

The Children of The Market Place

“Why don’t people like us?”
Catherine looks at them.
These African children
keep asking her the same question
as French children in housing projects
at home put to her,
when she was a volunteer in France.
Now she is in Africa.

This morning,
a dozen lively children,
beaming big, bright smiles,
walked Catherine back to her car
on the edge of the marketplace.
These are the same children
who called her names after mass yesterday,
because, sensing their humiliation and rage,
she had fled, burning with shame.

As she does every weekend,
she had come to be with these children
who live in the street,
befriending them
and bringing a few things essential to their survival.
They had crowded around her.
As she does every Sunday,
she had brought them curdled milk,
and, this Sunday, some woolen clothes,
offered by a missionary,
because January nights can be so cold.
Huddled against one another,
stretched out on bits of cardboard,
the children had shivered all night, too cold to sleep
in the stalls of the marketplace.

At first, things went well.
But then the older boys ganged up on the little ones
to wring a few drops of milk out of them.
Passers-by lingered beside them,
snickering and shrugging their shoulders as if to say,
“They’re taking advantage of that silly woman!”
Then one man announced very loudly for all to hear,
“They’ve all got sticky fingers. None of this does any good!”

It does no good?
But other people’s tenderness does help these children
who ran away from their villages and families one day
because people could no longer feed them.

Other people's tenderness helps these children,
some of whom have never known the affection of a mother,
and who sell themselves for a few pennies
to get some food,
or who are exploited by the older ones
who force them to steal and to beg.

Catherine had finally finished
distributing the curdled milk.
Then she took the missionary's sweaters out of her tiny car.
But the children lost interest
and started fighting again,
just as peels of laughter
and mocking began to burst out of the crowd.

Discouraged, Catherine,
tossed the remaining woolens onto the back seat
and fled,
despite the children clinging to her car
to keep her from starting it,
calling her names
and throwing stones at her.

That night, Catherine said to herself,
"What good does it do? It's too hard!
And there is just too much misery,
and too many people snickering
and doing the children so much harm..."

But this morning,
as she is making her way through the market,
along come the children, crowding around her.
They take her basket out of her hands
to help her carry it to the car,
and they ask her,
"Why don't people like us?"

