

Interview with Tim Skeen, author of Kentucky Swami

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry
Selected by Michael Burns

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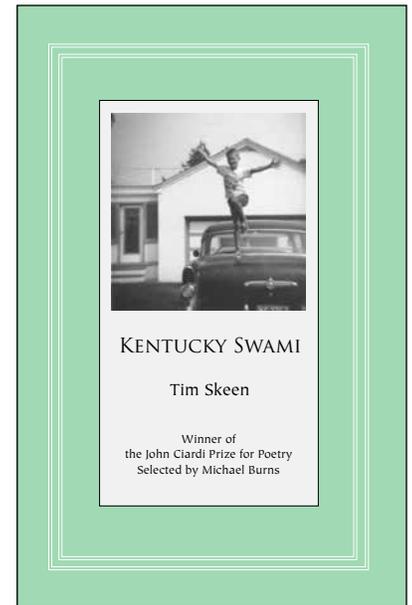
Question: Is there something in what calls you to be an American Red Cross national disaster volunteer (which you describe in your poem “The American Red Cross”) that also calls you to write poetry?

Answer: If anything, I think the impetus is just the other way around.

I was reading and writing poetry long before I began my work with the Red Cross, and I found in the poetry that I read not only beauty and dignity but also suffering and loss. Volunteering with the Red Cross was a way to literally address the suffering and loss. For example, once during the Midwest floods of 1993, I was given the keys to a truck filled with bottled water, a map, and told, Look, if you can get this truck to this spot on the map tonight, then the people there will have drinking water; if you can't, then they won't have drinking water until tomorrow. I'd been in the army. I felt capable. There was something wonderful about accomplishing that particular job. I feel a similar sense of ecstasy on the rare occasions when I get a poem right.

Q: Your unflinching look into a world filled with difficulty also finds many opportunities to express love without nostalgia. In your poetry, how is the difficult world you observe informed by love? By loss?

A: The death of my younger brother, Ernie, when he was 21 is one of the defining moments in my life. Reagan had recently been elected president, and he'd declared among other things the war on drugs. Well, Ernie was shot and killed by an undercover police officer in Lorain, Ohio, after allegedly brandishing a gun during a marijuana deal gone bad. I say allegedly because the only witness, other than the officer, was an informant, a “friend,” whose identity has never been released. His death was a tremendous shock. He'd never been in trouble with the law. During the legal proceedings that followed, my family felt the terrible weight of the state arrayed against us. I'd just turned 23, a sophomore at Lorain County Community College. The world became inestimably more difficult for me at that moment, a place less certain than it had been, a place where the only true solace I found was in reading and writing poetry. And I discovered in the work of poets such as Philip Levine and James Wright the possibility of redemption; by redemption I mean the process of learning to live with the suffering, the betrayal I personally felt. Many years later, in graduate school at the University of Nebraska, I met Ray Ronci, who introduced me to the study of Rinzai Zen, and later to Joshu Sasaki Roshi at the Mount Baldy Zen Center outside of Los Angeles. Kentucky Swami is dedicated to Ray. Meditating, writing, working, husbanding, fathering, volunteering are all part of that process of dealing with what is still essentially impossible to deal with. In many respects, my poetry is a record of that process, not in an objective sense like a police blotter report, but an internal, psychological, subjective record.



Q: You have lived in Kentucky, Ohio, Germany, Maryland, Nebraska, and you have returned to Appalachian Kentucky to teach. Would you comment on how poetry allows you to explore the significance of home and place, which are so vital to your work?

A: My last name, Skeen, is Scottish. The European population of Eastern Kentucky was in large part made up of Scottish and Irish immigrants. A skeen, or skene, is a small dagger used for personal defense. Thanks to a grant from the Kentucky Arts Council in 1999, I traveled with my friend, John Franklin, to Kirkton of Skene, the church of Skene, near Aberdeen, Scotland. One day we wanted to walk through a small woods in order to get to a nearby castle we could see in the distance. As we entered the woods, we saw an ancient sign on a stone post: “NOTICE. Anyone found trespassing on or causing willful damage to this property will be prosecuted. By order, Estates Office, Dunecht.” My peasant ancestors might have seen many such signs in the 19th century when the lords of the estates realized more profits in raising sheep than in keeping poor tenant farmers. I then realized something that I’d been doing all along in my life: defining home more in spiritual terms than in geographical terms. One of my teachers, Stanley Plumly, at the University of Maryland talked about the peripatetic method of living. It’s not that I’m more at home on the road as some people say, but that I feel at home wherever I have my family, an interesting book to read, and my notebook.

Q: What do you think a reader might discover about manual labor, art, and social class in the way that you relate these subjects in your work?

A: I’m naïve enough to believe that manual labor and art, if a practitioner works and studies long and hard enough, can be the vehicles that allow one to transcend self, and by extension, social class. I’m still working on it.



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