passing his hands in front of his face, trying to clear a passage from the second floor, through the thickening smoke rising like high waves. Up and up he goes, no faster than when he entered the house that afternoon, struggling through the smoke until he reaches the steps in front of his door. And as he gets there, it seems as if all the books, all the letters, all the bags of plastic and paper shout at once in an even greater explosion.

Before he can get downstairs to call for help from the woman on welfare, he thinks he hears all five of his clocks alarming. And then, in the way a man who has been struck by a deadening blow waits for the second one to land, he stands, expecting the five clocks to do something else. It is then that he hears one clock striking the hour. He counts aloud until he reaches eight, and then he refuses to count any longer.

Inez

MERLE HODGE

Mrs Henry was ready to call the police. The children and the dogs had to get breakfast, she and Henry had to have their coffee, and the confounded girl was ten minutes late. And she had warned her, two years ago when she started, that if she ever came late, every minute would be deducted from her wages. This was the first time but it would also be the last.

And to think that the facety girl had, just the day before, put God out of her thoughts and asked for an advance on her week's pay. In the middle of the week!

'Only five dollars, ma'am.'

'Five dollars! But that is half your pay – you can't get half your pay in the middle of the week!'

When the clock struck eight, Mrs Henry was seized with panic. Suppose she had been fool enough to give her the five dollars! She had no idea where the girl lived, she knew nothing about her, she would just have disappeared like that with her five dollars.

Mrs Henry now wanted to phone Matilda's Corner Police Station and report an attempted robbery.

The roll call revealed twelve absences. Praise be, sighed the teacher, God forgive my thoughts. But see my trial if all fifty-five of them turn up here one morning. And thank you, Jesus, Carlton didn't find his way to school today again (forgive me, Lord). He must be in the Plaza begging five cents, or his mother must be catch him up there yesterday and break his foot (I not wishing it on him, Lord).