



THE (GREAT) INDIAN POETRY COLLECTIVE

www.greatindianpoetrycollective.org
indianpoetrycollective@gmail.com
India +91 99451 36640 | US 415 937 1646

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Poetry Press Launches Ellen Kombiyil's *Histories of the Future Perfect*

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NEW YORK— *Histories of the Future Perfect* is the debut collection of poetry by Ellen Kombiyil, four-time Pushcart Prize nominee and Best of the Net nominee. It is the third book to be published by The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, a startup publishing house based in New York, San Francisco, and Bangalore, India.

This innovative book explores poetry inspired by concepts found in physics/astrophysics. Canvassing across time and space to provide a luminescence unafraid of the big ideas, the book itself has what Kombiyil calls a quantum structure. Here we find Galileo's thumbprint, Kurt Cobain in Las Vegas, and Mary Lincoln communing with the dead. The poems themselves are never narrowly historical but rather cosmic in their inflections, taking on subatomic particles, DNA, and black holes, not simply as scientific props but as the very impetus for lyric motion.

"These are intellectually dexterous poems, but, more vitally, poems 'laden and alive' with unexpected illumination," writes renowned poet Arundhati Subramaniam. Kombiyil's work as been lauded as shimmering, ecstatic, and innovative. Indeed, poet Srikanth Reddy proclaims "*Histories of the Future Perfect* marks out a bold beginning for a voice of great talents" and poet Ravi Shankar exclaims "these poems shimmer with their skill and acumen, and indeed it's been a long time since I've been as excited about a new book as I am about this one."

Along with poets Shikha Malaviya and Minal Hajratwala, Ellen Kombiyil is a founding member of The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective, a not-for-profit literary publisher specializing in new poetry from India. Under a peer mentorship model, the poets will publish several books by a range of poets each year, discovering and bringing forth new voices that are innovative and diverse. The Collective's first title, *Geography of Tongues* by Shikha Malaviya, was published in 2013, and second title, *Bountiful Instructions for Enlightenment* by Minal Hajratwala, was published in 2014, both to widespread critical acclaim.

The Collective is also developing inPoetry: The (Great) Indian Poetry App, currently in beta.

Below: Advance praise, author bio, author interview, sample poem, about the Collective

Attached: Author photo, cover image, logo

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94 pp • 6.5 x 9 in • ISBN: 978-0-9860652-2-4 • paper • ₹350/\$16.99

Advance Praise for *Histories of the Future Perfect*

“*Histories of the Future Perfect* is a shimmering book, both delicate and bold. Interstellar travel, girlhood, erotics, American history: Ellen Kombiyil ranges both far and near, with a command both intellectual and sensual. These are poems that test out life partly by imagining other lives—other lives one might live, the lives of Mary Todd Lincoln. Delicate lyrics zap us through the cosmos and back into memory; persona poems bring us into the specificity of grief. This is a poet who can toggle between bikinis and trilobites, between astrophysics and pop culture, between elegy and premonition. Kombiyil’s work is alive to whiplash our lives in the timeloops of the universe. ‘Let sprinklers equal X, an absence that is manifest./Now solve for bare feet glisten. Now step on constellations.’ This is a poetry of rigorous, ingenious, warmhearted exploration.”

—MAUREEN N. McLANE, National Book Critics Circle Finalist and National Book Award Finalist

“Ellen Kombiyil’s poems are fascinated with the many guises of time—physical and psychological, frozen, upside-down, cyclic, simultaneous. They capture moments that are eternal—‘handkerchiefs falling, falling/never landing’ and menus that never change. But they also explore the relentless ‘instability/of electrons,’ parallel universes where neighbors complain of parties that end with a ‘bang,’ and a future that ‘splits away like a cannon/boom of sound.’ The images are often drawn from the world of science, but these provoke other journeys of reflection, on which a sense of wonder remains a constant companion. These are intellectually dexterous poems, but, more vitally, poems ‘laden and alive’ with unexpected illumination— which could be found ‘inside God’s/sensorium, infinite shades of black,’ or those beautifully evoked places of intermingling where river and brook are no longer distinguishable. A finely-crafted, assured, and thoughtful debut.”

—ARUNDHATHI SUBRAMANIAM, winner of the Khushwant Singh Memorial Prize for Poetry

“Ellen Kombiyil’s debut collection, *Histories of the Future Perfect*, contains one of the most marvelous lines of poetry I’ve read in quite a while: ‘oh one one zero zero oh oh one.’ Unequivocating and precise as binary code, Kombiyil’s work hacks into the lyric itself, in poems of unsettling intelligence and emotional honesty. Like Wallace Stevens, this poet ‘delves past thought in search of/the anatomy of thought,’ but she always animates this anatomy with intimate feeling. From the boundaries of the universe to the nesting dolls of personal memory, *Histories of the Future Perfect* marks out a bold beginning for a voice of great talents.”

—SRIKANTH REDDY, author of *Facts for Visitors*

“‘Nothing happens until something moves,’ Albert Einstein once said, and Ellen Kombiyil’s first book of poems is a glorious embodiment of that principle, canvassing across time and space to provide us with a luminescence unafraid of the big ideas. Here we find Galileo’s thumbprint, Kurt Cobain in Las Vegas, and Mary Lincoln communing with the dead. The poems themselves are never narrowly historical but rather cosmic in their inflections, taking on subatomic particles, DNA, and black holes, not simply as scientific props but as the very impetus for lyric motion. Innovative, ecstatic, and emotionally potent, these poems shimmer with their skill and acumen, and indeed it’s been a long time since I’ve been as excited about a new book as I am about this one.”

—RAVI SHANKAR, Pushcart Prize winner and Founding Editor of Drunken Boat

“In Ellen Kombiyil’s baptismal work, *Histories of the Future Perfect*, personal intellect converges with conversation about many things in heaven and earth. Through her pure, astute, and humane poems, Kombiyil raises them all to a high power.”

—ALANE ROLLINGS, author of *To Be in This Number*

About the Author



ELLEN KOMBIYIL is a recent transplant from Bangalore, India, where she lived for nearly eleven years, leading writing workshops and teaching yoga. She is a four-time Pushcart Prize nominee and has read, performed or taught workshops at the annual Prakriti Poetry festival in Chennai, the Raedleaf Poetry Awards in Hyderabad, and Lekhana in Bangalore. Originally from Syracuse, New York, and a graduate of the University of Chicago, she now lives in New York City with her husband and two children.

(Please see attached press kit for high-resolution image)

An Interview with Ellen Kombiyil

You've described your work as "quantum poetry." How did you come up with that, and what does it mean to you?

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, I studied astrophysics for a year as a requirement for graduation. I was terrified of this class and its super long equations, but it ended up being one of my favorite classes in my whole four years of study. The concepts we studied, quantum theories and special relativity, deeply influenced me. I wasn't aware of how much until years later when reviewing the body of my work and noticing this pattern. It's influenced my entire approach to poem making.

When I'm writing a new poem, it's always from a place of wonder. I'm attempting to write about something that I don't have the words for, that normal language bumps up against and clangs around with, showing its incompetence. I also love taking on big concepts in my poetry, and I'm particularly drawn to the confounding and counterintuitive ideas often found in quantum physics. Take these two things – the failure of language and concepts that are difficult to wrap your head around, then stay with the concept and try to describe it bodily: include sensations, emotion/feeling and, most importantly, movement. Then you will have a quantum poem.

For the book, I had this wild idea of a whole quantum structure, (which is obviously non-linear!), in which the experience of reading the poems might feel like leaping into different timeframes/emotions/ways of moving/body sensations. Some of the poems specifically deal with the idea of viewing time, prism-like, rushing forward and back. So the entire book became one big quantum poem, pulling and pushing the reader through time, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes with multiple meanings. This gives me tremendous freedom, to examine life's many-pronged choices, as other lives one might live.

Tell us about your gorgeous cover: What is that bird doing? Why? How did you work with the artist on this concept, as well as the artwork that moves through the book?

I saw my first tarot-reading parrot when I lived near the ocean in Chennai. I was so taken with this idea that it became a central image in my poem "How I Came to Love." I am so lucky that I picked artist Kalyani Ganapathy to work with on my cover design. She paints beautiful birds and she also creates gorgeous paintings with night sky/stars in them. We thought the image of a tarot-reading parrot would make an intriguing cover, and it was her idea to backdrop the bird against night sky. The hand holding the cards had been a little problematic until Kalyani came up with the idea of using a pattern on the hand, and my best friend, also an artist, suggested using atoms as the pattern to tie in with the science theme in the book, and also suggest the hand as always unstable/in motion. Now I love this mysterious atom-hand as much as I love the parrot.

Working collaboratively also inspired the interior artwork. Because capturing the essence of movement/motion is so central to my work, I wanted evidence of the bird's flight through the pages. Kalyani suggested trails of tail feathers and atoms. For the final section, we have two trails, which echoes the idea of multiplicity explored in this section.

Your title is not a line from any of the poems. What does it mean to you, aside from the pun on the grammatical "future perfect" tense?

The title of the book came to me during my third major rewrite, which was when I was experimenting for the first time with the quantum structure of the book. I had all of these poems spread out around me. Some of them were the more historical First Lady poems, some of them other persona poems, which at times can feel difficult to integrate into a manuscript, unless it's a book of only personas poems, which this is not. And I had all my quantum poems. An earlier version of the book had all of the persona poems and First Lady poems clumped together in one section, which was titled "Alternate Histories." What I was trying for in quantum structure was to integrate all of these voices/personas not by style (persona, historical, etc.) but by emotional landscape. That meant that the reader may be whiplashed around into different timeloops of emotional content: Eve speaking alongside a persona poem of Mary Todd Lincoln.

With all of this jumping around, and playing with the idea of re-writing the past in order to understand the present moment more clearly, I thought, "I'm writing a history of the future." This paradoxical statement sat well with me, and then I added the word "perfect," for the play on the grammatical tense "future perfect," but also because of the very real wish to re-write the specific griefs into something more perfect. The title is both playful and full of regret.

How did your poetry develop during the 11 years you lived in India?

When I moved to India I was still very much in my early career. I was part of a thriving writing group in NYC when I moved and also had taken advantage of some of the great resources in the city. Poets House was still in its small space in SOHO, housing literary journals and all of the US-published books each year. I'd sit and read and learn. I hadn't yet started sending out my work, but I was researching the journals and publishers that I admired. I'd make lists of journals that I liked to read. I took poetry workshops at the Unterberg Poetry Center. What India gave me was a chance to slow down. The pace of life is markedly more relaxed. Even as a new mother, I found time to write when my children were napping. I stayed up late after they went to bed and edited my work. This slower pace was an important piece in the writing equation of my life. Quietness and space – it allows the work to compost.

After many years, during which I joined an online critique group and starting sending my work out to literary journals, I missed the presence of a physical writing group. What began as an informal meet-up of four writers in a café in Bangalore, quickly grew into a weekly writing workshop, which I led for many years.

Nothing brings people closer than writing together, in community. Some of my greatest friendships have formed in writing groups. If you are writing honestly, nothing gets left off the page. You stand in your own fire and speak from it. You listen to others as deeply as you listen to yourself. It is nourishing and transformative. I once told my students, when faced with something scary on the page, that they must hold their own hands, remember compassion for themselves first. In reality, in a writing group that works, we are all holding each others' hands. In that act, we give ourselves permission.

Teaching is one of the great joys of my life. I had a sensei, a great teacher who once told me that only by teaching does the student truly learn. I found this to be true. Teaching completes the circuit of understanding. India was where I first began teaching writing and it is the place I feel I came into myself as a writer.

Almost all of your poems have been published by a variety of U.S. and global journals, and you've been nominated for a Puschcart Prize by three different journals. Why did you choose to publish in a collective environment rather than submitting to traditional publishers and contests?

What's exciting about publishing as a collective is the amount of individual support I received while feeling my way through the maze of the manuscript. This cannot be overstated. I needed both time and permission to develop the manuscript into its final, shimmering form. What my mentors Minal and Shikha gave me was a safe space to experiment. I could bounce ideas off them, no matter how zany, and the answer, of course, is "try it and see." As a writer, I give myself that permission all the time, but it's very freeing when you know someone's got your back, will be there to dust you off when you fall.

What excites you about poetry now?

Grappling with language to architect spaces of thought. I don't mean this in an abstract way, but in a very mortar and bricks kind of way.

Can you talk about the relationship between time, place, and memory in your poems? I'm thinking of the historical personas, and the Recurring 1, Recurring 2, Recurring 3 sequence, and your amazing sort of "sestina on steroids" — all of which seem to deal with blending past, present, and maybe even future.

This is an experiment I'm excited about. Throughout the book I treat time as both something fluid and a heavy landing-place of memory/thought. Memory poems, particularly the Recurring sequence you mention, are pared down and tightly compacted into a density of feeling. I call them as neutron-star heavy. The idea is to land the reader in an emotional space. These intermingle with the poems I consider my sensation poems, which are more fluid and deal with the emotional landscape around physical movement. The "sestina on steroids" combines the two elements in a magical sort of way: the repeated talon words at the end of each line act as both a repository for thought – a gravitational tug, if you will –

and a fluid time loop, the repetitions of the words forcing thought into patterns of backtrack. Once the fluid tug of time is established in a poem, it's easy to imagine future as part of the dialogue.

Who are some of your poetic influences? Can you talk about how their work connects to yours?

I have many poetic influences, including the lyricism of Rita Dove, the experiments of Bernadette Mayer and Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, the philosophical wranglings of Vijay Seshadri. For this particular book, the work of Tracy K. Smith was groundbreaking. When I was putting together the first drafts of my manuscript, I noticed the quantum theme of some of my work. It's funny that it hadn't been apparent to me before. But I didn't know what to do with that idea. Could I structure a whole book around that idea? Tracy K. Smith's book *Life on Mars* was a testament to a resounding yes.

Your poems take us to Saturn and beyond. What's your fascination with outer space? Were you tempted to sign up for the Mars-One mission?

Ha! Outer space captures my imagination. It's a different way of seeing/understanding the world, something that's even beyond the five senses. Intuitive, yes, but also confounding. It's more of a means to grapple with concepts than the destination itself.

I was not at all tempted to sign up for Mars-One. That mission feels very desolate, not unlike the feeling in my Saturn poem. I am not yet ready to be exiled from Earth. I would, however, love to go up to the international space station. Unfortunately, poets aren't regularly asked to go up to space, but perhaps one day one of my poems will make it into orbit, or beyond.

**Sample poem from *Histories of the Future Perfect*
by Ellen Kombiyil**

ERRATUM

others remember differently of course
their echoes are echoes rippling
person to person silence not silence
but a form of *not speaking up* a form of
held back in the throat what could unravel
if you let it if you could rewind if
you closed your eyes & imagined something
else a swirl of dust kicked up in sunlit
dusk that green grape placed in cave
of mouth or the anthem sung & sung
each morning at 9 o'clock a ruckus
of *could have been* corrected because
I was there watching it become *what was*

ABOUT THE (GREAT) INDIAN POETRY COLLECTIVE

The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective is the coming together of poets who believe words can transform lives. Founded in 2013 in Bangalore, India, as a not-for-profit press, the Collective publishes innovative, diverse poetic voices from India. Through a mentorship model, members of the collective support one another in producing beautiful poetry books, chapbooks, and anthologies. Through workshops, readings, and community and school events, the Collective is building a poetry community in which artistic expression leads to positive action, as each poem initiates a dialogue with society and the greater world.

Poet Advisors

Meena Alexander
Sampurna Chattarjee
Eunice de Souza
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Ranjit Hoskote
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Also from The (Great) Indian Poetry Collective

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