

Over view

- An Elementary School classroom in a slum was first published in 1964
- Written at the time of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, this poem is perhaps the best example of Spender's political voice resonating throughout a poem.
- The theme of poverty is the 'leitmotif' (*a recurrent theme throughout a musical or literary composition*) of this poem. Spender exposes the widespread neglect of children of all nationalities, races, and ethnicities.



An Elementary School Classroom in a
slum

At back of the dim class
One unnoted, sweet and
young. His eyes live in a
dream,

Of squirrel's game, in the
tree room, other than this.



On sour cream walls,
donations. Shakespeare's
head,

Cloudless at dawn, civilized
dome riding all cities.



Surely, Shakespeare is
wicked, and the map a
bad example

With ships and sun and
love tempting them to
steal--



Where all their future's
painted with a fog,

A narrow street sealed
in with a lead sky,

Far far from rivers,
capes, and stars of words.



Shakespeare's head,
Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome
riding all cities.

Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-
handed map

Awarding the world its world.



Belled, flowery, Tyrolese
valley, Open-handed map

Awarding the world its
world. And yet, for these
children,
these windows, not this map,
their world,





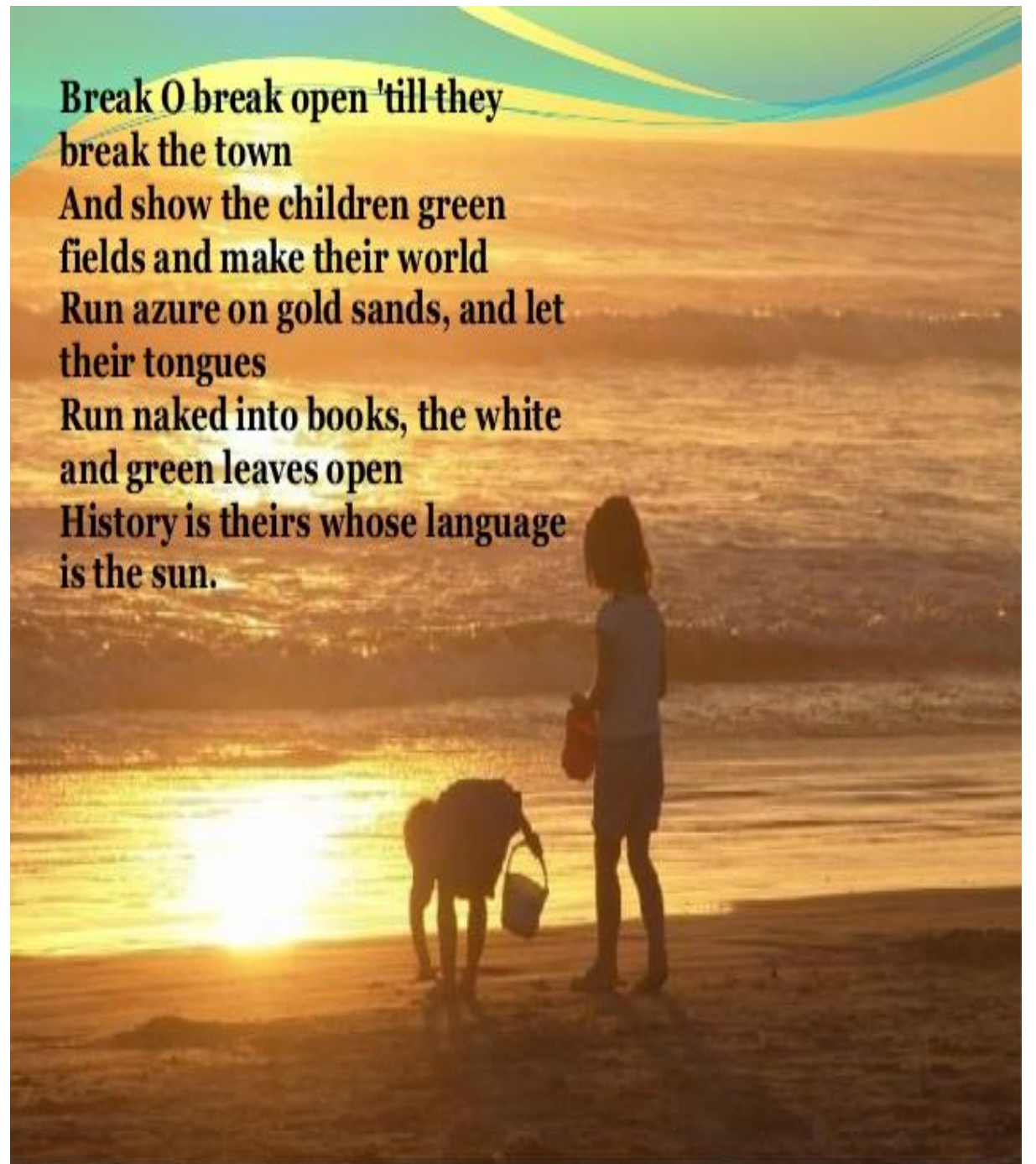
Unless, governor, teacher,
inspector, visitor,

This map becomes their
window and these windows

That shut upon their lives
like catacombs,



Break O break open 'till they
break the town
And show the children green
fields and make their world
Run azure on gold sands, and let
their tongues
Run naked into books, the white
and green leaves open
History is theirs whose language
is the sun.



Poem and Explanation

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.
Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor:
The tall girl with her weighed-down head.

The children's faces are most unlike the usual ones that are exuberant-full of energy-but are like rootless weeds. This implies that they are unwanted and ugly just like weeds in a garden. They are rootless and so seem to lack stability. The hair is unkempt around their pale faces.

Gusty waves: breezy winds powerful, energetic

Pallor: pale, dull face

Stunted: not fully grown due to malnutrition

Gnarled: Knotted, rough

weeds: unwanted plants that grow on their own

Paper seeming boy: Very thin boy, as thin as a sheet of paper

heir: Successor

The paper seeming
Boy, with rat's eyes. The stunted, unlucky heir
Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,
His lesson, from his desk.

- The tall girl is physically and emotionally exhausted, as if all life has been dredged (scooped out) from her body and sapped (Gradually weaken or destroy) from her mind. Her head hangs down in exhaustion. The children are under developed and like rodents. The rat's eyes is suggestive of being defensive and scared, like a scavenger. His prospect for survival, let alone success, is bleak..
- He has been left disfigured, trapped in a physically challenged body. The children are underprivileged and have inherited their diseased bones from their parents. This implies diseased generations...

At back of the dim class
One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,
Of squirrel's game, in tree room, other than this.



- The classrooms are equally dim and pathetic. There is one child , who is sweet and young, His eyes live in a dream, the child's desire to be a squirrel, playing in a hollow tree, which ironically reflects his current life! It is also suggestive of the world of dreams that he lives in , he is mentally ill.
- Simile children are compared to rootless weed
- Metaphor boy looks thin and impoverished like paper
- repetition: far far to stress on the distance.

On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head,
Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.
Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map
Awarding the world its world.



- The walls that have turned yellowish reflects the despondent look of the students. The life of slum children is far removed from that represented in schoolbooks, maps, photographs of alpine valleys, or a bust of Shakespeare.
- Donations: things given on charity
- Tyrolese Valley: a beautiful ice- free valley in Austria.
- Capes: a large piece of land that sticks out into the sea from the coast.
- Metaphor – walls dull as sour cream,

**And yet, for these
Children, these windows, not this map, their world,
Where all their future's painted with a fog,
A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky
Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words**

Sour: unpleasant, here refers to the colour of sour cream -off white or creamish

Donations: things given or received in charity

Dawn: early morning, sunrise

civilized dome: here, it means rising sun at the horizon which is in the shape of a dome (semi - circle)

Tyrolese valley: A beautiful ice-free valley in Austria

Sealed: shut or locked

lead: here, dark future of kids

Capes: A large piece of land that sticks out into the sea from the coast

Lead sky - metaphor

**Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal—
For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night?**

Wicked: evil Tempted: persuade Slyly: trickily Cramped: confined Slag: weak
mended: repaired, Blot: to mark with a spot doom : disaster.

If education is supposed to open doors or windows to other worlds, surely it has failed in this instance to liberate these children, both physically and intellectually from their restricted impoverished existence in the catacombs of modern industrial towns . For these children their future and their world are bleak painted with fog. The narrow roads do not lead them to a better future and these children are as removed as can be from the beautiful enlightened world. The world of the slum is far, far from rivers capes and stars of words.

*On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
All of their time and space are foggy slum.
So blot their maps with slums as big as doom*



- The ‘lives that sly turn in their cramped holes’ are those of the children whom the poet ironically dubs as sly in keeping with the earlier descriptions of wicked and tempting them to steal. These slum children, however, are doomed to cramped holes in limited , restrictive lives that progress from ignorance ,fog to death , endless night . The children are mere skin and bone; their maps of the future are irreparably blotted by fate.

Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,
This map becomes their window and these windows
That shut upon their lives like catacombs,
Break O break open till they break the town
And show the children to green fields, and make their world
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues
Run naked into books the white and green leaves open
History theirs whose language is the sun.



The poet pictures the imprisoned minds and lives of the school children as being magically released from their bondage. It is an appeal to governor, teacher, inspector, visitor to rescue the poor and oppressed from the tomb of class discrimination and show the children to the fields and make the world. He then imagines the liberated children running on the golden sands and delving (search through) into the books. It is then that they will be truly liberated and the inextinguishable spirit of human creativity abides in those whose language is the sun.

