David Keplinger

On Bruce Weigl: Finding a Shape for the Litany of Terror

In the poetry of Bruce Weigl, we encounter two voices within the one. *This is my secret to keep*, a voice says. *I want to tell you this*, says the other. "The fate the world has given me," he writes in his memoir *Circle of Hanh,* "is to struggle to write powerfully enough to draw others into the horror." The author of some 15 books of poetry, criticism, and translation over the past two decades, Weigl has established himself as a major voice of his generation, having reached beyond his early marginalization as a "Vietnam War" poet. Rather, the contradictions from which his poetry was first born—of war and return—permitted Weigl the forum in which to first experiment with the themes and issues that have since become his trademark.

Horror, though perhaps difficult for the man, is surely the source of vitality in his work. If horror is his subject, he is an explorer, not an exploiter, of it. His first chapbook, "Executioner" (1976), is a stark collection of irreconcilable matter-of-fact dualities. Many of the poems, marked by their imagistic non-judgment, achieve a strange balance between everyday, colloquial language and high climax:

> You're taught to walk at night. Slowly, lift one leg,
> clear the sides with your arms, clear the back,
> front, put the leg down, like swimming.
>
> —*from "Mines"*

When, in the early stages of his career, Weigl sent this piece to James Wright, the elder poet responded with a line of patented succulence:

"Out of the horror," Wright told him, "there rises a musical ache that is beautiful." In Wright's recognition of Weigl's early gift, it's the quality of the utterance that transcends the horror. Beyond the horrific and the comic there rises a beauty which renders the entire world a thing of wonder.

I was so in love with Weigl's music that I spent seven years of my tutelage with him—first as an undergraduate and then as a graduate student—trying to capture the magic formula that would translate my own experiences through his diction and sound. Unlike many workshop teachers, Weigl guided me away from his voice and, gradually, towards my own. When I graduated with an MFA in poetry writing from Penn State University in the mid-90s, I had taken away from Weigl's workshops primarily a sense of the importance of clarity and an awe for the sounds of words. I'm still applying those lessons today. I have had no other teacher show me so absolutely that writing good poems is not at all about *what* you have to say, but *how* you say it.

The final lines of his poem "The Impossible," which graphically describes the adult speaker's sexual molestation by a pedophile, lay the groundwork for our study of Weigl's craft:

> That afternoon some lives turned away from the light.
> He taught me how to move my tongue around.
> In his hands he held my head like a lover.
> Say it clearly and you make it beautiful, no matter what.

Clarity here is found in the sound underneath the words: where a most horrific thing is taking place, the speaker is falling in and out of blank verse meter: "He taught me how to move my tongue around." Underneath the wrongness, there is rightness. The rightness is a dull insistence beyond anger and trauma. There is a kind of necessity informing what need not have happened, and the speaker must go back, he tells us, must take us with him, to try to give it shape and life. With sparing vocabulary and no easy answers, he calls us towards that.

Years after studying with Bruce, I met a man at the gates of Birkenau in Poland. He was visiting the camp for the first time since the war. In his short sleeves, he showed me the fore of his arm and, quite calmly, the tattoo the SS guards had put there. Someone from our group asked him why he hadn't removed the thing. "It's out *there* now," the man said, and tapped his finger against his forehead, "It's not in here."

In his voice there was precious little anger. He struggled to find the words for his story. He wanted to get the story right. He recognized the incredible importance of the story and how it was told. Certainly, the man's experience had put him through unimaginable hell, but it also placed him in the presence of a truth mostly incomprehensible to us in our comfortable, everyday worlds. At the height of contradiction, somewhere between the polarities of life and death, he had witnessed the immensity of the impossible-come-true. This is the birth of art, as I've learned it. This is what separates art from social criticism, journalism, propaganda. The look of wonder on his face is what I remember. Amazed that he stood there at all, the man was 65; he was not a boy prisoner anymore; people had survived this; others had not.

Like the man at Birkenau, Weigl casts his stories into the "out there." Of the survivor of torture, Miss Tao, to whom he dedicated his 1988 book *Song of Napalm*, Weigl has written: "I imagine that her only way of staying on this earth is to keep one part of herself in the tiger cage. The horror of that year must have taken so much of her that she needs to go back there in her mind to stay whole."

Here, honesty is the highest mark of beauty. Contained within the utterance is forgiveness, no matter what. By revealing the source of their conflicts, Weigl's personae earn our compassion, our tolerance for the bad things they do, because, as Tim O'Brien has remarked, they do bad things for love.

"The war took away my life," writes Weigl in *Circle of Hanh*, "but gave me my poetry in return. The war taught me irony. That I instead of others should survive is ironic." Though his innocence was taken away, he was born into a new consciousness after the war. His work as a writer has forced him to identify not with the self but with the cycle of which the self is a part. I think of late Whitman: does he identify with a crippled body? "I pass death with the dead and dying," he proclaims even in the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "and birth with the new-washed babe…and am not contained between my hat and boots." Whitman's great poem is an identification with Walt Whitman, yes, but also with all things and beings. Whitman celebrates grass in the plural as much as in the singular. He "contains multitudes."

Two of Weigl's most recent books, *Circle of Hanh*, a memoir, and *Archeology of the Circle* (selected poems), meditate in their titles on this theme of death and rebirth. In the circle, end and beginning occur all at once. Violence is rendered powerless. The non-attachment of these later

books is an indication of both Weigl's growth and achievement as a writer. Not linear, not doomed inside the hell of time's straight unwavering line, the circle stands outside time and suffering:

> In my life that's left I want to find a shape for the litany of terror to bring it into comprehension. The impossible and terrible beauty of our lives: that we use them up, that the hunger fades.
>
> What endures is the story. The story circles back on itself if you let it have its way, and if you care for the words as if they were living things whose care your own life depends upon, because it does.
>
> —*from: Circle of Hanh*

Paradoxically necessary, death is a medium by which we recognize life, life's preciousness. I believe this is what George Herbert meant when he wrote that "the Fall furthers the flight in me." In the West, because of our religious rejection of nature and our scientific objectification of it, and because our hyper-rational thinking is aligned to the Cartesian understanding of causes and effects, we inevitably search for meanings behind the mad facts. When we cannot find them, we curse God, or each other. The existentialist movement, born out of that scientific materialism we have inherited, suggests that our lives are nothing more than a death-bound straight line of suffering in which there is no rebirth, no cycle at all.

Probably Weigl's love for Whitman and perhaps his introduction to Buddhism upon his several returns to Vietnam have acclimated him towards another point of view. Or maybe he let the story "have its way." Despite the abuse he suffered at home and during the war, there is a consciousness here which deeply struggles, if I can borrow a phrase from an early prose poem, to "rise violently upward."

Related to his subject matter is the violence and finality of his early line. Someone once said of Weigl's prosody that the line breaks *snap*, and I think that's exactly right. They contain the softness and the sudden sharpness of a towel being cracked in the air. In Weigl's earliest poems, we see this effect manifesting itself in long lines with frequent end stops. From 1979's *A Romance*:

I don't know how to say I tried again.
I saw myself in the mirror and couldn't move.
In her fist she crushed the paper money,
She curled in sleep away from me
So I felt cruel, cold, and small arms fire
Cracked in the marketplace below.

—from: "Song For the Lost Private"

The flat, testimonial voice—nearly journalistic—recalls for me Frost's epic blank verse combined with everyday diction: "He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath." In Weigl's later poems, as he became a more accomplished prosodist, he began to break lines without nearly so many end stops, eliminating commas and periods altogether in some cases. His lines also shortened; he used rests and white space more frequently for dramatic effect. Most notably this change can be sensed in the final lines of "Meditation at La Grange":

and he could kill or love

the blinding slats of light
cut through the god damned

branches of the dying elms,
and he could kill or love the lark.

—from: Sweet Lorain

With the introduction of silence and repetition, here is a musical lightness that counteracts the heaviness of the subject matter.

During our interview, which was conducted in late February of 2001, Weigl and I, via email, tried to flesh out some of the questions I've carried with me since I left his workshop almost eight years ago. He was hesitant to talk about his aesthetic or his beliefs as they inform the poems, because I believe Weigl's aesthetic is always in the process of becoming. Any writer who can't understand that—who believes in his ideas before all else, and not in the voice of the poem—may be a therapist or a priest, but not a poet. Poets are not good therapists. If poetry does wake the poet up, he wakes into a world of conflict and pain, the

source of which he can never quite grasp. Why bring this into the world? This is the question we all come to ask, if we are worth our salt. I remember Weigl saying in one of those workshops that poetry "makes us better." These were his exact words. I wrote them down. I told them to my parents, to provide them with a little encouragement. But I had no idea what he meant.

Richard Hugo talks about this, too, in his magnificent little book *The Triggering Town*. Poetry forces us to accept ourselves, as is. The act of writing a poem, I have come to understand, is the affirmation of the human life despite its imperfections. If poetry writing is to be separate from journal writing, from dream logs, from psychoanalysis, it must wake up the patient and listener alike. Stretching beyond the personal unconscious, Weigl's poetry touches us, I'm certain, on a collective level that transforms his experiences into ours. He achieves a kind of speech that impels us to remember our moral responsibility for each other.

I am doubly fortunate, because he has been my teacher on and off the page. When I first walked into his workshop in 1988, fancying myself what I called then "a Poet," Bruce couldn't have cared less about my "style." He didn't spend a minute scouring through my teen years' *oeuvre* for salvageable tidbits. He didn't want to hear about my ideas for the poems. He told me to be clear. He said that poems are made of words. He said these things over and over until I started to listen to him.

Sometimes he would tenderly egg me on. "Not clear what's going on" or "interesting and ambitious, but what is happening here?" would appear scrawled in his inscrutable handwriting in the margins of my returned copy, and I would go back diligently to look again at what I had tried to say, and I tried to say it better. Though my ego suffered tremendously during those years, I can say that when I left his classroom I knew what I was becoming. Sometime later I found myself living in Boston, and, after a long week of slammed doors during my post-MFA job search, I sought solace on the steps of Grolier Book Shop just before Louisa, the proprietor, had arrived. When she appeared on Plimpton Avenue and saw me sitting there in my blue suit with a briefcase (I was going out for another day of it), she asked me: "Are you a poet or a sales representative?" I said a poet, and she let me inside.

Recent Books By Bruce Weigl

What Saves Us (1992)
Sweet Lorain (1996)

After the Others (1999)
Archeology of the Circle: Selected Poems (2000)
Circle of Hanh (2000)
The Unraveling Strangeness (Forthcoming)

The following interview was conducted February 2001.

DK: I know that you spent a number of years in school before you ever began to write about the war. When did you first feel it was appropriate to write poetry about Vietnam? What finally got you started?

BW: I must say it did not occur to me to write poems about the war for a long time. It wasn't exactly that it hadn't occurred to me, but I wondered why anyone would want to read about the war because it was already terrible enough, and it had already been in the press for almost fifteen years, and over forty thousand Americans and probably a half million Vietnamese had already died. I also wrote a few early poems about the war when I first came home from the war, and even tried sending them out to magazines. They must have been terrible, this is before I had any formal education at all, and I got a few nasty notes back from editors saying things like: This has already been done by Bly and Levertov and Kinnell and Ginsberg, and no one wants to read about this anymore, so I made a more or less conscious decision not to write, not even to talk about the war. I know this will sound overly dramatic, so I'll try to tone it down a bit. One night I was walking past the office of a young poet, Tom Lux, that Oberlin had hired to teach the poetry workshop on a temporary basis. I loved Tom and I learned a great deal from him. That night I looked into his lit-up office window and saw him in there working so I went into the building and knocked on his door. He invited me in and after a few minutes of conversation he took out a bottle of Jack Daniels from one of his desk drawers and two plastic cups and offered me a drink. We drank and talked awhile and then he started asking me questions about Vietnam, which, at the time, was very unusual because most folks just didn't want to hear about it. I told him the story of being in a helicopter once in the Central Highlands

and seeing some NVA soldiers moving through the jungle on bicycles. As soon as I finished the story he pushed a yellow legal pad in my direction and then a pen and said, Write that down, just like you told it to me. I did, and then wrote my first more or less accomplished poem about the war called "Him, on the Bicycle." More importantly, at that moment this door opened up in my brain and I saw the enormous possibilities for a poetry at hand, and I remember too being frightened by the responsibility to get it right. That's where it started.

DK: You said in your response that "the war was already terrible enough." How have you come to reconcile the paradox that your best art has risen out of the horrific and wrong?

BW: I don't know that I ever have reconciled that; that's why it's a paradox. There are worse fates for writers than going to a war and more or less having that subject crammed down your throat. There is not having any subject at all. That's a real tragedy for a writer. Most of the writers whom I know well don't seem to have that much of a choice about what their subject matter is. I'm the same way. An accident of history put me right up against some brute facts of history and when I sat down to write, stories about that time came to me. I think now that the long period of time I spent writing about the war, fifteen years perhaps, represents on one hand a very personal struggle to try to understand what had happened there, and what had happened to me and to my people and to my country. I hope too, and perhaps this is naive or childish, but I hope too that there's some kind of miraculous way that if you work hard enough to get the words right, that which you call "horrific and wrong" is defeated. But that's just my Romanticism showing through.

DK: Your obsession with getting the words right, this recurrent theme in your poems and essays, is stated beautifully in "The Impossible," in which you write, "Say it clearly and you make it beautiful, no matter what." That poem, written in the early 1990s, follows closely the prosodic structure of your earlier work: long lines, loosely accentual, with frequent endstops. In the more recent poems *of Sweet Lorain* and *After the*

Others, there is a marked turn towards lyricism, most notably in your use of unpunctuated lines, repetition, and a much more mysterious "I" persona. Have those changes taken place due to a shift in your relationship to your subject matter?

BW: Twenty-five years ago I heard Phil Levine say that the most important thing you could do to get better was to always make it difficult. I understood then just enough to know that it's relatively easy for one to become accomplished at writing a certain kind of poem. You reach a plateau where things are easier. The danger is staying there, because the ease with which we come to write our poems is very seductive, and you can end up writing the same poem over and over, which I've done on occasion, I'm sure. In *Sweet Lorain* and *After the Others* I was making a conscious effort to make it hard again, to try to solve more difficult problems in terms of the speaker of the poems, as you suggest, the diction, as well as the form. In some ways I wanted it to feel like I was starting all over again. The forces of my life also had some influence on why and how my poems began to change. I was unhappy with my job, my family was struggling with the usual family struggles, made more difficult by the presence of an adolescent in the house, and on the other hand Buddhism seemed to be making its way deeper and deeper into my life until it finally reached the place where my poems must come from, so I think a kind of calm came into my writing that wasn't there before. In the book that follows *After the Others*, which I'm calling *The Unraveling Strangeness*, and which will be out next year, I tried to start all over once again, only this time the changes were made easier by the fact that I had moved back to where I grew up after being gone for over twenty years. All the old ghosts, as it turned out, were still waiting for me with open arms, and all of them were full of stories.

DK: Yes. I think what you're suggesting is similar to what Miles Davis started to say in the late-60s: "I don't play ballads anymore because I like to play ballads so much." Are the poems from *The Unraveling Strangeness* markedly different—in form, diction, subject matter—from the previous two books? In what way are they, as you say, like starting all over once again?

BW: They're different fundamentally because of how I came to see the world a little differently as the result of some considerable professional adversity, and as the result of coming home after being away for twenty years. I can say that several of the poems are longer than I've usually done. My sense was that I wanted to try and wring the narrative out as tightly as possible. I'm trying, in these new poems, to think about the music of the line (in mostly an accentual way) and think about the music of the sentence at the same time. In order to do that I had to find new ways to tell my stories, and I had to find new stories to tell. So, like any romantic worth his salt, I tried to broaden the range of subjects I found appropriate to poetry. I went back to the advice my great teacher Charles Simic gave me many times: Trust your hunches. Trust your judgment about where the poem wants to go, or about where to find the poem in the first place. That kind of meditation, combined with a certain willingness to see only opportunity and not failure laid out before me, led to the kind of poems I'm writing now; or at least was when I finished *The Unraveling Strangeness*. Here's a poem called "Meeting Mr. Death" that maybe addresses your question in a more practical way:

Meeting Mr. Death

You could say I
kept my cool
when I met Mr. Death.
I even made him
laugh
by offering my
hand to shake
in the bullet torn
morning hours,
and then I said
Are you looking at me?
and he got the joke. Death
gets the joke
or else
our whole lives
are a lie and a waste.
He didn't take my hand,

but he laughed at my jokes
and he made me feel
welcome inside the grace
he still wore,
shawl of the ghostly
angel he had been
but could not remember.
Mr. Death,
he was hanging around some
pals of mine, some
boys of the unspeakable
rapture of war. He
could have had me that morning
too, when I looked away
to the monsoon heavy
river
where the bodies
had come to rest
in the last eddies,
but he changed his mind.

DK: You've referred to yourself as a Romantic more than once already. It makes a lot of sense, since, as you say, a growing interest in Buddhism has played an important part in your life. "Mr. Death" is an acceptance of death's terms, as much as Keats' great line to Autumn is an acceptance of the beauty of every part of the cycle: "Where are the songs of Spring? Think not of them, thou hast thy music too." And what I find most interesting: even though death is much more absurd, more detached here, he nevertheless "gets the joke" that affirms the purpose and truth of our lives, that saves them from being a lie. Do you find that, despite having lived out the latter half of the twentieth century, your best insights (told to you by the poem and not the reverse) have persisted to awaken you, to bring you a greater sense of wonder?

BW: When you bring Mr. John Keats into the picture then the stakes are raised, and I am humbled, maybe a little like Keats was humbled when he visited the tomb of Burns and wrote "I sin against thy native

skies" to describe his own attempt at poetry in what he thought of as an almost sacred place. The presence of death, you're right, plays an very important role not just in the poetry of Keats and Wordsworth and Coleridge, but in the way they saw the world, and ultimately lived their lives. They believed that the fierce beauty of our lives existed only because of the inevitability of our deaths. The fact that we all die is why our lives are beautiful. But what I learned from Keats, I hope I learned this right, is that what the presence of our imminent deaths calls for is a more ironic regard for our lives: an openness to possibility instead of a devotion to failure. So yes, I have that affinity with the some of the British Romantics, along with some others. Now let me try to answer the last part of your question, which is very complicated to me. Two things happen simultaneously in the writer's life: as you work more and more and get older, you begin to recognize more and more the enormous possibilities at hand, and at the same time your own human limitations. That's another one of those wonderful paradoxes that leads us to poetry I think. That, and the fact that your first responsibility as a writer is to recognize the inherent failure of language to say a thing straight.

DK: Could you say more about what you mean by "an openness of possibility instead of a devotion to failure?" How has that openness worked itself into your own poems? I'm thinking of the shift from a poem like "For the Luminous Woman in the Trees," from *What Saves Us*, to the kind of pieces you're writing now.

BW: What I meant by cultivating an "openness to possibility instead of a devotion to failure" is really very simple once you get the hang of it. It's about being able to stay focused on very precise moments, and at the same time being open enough to see many, many possibilities for imaginative expression. If you believe that there is something worthwhile in every image and in every instinct that occurs to you, and you follow them all, you'll eventually deliver yourself to more and more interesting literal and figurative landscapes. Here's another poem from *The Unraveling Strangeness* that speaks to what I'm trying to get at here:

The Super

I met the super
on the battleship
gray painted
stoop
of the five floor walk-up,
Macdougal street, back
when it was neighborhood
and I'd
hooked up with a woman
who had money
from her folks and a job
that paid good
and who told me
Come stay with me, honey, that
nearly forgotten summer
in the post-war
black grief and loss and
all I had to do was
sleep up there
on the fifth floor with her and
love her some nights.
We ate dinner together in restaurants.
But that first morning
I got there ahead of her
and met the super
on the stoop
on Macdougal street. I
was twenty. I
had already seen
inside the storm of shit,
but this woman
said with a nasal screech
that she was the super and
that I couldn't get in
no how, as it wasn't my place, and
she called some Puerto Rican
young men to her aid

when I barely resisted
in defense of my
stupid rights
and of the rights
of the not yet arrived
woman who expected me, she
expected things of me if
I were to get this walk up
room to write in or
no, I never wrote, I couldn't
write when I heard her
breathe at night so close,
although there was some
loveliness there too I recall.
The tough guys said
they'd cut my fucking
heart out if I didn't
leave the super alone and
get the hell back
to wherever
I was supposed to be,
a question, I believe,
they had no idea
how to answer. I know
that I didn't. Later
when the would be
keeper of me
finally showed up,
the super relented, and
later still,
once summer
had become something
we could both bear,
we got to talking
one evening on the stoop.
August night time traffic and
lovers I watched, unworthy,
and in the middle
of the super's

winter story about
how the heat went off
one night in the place
so she nearly froze and
so dragged her chair
to the gas stove's
open door, propped
her tired feet there and
fell hard to sleep, she
lifted her dress
to show me. Like you
I could hardly believe the
scars on her legs from
where they'd caught fire,
open sores still oozing
that human acid and this
eight months after the fact.
Give us back our lives, I say.

I had no idea where this poem was going when I started writing it. It began after I had visited my son in New York where he lives, in Queens. That visit caused me to remember a summer I had lived in the city, so I started writing, when I got home, a poem about the city. It was too general and not very interesting and I couldn't really find a moment that could bear the weight of what I wanted to do until I remembered the super. I stayed with her story and hung on for dear life, and this is how it spun itself out. Whether you like the poem or not, you have to grant me the fact that from the beginning to the end the poem stays open to possibility and opportunity. That's what I was trying to do in these poems.

DK: In "Mr. Death," you write that the war is a *rapture*. Tell me if I'm off here: but the best writers about war—Crane, O'Brien, and I think Remarque—are able to somehow elucidate that beyond the horror, beyond even the loss of life, the war puts us in the presence of a kind of prodigious energy that calls us directly into the moment, with all of its attendant contradictions. But we're alive. The soldier wants to live; and

at the moment he loses his life, his face is filled with astonishment. What do you tell students who claim they haven't had such experiences of contradiction and rapture? And what are you doing these days in the classroom to help them tap into their own stories, their own moments of astonishment?

BW: Your description of how I mean the word "rapture" in that poem is frighteningly close to what I had in mind. It's the rapture of power, and the rapture of otherness; the knowledge that there are others out there who want you dead. And it's the rapture of the dead, rapture in my mind the only chance that those who die in war have to make it out of whatever shit hole they ended up in. Whatever jungle or beach or bombed city. I heard Robert Stone talk once about what he called the aesthetic of violence. A lot of people in the audience were obviously upset about what he was suggesting: that, somehow, beyond the pain, beyond the suffering, beyond even the human life, there is a kind of beauty to violence, a kind of majesty to the mushroom cloud. Now, he wasn't calling for violence or advocating violence, he was simply pointing out that it seems to be part of our nature to at least be interested, and maybe even compelled by violent imagery. So you see, if you come to it from that direction, there really is no contradiction. Stone wants us to see the clarity of the act. Like the scene near the end of *Apocalypse Now*, when Kurtz tells the story about the VC coming into a village soon after the American troops, who had been there to inoculate the children, had gone. The VC cut off the arms of everyone who had been inoculated by the Americans. It's a horrible, almost unimaginable thing, but Kurtz goes on and talks about the clarity of the gesture, the total absence of ambiguity about what is meant, which is beautiful. For me to write "the unspeakable rapture of war" is simply an extension of the idea that says "If you say it clearly, you make it beautiful, no matter what." Now, in terms of my own students, I don't feel it's necessary for them to have been traumatized somehow before they arrive in my classroom so that they can understand the depths to which they must sink to find and write poetry. Some of them come to the classroom that way, and some come as truly innocent, almost unscathed young men and women, and they all have the same opportunity as far as I'm concerned. You mentioned their "stories," and that's the key to my relationship with my writing students here, or anywhere. I'm most concerned with

getting them to the point where they can trust the class and me, and most importantly, themselves, enough to tell their stories, as they occur to them, brought to the surface of consciousness through acts of the imagination. Once they're willing to enter that realm, then there are enough contradictions to go around, and enough problems that need to be solved. When we're lucky and it works, they do discover what you call moments of astonishment. But there's enough terror in letting go that way; it's frightening enough to give yourself up to words; that's rapture enough.

DK: What are you reading these days?

BW: A great deal if not all of my reading during the semester is related to my teaching, so for the poetry I've been reading Bill Stafford's essays and poems, and Charlie's essays on writing. I've also been teaching and reading and studying Basho lately, and Horace, who I'm trying to translate. I read from the Buddhist texts on a regular basis, and I read and reread Peter Harvery's wonderful introduction to Buddhism, and finally, I've been reading a great deal of Elaine Pagel lately, and am now reading her book about Adam, Eve and the Serpent that's very rich and complicated.

DK: Last, I'd like to know where you stand on comedy: remember James Dickey's comment? "In poetry there's no time for whimsy."

BW: I'm afraid I don't have much to say about comedy. It's a shame, really, because I am a very funny person I think. I mean, I can still make my wife laugh until she cries, and that's after twenty eight years of marriage. I can still make my parents laugh, and my sister and her husband, and some of my colleagues, and most of my friends. I can even make myself laugh. It sometimes occurs to me that what I'm writing is funny, but when I read the poem at the reading, or publish the poem, it becomes clear that others don't see the humor. Something gets lost in the translation from one sense of irony to another. I don't agree with Dickey; I think there's plenty of room in poetry for whimsy; there's plenty of room in poetry for any damn thing.

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David Keplinger

memorial concert on a sloped clearing

Of the humming
Air raids of years ago
Over Hukvaldy and more east,
American bombs, or German,
No one got the story right.

The rain brought down
The high nests
Of storks and falcons,
Brought up the sewage with the mud.
From our hill, a spruce sang curves: the sun.

What do we know about what happened?
Our day along the hill:
Think violins. Think
Brass horns and banjos, hilarious
Oboes lined in a row.

We know about the one
Kind of light, which is the mind's light. Enough
Of that. On flimsy chairs the tubas
Nearly fell down,
Playing.

Bruce Weigl (born January 27, 1949, Lorain, Ohio) is an American contemporary poet who teaches at Lorain County Community College. Weigl enlisted in the United States Army shortly after his 18th birthday and spent three years in the service. He served in the Vietnam War from December 1967 to December 1968 and received the Bronze Star .Â "On Bruce Weigl: Finding a Shape for the Litany of Terror", David Keplinger, War Literature and the Arts Journal, Fall/Winter 2000. "An Interview with Bruce Weigl, Memorious magazine". This page uses Creative Commons Licensed content from Wikipedia (view authors). Bruce Weigl served in Vietnam and suffered shocks that time and artistic release cannot fix. Most of these poems don't deal with battle or bloodshed, but they scar all the same.Â And during an aborted turn with a prostitute he found himself 'Drunk, I couldn't do anything, angry I threw the mattress to the street.' And this helplessness follows Weigl into his civilian life. Song of Napalm's titular poem describes Weigl and his wife watching as 'horses walk off lazily across the pasture's hill' following a rainstorm; a serene scene to most eyes. Yet for Weigl the nearby trees morph into barbed wire and the distant thunder becomes the boom of incendiary blasts. No backdrop is so innocuous that it can't trigger memories that refuse to be forgotten. Eventually finding his way back into the world, Weigl drew solace from poetry and, later, from a family. Yet, it is not until his harrowing journey back to Hanoi, to adopt a Vietnamese daughter, that Weigl finds redemption. This act of personal humanity and recompense to a nation he helped to destroy lies at the heart of his memoir. The Circle of Hanh is a â€œmoving, singular, and highly readableâ€ chronicle of a haunted life and, ultimately, a stunning work of healing (Kirkus Reviews, starred review). Read More. Personal Memoirs.Â I come from a long line of violence. In my life thatâ€™s left I want to find a shape for the litany of terror to bring it into comprehension. The impossible and terrible beauty of our lives: that we use them up, that the hunger fades. What endures is the story.