

Scott Cairns on “Improbable Rescue of the Heart”

As hundreds gathered to say farewell (for the time being) to our beloved Brett, I was struck by how each of those offering words at his memorial service took care to acknowledge Brett’s great good heart, his expansive capacity for friendship of an uncommon sort, a generous and affectionate attention that gave each of his friends a profound sense that each mattered very, very much to him. With that gift, I daresay that each of us acquired, in turn, a greater capacity ourselves.

This poem, “Improbable Rescue of the Heart,” gives evidence of what I am saying, and it pleases me to witness in this poem evidence, as well, that Brett had some sense of the efficacious effect his very good heart had on ours. The epistolary utterance responds with characteristic warmth, sympathy, encouragement, and wit to a supposed email from a friend, and adds to that sweet mix a stunning analogical extrapolation that yields a delicious, theological expansion of the central image—the miners’ rescue as something of a new birth, thereafter something of a resurrection.

Without the condescension of love’s reach, the heart itself becomes mere mechanism; without love’s condescension, “[w]hat a tiny, bitter pump [the heart becomes].” Yet, “a gracious, sent / drilling breaks” us free, lifts our hearts into the “blessed grove,” the “broad expanses brightly” greeting them—unto “a kind of counter-explosion that heals all.”

This was this gift that Brett—having received—was consciously happy to give.