

LANGSTON HUGHES

From The International House Bronzeville Seems Far Away.

Almost up to the sky, my room at International House is the nearest thing to an ivory tower that I have ever had. It faces North toward the downtown Chicago skyline and the horizon-blue of the lake off at the right. The eternal Chicago wind whistles by bringing long months of snow, sleet, rain, and recently a breath of delayed spring. When the window is open even a crack, the wind blows all the papers off my table.

Chicago's wind goes well with the town because it is a big rough-neck city, a kind of American Shanghai, dramatic and dangerous, one of the cradles of the atom bomb, Carl Sandburg's "hog-butcher to the world" perfumed with stock-yard scents. It is a "Baby" Bell town (whose death by suicide sold out a whole issue of the "Chicago Defender" as soon as it appeared on the news stands). It is a Joe Lewis town with a knockout punch in its steel mills and stock yards. It is a Katherine Dunham town, seductive, determined, theatrical and clever. It's a Yancoy town with a heart-throb like boogie-woogie.

Heretofore I have always looked at Chicago from the Negro Southside. When I first came to the city as a kid just before the riots, my mother, my brother and I lived on Wabash in one room level with the elevated trains that roared outside our windows. Later, writing some of my early plays, I lived where the el curves to cross Indiana. When I wrote "The Big Sea" I had a room back of the Grand Hotel not far from the elevated's rumble.

So to be living this spring high in a quiet room in International House on the University of Chicago's Midway with green trees and grass below, is like living in another world far away from the Horace Cayton — "Baby" Bell — Etta Moten — Bigger Thomas — Gwendolyn Brooks — Joe Louis — world of Bronzeville. Yet the "Black Belt" is only a few blocks off. But here one cannot hear it. No el trains cut the quiet. No wineo's mother-foul the evening air. No jitneys blow their horns. No big cars dispensing policy slips speed around the corners. No Bigger Thomases come home to kitchenette confusions. Here in the University's sociology classes students only study about such things, but do not live them. The "Black Metropolis" is a book in the library.

I understand better now what the words, "ivory tower" mean. I understand better how people can live within a few blocks of daily melodrama, yet be as far away from it as one usually is from the news in the daily papers. I understand better how trees, yards, decent housing, cultured neighbors, clean bathrooms and ever-hot water can make people who live clean, quiet, library lives scornful of those whose lives are shattered by the roar of the el trains and chilled by the cold water that comes out of the faucet marked HOT in the kitchenette taps.

When I came to Chicago in February to be a "Poet in Residence" on the campus, I stayed at the Grand on South Parkway, my favorite little hotel. Then, to be nearer my students, a room was secured for me at International House — with the rest of the foreigners. In the "Black Belt" I, too, am a foreigner. In the recent pre-Supreme-Court-decision days, Cottage Grove Avenue was the dividing line between Bronzeville and the restricted covenant areas. Japanese-Americans could live scattered among the whites, but not ourselves. Housing in Chicago is still difficult to find for colored persons outside the predominantly Negro section. But, fortunately, International House — being truly international — is open to both foreigners and Negroes, Jews and Gentiles of all nationalities. That is how I came to my quiet room high up in the wind and the

nearest thing to an ivory tower I have ever had -- since ivory towers do not exist in colored neighborhoods.

International House is a pleasant place to live, to practice one's languages, and to meet students and teachers from all around the world -- including Dixie. There are International Houses only in Chicago, New York, Berkeley, and Paris, gifts of the Rockefeller fortune to international friendship and understanding. It would be nice if every major university center had such a house for it is helpful and good to be able to live for a while with folks from China, Georgia, France, Mississippi, India, Germany, Tennessee, Sweden, Texas, Egypt and Alabama. For white American and Negro American students from the South, it seems to me especially good that there is a house such as International House where they may be together and get acquainted in friendly fashion -- because they cannot share the same dormitories at home nor study together behind the Iron Curtains of Dixie.