

Richard Solly

SPELLING LESSONS

for Therese DeRose

It isn't a matter of deep love,
but simply two children, bookbags
slung over their shoulders, walking
down E. 136th street to St. Timothy's.
Every step we take is right.
At our desks, with our pencils
and tablets, we have the answers.
We're the first to raise our hands.

Standing in front of the class,
you spell four syllable words
while Sister Kiernan folds her arms,
approves each letter with a nod.
I root for you. It's *chrysanthemum*
you misspell, the flower
my father grows in the backyard.

In the afternoon, I grate
a block of wax over the wood floor,
and later sprinkle sawdust
up and down the aisles,
being sure to let a handful fall
and freckle your buckled shoes.
You frown and I smile, a game
our faces play on Fridays.

Or I might lift from my chair
as the teacher writes on the board
and peek at your test paper
just to see you lunge over it,
cover your answers with your hands
and scowl as I sit back,
my paper already finished.

Solly

During geography, in a blue blazer,
white blouse and pleated skirt,
you lay your hand over
and entire continent on the globe,
and point to the island of Crete,
while I draw Minoan bulls
and Sister tells the class: *Very Good*.

Minutes before the bell buzzes
in the halls,
we fold our hands on our desks,
look to the front like angels,
hoping Sister will call our row first
so we might burst into the sunlight,
outside, before anyone else.

And the following morning
we push open the doors again to this world
of long division and multiplication,
starred papers and squeaky chalk,
a world clearly marked right and wrong,
a world that is kind to us.

Not like it is for me later
in military boarding school where I'm hit
across the head for gazing out the window,
for writing letters home that ask
for train fare back. After school, I march
with a nine pound M1 rifle because
of scuffed shoes, an unbuttoned shirt sleeve,
the tie too loose around my collar.

Therese, I'd like us to pack
our suitcases, take the Greyhound bus
back to where we started,
and at E. 136th street and Saybrook Avenue,
begin walking, this May,
early in the morning
when the light is soft and studious,
spelling *chocolate, licorice, petunias....*