

The Staring Game

**first prize, 39 Poets and Artists Against Hunger Contest, 1996*

Inside me, there were voices, voices as real as eyes that watered
when I played the staring game with tiny Susan, my pigtailed
sister who was stronger, held her lids back, her face fixed

and pale, a mirror of despair. Her fingers moved to fists, nails
pressed into her palms. Our bodies shook together in the fight,
You can take it, you can take it. Then, the suffering. Mother

always said, *To suffer makes us strong.* Then, the cravings,
Give in, give in, shut them now. Tears welled up and fell,
darted down and made cheek alleys until I couldn't last

and looked away. Then came the breath, the fall of lashes,
and Susan's bare relief, *I won again,* her laughs blending
with the howls of stray dogs outside who caught the scent

of our Christmas turkey that lasted for soup. Those gifts
always came that time of year -- boxes of strange shirts
to grow into, baskets full of apples and pears. Three years

later, I can still taste the rations. I was born barefoot and stayed
this way. My bones poke at skin so thin I can almost see
blood there, want it all to rush out, to push into Susan's frame

and fill it up, bring her back with a mind that's still beating.
We can play hard enough at this fragile faith until, at last, we blink.

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