



Corpse Washing

They had grown used to him. Yet when
the kitchen lamp arrived and burned restlessly
in the dark draft, the unknown one became
completely unknown. They washed his neck,

and in that they knew nothing of his story,
they fabricated snatches together,
all the while washing. One coughed
and left the heavy sponge full of vinegar

on the face. Then it was time for the second
to take a pause. Out of the hard brush,
drops fell to the ground; while his cramped
gray hand wished to prove to the entire
house that he no longer needed water.

And this he proved. They took up their work
again with more haste, as if caught off guard,
now with a cough, so that on the wallpaper
their bent-over shadows wound and rolled

themselves into a mute pattern as in a net,
until their washing had come to an end.
The night coming through the curtainless windows
was merciless. And one without a name lay
there, bare and cleansed, and gave commands.

*Rainer Maria Rilke
(tr. Cliff Crego)*