

INTRODUCING THE SRPR ILLINOIS POET:  
BRETT FOSTER



---

Brett Foster earned his BA at the University of Missouri, MA at Boston University, and PhD from Yale University. He was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and an associate professor of English at Wheaton College in Illinois. His first collection of poetry, *The Garbage Eater* (2011), was selected for the Debut Poets feature in *Poets & Writers* magazine. His second book, *Extravagant Rescues*, is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press. Brett was not just a poet; he was also a scholar of early modern poetry. His critical work on Donne, Shakespeare, and other Renaissance-period literature was featured in a number of collected editions, encyclopedias, and journals. He died in 2015.

---

## 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.

## Improbable Rescue of the Heart

Receiving a good update, and good words  
from you, sending dispatches from the front,  
your overworked mother's life in Denver.

Most glad to hear your ever sensitive  
capacity, ever expanding, for joy—  
as with your rhapsodic soul in Gmail:

*Glued to cnn.com right now  
watching Chilean miners get rescued.  
O! my heart!*

And bless that heart. May its nerve be prophecy  
against this one: scheduled muscle mainly,  
the heart that bears its function, nothing more,

that circulates its weariness and gall,  
deigns to be hauled around on daily errands.  
What a tiny, bitter pump it can become.

They all need similar desolations,  
don't you think so? The briefer the better?  
But a condescension nevertheless,

plummet in darkness. Till a gracious, sent  
drilling breaks the lining, makes a tomb mouth.  
Every heart needs a season of forthcoming,

twenty minutes upward in a cylinder.  
The world's goodwill care meets it at the top,  
and from the dusty opening the heart

emerges, once again steps blinkingly forth  
into the blessed grove of patient living,  
as the broad expanses brightly greet it.

And soon, as a kind of counter-explosion  
that heals all, or seeming so, a thousand  
flares of camera flashes telegraph one wish,

signal rare and never-dared-sought welcomes.  
The heart's made steady, fed and blanketed,  
surrounded by those other, besotted hearts,

their carriers. Some chose to write it all down  
down there, but appreciate just the same  
(irradiant now) the day's invisible stars.

## Christian Wiman on “The Days We Have”

This title, in this context, is wrenching. Depressingly prescient too, since it was written before Paris and Colorado Springs and San Bernardino and no doubt some other mad massacre that will have happened by the time this goes to print. I met Brett Foster over twenty years ago in Palo Alto. It was rumored that he was a Christian—“like, a *serious* Christian,” someone told me—which seemed, in that place and among that crowd, half-illicit and half-insane. We realize too rarely how retrospective hope can be, how the little seed of feeling within your inert despair is the same full-blown flower that now graces—and is—your life. I don’t want to make too much of this. I never knew Brett all that well, though I did feel—I still feel—deeply and strangely stabbed when he died. Let me say this: at some point I realized that Brett had within him something to which I aspired, a clarity of being that kept the world from snagging in him, a faith that wasn’t simple but natural. And *strong*. Of course poetry was always part of this. I last saw Brett in a restaurant in downtown New Haven after a reading he had given at Yale, where he had done his doctoral work and still had friends. He was in his element, and he was so happy and so utterly himself that I remember literally thinking the word *charmed* about him. “No one mixes the poisons as creatively, as we do,” as the poem says. And now I want to say: God damn you, God. Full stop. But Brett and his poem keep going. May he always keep going: *to defend our living*.

## The Days We Have

The Internet's made us more sophisticated—  
discuss. Or just consider how it sides  
with the petty harbormaster who anticipates  
the comings and goings within each of us.  
Tuned into our grievances and fears,  
it broadcasts everything that's best left hidden,  
becomes a megaphone for loneliness.  
No question that our net worth's greater now,  
in terms of being ripe for advertisements  
and fluent in the season's silly films and memes.  
If you're feeling low, there's always Cialis,  
or other enthrallments that "know not seems, madam."  
I'm glad that you no longer need gun shows,  
you latest killer, but can "add to basket"  
semiautomatic rifles, flak jackets,  
and ammunition till its spilling out your door.  
*Stay away from me because I'm bad news.*  
In the cause-and-effect of online etiquette,  
soon enough my mother's sent a link:  
"How to survive an active shooter situation,"  
written as if it described a tire change,  
or how-to for your table's flower arrangement.  
"With all the knucklehead gun nuts out there now,  
this is good advice," her colorful intro  
begins. And oh no, the link! (You were thinking I'd  
somehow forgo this surrogate knowledge?)  
It opens a primed YouTube video  
about to recreate an office massacre.  
What were they thinking, the actors falling  
in the clip's first frame, frozen on my screen?  
That this is how it feels when a polity

is breaking down? As you show others  
how to duck for cover underneath a desk?  
How you desire it, but can only stay there,  
mid-scramble, stalled and still, still full of unrest?  
You and everyone you know and everyone  
who sees you stripped of any conceivable  
countermeasures? Not even quite sure  
any longer what *ressentiment* means,  
though convinced you too may be acting it out  
as the shooter hijacks the video?  
Nor sure under which mattress spring  
is hidden one's well-being? It's dusty now, and thin.  
"This is your thirst," says Zarathustra,  
"the gift-giving virtue" that makes a holiness  
of selfishness, the robber's value offered us,  
the suffering that is happiness's  
foundation, and not after all its obstacle.  
No one mixes the poisons as creatively  
as we do, and that's at least something to do  
better and better, to defend our living.

## Monica Youn on “Passing Thought on Apocalypse”

Brett was a poet, and a man, who could embody both daring and self-effacement in the same graceful motion. Here, the fabulous opening sentence takes us all the way from robe and curlers to bomb shelters by way of a moment of near-delight at the glorious spectacle of it all. For another poet, the invocation of apocalypse could be a bravura gesture, ego-driven, a bid for importance. But here, the clear-eyed parsing of affective registers—the banal, the wondering, the reflexively timid—fuse seamlessly in a looping, malleable line.

Brett achieved such tonal sensitivity not by imposing his will upon the world but by leaving himself open to the countercurrents and contradictions of experience. Even his own emotional reactions are rendered with a startling light-handedness, a “passing thought” in a second-person mode of address that suggests both intimacy and detachment. The poet gently doubts his ability to read the “manifest signs,” and counsels us, or himself, to set aside “all you thought you knew,” to put a stop to the “helter-skelter / robbing of the present.”

At the end, stripped of the assumptions by which we are accustomed to theorize about the world, we return to the bare sonics of the word “apocalypse,” the portentous thuds of its opening syllables softened by the surprising delicacy of its ending. The subtle rhyme scheme of the poem itself amplifies this pattern—the resonant tolling of “comes/kingdom/numb/tombs” playing off the fragility of “shelters/skelter/belt/melting.” Our shelters may be too insubstantial, ultimately, to shield us from disaster. But Brett’s poem, and his tragically shortened life, teach us to cherish them nonetheless, along with every moment of perception we are granted along the way.

## Passing Thought on Apocalypse

You may be in robe and curlers when it comes,  
its big-time sparklers rousing us toward bomb shelters.

Those may be a manifest signs of a kingdom  
newly at hand, and not the helter-skelter

robbing of the present, benighted, made numb  
by all you thought you knew, an infested belt.

The word suggests a curtain ripped behind the tombs,  
emergent steps of something mighty. The rest, melting.