

I've been reading—and relying on—Scott Cairns's poems for thirty years. He is one of those rare poets in whose work you feel a whole life underlying and fortifying every utterance. His work has reached far beyond the poetry world into the lives of readers who know poetry can be a source not only of delight and wisdom but of survival.

—**Christian Wiman**

Author of *Zero at the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair*

How does a poet face mortality? Poets like Keats and Hopkins, Elizabeth Bishop and Scott Cairns, face it alone and in company, binding themselves to the immortal through words, through *correspondences*. Prayers rise from and return to prayer; poems emerge from and fall back to poetry. As Cairns demonstrates in this characteristically wry yet weighty new collection, language begets language, casting itself urgently into the past and future at once, seeking—and finding—the divine. As it speaks back through his own life and a century of Greek poetry, Cairns's language finds and deploys faith, paradox, low and high discourse, an “elegance” he attributes to Kavafy but makes, as a true poet will, his own. In doing so, he shows that the work of the poet is ongoingly human and mortal: at once solitary and gloriously companioned.

—**Katharine Coles**

Author of *The Stranger I Become*

These poems—or palimpsests—take shape where “our lost beloveds gather / along the far bank murmuring.” Cairns sustains conversations with a host of modern and contemporary Greek poets whose words deliver him to the instruments of his own art and encourage him to “praise all that has set us briefly here.” The distinctive Scott Cairns manner abides—subtle undulations of syntax mapping a topography of belief—while these poems extol what is found in translation, in writing as an outcome of joyful reading.

—**Christopher Bakken**

Author of *Eternity & Oranges*

In his latest book, Scott Cairns understands that all poets are makers but also that the poems they make are always responding to what is already made. *Correspondence with My Greeks* brings together poems that correspond with Cairns's favorite Greek writers; that, moreover, are consonant with the feelings provoked by his reading of those writers; and are poems that respond wholeheartedly (as in a letter) to writers by way of Cairns's personal concerns. Cairns is one of our most authentic and skillful religious writers, and what the Cairns reader expects is all here: his wit, his humor, and his love of words and word play; his accurate and original images of the natural world; his participation in the fraught world of humanity and politics; and, of course, his overriding belief in the "superabundance [that] appears to hold / hegemony over the demons of deprivation." This superb, highly personal book is the work of a mature writer who knows we are always setting off and arriving and then setting off again; who hopes his poems are a constant prayer to be awake as the Lord approaches; and who understands that his life (and all our lives) "appear as a confusion / of compassions and judgments, kindnesses / and cruelties, consolations and regrets" as we make our way among the mysteries of being here. This is a superb book.

—Robert Cording

Author of *In the Unwalled City*

Reading this marvelous book, I'm not only reminded of the wonders of twentieth century poetry written in Greek (Kavafy, Elytis, and Seferis, for starters) but also of what a joy it is to read Scott Cairns's work. He rises to the occasion of these correspondences with seeming effortlessness; he too approaches "the world's extravagant bouquet" and dares to press the "stillness for a sign."

—Jacqueline Osherow

Author of *Divine Ratios*

Correspondence with My Greeks

Correspondence
with Αλληλογραφία
My Greeks με
τους Έλληνες Μου

SCOTT CAIRNS

S L / . N T
B O O K S

CORRESPONDENCE WITH MY GREEKS

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*For my beloved students,
and my beloved Greeks*

Contents

Introduction | xi

Still Waiting—After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης | 1

The City—After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης | 2

The Democratic State—After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης | 3

In the Year 2023, Pascha—After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης | 4

Half Past Midnight—After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης | 5

An Explanation—After Άγγελος Σικελιανός | 6

Euripides the Athenian—After Γιώργος Σεφέρης | 7

Vision—After Γιώργος Σεφέρης | 8

Secret Poem—After Γιώργος Σεφέρης | 9

Ode: Erotic Word—After Γιώργος Σεφέρης | 10

Noetic Core—After Γιώργος Θέμελης | 12

The Eros of the Moment—After Ζωή Καρέλλη | 13

Matter of Translation—After Ζωή Καρέλλη | 14

Exhumation—After Ζωή Καρέλλη | 16

Had My Efforts Proved Effectual—After Ρίτα Μπούμη-Παπά | 17

Our Habitual “Lord Have Mercy”—After Δημήτριος Αντωνίου | 18

They Open Us—After Νίκος Παππάς | 19

As Such—After Νικόλαος Κάλας | 20

Disinterest—After Μελισσάνθη | 21

Messenger—After Γιάννης Ρίτσος | 22

Capacity—After Οδυσσέας Ελύτης | 23

- Autopsy**—After Οδυσσέας Ελύτης | 24
- To Shape as I Am Shaped**—After Νικηφόρος Βρεττάκος | 25
- No Saint**—After Μίλτος Σαχτούρης | 26
- For My Father**—After Αντώνης Δεκαβάλλης | 27
- A Late Lament**—After Ελένη Βακαλό | 28
- Another Creed**—After Νάνος Βαλαωρίτης | 29
- A Late Prayer**—After Τάσος Λειβαδίτης | 30
- Distillate**—After Γιώργης Παυλόπουλος | 34
- My Question**—After Μανόλης Αναγνωστάκης | 35
- Orthodoxy**—After Νίκος Καρούζος | 36
- Cedar**—After Βικτωρία Θεοδώρου | 37
- The Origin and the Wandering**—After Λύντια Στεφάνου | 38
- Soul Saturday**—After Νίκος Φοκάς | 39
- My Language**—After Τίτος Πατρικίος | 40
- Waiting Room**—After Ντίνος Χριστιανόπουλος | 41
- Photograph, 1960**—After Κική Δημουλά | 42
- Absences**—After Χρίστος Λάσκαρης | 43
- Litany For Those Omitted**—After Στυλιανός Σ. Χαρκιανάκης | 44
- Violences**—After Μάρκος Μέσκος | 45
- Due Attention**—After Κατερίνα Αγγελάκη-Ρουκ | 46
- The Blood that Dizzied Me**—After Ζέφη Δαράκη | 47
- From My Cold Stasídi**—After Κυριάκος Χαραλαμπίδης | 48
- Skin**—After Σάκης Παπαδημητρίου | 49
- Measures**—After Αργύρης Χιόνης | 50
- There, Beneath Your Feet**—After Γιάννης Κοντός | 51
- Love's Fool**—After Μανόλης Πρατικάκης | 52
- At the Chapel on the Mount**—After Μιχάλης Γκανάς | 53
- Vantage**—After Λευτέρης Πούλιος | 54
- Performance**—After Ντίνος Σιώτης | 55
- Covert Moment, You**—After Άντεια Φραντζή | 56

Dwelling in the Kástro	—After Χριστόφορος Λιοντάκης 57
Praise	—After Αθηνά Παπαδάκη 58
No Apologia	—After Νάσος Βαγενάς 59
Fine Point	—After Βασίλης Στεριάδης 60
Prospect	—After Γιάννης Πατίλης 61
Late Prayer	—After Δημήτρης Καλοκύρης 62
Catalog	—After Κώστας Μαυρουδής 63
Late Apprehension	—After Παυλίνα Παμπούδη 64
Continuing Descent	—After Τζένη Μαστοράκη 65
From Whence the Road?	—After Χρήστος Τσιάμης 66
Undesired Kiss	—After Γιώργος Μαρκόπουλος 67
One Consolation	—After Αλεξάνδρα Πλαστήρα 68
Mists	—After Λιάνα Σακελλίου-Σουλτζ 69
Cemetery Chapel	—After Δημήτρης Χουλιάρáκης 70
Words for Irini, My Mother	—After Χάρης Βλαβιανός 71
A Glimpse	—After Στάθης Γουργουρήs 72
Considering the Martyrs	—After Τάσος Καπερνάρος 73
The Desolate	—After Σπύρος Λαζαρίδης 74
Changes	—After Στράτης Πασχάλης 75
Where Now?	—After Γιώργος Μπλάνας 76
The Heresies	—After Νίκος Δαββέτας 77
Inclination	—After Κωστής Γκιμοσούλης 78
This House, Et Cetera	—After Σωτήρης Τριβιζάς 79
No Oracle	—After Σπύρος Βρεττός 80
Apace	—After Θανάσης Χατζόπουλος 81
Apiary	—After Ιουλίτα Ηλιοπούλου 82
Uneasy Equations	—After Ανδριάνα Καλφοπούλου 83
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	84

Introduction

IN HER EVER-PROVOCATIVE poem, “The Bight,” Elizabeth Bishop avers: “The bight is littered with old correspondences.” So, also, is my mind.

I suppose that it was this Bishop poem—encountered late in my undergraduate education—that may have first alerted me to this salutary fact of literary history: virtually every work written over the centuries has been to some degree a *responsive* text, something of an epistolary response to what the writer beholds—the landscape, the heavens, or—as in most cases—another prior *text*. I daresay that this awareness thereafter served to shape my pedagogy, as well as my own work in poetry throughout subsequent decades; it has, moreover, shaped my disposition to virtually everything that I encounter—a willingness to attend, and to respond.

Sitting at my writing desk, I am inclined to respond to certain of the correspondences that I—through this disposition, precisely—have received. As most of my students know, I begin my mornings of writing by *reading*. My desk holds a stack of books by poets whose works have provoked me in the past, poets whose works I rely upon to provoke me every time I take and read. As my students have been told, the pile holds collections by Coleridge, Keats, Bishop, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, and Auden; more pertinent to the collection in hand, my desktop stack also holds collections by Kavafy, Elytis, and Seferis. These poets have served as my mentors, my provocateurs, and—in my mind at least—my primary audience.

The Greeks—*my* Greeks, as I think of them—have figured profoundly in this ongoing conversation, these correspondences, for several decades; I’m fairly certain that Constantine P. Cavafy (whose name I prefer to spell as Kavafy) was the first such Greek to speak to me in this way; he was, at least, the first whose elegance insisted to me that I might covet such elegance, and that in doing so I might find a way out of the cramped spaces of my own mind and my own experience.

Thereafter, Yiorgos Seferis and Odysseus Elytis came to make discursive claims on my compositional thinking—and also Zoë Karelli. For a while, I pored over their works thinking to make translations of certain of their poems—and some of the poems in this book began as such attempts. Soon enough, however, my perpetually tenuous grip on Modern Greek made me see how far my making actual “translations” exceeded my capacity.

This unavoidable fact led to my noticing something else: whenever I pored over one of their poems to attempt translation, other matter arrived. I began to see how these rich and enriching poems further nudged me out of my own, clipped existence, my previous habits of composition, and pushed me into another dynamic altogether—composition understood as opening my heart and mind to a conversation that both preceded me and will survive me. Among the many consolations of that awareness is the hope that, if I construct sufficiently provocative responses to these poets’ provocations, my own poor work might similarly provoke subsequent, new response and discovery.

Since 2003, I have made a habit of traveling to Greece at least annually. Some fortunate years of University of Missouri research leave and Guggenheim benevolence allowed as many as three extended trips in several given years. Many of those trips coincided with one or both of the two most glorious book events in the world—The International Bookfair of Thessaloniki and The Panhellenic Book Festival. Drifting for hours among the rows and rows of exhibitors’ booths, I have acquired over the years a remarkable haul of poetry in Greek editions, over which I have thereafter puzzled and pressed and glimpsed new matter to which I would gratefully respond.

As Mr. Auden has observed in his late poem, “Archaeology,” “Poets have learned us their myths, / but just how did They take them? / That’s a stumper.” The myths that many of my most cherished poets have learned *me*, are the Greek myths and their somewhat *Christianized* revisions. I have discovered that it is one thing for a poet from another country to employ these foundational narratives in modern and contemporary work; it is something altogether more moving to witness those myths being visited again by a modern Greek poet, witnessing—as it were—the *correspondences* of a modern poet responding to a text received from his or her originating mother or father.

I would offer one additional bit as apology for what might seem an excess of my longtime obsession with mortality. Much of this book—especially those poems composed initially for this book—were composed since my receiving an untoward diagnosis in late 2022. I have a rare and currently incurable blood cancer of the sort to which, apparently, Christian poets are prone. That’s the

bad news. The good news, according to my doctors, is that this species of blood cancer is famously “indolent,” which, in my case, strikes me as fitting.

Here’s hoping that my responses will serve to provoke further response in kind.

Scott Cairns
University Place, Washington
September 2023

STILL WAITING

After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης

Yes, and after all of this we stand, still waiting
for those quaint people to arrive, and to accomplish
their famous work among us. And isn't it just like
barbarians to make us wait. It's been so long since

we first made ready that the town could use another
coat of paint. Someone should probably feed
the children. The senator might as well take his seat.
The feasting tables have begun to stink; servant boys

can't keep the birds away. Without a breath of wind,
the pennants hang like laundry. The afternoon is
failing altogether. Evening, as they say, is already
at the gate. So I embroider this longest part

of an exaggerated day, drawing with a stick
to relieve the wait. I should have known—I'm sure
I told them—these foreigners are always on their way;
they are forever late. Just the same, we know they must

be coming. What else could they do? They have
so little patience, no interest in board games, books,
or conversation. Slow as they are, they could hardly
stay home—so easily bored, so discontent, so great.

THE CITY

After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης

When I arrived at last I said aloud
at last, I have arrived. And I was pleased
to have at long last freed myself from all
the grit and grimy matter of the poor,
regrettable metropolis I'd fled.
It may have been the city of my birth,
but still it felt as if it would become,
for all its charms, the city of my death.

This city, ancient as it was, spread out
before me like a dewy promise kept.
As I passed through the gate I took in all
that lay ahead—the market's spice, its roar,
the colorful array of persons, each
clamoring for coins and brilliant goods.
I hurried in, full willing to be lost
amid the unknown passages I'd sought.

THE DEMOCRATIC STATE

After Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης

That things in the democratic state are not as they should be is without question, and while—despite the plethora of numbskulls and dipshits—the roads continue to be paved, the bridges in turn replaced or refurbished, and certain of the numbskulls and dipshits have made their way to court and thereafter to jail, one cannot help but think that things will not get much better anytime soon.

The catch remains an expansion of ill will that threatens to replace our long-evolving system of laws with the sudden whims of numbskulls and dipshits. The senators continue to attempt redress of things that are not as they should be. This much is mildly reassuring, but the outcome remains uncertain. Have I mentioned the legion of numbskulls and dipshits? Have I also made note of their intransigence and willful ignorance? Well, I offer that note now for your consideration. Certainly and with chagrin felt by all—save, perhaps, the numbskulls and the dipshits—much in the democratic state has succumbed to manifest absurdity.

Regardless, if without much hope or cheer, we do proceed.