

## John Riley

### Welfare

On the days we went downtown  
and picked up our welfare food  
I would hold the giant silver can  
of peanut butter between my legs  
on the bus ride home, my mom  
held the brown box with cheese  
and the bags of powdered milk  
we never used and the boxes of staples  
is the word she used because that  
was the word the man who gathered  
our allotment from the backroom said  
after he counted out the list then  
told my mom to inventory her box  
and make sure she had all the staples  
she was entitled to and that one time  
she laughed her ugly laugh and said,  
“I’m already stapled to four hungry  
little bastards, isn’t that enough,”  
and scooped up the reinforced cardboard box  
and yelled out my name so I’d follow  
her past the long line of folks  
waiting for their boxes and their cans  
and onto the bus that groaned over hills.

**John Riley** is a former teacher. He has published poetry and fiction in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Eclectica*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Banyan Review*, *Bindweed*, and many other journals and anthologies online and in print. *EXOT Books* will publish a volume of 100 of his 100-word prose poems in the fall of 2022. He has published over forty books of nonfiction for young readers.