

Among Elms, In Ambush
Interview with Bruce Weigl
Patrick Hicks

Bruce Weigl joined the U.S. Army shortly after graduating from high school and he served in Việt Nam between December 1967 and December 1968. As he would later say about his experiences as a foot soldier, “The war took away my life and gave me poetry.” When he returned to the United States, he attended Oberlin College, where he received a BA, and this was followed by an MA from the University of New Hampshire. He earned a PhD from the University of Utah, which allowed him to teach at a variety of institutions, including Old Dominion University and Penn State. He spent his final years teaching at Lorain County Community College as a Distinguished Professor.

Over the decades, Weigl has become known as one of America’s preeminent poets and essayists. Although much of his work revolves around his wartime experiences, he also writes about his relationship with contemporary Việt Nam. In the early 1990s, he worked with Thanh T. Nguyễn at the Joiner Research Center to translate poems of Việt Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers who had been captured during the war. This resulted in a co-translated book, *Poems from Captured Documents*. He has worked hard to learn more about Việt Nam; he has studied the language, and he adopted a young Vietnamese girl with the promise that he would raise her to the best of his abilities in her ancestral culture.

Weigl has won prizes from the American Academy of Poets, fellowships to Breadloaf and Yaddo; he has won the Lannan Literary Award, the Robert Creely Award, and he has received grants from the National Endowment of the Arts. In 2013, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize

for *The Abundance of Nothing*. His previous books include *The Monkey Wars*, *Song of Napalm*, *The Circle of Hanh*, *On the Shores of Welcome Home*, and many others. His latest book is *Among Elms, in Ambush*, published by BOA Editions.

Patrick Hicks (PH): Congratulations on your latest book, which is a haunting meditation on the horrors of the past and trying to find moments of grace in the present. There is something dreamlike, at least for me, about these flashes of memory. The book is classified as prose, but these pieces read more like poems or like condensed poetic essays. It reminds me of the latter work of Jorge Luis Borges. Why did you decide to write in tight paragraphs, which could be seen as stanzas?

Bruce Weigl (BW): Thank you, Patrick, for your kind words about my book. You've gotten to the heart of the matter right away. Several years ago, I taught for a semester at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. The deal included a beautiful mountain cottage, tucked away in the mountains near the small town of Blowing Rock. I was there alone, surrounded by wilderness and possessed of an amazing quiet at night. I had a second story deck and I used to sit out there and listen to the woods. I wanted to open up a vein and see what would happen, and the first thing I wrote was a short prose paragraph about where I was living. For reasons I still don't understand, the prose felt very natural to me; it even called to me and challenged me to do more, so I did. I gradually began to measure the parameters of what was allowed and accepted as a literary form. I'd never before considered myself an "experimental writer," but this was clearly an experiment. You see, what I wanted to do was have present the power of narrative to

capture the readers' attention, and at the same time, juxtapose the imagery in the pieces the way someone might do in a lyric poem.

"Dreamlike" is probably another good way to describe what I've done. It's what Tim [O'Brien] noticed about it. I have to say that I never made a conscious effort to evoke either the feel or the sense of dreams, but I was able to imagine that I could dwell in a place that existed between those two worlds, where everything is different, where even the physics allow magical things to happen.

You mentioned Borges, who I first read as an undergraduate student at Oberlin College. He had a profound and lasting effect on how I thought about writing.

PH: Việt Nam is so much a part of your writing and, unlike many other veterans, you return to that country often. It's something of a seasonal home for you, and you've studied the language. I wonder if learning about the culture and being there as a long-term visitor is a way to see Việt Nam beyond the lens of war. What have you learned about the country and yourself by being there in times of peace?

BW: I would be in Hà Nội as I speak if not for the pandemic, and you're right, my goal is to spend winters in Việt Nam every year. I was fortunate to return to Việt Nam early, in 1986, before the embargo had been lifted. Hà Nội was mostly empty in those days, with very few shops or restaurants open and with no hotels for American visitors, so we stayed in what was called a "guest house," a beautiful and crumbling residence built by the French on Nguyen Du street. During the first three days we were lectured by a variety of members of the General's staff who was our host. It was endless, from morning until lunch, and then back again until dinner.

We did nothing else during those first three days but learn about the variety of fish in the South China Sea, and the natural resources that enriched the country. Although we were allowed to ask questions, it was clear they were discouraged, so we sat there and took in as much as we could. During the evening of the third day, after another endless day of lectures designed to numb your brain, we—the poets, Bill Ehrhart, John Balaban, and I—sat down and decided we had to do something to change the paradigm. We would begin the next day's session by announcing to the General that we were grateful for what he and his staff had taught us about Việt Nam, but that now we wanted to go out on our own and learn from the people. The General, his name was Kinh Chi, seemed confused by our request, and there was some activity among the staff who whispered into the General's ear. The interpreter said that the General wanted to know where it was that we'd like to go. We wanted to "hang out" in Hà Nội, walk through the city, have a coffee, speak to whomever wanted to try their English, or Balaban's excellent Vietnamese, but that request rubbed against the post-war Hà Nội culture.

We learned later that they were mostly worried about us and when we were eventually turned loose on our own, we were followed by someone who'd been sent to "keep an eye on us" for our safety. But Hà Nội was safer in those days, and still is, than any major American city where I've spent time. Our plan on the trip was to head south to Ho Chi Minh City after two weeks in Hà Nội where we were fortunate to have an invitation from a writers' organization. Much to our surprise, and on the morning we were ready to depart for our flight south, the General showed up and announced that he'd accompany us to HCMC and be our guide to wherever we wanted to go. Away from the office and the annoyingly obsessive formality of Party business, the General was a different man. He laughed easily, told us many jokes and shared with us stories about his wartime experiences. We spent a week with him as our host and guide.

Among other things, the General made arrangements to cross the border into Cambodia to speak with villagers in places that had been ravaged by Pol Pot's army of thugs. He took us there because we had questioned Vietnam's role in the war in Cambodia. We spoke to families who had lost loved ones to the Khmer Rouge brutality. We listened to stories so horrible they were difficult to hear.

During all of our travels together, the General had been a generous and compassionate teacher who had showed us a side of Việt Nam that had nothing to do with the war. That was an important beginning for me—it led to a thirty year plus close relationship with the Hà Nội literary community. Because of that relationship, and because of those dear friends, I have been able to think about Việt Nam as the beautiful and deeply spiritual place that it is, instead of thinking of it as a war. You see the difference? What I've learned from my relationship with Việt Nam is the Dharma, and everything else comes after that.

PH: It's clear that Việt Nam means something special to you, and I can see this meeting with the General cracking open new possibilities to understand the country. One of the poems in your new collection is "Saturday Night in Bangkok with Nguyễn Thị Hanh II" and it's about the first few days of being with your adopted daughter, Thị Hanh. My own son was adopted from South Korea, so this particular poem really spoke to me. I was wondering if you could talk about what it means to adopt transracially and transnationally. It means adopting a new culture, of course, but for you, as a veteran, what has it been like to learn Vietnamese and try to raise a daughter in her ancestral culture?

BW: Thank you for asking about my daughter, Nguyen Thi Hanh Wilbond. Hanh is a nurse and she's getting ready to begin her PA training. She's married and has a daughter, Mila, who's six years old and who is the great joy, along with my grandson, of my life. Hanh was only eight when we adopted her from a rural orphanage that sometimes didn't have enough food, in a place called Binh Luc. She spoke no English and I spoke only rudimentary Vietnamese and had to rely upon the dictionary, which you discover quickly is not much help.

By the time I went to pick my daughter up, I knew quite a bit about Vietnamese culture, and I had made some good friends in the city who were able to assist me throughout the convoluted process of foreign adoption. We hit it off right away, Hanh and me. I called her daughter in Vietnamese—*con gái Bố*—and she called me *Bố* back. We spent several days hanging around the city. We'd order food for our room so Hanh could sit on the bed and watch cartoons, and we waited for the slow wheels of Hà Nội bureaucracy to turn so we could secure Hanh's exit visa.

We were finally able to leave, but then we had to be processed in Bangkok at the American Embassy, another mind-numbing experience. But our time together had been great. We had a lot of fun and we got to know each other a little and taught each other some vocabulary from each other's language. She's been that same delight in my life to this moment, as she was those days we had travelled together in Việt Nam, and then Thailand. She's taught me things about Vietnam and Vietnamese culture that I never otherwise would have learned, and she was a big part of transforming what "Vietnam" was for me after the war.

My wife is a sansei, and my son then is of course half and half, so the "different culture" part didn't really come into our consideration. I knew enough about Vietnamese culture to get us started, and we made some good Vietnamese friends who were graduate students at the

university where I taught at the time, and who became like godparents to Hanh. But the way we lived was cross-culturally, and to add a Vietnamese daughter to the mix felt as natural as anything.

PH: And yet, the war is a constant throughout this new book. One of the early pieces that really grabbed me was "War Story." You write, "I'm waiting for the war to end for me," and you mention there is "no remedy for how the brain is twisted into a loop that will never end, until it does." I can't help but think of one of the oldest war stories in the Western canon, *The Odyssey*. There is that line, "Must you carry the bloody horror of combat in your heart forever?" Do you feel that way?

BW: If you fought in a war or were the victim of war, then you understand that Homer got it right. I've studied *The Odyssey* closely for many years, and I know that I've allowed—no, I've gone after—words, phrases, ideas, characters and emotions from that poem and tried to bring at least some essence of them into my own work. If you're a poet, that poem, probably a compilation of many oral poems by different authors, created over centuries, perhaps, and compiled by someone we call Homer, is an essential part of your curriculum.

The other part of your question is more difficult because it's more personal. Like I am about many things, I'm of two minds about this. I believe that the experience of war and frequent near-death experiences stains your soul with something that can never be completely erased. Certain images, usually the most horrible, remain part of a movie that flashes through your head without notice, and your reactions to the world is marked by vigilance and a feeling that someone is out to kill you.

But then there's the Dharma. I'm fortunate to have had and continue to have wonderful Buddhist teachers in Việt Nam and here in this country [America]. I was at a mountain-top temple and pagoda just outside of Huế. Our group was the guest of the monk there, and we'd been invited to join him in a vegetarian lunch served outside on long tables in the sun. The food was extraordinary. Like most of the other Americans there, I was dressed in shorts and a short sleeve shirt, but the sun was still too much. I began to sweat and had to use my napkin to keep the sweat out of my eyes. I was sitting next to the monk, and I looked over at him. He was dressed in robes, with more than one layer of clothes wrapped around his entire body. Not only was his forehead dry of perspiration, but he looked totally relaxed, comfortable, and cool. I had to ask, so I did. I looked around and saw practically everyone sweating in the heat and wiping the sweat away. I asked the monk why he wasn't sweating like the rest of us, and how did he manage to stay cool? He shook his head, yes, as he listened to the interpreter's version of my question.

He smiled and answered back that he "chose not to be hot."

That turned out to be a huge lesson for me to figure out and it took some time—years, even—but now it's part of how I live and think. I'm not angry at someone who may have betrayed me because I choose not to be angry. I'm not jealous of other writers' accomplishment because I choose not to be jealous. I'm not tired and weary from the long pandemic, because I choose not to be tired and weary. It sounds simple, I know, but giving yourself those kinds of beliefs can become a very powerful experience.

PH: Speaking of the body, and how we live in the physical world, you've got a number of pieces about being at the VA. I'm thinking specifically of "Wade Park VA" and "Lunch at the Wade Park

VA Cafeteria, Early Twenty-First Century.” What strikes me about these poems is not necessarily your own concerns with the many brain surgeries you’ve had over the years, but how you eavesdrop on your fellow veterans, some of whom fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. What’s it been like to watch new generations of women and men come into the VA? What have you learned about the long afterburn of war?

BW: The bond between war veterans is a terrible and wonderful thing. Because I have a seventy percent disability, all of my medical needs are taken care of by the VA, so I spend a lot of time there. To be among those men and women is a great honor to me, and as a writer I find their stories a rich tapestry that I can bring into my own work. Not just the words, but the rhythm of speech and the sometimes more imaginative regard for where the stressed syllables fall in multisyllabic words. Is it *Po-lice*, with the first syllable stressed, or is it *Po-lice*, stressing the second syllable? Even this tiny shift in the language has enormous consequences.

During my final two years working at the community college, I took over the project of centralizing veterans’ services on campus and then became Director of that office. My staff consisted entirely of veterans, men and women, of our most recent wars. Because I worked closely with this group, I had the opportunity to get to know them. I was a “fellow veteran,” and not just their boss, so they would open up to me. Their stories were shockingly similar to mine, and the ways they still suffered from things they’d had to do—or had to bear witness to in combat—emphasized how similar the experience is for all warriors. These are brave and good people, and politics aside, they had stood up against an enemy who had sworn to kill us all and fought bravely.

I think I learn something new about what you call the “afterburn of war,” whenever I have the opportunity to sit down and talk with a fellow veteran either from my war or one of the many others we’ve fought in since. What [Wilfred] Owen called “the horror of war” is something that never leaves a soul, but some kind of salvation must be possible. “He yielded to her, and his heart was glad,” Homer tells us, and that only after Odysseus was able to find his way to the truce, thanks to Athena, can he be “glad.” You know, some things never go away.

PH: One of the most powerful essays in *Among Elms* is “The Problem with Shapes in the Night Trees” where you’re on guard duty, and stoned, and you’re scanning the darkness for the enemy. A firefright breaks out, and when it’s over a “frightful bellowing” comes from the trees. Something has been mortality wounded. It turns out to be a calf, and you write, “How human the voice had sounded, and how full of longing for peace. Any kind.” This is a poem about imagination and horror. It’s also about innocence—the calf, and you. Maybe you could talk about writing this memory onto the page? Did this happen early in your war?

BW: I have to say that I’m not interested in talking about what is real and what is not real in these pieces for the most part, perhaps largely because I don’t know any more. The question I’m most interested in is: do you, as a reader, believe these things happened? Do you believe it’s real? If your answer is yes then I’ve done my job, even if I fail the lie detector test. What I can add is that each of these pieces were driven by a trigger, in the form of long memories of seemingly small moments, if that makes sense. I want the sounds of the baying calf, dying from shrapnel wounds, to be a real sound, but at the same time I want the story of the calf’s death to be allegorical. Perhaps my expectations are too high, but that was my intention.

PH: There are several elegies here—"Elegy for C.D." and "Elegy for Mahnke"—as well as remembrances of your writer friends, Thomas Lux and Larry Heinemann. Words can resurrect the dead and let us be with those we love again, and I'm interested in when you wrote these. Were they composed shortly after your friends passed or were they done much later? Or maybe these were written all at once?

BW: I've always thought of the elegy as a way to say goodbye, and yes, each of these was written in response to those friends' crossing over, as Emily D. called it. C.D. refers to C.D. Wright by the way, and John Mahnke was a visionary poet I met in my undergraduate days at Oberlin who suffered through years of alcoholism, only to emerge on the other side full of poetry and good work. He fought hard against cancer his last five years of life. So you see, all of the elegies are for writers who have had some impact on my writing life.

PH: There are moments in this collection that remind me of *Song of Napalm* (1988) for their brutal honesty about warfare, and yet there are also moments of finding calm. More specifically, you talk about great beauty in Việt Nam. I'm thinking of "Hà Nội Morning," "On the Road to Bồ Đà Pagoda," and "The Price of Roses in Hà Nội." You invite the reader to see contemporary Việt Nam through your eyes. How, I wonder, has practicing Buddhism changed your understanding of war? And maybe peace?

BW: Oh my, what a question! I have to say that practicing the Dharma has changed my understanding about everything, and that would include war and peace. I don't want to proselytize here, or narrate my Buddhist education, but I can say I've learned enough to know

that what I see is often not what is there—and I've practiced in order to learn the difference. War is one of the many things that's on the wheel of humankind that goes around and around. It's not a straight line like we say in western thinking, but a circle that comes around and passes and then comes around again. On that wheel is good fortune and woe, love and hate, war and peace, all of which will come and then pass. Our job is to learn how to live with all of the things that come up on the wheel.

I've learned from the dharma that there is no "why" to war, and no "why" to peace, either. There is only our will.

PH: There are three prose poems—maybe I should call them vignettes?—that talk about how you frequently get lost. You talk about being calm even when you have no idea where you are. There is "Lost in Beijing," "Some Ohio Cows," and "Lost," which is about wandering away from your LZ during the war and not being able to find your way back to safety. You have to hunker in the dark jungle and wait for sunrise while hoping the enemy isn't around you. There is this line: "This feels like an ending to me, although I know it was just a beginning, that night, the beginning of a road through the unimaginable." Do you still feel that sense of being lost? Maybe you welcome it now? Being lost, after all, means leaving what you know and discovering new things.

BW: Ha, now it's revealed! I am a certifiable lost soul. I have been since my earliest memories, and I still am as I sit here today answering your questions. I've lived long enough now to see it as my nature to be this way in the world, and to accept it as an invitation to other planes, you could say. And, to a certain extent, "being lost" is a good thing for a writer. Being lost is a

problem you have to write your way out of, like painting yourself into the corner. What can you do? Wait for the paint to dry. Walk over the new paint and ruin the work, or paint a door. The “lost soul” is the one who paints the door, I think.

PH: One of the vignettes that had the strongest emotional impact on me was “The Still Unravished Bryn of Quietude” which is about a woman who takes you in shortly after you return from war and she gives you love, as well as a place to stay. You write, “Some people have the kind of smile that can look back through thousands of years so that when their light falls on you, you can feel them through your whole body like the shiver that joy is.” Something horrifying happens to Bryn, and you’re not there to help her. It’s this helplessness that I find so moving. She has her own trauma and you’re not there to help her carry it. Could you talk about the construction of this vignette?

BW: This is one of the pieces that is nearly purely autobiographical I can say, largely because the actual events had been such high drama. Practically everything narrated in the piece happened. I thought about Bryn years later because only years later did I realize that her pain was a lot like my own, and that what trauma does to people is stun them into too much understanding of the world, especially the darker side of things. You know, bad things had happened to Bryn and bad things had happened to me. What writing that piece taught me was that she and I were both in need of the same thing, even if we didn’t know it at the time. Sometimes you try to tell a true story because it’s the only way you know how, but words are slippery, words want to try to say something else, unless you’ve found a single moment that can bare the weight of its own revelation.

PH: One of the final pieces is “Fishing in Hà Nội.” I’m pleased it’s near the end because it’s about learning how to fish Vietnamese style and how you accidentally slip into a lake. All of these people come to help you out of the water, which is such a wonderful metaphor. You write about the “solitary kindness of strangers I find here,” and the reader is left to wrestle with your complicated relationship with Việt Nam. It’s a place of nightmares for you, but it’s also a place of renewal. Maybe you could talk about this?

BW: The way I settled all of that in my own head was this: there are two, distinctly different Việt Nams for me. The first one I knew for a short period of time when I was eighteen. My life was often in danger there, and I saw good people on all sides suffer and sometimes die such horrible deaths that I couldn’t bring my conscious mind to remember them, and so they have haunted my unconscious at practically every turn, even up to this day. The other Việt Nam is the one into which I have been welcomed as a man and as a writer that has little if anything to do with the war and is instead focused on translation and other cross-cultural literary projects and on my growing friendships with Vietnamese writers. I think both of those versions of Việt Nam will always be with me.

I’ve finally gotten word that I’ll have a visa to travel to Hà Nội during the first week in January. I plan to spend three months there and I look forward to returning. It’s a happy place for me to spend my time, and I’m grateful for my life there among my many writer friends, and I continue to learn deep and abiding lessons about an old and richly creative and spiritual culture.

Patrick Hicks is the author of *The Commandant of Lubizec*, *The Collector of Names*, *Adoptable*, and *Library of the Mind*. He is the Writer-in-Residence at Augustana University as well as a faculty member in the MFA program at University Nevada Reno at Lake Tahoe. His latest book is *In the Shadow of Dora: A Novel of the Holocaust and the Apollo Program*.