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Night Nurse

Freya Manfred

He lies in sheet-blue shadows, barely moving,
not always remembering
to swallow his small aloof pills,
white, yellow, pale green, and gray.

He's glad we came, but keeps his eyes closed,
as I gather him into my eyes,
and try to understand that he's my brother,
my brother as before, as always.

He seems so far away he could be anyone –
a native hunter, alone in a bleak land
crouching by an icy river,
severed bear paws with curved black claws

beside him, sticky with blood,
his sharp knife cutting raw meat,
taking it to his tongue –
the whole earth as wild and brutal as always,

smashing into our eyes
when the night nurse comes
with her fierce blond hair and long white teeth –
and turns on the light.

Ants

Freya Manfred

I first learned life wasn't fair
when I discovered ant hills along our driveway,
millions of sand grains shaped into miniature brown volcanoes.
Some ants trudged uphill in long meandering lines,
carrying beetle legs, breadcrumbs, and fat nuggets of corn,
while others streamed out of their holes to seek more.
One ant lay crippled.
Another lugged a dead brother home.
Another stood on the tip of a blade of grass,
antennae trembling with news of the universe.
When I dropped a gigantic bread crumb on their mound,
two ants danced around it
until a phalanx of ants arrived to carry it away.
I knew I could kill any one of them,
or the whole tribe, with one foot.
But I didn't.
And I never showed their cities to the boys next door.
I didn't realize I'd someday feel as tiny as those ants.
But the more I watch TV,
or spend time in hospitals and rest homes,
the more ant-like I become.
I, too, have sensitive feelers,
and carry loads bigger than my body.
I, too, try to drag the sick and the dead
back where they belong, to homes they helped to build.
I don't know why I do it
beyond them not wanting to live, or die, alone.

The Helper

Freya Manfred

My friend is hardworking, but sick and hungry.
When I tell him I have little food left, he says he'll eat later.
No! I protest. I'll buy bread and cheese from a shop down the street.
But block after block, nothing is open –
so I dive into the subway, where I'm lost in a maze of tunnels.

Young men and women roam far and wide,
but I'm old, tired, and claustrophobic, on my knees,
scraping my belly down dark, descending passageways.
My head is bursting. My heart attacks me.
There's no food here, not even much air. I give up.

I turn back, climb a cliff, leap a crevasse, cross a river.
I hope I'll find the strength to scramble on,
but maybe I've come too far, and can't return?
I wish I hadn't left my own work behind –
my peace, my joy – the last fearless place I've ever known.

Freya Manfred's
eighth book of
poems is *Speak,*
Mother (Red
Dragonfly Press),
and her latest mem-
oir is *Raising Twins:*
A True Life
Adventure. Website:
[www.freyamanfred
writer.com](http://www.freyamanfred
writer.com)