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Two by Two

Paul Nelson

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which you reject like a name,
your lips stitched with mud and whiskey.

The woman soaps your ankle, crooning;
children and disciples 'But,' like fish
kissing the glass of your talk.
You've heard this all before,
and when a friend remarks the terror of your cough
it's like resisting thumbs,
pushing up the corners of your mouth
before the solitude sets in.

Two by Two / Paul Nelson

Not since air first cut their lungs
in another language
had they been touched. Now he's lost a polyp,
hung like a mussel on a kelp stalk: my father
divided by a scar, talking to himself
as she sits listening, one tuck
folded over the slit that crosses her,
through which they fished the bed we coiled in.

In May my brother and I dumped the coal bucket
buried to the lip beneath the maples,
watched the mud-water, stiff with leaves,
flood the lawn, watched the old roots
of Mother's lilies thaw among the sleeping garter snakes.
With hoe and edger we diced them, for her and lust
working happily together
as they wound out slowly toward the sun, the hedge,
like conversations between strangers.

The bits were carried off by crows.
The garden overgrew. Dad still marvels at his feet,
their perfect arch and metacarpals,
sleeping like brothers under sheets.