

# Verse Affairs: ‘Slam Shut the Door on Fingers Made Numb’

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An early poem in Naveen Kishore’s new book, *Mother Muse Quintet* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2023), negotiates with grief, especially numbness-inducing bereavement:



slam  
shut the door on fingers made numb so I may feel pain  
grieve a little longer

Mental health scholars have pointed out that numbness is a common response to bereavement, a way to contain overwhelming emotions of loss. In 2020-21, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world, claiming millions of lives, doctors across the United States prescribed poetry to their grieving patients. Poetry, they claimed, could help process the cocktail of emotions one experienced with death all around.

The landscape of Kishore’s poetry in this book — like its predecessor *Knotted Grief* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2022) — is shot through, like dense fog shot through with sunlight on a spring morning, with loss. But unlike the previous book, which explored, through poetry, public grief, in this one, it is intensely, furiously personal. While the narrator of the book — it is essential to distinguish between the narrator and the poet — negotiates with the loss of a parent through memory, history and language, he also desires to heal. The stunning image of the door slamming on one’s fingers to make one feel something — anything — is a cry for catharsis.

The last poem of *Knotted Grief* was a sort of arrival at catharsis in some ways:

Grief        unravelled the  
threads in spate    rush to fill the breach  
tearing into half my cloak of mourning

This unravelling, like wool or thread pulled away from a cloak, is also like a river at its delta, spreading out into hundreds of distributaries. Kishore, who has lived much of his life in Kolkata, about 130 km north of the mouth of the Ganga, the largest delta in the world, is likely to be familiar with this geographical site. But in his poetry, it is also an unknottling of the grief that informed all the poems of this book, a letting-go, a release of emotions:

how the drain-water eyes brim over  
no reason to wipe them dry is there?

Kishore's emergence as a poet with these two books is likely to be a surprise for many — it was for me. For lovers of books and the arts, he is the founder of Seagull Books, a radical, independent publisher that began by bringing out film scripts of Mrinal Sen and Satyajit Ray and plays of Indian playwrights in translations. Over the 40 years since it was established in 1982, Seagull has built a list full of philosophers, historians, academics and Nobel Laureates from India and all over the world. The books it publishes are treasured not only for their literary merit or scholarly rigour, but also their unique designs; in this, Kishore has been ably aided by colleagues such as Sunandini Banerjee.

Unlike many other independent publishers who can barely make ends meet leave alone dream of expanding internationally, Seagull has done both, with a presence now both in Europe and the US. In an interview with Lit Hub last year, Kishore explained his company's ambitious expansion abroad: "In 2005 we set up Seagull Books London Ltd as a British company—somewhat in reaction to major Western publishing groups setting up offices in India. This came with major risks as hardly anyone had something like this before. We did this because we felt our books need to be everywhere in the world."

For those of us who grew up in Kolkata in the 1990s and 2000s, when the city's claim to be a centre of culture was increasingly only in the realm of nostalgia, the Seagull Foundation for the Arts was a glimpse into what the world of aesthetics offered. Anyone who has been to the Seagull office — or seen pictures of it — knows that it looks like a Wes Anderson film. Besides publishing, Kishore is also known as a theatre practitioner, especially a light designer. He told novelist and translator Jerry Pinto in an interview last year how he started designing lights for theatre productions — for which people were willing to pay — because he needed to support his family. He is also a well-known photographer — the exhibition of his photographs, "In a Cannibal Time", will be up for preview on 28 April in Kolkata.

But who knew he wrote poetry as well? Apparently, historian Romila Thapar did. In the same interview with Pinto, Thapar says: "When I finally got to read some of his poems I was taken aback by the imagery and the idioms that transformed the world that he was speaking of, and with such inherent sensitivity. Yet he never made a serious attempt to

publish them and they just circulated among friends.” Perhaps the deeply personal subject of the poems and the intensity with which he presented them made Kishore reluctant to put them out into the world.

In the third quintet — usually, a five-member musical group or a five-part musical piece — of *Mother Muse Quintet*, an untitled poem confronts the reader with the messiness of the deathbed:

she lay there. bleeding a red that impregnated the white  
cotton sari from the front. on the bed. on her side. one  
quivering hand clasping another. asleep or meditating.  
who could tell. i thought of ink as it spreads on blotting  
paper. slowly moving. forward and sideways. the folds of  
the sari doubling as small pouches. getting heavier with  
the weight of the advancing liquid. drop by drop. on the  
sheet. then the floor. red on red. like lava.

something inside her had burst.

This prose poem beginning with a lower-case *s* is a deliberate strategy to plunge the reader into the traumatic sick room. The poem moves forward in a staccato rhythm, almost a shorthand — *on her bed. on her side. one quivering hand clasping another*. This is a verbal strategy that Kishore uses in other poems: “I decided to call by her name. Prem. With a ji. So Prem-ji. The loved one.” A theatre practitioner, Kishore is well aware of the power of this rhythm, of which *Macbeth*’s “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” is perhaps the best example. It does the same job as a close-up shot in cinema — revealing the contours of the narrator’s mindscape.

This was not an easy poem to read — none of the poems in the book are. As I travelled through the book, making notes in the margins, I was constantly reminded of my father’s death a few Aprils back. Though I was not in Calcutta, where my parents lived, at the time, I remembered admitting him to a hospital a few years before, waiting outside the ICU as he slipped in and out of consciousness.

Susan Sontag writes about the “conventions of concealment” around diseases thought to be fatal, such as tuberculosis till the early 20th century, or cancer in our times. “All this lying to and by cancer patients is a measure of how much harder it has become in advanced industrial societies to come to terms with death,” she adds. “As death is now an offensively meaningless event, so that disease widely considered a synonym for death is experienced as something to hide.”

Kishore’s poetry reveals to us that though grief and mourning might have been compelled to retreat into a private realm, it is not a meaningless event. At all.

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