

Seven Poems

Bruce Weigl

Elegy for a Young Captain

When I'm ashamed of deeds that haunt me still,

especially at night, when there's no peace,

the only thing that I can do is kill

the images that won't release me from

the muggy jungle memories of blood;

the one boy's face that I cannot let go,

his body torn to shreds. I understood

the trouble we were in, how death can glow

inside a body just before its time.

I watched him fall away. I didn't know

the end of things could be so near.

November Eleventh, 2023

for W.D. Eharhart

I couldn't believe how fast the autumn night
descended. Like an ambush, I thought,
because I see things that way sometimes.
I can watch from here
a wide expanse of ill-lit neighbors' houses
through the windy trees, but not like in a dream.
On this Veterans Day, I think of how
I ache to feel even anything, lost, but not like
those who would not find
their good way back, although
we wait for them,
all these mummified years later,
to rejoin the unit, and get back up to snuff, those
witnesses of terror, their long silence.

Homage to Heinemann

Winter's rain has coated all the leafless trees, a
drowsy stillness settles in, but still
there's no release from nights ruined
by rockets flown across a jungle sky
by men you never see except in dreams.

There is no room in memory for war,
for what war takes away, and won't give back,
the only way's to make a space inside
your head, where tiny movies still may play,
those jangled moments fractured out of time.

Some things stay printed on your brain, no matter
what you do or say, and pills may only
mask the horrors like behind a screen,
until you understand, there is no there,
except the one already blown away.

I Know Your Face in Morning

for MT

I know your face in morning, your

"morning face," as they say,

a privilege that I'm grateful for,

a lonely surrender

to the day that wants nothing

but your life.

Better to keep some distance from desire,

in whose midst there's only light.

Better to stay on this side of the wire

where you know there's still some air to breathe.

No excuse for longing, when it's said and done,

no reason to doubt, or grieve,

no good time to see the door and run,

outdistancing your own pain, but you can't leave.

There's nowhere left to go

to escape the years that are a weight

on your back, you have to know
what is and what is not your fate.

They say be wary of what desire says, the words
so sweet you can't resist,
and so you're lured
by a single kiss
on the dark stairway,
on the verge of everything,
without a word to say,
and what's left is only the sting
of "no," as the sky falls down,
all around your life.

December Revolution

Beijing winter so cold, our frozen breath
hangs in the air.
I wanted to hold your hand and walk with you without a care,
as if our lives had somehow come to be. The streets
are filled with shoppers in a rush,
so you negotiate ahead of me;
it's not so much a question of your trust
in me to make my way,
but more your care, your easy way
through crowds like this
as if we were a pair,
yet in our coming home there is a rift,
a wide expanse of darkness I don't understand.
No need to speak the weight of parting,
the miles away from even the smallest touch,
an arm on your shoulder, as the sun goes down,
your lips against my ear with a secret
no one else could know, a bond
between two spirits. I go for refuge to that source.

Gone

i

I know the distant rumbling's only thunder,
but mortars walking in on us, that sound,
is printed on my brain, how about on yours?
It's not like you can shut it off. The movie
comes inside your head at any time,
but is never yours to keep,
and it plays when it wants.
Do you understand
that the movie plays when it wants,
inside your head,
transforming thunder
into mortar rounds
fired from dark trees
until they stop,
and night settles in,
all its dark intentions
waiting in the shadows like ghosts
who want only the light of your life,
and nothing of your blood. I don't know

what living through nights under fire
does to your mind,
but I know what it did to mine,
and these spirits never ask
if they can come,
they just show up and make themselves
at home among my haunted memories,
the juvenilia of a failed life.
There is no moving backwards
to before, the hands of clocks
move only in one way.
It's space that can be taken back,
you understand? You may journey inward,
to reach the needful words,
buried in the muck of our defeats.

ii

There is a way to understand
the world raw
and how the world happens to you,
and another way
that says the thunder's only
thunder, and no one

waits to kill you in your sleep.

You choose the path

you want by how you live.

Compassion as a guide,

you're never wrong,

the greatest act, to take away

the suffering of someone else,

and bring peace to their life.

To understand the weight of that

is to free your mind in ways

impossible to understand.

iii

A boy

in an ill-fitting suit,

captured by his uncle's camera

only a month away from the jungle

around An Khe,

and rockets and mortars at night.

I'm almost afraid to look into his eyes

and see what I was those days

before an unnamable force

tore through me,

and carried me away.

The Function of Lilies

Sudden shifts of consciousness
are difficult to trace
once they happen. You have to
be inside the outside, and
outside of the inside
at the same time
to know anything at all.

What can the summer evening
tell you about suffering
that your own
bomb-rattled brain
didn't already know?

Precisely nothing,
but that's the point,
so many lilies
spread across the surface of the water
you no longer see the pond.

The Function of Lilies

Sudden shifts of consciousness
are difficult to trace
once they happen. You have to
be inside the outside, and
outside of the inside
at the same time
to know anything at all.
What can the summer evening
tell you about suffering
that your own
bomb-rattled brain
didn't already know?
Precisely nothing,
but that's the point,
so many lilies
spread across the surface of the water
you no longer see the pond.

Bruce Weigl has published more than a dozen books of poetry, including *On the Shores of Welcome Home* (2019), winner of the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award. Other collections include *The Abundance of Nothing* (2012), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize; *The Unraveling Strangeness* (2002); *Archeology of the Circle: New and Selected Poems* (1999); *After the Others* (1999); and *Song of Napalm* (1988), which was also nominated for a Pulitzer. He recently finished co-translating a book of one thousand short poems written by the Vietnamese poet Tran Le Khanh.