

1980

## Blue Suede Shoes

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## Blue Suede Shoes · *Ai*

*A Fiction*

1

Heliotrope sprouts from your shoes, brother,  
their purplish color going chianti  
at the beginning of evening,  
while you sit on the concrete step.  
You gasp and open your hands  
and then I see your eyes,  
the zigzag of red through the center.  
“Bill’s shot up,” you say,  
and hand me the newspaper.  
I don’t take it.  
“Remember how he walked  
on the balls of his feet like a dancer,  
him, a boxer and so graceful  
in his blue suede shoes?  
Jesus, he coulda stayed home, Joe,  
he coulda had the world by the guts,  
but he gets gunned,  
he gets strips of paper  
tumbling out of his pockets like confetti.”

Is Bea here? I say,  
and start for the house.  
“No,” you say. “This splits us.  
You got money, education, ‘friends.’  
You understand. I’m talking about family  
and you ain’t it.  
The dock is my brother.”  
Lou, I say, and step closer,  
once I was fifteen and celestial.  
Mom and Pop called me sweetheart  
and I played the piano in the parlor  
on Sunday afternoons.  
There was ice cream.  
Your girl wore a braid down the center of her back.  
The sun had a face and it was mine.  
You loved me, you sonofabitch, everybody did.

87

In 1923, you could count the golden boys on your fingers  
and I was one of them. Me, Joe McCarthy.  
I gave up music for Justice,  
divorce and small time litigation.  
And you moved here to Cleveland—  
baseball, hard work, beerhalls,  
days fishing Lake Erie,  
more money than a man like you  
could ever earn on a farm  
and still not enough.  
Pop died in bed in his own house  
because of my money.  
“Share,” he always said, “you share  
what you have with your family  
or you’re nothing. You got nobody, boys.”  
Will you cut me off now  
like you cut me off from my nephew  
when I could have helped,  
when you hated the way he hung on to me,  
the way he listened when I talked  
like I was a wise man. Wasn’t I?  
I could already see a faint red haze  
on the horizon;  
a diamond headed hammer  
slamming down on the White House;  
a sickle cutting through the legs  
of every man, woman and child in America.  
You know what people tell me today,  
they say “you whistle the tune, Joe,  
and we’ll dance.”  
But my own brother sits it out.

2

A man gets bitter, Lou,  
he gets so bitter  
he could vomit himself up.  
It happened to Bill.  
He wasn’t young anymore.  
That night last July  
lying on a canvas of his own blood  
he knew he’d had it.

After a few months, he ran numbers  
and he was good at it, but he was scared.  
His last pick-up,  
he stood outside the colored church  
and heard voices  
and he started to shake.  
He thought he'd come all apart,  
that he couldn't muscle it anymore,  
and he skimmed cream for the first time—  
\$10's, \$20's.

You say you would have died in his place,  
but I don't believe it.  
You couldn't give up your whore on Thursdays  
and Bea the other nights of the week,  
the little extra that comes in off the dock.  
You know what I mean.  
The boys start ticking—  
they put their hands in the right place  
and the mouse runs down the clock.  
It makes you hot,  
but I just itch  
and when I itch, I want to smash something.  
I want to condemn and condemn,  
to see people squirm,  
but other times,  
I just go off in a dream—  
I hear the Mills Brothers  
singing in the background,  
“Up a lazy river,”  
and then the fog clears  
and I'm standing at Stalin's grave  
and he's lying in an open box.  
I get down on top of him  
and stomp him,  
til I puncture his bloated skin  
and this stink rises up.  
I nearly black out,  
but I keep stomping  
until I can smell fried trout, coffee.  
And Truman's standing up above me  
with his hand out  
and I wake up always with the same thought:

the Reds are my enemies.  
Everytime I'm sitting at that big table in D.C.  
and so and so's taking the Fifth  
or crying, or naming names,  
I'm stomping his soul.  
I can look inside you, Lou,  
just like I do those sonsofbitches.  
You got a hammer up your ass,  
a sickle in between your percale sheets?  
My own brother.  
Everybody'd think what a man I am.  
Threaten me, you red-hearted bastard. Come on.  
I'll bring you to heel.

3

Yesterday, Bill comes by the hotel  
and he sits on the bed, but he can't relax.  
Uncle, he says, and points at his feet,  
all I ever wanted was this pair of blue suede shoes,  
and he takes out a pawn ticket,  
turns it over in his hand, then he gets up  
and at the door, he holds it out to me  
and says, you keep it.  
Today I go down to the pawn shop  
and this is what I get back—a .38.  
Bill didn't even protect himself.  
You have to understand what happened to him,  
in a country like this,  
the chances he had.

Remember Dorothy and The Yellow Brick Road?—  
there's no pot of gold at the end,  
but we keep walking that road,  
red, white, and blue ears of corn  
steaming in our minds:  
America,  
the only thing between us and the Red Tide.  
But some of us are straw,  
we burn up like Bill in the dawn's early light.  
He didn't deserve to live.

This morning, when I heard he was dead,  
I didn't feel anything.  
I stood looking out the window at the Lake  
and I thought for a moment  
the whole Seventh Fleet was sailing away beneath me,  
flags waving, men on deck  
shining like bars of gold,  
and there, on the bow of the last ship,  
Dorothy stood waving up at me.  
As she passed slowly under my window,  
I spit on her.  
She just stared at me  
as if she didn't understand.  
But she did.  
She gave up the Emerald City  
for a memory.  
I'd never do that, never.  
I'm an American.  
I shall not want.  
There's nothing that doesn't belong to me.