Tishani Doshi
- poems -

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Tishani Doshi (9 December 1975 -)

Tishani Doshi is an Indian poet, journalist and dancer based in Chennai. Born in Madras, India, to a Welsh mother and Gujarati father, she received an Eric Gregory Award in 2001. Her first poetry collection, Countries of the Body, won the 2006 Forward Poetry Prize for best first has been invited to the poetry galas of the Guardian-sponsored Hay Festival of 2006 and the Cartagena Hay Festival of 2007. Her first novel, The Pleasure Seekers, was published by Bloomsbury in 2010 and was long-listed for the Orange Prize in 2011, and shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010.

She writes a blog titled "Hit or Miss" on Cricinfo, a cricket-related website. In the blog which she started writing in April 2009, Tishani Doshi makes observations and commentaries as a television viewer of the second season of the Indian Premier League. She is also collaborating with cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan on his biography, to be published when he retires.

She works as a freelance writer and worked with choreographer Chandralekha until the latter’s death in December 2006. She graduated with a Masters degree in creative writing from the Johns Hopkins University.

Countries of the Body was launched in 2006 at the Hay-on-Wye festival on a platform with Seamus Heaney, Margaret Atwood, and others. The opening poem, The Day we went to the Sea, won the 2005 British Council supported All India Poetry Competition; she was also a finalist in the Outlook-Picador Non-Fiction Competition.

Her short story Lady Cassandra, Spartacus and the dancing man was published in its entirety in the journal The Drawbridge in 2007.
Aj, Age 15

I once chased my brother
Down to the edge of the sea.
We ran past sheets and towels
Spread like sky on the beach,
Between strips of cloth,
Drying chilli and tamarind.
Past slums shackled to the shore –
A maze of thatch roofs and cowdung
Caked walls. And then I lost him,
Searched loudly for him, called his name.
Said, Come out or else –
All the usual tricks.

A woman cleaning rice on her knees
In a blouse done up with safety pins
Pointed to a hut with a single weary finger –
Where he was hiding with a water buffalo.
The low blue lights of the television flickering.
He was inside, laughing so hard,
Shaking his head back and forth,
I thought the joy would come tearing out from him.
Afterwards, we sat in something like silence –
His rare chubby hand in mine,
Listening to the breath of living water.

Tishani Doshi
Another Man's Woman

My lover has failed to come to the trysting place,
It is perhaps that his mind is dazed,
Or perhaps that he went to another woman,
Or lured perhaps by festive folk, that he delays,
Or perhaps along the dark fringe
Of the forest he wanders lost

- JAYADEVA

If we’d lived in another age,
I’d have been the kind of woman
who refused to cast down her eyes.
The kind of woman
the other maids in town despise
because she forgets to tie up the calves
and split the curds.
You know the kind -
with a tilt in her hips
and hair that slips
continually
from her braids.

But since we live in a world
that’s just reflection,
mere illusions of the mind;
perhaps I can be her after all -
the one whose hips defeat the mountains
with their greatness,
whose breasts are heavy,
close and high –
sandal-pasted;
who walks through moonless nights
with lotus skin and lotus feet
across forbidden boundaries.

I’ll be the kind who sallies out
to wait for love
with musk-kissed hair
and navel bared in a thousand secret places –
past the cowsheds
and the balsam grove,
across the river,
to the garden of hibiscus.

And although the night be dark
and fierce enough to stir
the seven sleeping oceans,
I’ll deceive the forest
like a shadow,
slipping noiselessly past
evil eyes and serpent tongues
and the husband who lies inside
jealous of my devotion.

But if I should reach the river bank
and see you there -
combing another woman’s hair.
If I should see the girdle
loosen from her waist
while you string jasmine
round her supine face.
If you should drink the honeyed sweet
from the petals
of her crimsoned lips -

I won’t question this betrayal,
or ask who this other woman is.

I’ll simply walk
into the darkness
where every trunk
and branch and leaf
looks like you, feels like you,
speaks like you: deep-chested
yellow-limbed
rain-cloud blue.

And later, while the husband sleeps,
I’ll make my way
to the town’s cremation grounds.
I’ll strip away my clothes and dance among the mounds of ash.
to command the churning of a storm.
For I have been with you
since you were born
and will stay with you
till you return -
soaked with the lasting dawn.

Tishani Doshi
At The Rodin Museum

Rilke is following me everywhere
With his tailor-made suits
And vegetarian smile.

He says because I’m young,
I’m always beginning,
And cannot know love.

He sees how I’m a giant piece
Of glass again, trying
To catch the sun

In remote corners of rooms,
Mountain tops, uncertain
Places of light.

He speaks of the cruelty
Of hospitals, the stillness
Of cathedrals,

Takes me through bodies
And arms and legs
Of such extravagant size,

The ancient sky burrows in
With all the dead words
We carry and cannot use.

He holds up mirrors
From which our reflections fall —
Half-battered existences,

Where we lose ourselves
For the sake of the other,
And the others still to come.

Tishani Doshi
Dear Reader,  
I agree to turn my skin inside out,  
to reinvent every lost word, to burnish,  
to steal, to do what I must  
in order to singe your lungs.  
I will forgo happiness  
stab myself repeatedly,  
and lower my head into countless ovens.  
I will fade backwards into the future  
and tell you what I see.  
If it is bleak, I will lie  
so that you may live  
seized with wonder.  
If it is miraculous I will  
send messages in your dreams,  
and they will flicker  
as a silvered cottage in the woods,  
choked with vines of moonflower.  
Don't kill me, Reader.  
This neck has been working for years  
to harden itself against the axe.  
This body, meagre as it is,  
has lost so many limbs to wars, so many  
eyes and hearts to romance. But love me,  
and I will follow you everywhere -  
to the dusty corners of childhood,  
to every downfall and resurrection.  
Till your skin becomes my skin.  
Let us be twins, our blood  
thumping after each other  
like thunder and lightning.  
And when you put your soft head  
down to rest, dear Reader,  
I promise to always be there,  
humming in the dungeons  
of your auditory canals—  
an immortal mosquito,  
hastening you towards fury,  
towards incandescence.
Tishani Doshi
Find the Poets

I arrived in a foreign land yesterday,
a land that has seen troubles,
(who hasn't, you might say?)
This land
with its scrubbed white houses
and blue seas, where everything was born,
and now, everything seems as if it could vanish.
I wanted to find out the truth
about how a great land like this
could allow ancient columns to crumble
and organ grinders to disappear.

Find the poets, my friend said.
If you want to know the truth, find the poets.

But friend, where do I find the poets?
In the soccer fields,
at the sea shore,
in the bars drinking?

Where do the poets live these days,
and what do they sing about?

I looked for them in the streets of Athens,
at the flea market and by the train station,
I thought one of them might have sold me a pair of sandals.

But he did not speak to me of poetry,
only of his struggles, of how his house was taken from him
along with his shiny dreams of the future,
of all the dangers his children must now be brave enough to face.

Find the poets, my friend said.
They will not speak of the things you and I speak about.
They will not speak of economic integration
or fiscal consolidation.

They could not tell you anything about the burden of adjustment.
But they could sit you down
and tell you how poems are born in silence
and sometimes, in moments of great noise,
of how they arrive like the rain,
unexpectedly cracking open the sky.

They will talk of love, of course,
as if it were the only thing that mattered,
about chestnut trees and mountain tops,
and how much they miss their dead fathers.

They will talk as they have been talking
for centuries, about holding the throat of life,
till all the sunsets and lies are choked out,
till only the bones of truth remain.

The poets, my friend, are where they have always been—
living in paper houses without countries,
along rivers and in forests that are disappearing.

And while you and I go on with life
remembering and forgetting,

the poets remain: singing, singing

Tishani Doshi
Girls are coming out of the Woods

Girls are coming out of the woods, wrapped in cloaks and hoods, carrying iron bars and candles and a multitude of scars, collected on acres of premature grass and city buses, in temples and bars. Girls are coming out of the woods with panties tied around their lips, making such a noise, it's impossible to hear. Is the world speaking too? Is it really asking, What does it mean to give someone a proper resting? Girls are coming out of the woods, lifting their broken legs high, leaking secrets from unfastened thighs, all the lies whispered by strangers and swimming coaches, and uncles, especially uncles, who said spreading would be light and easy, who put bullets in their chests and fed their pretty faces to fire, who sucked the mud clean off their ribs, and decorated their coffins with brier. Girls are coming out of the woods, clearing the ground to scatter their stories. Even those girls found naked in ditches and wells, those forgotten in neglected attics, and buried in river beds like sediments from a different century. They've crawled their way out from behind curtains of childhood, the silver-pink weight of their bodies pushing against water, against the sad, feathered tarnish of remembrance. Girls are coming out of the woods the way birds arrive at morning windows - pecking and humming, until all you can hear is the smash of their miniscule hearts against glass, the bright desperation
of sound - bashing, disappearing.
Girls are coming out of the woods.
They're coming. They're coming.

Tishani Doshi
Immigrant's Song

Let us not speak of those days
when coffee beans filled the morning
with hope, when our mothers’ headscarves
hung like white flags on washing lines.
Let us not speak of the long arms of sky
that used to cradle us at dusk.
And the baobabs – let us not trace
the shape of their leaves in our dreams,
or yearn for the noise of those nameless birds
that sang and died in the church’s eaves.
Let us not speak of men,
stolen from their beds at night.
Let us not say the word disappeared.
Let us not remember the first smell of rain:
It will only make us nostalgic for childhood.
Instead, let us speak of our lives now —
the gates and bridges and stores.
And when we break bread
in cafes and at kitchen tables
with our new brothers,
let us not burden them with stories
of war or abandonment.
Let us not name our old friends
who are unravelling like fairytales
in the forests of the dead.
Naming them will not bring them back.
Let us stay here, and wait for the future
to arrive, for grandchildren to speak
in forked tongues about the country
we once came from.
Tell us about it, they might ask.
And you might consider telling them
of the sky and the coffee beans,
the small white houses and dusty streets.
You might set your memory afloat
like a paper boat down a river.
You might pray that the paper
whispers your stories to the water,
that the water sings it to the trees,
that the trees howl and howl
it to the leaves. If you keep still
and do not speak, you might hear
your whole life fill the world
until the wind is the only word.

Tishani Doshi
When I see the houses in this city,  
the electric gates and uniformed men  
employed to guard the riches of the rich,  
the gilded columns and gardens,  
the boats on water, I wonder,  
how to describe my home to you:  
the short, mud walls,  
the whispering roof, the veranda  
on which my whole family  
used to spread sheets and sleep.

The year I came to find work in the city,  
my wife painted our house white  
so it would be brighter than the neighbours'.  
I beat her for her foolishness.  
The children are hungry, I said,  
the cow is old,  
the money collector is after my blood,  
and you steal like a magpie—  
half a month's wage—to decorate  
your nest like a shiny jewel?

The monsoon finally arrived the year I left,  
dripped through the thatch,  
peeled paint off the walls.  
The wells grew full and overflowed.  
The farmers rejoiced in the fields.  
My son sat with his mouth open  
catching drops of water like a frog.  
My wife clung to the walls and wept.

When I fall asleep on the pavements  
in this city, I try to imagine my wife's skin  
against mine, the kohl in her eyes,  
the white walls, the whole village sky  
bearing down upon us  
with all the weight of the stars.  
I think of returning to that life,  
but mostly I try to remember
how the world was once.
I want to open my mouth like my son,
and swallow things whole—
feel water filling all the voids,
until I am shaped back into existence.

Tishani Doshi
Love In Carlisle

Girls were crying yesterday in their ball gowns;
Holding each other up like poles of wilted beanstalks.
I wanted to carry them into the streets.
To the unused railroad track in the middle of town,
Unwrap the past and lay before them
A fragile girl I once knew, walking toward love
In a thin, determined way. That she should live here too —
In this town of carefully-guarded houses
And old ladies in rocking chairs
In fake pearls and printed button-down dresses.

Girls are crying in their ball gowns and boys
Are holding them up and taking them to the streets,
To warehouses or backs of deserted pick-up trucks.
A troubadour waits on a wooden porch
For the faultless girl, to speak her name,
Undress her, give noise to her that is new and violent.
The old ladies form a line and hold photographs
Against their faces where the skin used to be unbroken.
They step out from their dresses and kick off their shoes,
Cross over the barren tracks in their solitary dance.

Tishani Doshi
Ultimately, we will lose each other to something. I would hope for grand circumstance — death or disaster. But it might not be that way at all. It might be that you walk out one morning after making love to buy cigarettes, and never return, or I fall in love with another man. It might be a slow drift into indifference. Either way, we'll have to learn to bear the weight of the eventuality that we will lose each other to something. So why not begin now, while your head rests like a perfect moon in my lap, and the dogs on the beach are howling? Why not reach for the seam in this South Indian night and tear it, just a little, so the falling can begin? Because later, when we cross each other on the streets, and are forced to look away, when we've thrown the disregarded pieces of our togetherness into bedroom drawers and the smell of our bodies is disappearing like the sweet decay of lilies — what will we call it, when it's no longer love?

Tishani Doshi
Ode To Drowning

is it or is it not
the cold monsoon
bearing the shape
of my dark lord,
speaking of his cruelty
his going away?
— Nammalvar

i.

This is an ode
to be sung
in the latest hour of night

when the rain clouds
have gathered
over shingled roofs

and blue-skinned gods
with magical flutes
seduce the virgins to dance

For there is no love
without music
No rain
without peacocks
perched
in branches

of sandalwood trees
with plumes
of angels

and voices of thieves
pleading for their loves
to return

ii.
If rain signals
the lover’s return
then I am lost

in the desert
burning
like the brain fever bird

looking for images of you
through mesquite
and teak

Because there's no sign
of you
or what I know

to be as you
only clouds adrift
in a vanquished sky

like vines
of throbbing arms
and mouths

drinking at the shore
intoxicated
with the night

iii.

There are as many ways
of yearning
as there are ways for rain

to fall
slow
incessant
gentle
squalling
melancholy
warm
It's that old idea
of drowning
in another to find the self

the compliance
that water gives in form
and depth

to something else
But what if the humming bees
are quiet

and the garlands of jasmine
have been laid out
to dry

How long to wait
for everything to turn
heavy with flower
immodestly green
washed of dirt

iv.

It's desire after all
that spins us
Demands to be praised

as though it were new
like the stillness
before the first monsoon

when the hymen
of the earth
is torn into

and the brazen smell
of damp
fills the air

Must there be surprise
after we've thundered
and rolled
and appeased our thirst
when the silence returns
again

In truth
isn't it a waiting
that never ends

like the chasm between
the cycles of the world
Between separation

and union
longing and abandonment
And somewhere

between the waning
isn't this what
we're left with

the music
of uncertainty
the aftertaste of rain

Tishani Doshi
Ode To The Walking Woman

(After Alberto Giacometti)

Sit -
you must be tired
of walking,
of losing yourself
this way:
a bronzed rib
of exhaustion
thinned out
against the dark.
Sit -
there are still things
to believe in;
like civilizations
and birthing
and love.
And ancestors
who move
like silent tributaries
from red-earthed villages
with history cradled
in their mythical arms.
But listen,
what if they swell
through the gates
of your glistening city?
Will you walk down
to the water’s edge,
immerse your feet
so you can feel them
dancing underneath?
Mohenjodaro’s brassy girls
with banged wrists
and cinnabar lips;
turbaned Harappan mothers
standing wide
on terracotta legs;
egg-breasted Artemis –
Inana, Isthar, Cybele, clutching their bounteous hearts
in the unrepentant dark,
crying: 'Daughter,
where have the granaries
and great baths disappeared?
Won’t you resurrect yourself,
make love to the sky,
reclaim the world.'

Tishani Doshi
In Nairobi, an albino boy followed me everywhere
Peering at me from behind cupboards and trees,
Chortling with glee: Hello fine!
Here is space. Here is space.

It is open and large and dark here
And I feel open and large and dark.

I’m moving into a scene already imagined,
A life already waiting under the topaz sky,
Under the blue lacquered trees where the dust
Is spiralling up to hide it.

The boy teaches me names of animals.
They are spread out and running under us:
Giraffe, lion, hippopotamus — Twiga, simba, kiboko.

What if it isn’t true that we inherit our homes?
It’s lovely here isn’t, the boy says.
It’s lovely.

So we must make meanings of things:
A carcass of a jackal in a baobab tree,
A man’s fingers pushing up the straps of your maroon dress,
A low wood-beamed room full of misgivings.

The boy holds me in his lanolin arms,
Looks at me as though I were a sheet of glass,
A single antelope facing a row of acacias,
An unending ruinous landscape.

It’s the hardest thing to do —
To take him aside, feel his pigmentless skin —
Explain how there’s so much space
I’ve lost myself.

How I cannot be this woman
Looking to a foreign sky for the day,
Disappeared again, leaving only a dim glow
In my hands to remember it by.

Tishani Doshi
The Affair

These days men on curbs are curved
Like farm tools or bits of wire,
Like unruly saucers of tea flung
Into the trees, the walls, the breeze.

Houses are shifting too —
Up and going on emerald shoes,
Colliding on streets, spitting
Bits of brick and splinter on our sleeves.

This one holds a wife
Standing at the bleak stairway of a dream,
Grappling with her wedding veil;
With mothballs and pearls and girls.

See, the husband is rising — a shipwreck
Disappearing against a photograph
Of beaten love. He’s separating pink
From dark, fodder from cloud,

Movement from half-movement.
We can throw away these things:
The sweat, the chests, the hair,
The dead weight of despair dropping
Into the living rooms of our lives;
The broken furniture, the cracked foundations.
I claim you back, the wife says to him.
She claims him back.

But what of this youngest one
Inching along the sinew of the floor?
He knows nothing— little kernel of snail —
Except to unfurl along his silver trail.

Tishani Doshi
The Art of Losing

It begins with the death of the childhood pet - the dog who refuses to eat for days, the bird or fish found sideways, dead. And you think the hole in the universe, caused by the emission of your grief, is so deep it will never be rectified. But it's only the start of an endless litany of betrayals: the cruelty of school, your first bastard boyfriend, the neighbour's son going slowly mad. You catch hold of losing, and suddenly, it's everywhere - the beggars in the street, the ravage of a distant war in your sleep. And when grandfather hobbles up to the commode to relieve himself like a girl without bothering to shut the door, you begin to realize what it means to exist in a world without. People around you grow old and die, and it's explained as a kind of going away - to God, or rot, or to return as an ant. And once again, you're expected to be calm about the fact that you'll never see the dead again, never hear them enter a room or leave it,
never have them touch
the soft parting of your hair.
Let it be, your parents advise:
it's nothing.
Wait till your favourite aunt
keels over in a shopping mall,
or the only boy you loved
drives off a cliff and survives,
but will never walk again.
That'll really do you in,
make you want to slit your wrists
(in a metaphorical way, of course,
because you're strong and know
that life is about surviving these things).
And almost all of it might
be bearable if it would just end
at this. But one day your parents
will sneak into the garden
to stand under the stars,
and fade, like the lawn,
into a mossy kind of grey.
And you must let them.
Not just that.
You must let them pass
into that wilderness
and understand that soon,
you'll be called aside
to put away your paper wings,
to fall into that same oblivion
with nothing.
As if it were nothing.

Tishani Doshi
The Day We Went To The Sea

The day we went to the sea
mothers in Madras were mining
the Marina for missing children.
Thatch flew in the sky, prisoners
ran free, houses danced like danger
in the wind. I saw a woman hold
the tattered edge of the world
in her hand, look past the temple
which was still standing, as she was —
miraculously whole in the debris of gaudy
South Indian sun. When she moved
her other hand across her brow,
in a single arcing sweep of grace,
it was as if she alone could alter things,
bring us to the wordless safety of our beds.

Tishani Doshi
Turning Into Men Again

This morning men are returning to the world,
Waiting on the sides of blackened pavements
For a rickshaw to carry them away
On the sharp pins and soles of their dancing feet.

They must go to the houses of their childhoods
To be soothed. They must wait for the wheels
To appear from the thin arm of road.
They must catch the crack in the sky

Where the light shifts from light to dark
To light again, like the body in the first stages of love;
Angering, heightening, spreading:
Bent knees, bent breath.

Now they are moving, changing colours.
Women are standing at the thresholds of doors
Holding jars of oil, buckets of hot water and salt,
Calamine, crushed mint and drink.

Some crawl into their mother’s laps,
Collapse against the heavy bosoms of old nannies,
Search for the girl who climbed with them
To the tin roof for the first time.

Inside, in the shadows of pillars,
Fathers and grandfathers are stepping down
From picture frames with secrets on their lips,
Calling the lost in from their voyages.

Tishani Doshi
Undertwo

I.
I hold my husband in plastic bags.
He’s whispering like a soft, worn thing,
dropp me here, dropp me gently.

Everything is terribly light — incense,
Ash, the thinness of his voice falling
Into waves, disappearing.

II.

The sea picks up my life,
Empties it across itself.
I see it spilling over, dissolving.
Here are the forgotten parts —
A pink night sky, broken bangles,
A fisherman walking away from the light.

There you are, held up with wind and sails.
If you would turn, you would hear me say,
Come back, my arms ache from all the carrying.
Underneath, you’re lost in a place
Where everything is scraped together
And nothing is thrown back.

You sink. Colours dissolve.
You move hair from your forehead,
Salt from your eyes. You’re left with greys —
Calling out to me, bubbles
Instead of words. It is a silent death:
One I feel before it happens.

III.

Was there a child then? The child I could not have?
With hair that shakes and shines as though a sun
Were gleaming under her roots. I want to stroke her.
Lean over and touch her. Come here, let me hold you.
I want only daughters — a thick rope of black
Around her neck. She calls; the beginning of your name.

If I were really a mother, I would do it quick
And painless, out of love. Take the hair —
Twist, yank, drop; tilt her over like a bag of sand.

It would be done then. There would be less
To clean up. She will never be like me.
The death of her child will kill her.

IV.

If you must collect pictures, take them
When I’m looking away. Here’s a beach again —
The nets spread on the sand drying,
A fish in the corner slapping its tail.

Nothing matters then,
We’ll meet when we’re warm and dry.
Take this picture — my shoulders, the bone,
The shine, the criss-cross of white straps.

V.

I’m eight-years-old, running into the sea.
Run in, my mother says, Go on then like a naked girl.
Nobody cares, nobody’s watching.

The sea pulls me in around the ankles,
Grabs the sand from underneath, shows me
A glimpse of my life, what it will be like later.

It was all calm once, long ago, a teardropp
Between apartment buildings. But here in my life;
Hiss hiss. This one is no good.
This one doesn’t love you.
This one doesn’t know what you need.
Leave, let go, stop.

The frothy fingers at my throat,
The voice pouring into me,
A terrace of vanishing blue.

You will leave this one.
You will leave this place.
For a while you will know nothing.

Tishani Doshi
Walking Around  after Neruda

It happens that I am tired of being a woman.
It happens that I cannot walk past country clubs or consulates without considering the hags, skinny as guitar strings, foraging in the rubbish.

All along the streets there are forlorn mansions where girls have grown up and vanished. I am vanishing too. I want nothing to do with gates nor balconies nor flat-screen TVs.

It happens that I am tired of my veins and my hips, and my navel and my sorrows. It happens that I am tired of being a woman.

Just the same it would be joyous
To flash my legs at the drivers playing chess, to lead the old man at house 38 onto the tarred road to lie down under the laburnum dripping gold.

I do not want to keep growing in this skin, to swell to the size of a mausoleum. I do not want to be matriarch or mother. Understand, I am only in love with these undrunk breasts.

And when Monday arrives with the usual battalion of pear-shaped wives who do battle in grocery store aisles, I'll be stalking the fields of concrete and ash,

the days pushing me from street to street, leading me elsewhere - to houses without ceiling fans where daughters disappear and the walls weep.

I will weep too for high-heeled beauty queens, for sewing machines and chickens in cages. I will walk with my harness
and exiled feet through cravings
and renunciations, through heaps
of midnight wreckages
where magistrates of crows gather
to sing the same broken song
of unforgiving loss.

Tishani Doshi
What The Body Knows

The body dances in a darkened room
Turning itself inside out
So that skin can face the light in fractures,
Slip like shadow through skeleton walls,
Begin to cry — really — to scream
About the tarnished weight of dreams.

This has been a drift after all.
The body returns to its original place,
Moves from one to the other — creeps —
Tries to flee itself, lone trunk,
Searches for remain of bark,
Hints of what it used to be.

Perhaps an ocean framed in bone,
A pair of birds in early white,
Flying from this dream to the next
Fixing the gaps between memory
And reverberation; binding spine
On vein, feather to lesion.

The body collects its wandering parts,
Leans back through layers
Of thickening water; roots above
Boughs beneath, feet caving in to wonder.
It’s how the world reverses itself,
How the distant sky finds the earth.

Tishani Doshi