KEEP ON PUSHING
(Harlem Riots/Summer/1964)

The title taken from a recent hit recording
(Summer, '64) by the famous rhythm & blues
trio, Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions.

Lenox Avenue is a big street
The sidewalks are extra wide—three and four times
the size of a regular Fifth Avenue or East 34th
Street sidewalk—and must be so to contain the
unemployed vigiling Negro males, the picket lines
and police barricades.

Police Commissioner Murphy can
muster five hundred cops in fifteen minutes.
He can summon extra
tear gas bombs, guns, ammunition
within a single call
to a certain general alarm.
For Harlem
reinforcements come from the Bronx
just over the three-borough Bridge.

a shot a cry a rumor
can muster five hundred Negroes
from idle and strategic street corners
bars stoops hallways windows

Keep on pushing.
I walk Harlem
I see police eight per square block
crude mathematics
eight to one
eight for one
I see the store owners and keepers—all white
and I see the white police force
The white police in the white helmets
and the white proprietors in their white shirts
talk together and
look around.

I see Negro handymen put to work because of the riots
boarding up smashed storefronts
They use sparkling new nails
The boards are mostly fresh-hewn pine
and smell rank fresh.
The pine boards are the nearest Lenox Avenue will ever have
to trees.

Phalanxes of police
march up and down
They are dispatched and gathered helmet heads
Bobbing white black and blue.
They walk around—squadroned & platooned.
groups of six eight twelve.
Even in a group
the sparse Negro cop walks alone
or with a singular
talkative
white buddy.

keep on pushing

Am I in the 1940's?
Am I in Asia? Batista's Havana?
where is Uncle Sam's Army? The Allied Forces
when are we going to have the plebescite?

III
I walk and the children playing frail games seem
like no other children anywhere
they seem unpopular foreign
as if in the midst of New York existed
a cryptic and closed society.
Am I in Korea?
I keep expecting to see
companies of camouflage-khakiied Marines
the Eighth Army
Red Crosses—a giant convoy
through the narrow peopled streets
jeeps with granite-faced generals colonels
marching grim champions of the free world
Trucks dispensing Hershey Bars and Pall Malls
Medical equipment
nurses doctors drugs serums to treat
The diseased and the maimed
and from the Harlem River
Blasting whistles horns
volleying fire bombs against the clouds
the 7th fleet
but the prowling Plymouths
and helmeted outlaws from Queens
persist
Keep On A' Pushing

IV
I see plump pale butchers pose with their signs:
"Hog Maws 4 pounds for 1 dollar"
"Pigs ears 7 pounds for 1 dollar"
"Neck Bones Chitterlings 6 pounds for 1"
Nightclubs, liquor stores bars 3, 4 & 5 to one block
3 & 4 shots for one dollar
I see police eight to one
in its entirety Harlem's 2nd Law of Thermodynamics
Helmet to barehead
nightsticks bullets to barehead
black reinforced shoes to sneaker

Am I in Korea?

V
At night Harlem sings and dances
and as Jimmy Breslin of the Herald Tribune says
they also pour their whiskey on one another's heads.
They dog and slop in the bars
The children monkey in front of Zero's Record Chamber
on 116th and Lenox
They mash potatoes and madison at the Dawn Casino,
Renaissance Ballroom, Rockland Palace, and the Fifth Avenue
Armory on 141st and the Harlem River
Come out of your windows
dancehalls, bars and grills  Monkey Dog in the streets
like Martha and the Vandellas
Dog for NBC
The Daily News and the Christian Science Monitor
Dog for Adlai Stevenson
And shimmy a bit
for ‘the boys upstate’
‘cause you got soul
Everybody knows . . .
Keep on Pushin’

VI
This twilight
I sit in Baron’s Fish & Chip Shack
Alfonso (the counterman) talks of ammunition
and violence   The Journal American in my lap
headlines promised ‘exclusive battle photos’
by a daring photographer they call Mel Findlestein
through him they insure “The Face Of Violence—The most
striking Close-ups”
WWRL the radio station that serves
the Negro community
tools along on its rhythm and blues vehicle
The colorful unison announcers
declare themselves “The most soulful station in the nation”
Then the lecture series on democracy comes on
The announcer Professor Robert Scalapino for this series
doesn’t sound soulful
(eight to one he’s white, representing management)
We Negroes are usually warned of the evils of Communism
and the fruits of democracy, but this evening he tells us
that in this troubled time we must keep our heads
and our law
and our order
he says violence only hurts (and he emphasizes hurts)
the cause of freedom and dignity. He urges the troubled
restless residents of Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant to stay
in their homes, mark an end to the tragic and senseless
violence
a pause
then he concludes
and a rousing mixed chorus ends with
“...And the home of the brave.”
Alfonso didn’t acknowledge the majestic harmony
he hears it every hour on the hour.
The rhythm and blues returns
a flaming bottle bursts on Seventh Avenue
and shimmies fire across the white divider line
helmets
and faces white as the white fluorescence of the street
bob by BLACK
Prowl cars speeding wilding wheeling
the looney tune of the modulating de-modulating sirens
climb the tenements window by window.
Harlem moves on an automatic platform.
The red fish lights swirl the gleaming storefronts
there will be no Passover this night
and then the gunfire high
in the air death static
over everything
ripped glass
shards sirens gunfire
down towards 116th

Then Jocko scenes radio WWRL
late at night he hustles wine: Italian Swiss Colony Port
sherry and muscatel. Gypsy Rose and Hombre “The man’s
Adult western drink,”
but by day and evening
his raiment for Harlem’s head is different
zealous Jocko coos forward
his tongue baroque-sinister
snakes like fire  “Headache? —Take Aspirin”
“Tension?
   .... take Compoz!”

Keep on a’ pushin’
S someway somehow
I know we can make it
with just a little bit of soul.