

Time is an egg or the night or forever

Tishani Doshi

What is the first measurement of time? A heartbeat, or the silence before? The old stories began with once upon a time, or some version of long ago there lived. In places where stories are still enacted in village squares over several nights, performances often begin with a drumbeat, which is a version of the heartbeat – thump thump, dddrrrrrrrm, listen, are you ready? After this first signal, there is anticipation. Time starts its delicious unfolding. Who will we meet and how will we feel? An infinitude of possibilities.

When we are in the time of a story, we forget the time around us, and this is perhaps why we go to story in the first place. To be afloat in time. To understand that time may carry on without us, but while we are alive, we find ways to participate in our collective dream of immortality. To live in a story is one way of understanding how time can be both present and eternal.

Here is my perfect reader, lying on a charpoy or a sofa. It is important that she is comfortable. She reads the first page, then the next. She keeps going with a few breaks, but she reads until the book is done. Time in a novel is dependent on the reader's time. If she can only manage a few pages before

falling asleep at night, it may take months to finish, and time may grow jumpy, the characters furtive. If she reads with few interruptions, there's a chance to enter the time of the novel and bring to the pages her own time – the sound of morning birds, rising to put together a hurried lunch, the hush of the sea. Years later, this reader may not remember all the people of this novel or their motivations, only what it felt like to be *in* the novel, to inhabit it the way I remember inhabiting the world of *Anna Karenina*. London, the year 2000. My blue-walled flat above the Finchley Road tube station. The frequent squeal of trains tunnelling under my bed. Anna. Her terrible decision with the train. The unbearable longing for a life different from the one you have, a life you can just about make out the shape of... but can't reach.

As children our comprehension of time is connected to action and space. Nap time and school time have little to do with being able to read the hands of a clock. I was eight when I had my first experience of time as existential. It was summer, and we were visiting my mother's family in North Wales. There was a playground down the street from my grandparent's house in Nercwys where my sister and I used to play with the other children. It retains mythical proportions for me – that playground. I remember my mother coming to fetch us one evening, saying it was late, past bedtime. I would not believe her because the sky was still a dusky blue. I had only ever known the tropical nights of Madras, where evening slipped so quickly into blackest night. Sleep was tied to night, and night was tied to dark. Many years later, when I began reading Indic love poetry, I understood why night was the most desperate time for separated lovers – described as an aeon, an endless chasm of waiting. I thought then about that Nercwys summer sky, how it went on and on.

As much as writing is about trying to capture the contemporaneity of ongoingness, there is also some part of writing that longs to leap across the present – to speak back to deep time, or speak forward to future time. To free itself from pendulum ticktock temporality. We write with the hope of time travel through language. That someone in the future may receive our poem-children and be amazed by them.

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Listening to the writer Anuk Arudpragasam recently, I was struck by something he said: that there are things that happen in people's lives that are brief, but whose consequences echo into the rest of their lives. Arudpragasam said that literature could restore time, give those moments more time than the world ever could. His novel, *A Passage North*, has in its shadowy background Sri Lanka's long bloody civil war and the culmination of that war in the genocide of Tamil civilians. The final third of the book, roughly a hundred pages, is a single scene of a cremation, where time is so slowed down it becomes impossible to look away. We are immersed in ritual, the funeral of one Tamil woman who comes to represent the many dead. It seems to me one of the most elegant and capacious powers of fiction – to honour by restoring time.

Time in a novel is rarely linear, even if it appears straightforward. There's always some kind of archaeology beneath or overstory above at play; levels of living and hiding. I think of a novel as its own universe. A writer creates not just an entire cosmology, but must hold it for the duration of the time they take to write the novel. I can think of no other process that must straddle so many time zones, but whose ultimate goal seems to be to want to escape time entirely. Part of the reason why books have been so important to me is that they hold moments of discovery, leading me

through trapdoors and secret stairways that seem to stop time. I heard once about a 42,000-year-old baby horse, a species now extinct, that was found perfectly intact with urine in its bladder and liquid blood in its veins, entombed in the ice of Siberia's Batagaika Crater. There are moments in a novel when you come across your own version of this animal, frozen but alive, a relic that is almost like a god, proof of existence, of continuity.

When I began writing my first novel, I remember struggling to write the simplest things – how to move the characters from one place to another, how to segue into a new scene. I tried to take cues from Bollywood films, how they use songs to drive narrative forward. Over the course of just one song, hero and heroine could transform from children into adults, from being friends into being lovers. In just a few minutes, with the swish of hips, three outfit changes and Lata Mangeshkar's voice, you could get to the part of the action that you were really interested in. Was it possible to create the equivalent of a Bollywood song sequence in a novel?

There are tricks a novelist can learn from cinema – how to skip ahead, zoom in, pan out, but ultimately, fiction is about the subterranean, the fill in the blanks of what can't be captured – the vast silos of human interiority.

Michael Ondaatje, in a conversation with the film editor Walter Murch, said that the structure of a book allows readers a more meditative participation because 'we are not bound by time'. By 'we', I assume he means not just writers of books, but readers too, and the way they are bound together in a particular experience of time that is not finite.

I wept both times I watched *The English Patient*, but my reading of the book remains more complex, mysterious. Books are always whispering to

their readers. One of the hiding places of time must surely be the imagination.

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Time is not the sole preserve of storytellers, although we often begin there. There are swathes of literature that are more interested in praise, the erotic, list-making, rather than saying *and then* this happened *and then* that happened. Plot, and by extension, story, is not the only route to understanding ourselves as a species. Poems do not have to be epic or even narrative to hold time. Take this 2,000-year-old Tamil love poem from the *Kuruntokai*, translated by A. K. Ramanujan:

What could my mother be
to yours? What kin is my father
to yours anyway? And how
did you and I meet ever?
But in love our hearts are as red
earth and pouring rain:
mingled
beyond parting.

Cempulappeyanrar, the poet this verse is attributed to, was writing in the Sangam tradition, collectives of poets who organized the Tamil land into five categories – mountainous, forested, agricultural, coastal and arid – each with its own codified world of animals, birds, trees, prevailing emotion, soil, time of day. It is the earliest kind of ecopoetry, attributing to ecological zones a grammar by which inner emotional lives could be navigated. Centuries later, I inhabit these same Tamil Nadu landscapes and feel I can echo back in answer to the poem and the poet. We are connected. Time

has dissolved. We are brought as close together as yesterday and tomorrow, just a breath separating us.

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When I was 26, I became a dancer, and grew convinced that time was held in the body. I had begun working with a choreographer who was 73. Her name was Chandralekha. I spent mornings in her dance theatre in Madras, and in the evenings, I'd return to her home, just a few paces away from the theatre. There were three large wooden swings in her front room, on which people sat and talked – lively salon-style gatherings where I mostly listened. It was my education. Those swings somehow represent the way I think about that time – not static and obdurate in the way a chair can be, but in constant flux, replete with glee. For five years there was a tunnel of dailiness and foreverness running between us that I can still access, even though it has been fifteen years that she's been gone.

In those years when I was dancing, I would touch the ground at the threshold of the theatre to take blessings of the earth before entering. It was a pause to acknowledge that I was passing from outside time to theatre time. Inside the theatre, time elongated, slowed down, struggled, soared. My dance partner and I did not rehearse to music. We had to keep our own time in silence. Chandralekha came from a Bharatnatyam dance background, which has an intricate structure of time called the tala or beat system with 35 varieties. She tried teaching me the difference between the three beat *ta ki ta ta ki ta* and the four beat *ta ka dhi mi*, but it was no use. I had to make my own system with the soundtrack available to me of the crows in the neem trees and the clang-clang of a vendor and his cart in the distance. When we travelled for performances to black boxes all over

the world, I tried to reimagine those sounds, the warm stone of our theatre floor, that cocoon of suspended time.

Our musicians would join us for our performances. They were Dhrupad singers who lived in Bhopal, and they measured time following the classical North Indian musical system which has its own complex time cosmology, of which I knew only the basics: ati-vilambit (very slow), vilambit (slow), madhya (medium), drut (fast), ati-drut (very fast). There was a whole vocabulary that passed between these musicians, and with the slightest shift in their bodies, they knew when to escalate, at what tempo, in what sequence. The two brothers who sang had diaphragms that could springboard into eternity. That's all I knew. And all of it was powered by breath. When they began singing in that slowest of slow time, it was like being in primordial space. Their first notes were waves that floated over me, lighting up my body like a house – all the rooms afire, all at once.

I began listening to Dhrupad when I wrote as a way of preparing my body to leave at the threshold outside time and surrender to the time of the book. Each morning at the desk was a new beginning. It felt like those moments backstage before a performance – the scritch scritch of the audience shuffling in, the musicians clearing their throats and fine-tuning their instruments.

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There is an idea of time as the flight of an arrow, with definitive beginning and end; an idea of time as serpent eating its tail; time as hourglass with shifting sands; time that is held in the land, in which ancestry is not a thing that has passed but is around us always. From the beginning, there have been civilizations who have learned to measure shadows as a way of telling

time, who have looked up at the stars and tried to align the time in their bodies with the patterns in the sky.

I like to think of time as an egg – a golden womb, as described in the creation hymn of the Rig Veda. Hiranyagarbha – a giant golden egg afloat in a sea of nothingness. In this time of neither nonexistence nor existence, neither death nor immortality, neither night nor day, there was only desire, which was the first seed, the creator. And after the creator, came the poets, seeking.

Time is talked about in terms of money or freedom, as a limited resource. But rather than think of time as productive or leisurely, triumph or failure, a more expansive way would be to think of how time can be renewed. The daily making and unmaking of time, the rituals and practices artists make for themselves. Every day you go chasing that most elusive note or word, so as to be able to deepen or transform what you have been able to do thus far. Every day you become more comfortable with failure. Call it riyaz (training, practice), call it sadhana (spiritual meditation), call it 'Lying in a Hammock, at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island' – that poem by James Wright, which ends enigmatically with the line, 'I have wasted my life.' Are those hours lost, or are those hours everything?

Time is an egg. Come, crack it open.

Tishani Doshi

Tishani Doshi publishes poetry, essays and fiction. Her most recent books are *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*, shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award, and a novel, *Small Days and Nights*, shortlisted for the RSL Ondaatje Prize and a New York Times Bestsellers Editor's Choice. For fifteen years she worked as a dancer with the Chandralekha group in Madras, India. She has interviewed over a hundred writers about the craft of writing, and publishes essays in *The Hindu*, *Granta*, *The National*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Lithub* and *Corriere della Sera*. She is a visiting associate professor at New York University Abu Dhabi, and otherwise lives on a beach in Tamil Nadu. *A God at the Door*, her fourth full-length collection of poems, was shortlisted for the Forward Prize 2021.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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