

Classic Poetry Series

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor
- poems -

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Gopi Krishnan Kottoor(1956 -)

Gopikrishnan Kottoor is an award winning Indian English poet, novelist and playwright.

 Early Life and Education

Kottoor won the Philip McCormick scholarship of the Texas State University, Southwest Texas, USA and attended the Master of Fine Arts (Poetry) program of the University with a Teaching Assistantship in the Department of English of the University during the year 2000.

In 2005, Kottoor was Poet-in-Residence in the University of Augsburg, Germany, on a sponsorship by the Indian Council Of Cultural Relations,(ICCR) in association with Tagore Centre, Berlin, Germany. Kottoor was invited to read from his translation of the 15c Bhakti poet Poonthanam's Gyanappana (The Fountain Of God) at the University of Vienna, Austria, in the same year.

 Career

To quote eminent poet-critic Ayyappa Paniker about Kottoor, 'a poet who has discovered his own voice distinct from that of his ancestors or his compeers'. His poetry, known for its 'rich visual imagery embalmed with feeling' has won him accolades both in his home country and abroad.

Kottoor is perhaps best known for his work, Father, Wake Us In Passing, a poem sequence on his father in coma, and dying. The German translation of this poem by the German poet Wolfgang Heyder (b.1956) appeared as a Laufschrift Book edition, Fürth, Germany,(Vater, wecke' uns im Vorübergehen') in 2004.

Gopi Kottoor won both the All-India Special Poetry Prize of the British Council-Poetry Society, India All India Poetry Competitions (AIPC) in 1997 for his poem These are the things we could talk about as also the Second Prize for his poem Digging in the General Category of the Competition in 1997. Between 1995 and 1998, he won three more major poetry prizes presented by the British Council - Poetry Society India sponsored All India Poetry Competitions (AIPC).

Writing to him soon after he won his poetry prizes, the leading poet Jayanta Mahapatra, and editor of Chandrabhaga, who was also a part of the jury wrote to him saying:

"You write exceptionally well.... My admiration grows for you for your poems".

Kottoor's poetry has appeared in a wide range of journals, including: The Illustrated Weekly of India, Indian Literature (Sahitya Akademi), Thought, Literary Half-Yearly, Kavya Bharati, Ariel (University of Calgary, Canada), Lipi and Chandrabhaga (Ed: Jayanta Mahapatra), Toronto Review, Plaza, Persona (Texas State University Journal).

His poems have featured in the Special Editions on Contemporary Indian Poetry in English brought out by the poetry journals: Verse, (Seattle) USA and Fulcrum, (USA).

Kottoor's plays include The Mask of Death, a radio-play on the dying days of the Romantic poet John Keats in Rome, and 'Fire In The Soul', a play on the life and times of the Nationalist rebel poet of India, Subramania Bharati, which won the Bharati award in 1995.

He recently brought out his latest book of poems Victoria Terminus, Poems selected and new (Authors Press New Delhi, 2010). Works in progress include Angel's In My Garden, A fictitious novel on the life and prison times of an incarcerated fashion designer.

His recent poems can be read at Nthposition UK.

Kottoor edits a poetry quarterly 'Poetry Chain' and presently lives in Mumbai, India, where he works with the Reserve Bank Of India.

He also edits the popular website for Poetry, PetrychainOnline (India).

Africa

We used to sit
Around the red teak table
With the Book Of Knowledge
Open with its picture
Of Africa.

That's where we were soon going.
To the country that stood out like the cat muscle
On Cassius Clay's shoulders

We would get there,
As soon as father's office papers
Came back from New Delhi.

For days, months, years,
Africa was our mulberry bush.

Africa. In all weather, the book would lie open
Upon the teakwood table.
We would sit and dream of the crown of Pyramids
Or of our feet dipped in Uranium.

The pygmies came out of the Denkali forest
At night
With their poison-tipped arrows
But there was always Phantom,
With his skull ring
And we woke up without sweat.

Every morning we returned before breakfast to Africa
Turning brown among silver fish in the sunlight from the window.

Decades later near a soccer field in America,
I saw Boko on film. I saw a black youth's red blood

On the dark long white patrolled streets of Africa.

Now I know,
Africa is no open book.

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor

Digging

The soil I now pick
contains fragments of the dead.
They once saddened and happied themselves here
turning to the sun and moon, quite puzzled
then taking things as they came,
for granted. This is hard brown laterite
that I turn,
to plant a few bright periwinkles
stolen from the mound of one long obscure,
dead. They should grow well
here. So I turn out
the millipedes curling up
ashamed of the sudden expose
into dark ring stones of sapphire and topaz.
Pinned to sudden light they have all coiled up
in abject surrender. These things we bury back
with pushed up soil, crushing strange roots
going everywhere like soft nerve fibers,
sending messages of thirst to strange
destinations. Each scoop of mud

brings more life to light

lost like death underground

doing odd jobs, ordained like saints, salient

in dark recess drawing salary in kind.

Mud-work is a kind of work ship.

A silent thanksgiving for a home, called earth.

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor

My Daughter Reports A Senior's Suicide

Why dear, I ask her.
In my mind, somebody fallen in love
Has been jilted.
But things are simpler.

'Her parents had strange diseases.....'
That baffles me.

I think of AIDS, of nothing in particular,
But drift to the silent body
Of a young girl, and her puberty,
Laid among the freshly done roses.

Don't lose focus dear, I tell her,
And end the conversation with a telephone kiss.

Back in my mind, a young girl,
The poison she ran to,
Lips gone cold, on thresholds of beauty,
And a mind cut inside salted flesh,
Baked in sprouting alphabets of love.

Gopi Krishnan Kottoor

The Coffin Maker

The coffin maker is a happy man now.
More and more orders keep coming in.
Soon he'll able to marry off
his daughters who have just attained puberty
and keep pretty Angela happy
on condoms strawberry flavoured an chocolate ice.

Of late he painted his house bright chrysanthemum red
ordered teakwood beds and never cared a damn
what the neighbours said. Atop his showroom
the great catlights came on
and his name glowed in the dark
whenever passing lights hit it.

Now he's not wondering any more,
he knows he's the best in town.

What about air-conditioning? That would lengthen
the life of coffins. Now he's struck with a bright new idea
that would revolutionise coffin making for
all time. Electronic remote-controlled polymer coffins
with micro chips and inbuilt flash units
that brought home to your PC screen
your dear dear dear departed along with uptodate
information on the state of decomposition
that you could activate or slow down
much like a video-game. An idea he knew would catch on like
wild fire making him a billionaire overnight.

Now whenever he kneels down with Angela
to pray,
he can only think of this
no one else can help him raise such funds
so hi-tech
which of course secretly meant
more and more accidents, causalities, fatalities
of course work was worship, it didn't matter what you did
you just had to put in your best, there could be no wrong asking
and for all this (if his dream came true)

he would keep his wood
and bury his god
in a coffin of gold.

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The Waters Of The Ganges

Have these waters of the Ganges
been flowing down the memory
for small change?

In these wet bones I see the winter
of a dead man's eyes, he could have
sailed my blood.

Have these ghats burnt their dead in waste?
Ashes blow the air, fall in the eye
of the spread peacock feathers
searching first rain

as the boat drifts ashore,
A white flower floating on the water
is a translucence of God.

[Poet's notes: Ghats are a broad flight of stone steps upon the riverbank of the Ganges in Varnasi. On some of the ghat shores, such as the Harischandra Ghat, the funeral fires always keep burning.]

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