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Two by Two

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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.

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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  
brained 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.