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Take and Eat

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Take and Eat

Second Place winner of the Prairie Writing Award

Beets
I say too loudly
and hold the can so
the label is clearly visible.

She raises her eyes to look at me,
not understanding—
wanting to understand—
Muslim in the Lutheran food pantry.
She hides her fear behind
a spill of black hair.

In Afghanistan,
she’d never seen canned beets,
Chef Boyardee Ravioli, Hickory Farms spicy mustard,
Sweet Baby Ray’s BBQ Sauce, Hershey’s chocolate syrup,
or the assorted pink, green, and yellow miniature marshmallows
that instinctively she knows will not nourish
the five mouths to feed at home.

Only desperation
those rumbling bellies
those tiny mouths
could propel her here.

But…
How do you explain salsa, or Hamburger Helper?
Taco shells, pizza kits, Ramen noodles,
California smoothie mix, or the foil-wrapped hotel coffee packets
and other flotsam and jetsam hastily plucked
from someone’s kitchen cabinet for donation?
Carb-lite pasta, energy bars, Girl Scout Thin Mints, microwave popcorn,
Funfetti cake mix, Hormel Chili, Gatorade, Suddenly Salad?

Her English starts and stops with “hello,”
I’ve never toyed with learning Pashto.

She grips her four-year-old son’s hand.
He glances at me shyly through thick dark lashes,
eyes the candy, 
but doesn’t whine or beg.

I want to give him the world.

Instead, I convince her to take
a few bags of beans,
black olives,
a small package of cookies.

*You can fill this basket to the top,* I show her, pointing.
She shakes her head.

I pantomime, wave my hands
Talk slower, talk louder
Beg her to take

*Rice! Noodles! Soup?*
She leaves without so many things.

The gulf between us
is wider than
the words she doesn’t understand.

On my way home
I’ll stop at Whole Foods
Load my cart with fresh spinach, strawberries
Nine-grain flour, expensive Greek yogurt,
Lean sirloin, apples grown without pesticides,
Fresh fruit juices, brown eggs from free-range chickens.

Happy chickens
Who lay their eggs in nests
I don’t like cruelty.