

Martín Espada

Vivas To Those Who Have Failed: The Paterson Silk Strike, 1913

*Vivas to those who have fail'd!
And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea!
And to those themselves who sank in the sea!
And to all generals that lost engagements, and all overcome heroes!
And the numberless unknown heroes equal to the greatest heroes known!*
Walt Whitman

I. The Red Flag

The newspapers said the strikers would hoist
the red flag of anarchy over the silk mills
of Paterson. At the strike meeting, a dyers' helper
from Naples rose as if from the steam of his labor,
lifted up his hand and said *here is the red flag:*
brightly stained with dye for the silk of bow ties
and scarves, the skin and fingernails boiled away
for six dollars a week in the dye house.

He sat down without another word, sank back
into the fumes, name and face rubbed off
by oblivion's thumb like a Roman coin
from the earth of his birthplace dug up
after a thousand years, as the strikers
shouted the only praise he would ever hear.

II. The River Floods The Avenue

He was the other Valentino, not the romantic sheik
and bullfighter of silent movie palaces who died too young,
but the Valentino standing on his stoop to watch detectives
hired by the company bully strikebreakers onto a trolley
and a chorus of strikers bellowing the banned word *scab*.
He was not a striker or a scab, but the bullet fired to scatter
the crowd pulled the cork in the wine barrel of Valentino's back.
His body, pale as the wings of a moth, lay beside his big-bellied wife.

Two white-veiled horses pulled the carriage to the cemetery. Twenty thousand strikers walked behind the hearse, flooding the avenue like the river that lit up the mills, surging around the tombstones. *Blood for blood*, cried Tresca: at his signal, thousands of hands dropped red carnations and ribbons into the grave, till the coffin evaporated in a red sea.

III. The Insects in the Soup

Reed was a Harvard man. He wrote for the New York magazines. Big Bill, the organizer, fixed his one good eye on Reed and told him of the strike. He stood on a tenement porch across from the mill to escape the rain and listen to the weavers. The bluecoats told him to move on. The Harvard man asked for a name to go with the number on the badge, and the cops tried to unscrew his arms from their sockets. When the judge asked his business, Reed said: *Poet*. The judge said: *Twenty days in the county jail*.

Reed was a Harvard man. He taught the strikers Harvard songs, the tunes to sing with rebel words at the gates of the mill. The strikers taught him how to spot the insects in the soup, speaking in tongues the gospel of One Big Union and the eight-hour day, cramming the jail till the weary jailers had to unlock the doors. Reed would write: *There's war in Paterson*. After it was over, he rode with Pancho Villa.

IV. The Little Agitator

The cops on horseback charged into the picket line. The weavers raised their hands across their faces, hands that knew the loom as their fathers' hands knew the loom, and the billy clubs broke their fingers. Hannah was seventeen, the captain of the picket line, the Joan of Arc of the Silk Strike. The prosecutor called her *a little agitator*. *Shame*, said the judge; if she picketed again he would ship her to the State Home for Girls in Trenton.

Hannah left the courthouse to picket the mill. She chased a strikebreaker down the street, yelling in Yiddish the word

for shame. Back in court, she hissed at the judge's sentence of another striker. Hannah got twenty days in jail for hissing. She sang all the way to jail. After the strike came the blacklist, the counter at her husband's candy store, the words for shame.

V. Vivas To Those Who Have Failed

Strikers without shoes lose strikes. Twenty years after the weavers and dyers' helpers returned hollow-eyed to the loom and the steam, Mazziotti led the other silk mill workers marching down the avenue in Paterson, singing the old union songs for five cents more an hour. Once again the nightsticks cracked cheekbones like teacups. Mazziotti pressed both hands to his head, squeezing red ribbons from his scalp. There would be no Buffalo nickel for an hour's work at the mill, for the silk of bow ties and scarves. Skull remembered wood.

The brain thrown against the wall of the skull remembered too: the Sons of Italy, the Workmen's Circle, Local 152, Industrial Workers of the World, one-eyed Big Bill and Flynn the Rebel Girl speaking in tongues to thousands the prophecy of an eight-hour day. Mazziotti's son would become a doctor, his daughter a poet. Vivas to those who have failed: for they become the river.