

“I’ve Been Waiting Too Long”

I found Matthew there alone
sitting on a pile of planks and cardboard,
amid the debris that had once been his hideout.
He had put up the cabin to be his haven.
I found him there,
wrapped up in himself by the loneliness
brought on by his parents’ poverty.

At thirteen, Matthew is lonely and friendless,
because as soon as he sees other youngsters,
he feels ashamed and darts out of sight.
He is alone, rejected like his family,
because no one in the neighborhood
will have anything to do with him.
No one takes any notice of him,
nor of anyone else who shares in the shame of poverty.

No teacher ever comes to see your family here,
nor any minister to share his faith with you.
There is no big brother, no friend spending some time
to make a little confidence and happiness
grow in your heart.
If he has cut himself off from the others,
it isn’t that he doesn’t like them,
but because there are too many people missing
for him to believe that he is loved
and that his family is respected.

Last time I came, I found Matthew
inside the hideout he had just built
with these planks and cardboards
he is sitting on today.
He had built it,
hoping other youngsters would come there
to share in his games, laughter, and dreams.
Hoping older children might join them too,
Matthew had set everything up so painstakingly.
He had furnished it with an old mattress used as an arm-chair;
three cups were lined up on a shelf.
A calendar marked the time.
And in one corner--I’m no longer sure which one--
the Virgin Mary kept watch discreetly over the room.

Last time, I had sat down next to Matthew,
wondering how we could
build a world together

where all children would learn to read and write,
where teachers, ministers
and everyone else would be their friends.
A world of men and women
who would treat them like tomorrow's adults,
a world from which children trapped in poverty
would no longer have to escape.

In his cabin, Matthew had hung up a plate
on which was written,
"Give us this day our daily bread."
But this bread is not given
to all the world's children.
For the most needy,
daily bread is the shame of grinding poverty.
For Matthew,
daily bread is absence and loneliness.

Why had he abandoned his dream and destroyed his cabin?
I asked him.
"I've been waiting too long," he told me.
He had been waiting for someone to come sit beside him,
someone from the neighborhood, or from somewhere else,
someone led there by the light of his heart,
someone who would have seen in this child
all the millions of children
who wait in vain and keep on hoping.

But no one came.
So Matthew tore down his haven.
It hadn't done any good,
because no friendship had blossomed there.
It hadn't filled the gulf of his loneliness.
It was like an empty manger
to which the Magi and the shepherds hadn't found the way.