

On the Problems of Empathy

By Rita Mae Reese

1

Twice a year the orphans come.
Like Job's children, pawns in a bet
made with the Devil.

2

You and your mother watch
from the porch as Father Whiskey's car
rolls up the long dirt drive.
The orphans inside ignore the fields,
the cows, the pond, the patch of woods.

3

When you were younger,
you begged for a brother
or even a sister.

4

What should you say to an orphan?
You think of your mother's
habitual prelude to sympathy:
"There's nothing easier
than burying other people's children, *but...*"
The orphans are beyond sympathy.

5

Sympathy being one of the problems.
How far does it go?
Not quite to the horizon.
Not even to the trees beyond the pond.

6

The orphans, their still-breathing,
lye- and cabbage-smelling bodies,
are also a problem.

7

Father Whiskey with his lazy eye
thinks a good Catholic family
with only one child is both
problem and solution.

8

One eye looks at your mother.
The other looks at God
looking at you.

9

Sympathy requires action, or at least words;
empathy is a private affair,
which is nevertheless a basis for community.
However the distinctions are imprecise and need
further work.

10

Father Whiskey sees God looking at you as if
--if you believed in the Creed, the Holy Ghost,
and all that he has tried to tell you,
if you could even look a statue
of Mary in the eye—
then you could reach out a hand,
lay it on this boy's scrubbed forehead,
make him your brother.

11

Later, in college, in a winter of mind and place,
you will read Edith Stein's
On the Problem of Empathy.
Now though she is of no help to you.

12

You stand on the front porch
and wait for the miracle
to begin in your shoulder
and travel down through your fingertips,
the way you've heard lightning
tries to escape the body.

13

In a few months there will be different orphans.
Then the time comes but no orphans.

14

Years later, in a city where you can't speak
the language, you will pass a woman
sitting on the pavement, a burnt out shell
of a woman holding an infant. The infant is sleeping,
on his head a robin's-egg-blue bonnet, spotless.

15

Your problem is you feel too much, or not at all.

16

Their grown bodies move past you.



Rita Mae Reese is a recipient of a Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Award, a Stegner fellowship in fiction, a "Discovery"/The Nation award, and a Pamaunok Poetry Prize, among other awards. Her second book, *The Book of Hulga*, was selected by Denise Duhamel for the Felix Pollak Prize in 2016. She is a co-director of literary arts at the Arts & Literature Laboratory in Madison, Wisconsin. Visit her at www.ritamaereese.com