

POEMS BY ADORA SVITAK

Schoolroom image

No one knows

No one knows where Nell will go,
Whether she'll really ever settle down with the no-good Jaspers boy,
If Alice and Ida are going to teach in Whitman County where the sky runs big and the wheat is long,
If the little boys, Henry and Louis and Joe, will study at all come harvest-time,
Whether the insolent children will ever help teacher get coal (all the good children are going now)
How all the kids managed to crowd together into one picture—

The world gathers them up in her calloused hands like so many fragments of colored glass,
Making this mosaic in one second, the next
The world gathers them up and she scatters them,
Disperse, she whispers.
They flutter apart like ashes on the wind,
Break apart and change. The glass goes back to sand, and
We walk on the sharp sand beaches of Idylwood Park,
We walk on the fragments of glass mosaic,
of NellAlicildaHenryLouisandJoe,
log cabin schoolhouse and years ago.

empty

Chile, there's a strange prison called empty and the jailer's all around.
It's in these floorboards and the cold ground and the windows and the days.
It's in that logger's eyes and in some mother's lonesome look.
You can try to fill it but those shackles stay in place, oh they do.
Chile, I knew empty like big East swindles know the federal pen!
I knew empty way back before when everything knew empty,
All this was, was empty, all the people and the land and the house,
Wash day and Sunday and pay day and work day,
Empty, empty, empty.

Chile, you get a strange yearning for empty when you've known it for so long.
When the land gets filled with people who have fullness in their eyes,
And the trees get felled for reason and for progress and for homes
and in their place are buildings that have smiles to fill the hole,
the library we started—sure, that was my own doing, true—
but you think back to the empty and you wonder if it's gone
not for us old-timers, not for us, now that we see empty in the full.

Redmond Shoe Hospital

Their states of health are various,
Some need mending, some need love,
A few need new tongues—or soles,
Most need softer labor—they're worked too hard.
The man with the monocle is inspecting another pair.
Says the woman that brought them, "The loss would crush me!"
And those, all those worn-out boots by the door—well, sir, I hate to say it,
but they're a lost cause...
I still have to inform the family.

Needles

Peering through the barbed-wire fence at them,
she can't help but think that they sort of look like needles,
Big thick knitting needles poised on the edge of a new line of yarn,
There's the quick flash to them, that paused potential,
The suspense in the second when Grandma pauses knitting and
You know that when she starts it'll go, go, go, no stopping,
And you know that when these start they'll go, go, go no stopping,
Except Grandma makes things, brings fragments, fabric, yarn *together*
And these are Grandpa's clumsy knitting needles, poised on the edge like they are
About to tear, rip, break the fabric apart.

That day in Bothell at the end

That day in Bothell at the end, I saw it in your eyes, that sort of scary something—
There's something that makes you want to lose yourself in the thrill.
If you could succumb completely to the way the careen of a sudden turn feels,
Live your life as fast as the world rushes past you, leave as loud and big a mark as
The ephemeral white spray behind the boat, pummeling the water's edge,
Peppered the onlookers whose giggles barely reach you
in that beautiful brief second before the ripples cease, the fishes rise,
and quietude settles on the river like you were never racing there—
If you could fire your veins on the charge of the stampede,
Live life so much simpler with
the need of *just one thing*—
To win—
Would you?