

# Praise for *Anaphora*

“Anaphora—the deliberate repetition of a word or phrase—is the major poetic device of Scott Cairns’ most recent book of echoes and reiterations tuned to the sound of praise and worship. In other words, Cairns writes to arrive at ‘the most of what our words could not.’ These poems exalt the lives of his literal forbears—both mother and father—and his poetic forbears, Strand and Stevens. But they manage all this adoration through a real respect for the natural world and the human body as a part of that world, even if that body grows old. Look at what Cairns sees when his eyes do the beholding!”

—JERICHO BROWN, author of *The Tradition: Poems*

“*Anaphora* is a book of both utterance and stillness, written in the language of attention suffused with the sacred. It is a work composed mid-prayer on the threshold of deep encounter, in the liminal spaces of breakwater and tree line, amidst the high peaks of the north Cascades, in forests of cedar and the silence within unceasing longing for God. These are poems of graceful and deft argument, echoing Wallace Stevens, the Book of Psalms, and the homilies of Saint Isaak of Syria, with whom this poet holds particular affinities. Cairns’ is a poetry of presence and watchfulness, of elegy and beatitude and counsel on how the just must respond to injustice. It is a poetry awake to love’s inspiring agency, soulfully both a burning and a balm, and most especially for our moment, a gift.”

—CAROLYN FORCHÉ, poet, memoirist,  
author of *The Angel of History* and *What You Have Heard Is True*

“Here is a deft and beautiful collection: poetry as incantation, poetry as both wound and cure. These poems do more than point beyond themselves, for sometimes, in their soft repeated summons, they become the thing they point to.”

—MALCOLM GUTE, poet, critic,  
author of *Mariner: A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

# Preface

For those familiar with literary and rhetorical devices, *anaphora*—the deliberate repetition of a word or phrase—is a familiar strategy, one that both assists textual coherence and draws uncommon attention to the repeated terms. One might recall profound examples of anaphora in biblical poetry and more recently in the Bible-inflected orations of Martin Luther King.

Less familiar, perhaps, is the use of the term in liturgical-Eucharistic settings. Named for the prayer that accompanies the preparation of the Eucharist—a prayer whose structure often employs formal anaphora—the term has come to indicate as well the specific liturgical moment when the elements—the bread and wine—are consecrated, when they become what we in the Eastern Church are pleased to call the Holy Mysteries.

While certain of the poems in this collection employ overt anaphora, many do not. I trust, however, that most will invite a sense of words as doing more than naming, more than serving as arrows pointing to prior substance; I trust that, at least intermittently, these words may acquire due substance of their own, partaking of more than is apparent, the more that is nonetheless *so*, and is present.

## Erato at 64

She asked if I still loved her, and I said  
of course, I love you still. I watched to see  
if she believed, but all I saw was that  
she wanted very much to so believe.

As for myself, I wanted very much  
to find a word to grant us both assurance,  
which is when I saw how words alone would not  
avail, that words alone cannot attain

to evidence, cannot perform a proof.

I pulled her to the bed. Together, we  
addressed the matter of our love, and made  
the most of what our words could not.

---

# I. First Body

[Πρώτον Σώμα]

---



## Opening the Text

The limen and the choppy line continue  
    their provocative confusions at the shore.  
The limen and the chattering line obtain a pulse  
    as yet absorbing at the shore.  
The παραλία, as expected, keeps the sea at bay,  
    and we embark from it intent upon what late  
familiar measures we might find meet concerning  
    how we push our laden coracle once more  
into the morning mist. Sublimity proves compelling,  
    as a rule, and implicates a matter apprehended,  
albeit ever out of view, ever unavailable. Consider it  
    as figure for what trembling joy you felt  
when, as a child, you stood before the blue Pacific  
    and beheld what seemed a pulsing stillness  
far beyond the roar, or when you walked  
    through low cloud swirling at the ridge, or when  
the great elk raised its massive head from undergrowth  
    to meet your open eye with his.

## Shoring Up and Shoring Down

With near-anaphoric repetition  
the tedious Pacific yet insists  
on pressing this our gritty beach  
for further evidence. And look!  
At intervals the shore concedes. And Look!  
Here and there the cliffs  
reveal the land has altogether  
acquiesced, having shrugged  
its shoulders, shedding heaps  
of clay onto the grit.

With near-anaphoric repetition  
the melancholic ebb and flow  
repeat their endless question, just as we  
interrogate the rock and clay  
and fossil-bearing strata for a clue  
regarding what has brought us here,  
regarding what might lead us hence.

## Forsaken and Foregone

The ship is slow, and also slow  
the swarthy crew. What's new?

Somewhere far ahead, obscured  
today by low cloud, winter mist,  
and, as I say, no small distance,  
the island bides regardless,  
and we, ship-bound for the moment,  
have grown a little slow about  
our chores, assuming more delays  
in any progress fostering  
efficacious effort at the prow.  
What now? You're dozing at the oar.

We're sore, and sorely underwhelmed  
by these our prospects, but admit  
it's just that kind of thinking keeps  
the island's promise far away,  
unconsidered, unexplored, all  
but impossible to believe.

## Conifer Forest

—January 27, 2018

More green than blue, more the color  
the sea adopts as the sun surrenders to  
the western edge, the near, the looming  
conifer forest, just now, appears to hang  
beneath a tattered shroud, cloud resembling  
wood smoke. The resin in the air affords  
as well a scent akin to wood smoke hovering.  
Many years ago, I walked this very  
schist road with my dad—the two of us  
with rifles slung, muzzles to the ground,  
rifles we were unlikely ever to discharge.  
The mist was fresh upon my face, the mist  
thinning as we walked. Our *going hunting*  
was our way to make a day together, far  
from all that might have kept us moving  
more apart. As I recall, we hardly spoke,  
but savored our slow ascent upon the road,  
breathing in the cool obscuring mist, the cedar,  
fir, and hemlock. At one point or other, we  
found a likely stump atop a clear-cut slope.  
We settled there, dropping guns and packs,  
sharing coffee from dad's red Thermos cup.  
Thirty years ago today, by all appearances,

he left us altogether. In my dreams, he  
visits still, walking with me on the schist road,  
offering again the sandwich, the steaming cup.