

Tissue



SUMMARY

Translucent paper like this could change everything. Paper made thin by time and human touch.

The sort of paper you might find in an old book. Like the Koran, for example—like this one, in the back of which someone has written out people's names and family trees.

Their weights and heights are recorded there too, and how and where people died, and on what day long ago. These pages have been worn down by decades of reading, so that they have become thin enough to let light through.

Imagine if buildings were made out of paper. Then I would be able to feel the way they sway in the wind, watch them easily get caught up in the air of a sigh or a change in the wind's direction.

And maps—think about the way the sun shines through them and all their different markings: borders, rivers, roads, railways, mountains, and so on.

And how about receipts from stores—they tell a story about what we bought, how we paid. These bits of paper fly away from us like kites.

An architect could make buildings out of layers of paper. These buildings would shine with light and display their texts. In fact, that architect would probably never want to use bricks or concrete ever again.

Instead, the architect would prefer paper buildings that daylight shines through—translucent cities and statues, the types of buildings put up to mark humankind's power. This architect could create a great new design.

This design would be made with living material. The architect would build something not meant to last—make it out of paper that was smoothed until it became translucent.

The paper would be transformed into your own skin tissue.



THEMES

HUMAN POWER AND FRAGILITY

 "Tissue" is about human power and fragility. The "Tissue" referred to in the title is, at the beginning at least, a reference to paper. The poem begins as a kind of hymn of praise to this material, before imagining what a human world made out of paper would be like. The poem uses this [metaphor](#) to highlight both the power and fragility of human civilization, two traits that the speaker perceives in the material of paper itself. The speaker is in awe of the thin, translucent paper

described—seeing in this humble material nothing less than a [symbol](#) for all of human existence.

The poem begins by stressing the majestic power of paper—which might go unnoticed or unacknowledged in daily life. This paper, “thinned by age or touching,” represents one of humankind’s most miraculous achievements: the ability to store and transfer knowledge. Paper grants humanity power because it allows knowledge to survive outside of people’s minds, facilitating an ever deeper understanding of the world—as well as the ability to change the world; “this / is what could alter things,” the speaker says. This ability is emphasized by the almost heavenly light that shines through the paper.

Indeed, paper as initially presented in the poem is in a way *less* fragile than human life, because it records details about people who are no longer around—their births, deaths, family histories, even heights and weights. The paper, thin and weak as it is, outlives these people, emphasizing its power and the comparative transience of human life. But this is where it gets complicated. Just as paper symbolizes human power—the same power that has made humanity the dominate species on the planet—it *also* stands in for the way that this power is a kind of illusion.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker imagines what it would be like if “buildings were paper”:

[...] I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

Buildings are obviously not, and probably never will be, made of paper—but here they presented as being just as *fragile* as paper. It may take longer, but even buildings—which seem permanent—are prone to collapse, dilapidation, and destruction. *Nothing* about humanity, not even the creations it leaves behind—so the poem argues—is truly permanent.

The poem expands on this idea by turning to maps. These symbolize the human ability to adapt to the environment, while also remaining vulnerable to the extreme conditions that might come about in the natural world. Receipts from grocery stores, meanwhile—falling out of people’s pockets or thrown into bins—represent the illusion of money (another way that humankind imposes its power on the world).

The speaker imagines a civilization in which the buildings *are* made out of paper, suggesting that this would somehow be a more truthful world because it would acknowledge the fragility of life while also allowing life’s beauty to shine clearly (again represented by light traveling *through* the paper). The truth and

beauty of human life, argues the poem, is that it is "never meant to last." The poem circles back on itself with this thought, returning to the subject of human life itself. Paper is transformed in the speaker's imagination into "your skin"—which could be the skin of the reader but equally could apply to *any* human life. The poem thus ends by emphasizing both the fragility and the power of being alive—with all the possibilities and risks that living brings.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-37



HUMAN CONNECTION

"Tissue" explores not just the fragility of human life, but also the importance of human connection. The poem is in fact partly inspired by a real event in Dharker's life. She found an old copy of a Koran, in the back of which her father had written various information about people's birthdays, deaths, and so on (similar to what is described in the poem). Of this event, she said, "Looking at it, I felt a connection to him, that we had lost for years." Paper, in other words, allows for connections between different points in time and space—and this connection, the poem implies, is part of what gives life meaning.

The poem also looks briefly at how paper connects humankind to its environment. Maps allow for graphic representation of rivers, roads, railways, mountains, and so on, which in turn help people to navigate the world more easily—and, in doing so, to connect with people far and wide. Of course, paper also forms connections on a smaller scale in an individual's day-to-day life, the paper trail of receipts leaving behind a picture of where that person was and what they did.

Perhaps that's why the speaker seems to like the idea of a city built out of paper—because it would foreground the importance of interconnectedness. In fact, it's in this section of the poem that the speaker talks most generally about paper, thinking how these imaginary paper buildings would lay "script over numbers over line." These three nouns emphasize the incredibly wide-ranging importance of paper—from religious scripture, to mathematics and science, to art and culture. These things, the poem ultimately suggests, are of the highest importance, because they are the things that structure culture, society, and life itself—more so than any "brick // or block." Whereas "capitals and monoliths" are the products of "pride" and "grand design," it's the connection between people and across generations, however physically insubstantial, that really matter.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 4-12

- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-29



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Paper that lets ...
... could alter things.*

The poem begins by establishing its focus on paper (and thus putting the title into context). Though it isn't explicitly said that this is the case, it seems like the speaker is holding paper in their hand, contemplating what this humble material says about life, society, and humanity. The speaker perceives a kind of power in the paper, saying in line 3 that this "is what could alter things." Paper could change the world, somehow, though the speaker's meaning is still to be explored.

Light functions as a [symbol](#) in this poem. Traditionally a symbol for human knowledge (which, in the poem, depends on paper), it also suggests the fragility of that power—after all, paper is thin enough for light to pass through it! The [enjambement](#) between lines 1 and 2 after the word "light" visually represents the translucence of paper, as if light shines through the line break.

There is also a delicate [consonance](#) at play in these lines (and throughout the poem) which suggests the fragility of paper (and, by extension, human life):

Paper that lets the light
shine through, this
is what could alter things.

"Things" here is an ambiguous word, but it allows the poem to set itself up on quite general terms. Indeed, the poem's subject is both specific and extremely broad: paper on the one hand, and nothing less than the meaning of life on the other.

LINES 4-8

*Paper thinned by ...
... born to whom,*

Lines 4 to 12, from the end of the first stanza to the end of the third, seem to describe a specific and memorable encounter between the speaker and a piece of paper. Indeed, here it's worth learning a bit more about the context of the poem's composition. Dharker was inspired to write the poem after looking in an old copy of the Koran—her father had written her date of birth on the fragile paper on the back (Bibles and Korans are often printed on tissue-like paper due to their length).

Dharker explains how "Looking at it, I felt a connection to him,

that we had lost for years." This supports the poem's theme of interconnectedness:

And in this poem I wrote, I was really trying to think about what matters, what's worth writing in books, birth, death, family, relationships, and how the scraps of paper that we throw away are the things that tell the real story of our lives. And also how something as fragile as tissue, tissue paper, human skin, can be more precious than all the things we build to try and make ourselves feel safe and secure, the temples and churches and mosques, and the monuments.

The poem expands on Dharker's initial inspiration, exploring the way that paper records important facts about life. Indeed, by recording births and deaths, in a way it records *all* life (from first moments to the last). So while the paper is physically fragile, it also possesses a strength by virtue of its contribution to knowledge and its ability to survive for a long time *despite* how easy it is to destroy.

Indeed, paper—and the way it records knowledge and thoughts—connects people across time and space. Someone can pick up a book and read the thoughts of someone else from a completely different era. The poem emphasizes this powerful interconnectedness through sound in the second stanza:

the kind you find in well-used books,
the back of the Koran, where a hand
has written in the names and histories,
who was born to whom,

[Assonance](#), [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#) here connect different words together, mirroring the way that words themselves connect people, and require paper to do so.

LINES 9-12

*the height and ...
... transparent with attention.*

The third stanza continues the sentence started all the way back in line 4. The flowing grammar—aided by [enjambment](#) and [caesura](#)—creates a sense of interconnectedness between lines and across stanzas. This supports the poem's focus on the way that the paper connects people across time and space.

With that in mind, then, the third stanza continues where the previous stanza left off. It's worth noting the mix of [asyndeton](#) and [polysyndeton](#) in this stanza (and the previous). Asyndeton is a lack of conjunction words—like "and"—while polysyndeton is the use of many such words. While at first the combination of these devices might seem paradoxical, a quick glance at stanza three reveals how it's done. First, the lack of conjunction words brings the individual clauses of the long sentence closer together, again supporting the theme of interconnection. Then,

especially in line 11, a plethora of *ands* emphasize how full of evocative qualities these pages seem: "pages smoothed and stroked and turned / transparent."

The poem uses sonic devices to accomplish a similar feeling of interconnection. The gentle shared /t/ [consonance](#) in "height and weight" links these two words together as things recorded at the same time. Line 10 uses subtle /d/ [alliteration](#) between "died" and "date" to suggest marks on a page. (Also note that, in this line, the color "sepia" evokes how long ago this information was recorded in "the back of the Koran.")

Line 11 picks up on this /d/ sound, transforming it from alliteration into consonance (/s/ consonance is present too):

pages smoothed and stroked and turned

Notice the smoothness of the /d/ sound, suggesting how the pages have been made softer by human touch over the years. All of this forms part of the way that the poem strikes a delicate balance between the fragility and enduring power of paper. The enjambment at the end of this line ("and turned / transparent") also contributes to this feeling of smoothness, as though the punctuation at the end of the line has been eroded away by a page-turning thumb.

LINES 13-16

*If buildings were ...
... of the wind.*

The fourth stanza marks the first main shift in the poem's direction. It picks up on the sentiment expressed in the opening lines—that paper "could alter things." Now, the speaker wonders what it would be like "if buildings were paper." The speaker imposes the characteristics of paper onto the built urban environment, imagining how "paper" buildings would have a more obvious "drift" than those made out of bricks and concrete. The point here, though, is not really the *difference* between paper and bricks—but the way that, over the long passage of time, even things as seemingly permanent as buildings are fragile too.

/F/ and /n/ [consonance](#) in these lines has a delicate, gentle sound, as though the lines are being blown by the wind:

If buildings were paper, I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

And, once again, the lack of conjunction words (such as "and") creates an up-close sense of interconnectedness in the lines, which relates to the way paper connects different people and cultures. (This device is called [asyndeton](#).) The three [enjambments](#) also create the sense that a wind is blowing through these lines. Finally, three consonant /n/ sounds

(highlighted above) combine with /i/ [assonance](#) in line 16 ("in the direction of the wind"), clumping together as if blown by the wind.

LINES 17-20

*Maps too. The ...
... railtracks, mountainfolds,*

The fifth stanza marks another shift in the poem, moving from "buildings" to "maps." It's not clear what the "too" in "Maps too" refers to—it probably means "maps in addition to buildings," but obviously maps are actually made of paper. At any rate, this short sentence acts as an emphatic introduction to the next section of the poem.

The full-stop [caesura](#) after this short sentence marks the shift in focus. The rest of the stanza lists the kind of information found on a map:

Maps too. The sun shines through
their borderlines, the marks
that rivers make, roads,
railtracks, mountainfolds,

As with earlier in the poem, these lines use sound patterning to suggest interconnectedness—which relates to the way that maps help make sense of the world, turning it into a comprehensible whole.

The sun shining through the map, like the light in the first line, is suggestive both of the [metaphorical](#) light of knowledge and the fragility of paper—the fact that light can pass through paper in the first place. [Asyndeton](#)—the lack of conjunctions like "and"—draws these clauses together, again suggesting the way human knowledge, as facilitated by paper, connects people, places, and times.

Additionally, the manmade aspect of the land—"borderlines," "roads," and "railtracks"—can be read as a kind of [metaphorical](#) representation of writing. That is, humans treat the earth like paper, covering it with borders and roads, as if writing on the land.

LINES 21-24

*Fine slips from ...
... like paper kites.*

In the sixth stanza, the poem shifts from maps to receipts without giving the reader any warning. This abruptness actually adds to the sense of interconnectedness, the way that paper plays a more important—and wider—role in daily life than people might generally acknowledge. The speaker highlights the way that even something as frivolous as a grocery shop receipt can tell a kind of human story (as did the pages at the back of the Koran in the second stanza).

These lines are full of /s/ [consonance](#):

Fine slips from grocery shops
that say how much was sold
and what was paid by credit card
might fly our lives like paper kites.

This consonance gives the stanza a delicate sound, helping to convey the smallness of these throwaway bits of paper. Indeed, the /s/ sounds are also suggestive of wind, fitting nicely with the [simile](#) in line 24—that these papers fly away from people "like paper kites."

This stanza is really made of the stuff of everyday life, and demonstrates how human life leaves a kind of paper trail behind it. The kite image simultaneously speaks to the fragility and the beauty of being alive, with the [enjambment](#) throughout the stanza suggests the freedom of something flying on the air. The /i/ [assonance](#) in line 24 (also highlighted above) weaves through the line as if caught on the wind.

LINES 25-29

*An architect could ...
... or block,*

The seventh stanza marks another key shift in the poem. The speaker now imagines paper as a kind of building material, and how a skilled architect could put it to use. This architect, says the speaker, could "use all this" (the world's paper) and create something beautiful.

This beauty is suggested by the sound of these lines, and the use of the word "luminous":

An architect could use all this,
place layer over layer, luminous
script over numbers over line,
and never wish to build again with brick
or block,

As highlighted above, these lines are full of sound patterning through [consonance](#), [alliteration](#), and [assonance](#). The delicate /l/ sound in particular helps to conjure a sense of beauty. Other sounds include the /c/, /n/, /s/, /b/, /r/ and /t/ sounds. Generally speaking, the use of sound patterning reminds the reader that poem is a *constructed* object. In turn, this fits with the image of a city built out of paper—both represent ways of building.

As the speaker imagines it, this hypothetical architect would never want to return to brick and concrete—they would love building with paper too much. The [enjambment](#) across stanzas also highlights the poem's internal sense of construction. In a way, the speaker is describing how human knowledge functions—layers get built on top of other layers, with one generation's knowledge building on that of the past.

Indeed, it is appreciation for the role of paper in this development of knowledge that forms one of the poem's key

ideas. Religious writing ("script," as in *scripture*), mathematics/science ("numbers"), and art/literature ("line," as in visual art as well as poetry) are all gestured to. Paper is the common element in all of these different types of knowledge and ways of understanding the world.

LINES 29-33

*but let the ...
... with living tissue,*

After the [caesura](#) at the start of stanza 8 ("or block, but let"), lines 29-33 sing the praises of this hypothetical architecture—buildings made out of paper. The speaker imagines the way paper buildings would "let the daylight break / through" them, the [enjambment](#) between "break" and "through" creating the poem's own break on the page.

These lines are pretty open to interpretation, but one point the speaker seems to make is that paper structures would showcase the fragility of human civilization, while also celebrating it. That is, paper "monoliths" (large structures) would commemorate human achievement and remind the viewer that such achievements are temporary (and perhaps more beautiful for being so). Capital cities, with their air of importance, would demonstrate the same thing if they were made out of paper. The speaker perceives a kind of "pride" in these "shapes" that humans make through their buildings—perhaps even a kind of vanity.

Paper, then, highlights a kind of deeper truth about human power and fragility. With another sudden line and stanza break, the poem [enjams](#) into its final significant shift—switching from focusing on buildings to the human body itself.

LINES 33-37

*raise a structure ...
... into your skin.*

After line 33's [caesura](#) ("with living tissue, raise a structure"), the poem turns its attention to the human body itself. In a way, the poem is using paper as a way to get to the core of what it means to be human, arguing that it is human *fragility* that makes life beautiful, not the ability to create vast structures out of "pride."

The speaker returns to paper's own delicateness—it is "never meant to last" (yet does)—and to its smoothness, thinness, and transparency:

[...] paper smoothed and stroked
and thinned to be transparent,
turned into your skin.

The soft /d/ [consonance](#) here has been encountered before, almost word for word in line 11 ("pages smoothed and stroked and turned"). Like that point in the poem, the /d/ here captures

the way that paper gets eroded over time, especially through human touch.

But the poem here is also talking about the physical body, and skin in particular. Skin is also like a kind of paper, "smoothed and stroked;" "thinned" over the years by aging—it even allows a degree of light to pass through it. This final focus on human skin foregrounds the way that the poem has been talking about humanity—and the experience of being human—throughout its thirty-seven lines.

The "your" in the last line is an interesting twist. It's the only use of the second-person throughout the poem (the other occurs in line 5: "the kind **you** find in well-used books"). This "your" is both intimate and general. That is, it could be a specific "you," one whose skin is familiar to the speaker. Or, it could be more general and apply to the reader, any reader—who, it's worth remembering, is probably looking at the poem on paper.



SYMBOLS



PAPER

Paper is a constant presence in the poem, referred to from the title onwards. In part, the poem is a kind of hymn to paper—praising its usefulness and subtle beauty. Broadly speaking, paper comes to symbolize both the power and fragility of human life.

The poem emphasizes paper's—and humanity's—power by focusing on paper's role throughout human civilization. Paper has played and continues to play a vital role in humankind's relationship with knowledge and the storage of that knowledge. Essentially, it is a media device that allows information to transcend the confines of the specific time and space in which it is written (the way that 21st century readers can get a sense of Elizabethan language in the works of Shakespeare, for example). The power to externalize knowledge influences all kinds of aspects of human civilization, from the understanding of the natural world (through maps) to commerce (e.g. receipts). Of course, it also plays a vital role in religion and culture too.

At the same time, paper is a fragile material—easily crumpled and torn, and often rather transparent. It must be treated gently and taken care of to survive. When the speaker argues for buildings made out of paper, rather than brick, this isn't meant literally; rather, the speaker is using paper as a stand-in for the best aspects of humanity itself—connection, shared knowledge, and so forth. This helps highlight paper's central role in human civilization and another important aspect of its symbolic power—paper is fragile, and so too is human civilization.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2:** "Paper that lets the light / shine through"
- Line 4:** "Paper thinned by age or touching"
- Lines 5-6:** "the kind you find in well-used books, / the back of the Koran"
- Lines 11-12:** "pages smoothed and stroked and turned / transparent with attention"
- Lines 13-14:** "If buildings were paper, I might / feel their drift"
- Line 17:** "Maps too."
- Lines 21-22:** "Fine slips from grocery shops / that say how much was sold"
- Lines 26-27:** "layer over layer, luminous / script over numbers over line"
- Lines 35-36:** "paper smoothed and stroked / and thinned to be transparent"

**LIGHT**

Light is mentioned in a few instances throughout "Tissue." It's closely linked to the other main symbol in the poem: paper. If paper symbolizes humanity, then light symbolizes the power of nature. Note how the poem repeatedly depicts light as shining *through* paper, at once underscoring how delicate this material is and metaphorically suggesting that nature is more powerful than any human accomplishment or creation. Light doesn't care about the arbitrary lines people have drawn up on maps, for instance.

The speaker doesn't present this as a negative thing, however. Rather, the speaker wishes for a world in which buildings were made of paper and as such could let the light through. Perhaps this suggests a desire for a world in which humanity better understood its limitations and essential fragility—that it, too, is subject to the whims of the natural world and the passage of time.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2:** "Paper that lets the light / shine through"
- Lines 17-18:** "The sun shines through / their borderlines"
- Lines 29-30:** "let the daylight break / through capitals and monoliths"

This delicate /l/ sound is associated with light throughout the poem, which is an important part of the discussion of paper's translucence. Additionally, because the lines are so short, alliteration also occurs between lines. "[T]hrough," "this," "things," and "thinned" all chime together in the first stanza, another soft sound conveying the delicateness of paper.

The second stanza uses alliteration too: "kind" chimes with "Koran," "books" with "back," and "hand" with "has." Here, the poem discusses writing in the back of a book which records births, deaths, height, weight and so on (based on a true discovery made by Dharker). The prominent alliteration accentuates this description of the markings in the back, drawing the reader's attention to the way that the words of the poem are selected with intention and purpose, just like those at the back of the speaker's Koran.

In the third stanza, /s/ alliteration creates a smooth sound: "sepia," "smoothed," "stroked." This helps bring to life the way that paper is smoothed over time by human touch. The /s/ sounds in the sixth stanza ("slips," "say," "sold") are delicate, and support the speaker's focus on store receipts—all the bits of paper that human beings don't really value. The /s/ sounds suggest the fragility of this paper, and also evoke the wind that forms part of the line 24's *simile*: "[these papers] might fly our lives like paper kites."

In the fifth stanza, "rivers," "roads," and "railtracks" alliterate. These /r/ sounds cut a route through the stanza like the things they describe—the way humans cut through a landscape with a road, for example.

The seventh stanza returns to the link between the /l/ sound and light, imagining a city made out of paper. The speaker conceives of this translucent metropolis as something beautiful, and the /l/ sounds help convey that beauty: "place layer over layer, luminous" (line 26). In this stanza and the next, the poem also uses /b/ alliteration:

and never wish to build again with brick
or block, but let the daylight break

This alliteration draws the reader's attention to the poem's construction. Foregrounding the fact that the poem is made out of language mirrors the way that an architect uses bricks. As throughout the poem, the speaker highlights the constructive power of language and paper.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- Line 1:** "lets," "light"
- Line 2:** "through, this"
- Line 3:** "things."
- Line 4:** "thinned"
- Line 5:** "kind," "books"
- Line 6:** "back," "Koran," "hand"

**POETIC DEVICES****ALLITERATION**

[Alliteration](#) is used here and there throughout "Tissue." The first instance is in the first line:

Paper that lets the light

- **Line 7:** "has," "histories"
- **Line 8:** "who," "whom"
- **Line 9:** "height," "who"
- **Line 10:** "died," "how," "sepia," "date"
- **Line 11:** "smoothed," "stroked," "turned"
- **Line 12:** "transparent"
- **Line 14:** "feel"
- **Line 15:** "fall"
- **Line 17:** "The," "through"
- **Line 18:** "their," "the marks"
- **Lines 19-20:** "that rivers make, roads, / railtracks, mountainfolds"
- **Line 21:** "Fine slips from"
- **Line 22:** "say," "sold"
- **Line 23:** "what was," "credit card"
- **Line 24:** "lives like," "kites"
- **Line 26:** "layer over layer, luminous"
- **Line 27:** "over numbers over line"
- **Line 28:** "never wish," "build," "with brick"
- **Line 29:** "block, but," "break"
- **Line 30:** "through," "monoliths"
- **Line 31:** "through the , "that," "make"
- **Line 35:** "smoothed," "stroked"
- **Line 36:** "transparent"
- **Line 37:** "turned," "skin"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) is used throughout "Tissue." This often adds to the poem's musicality, imbuing the lines with a gentle sense of rhythm and cohesion. Take the first stanza, where the long /i/ of "light" links it to "shine" at the start of line 2, and the short /i/ of "this" then sonically links line 2 to "is" at the start of line 3. The shared long /ay/ of "Paper" and "age" in line 4 suggests a connection between these words, subtly reflecting the poem's thematic idea of paper itself as a testament to the ages, in a way—a physical means of ensuring connection between one generation and the next.

In the next stanza, assonance is part of the [internal rhyme](#) created by "kind" and "find." "Koran" and "hand" chime as well, as does the phrase "written in [...] histories." Altogether, then, assonance adds to the lyricism of the stanza. The third stanza is yet again made musical by its assonance:

the height and weight, who
died where and how, on which sepia date,
pages [...]

The long /i/ and /ay/ sounds trickle down the lines, linking them together and making the stanza feel cohesive. Yet another subtle example of assonance appears in the fourth stanza:

If buildings were paper, I might

feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

The short /i/ sound filters down the stanza, and gives the last line a kind of uniform sound, as though it is itself heading in one direction. The speaker's point is that paper buildings would sway easily in the wind—and the use of assonance captures a similar kind of sway. Something similar happens at the end of the sixth stanza, when the speaker vividly imagines how grocery bills "might fly our lives like paper kites." A single long /i/ sound dominates the line, perhaps evoking small bits of paper borne on a breeze.

Line 26, in the seventh stanza, uses assonance to pointed effect as well. The speaker imagines an architect constructing a city out of paper. The architect would "place layer over layer." The similar vowel sounds draw the reader's attention to the poem as a constructed object, mirroring the way that buildings—like sentences—are made out of smaller units.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "light"
- **Line 2:** "shine," "this"
- **Line 3:** "is"
- **Line 4:** "Paper," "age"
- **Line 5:** "kind," "find"
- **Line 6:** "Koran," "hand"
- **Line 7:** "written in," "histories"
- **Line 8:** "who," "to whom"
- **Line 9:** "height," "weight"
- **Line 10:** "died," "date"
- **Line 11:** "pages"
- **Line 13:** "If," "buildings," "I might"
- **Line 14:** "feel," "drift, see," "easily"
- **Line 15:** "they," "away," "shift"
- **Line 16:** "in," "direction," "wind"
- **Line 17:** "too," "shines through"
- **Line 18:** "borderlines"
- **Lines 19-20:** "make, roads, / railtracks, mountainfolds,"
- **Line 21:** "grocery"
- **Line 22:** "say," "sold"
- **Line 23:** "paid"
- **Line 24:** "might fly , "lives like paper kites"
- **Line 25:** "this"
- **Line 26:** "place layer over layer"
- **Line 27:** "script over," "over"
- **Line 28:** "wish," "build," "brick"
- **Line 29:** "daylight break"
- **Line 31:** "shapes," "make,"
- **Line 32:** "way," "trace"
- **Line 33:** "with living tissue, raise"
- **Line 34:** "never meant"

- **Line 35:** "paper"
- **Line 36:** "thinned"
- **Line 37:** "skin"

ASYNDETOM

[Asyndeton](#) is used extensively in "Tissue." One of the poem's main aims is to represent the way that paper provides humanity with a kind of interconnectedness. Paper connects different eras and cultures with each other, it links individuals, and it keeps a society glued together. The poem for the most part does away with conjunction words like "and" in order to make its individual clauses feel more connected, and to make the flow of the poem somewhat unpredictable. The reader doesn't know where sentences will come to a stop, giving them an open-ended feeling. Take, for example, the second and third stanzas:

the kind you find in well-used books,
the back of the Koran, where a hand
has written in the names and histories,
who was born to whom,
the height and weight, who
died where and how, on which sepia date,
pages smoothed [...]

The asyndeton allows for the reader to feel something of the speaker's own feeling of discovery while reading the writing in the back of the Koran. The lack of conjunctions seems to mimic the way that the eye scans down the page. Asyndeton can also create a sort of piling up effect, which here reflects the piling up of information as more and more details are jotted down onto these pieces of paper.

In the following stanza, the asyndeton has a slightly different effect:

[...] I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

Here the lack of conjunction words helps convey the stanza's image of paper buildings. The lines have a kind of swaying unpredictability to them because it's hard to know when they will come to a stop. The last stanzas achieve a similar effect in its use of asyndeton.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-11:** "well-used books, / the back of the Koran,
where a hand / has written in the names and histories, /
who was born to whom, / the height and weight, who /
died where and how, on which sepia date, / pages

smoothed"

- **Lines 14-16:** "their drift, see how easily / they fall away on a sigh, a shift / in the direction of the wind."
- **Lines 18-21:** "their borderlines, the marks / that rivers make, roads, / railtracks, mountainfolds, / Fine slips from grocery shops"
- **Lines 26-27:** "layer over layer, luminous / script over numbers over line,"
- **Lines 29-34:** "let the daylight break / through capitals and monoliths, / through the shapes that pride can make, / find a way to trace a grand design / with living tissue, raise a structure / never meant to last,"

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) is used throughout "Tissue." The poem's sentences and phrases rarely conform to the individual line lengths, making for an unpredictable poem full of turns and abrupt stops. Generally speaking, this also helps the poem subtly build its argument for interconnectedness, the way that paper links different people, spaces, and times together.

Individual caesurae also have more localized effects. The caesura in line 2, for example, evokes the way that light travels through paper, emphasizing the word "through":

Paper that lets the light
shine through, this

The caesurae in the second and third stanzas have an altogether different effect. Whoever has written in this "Koran" has done so meticulously and methodically, recording facts about people—their births, deaths, and measurements. The caesurae help get this across, making each phrase feel carefully and deliberately placed.

In the fourth stanza, the caesurae help to bring the speaker's [imagery](#) to life:

If buildings were paper, I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

The caesurae give these lines a sense of "drift" and "shift[ing]" unpredictability.

In stanzas seven, eight, and nine, (from "An architect" all the way down to "never meant to last") caesurae draw attention to the poem as a constructed object—something *made*. They are like the glue between bricks. This ties in with the discussion of architecture, during which the speaker imagines an architect building a city made out of paper.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "through, this"
- **Line 6:** "Koran, where"
- **Line 9:** "weight, who"
- **Line 10:** "how, on"
- **Line 13:** "paper, I"
- **Line 14:** "drift, see"
- **Line 15:** "sigh, a"
- **Line 17:** "too. The"
- **Line 18:** "borderlines, the"
- **Lines 19-20:** "make, roads, / railtracks, mountainfolds,"
- **Line 26:** "layer, luminous"
- **Line 29:** "block, but"
- **Line 33:** "tissue, raise"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Tissue." Some of this is alliteration (occurring at the start of words), and there is a separate entry to cover these examples.

In the first stanza, delicate /th/ and /t/ sounds (among others) run throughout:

Paper that lets the light
shine through, **this**
is what could alter things.
Paper thinned by age or touching,

The /th/ sound and the /t/ here are both gentle, subtly evoking the fragility of paper (which also comes to stand for the fragility of human life more generally).

Another next key example of consonance appears in the third stanza, during which the speaker discusses the different information recorded in the back of a copy of the Koran:

died where and how, on which sepia date,
pages smoothed and stroked and turned
transparent with attention.

Notice the way that the /d/ and /t/ sounds fill the lines, making them feel interconnected. The repetition of sound is insistent and inescapable; these sounds build upon each other just as the information builds up on these pages.

The fourth stanza uses a gentle /f/ sound:

If buildings were paper, I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift

The softness of this sound helps convey the fragility of the image—buildings made out of paper.

The next key example is in the sixth stanza, with its clear /f/ and /s/ sounds:

Fine slips from grocery shops
that say how much was sold

This is technically an example of sibilance, which adds a sense of whispering quiet to the line. This, in turn, reflects the ease with which these delicate slips of paper—despite in fact conveying a great deal of information—may indeed "fly" out of our purses and pockets unnoticed. The consonance evokes the sound of the wind as these throwaway bits of paper that people tend to ignore in daily life—receipts, etc.—flutter away.

The last two lines use /n/ and /t/ consonance:

and thinned to be transparent,
turned into your skin.

These gentle sounds evoke the way that paper becomes thinner through human touch. Because the speaker also relates this "tissue paper" to human "tissue"—i.e., skin—this perhaps suggests the fragility of human life more generally.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Lines 18-20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28
- Lines 28-29
- Line 30
- Line 31

- Line 32
- Line 33
- Line 34
- Line 35
- Line 36
- Line 37

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used all the way through "Tissue." Broadly speaking, it works with caesura to create two main effects. First of all, the enjambment and caesurae make the poem very unpredictable—it's hard to know when sentences will start or end. But this also gives the poem a kind of interconnected feel, preventing the sections from feeling too separate from one another.

Enjambment also has more specific effects on individual lines. Take, for example, the first and second lines:

Paper that lets the light
shine through

Notice the way that the enjambment here seems to allow the light to shine through the line itself. It would feel very different if, for example, it was written like this:

Paper that lets the light shine through,

This would have created a duller, more leaden line. Instead, the speaker keeps the lines short and dynamic.

The fourth stanza uses enjambment in every line:

If buildings were paper, I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.

Here, the speaker imagines buildings made out of paper—how delicate they would be, and how they would "drift" and "shift" in the wind. The enjambment is the poem's way of conveying that motion, refusing to settle into a steady shape.

The next key example is in the sixth stanza in which, once again, all of the lines are enjambed:

Fine slips from grocery shops
that say how much was sold
and what was paid by credit card
might fly our lives like paper kites.

Here the speaker imagines all the tiny bits of paper that pass through people's hands during their lives (such as receipts). The lack of punctuation at the ends of the lines makes them flow

quicker, mirroring the way in which these papers easily come and go.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "light / shine"
- **Lines 2-3:** "this / is"
- **Lines 6-7:** "hand / has"
- **Lines 9-10:** "who / died"
- **Lines 11-12:** "turned / transparent"
- **Lines 13-14:** "might / feel"
- **Lines 14-15:** "easily / they"
- **Lines 15-16:** "shift / in"
- **Lines 17-18:** "through / their"
- **Lines 18-19:** "marks / that "
- **Lines 21-22:** "shops / that"
- **Lines 22-23:** "sold / and"
- **Lines 23-24:** "card / might"
- **Lines 26-27:** "luminous / script"
- **Lines 29-30:** "break / through"
- **Lines 32-33:** "design / with"
- **Lines 33-34:** "structure / never"
- **Lines 35-36:** "stroked / and"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"Tissue" is a somewhat impressionistic poem that uses metaphor throughout, though there isn't always one single obvious interpretation. Speaking generally, the poem uses paper—which it discusses in all of its thirty-seven lines—as an extended metaphor that relates to both human power *and* fragility. Obviously, paper is a fragile material—but it's also powerful, allowing knowledge to be preserved across time and space, an ability which is essential to the way human civilization has evolved.

The poem opens fairly literally, though the relevant qualities of paper—its ability to record information and its translucence—are present from the start. The translucent quality of the paper stands in metaphorically for the light of knowledge and truth, *as well as* the way that these are ultimately fragile.

In the last three stanzas (and the last line), running from "an architect" to "your skin," the speaker imagines a city built out of paper. This becomes a metaphor that compares buildings and statues to the fragile paper. This seems to be the speaker's way of highlighting their impermanence. In the last line, paper becomes a metaphor for human skin too. This speaks to the way that the experiences of life are written onto people's skin—through wrinkles and smile lines, for instance.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-37

SIMILE

"Tissue" uses one [simile](#), which occurs in line 24 (quoted with the rest of the stanza for context):

Fine slips from grocery shops
that say how much was sold
and what was paid by credit card
might fly our lives like paper kites.

This likens the small, ephemeral bits of paper that pass through people's hands on a daily basis to "paper kites."

The implication, of course, is that these bits of paper are constantly flying away from people—partly because they aren't valued. But the speaker is subtly suggesting that these papers tell more of a story than people might realize. They show where people were, and when, and perhaps even something about their personalities (in terms of the kind of things they might buy).

The reference to kites also links to line 16's description of paper buildings falling "in the direction of the wind"—all in all creating a picture of the fragility of paper. This in turn forms part of the poem's argument that, in fact, *all* human life is fragile—even the huge buildings in capital cities.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- Lines 21-24:** "Fine slips from grocery shops / that say how much was sold / and what was paid by credit card / might fly our lives like paper kites."



VOCABULARY

Koran (Line 6) - The holy text of Islam.

Sepia (Line 10) - A reddish-brown color. Books often turn this color over the years, and many antique photographs have the color.

Fine Slips (Line 21) - Receipts from shops.

Fly Our Lives (Line 24) - Disappear from us.

Luminous (Line 26) - Shining with light.

Monoliths (Line 30) - Tall, imposing, man-made structures.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

For the most part, "Tissue" is written in [quatrains](#) (four-line stanzas). In addition, one line stands on its own right at the end.

The poem isn't written using a traditional form, and the quatrains are pretty much stretched to breaking point

(intentionally). The way that sentences seem to disregard the box shape that contains them—an effect built using [caesura](#) and [enjambement](#)—suggests the fragility of paper, as though the poem itself could be easily torn apart.

The poem is fairly free-form in the sense that it shifts from one aspect of its subject to another almost without warning. The first stanza is a general statement, while the second and third deal with a specific encounter with paper (one which is based on real-life events). Then, the speaker starts imagining paper buildings, before discussing maps and receipts. Finally, the speaker returns to these paper buildings, before ending with a mention of skin. All in all, this makes for a wide-ranging and unpredictable poem that effectively demonstrates the various uses of paper and its essential importance to human life.

METER

"Tissue" is not a [metered](#) poem, and uses [free verse](#) instead. The lines are short throughout, which helps give the poem a literal thinness on the page that reflects the *actual* thinness of paper pages. The lack of meter helps make the poem more unpredictable, which seems to be an intentional effect—especially given the way that the lines are so frequently disrupted by [caesura](#) or joined together by [enjambement](#).

RHYME SCHEME

"Tissue" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#), though there are a handful of rhymes here and there. Note how "things" in line 3 basically rhymes with "touching" in line 4 (though the fact that the "-ing" of touching is unstressed makes this rhyme pretty subtle). There are some [internal rhymes](#) throughout as well—note the rhyme between "kind" and "find" in line 5, and how "weight" in line 9 rhymes with "date" in line 10. There's nothing particularly significant about the link between these words, but, broadly speaking, these moments of internal rhyme add to the poem's musicality. The fact that the poem's few rhymes don't typically appear at the *end* of lines might also suggest a kind of *internal* connectedness. This, in fact, is one of the themes of the poem—the way that paper brings people, times, and places together. The same thing occurs in lines 14 and 15 with "drift" and "shift," with the added effect of making the stanza feel like its structural integrity is wavering, in keeping with the image of paper buildings.



SPEAKER

The speaker in "Tissue" is unspecified. Dharker herself has stated that the poem was inspired by her discovery of her father's old Koran, in the back of which he had recorded similar information to that referenced in lines 6-10. But that doesn't mean that the poem itself has to be equated with Dharker as the speaker.

The speaker undoubtedly sees paper as a material worthy of

praise, perhaps something that is too often neglected. Talking in the first-person, the speaker shifts between different aspects of paper, referring to its role in religion, culture, geography, and commerce. This praise of paper reaches its imaginative heights when the speaker imagines a civilization in which the buildings are made out of paper, not bricks and concretes—and how that would allow for beautiful light to shine through, in addition to reminding everyone about the inherent fragility of human life.



SETTING

"Tissue" doesn't really have a specific setting. Instead, it is a sequence of thoughts that unfold quite unpredictably. In this way, then, the setting is the speaker's mind.

Part of the poem's main argument is that paper has the ability to connect different settings, both in time and space. Paper facilitates the storage of knowledge, allowing people to have an experience of places and times in which they were not present. Within this discussion, the poem travels from religion (the Koran) to maps, to receipts, and to imagined cities of paper buildings.

The poem makes an interesting shift at the very end with its reference to "your skin," suggesting a more intimate relationship between the speaker and the addressee. It's as if the giant, wide-ranging setting that the poem has conjured collapses to the space between two people. The nature of this setting, however, is left up to the reader's imagination.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Imtiaz Dharker is a British poet who was born in Pakistan in 1954. Though born in Lahore, the Pakistani capital, Dharker mostly grew up in Glasgow, Scotland, where her family moved when she was one year old. Dharker studied at the University of Glasgow, graduating with an M.A. in English Literature and Philosophy. She divides her time between London and Mumbai, with the slums of the latter city providing part of the inspiration for this poem.

Dharker has published numerous books of poetry, mostly with the publisher Bloodaxe Books. This poem is taken from Dharker's 2006 collection *The Terrorist at My Table*, which focuses on questions of identity, home and exile, cultural displacement, and community. Communication as a theme is also central to Dharker's work—for example, in "Text" from the same book, or the poems of the earlier collection *Postcards from God*. Other contemporary poems that specifically feature paper as a subject include David Ferry's "In the Reading Room" and "Paper Aeroplane" by Simon Armitage.

Dharker's poetry is well-established, featuring on the GCSE

syllabus in the U.K. and earning Dharker a Cholmondeley Prize in 2011 and a Queen's Gold Medal in 2014. She is also a member of the Royal Society of Literature. In addition to her poetry, Dharker also works as an artist and a documentary maker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Tissue" doesn't really have a specific historical context. Indeed, part of its point is to hit at the way that paper—this humble yet miraculous material—can connect different points in space and time together. In other words, paper brings various historical contexts into common understanding.

Paper is thought to have been invented in China in 105 AD, though other forms of writing (and knowledge storage) predate paper as a specific material. Paper is made out of pulp from wood or grasses, and its invention had a significant impact on almost every aspect of human civilization. From the 17th century onwards, European innovations in the paper-making and printing processes allowed for mass production of paper-based products, ultimately leading to the paper-filled world that we now live in. The dominance of paper, of course, is under threat from newer storage mediums like the internet and computers.

The Koran, first mentioned in line 6, is the central religious text of Islam and, like the Bible in Christianity, is considered the word of God in that religion. It was written around 609-632 AD.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [A Reading of "Tissue"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfYX15PwvWg) — The poem read by the poet herself. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfYX15PwvWg>)
- [The Invention of Paper](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUm7la4P9NI) — A short video exploring one of humankind's most vital materials. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUm7la4P9NI>)
- [An Interview with Dharker](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpdeqEzAKJg) — An informal chat with the poet. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpdeqEzAKJg>)
- [More Poems by Dharker](https://poetryarchive.org/poet/imtiaz-dharker/) — A valuable resource from the Poetry Archive. (<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/imtiaz-dharker/>)
- [Dharker's Website](http://www.imtiazdharker.com) — The poet's own website, with details of Dharker's other poems and films. (<http://www.imtiazdharker.com>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER IMTIAZ DHARKER POEMS

- [Living Space](#)



HOW TO CITE

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