Reading Dorian Gray in Kashmir

> . . . for a whole year, he sought to
> accumulate the most exquisite specimens . . .
> of textile and embroidered work . . . the
> Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency,
> are known in the East . . .
>
> --The Picture of Dorian Gray

Dorian Gray wore those gauzes from Dacca
known as woven air, running water, evening
dew, that transparent cotton a dead art

now, dead for over a hundred years.
No one can imagine, my grandmother says,
what it was to wear, just to touch, that cloth.

She wore it once, an heirloom sari from
her mother's dowry, proved genuine when
it was pullled, all six yards, through a ring.

Later, years later, when it tore, many
handkerchiefs, wrought with gold-thread
palmates, were distributed among the nieces

and the daughters-in-law. Those too now lost.
"The looms of Bengal were silenced, the raw
textiles shipped to England, and the hands

of weavers, witnesses said, had been amputated."
She continues: "The muslins of today seem
like coarse air. Only sometimes in autumn,

when I've woken before sunrise, to pray,
have I, touching Kashmir's dew-starched dawns,
felt that texture and transparency again."

19 May 1983
Penn State

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