

The Language of Starvation / Paul Nelson

Huddled on our stools, we carve
at blankness, to make meat
hang or dance, hold itself from falling.
We smear and chew, smoke and erase
looking through the young Calcutta bones
hooked before us on the rafter,
his teeth still growing in the air.
He lets his arms swing down
on their metal clips and springs,
one palm back, the other forward
as for alms.

The ulna parallels the radius
on this side, crosses on the other.
We see the backside by recollection,
like fear when it isn't there,
hunger when we do not feel it.
We imagine the flesh we sit on,
our organs clutched like birds
in a covered cage, the asp
peeking through the girdle. Today
we want a live model; we want our mothers,
and can't imagine from this armature
anything we may have eaten.

Binge / Paul Nelson

Men in felt hats
slough along the river flats
where someone said you flashed beneath the bridge.
Or were you simply smiling?

They find you; you are being blind,
staring down again. They grab your coat,
turn you to the door, the sun,

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.