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on Bruce Weigl

Judith Hiott

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by a priest-poet. In the final words of the last poem Matthew Graham acknowledges the fears that haunt us as we attempt responsibility for the past which we did not make:

...I want to think of the past
As a place I can float above, unmarked,
As a city lit with sleep; where couples walk
The empty avenues, where the rivers are warm,
And the bills of lading lie unused.

("Amnesty")

We are ennobled by acceptance brought about by Mr. Graham's honesty and compassion.

-Bette Tomlinson

Bruce Weigl, *The Monkey Wars*; The University of Georgia Press.

The description on the back cover of Bruce Weigl's *The Monkey Wars* says "Weigl writes of peaceful landscapes suddenly and often violently disrupted." It seems to me that the writer of that comment has it backward. Weigl writes of violent landscapes peacefully disrupted, and this is what makes his poetry more powerful than the frequently unsuccessful war poetry written since 1945. In Weigl's vision violence and hatred surrender to beauty and love which survive in spite of conditions which deny their existence.

That the inherent conditions of the landscape are violent is established in the conditional statement which opens "Amnesia" as well as the book:

If there was a world more disturbing than this
 Where black clouds bowed down and swallowed you whole
 And overgrown tropical plants
 Rotted, effervescent in the muggy twilight and monkeys
 Screamed something
 That came to sound like words to each other
 Across the triple-canopy you shared,
 You don't remember it.

Beauty and love overcome but don't change the violent conditions of the world however. In fact the attempted denial of violence in the last line of this stanza by the end of the book is rendered a lie. At the end of the last poem, "Song of Napalm," the same conditions that open the book close it, but denial is no longer possible:

But the lie swings back again.
 The lie works only as long as it takes to speak
 And the girl runs only as far
 As the napalm allows
 Until her burning tendons and crackling
 Muscle draw her up
 Into that final position
 Burning bodies so perfectly assume. Nothing
 Can change that; she is burned behind my eyes
 And not your good love and not the rain-swept air
 And not the jungle green
 Pasture unfolding before us can deny it.

Throughout *The Monkey Wars* violence is interrupted by beauty or love and sometimes both at once. In "The Girl at the Chu Lai Laundry," the girl, beautiful with her facts," stops the war if only for a moment, and in "On the Wing" only the conditions of the narrator are important. It is the moment he possesses outside the violent world which defines his character:

Well, if that's what I am, home
 With my shoes filled with mud
 And the dust of wings still
 Burning my face
 Then the touch of a white thing
 Flying over and away from me
 Is everything,
 Day in, day out,
 When the sky is absolutely white
 And we are on the wing.