

Priyanka Sacheti

Practising at becoming myself again: of post Covid healing and the body as a map.

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Priyanka Sacheti (she/her) is a writer and poet based in Bangalore, India. She grew up in the Sultanate of Oman and previously lived in the United Kingdom and United States. She's published extensively on art, culture, gender, and the environment in print and digital publications. Her literary work has appeared in many literary journals such as Barren, Parentheses Art, Dust Poetry Magazine, Popshot, The Lunchticket, and Jaggery Lit as well as various anthologies. She's currently working on a poetry and short story collection.

***** TW: Illness + Covid-19

I am Priyanka Sacheti, a writer based in Bangalore, India.

In April this year, I contracted Covid and had to be hospitalised for six days. My subsequent recovery coincided with the catastrophic second wave which befell India at that time, afflicting thousands and resulting in unprecedented oxygen and hospital bed shortages and resultant deaths. Grappling with the profound effects the virus had wrought upon my mental and physical health, along with the larger implications of the grief, trauma, and despair unfurling around me, I found myself turning to writing and art to chart both my recovery as well as "bearing witness" to all that was happening. I found myself thinking of my body as a map vis a vis trauma and recovery and also painted healing maps as a reminder of how far I had come. This essay is a chronicle of my recovery, or what I describe as practising becoming myself again, sharing the journey of the healing of my mind and body.

As a child, I spent hours studying atlases. Given that I was an Indian girl growing up in Oman, I was perhaps trying to get a sense of my place in the scheme of things. I did this through the language of geographical coordinates. At that time, India was home, and Oman was just a place I lived in. I did not know then that maps were inherently fluid entities, borders constantly shifting, and countries liable to vanish and reappear. In my map of memories, Oman eventually displaced India as home, the latter now just a place that I happen to live in. It took me years to learn that both my world and the larger one beyond are constantly changing maps; their truths shifting like tectonic plates beneath our feet.

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Over the years, I eventually lost interest in the idea of atlases and maps. As I entered my thirties, I began experiencing health crises making me be more aware of my body than ever before. I started to think of my body too as an evolving map. A map containing within its borders all that I had endured and survived.

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In April 2021, I contracted Covid. A cytokine storm brewed inside my lungs as my immune system went into overdrive, valiantly battling the virus. The CT scan of my lungs indicated moderate Covid pneumonia, resulting in a six-day hospitalisation. Excruciating bouts of coughing racked my body. I began suffering from extreme breathlessness. My smell and taste abandoned me, almost as if they never existed in the first place. Once the oxygen and drugs were pumped into my body, the virus began to retreat. I gradually reclaimed my smell and taste. More crucially, I needed to learn how to breathe again, which took the longest to stabilise and affected me the most. Once you stop breathing normally, you think: *how have I been breathing all this time?* You recognise the act of breathing as a miracle in itself. Now as I stop to consider my even and measured breathing, it truly is a miracle following all that I have been through.

Muscle memory is a real thing. Repeated movements that are difficult for the muscles will result in the construction of new neural pathways, carving out new roads in the brain. In the time it took the virus to enter, possess, and then vacate my body, I found my muscles having to re-learn everything again. I had to practice re-becoming myself, the first point of focus being my physical body.

After leaving the hospital and being lost inside a dense post-Covid fog and fatigue, I marked every milestone in my phone's notes app: *today, I walked for ten minutes. Today, I painted. Today, I cooked.* I was my cheerleader, an entire team in fact, celebrating every action which I successfully re-performed and that commemorated a return to my pre-Covid self. I reassured myself with each achievement that I was going further and further away from the virus.

But this is also a truth: it has taken me a long while to re-become myself post-Covid. No matter how much I tried to hurry my body into healing, it ultimately only healed as and when it could; and even then, the virus still haunts me, like a homeless ghost. The steroids which ultimately stilled the cytokine storm have burrowed themselves into my skin. Post-Covid brain fog still clouds my mind, causing me to intermittently blank out. My hair fell out in clumps a few months ago, a common post-Covid side effect. Perhaps, like a tree during autumn, I am in a state of renewal, but for what ultimate end? I do not have the answers: perhaps I never will.

There is a novel titled *The Body Remembers Everything* by Shauna Baldwin; that title haunted me for years although it is only now I feel I have truly grasped its meaning. I may say that I am feeling myself again post-Covid but the reality often feels like I am still practising at being myself. I can never be the same again after all that has happened to me, and who would know that better than my body? The memory T-cells in my body still carry memories of the battles they fought to defeat the virus: they will always remember everything.

I have been painting regularly for the last few years. One of the first artworks I made during recovery was a healing map. I began to paint on paper whatever emerged forth from my Covid-fogged consciousness. During those days of halting, foal-like steps towards recovery, one thought repeatedly echoed in my mind: *I must bear witness to whatever has happened and is happening.* Outside, India was going through an apocalyptic Second Wave: ambulance sirens heartrendingly rent the air at all hours, my Twitter timeline was soaked with anguished pleas for oxygen and hospital beds, and the virus ran like a scythe through families, grief, terror, and fury everywhere. I encountered the term, *survivor's guilt* and then stubbornly closed my mind to it, a wardrobe I could not open just then. I channelled the messy library of emotions I was experiencing towards making healing maps, marking the distance I had travelled and still needed to travel in my healing journey along with everything that had happened in between. The collective effect of the steroids, the virus remnants in my body, and the larger external circumstances all converged together to form one bare bone truth in my head: *I needed to acknowledge and remember what I had gone and was going through.* This too was a way of re-becoming the person that I was, reintegrating this new experience into the matrix called me.

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The one thing I did not stop doing during and after Covid was writing. During the Covid storm, my writing was both my lifeboat and jacket, it was what kept me from drowning. It was the anchor which reminded me that once the storm blew over, I would be in a safe, protected bay. What I did not realise then was that my writing had already become the bay. It was the act of writing which helped me take those first steps to recovery, remembering and acknowledging, and which preserved for posterity all that I was experiencing. In this journey of re-becoming myself, my writing was the beacon that illuminated the darkness, which made the unbearable bearable.

If my body is a map, my words are now the coordinates shaping it. In years to come, while browsing through the atlas that is my life, I will pause upon the specific map that my body was on during these past months. The words I wrote then will be battle-sites, memories of the wars my body fought to defeat an invader and how it indelibly changed afterward. My body will fight more future battles too. But I will know what I need to do for I will now remember everything.