

The Poet on Penang

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

WKU ENGLISH PROFESSOR JOE SURVANT HAS ALWAYS USED THE MEDIUM OF POETRY TO EXPRESS HIS MEMORIES AND FEELINGS. LAST JULY, HE PUBLISHED A COLLECTION OF POETRY, *THE PRESENCE OF SNOW IN THE TROPICS*, WHICH COMES OUT OF HIS EXPERIENCES AS A FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR IN MALAYSIA DURING THE MID-1980s.

“One thing poetry — and art in general — does is that it mediates experiences and deals with the emotional and imaginative sides of our lives,” Survant explained.

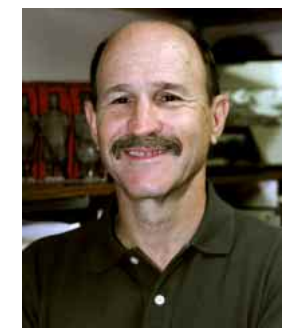
“Through my writing, I tried to take in the interesting things we were seeing. This book came long after the fact, but the experience was powerful.”

During his Fulbright appointment, Survant and his wife and daughters lived on Penang, an island off the west coast, while he taught at the University Sains Malaysia.

“Most [of the poems] were written during that time,” he wrote in the forward of his book, “others have continued to appear over the years as if they were dormant chrysalises waiting for some invisible signal to change and emerge.”

“It was not easy,” Survant recalled of their experience, “particularly for the first two or three months. We had

to find a place to live and a place to buy food the girls could or would eat. We also had to buy a used car and find places to shop.”



Dr. Joe Survant

The family set up residence in a multi-cultural neighborhood near the ocean. By living in modest housing, the Survants were able to afford to

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Navarathri

*Today
the noodle woman
and her sister
were subtracted
from the human sum,
their Honda 90
sent spinning
across slick pavement
like a stricken dog,
their limbs adjusted
permanently askew.*

*The bas kilang
had its own trajectory,
the motorcycle less
than vulnerable.
The driver may have regretted,
but the fine disharmony
of thoughtless action
is worked out
in heat and motion.*

*Billowing black smoke
dwarfing all else
on the narrow roads,
the busses are not to be taken lightly.
And so
two cautious women are dead
while young boys
on jazzed-up Suzukis
slalom through
tightly moving traffic
in their own kamikaze
versions of thrill.*

*Khakti,
why not them?
But the inertia
of the great diesel body
simply cut down
what was in its way.
The slowest
the easiest
scattered
upon the water
like chum
for rising sharks.*

*One thousand three hundred
and sixty-four years ago
Muhammad journeyed
from Mecca to Medina
and the year began,
but Pearl Hill
is silent in its mists.
The island
sways on its stem.
Rain washes the streets
each night
and tells us
that there is no struggle.*

travel extensively to locations in Southeast Asia, including China, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore. Survant's older daughter, who was 9 at the time, was enrolled as a day student at a boarding school for children of missionaries. In their neighborhood they were exposed to various religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.

Their home was near a small park, and every evening, various food vendors would set up shop and sell food. One set of vendors was two sisters who rode a Honda 90 motorcycle and sold hot noodles.

"They were known as the 'Noodle Women,'" Survant said. "One day my wife heard that the women had been hit by a *bas kilang* (a factory bus) and killed. The irony of the situation was that it occurred during Navarathri, a Hindu holy day sacred to Khakti, which celebrates the triumph of good over evil."

Out of this experience, the poem *Navarathri* was born, and it highlights the irony of the innocent, careful women being destroyed by the large bus while other, more reckless and careless drivers escaped unharmed. *Navarathri* is one of 21 poems included in the new collection.

After Survant returned from Asia, he explored having his poetry about the experience published. This opportunity never materialized, so he put the project on the back

burner. In the summer of 1999, a friend who had taught with Survant in Malaysia moved to Singapore and learned of an upcoming conference that would deal with the relationship between the United States and Southeast Asia at the end of the 20th century. Survant was invited to submit a paper for the conference.

"I put together a paper topic but then thought my poems were the best illustration of the conference topic, so I also offered to give a poetry reading," Survant explained. "They

liked the idea of a poetry reading, so I went to Singapore and participated in the conference. A member of the audience at the reading was the editor of a small press in Singapore; she asked to see more of my poems."

"Even though I was an outsider to the culture, and my images were not always complimentary, my poetry was well received at the conference," he said. "In a way it validated my work."

the presence of snow in the tropics has had a positive reception. Singapore poet Chin Woon Ping writes, "With lean lines and a keen eye for the apt metaphor, Joe Survant uncovers in his poems beauty, potency, and ambiguity in the Malaysian landscape."

Survant writes, "As that year slips further into memory, the metaphorical language of these poems rescues and revivifies it. The metaphor, with its double life in the worlds of the actual and the figurative, has a power greater than the logic of its construction. More and more I am aware of its value as an instrument of the unsayable."

Joe Survant is a graduate of the University of Kentucky (B.A.) and the University of Delaware (Ph.D.). He teaches contemporary literature and creative writing at Western Kentucky University. In November 2002, Survant's newest work, *Rafting Rise*, was published by the University Press of Florida. This

work combines lyric and narrative to describe central Kentucky at the turn of the 20th century. *Rafting Rise* is the second in a trilogy, the first of which, *Anne & Alpheus, 1842-1882*, won the Arkansas Poetry Award. The third book of the series is in process and will be set in the 18th century.

In January, Kentucky Governor Paul Patton appointed Dr. Survant as Kentucky Poet Laureate for 2003-04. The Poet Laureate leads the state in literary endeavors, including the activities of Kentucky Writer's Day in April.

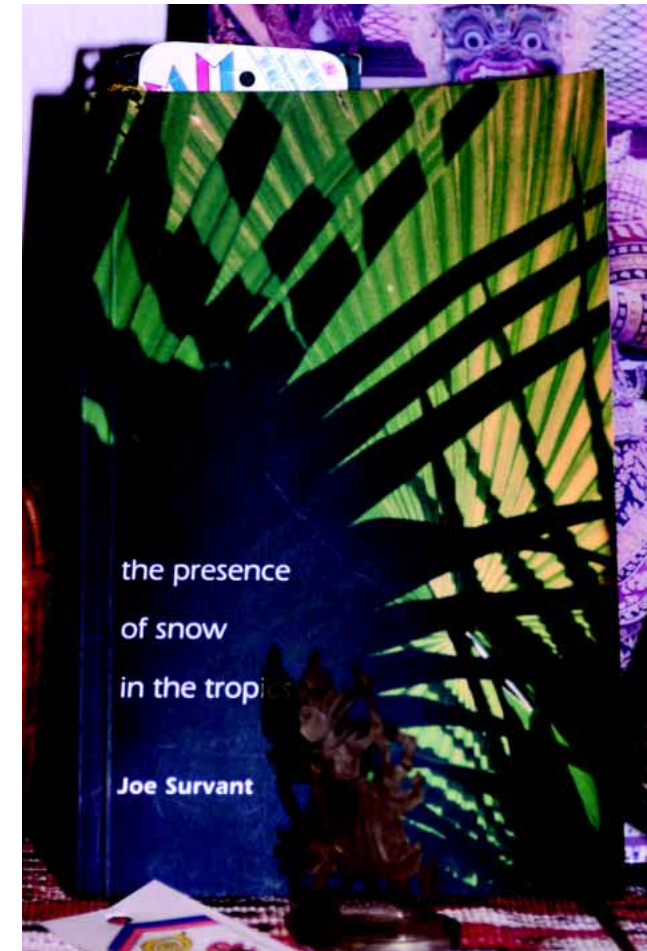


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