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Washing with Alzheimer's

By Christine Nichols

Five days ago you had your last bath.

After a lifetime of leisurely soaks
at home, safe in a warm tub,
now you face a future of regimented showers,
hand held wands,
and hard teak seats.

"I don't know how to take a shower."

I say I will help you.
I kneel at your feet, help you take off your jeans.
You shiver.
The water from the wand is too cold, or hot,
too little.
You skin dimples.

You hunch your back in shame,
rest your elbows on your knees,
fray at your hair with your hands.

The cog in my throat threatens to open.
So I concentrate on the mechanics.

"Here is the washcloth.
Is that too hot?
Would you like some conditioner?"

I palm the shampoo then roll it
through soft, fragile strands.
I want to let love out through my fingertips.
As I massage your scalp, I am
reminded of how I would touch a newborn.
But I know it is not enough.

"I just want to sit here and die."
you say through the drips,
and I have no answer.

Christine Nichols is a poet from Stillwater, OK.

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