

WRITERSMOSAIC

Tishani Doshi

In Conversation with Vayu Naidu

'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'

— Tishani Doshi

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Vayu Naidu talks to Tishani Doshi about the round-the-world adventures her poetry has taken her on.

[Music]

Vayu Naidu (VN): Welcome, Tishani. Such a pleasure to have you with us.

Tishani Doshi (TD): Thank you, Vayu. Lovely to be here.

VN: Great. All the way from Madras, Chennai, into this. And you've traveled through to Dublin. You're actually doing a tour of your book.

TD: Yeah.

VN: But I'm not going to stick to a chronology or linearity of time. Your poetry is a real sort of activism of the soul, and it has that substance. And really what I wanted to share with our *WritersMosaic* listeners and readers was that arc that you take. You look at issues on climate change, gender and other identities, and you talk about war, but war with a call to life. And we'll go through your collections and your readings, which would be absolutely splendid for us. I was wondering if you'd take us through your first

adventure of this project on the Russian ship with these high school children. So, tell us about it, talk us through it.

TD: So, essentially, I was a poet for hire and only interested in traveling the world in my 20s. And any time I got the opportunity to do so, I would go. And Antarctica came up as a conversation. Two Canadian friends who run this organisation called Students on Ice, who had been taking children, celebrities, and rich people to the poles, and then shifted gears and said, 'Look, we want to make a difference, so let's take young people. And let's choose the really top percent of these high school students, who are then going to become the future glaciologists and marine biologists and all of this.' And so, I went along as a kind of babysitter because they're still teenagers no matter how smart they were, and they needed looking after.

VN: And how many days was this for?

TD: It was a two-week trip. And it remains one of the places that I have never been able to write a poem about, and—which is strange because I always write about places very important to me. But it was a truly surreal experience, and I was unable to find my holding there, primarily because humans have never lived there as a civilisation, and your sense of perspective is completely out. I did write a few articles about that, and

one of them happened to get onto the newspaper, the Hindu newspaper in Chennai, and then it got onto the syllabus. And for the last 20 years, I've been bombarded by teachers and students asking me what I meant when I said this or that. And I said, 'Look, that was a long time ago.'

VN: It's a fantastic work. It's a real legacy of understanding the relationship of, in a way, us humans to the history of the Earth. I think that that was quite incredible.

TD: Yeah, absolutely. The sense of connection, the sense of our relationship to time, I think, which really you understand how minuscule the human element of being on this planet has been and how deep the time goes back in the past. And I think, this was many years ago, but the foreshadowing of the sense of climate change and what does it mean to go through these places, to go through lightly. So yeah, it was an extraordinary experience. And it was educational because I also was sitting in on the classes, and I kind of remember it being this life-changing moment, but at the same time I feel, yeah, I was privileged to go, I don't feel I will go back, but that was the one time.

VN: Yeah, it's a real moment in time, in a way. And it also, while reading the essay, it brought to me your, in a way, the form in poetry where you are, as a poet, a vehicle

acoustically of absorbing and witnessing and take that forward. So, I'm going to move to your next collection. By the way, the essay that Tashani wrote was called 'Journey to the End of the Earth'. It's an essay. It's available quite widely online. Very educational. So, it takes you right from—I think, great material for sixth formers. So, now I'm going to move us quickly on to your poetry, which is beyond the geographic, and it moves into the frontiers of gender. Now, you're someone, long before Me Too came up as a great movement, you were looking now through words and through performance to break away from that silence that many women undergoing violence have been shackled by. And that collection [is] called *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*. It's written for somebody, but it doesn't matter. I think it's for all women. It addresses all women and changing times.

TD: Yeah, I've been—I think, interestingly, when you—I became a dancer in my mid-twenties, and I thought that I understood my body quite well, and I understood that I'd been lugging around this thing without really understanding it, even though I was very athletic. And I think there was a real inward movement for me to understand what it means to navigate the world with this anatomy, with this frame as a woman, with this frame as a woman in this particular country, and when I say that I mean in India, where you have this strange scale, let's say, of adoration, of worship, of mother, of goddess, of feminine principle, which is very, very primal, the beginning of all life, and

where there are the statistics of female infanticide and feticide, of rapes, and all the dowry deaths and all of that, as we well know, because it's there in the papers and around us. And I think in my very first collection, I have a poem which is, I think, on the A-levels here, called 'The Deliverer'. And that's about a baby that my mother brought to America. And it was from a convent in Kerala. And essentially, the understanding that no boys were ever abandoned, and it was always the girl babies. And there was this examining of behaviors of society, of what does it mean to be in a society which has this construct of patriarchy, but within that, this divine feminine principle of the roadside shrines of the goddess?

VN: It's such a paradox.

TD: It's a paradox, yeah. And I think that all of my work has come from that paradox, that sense of this frame of girl, woman, being incredibly strong, incredibly powerful, able to sustain an entire universe type of thing, just from this body comes forth the whole planet, and at the same time being so violated. And I think in *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*, that was the—really a couple of things that informed that collection: one was the incident of Jyoti Singh being raped on a bus in Delhi, but it was also a very dear friend of mine who was murdered and raped in her apartment in Goa, Monika. And it was this sense of that violence circling close. And you could no longer say, 'Oh,

it's so far away. It happened somewhere else.' All the excuses that are given. 'You shouldn't have worn this. You should have stayed in the house,' blah, blah, blah. And we know those statistics are—and the reality is that it is often something that is coming from very close to home, and that's what many women go through.

So, yeah, I think for me, I'm really interested in what do I do with this? Because writing about violence, you also have the capacity to double the violence. And so, you don't want to do that. You don't want it to be just voyeuristic in that way and lurid and just repeating of, 'Oh, this is what happened. That is what happened.' Oh, horrible. But how to harness and how to work within the areas of reclamation and transformation, which is, I think, deeply that language and dance and art can do, is taking this emotion, this feeling, this despair, and converting it into something holdable, bearable, or even something strident. And I think *Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods*, for me, was this real rage, this channeling of rage, of anger, of hauntedness, of an anthem of girls and women marching out of the woods with weapons and with battle cries and the sense of we will not be silenced or vanished. And it just happened in that moment, and then, Me Too came a little later. And it was written out of years of—I don't know how long, yeah. And I think in a way it's always going to be one of the topics or one of the issues that I think about because I feel this is the body I have, this is the society I belong to,

and that's how I move through the world, through trying to navigate these dichotomies.

VN: And yes, it's really a sense of the rage where I found it, in a way, if I can use the word therapeutic, and this is where your art and what you have felt as this vehicle absorbing, witnessing, that's the aesthetic activism. This is a wonderful thing. And I can't quote it verbatim, but Jung talks about what is loneliness. It's not about not having anybody around, but for a lot of women, not being able to talk about it or even feeling that they'd be understood. And you really unleash the tongue, and your performance also gesturally does that. So, would you give us the pleasure of reading from it, please?

TD: Okay.

[TD reads '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 briar. 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.'

TD: I haven't read that one in a while.

VN: It's very powerful however you read it. I've heard it when you have performed it. So, did the performance come after the poem?

TD: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I never, ever thought that I would combine movement and poetry together in that performative way that I have done or experimented with because my world of dance was quite separate and then the world of writing had been quite separate. And it's only when I stopped dancing with the company and after 15 years of performing that I felt this sense of gap of I had been training and working with the body for so long, and to just abandon it felt like a shame and a waste. And I thought, *well, what can I do?* And so, it really came as an invitation, a small experiment, very small scale. And I created *Girls*, and primarily because I knew that the form of a dance, which is very rooted to the ground where I don't actually even move my feet, that worked with the poem in a textured—and in a way that was adding to—I didn't want to just do something.

VN: And if I can add that part of Chandralekha, your sort of mentor—

TD: Yes.

VN: —choreographer guide, she was very much a deconstructionist of traditional forms to come to the essence of things. And when I watched you perform, it's from that lineage of a certain martial art.

TD: Yes.

VN: Of a Southern Indian martial artist.

TD: Yeah. It's Kalaripayattu from Kerala. And I think the geometry of Bharatnatyam very much in Chandralekha's work and yoga also as a form which I've practiced. And I think, yes, there's a certain abstraction, but also this just the unadorned body, not prettified with flowers and jewelry and—this very, very unadorned body. And that—in slowness also, which was a sort of trademark of Chandralekha's work. But I think, yes, the sense of what is the vehicle then of the body on stage? What is the body capable of doing? And in this case, I was thinking, *I am talking about these things which are precisely to do with body, and how can that same body then channel back this rage in a way that creates something very powerful?* There's just one lone body on stage in this very martial

position. And so, it worked for that. And I performed it for years, and I continue to. It hasn't gone out of the repertoire, let's say.

VN: And that's why I felt it had that—it's the stillness that in a way, I think, contains and manifests or disseminates the rage. Now, you've toured it sort of worldwide. And I have seen, well, I've seen a recording of it as well for an Indian audience and a mixed Indian audience with men, women, and quite middle class in a way. And that was received with great sense of awe. And have you done it in the Gulf? I mean, you've been based in Abu Dhabi for some time.

TD: I have performed it everywhere. I've performed it in Australia. I've performed it in festivals all over the world. And yeah, the response is always—I think it generates a visceral response. The poem generates a visceral response and the performance too. And that was, I suppose, what I was trying to do is to not sit with the silencing of this, but to hand it back to the reader, to the viewer.

VN: No, thank you for that. And thank you for the magnificent reading. It gives us great sense of that. So, I'm sort of wondering, in a way, I suppose I'm going back in time, and I'm looking at your collection from *Everything Begins Elsewhere*. Again, a terrific title.

TD: That's, I have to say, from John Burnside, who is a poet I love very much. And I was very sad when he passed away recently. But it's from a line of one of his books.

VN: I love the sense of elsewhere, its origins, it's scattered. And it's—I was very struck by this—the poem, which I keep calling the Welsh poem, [TD laughs] but it's not. It's a 'Memory of Wales'.

TD: Yeah.

VN: Which is one of your landscapes of origin, I should say. So, would you both read and tell us about the poem?

TD: So, this poem came in rare form, almost the way it exists on the page now, very little editing. I wanted to write about this feeling of returning to my mother's village in North Wales, the village of [missing name], which is a one street village in North Wales. And there is a playground – and it's still there – where it was just magical for me as a child to be in this playground because again, the sense of time completely collapsed because summer skies—I remember my parents coming and saying, 'Where have you been? It's nine o'clock.' And it was not a nine o'clock sky, which as you know in Madras, it's black, dark, pitch black by then. And this was still light. And I thought, *we can just*

keep playing in this endlessness. And in that dissolving of time, I thought how strange it would be and how possible for me to meet my mother as a young girl and for us to play in this playground. And wouldn't it be possible in a place like this? And so the poem is a sestina, which really works on the repetition of these six end words. And I was thinking about how memory works, and particularly for me, the most potent season is summer. Summer is this endlessness from school, you have these months off, and for us, it was also the time that we would go to Wales, not every year, once every three years or something.

VN: For me it was mango season.

TD: Yeah, and this time stacking up one on top of the other so that this change of age can happen and we could meet you know. And so, yeah, I'll just read the beginning of that poem. It's called 'Memory of Wales'. And the end words are 'memory', 'light', 'playground', 'this', 'ate', and 'mother'

[TD reads from 'Memory of Wales']

This is how it arrives.

The memory of Wales on a day of scanty light.

I'm walking towards the playground.

I will never know newness like this, or fear.

I'm walking and I'm eight.

I see a girl on the swing, my mother,

or at least a version of my mother,

fair-haired, small.

In the memory of Wales it is often cold.

I'm eight and the cows are stalking light

like monsters in the playground.

I will never know newness like this.

I will never know a world like this.

This is my childhood and my mother's.

Everything begins in the playground.

Beauty, decay, love, lilies.

Memory starts here on the stairs, in skylight.

Cows chew eternally.

I'm eight in this memory.

I'm always eight.'

TD: And it goes.

VN: It goes on. Yeah. So, it's like the eternal dream in a way. It's got that lovely dream quality.

TD: Yeah, and it—the poem shifts, and towards the end, in the envoy, there's the sense of the mother character has met a man and she's going away. 'I'm eight but I've always known she'll leave all this, forsaking after all is a kind of memory. My mother is eight and in Wales again. She's in the playground of memory, swinging towards light, towards this.' So, really, I think time has been my big preoccupation. And I, as a dancer, you're thinking about the space and the time within a particular context of the stage. And in the poem, you have so much more freedom, so much more imagination to construct this—it's almost a small movie of that collapsing, of mother and daughter meeting in the playground, and then mother becoming a child again, mother going off. I really—and the sestina is a great form for this kind of thing because it keeps bringing you back to those words.

VN: Yes, that's what I love. And there's a musicality because it's like also time and the beat or the ticking of the [missing word] as I think of it, as particles. And you've really—so, and it's also that fluidity of what is mother and daughter? We are ourselves both, isn't it?

TD: Yeah, exactly, exactly. And this whole turning into, turning away from, becoming, yeah, it's a very nesting idea of—which shifts in your lifetime. But I think when I wrote this poem, it really crystallised and organised certain things for me in this head and really pinned to that place this—I attributed this magic. And every time I go back to [missing name], I go to that playground. And I'm there, and those cows are still there in the fields. And all the—so many of the people are long gone, my grandparents and aunts and uncles and all of this. The feeling is you're so far away from it, but that playground suddenly takes you back into childhood. You just tumble into it.

VN: It's a real Welsh eternity in one sense. But it's how you capture that. And it's the sense of mothers also becoming our children in a way. But I love the way it takes one out of the selves, of yourself and your mother, and that's the eternal thing with the cows also chewing the grass.

TD: Yeah, yeah. The witnessing, watching.

VN: It's fabulous. And the maternity of cows. It's very interesting, isn't it, in a English or, well, I shouldn't say English, in a Western sense, a cow is, well, it's quite pejorative, whereas I think for us as Indians, in a way there's a comfort, but there's a reverence to

it. I love that little touch you give it. So beautiful, thank you. It's also you're looking at these identities. I mean, yes, on the surface of it is the Welshness, that moment, it's part of your history. But then I was fascinated by this poem is in that collection, isn't it, *The Adulterous Citizen*? Love the title, again. So, tell us about it and read a bit from it.

TD: Sure. So, again, a borrowed title from Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*, which is about Bombay. And he writes, 'I am an adulterous resident: when I am in one city, I am dreaming of the other. I am an exile; citizen of the country of longing.' I spent so much of my life being in between places and suffering from that, having this deep longing, mainly my longing for India, I must say. When I left home to go to study in America, I was away in college and then working, so there was a period of about eight years when I was away, and I was longing always for something, of going back. And I think this idea of walking down the streets of Bombay and craving something in New York, there is something very, very appealing, but it can also go into a disorder in a way. And I started to think about what this idea of elsewhere means. What does it mean to then be in a place, to inhabit it completely without wanting to be anywhere else? And actually, the only place that I've ever succeeded, I'll say, in feeling that I don't want to be anywhere but here is where I live now by the sea. When I'm there, I don't want to be anywhere else. So, in a way, that's a great gratification and a great homecoming. And I

think this poem, I was beginning to start and nudge towards this sense of can't you just be in the place. So, yeah, I'll read a bit of it.

[TD reads 'The Adulterous Citizen']

'When it comes to it, there's only the long paved road that leads to a house with a burning light, a house you can never own but allows you to sleep in its bed without demanding sex, eat from its cupboards without paying, lie in the granite cool of its tub without drowning. And only when the first shards of day slice through the blinds of the basement windows, nudging you with something of a whisper, something like maybe it's time to go, do you finally drag your suitcases up the carpeted stairs, out the front door, on to the summer pavements. It is nothing like losing a lover or leaving behind the lanes of childhood, nothing like scaling the winged walls of memory to discover your friends have packed up their boxes and vanished. More like stumbling into a scene from the future, where the ghost of a husband beckons with pictures of a family you no longer recognize and other people's children race across the grass, lulling you into belief that you can always return like this, without key in hand, to lie in the folds of one city while listening to the jagged, carnal breaths of another.'

VN: It's the real final sighing place. And it's not as though you don't travel and you continue to live out of suitcases as well, but it's that you found your place.

TD: Yeah, I read the whole thing because I realised I can't extract from it.

VN: I'm glad you did.

[laughs]

TD: But yeah, I think that sense of when – I read this poem now and again, it's been a long time, it's an old poem – when I read that, I read it now as a longing for wanting to have a place and I didn't for so long. For so long, I was this itinerant wandering person/poet/dancer, looking for my place in the world. And I really think so much of the endeavor as a poet, for me, has been the relationship to self and the world. And how do you make your space in the world? And where is it going to be? And how do you negotiate that? And it's always changing. But for me, I know that home, return, Madras, this cycle of leaving and coming back, leaving and coming back, the return is a very important And I begin my novel, *Small Days and Nights*, with the return to Madras. And even the first one, *The Pleasure Seekers*, is all about the comings and the goings. And I think, for me, that is the most potent feeling: the return home.

VN: It really is. And also, it's interesting, it's the coast. I have to say, I share this immensely.

TD: We do.

VN: I think good old Woolf when she was talking, it is 'room of one's own'. But with us, it's really that earth, the salt air, the dogs, the coast. And I can see, yeah, we—the paradox of always being the itinerant, but the return is always the anchor.

TD: Yeah. And this sense of suddenly being still, suddenly arriving and staying and not being—removing some of the restlessness, let's say. And restlessness is wonderful, and it creates wonderful energy and magic, and without restlessness, we would be stagnant. But I think this was an early attempt to try and say, look, you can't constantly be in this state where you are longing. You just need to find the place where you belong and be there and see then how it goes.

VN: Yeah, because I think too much longing just breaks—I think that's something.

TD: Yeah, a little bit of that longing is very sweet, I think, and it's a wonderful feeling. Even in Madras, I will, of course, long to be away from Madras. I will long to be walking

down the streets of London and all kinds of things, sitting in a park, things that you can't do here, you do there. But I think the sense of finding a place and that being your place has also been a big project for me.

VN: You absolutely nail it by saying it's the return. That's crucial because that holds so much of going out, but always knowing, like a wave, you're back in the centre.

TD: Yeah, yeah that's lovely.

VN: Thank you for that. Tsunami; you were also on the coast when it happened. And I remember I had such vivid memories of it as well. And you've placed it in this poem, 'Homecoming'. Is it possible to read or tell us from it?

TD: Sure. So this is from the first collection, *Countries of the Body*. And I was actually in Madras, at my parents' house, and we lived quite close to the sea in Besant Nagar. And there was some neighbor who called and said, 'Fishermen have said that the sea has come to the land.' And it was Boxing Day. We went in our pajamas and nighties to the Besant Nagar beach to see what had happened, and everything looked fine. And actually, I have two poems about this. One is called 'The Day We Went to the Sea'. Both are in this collection. The first one, there was an image of a woman holding her sari,

and she was looking at the horizon. And I'll never forget it. It just formed such a strong impact. It was as though she was holding up this whole thing, this whole event, and the unbelievability of what had happened. And then, of course, the next days of the news of the endlessness of this list of of the many places and people who had been affected by the tsunami. But I think Madras itself is a place that is very defined by its relationship to water. So, the tsunami is one of many. We've also had cyclones, we have floods, we have almost reached Day Zero, we are constantly in danger of over flooding or drought. And I think that that relationship to water, again, because now I live on the sea, on a beach, with the sea in view all the time, that you're very aware of this sense of fragility of living in this kind of an environment. But 'Homecoming' is a combination, I suppose. Let me see if I remember the poem. It's been a while.

[TD reads from 'Homecoming']

'I forgot how Madras loves noise
Loves neighbours and pregnant women
And Gods and babies

And Brahmins who rise
Like fire hymns to sear the air
With habitual earthquakes.

How funeral processions clatter
Down streets with drums and rose-petals,
Dancing death into deafness.

How even colour can never be quiet
How fisherwomen in screaming red
With skirts and incandescent third eyes
And bangles like rasping planets

And Tamil women on their morning walks
In saris and jasmine and trainers
Can shred the day and all its skinny silences.

I forgot how a man lying under the body
Of a tattered boat can ask for promises;
How they can be as silent as the sea

On a wounded day, altering the ground
Of the earth as simply as the sun filtering through
The monsoon rain dividing everything.'

TD: So, that poem is, yeah, that last bit is, I think, to do with the relationship to the silence of that time. And I was—I'm always struck by talking about the return in Madras of the level of noise. It's quite at a level: the vegetable guy, the bells, there's a lot of noise. And that moment on the beach when we went, it felt so hushed and quiet. And it was this thing of can't believe what happened, that intake of breath. And I think that was the sense of this strangest of homecomings where everything is silent. So, yeah.

VN: It's very interesting you really pin that because, for me, I really started feeling I belonged to Chennai after that tsunami because I walked up towards the sea edge, and you could see the steeples of the shore temples the water had dragged straight back. A lot of women casualties because their hair got caught in the splinters. And much as we say, 'Oh, there's no education among the fishermen,' I remember this boy who tends goats. And he suddenly said in Tamil, the word they use is the sea has 'boiled over'. Sort of foam. Boiled over. And we saw these waves. And then this boy relating this incident of 'I was taking the goats out, and then suddenly I saw this, and it reminded me of the street storytelling theater that comes in the village. And they told a

story about one of these old sages who went down into the sea when the great ocean came.' So, it was this wonderful—it's this—it's so much vibrance that happens, but it's that silence. And suddenly it was—the fishermen started having this talk about betrayal. 'The sea has betrayed me. She never warned.' And it's very interesting to just share that sense of belonging and this coast, which is normally we consider, *oh, you've got the sea's edge*, but it's very grounding.

TD: It also recalls, if you're thinking of Tamil Sangam poetry, the thousand year old poetry, gatherings that went on for hundreds of years, that two of them, I think, were destroyed by a big wave. And so, it's there in the epic, in the mythology, in the long past, again, this memory of the sea swallowing up a kingdom, swallowing up the place. And I think that is something that in a place like India, where you are living again with many, many layers of time, when something like this happens, you also reach for myth, for story, because they have spoken about these things.

VN: And it's great to be in this moment to actually—in our bodies to experience it. So, thank you for that well-recovered memory of 'Homecoming' in Chennai from a place that you returned to. So, now you seem to know more than anybody else [about] flight and return and migration patterns. And your wonderful new work that's come out, that came out in May, *Egrets, While War*, talk us through it. Read from it, please. I saw your

performance both in Dublin and in London at the Jaipur Literature Festival. And now you've added another dimension of media to your work as a sole performer. So, take us through it.

TD: Yeah. So this collection really is a post-COVID collection, I would say, coming out of the fog of this pandemic, which in all its horrors, was also very potent and a time of togetherness in the world of we are going through this together. And then the shock of coming out from that into several wars, conflicts, genocides, and a feeling of constant threat and not togetherness [laughs]. And there are a lot of birds in the collection. They began with observing birds in my garden: kingfisher, [missing name], peacocks, crows, lots and lots of birds, bulbuls, parakeets. And then I started to—egrets, in fact. The title poem is from watching the egrets do their strange stalking dance, which is like a little dinosaur move, in the garden. And then I started to think of the disappeared birds, like the dodo. I have literary birds from the *Ramayana*. I reference the *Ancient Mariner* and the albatross. There are lots of birds in here, birds from the *Upanishads*. Once I caught on to the idea of the birds as being these prophecies, these witnesses, these winged messengers that connect the sky and the earth, they're just there as—I think, because there's a comma in the title, so the egrets, for me, represent all of the birds, all of these flying beauties and the epiphanies, and then the coma and the *While*

War, which is an ongoingness which is beating us down. And so, it's really again trying to hold two things that seem quite opposite.

VN: And the war is both what we are actually facing with our human bestial tendencies, but it's somehow the birds—I just always have this image of your birds flying like drones, time, and witnessing all this chaos we constantly cause. They're great seers, aren't they?

TD: Yeah, and they're absolutely—once you start to become the crazy bird lady, there's no going back. So, I'm now the crazy dog lady and the crazy bird lady. But I—and there's just something there—the fact that they almost come out of time for me, the sense of, again, this reminder that humans, we have only been here for such a short time, and we have created such chaos. And there are also—I think this is a return to me to love poems in this book after two collections of being maybe more looking outward at particular events and responding to news headlines and things like that. And these are sort of more old-school lyric love poems of a different body, a body that's going through a different middle-age part of life. And so, I have poems about perimenopausal desire and things like that. But also I'll read just the first poem, which is called 'Amor Mundi', and it's love poem for the world essentially. And yeah, here it goes.

[TD reads 'Amor Mundi']

'Amor Mundi

For years I'd throw myself at a rock
and say, *Catch!* I'd see a hole and try
to shapeshift into it. I won't lie,
there were gardens I briefly revelled in
until I saw the train tracks, and estuaries
at the edge of which I almost began
a civilization. Something always pulled me
back. Meeting you in that winged lonely
century was like moving to a border town
and understanding the fallacy of a wall.
Evening does not always have to mean defeat.
Night cedes to dew and dew to heat. Darling,
I do not know how it happened that we found
a world to name and love, how this many-
drawered cocoon of longing grew,
but I want to tell you, the tree outside

our window has erupted with bright orange
goblets from which a pair of parakeets—
emerald-bodied luminaries—feed and feed.'

TD: So, I wanted that sense of lushness, of love, of joyfulness, of celebration, because we are living in a time where there feels we are watching live stream genocides and wars on our phones, and we are making our coffee and getting on with our day and trying to understand what it means to be human living in this moment. So, there is a real pressing down upon that sense of what it means to be human. And I think, for me, writing these poems about war, and there are a lot of them in this collection, there was also the equal need to write simply the love poems, the poems which have birds, the poems for the world, about the celebration of the body, of being alive, of love in all its forms, because that is what keeps us human, going, believing in the idea of beauty and wonder and awe.

VN: Such a beautiful note to close our conversation on is, I remember through the poems that you were reading, it's about actually urging your reader, your listener, to scream, to understand the breadth of life. And it's just so evocative. Yes, it is a love poem to the world as well. So, I really thank you, Tishani, for this time and this—you developed an arc of narrative right from your to an [missing word] to the South Pole.

[Music] And so I really thank you for this time. And you certainly have traveled across oceans and continents. And I know you're touring as well and wish you good luck with that. So, thank you once again.

[Music]

TD: Thank you. Thank you.

[Music]

Presenter: Tishani Doshi was in conversation with Vayu Naidu for *WritersMosaic*. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Tishani Doshi was in conversation with Vayu Naidu

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

© Tishani Doshi