

Fair Exchange, No Robbery
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Today I am wearing my grandmother's hands.
Here are her flaking pores, dandruff-dry,
her bruise-dark knuckles, her pink-leathered palms, bereft of oil,
curled at the end of my arms. Today my grandmother's veins
are pebbled greenly under my skin, which is congealed and thin
like the scum that hides in all my teacups;
there's a yellow tinge at our fingernails' edge,
like the sunset dying on the peeling *walauwa* walls.
Today I am wearing my grandmother's hands
that have buried a son, rolled *mung kavum*, buried a husband,
hidden heirloom jewels around the bedroom,
warded off swords of marauders and thieves,
poured a quarter million cups of tea. I oil these hands
in cardamom-rose, glove them away
from unknown boys and snow.
Tomorrow I will give them back.
At two-thirty am, they'll turn into my skin,
inked blue with borrowed lines of *desi* poetry,
words and numbers in multiplying alphabets keeping me alive
when I'm dying for sleep till the back of my hand looks like
a rapper got hennaed and I pass out with the uncapped pen
between my fingers like a lit cigarette that could fine me
three hundred dollars -
and on the other side of the world
eleven hours in the future
my grandmother's hands are bleeding ink;
her wedding ring wafts flakes of ash.

walauwa - ancestral home (Sinhala)
mung kavum - Sri Lankan sweetmeat (Sinhala)
desi - of South Asian ancestry (Hindi)