In the wake of injury, the body heals: bleeding clots and new cells grow, reforming to recreate what was once whole, often so neatly that we forget we were ever broken. And yet the healing process isn’t always a perfect one, sometimes leaving us to carry the lingering aches of injuries from long ago or the indelible etches of scars across our skin, raised reminders of past hurts and broken bones. Our scars then become stories, permanent tales of the experiences that left us fragmented and undone. Lawrence Weschler traces his hands across these scars in his collection of carefully crafted essays, *Vermee in Bosnia: A Reader*, exploring the ways in which tragedy continues to affect us long after it should have been left behind.

Weschler finds that we carry the traumas of the past into the future, dredging them up both intentionally and unconsciously. As he sits in on the hearings of the Yugoslav War Crimes Tribunal, Weschler reflects on the continuing violence that has plagued Yugoslavia throughout time:

> Yugoslavia today has been turned back into one of those places where people not only seem incapable of forgetting the past but barely seem to be capable of thinking about anything else: the Serbs and Croats and Muslims now appear to be so deeply mired in a poisonous legacy of grievances, extending back fifty years, two hundred years—indeed, all the way back to the fourteenth century—that it’s almost as if the living had been transformed into pale, wraithlike shades haunting the ghosts of the long-dead rather than the other way around. ("Bosnia" 23)

Digging up age-old graves, the people of the former Yugoslavia remain unwilling to let past conflicts and grievances pass. They revive even the dead to fight in their present-day civil wars. Intent on justifying their modern atrocities, they cling steadfastly to the tired ghosts of the past, anchoring them to this world even if to do so is to trap themselves in a "poisonous cycle" that hurts themselves as much as it does their opponents. By holding onto old injuries, they prevent themselves from ever putting the past to rest, and in so
doing lose sight of what it means to live. Less consciously, the Serbians have also found themselves mirroring the past, a discovery recorded by Weschler in “Henry V at Srebrenica.” He draws this connection after watching a rehearsal of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, which details the Battle of Agincourt and, most notably, King Henry’s shocking orders, in defiance of all chivalric norms, to kill all of the French prisoners of war. As the scene unfolds, Weschler notes the similarities between the massacre at Agincourt in the 1400s and the more recent slaughter of Muslim prisoners at the hands of the Serbians in Srebrenica. In each scenario, the prospect of early victory, followed by an overextension of manpower and resources and a protracted battle, culminate in the killing of powerless prisoners. In both cases, the actions taken were defended as having been completely necessary. Events of the past resonate clearly into the future.

Spilling across time, tragedy leaves no individual untouched, affecting even those who come years later. In “The Son’s Tale,” Weschler interviews graphic novelist Art Spiegelman, whose parents’ experiences during the Holocaust greatly influenced their children’s lives for years afterwards. His parents were left “hollowed out and cratered” by their ordeal, creating for Spiegelman a home life “haunted, darkly freighted and overcharged with parental concern” (183, 188). His mother became overbearing to the point of obsession; after the war and the death of her first son, Spiegelman’s brother, she “invest[s] her whole life” in Spiegelman (192). Unable to bear the separation when he leaves home, she commits suicide. At the same time, Spiegelman’s relationship with his father becomes strained. Eventually the weight of his parents’ tragedy proves to be too much for him to bear, leading to a nervous breakdown that precipitates Art’s departure. The effects of the Holocaust are far-reaching, coming to not only define the survivors, but also trickling down to extend their poisonous legacy to the next generation.

Art Spiegelman achieves peace only after striving to comprehend the events of his family’s history. As he retells their story in his graphic novel, *Maus*, Spiegelman sees his father, Vladek, in a new light: “but [being objective] also proved helpful—*is* proving helpful—in my coming to terms with my father. . . . there must have been a deeper sympathy for him which I wasn’t even aware of as I was doing it, an understanding that I was getting in contact with. It’s as if all his damn cantankerousness finally melted away” (197). Finally understanding his father to be “a survivor of hell, a mangled and warped survivor,” Spiegelman sees and comes to terms with how deeply Auschwitz has pervaded his family’s past, and his rage at his father slowly dissipates (196). Referring to Spiegelman’s own young son, Weschler writes,
“Over a half century after the Holocaust, Vladek’s line had at last produced a blessedly oblivious survivor,” a testament to the end of his family’s cycle of trauma (201).

As Spiegelman shows us, then, despite the long-reaching effects of our traumas, we do not have to resign ourselves to being products of the past. By working for a greater understanding of history and those who play a role in it, it is possible to reclaim the sense of agency lost in the face of oppressing and tragic circumstances. In his analysis of the work of poet Wisława Szymborska, Weschler realizes the power that the act of comprehension may afford us as both writers and readers. Weschler examines the poem “Maybe All This” in light of Vermeer’s *Lacemaker*, both of which concern the act of creation, and finds himself enraptured by a “double awareness” of Szymborska’s existence as both all-powerful creator and humble subject: “as creator of the poem, Szymborska is of course simultaneously the Boss (as do we, too, the poem’s readers, momentarily get to be, re-creating, recapitulating her epiphanic insight, seeing it clean for ourselves)” (“A Girl Intent” 404).

Because the act of understanding involves the shaping of a reality for ourselves and the construction of our own knowledge of the world, it is also an act of creation that allows us to take on a more active role. Acknowledgement and understanding of circumstances that ensnare us also allow for conscious choices to break the temporal ties that bind us, further enabling us to move beyond the passivity thrust upon us by events.

This principle, this notion that history is not an inescapable force, and that our own conscious choices allow us to shape our legacy, is the underlying principle behind the Tribunal that Weschler bears witness to. In response to Weschler’s questioning, lead prosecutor Richard Goldstone describes his envisioned mission for the Tribunal: “Specific individuals bear the major share of the responsibility, and it is they, not the group as a whole, who need to be held to account, through a fair and meticulously detailed presentation and evaluation of evidence, precisely . . . so that people are able to see how it is that specific individuals . . . [were] continually endeavoring to manipulate them” (“Bosnia” 24). An end to the cycle of vengeance and the subsequent creation of a more peaceful world comes only with an understanding of how tragedies occur.

But it is not enough to change our own perception of reality, to be the subjects of our own histories; we must rewrite our stories, but we must also recast our roles to truly transcend the circumstance into which we are born. Intent on changing the status quo, the subjects of Weschler’s essays refuse to accept or fall into the role of victim that arises so readily in any tragedy. In
“A Parkinsonian Passion” Weschler interviews furniture-designer Ed Weinberger, who, in the face of his Parkinson’s diagnosis, chooses to design several visually confusing pieces of furniture that, despite their stability, appear to be anything but stable. Weinberger describes his approach: “Going after what your mind can conceive or project but turns out to be physically impossible—that’s an echt-Parkinsonian way of proceeding” (380). His designs are thus an act of subversion, a means of overturning the limitations of his debilitating disease through art and “an attempt to create for [himself] a life of [his] own, to assert that life, to safeguard it in the face of an otherwise overpowering condition” (398). Through his designs, he strives for exactly that which his illness has denied him, precision, in a blatant refusal to accept the limitations of his disease. Journalist Jerzy Urban, whom Weschler spotlights in “The Troll’s Tale,” adopts a similar mentality. Weschler observes: “One thing is clear: he cannot abide either playing the role of passive victim or being cast in it” (160). Despite his experiences as a child struggling to survive through the harrowing events of World War II (and the Holocaust as a Jew), Urban displays a remarkable “ability not only to survive but, time and again, to triumph” (155-56). In contrast to families like Spiegelman’s, who remain mired in the past, unable to escape, Urban is defiant, fighting the constraints of his past and making his way to the top. Not only did he create his own history, independent of the tribulations of his childhood, he rose above his past experiences to quite literally direct the course of history at large, becoming a man in a position of power. Far from becoming pale ghosts, fading into the shadows of their pasts, these two men were defiant, creating for themselves lives that were vibrant and unapologetic, and above all, of their own choosing.

Appropriately, Weschler often lets his subjects do most of the talking. His minimal narration sets the scene or aids us in following the conversation. For the most part, however, his essays read more or less as monologues in which his subjects dominate the conversation and speak directly to us to tell their own stories in their own words. Weinberger’s musings on tolerances, variances, and the golden ratio, for example, reveal a remarkably sharp mind that Weschler characterizes as “straining after greater and greater precision, toward an almost infinite perfection” (“Passion” 373). In Urban’s often crude and profane remarks—“you know how it can be with girls who spend years cooped up with the nuns: inevitably they end up making the easiest lays”—we see a man who is irreverent and intractable, a man who is not afraid to say what he wants or do what he wants (“Troll” 154). As a result of Weschler’s hands-off approach, his subjects are able to direct their own narratives and
complicated histories. Their presences become clear to us. Both on the page and in our minds, they become real to us, and we are able to understand them on their own terms.

That’s not to say, however, that Weschler as a writer is passive, or that he allows his subjects to do all of his work for him. Rather, he often works to orchestrate our experience of revelation through a deliberate juxtaposition of images. In “Vermeer in Bosnia,” he sheds light on the work of the Tribunal by constructing a very specific visual metaphor, beginning with his introduction of Vermeer’s *Head of a Young Girl*: “This is a woman who has just turned toward us and is already about to look away” (19). Interpreting the image as such, he understands the woman in the painting to be “autonomous, self-sufficient, suffuse with individual dignity and potential agency” (20). Having set up this image in our minds, Weschler later, at essay’s end, describes Dusko Tadic, the man on trial at the Tribunal: “For a startling split second, he looked up at the camera. And then he looked away” (25). Weschler wants us to see that Tadic, like the young girl in Vemeer’s painting, is autonomous and responsible for his own actions. Only by holding individuals accountable for their crimes can the tribunal hope, finally, to put an end to the violence that has for so long pervaded the nation. Weschler recognizes certain parallels and guides us through their every nuance and complexity, leading us to see, through a simple but haunting image, how blood feuds might finally end.

Weschler also draws attention to events and objects that are not necessarily connected. Through a juxtaposition of art, history, and biography, he evokes a new sense of understanding. His methods are reminiscent of another of his subjects, photographer David Hockney, whose primary preoccupation is creating works of art that are true to the ways that we actually see and perceive the world. Initially, Hockney forgoes photography as a medium, insisting that “your eye doesn’t ever see that much in one glance. It’s not true to life” (“True” 321). However, he finds a solution to his problem in his *joiners*, photocollages that piece together images of the same subject from different perspectives: “I realized that this sort of picture came closer to how we actually see—which is to say, not all at once but in discrete, separate glimpses, which we then build up into our continuous experience of the world” (326). Weschler’s essays are, for us, joiners, assembling various glimpses of the world—Srebrenica through the lens of Henry V, the War Tribunal through the lens of the work of Johannes Vermeer—to present a more cohesive understanding of the world, one that we would be unable to see at first glance. Hockney also finds value in the complication his collages offer: “With five photos, for instance, you were forced to look five times. You couldn’t
help looking more carefully” (322). Complication commands our attention, forcing us to look closely until we uncover some sort of truth, until we achieve some level of understanding.

Weschler employs these careful juxtapositions to construct new narratives that focus not merely on how we are mired in the tragedies of the past but rather on how these tragedies are elements of a complex and often untold whole. Storytelling allows for the possibility of change and remaking; with each telling we choose to include or exclude certain evidence, thereby propagating different realities. The perception of Bosnia has lately been particularly bloody and violent. However, as Weschler is reminded as he speaks to a group of merchants of various backgrounds, there is another part of Bosnia’s history that is often overlooked:

Look . . . the thing you have to understand is that for eight hundred years around these parts, going all the way back to the Middle Ages . . . people around here have lived with each other in peace. Catholics, Muslims, Orthodox, Jews. In peace. No one anywhere else has been able to pull such a thing off. Sure, every once in a while some crooked politicians come along and muck everything up, but eventually they leave, and we’re all still here. And people here know how to get along. (“Coda” 79)

Through the glimpses and snapshots presented in his essays, Weschler fills in our fragmented understanding of the world with the knowledge that other possibilities exist, forgotten amongst the more prominent stories of pain. Pulling together narratives that speak to the strength of the human spirit, Weschler demonstrates that these alternate histories are stories that we can and should tell. Ghosts can be banished and scars can begin to heal. Shadows and disfigurements need no longer remind us of horrors past but might instead testify to strength and survival, to the ways in which people can stand up in the face of conflict and oppression. Fashioning our words in the way Weschler has shown us, we can begin to create new stories of survival.

WORKS CITED

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