

## Slow Learning (2009)

SATB a/c

Difficulty rating: 4

Duration: 5'00"

Premiere: C4, conducted by David Harris, New York, NY, 11/19/09

One can only be so serious setting a text about paper training, and there is certainly a disconnect between the earthy text and the gravitas of some of the solo vocal lines in my piece. But Scott Cairns' poem is ultimately about mercy. Concluding my work with an outsize and formally Bachian fugue is, on the one hand, of course patently ridiculous. And yet, viewed as a kind of "Miserere mei" ("Have mercy") re-directed to the third person ("Forgive him"), it is perhaps less absurd and even a little bit spiritual.

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### on slow learning

If you have ever owned  
a tortoise, you already know  
how terribly difficult  
paper training can be  
for some pets.

Even if you get so far  
as to instill in your tortoise  
the value of achieving the paper,  
there remains one obstacle--  
your tortoise's intrinsic sloth.

Even a well-intentioned tortoise  
may find himself, in his journeys,  
to be painfully far from the mark.

Failing, your tortoise may shy away  
for weeks within his shell, utterly  
ashamed, or looking up with tiny,  
wet eyes might offer an honest shrug.  
Forgive him.

--*Scott Cairns*

From *Compass of Affection: Poems New and Selected*

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