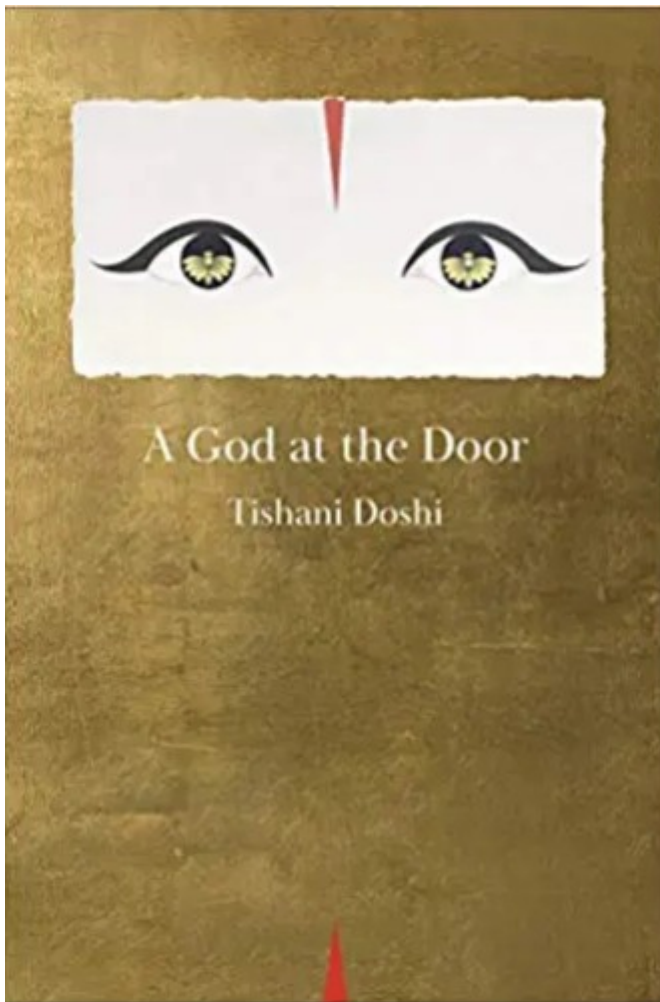


In witness to a wilting world

Tishani Doshi's poetic voice dwells between the scriptural and the cultural, between lesson and observation.

by [Benny Vanderburgh](#) in the [November 2022](#) issue

In Review



A God at the Door

By Tishani Doshi

Tishani Doshi's latest poetry collection is a practice in rewilding the familiar horrors of contemporary life. In ecofeminist fashion, these poems center women and girls as an ecology that contains both quotidian and cosmological expressions. Women's bodies age, a fact worthy of poetic study; the nation is deemed female, yet women always seem to get intimately injured by the state form; women live together in Doshi's imagined village of disenfranchised, disinherited, and otherwise missing people who are all these things because they are women.

At their best, these poems neither reveal some hidden layer to the horrors nor glory in an omniscient moral clarity. Instead, they offer dispatches on how religious and legendary forces press so many of these scenes of struggle into their heartbreaking shapes. Sometimes those forces are so accessible to us that we may forget they are the works of lore—and so the sayings our parents repeated about our bodies turn into monstrous legal precedents and political proclamations. In other instances, ideas like capacities are refigured back into the wildness of which we are all a part. As Doshi titles one of her poems, "Everyone Has a Wilting Point." After the wilting point, the plant simply ceases to be.

This book is most successful as a single event, one that simultaneously reveals legend and makes it. This helps us identify the poems' shared genre as something in between scriptural and cultural, between lesson and observation. The voice in these pieces is proverbial and self-consciously didactic. Doshi tells us with certainty how she would like us to feel as she retells recent news stories, statuses, and situations.

But she is not just speaking truth about the themes central to this collection, nor is she just making legend as an aesthetic flourish. Her speaker is furious about loss and is losing her mind from witnessing all of it: violence against women and girls, the global pandemic, the extractive and dangerous gaze across borders, climate apocalypse, and religious fascism movements in both the United States and India. The ways our worlds crack open when we become caretakers to the people we grew up with, the ways our worlds crack open when we pretend we can cheat our birthright of waning independence. Cancer.

Doshi's work is explicitly theological in part because her strategy of addressing these themes is simply to keep repeating that there is a clear and obvious truth, a

truth clear and obvious always to the grieving. That truth flourishes within legend—and legends are meant to be retold and shifted; they cannot be captured. Legends, like poems, die in a monocultural environment. They thrive as part of a larger echo stream, as a call and response.

Parallel to humanity's spiritless taxonomizing, possession, extraction, and domination of creation, parallel to this present that destroys complexity while also leaning on it as an excuse for violence, there is a persistent human sound kindred with the voices of all other planetary beings—and Doshi tries to speak it. That voice is both grateful to be alive and broken with grief.

After offering an account of Hindu fascism in India, brazenly claimed to be the work of peace by its adherents who terrorize their Muslim neighbors, Doshi pulls out of it a science that can travel. She scales her lesson across time in off-putting, sarcastic, pithy statements that are nonetheless true, such as: "The victory / of genocide relies on an understanding / of pathogens."

This is where Doshi is the most generous with us. Her teaching is not only telling. She invites theological clarity about the technology of language, yet she does so via sayings. It is one thing to understand that groups of people are frequently stripped of being and erased as an exercise of empires protecting themselves. It is another thing to dislodge and reexamine the roots of concepts such as victory, pathogen, linear time, that thing called nation or nationality, religion as a social class, and even to some extent gender (though Doshi very much resists holding gender accountable to the same level of wilding, playing, and problematization).

In a poem called "Mandala," she writes, "Anyone who believes a leaf is just a leaf is missing / the point." There is an aliveness in the writer, in the written, in the reader, in the leaf and tree and soil, in all the working and caretaking hands that supported this utterance by way of a poem, mass-printed or uploaded. But besides the fact that we are all alive together and failing to be present to the wonder of it, Doshi also reminds us what legend does and can do about a leaf, nation, woman, and god.

It is here where religion can be invited in as the most powerful lens to extend our vision. Instead of a subject we are asked to critique, religion is the atmosphere where freedom or cruelty can find its greatest expressions. At best it offers us a way out of becoming desensitized to the other forms of being together that constantly reach us through popular media.

In her closing poem, “Survival,” Doshi reminds us what legends give to those of us who are undone by body counts, more often flattened by living than hopeful for our collective ongoingness:

In the hours of waiting,
I heard a legend about a woman who
was carried off by winds,
a love ballet between her and the
gods, which involved only minor
mutilations. How I long to be a legend. . . .

Telling stories is not enough to cool our planet, or to protect each other from patriarchal violation, warfare, and our own private losses. Nor is swapping legends a fix—such minor mutilations are not truly the horizon we call heaven. Still, if we embrace the fact that we sit and wait within an atmosphere of the legendary, with legends emerging as a way to remember the god at the door, we may find new, loving, hopeful strategies of taking care in our hours of waiting to come.