

“Hands” by Sarah Kay

People used to tell me that I had beautiful hands—  
told me so often, in fact, that one day I started to believe them  
until I asked my photographer father, “Hey daddy could I be a hand model?”  
to which he said, “No way.”  
I don’t remember the reason he gave me, and I would’ve been upset,  
but there were far too many stuffed animals to hold, too many homework assignments to write,  
too many boys to wave at, too many years to grow.  
We used to have a game, my dad and I, about holding hands  
‘cause we held hands everywhere,  
and every time either he or I would whisper a great big number to the other,  
pretending that we were keeping track of how many times we had held hands  
that we were sure, this one had to be  
8 million 2 thousand 7 hundred and fifty-three.  
Hands learn more than minds do, hands learn how to hold other hands,  
how to grip pencils and mold poetry,  
how to tickle pianos, and dribble a basketball, and grip the handles of a bicycle.  
How to hold old people, and touch babies.  
I love hands like I love people.  
They’re the maps and compasses with which we navigate our way through life.  
Some people read palms to tell your future, but I read hands to tell your past.  
Each scar marks the story worth telling—  
each calloused palm, each cracked knuckle is a missed punch or years in a factory.  
Now I’ve seen Middle Eastern hands clenched in Middle Eastern fists,  
pounding against each other like war drums.  
Each country sees their fists as warriors and others as enemies, even if fists alone are only hands.  
But this is not about politics; no, hands aren’t about politics.  
This is a poem about love, and fingers.  
Fingers interlock like a beautiful zipper of prayer.  
One time I grabbed my dad’s hands so that our fingers interlocked perfectly,  
but he changed positions, saying “No, that hand hold is for your mom.”  
Kids high five, but grown up, we learn how to shake hands:  
you need a firm handshake, but don’t hold on too tight,  
but don’t let go too soon, but don’t hold down for too long,  
but hands are not about politics.  
When did it become so complicated? I always thought it was simple.  
The other day my dad looked at my hands, as if seeing them for the first time,  
and with laughter behind his eye lids, with all the seriousness a man of his humor could muster,  
he said, “You know you’ve got nice hands, you could’ve been a hand model,”  
and before the laughter can escape me, I shake my head at him and squeeze his hand:  
8 million 2 thousand 7 hundred and fifty-four.