Spelling Lessons

Richard Solly*
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....