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Everything Begins Elsewhere by Tishani Doshi - review

The spirit of Indian dance infuses an assured and complex collection

Miriam Gamble

The Guardian, Friday 1 June 2012 22.55 BST

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Chandralekha: a sensuous, taboo-breaking outlook. Photograph: Raghavendra Rao

Dance features prominently in **Tishani Doshi's** second collection, *Everything Begins Elsewhere*, which is dedicated to her one-time teacher and choreographer, **Chandralekha**. Doshi worked with Chandralekha for a number of years, performing in *Sharira*, her last ever production, and her work as a writer takes much from the sensuous, taboo-breaking outlook of her mentor. A feminist and human rights campaigner, Chandralekha revolutionised Indian dance, going against the grain of post-colonial "exotica" to celebrate (and often eroticise) the human body. She was a controversial figure, alternately loved and loathed, seen as a visionary by some and by others as "a woman not meriting respect". Poems such as "That Woman" and "Ode to the Walking Woman" reflect this fraught inheritance. However, it is in the quieter zone of discipline

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that dance most makes its presence felt, and the relationship between poet and dancing pupil is complex.

Everything Begins Elsewhere

by Tishani Doshi



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There are two parts to the book ("Everything Begins" and "Elsewhere"), so the poems display opposing attitudes to the spiritual demands of self-discipline, if not to the physical. *Everything Begins Elsewhere* is punctuated by "lesson" poems which chart Doshi's training as a dancer. In some of these, the spiritual and physical unite to achieve both beauty and transcendence:

... only after touching our heads to the diamond back of the earth, do we rise again, arched like curls of river silk, emptying our souls into the sky, forgetting the world.

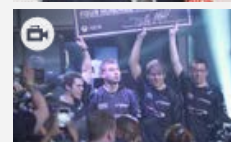
In others, such as "Lesson 3: Stillness", the strength to overcome required of the dancer is jibbed against, viewed as bringing about not inner peace but "the bright suffocation of flowers" – the stiling of life itself.

One of the most striking features of Doshi's work is her imagery, and here, too, concrete and intangible are brought together in unusual conjunctions that sometimes stress affinity, sometimes impassable distance. In "Lesson 2: Learning Mudras in Bhutan", a woman "gives me the food she hasn't eaten all day, the words / she hasn't spoken" and the skills learnt render it possible to visualise a literal space "through which ... to escape" from an unhappy relationship. In "Buffaloes", on the other hand, outer and inner realities are at odds:

Think of all the invisible insurrections it takes to wake a city from slumber. In these woods, a single man will do, armed with a stick and a paltry collection of stones.

Doshi frequently employs Dante's trope of *selva oscura*, the dark wood, to represent the love relationship, so there is a metaphorical parallel to these paired ideas. However, she also knows how to pitch the artful against the blunt, the symbolically charged against the thing itself, to forceful effect. In "The River of Girls (i.m. India's missing girls)", a startling shift occurs between "This coin-thin vagina / and acid stain of bone" and "This doctor with his rusty tools": the poem, like many others, moves between the "myth" of art and the dirt of reality without giving the reader time to adjust to the gear change – the forced crunch of recognition is deeply unnerving.

The poems walk "that line between" in other areas: the collection's title is taken from [John Burnside](#), and Doshi, also a fan of [Don Paterson](#), pays tribute to Scottish influences through the play of light and dark, self and double. A repeat motif has evening bleed into night, and "That Woman", one of the best poems in the book, maps the uneasy and precarious relationship between polished surfaces and "dark undersides". Many poems are written in short, tentative lines, and some are centralised to create the visual effect of being marooned; others try to disentangle past, present and future, yet court situations in which such divisions are blurred. In "Sunday Afternoon", an ex-lover appears "when you're walking upstairs / for lunch; cutting broccoli into perfect spears": the



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precision of this physical action sits in stark contrast to the emotional confusion of recognising that "Between this moment and the next / there's always space for a lover's return" – a space in which the self may, unwitting, "allow him to fall easily – into the future".

If the first section of *Everything Begins Elsewhere* seeks clarity, the second works in inverse, exploring situations in which severance from the past has actually happened, and finding "the world washed clean" to be "nothing but a trampling" rather than the promised "kiss of life". In truth, however, this is a book which disrespects comfortable systems, and the divisions between its parts are less than binding. In structure as in sense, Doshi works to trouble fixed categories even as she sometimes seeks their aid; the result is an invigorating, thought-provoking collection which, like the dancing Doshi loves, enlivens soul and senses, sharpening responses to both "the music of uncertainty" and "the aftertaste of rain".

• Miriam Gamble's *The Squirrels Are Dead* is published by Bloodaxe.

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