

Grace Before Meals

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*Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts
which we are going to receive from thy bounty
through Christ, our Lord. Amen*

As a child, I'd refuse to eat my veggies,
pushing them round and round my plate
until my mother's glare unclamped my jaw
and I choked down every last leaf.
Think, she'd say, *of the starving children.*
Ethiopia was big then—the television
haunting us with its images of thin limbs
and distended bellies, flies ringing
the faces of people too tired to brush them off.
How I'd wished I could slip the greens,
those healthy abominations, into the screen—
imagined the surprise of some little boy
when he saw my hand reaching down
from his sky passing the carrots and okra
like manna. In today's news, another riot
—in Haiti this time. Bands of people storm
Port-au-Prince, fearless with hunger
while peacekeeping troops place their guns
and bodies between the mob and the giant
containers of food stockpiled in the city.
I'm on my way to Wegmans; it's Monday
night and the parking lot is almost empty.
I pull my cart from the long train, discard
the one with the squeaky wheel. It's eerie
wandering alone in the fluorescent glow
to the background music of Bon Jovi, and the night
manager's pen clicking against his clipboard.
I walk right past the sprinkled produce,
wheel through the isles of fresh and frozen
meat, blocks of cheese waiting to be cut,
the twenty different types of cereal
high fiber/all natural/calcium enriched,

and for a second, it is a bad dream—
I'm in a labyrinth I must eat my way out of,
the ghosts of all the world's hungry
up in the bleachers watching, bony hands
under their chins, and the flies, again, the flies.
Waste is the America's biggest crime,
my mother had declared when once,
I casually tossed the bread molding
in my kitchen: it had been on sale—
buy one get one free. I should, she warned,
be more mindful of the privilege of too much bread.
This night, I am. For thirty minutes
I roam the shelves, read their bright tags,
pick up or leave the cans and jars, the boxes
that read a complete meal in 10 minutes—
stock up to satisfy next week's hunger.
At checkout, the sleepy cashier offers paper or plastic,
piles bag after bag, and I pay with nothing
more than my name.