

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.