



The Circle of Hanh: A Memoir

Bruce Weigl

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In this piercingly honest memoir, Bruce Weigl, who has established himself as one of our finest American poets, explores the central experience of his life as a writer and a man: the Vietnam War, which tore his life apart and in return gave him his poetic voice. Weigl knew nothing about Vietnam before enlisting in 1967, but he saw a free ride out of a difficult childhood among volatile people. The war completely changed his life; there was a before and then one irrevocable after. In the before, the injured and beaten always had a chance; in the after, young men lay in his arms with throats torn by shrapnel, pleading with him not to tell their mothers how they had died. In the before, Weigl pretended to be dead in mock battles with his friends; in the after, he watched as a boy from his unit whispered to Vietnamese corpses while caring for their inert bodies as if they were dolls. Weigl returned from Vietnam unprepared to cope with life in the aftermath of war. One day he was squatting in a bunker, high on marijuana and waiting out a rocket attack; two days later he stood in his parents' house, breathing the old air. For years, he struggled to adjust, sleeping in different rooms each night and leaping at a person's throat if a hand reached to touch him in his sleep. He turned to alcohol, drugs, and women in an attempt to escape his confused purgatory, but only found himself alone, watching other people's lives from the shadows. Eventually finding his way back into the world after a long time in a zone between being and not being, Weigl drew solace from poetry and, later, from a family.

Yet, it is not until a harrowing journey back to Hanoi, to adopt a Vietnamese daughter, that Weigl is fully delivered from the brutal legacy of the war. This act of salvation and recompense to a nation he helped to destroy lies at the heart of his memoir and infuses it with a profound sense of humanity and transcendence. Moving from childhood to the war to a final act of compassion and hope, *The Circle of Hanh* is a powerful recreation of a deeply haunted life and, ultimately, a stunning work of redemption.

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