Tobias Wolff. This Boy's Life
© 1989 by Tobias Wolff

Our car boiled over again just after my mother and I crossed the Continental Divide. While we were waiting for it to cool we heard, from somewhere above us, the bawling of an airhorn. The sound got louder and then a big truck came around the corner and shot past us into the next curve, its trailer shimmying wildly. We stared after it. "Oh, Toby," my mother said, "he's lost his brakes."

The sound of the horn grew distant, then faded in the wind that sighed in the trees all around us.

By the time we got there, quite a few people were standing along the cliff where the truck went over. It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders. It looked pitifully small. A stream of thick black smoke rose from the cab, feather-

(1924–1987)

As a teenager, James Baldwin preached the gospel in Harlem. After high school, he relocated to Greenwich Village to write, and published articles in The Nation *and* Commentary.

In 1948, he moved to Paris, keeping his U.S. citizenship. "I could see where I came from very clearly, and I could see that I carried myself, which is my home, with me." In 1953, he published the celebrated novel Go Tell It on the Mountain, *and two years later, the nonfiction volume* Notes of a Native Son.

He was a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and a commander of the Legion of Honor. When he died, he was working on a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.

■ ■ ■

from NOTES OF A NATIVE SON

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. Over a month before this, while all our energies were concentrated in waiting for these events, there had been, in Detroit, one of the bloodiest race riots of the century. A few hours after my father's funeral, while he lay in state in the undertaker's chapel, a race riot broke out in Harlem. On the morning of the 3rd of August, we drove my father to the graveyard through a wilderness of smashed plate glass.

The day of my father's funeral had also been my nineteenth birthday. As we drove him to the graveyard, the spoils of injustice, anarchy, discontent, and hatred were all around us. It seemed to me that God himself had devised, to mark my father's end, the most sustained and brutally dissonant of codas. And it seemed to me, too, that the violence which rose all about us as my father left the world had been devised as a corrective for the pride of his eldest son. I had declined to believe in that apocalypse which had been central to my father's vision; very well, life seemed to be saying, here is something that will certainly pass for an apocalypse until the real thing comes

from Modern American Memoirs
edited by Annie
Dillard & Bart Conl

ditions of his life, for the conditions of our lives. When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own.

I had not known my father very well. We had got on badly partly because we shared, in our different fashions, the vice of stubborn pride. When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had. It seems to be typical of life in America, where opportunities real and fancied, are thicker than anywhere else on the globe, that the second generation has no time to talk to the first. No one, including my father, seems to have known exactly how old he was but his mother had been born during slavery. He was of the first generation of free men. He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 1919 and I was part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country.

He had been born in New Orleans and had been a quite young man there during the time that Louis Armstrong, a boy, was running errands for the dives and honky-tonks of what was always presented to me as one of the most wicked of cities—to this day, whenever I think of New Orleans, I also helplessly think of Sodom and Gomorrah. My father never mentioned Louis Armstrong, except to forbid us to play his records; but there was a picture of him on our wall for a long time. One of my father's strong-willed female relatives had placed it there and forbade my father to take it down. He never did, but he eventually maneuvered her out of the house and when, some years later, she was in trouble and near death, he refused to do anything to help her.

He was, I think, very handsome. I gather this from photographs and from my own memories of him, dressed in his Sunday best and on his way to preach a sermon somewhere, when I was little. Handsome, proud, and ingrown, "like a toe-nail," somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with war-paint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met;

Life, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (not a great book, but an iconic one), and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

Of the recent spate of memoirs, some are fast becoming classics: Frank Conroy's *Stop-time*, Harry Crews's *A Childhood*, Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons*, Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City*, James McConkey's *Court of Memory* trilogy, Geoffrey Wolff's *The Duke of Deception*.

It is possible to imagine the writers in this disparate volume as a single, composite American of any heritage or gender, who appears in a family, grows up somewhere, and somehow watches, learns, falls in love, works, and perhaps has children and grandchildren. The writer celebrates, as Charles Wright did in a poem, "all the various things that lock our wrists to the past." Because the collection represents only seventy-five years of published memoirs, and then only of memoirs whose action takes place in this century and on this soil, the editors excluded many great favorites. An afterword lists these.

A.D.

from Modern American Memoirs ed. by Annie Dillard & Cort Conley

(1935–)

Harry Crews was born the son of a farmer in Bacon County, Georgia, and grew up there. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps as a sergeant, then attended the University of Florida, where he became a professor of English in 1974.

Author of more than a dozen novels, from The Gospel Singer *(1968) to* Scar Lover *(1992), Crews has also written stories, essays, and nonfiction.*

Crews's memoir, A Childhood: The Biography of a Place, *describes the first six years of his life, under circumstances "where there wasn't enough money to close up a dead man's eyes." His family lived on a series of tenant farms in Bacon County. His father died when he was two. The "daddy" in this memoir is his stepfather, whom he loved. Later he learned that this man was his uncle.*

■ ■ ■

from A CHILDHOOD

It has always seemed to me that I was not so much born into this life as I awakened to it. I remember very distinctly the awakening and the morning it happened. It was my first glimpse of myself, and all that I know now—the stories, and everything conjured up by them, that I have been writing about thus far—I obviously knew none of then, particularly anything about my real daddy, whom I was not to hear of until I was nearly six years old, not his name, not even that he was my daddy. Or if I did hear of him, I have no memory of it.

I awoke in the middle of the morning in early summer from the place I'd been sleeping in the curving roots of a giant oak tree in front of a large white house. Off to the right, beyond the dirt road, my goats were trailing along in the ditch, grazing in the tough wire grass that grew there. Their constant bleating shook the warm summer air. I always thought of them as my goats although my brother

possessor's substance. The second lesson is the transience of material being. This has not quite converted me to a dualist, but it has made some headway in that direction. I do not suppose that ideas are immortal, but certainly mental things are longer lived than other material things.

Once I was the sort of person who invests objects with sentimental value. Now I no longer have those objects, but I have the sentiments yet.

Many times in our travels I have lost everything but the clothes I was wearing and Lizbeth. The things I find in Dumpsters, the love letters and rag dolls of so many lives, remind me of this lesson. Now I hardly pick up a thing without envisioning the time I will cast it aside. This I think is a healthy state of mind. Almost everything I have now has already been cast out at least once, proving that what I own is valueless to someone.

Anyway, I find my desire to grab for the gaudy bauble has been largely sated. I think this is an attitude I share with the very wealthy—we both know there is plenty more where what we have came from. Between us are the rat-race millions who nightly scavenge the cable channels looking for they know not what.

I am sorry for them.

QUESTIONS

1. How does Eighner organize his essay? What does such an organization imply?
2. Eighner's simple, understated tone suggests that anyone can adapt to Dumpster diving with a little practice. Why do you think he uses such a tone?
3. Write about someone who does what Eighner deplores in his closing paragraphs, "invests objects with sentimental value." Let your description reveal whether or not you agree with Eighner.

NANCY MAIRS

On Being a Cripple

To escape is nothing. Not to escape is nothing.
—LOUISE BOGAN

THE OTHER DAY I was thinking of writing an essay on being a cripple. I was thinking hard in one of the stalls of the women's room in my office building, as I was shoving my shirt into my jeans and tugging up my zipper. Preoccupied, I flushed, picked up my book bag, took my cane down from the hook, and unlatched the door. So many movements unbalanced me, and as I pulled the door open I fell over backward, landing fully clothed on the toilet seat with my

From Plaintext *(1986), a collection of personal essays, many about Mairs's life with multiple sclerosis.*

legs splayed in front of me: the old beetle-on-its-back routine. Saturday afternoon, the building deserted, I was free to laugh aloud as I wriggled back to my feet, my voice bouncing off the yellowish tiles from all directions. Had anyone been there with me, I'd have been still and faint and hot with chagrin. I decided that it was high time to write the essay.

First, the matter of semantics. I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me. I choose from among several possibilities, the most common of which are "handicapped" and "disabled." I made the choice a number of years ago, without thinking, unaware of my motives for doing so. Even now, I'm not sure what those motives are, but I recognize that they are complex and not entirely flattering. People—crippled or not—wince at the word "cripple," as they do not at "handicapped" or "disabled." Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger.

But, to be fair to myself, a certain amount of honesty underlies my choice. "Cripple" seems to me a clean word, straightforward and precise. It has an honorable history, having made its first appearance in the Lindisfarne Gospel[1] in the tenth century. As a lover of words, I like the accuracy with which it describes my condition: I have lost the full use of my limbs. "Disabled," by contrast, suggests any incapacity, physical or mental. And I certainly don't like "handicapped," which implies that I have deliberately been put at a disadvantage, by whom I can't imagine (my God is not a Handicapper General), in order to equalize chances in the great race of life. These words seem to me to be moving away from my condition, to be widening the gap between word and reality. Most remote is the recently coined euphemism "differently abled," which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from "undeveloped" to "underdeveloped," then to "less developed," and finally to "developing" nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.

Mine is one of them. Whatever you call me, I remain crippled. But I don't care what you call me, so long as it isn't "differently abled," which strikes me as pure verbal garbage designed, by its ability to describe anyone, to describe no one. I subscribe to George Orwell's thesis that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."[2] And I refuse to participate in the degeneration of the language to the extent that I deny that I have lost anything in the course of this calamitous disease; I refuse to pretend that the only differences between you and me are the various ordinary ones that distinguish any one person from another. But call me "disabled" or "handicapped" if you like. I have long since grown accustomed to them; and if they are vague, at least they hint at the truth. Moreover, I use them myself. Society is no readier to

1. Illustrated manuscript of the four gospels of the New Testament done by Irish monks; English commentaries were added in the tenth century.

2. A quotation from "Politics and the English Language" (included in the section "Language and Communication") by Orwell (1903–1950), British essayist and novelist, famous for his political commentaries.

Caroline Knapp,
Drinking: A Love Story
© 1996 by Caroline Knapp

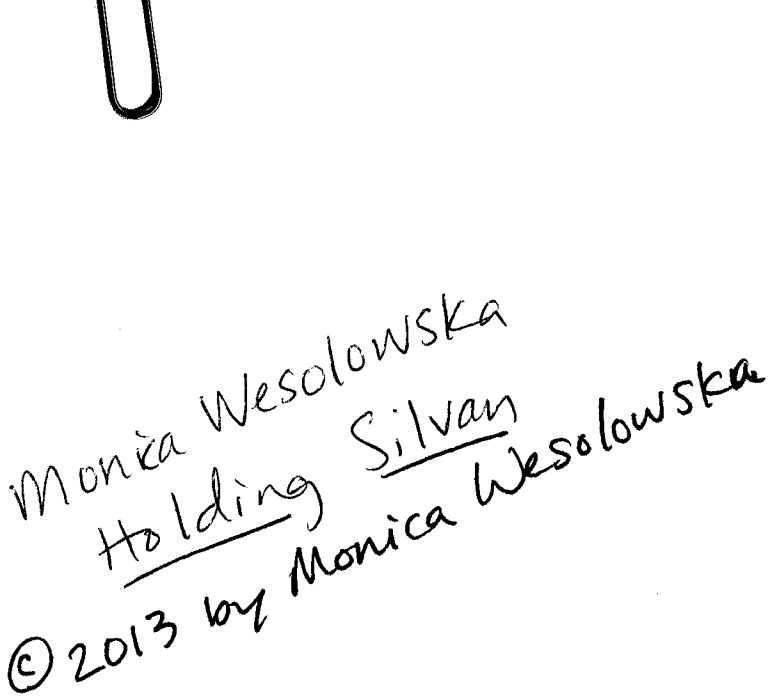
PROLOGUE

It happened this way: I fell in love and then, because the love was ruining everything I cared about, I had to fall out.

This didn't happen easily, or simply, but if I had to pinpoint it, I'd say the relationship started to fall apart the night I nearly killed my oldest friend's two daughters.

I'd been visiting my friend Jennifer over Thanksgiving weekend a few years ago, and we'd all gone for a walk after dinner, she and her husband and the two daughters and me. The kids were five and nine years old, beautiful little blue-eyed girls with freckles and wide grins, and I'd been playing Rambunctious Friend of Mom's. I chased them around, and hoisted them into the air, and then, in a blur of supremely bad judgment, I dreamed up the Double Marsupial Hold.

I put the older girl, Elizabeth, on my back, piggyback, and then I picked up the younger one, Julia, and held her facing me, so that her arms were around my neck and her legs around my waist. I was sandwiched between them, holding 130 pounds of kid. Then I started running across the street, shouting like a sportscaster: "It's the Double Marsupial



Birth

IN THE MORNING, THE PHONE NEXT TO MY HOSPITAL bed rings. Stepping from the shower, my skin scrubbed of the sweat and blood of yesterday's triumphant labor, I slip past David to pull on my old robe and head for the phone. I'm not worried. I'm expecting another friend, a relative, more words of congratulation to match my sudden pleasure in my baby – a healthy, full-term boy who waits for me in the nursery – but the woman on the other end of the line is a stranger.

"Hello, darling," the stranger says in a husky, soothing voice. She is calling from another hospital. She says she needs to clear up some confusion about the spelling of my name before the transfer. I, too, am confused. When I tell the stranger that I don't understand, that I am about to go down the hall to collect my baby because it's time to nurse, she says, "I'm so sorry to be the one to tell you, darling."

With these vague but tender words, the ecstatic glow of motherhood that has surrounded me since Silvan's birth begins to fade.

An ambulance waits; the transfer is happening any minute. Wrapped still in my dirty robe with its stiff patch of dried blood in back, I open the bathroom door and try to convey the stranger's words to David hidden in the steam. Though David has told me his worries about Silvan since the birth, I've dismissed them