



The Body Remembers: Mapping Illness and Intimacy in Tishani Doshi's Pandemic World

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the poetic and prose world of Tishani Doshi, crafted in the crucible of the COVID-19 pandemic, to argue that her work offers a profound literary map of that disorienting time. I contend that Doshi uses the human body—in its fragility, its pain, and its capacity for connection—as the central lens through which we can understand the overlapping crises of public health, gendered violence, and ecological decay. Rather than treating the pandemic as a simple backdrop, her writing performs a kind of literary autopsy, revealing how the global shock of contagion forced a radical re-evaluation of our most intimate lives. Drawing on theories of embodied phenomenology, feminist thought, and the environmental humanities, this analysis traces three interconnected paths in Doshi's work: the struggle to articulate the "dys-appearing" body in pain, the unexpected reconfigurations of intimacy under lockdown, and the undeniable links between the ailing human form and the suffering body of the Earth. Ultimately, this article proposes that Doshi's pandemic world is not one of pure despair. Instead, it is a fraught and fertile ground where the enforced stillness and confrontation with mortality become catalysts for a profound act of re-membering—a piecing together of self, community, and world through the vulnerable yet resilient corpus of the body itself.



Introduction

When the world contracted in the spring of 2020, shrinking to the four walls of our homes and the anxious borders of our own skin, a strange and collective bodily awareness took hold. The COVID-19 pandemic was, as Arundhati Roy powerfully termed it, a “portal,” a world-historical event that forced us to pause and reconsider everything (Roy). Beyond the grim tally of numbers on a screen, it was a deeply phenomenological shock—a global, simultaneous confrontation with our own discomfiting materiality. We became acutely conscious of our breath, our touch, our proximity to others. The body, so often the silent, taken-for-granted vessel of our lives, suddenly announced itself as a site of profound vulnerability and potential danger.

It is in this raw, uncanny space that the work of poet, novelist, and dancer Tishani Doshi finds its urgent resonance. Her collection *A God at the Door*, published in the thick of the pandemic’s aftermath, alongside her incisive prose essays, provides one of the most compelling literary testimonies of that era. Doshi does not merely document the crisis; she immerses us in its felt experience. Her writing creates a nuanced cartography where the intimate, trembling body becomes the primary text through which the larger pathologies of our world are read. In her poetic universe, a cough is never just a cough; it is a political statement, an ecological warning, a echo of ancient violences.

This article maps the terrain of Doshi’s pandemic world, arguing that she masterfully illuminates the intricate, often violent, intersections between illness and intimacy. For her, the private, ailing body is a microcosm of the public, political, and planetary body. The virus, in its insidious, microscopic logic, acted like a revelatory agent, exposing the rot that was already there—the endemic nature of patriarchal violence, the fragility of our social contracts, and our toxic alienation from the natural world.

To navigate this terrain, I draw on the philosopher Drew Leder’s concept of the “dys-appearing” body. Leder suggests that in health, our body is “ecstatic,” transparently oriented towards the world. But in pain or illness, it “dys-appears,” thrusting itself into the foreground as an alien, obstructive presence we are forced to contend with (84-85). Doshi’s work captures this global “dys-appearance” with breathtaking precision. Her poems give voice to the moment when billions of bodies, all at once, could no longer be ignored.

This exploration will unfold in three parts. First, in **“The Grammar of Aching: The Dys-appearing Body and the Unmaking of Language,”** I will examine how Doshi grapples with the physical and psychological reality of illness. Engaging with Elaine Scarry’s seminal work on the world-destroying



nature of pain and Susan Sontag's warnings against the metaphorization of illness, I will analyse Doshi's struggle to find words for what often feels wordless. Second, in "**Intimacies of Distance: Touch, Isolation, and the Re-membered Self,**" I will turn to the paradoxical ways connection was reconfigured under lockdown. When touch became threat and proximity danger, Doshi explores how intimacy persisted, mutated, and even deepened in the spaces between bodies, leading to a profound re-membering of a fragmented self. Finally, in "**The Body of the World: Pandemics, Patriarchy, and Planetary Illness,**" I will situate Doshi's work within the discourse of the environmental humanities, showing how she inextricably links the violence inflicted on women's bodies, the neglect of the marginalized, and the exploitation of the Earth, framing the pandemic as a symptom of a much deeper sickness.

Through a close reading of her poetry and prose, I hope to show that Tishani Doshi offers not just a record of the pandemic, but a vital tool for processing it. Her work is a map that guides us through the wreckage, pointing towards the possibility of a more embodied, intimate, and ethically attuned way of being in the world.

1. The Grammar of Aching: The Dys-appearing Body and the Unmaking of Language

The first and most visceral shock of the pandemic was the body in pain. It was the fever that spiked without warning, the cough that rattled deep in the chest, the terrifying, simple inability to draw a full breath. Tishani Doshi's poetry captures this sudden, overwhelming "dys-appearance" of the body with a raw, unflinching clarity. In Drew Leder's terms, the sick body ceases to be the transparent medium of our existence and becomes a "thing" that stands against us, a "foreign presence" we are forced to inhabit (91). This sense of alienation from one's own physical self permeates Doshi's work.

In poems like "The Pandemic is a Prison," the confinement is not just spatial but corporeal. The speaker describes a body that has become a foreign land, a territory she no longer recognizes or commands:

My body, a forgotten province.

I am governor of nothing. (Doshi, A God 23)

This loss of governance—this feeling of being a stranger in one's own skin—perfectly articulates the helplessness described by so many who fell ill. The autonomic miracle of breathing became a conscious, laboured battle. The body's interior, its once-silent lungs and airways, became a hostile, internal landscape. This aligns powerfully with Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* that intense



physical pain is fundamentally world-destroying. It, “actively destroys a person’s world, his or her self and voice, by its relentless, inexpressible nature” (33). Pain, Scarry insists, resists language, residing in a pre-linguistic realm that defies objectification.

Doshi’s poetic project, then, can be seen as a brave and necessary struggle against this silence, an attempt to forge a “grammar of aching.” In “Symptoms,” she catalogues the physical and psychic manifestations of the era with a diagnostician’s eye and a poet’s heart:

A cough that unpacks its little suitcase in the lungs.

A temperature chart like a erratic stock market.

And the mind, a dial tone buzzing in an empty house. (Doshi, A God 45)

Here, metaphor is not a decorative flourish but a vital tool for phenomenological precision. The cough is personified, an unwelcome guest taking up residence. The fever is graphed onto the volatile anxieties of global finance. The mind’s static terror is rendered as an audible, meaningless signal in an abandoned space. Doshi walks the fine line that Susan Sontag delineated in *Illness as Metaphor*, where she warns against the mystification of disease. Doshi does not use metaphor to mystify, but to communicate, to make the reader *feel* the weight of that “little suitcase” in the chest. She uses imagery to bridge the chasm between private sensation and shared understanding.

This confrontation with the dys-appearing body extends beyond the specific pathology of the virus to encompass what has been rightly called the “shadow pandemic” of domestic violence. Doshi’s work is acutely, painfully aware of the gendered dimensions of lockdown. In a searing prose piece for *The Guardian*, she notes that for countless women, “home was already a place of quarantine” long before the world caught up (Doshi, “Home was already”). This grim reality bleeds into her poetry. In “The Immigrant’s Song,” the threat of intimate violence is as palpable and suffocating as the virus itself:

He has a new way of touching me now.

It is not a question. It is a statement.

The virus is outside, he says, locking the door.

But the real virus is in the way he breathes,



in the space between his hand and my face. (Doshi, A God 68)

This stanza is a masterclass in rendering psychological terror through the lexicon of a public health crisis. The breath, the very medium of life and viral transmission, is twisted into a vehicle of control. The “real virus” is identified as patriarchy itself—a pre-existing condition that the lockdowns merely amplified and trapped women with. Here, the body is vulnerable not only to an external, anonymous pathogen but to a familiar, human one. The poem aligns with a long tradition of feminist writing that locates the female body as a battleground, demonstrating how Doshi maps the macro-crisis of the pandemic onto the micro-geographies of the home and the vulnerable body.

The unmaking of language, therefore, occurs on a dual front in Doshi’s work: the struggle to articulate the sheer physicality of pain and the struggle to name the social and psychological trauma that the pandemic both revealed and exacerbated. Her poetry becomes a testament to this struggle. Its fragmented lines, its sharp enjambments, and its stark, startling imagery are formal reflections of a fractured consciousness—of a world, and a self, coming undone. It is a grammar forged in the crucible of dys-appearance, a language that remembers, viscerally, what it is to have a body that can break.

2. Intimacies of Distance: Touch, Isolation, and the Re-membered Self

If the first shock was the dys-appearance of the pained body, its necessary corollary was a radical and unsettling reconfiguration of intimacy. Governments worldwide instituted regimes of “social distancing,” a clinical term that belied a profound human paradox. It was primarily *physical* distance that was mandated, turning the most fundamental gestures of care—a hand on a shoulder, a warm embrace—into potential acts of harm. Doshi’s writing navigates this altered emotional landscape with profound sensitivity, exploring how intimacy not only persisted but also mutated, finding new, often surprising, pathways in the spaces between isolated bodies.

The deprivation of touch emerges as a central, aching motif. In a world suddenly mediated by the cold glow of screens, the longing for physical connection becomes a visceral presence in her poems. In “Zoetrope,” a piece that captures the strange, spinning stasis of lockdown life, the speaker observes:

We are learning new ways of not touching.

Our hands, formerly dictionaries of skin,

now forget their native tongues. (Doshi, A God 51)



The metaphor here is exquisite and heartbreaking. To imagine hands as “dictionaries of skin” is to conceive of touch as a primary language, a rich and nuanced system of communication that conveys comfort, desire, love, and reassurance without a single word. The loss of touch, then, is not merely a sensory deprivation but a form of aphasia. We become linguistically impoverished, losing our fluency in the first language we ever knew. This resonates deeply with Constance Classen’s exploration of haptic culture, where she argues that touch is the foundational sense, crucial for constructing a sense of reality, connection, and empathy (Classen 1-5). The pandemic, in enforcing a tactile famine, induced a kind of collective sensory starvation.

Yet, Doshi is not content to merely document this loss. She is a poet of the in-between, and she probes the new, fragile forms of intimacy that blossomed in the cracks of our isolation. The digital realm, for all its limitations and “Zoom fatigue,” became a crucial lifeline. In poems like “The Screen,” she explores the self-reflexive intimacy of being constantly confronted with one’s own image on video calls, and the fragile, pixelated connection to loved ones. This was an intimacy stripped bare of the haptic, reduced to the visual and auditory, yet it acquired a new, focused intensity born of sheer necessity and shared circumstance. The lover on the screen is both palpably present and agonizingly absent, a paradox Doshi captures with characteristic precision: “Your face is a country I can only visit with a visa of light” (Doshi, *A God* 77).

This enforced distance and the constant, low hum of mortality anxiety also catalyzed a massive turn inward, fostering a different, more challenging kind of intimacy—with the self. The global “pause” of the lockdown becomes, in Doshi’s rendering, a space for radical introspection, for what she herself called “the great unlearning” (Doshi, “The Great Unlearning”). This is where the concept of “re-membering” becomes crucial. It is more than recollection; it is the active, deliberate work of piecing a self back together. In her poem “The Body Remembers,” which gives this article its central thesis, the speaker engages in this profound act of reconstruction:

The body remembers everything—

the weight of a hand, the arc of a bird,

the particular silence of an empty street.

It is an archaeologist of its own ruin,



digging for the shards of a former life,

trying to make a whole from what is broken. (Doshi, A God 92)

This is not a nostalgic retreat into the past. It is an active, archaeological process. The body's memory is not a passive storage unit but an agent of its own excavation and reassembly. The "ruin" is both the personal trauma of surviving the pandemic and the collective ruin of a world order whose fragility was laid bare. The act of "re-membering" is the literal and figurative putting-back-together of the members, the constituent parts of a self that has been fragmented by trauma, by the frantic pace of "normal" life, and by the shock of the crisis. This process echoes the psychoanalytic concept of working-through, where an individual must actively engage with traumatic memory to integrate it into a coherent life narrative (Laplanche and Pontalis 488).

Furthermore, this re-membering extends beyond the boundaries of the individual human self. With the anthropogenic din of human activity suddenly hushed during lockdowns, many people reported a re-sensitization to their natural environment. Doshi's poetry is saturated with these moments of ecological intimacy. In the title poem "A God at the Door," the arrival of a peacock is treated not as a casual event, but as a moment of epiphany, a visitation from a more ancient, resilient, and beautiful world. This connection to the non-human becomes a vital source of solace and a model for a different form of intimacy—one based not on possession or consumption, but on attentive coexistence and awe. The isolation from other humans, therefore, paradoxically opened a door to a deeper, more resonant communion with the planet itself, suggesting that the path to healing lies in recognizing our embeddedness within a much larger, living web.

3. The Body of the World: Pandemics, Patriarchy, and Planetary Illness

For Tishani Doshi, the SARS-CoV-2 virus is never merely a discrete biological actor. It is a symptom, a raging fever in a planetary body that was already critically unwell. Her work consistently and powerfully draws a through-line from the ailing human body, to the diseased body politic, and finally, to the wounded body of the Earth. This deep ecological consciousness positions her writing at the vital intersection of the medical and environmental humanities, a field which insists that the health of people and the health of the planet are inseparable (Heise 10). In Doshi's meticulous cartography, the pandemic becomes a magnifying glass, intensifying the glaring light on our pre-existing conditions: patriarchy, state failure, and relentless ecological collapse.



The link between the exploitation of women's bodies and the exploitation of the Earth is a central, and often devastating, connection in her poetry. In "Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods," a poem written before the pandemic but whose themes scream with relevance to it, she portrays female bodies as landscapes subject to violation, but also as sites of fierce, indomitable resurgence. The girls returning are survivors of violence, and their return is an act of spectral, powerful rebellion. This imagery equates the forest—a natural space—with a site of patriarchal danger, while simultaneously suggesting that the violated female body, like a clear-cut forest, possesses an unstoppable, innate capacity for regeneration.

This theme is amplified and sharpened in the pandemic context. The lockdowns that confined women with their abusers were a direct result of public health policies that failed to account for gendered realities—a catastrophic blind spot. Doshi's work implicitly critiques this failure, framing it as part of a broader systemic sickness. The state's negligence towards women's safety is of a piece with its underfunding of public health infrastructure and its failure to protect the environment from corporate plunder. In this sense, the "patient" in Doshi's work is not just the individual COVID-19 sufferer, but society itself, diagnosed with a chronic, life-threatening illness of inequity and short-sightedness.

This diagnostic gaze is turned most unflinchingly toward the relationship between human and planetary health. The poem "We Have Crossed All the Rivers We Should Not Have Crossed" serves as a stark ecological indictment. It alludes to the robust scientific consensus that zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 are vastly more likely to spill over into human populations due to habitat destruction, wildlife trade, and industrial agriculture (Wallace 7). Doshi writes:

We have pushed into the deep forests,

traded in scales and pelts, built cities on swamps.

We thought we were masters of the great chain,

but the chain has a small, vengeful link,

a virus, a cough, a closing of the world's great lungs. (Doshi, A God 114)

Here, the "world's great lungs" is a polyvalent metaphor of breathtaking power. It refers literally to the rainforests, the planet's actual respiratory system, which we are methodically destroying. It also refers, unmistakably, to the human lungs besieged by the virus. The connection is direct and causal: the destruction of the former creates the conditions for the affliction of the latter. The pandemic is framed not



as a random, tragic act of nature, but as a predictable, even inevitable, consequence of an extractive, ecocidal civilization. This perspective aligns perfectly with the “One Health” approach, a paradigm increasingly adopted in medicine and ecology that recognizes the inextricable linkages between the health of people, animals, and ecosystems (Zinsstag et al. 148).

Doshi’s poetic response to this planetary illness is not, however, one of passive despair. The enforced stillness of the lockdown is presented as a moment of grim reprieve for the Earth, a chance to breathe, for the “hills [to] come out of hiding” and the “sky [to] remember its true colour blue” (Doshi, *A God* 29). This is not a naive romanticization but a powerful demonstration of the planet’s resilient vitality and a profound lesson in humility for a humanity that fancied itself master of all. The pandemic, in its terrifying, global reach, was a brutal teacher of ecology, proving our inescapable entanglement with each other and with the entire biosphere. The body that remembers, in Doshi’s final, powerful analysis, is not only the individual corpus but the collective, planetary body. To heal one, we must inevitably heal the other. Her poetry, therefore, becomes more than a reflection; it is a prescription for a new ethos—one rooted in care, reciprocity, and a profound, embodied recognition of our shared vulnerability on this precious, fragile planet.

Conclusion

Tishani Doshi’s pandemic writing is more than a collection of poems; it is a vital organ of cultural memory, a profound contribution to how we process, understand, and live with the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. Through a masterful fusion of lyrical grace and unflinching witness, she has drawn a map of the complex terrain where the most intimate tremors of the body meet the seismic shifts of global catastrophe. As I have argued, her work moves beyond documentation to become a critical phenomenological and ethical inquiry into the nature of being in a world undone.

By charting the “dys-appearance” of the body in pain, Doshi gives voice to the world-shattering quality of illness that Elaine Scarry describes, while simultaneously engaging in the heroic struggle to forge a new “grammar of aching” to give it form. In exploring the “intimacies of distance,” she reveals how the deprivation of touch and the solitude of lockdown led not only to a profound sense of loss but also to an unexpected opportunity for introspection and the crucial work of “re-remembering” a self fragmented by trauma and the pace of modern life. Finally, and most ambitiously, she connects these personal trials to a planetary scale, diagnosing the pandemic as a symptom of a deeper sickness rooted in patriarchal violence, social inequity, and our wilful disregard for the ecological systems that sustain us.



The title of this article, “The Body Remembers,” lies at the heart of Doshi’s vision. The body, in her poetry, is an archive—a living, breathing repository of personal and collective history. It remembers the weight of a comforting hand and the threat of a violent one; the arc of a bird in flight and the eerie silence of a locked-down city. The act of remembering is not a passive looking back but an active, often painful, process of reassembly and reckoning. It is through this corporeal memory that we can begin to comprehend the full, sprawling impact of the pandemic—not as a temporary interruption to business as usual, but as a transformative event that laid bare the fundamental, fragile conditions of our existence.

Doshi’s work offers no facile consolation. The gods that come to the door in her poems are often ambiguous, demanding, and strange. There are no easy answers. Yet, her cartography of illness and intimacy ultimately charts a path toward a potential, hard-won wisdom. It suggests that the way forward lies not in building higher walls or forgetting the pain, but in embracing our shared vulnerability, in listening to the deep wisdom of the body—both human and earthly—and in forging new forms of community and care based on this sacred, precarious embodiment. In the burgeoning landscape of pandemic literature, *A God at the Door* stands as a vital, enduring testament, a reminder that to be embodied is to be vulnerable, but it is also the only way we can truly know, love, and perhaps finally learn to heal, our world.

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