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Learning to Touch

Marilyn Bushman-Carlton

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Learning to Touch

I was relieved when my daughter arrived at the dying,
when she got to work
saturating a hospital sponge,
pressing it inside her grandmother's cheek,
allowing her to drink. I marveled

when she moved to the bottom of the bed,
lifted the sheet and, one at a time, her feet,
bloated now, and ghost white,
and with lotion and unambiguous care
hydrated the dying flesh.

When she was in medical school, Alisa told me
how she and the other students had to learn to touch.
They practiced on one another,
and then on practice patients,

touching an arm, a leg, Gradually,
they touched the stomach, the chest,
easing their way to the consecrated place
where they would deliver babies. They practiced

until they could touch without revulsion or shame,
until it was as natural to spread the petal folds
as it was to deliver a new life
to the mother to put to her breast.

—Marilyn Bushman-Carlton