

AMY FLEURY

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*Ablution*

Because one must be naked to get clean,  
my dad shrugs out of his pajama shirt,  
steps from his boxers and into the tub  
as I brace him, whose long illness  
has made him shed modesty too.

Seated on the plastic bench, he holds  
the soap like a caught fish in his lap,  
waiting for me to test the water's heat  
on my wrist before turning the nozzle  
toward his pale skin. He leans over  
to be doused, then hands me the soap  
so I might scrub his shoulders and neck,  
suds sluicing from spine to buttock cleft.

Like a child he wants a washcloth  
to cover his eyes while I lather  
a palmful of pearlescent shampoo  
into his craniotomy-scarred scalp  
and then rinse clear whatever soft hair  
is left. Our voices echo in the spray  
and steam of this room where once,  
long ago, he knelt at the tub's edge  
to pour cups of bathwater over my head.

He reminds me to wash behind his ears,  
and when he judges himself to be clean,  
I turn off the tap. He grips the safety bar,

steadies himself, and stands. Turning to me,  
his body is dripping and frail and pink.  
And although I am nearly forty,  
he has this one last thing to teach me.  
I hold open the towel to receive him.