For My Father: On Looking at a Robert Capa Photograph

Howard Levy
I come across a photograph of Spain. it is Barcelona, 1938. these are soldiers of the International Brigades, scarves tied around their necks like dockhands. they are losing and going home, but they salute, right arms bent at the elbow, fists clenched.

you were not there, but I see you in the photograph. I see you whenever Spain comes up, though you were not there. you raised money for them in Manhattan.

it is unimportant what you did. Spain has become a word that stretches between us, a rope bridge across 30 years of ordinary life, the cliffs of father and son.

I remember you on the blue sofa telling me about the Ebro, the Jarama, door to door fighting in Madrid, Guernica and the war lost. quiet and subdued, the words fell into the canyons between us.

and now, it is 1978. I am on a bed in a rooming house in upstate New York, a photograph of Spain on my lap. we have never been further apart.

and I am also a photographer of loss. this room, picture this: the gray, green carpet, the drawers with knobs missing,
not even in a pattern, the sunken bed
I don't fit, the obligatory
cracked mirror.

a closeup of me with the photo on my lap.
my face grave and childish.

I am haunted by these men.
they seem from a world that has blown up,
their sun gone nova.