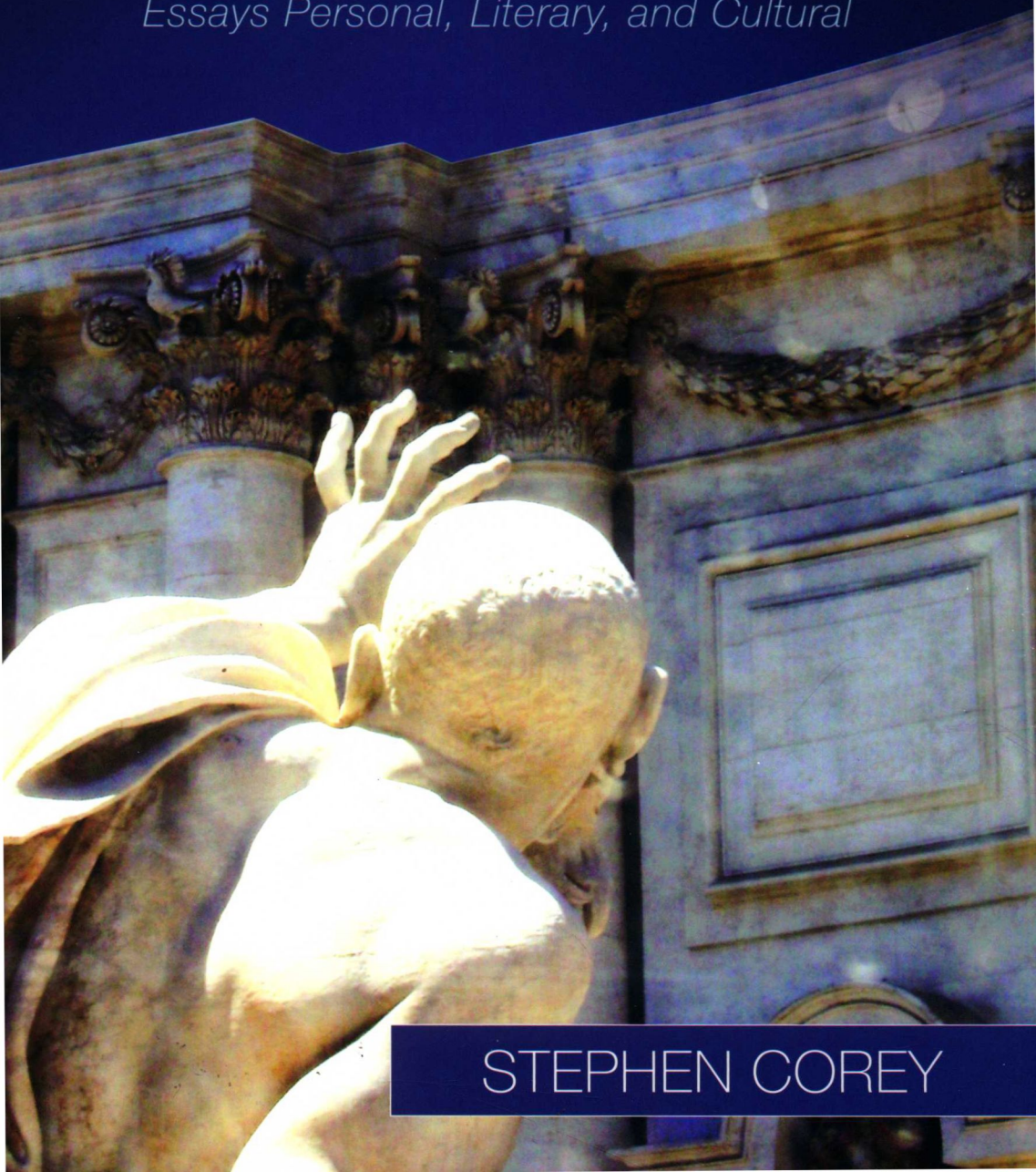


STARTLED

AT THE BIG SOUND

Essays Personal, Literary, and Cultural



STEPHEN COREY

Now I know why I have called Stephen Corey the absolute best journal editor in America, the only editor I have trusted implicitly and from whom I have taken every suggestion offered about my prose and poetry. So, it simply follows to say I have always known he was that rare combination of important poet, superb editor, and absolutely absorbing essayist. This superb book portrays the Renaissance man behind it all. It is, as he says in one essay on translation, about balance, for translation is always a balance among contending forces. In *Startled at the Big Sound* you find life and art, history and hope, the immediate and the transcendent, and so many other crucial topics balanced in a perfect artistic whole. If you want to experience what it is to live fully the life of letters as a fully engaged human being, then you must experience this book.

— RICHARD JACKSON —

author of twenty books of poetry and prose

I have come to see Stephen Corey as—in a world of online slapdash infinity-space to fill—one of the last of the true gatekeepers of care and quality and conscience in a literary journal world where space is determinedly limited.

— ALBERT GOLDBARTH —

Adele V. Davis Distinguished Professor
of Humanities at Wichita State University

I'd stared and stared at my poem "Jacquard" until there was nothing left to be done, until I could no longer see it. Then Stephen's comments startled me awake. I'm grateful for his suggestions. I'm afraid you'll think I've mellowed, not putting up a fight, but I know good advice when I hear it.

— MICHAEL WATERS —

author of *Celestial Joyride*

In the decades that Stephen Corey has been at the helm, *The Georgia Review* has published luminaries, laureates, and well-loved literary figures, but that isn't the measure of Corey's excellence as an editor. (What editor wouldn't look good when such contributors regularly send him their work?) One of Corey's greatest gifts is his eye for the unfamiliar, his ear for the possibilities that hide in the unknown. His qualities of discernment inform his generous consideration of the unsolicited manuscript, which he refuses to regard as slush. It is because of this that *The Georgia Review* has remained a vital and engaging blend of new and established voices, with revelations in every issue.

— LAURA SEWELL MATTER —

essayist and biographer

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STEPHEN COREY



MERCER

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Personal,
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and
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Stephen Corey

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"Juggling Voices: Robert Dana's Journey from the Skin," *Poet & Critic* (v. 13, no. 2, 1982).

"Just a Goll-durn Minute...," *New Ohio Review* (issue 7, Spring 2010).

"Double-Teaming Stephen Dunn," *The Room and the World: Essays on the Poet Stephen Dunn*, edited by Laura McCullough (University of Syracuse Press, 2012).

"Stephen Spender: A Precious Silliness of Intellect," *Illuminations* (no.13, Summer 1997).

"Remembering to Be Perplexed: On 'A String around Your Finger' and 'No Beauty'," *Kestrel* (Issue 7, 1986).

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"A Squirming Aleph: On David Swanger's 'What the Wing Says,'" *Spreading the Word: Editors on Poetry*, edited by Warren Slesinger (Columbia, South Carolina: The Bench Press, 1989, 2001); *Poets & Writers* (v. 19, no. 2, March/April 1991).

"Don't Ask Me How to Spell *Fuchsia*," *Poets & Writers* (v. 26, no. 4, July/August 1998).

"Putting the Work First: An Antidote to the Anxiety of Influence," *Poets & Writers* (v. 28, no. 3, May/June 2000).

"Lives on Leaves," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (v. 57, no. 4, Autumn 1981). [On *Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People* by William Stafford, *In a Fugitive Season* by Robert Dana, and *The Need to Hold Still* by Lisel Mueller.]

"Strange Altars," *Poet & Critic* (v. 21, no. 2, Winter 1990). [On *In Your Own Sweet Time* by Alane Rollings, *The Way Water Rubs Stone* by Christopher Bursk, *The Whole Truth* by James Cummins, and *Out in the Open* by Margaret Gibson.]

"The Eloquence of Eberhart," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (v. 55, no. 4, Autumn 1979). [On *Of Poetry and Poets* by Richard Eberhart.]

"Gold Rings: Recent Award-Winning Poetry Volumes," *The Georgia Review* (v. 42, no. 1, Spring 1988). [On *Fragments from the Fire: The Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of March 25, 1911* by Chris Llewellyn; *Little Star* by Mark Halliday; *Saving the Young Men of Vienna* by David Kirby; *Whistle Maker* by Robert J. Levy; and *Stages of Twilight* by Alice Derry.]

Author's Preface

Mrs. Yasher, Mr. Abrams, Mr. Doverspike, and a double handful of others along my public school path from the early 1950s to the middle 1960s drilled and insinuated into me the rudiments and details of a prose style—with assistance, of course, from all those authors whose books they gave me to read, from Dr. Seuss to Dostoevsky. So, when my freshman Lit & Comp I and II professors at Harpur College, Christian P. Gruber and G. Mallory Masters, sang my prose-writing praises out of the gate, I already knew enough to credit those earlier teachers for readying me so well. I suppose the fact that my continuing English studies (and my life in general) led me to begin thinking of myself as a poet—rather than a fiction writer or an essayist—might in some odd way have been a betrayal of what all those fine supporters gave me, but I prefer to call the choice an outgrowth: I believe one can be a fine prose writer and an inept poet, but that no inept prose writer can become a fine poet.

In any event, I wrote my first poems in 1967, grew increasingly serious about them over the next five years, began allowing myself to think of myself as a poet over the *next* five, and had the good fortune to publish my first collection, *The Last Magician*, in 1981. I was of course writing various kinds of prose all along—including letters (love and otherwise), newspaper journalism, book reviews, and a 450-page doctoral dissertation on the writing career of the English poet Stephen Spender—but if you had asked me what kind of writer I was at any time up until the early 1990s, I'd have said without hesitation or qualification "a poet." I continued to publish reviews in the 80s, as well as a couple of pieces I'd written from the perspective of my then-new career as an editor for *The Georgia Review*, but my heart was in the next two poetry volumes, *Synchronized Swimming* (1984) and *All These Lands You Call One Country* (1992).

However...

Still...

But...by the late 80s and early 90s I'd also come up with something else: a small but growing stockpile of nonexistent work—images, narratives, and subjects I had unsuccessfully tried to work into poems. Somewhere along that time line I decided I had to give up—on an as-needed basis—the

fixation on my primary genre to see whether the essay form might sometimes get me past the stymie I had not been able to escape.

Now and then that shift of emphasis from the line to the sentence allowed me to find the path and focus I had been unable to achieve: the title essay and several others gathered here grew because some attempted and longed-for poems did not.

My chosen subtitle words—*personal, cultural, literary*—I think of as both useful and arbitrary. Almost every piece here includes all three elements to varying degrees, so I would be neither surprised (except as regards the reviews) nor disappointed if readers sometime get the urge to move a given essay from one section to another. My choice of different terms to head those sections is intended to show that the pie can be otherwise sliced—yet to the same intermingling effect.

The intermingling is on occasion literal, especially in the “Editor” section, where a few incidents and examples surface more than once. I attribute this to two facts: the works in this collection were written across more than two decades, and sometimes a good story or proof is worth repeating. While preparing the book I seriously considered rewriting certain passages to remove what might be seen as redundancy, but in the end I came down on the side of reemphasis and of trusting the choices I had made along the way. The poet Richard Hugo argued (more than once) that a poet must take ownership of certain words, in spite of potential criticism from readers for repetitiveness—his biggie was *gray*—and I think his notion, rightly handled, extends beyond the level of individual terms.

I also considered, case by case, whether any of the numerous reviews I’ve written could or should find a place in a gathering whose contents are officially categorized as essays, and I’ve ended up admitting a quartet from among the dozens of candidates. Three of these outliers already bore the tag of “essay-review,” and I believe they make broad observations and arguments about poetry (and other good writing) whose relevance has not faded for me. The fourth, on a single book not in its author’s primary genre, is an attempt to keep alive the name and work of an important writer too seldom recalled in the past couple of decades.

S.C.

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I

PERSON

Getting to Know the Strangers in the House

Years afterward, he told me how he'd risen from bed around midnight in that small, strange town and wandered the streets surrounding his motel, searching for an open bar. He'd found one—didn't remember the name—and taken a stool as far as possible from the two old men who, sitting together but with an open stool between them, made up the entire clientele of what could only be called a joint. He'd ordered his drink, a Manhattan, and raised it to me in silent salute. He'd always remembered, he said, that it seemed important not to speak my name. Rather, he had stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar and had worked to conjure my face where his own looked back at him. Then, he'd lifted the glass again—just with his wrist, keeping his elbow on the bar so as not to attract attention—and he'd said, "Here's to you."

I told this story of my father when I spoke at his funeral, right after reading Robert Hayden's brief but expansive poem, "Those Winter Sundays." The son speaking in Hayden's implied elegy (we aren't actually told of a death) recalls his father rising to start fires in the frigid predawn hours—this one activity standing in for the whole range of selfless tasks performed across a lifetime in the name of caring and family. The poem, just fourteen lines long, concludes with recognition and lament: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" During the three days I had to mull my words for the impending service, I came to realize that poems of death and dying don't play well when death and dying are at hand. I knew I wanted to include poetry in my memorial, just as I knew I must be the one to stand up and speak, but I had grown nearly desperate prior to the moment when Hayden's poem came to mind. I knew at once that it was what I needed: sad but uplifting, with death in the wings and life's energy on stage.

After my story of the midnight toast, I asked people before me to recall their own anecdotes of my father's positive presence in their lives, and to hold on to those stories, whether for themselves or to share with others. What I didn't ask these gathered relatives, friends, and business colleagues to consider was something else my talking brought to mind, a something else