

They Shall Not Pass · *Ai*

Above me the sky is all Atlantic
and I taste vinegar, salt
and those hot yellow peppers
Natividad used to eat
with tamales and beer.
And the sweat above her lip—
I can taste that too.
And I have to remind myself
why I left Mexico,
why I'm lying here dying in Madrid
when I should be standing,
thumbs hooked in my belt loops,
a Lucky Strike caught in the corner of my mouth.

I was an IWW man like my father
and I always bought two drinks:
one for myself and one for the living ghost
of universal brotherhood,
with his tattered suitcase
and checkered tie
and a thirst for handshakes and hammers,
always leaning at the bar when I'd arrive,
with his *Joe, buy me a drink, just one more.*
He was in Vera Cruz the night I left,
he stood on deck with me before I sailed,
squinting at the dock, pointing out the ones
who were his.
And I stood there,
empty of everything
but what I believed:
that your brother was your brother
and you had to spare a dime,
that when you went down,
the next man would stand up
hand in his pocket,
that there were angels

who walked among the honored dead
carrying red sickles,
that Joe Stalin sat like Ole King Cole
top of the world
and I'd sit next to him someday
with the back pay of a thousand years
in my own hands.
I had a heart like a goddamn sponge.
You could fill me and fill me,
with slogans, with songs and marches,
with dead men—
like Sunshine.
He was next to me
when he split up the middle,
out of luck, out of dimes;
when there was terror no one told me existed,
betrayors, idealists; hysterical and uneven fighters.
Only this: they shall not pass.
I said it over and over to myself
as we defended the University of Madrid,
even when I took this slow glide down,
my blood like thick bolts of cloth,
hitting the ground as I fell
while the layers of ice and ash
floated down from Kingdom Come.

A chrome ship slides across the sky's smooth surface
and Franco himself lifts the Stars and Stripes sail.
My whole face is numb.
I wanted to hit the coast of Spain
like a fist ramming an old man's belly.
But instead found whatshisname
in the first bar I stepped into,
wearing a St. Patrick's day smile:
cold sober, Joe, he said, and he spat on the sawdust floor.
I'm my own man, first time in years.
You should try it.

And I did, with a carbine.
They told us a man can kill without hate,
that that's how it's done,
that Jesus Christ is the bullet
that makes everything right.
But it doesn't matter
now that the glorious perfumed air
is filled with butterflies
which have men's faces, men's feet,
now that the cocoon of flesh
that held me bursts
and I step left, right, left,
and whatshisname swaggers head of the line
and his voice floats over us
like the Holy Ghost:
victory, friends, brothers;
as we march
all in a row
into the motionless sea.