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THE THREE MUSKY TEARS, OR,  
THREE DECADES AND REALMS OF EDITORIAL  
HAPPENSTANCE  
Stephen Corey

On 18 July 2005 I celebrated my twenty-second anniversary as a member of the editorial staff of *The Georgia Review*, a journal of arts and letters founded at The University of Georgia in 1947 and published there quarterly ever since. I have served, variously, as assistant editor, associate editor, and acting editor. I have had a hand in the putting together of nearly ninety issues with a cumulative page count of about 20,000; to get those published pages our staff had to make its way through roughly 15,000 essays, 50,000 short stories, 200,000 poems, and a smattering—call it a few thousand—of book reviews.

What in the world did we think we were—are—doing? The learning curve is a long one, and the answers at its end lack the solidity of a nice pot of gold.

I

Down a seldom-used back hallway of the Harpur College student center, there was a room. My newfound friend and fellow senior Stephen Denker took me there after I'd said yes to his invitation to help him edit the college's undergraduate literary magazine, *Clarendon*. The room appeared to be no more nor less than an abandoned junior administrative office: a large metal desk, a filing cabinet, a couple of chairs, bare walls, and a large uncurtained window looking out on a concrete courtyard holding the extruded mechanical guts of the building—lengths and curves of large pipe, an air conditioning unit, and so on. The only sign of past occupancy was an odd stack of papers on top of the cabinet: manuscripts, letters, fliers, past issues of *Clarendon*, and, most curious, a black and yellow woodcut print—apparently an

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Corey presented a version of this essay as a talk at Binghamton University in the spring of 2005.

original, since the paper was thin and unusually textured, quite unlike anything my small-town upbringing had shown me in my first two decades.\*

This was in the fall of 1970. Across the previous four years I had learned to be lonely—my girlfriend throughout high school having long since left me; had learned I was a pacifist—having applied for and received conscientious objector status at the height of the Vietnam War; and had learned to call myself—though not yet in public—a poet, one with twenty or twenty-five compositions to his credit. Helping to put out a magazine devoted to literature certainly seemed like something a poet would do, and something a soldier would not—and, at some far-removed, astonishingly silly emotional level, I probably saw doing this work as revenge on my old girlfriend, who had failed to see what a sensitive guy I was and would continue to be. (As the poet Peter Meinke has written in *The Night Train and the Golden Bird*, “Everything we do is for our first loves / whom we have lost irrevocably / who have married insurance salesmen / and moved to Topeka / and never think of us at all.”)

Denker and I put together that school year’s several issues of *Clarendon*, reading through however many poems showed up in response to our posters, our ads in the school newspaper *Pipe Dream*, and whatever announcements a few English professors may have made in their classes. I think we probably received a few dozen poems per semester—possibly a hundred—from which we chose about fifteen for each issue; because we were twenty years old and in charge, we made the usual novices’ mistake of printing our own work along with that which we had accepted from other writers.

I’ve held onto a couple of copies of *Clarendon*, and when I glance at them every few years I am pleased to find that I think we probably made some right decisions—about others’ poems, of course—given what we must have had as choices. An administrator named R. A. Pawlikowski (we didn’t limit ourselves

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\*The print is reproduced on the cover of this issue; see note on contents page.

to students) managed to teach us the value of a more mature view, as did such notable scholar-poets as Arthur Clements and William V. Spanos, and the whimsical lyrics of a then-young woman named Joni Sedaca still sing nicely:

Did he wear orange  
or did she  
I chose his face from afar for  
he was a pretty man  
and his face was a satisfied face  
while I had no one, no  
face for my own.  
He wore orange.  
But it does not matter  
Things like that  
don't matter at all.

This was editors' school, this reading and choosing what we liked best at a given moment in our lives, with nobody else anywhere near to say No or Yes. There was no other course of study in 1970, nor is there today; one cannot earn a degree in literary editing at any school in the United States.

Stephen Denker and I had great fun for a few months, with our love of words and our little senses of power and importance, and then we went our separate ways. I have never seen or heard from him since. The woodcut was still on the cabinet at the end of the year, unclaimed, and I reasoned that such mysterious beauty ought not to be wasted. Two cloaked and faceless figures, together and apart at once, sit hunched in a symbolic forest composed of wavering black and yellow vertical stripes. I placed the print between two large pieces of cardboard and took it away; nobody in the student center or anywhere else across the campus paid any attention.

## II

I was not then an editor—merely someone who had edited;

yet the bug had entered the wood and was not dead. Six full and complicated years went by. I got married; took a master's degree in English (also from Harpur College, but it was now called the State University of New York at Binghamton) with a small poetry collection as thesis, something scarcely heard of in that place and time; had two daughters; returned to my home town of Jamestown, New York, and did newspaper work; moved south with my family to enter the English PhD program at the University of Florida—which at that time, like SUNY Binghamton, did not have a creative writing program as such.

The bug was not dead. UF visiting writers Stephen Spender and Robert Dana were enough impressed by the poetic talent in the Gainesville area, both within and without the university community, that they decided to honor it with a self-published anthology, *A Local Muse*, in the spring of 1976. Next to the work of graduate and undergraduate students, university faculty, and assorted other Gainesville residents, Spender and Dana placed poems from past visiting writers—among them John Ciardi, Richard Eberhart, Robert Fitzgerald, and John Frederick Nims. The booklet was tall—6 ½ inches across and 12 inches high—and had a pebbled burgundy cover that sported a winged armadillo.

The following New Year's Eve, poet Edward Wilson and I had had enough to drink at a writer-filled party that we were finally able to recognize, along about 1 a.m., that *A Local Muse* was such a damned great idea that, goddamn it, it ought to be kept alive. The anthology ought to become a periodical! Spender and Dana were long gone back to England and Iowa, so Ed and I appointed ourselves co-editors, right there on the couch. After all, we both had editorial experience—his similar to mine, down I-75 at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg—we were both avid readers of poetry, and we were both poets. What need of a degree when one is self-anointed?

*A Local Muse II* came out in the spring of 1977, tall and bright green and featuring a Eustace Tilly sendup in alligator guise. Contributors included many of the previous year's locals, recent

visitors Maxine Kumin and Michael Mott, and—no, we still hadn't learned—Edward Wilson and Stephen Corey.

Ed moved on, and in 1978 poet Lola Haskins joined me as co-editor. Robert Dana asked that we "return" the name *A Local Muse*, since he was thinking of starting his own magazine under that moniker. Inspired by what we had just lost, Lola and I came up with *The Devil's Millhopper*, whose namesake was a huge and ancient sinkhole on the outskirts of Gainesville.

We decided to publish twice a year and to go "national." We placed, as I recall, a single classified ad, in the *CCLM Newsletter* (that's the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, predecessor of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses)—and we quickly learned that the country was full of poets ready to take a chance on submitting to a never-before-heard-of magazine. Hundreds of poems came in, and the number grew year by year. Supported annually by nickel-and-dime contributions from local patrons (including the co-editors), and one year by a small grant from CCLM, *The Devil's Millhopper* actually came to have several dozen subscribers by the time I left it in 1983.

When I departed from Florida in 1980 to take a three-year teaching job at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, *TDM* went with me. I handled it on my own for a year, then took on a Columbia poet and new friend, Jim Peterson, as my assistant editor. The submission numbers continued to rise, as did the overall quality, and we also began to see something new: poetry books with *The Devil's Millhopper* listed on their acknowledgments pages along with *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry*, and so on. We had gradually injected ourselves into the quiet system to which we had always meant and hoped to contribute, consciously or not.

*The Devil's Millhopper* survived beyond my seven-year tenure for nearly fifteen more circuits of the sun, first under Jim Peterson and then with its final editor, Stephen Gardner of Aiken, South Carolina. When the magazine quietly succumbed in the late 1990s to the usual maladies of short funding, short staffing, and editorial

exhaustion, it had lived far longer than most of its brethren. Get yourself into any room full of middle-aged poets and mention the *Millhopper*, and even today you can be sure you'll raise a few eyebrows and smiles.

### III

Because my work at the University of South Carolina consisted almost entirely of teaching freshman composition to mostly indifferent special-needs students, my editing avocation came to feel more and more central to my literary and emotional well being. My little writing career was going tolerably well, despite my not having much sense of how to conduct it: I had published my first poem in 1976, the year after I moved to Florida, and in 1981 I won the fledgling Water Mark Poets First Book Award for a collection called *The Last Magician*. I had also begun trying to place reviews and essay-reviews, having early (1979) success with *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and with the journal that had become my favorite as I read around in the field—*The Georgia Review*.

When a paid editorial position with *GR* was nationally posted right around the time that my three-year contract was running out at USC, I barely dared hope that such an attractive job could come my way to replace all those days in front of freshman comp classes, but still I eagerly applied. After all, my editorial “education” now spanned a dozen years, and my aesthetic affinities with *The Georgia Review* seemed to be stacked up at least three deep: I liked most of what I read in the journal’s mix of several genres, the editor Stanley W. Lindberg had seen fit to publish several of my reviews and a handful of my poems, and Lindberg had recently commissioned me to edit and introduce a selection from the correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Richard Eberhart, knowing that I knew Eberhart and his work from my University of Florida days.

Despite the odds, employment hope can spring almost eternal.

I landed the assistant editorship of *The Georgia Review*, a full-



time paid position, and began work in July, 1983, after about six weeks on the unemployment dole in South Carolina. *The Georgia Review* was not mine to create in the senses that *Clarendon* and *The Devil's Millhopper* had been; I would serve as screener and advisor for Stan, who had come to *GR* six years earlier and completely revamped it from what it had been under his predecessor, John T. Irwin. Stan had hired me because he sensed my literary tastes and interests were close enough to his that when I read manuscripts I would not reject works he would want the chance to see himself. And because his sense of our shared aesthetic was accurate, I never had to feel that I was serving Stan's interests and standards rather than my own: I simply followed my nose and ears to the works that most moved me, as I had done in my previous editing positions, and I passed those along for Stan's consideration. As the years went by, Stan gave more and more weight to my opinions and remarks, but at the deepest level this did not matter because what *did* matter was the constant, present-tense search for the new right words. As long as I was pulling from the paper piles those rare works that slammed my gut and my head at the same time, I was accomplishing what felt more and more like one of my destined functions in the world. (Melodramatic, this remark, but true.)

Editing so-called serious literature—writing that by intention of style and thought tries to set itself apart from all previous efforts—is a form of spiritual occupation, as is the creation of same. About this, for me, there is no doubt. Arthur Symonds, in his grimly stunning afterword to his compact group of essays entitled *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), argues that all the great human passions—for religious experience, for romantic and sexual human love, for art—are born of the same need, which is to counter and deny the fact of mortality. For better and worse, a literary editor—like a literary writer—must believe himself to be on a mission for the art of the written word, and it is this sense of mission that keeps him going even though he may have to count his journal's readers in the dozens or the hundreds, or perhaps in the several thousands if he is really



fortunate. (I'm quite sure the bookstores in Athens, Georgia, alone sell more copies of each new Harry Potter novel than *The Georgia Review* sells copies worldwide.) If the means to produce the journal exist, the editor—I should say *this* editor—will continue to seek the works to fill it.

The most profound pleasure in the profession is easily noted, but only with the greatest difficulty explained: it is to come upon that one story or poem among many hundreds that manages to sing and ring with a self-generated and sustained authority, a rightness that infuses the work from beginning to end—or that, if certain lapses intrude upon it, the editor can advise the author about how to repair. To choose a single example of such pleasure out of twenty-plus years at *The Georgia Review* is impossible, so let me do so.

I had been with *GR* for less than a year when I encountered a story called “The Gittel” by an unpublished young writer named Marjorie Sandor. Immediately upon finishing my first reading, I marched into Stan’s office and insisted that he listen to this opening paragraph:

There is a tradition in our family that once in a while a dreamer is born: an innocent whose confused imagination cannot keep up with the civilized world. This person walks around in a haze of dreams, walking eventually right into the arms of the current executioner, blind as Isaac going up the mountain with his father. Nobody knows who started this story—my mother used to say it was a second-rate scholar out to impress the neighbors—but apparently there are characteristics, traits peculiar to this person, and two hundred years ago people knew a catastrophe was on the way if such a person came into their midst. Once, when I was a little girl, I asked Papa to name the traits. He said he couldn’t; they’d been lost. All he knew was that this dreamer, before vanishing, always left behind a dreaming child, and that sometimes he thought he was such a child.

Stan went away with the manuscript that evening, and the next day he agreed we should accept it. This may not have been the quickest decision ever made at *The Georgia Review*, but certainly it came close. "The Gittel" was subsequently selected for reprinting in *The Best American Short Stories*, and it helped make *The Georgia Review* a finalist that year in the National Magazine Awards fiction category (along with *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Playboy*). In other words, I wasn't simply flighty or arbitrary when I heard the magical voice of controlled invention in Sandor's opening sentences and then throughout her tale. Such a voice, no other quite like it, clues us to its own grasp on some set of circumstances we have not quite encountered before, and begins immediately to persuade us that those circumstances are worth our time and consideration—are, in fact, a portion of our own lives.

A grim but amusing side note about style: In late 1973, under the acting editor Edward Krickel, *The Georgia Review* was "fortunate" enough to be able to feature the short story "Cannon!" by Donald Barthelme, who was about as hot a literary property as there was on the market at that time. Turned out, though, that "Cannon!" had in truth been set off by an unknown hoaxer—one who also published "Donald Barthelme stories" around that same time in at least two other journals, including the same story (i.e., "Cannon!") in *Carolina Quarterly*. Damned few of us can forge a genuine style, but plenty of us can imitate the real thing because its realness is usually so palpable.

I believe that one key to *The Georgia Review's* growing success during the past quarter century has been our insistence upon the equal importance of the four primary kinds of writing we feature: essays, poems, reviews, and short stories. The generous financial support of our home institution has given us, among other things, more pages to work with than many comparable journals can afford, which in turn allows us to feature in each issue 30-50 pages of work from each of the aforementioned genres. Readers can take in an entire issue, but they can also turn to just one or two areas and not feel shortchanged.

Another key has been our commitment to the expertly written general-interest essay, broadly defined. Reaching for informed studies in many disciplines, preferably with more than one discipline touched upon in any given essay, we have tried to open *The Review* to as many thoughtful readers as possible, though of course we never seem to be able to reach anywhere near as many as we are convinced would consistently peruse our pages if we could just get ourselves up under their noses.

When I began working with *The Georgia Review* there were scarcely any computers (as they are now defined) to be seen, to say nothing of no Internet. Up until a couple of years ago, our pages were still set in hot lead on Linotype machines and printed letterpress. Now we have in-house typesetting, are offset printed, and of course have a Web site and do all sorts of communicating via e-mail. I have watched my children, and recently my grandchildren, and they give me firm faith that books (and therefore journals) are not about to disappear, even though more and more activity will take place in on-line venues. We need the literal touch and feel and pressure of printed works just as we need the touch of other people; some things can be automated only so far before they curve back on themselves and journey into the territory they (and we) thought they had left behind. This is no Pollyannish talk, no Luddite avoidance. Imagine going to a "poetry reading" and finding that the voice you are expected to listen to is one of those you get when you are shunted into the automated telephone answering system of a large business. Imagine allowing such a voice to read your child to sleep.

That woodcut I lifted from the *Clarendon* office is framed and hung on a wall in my living room, just to one side of the front door. I see it every time I walk out into the world. I don't know who those ghostly figures in the print might be, nor do I have any idea about the identity of the artist who created this work that is an unspoken but never-forgotten piece of my daily life. However, I know that the work and the artist are important. They help me to move along; they help me to know I won't stop moving.