Mid all the rotating neon and plunging machinery's roar and jagged screams and high-volume rock, the crowds seem radically happy, vivid, somehow awakened, sponges for sensuous data, feeding on stimuli

the ref wipe him down and help him from the ring, not un gently. His opponent, watching, tentatively puts up his arms.

7:30 P.M.

So the old heave-ho is the last thing I see at Golden Gloves Boxing and then the first thing I see at Happy Hollow, right at sunset. Standing on the midway looking up at the Ring of Fire, a set of flame-colored train cars sent around and around the inside of a 100-foot ne- hoop, the operator is still the train at the top and hanging the patrons upside down, jackknifed over their seat belts, with loose change and eyeglasses raining down—looking up, I witness a thick coil of vomit arc from a car; it descibes a 100-foot spiral and lands with a meaty splash between two young girls, who look from the ground to each other with expressions of slapstick horror. And when the flame train finally brakes at the ramp, a mortified-looking little kid wobbles off, damp and pale, staggering over toward a Lemon Shake-Up stand.

This is my last day at the fair, and I've put off a real survey of the Near-Death Experiences until my last hour. I want to get everything catalogued before the sun sets. I've already had some distant looks at the nighttime Hollow and have an idea that being down here in the dark, amid all this rotating neon and the mechanical clowns and plunging machinery's roar and jagged screams and barkers' pitches and high-volume rock, would be like the depiction of a bar acid trip in a bad Sixties movie. It strikes me hardest in the Hollow that I'm not spiritually Midwestern anymore, and no longer young—I do not like crowds, screams, amplified noise, or heat. I'll endure them if I have to, but they're sure not my idea of a magic community-interval. The crowds in the Hollow though—mostly high-school couples, local toughs, and kids in single-sex packs, as the demographics of the fair shift to prime time—seem radically happy, vivid, somehow awakened, sponges for sensuous data, not bombarded by the stimuli but feeding on it. It is the first time I've felt really lonely at the fair.

Nor do I understand why some people will pay money to be careened and suspended and dropped and whipped back and forth at high speeds and hung upside down until somebody vomits. It seems to me like paying to be in a traffic accident. I do not get it; never have. It's not a regional or cultural thing. I think it's a matter of neurological makeup. The world divides into those who like the managed induction of terror and those who don't. I do not find terror exciting. I find it terrifying.

And Happy Hollow, I discover, offers nothing if not managed terror. And not one but two 'tilt- a-Whirls. An experience called Wipe Out straps riders into fixed seats on a big lit disc that spins with a wobble like a coin that won't lie down. The Pirate Ship puts forty folks in a plastic galley and swings it in a pendular arc until they're facing straight up and then down. The carny operating the Pirate Ship is made to wear an eye patch and parrot and hook, on the tip of which hook burns an impaled Marlinho. The operator of the Fun-house is slumped in a plastic control booth that reeks of sinsemilla.

The 104-foot Giant Condole Wheel is a staid old Ferris wheel that puts you facing your seatmate in a kind of steel teacup. Its rotation is stately, but the cars at the top look like little lit thimbles, and you can hear thin female screams from up there as their dates graph the teacups' sides and joggle.

The lines are the longest for the really serious Near-Death Experiences: Ring of Fire, the Zipper, Hi Roller—which runs a high-speed train around the inside of an ellipse that is itself spinning at right angles to the train's motion. The crowds are dense and reek of bug repellent. Boys in Chicago Cubs shirts clutch their dates as they walk. There's something intensely public about young Midwestern couples. The girls have tall hair and bee-stung lips, and their eye makeup runs in the heat and gives them a vampish aspect. The overt sexuality of high-school girls is not just a coastal thing. The Amour Express sends another little train at 60-plus mph around a topologically wobbled ring, half of which is enclosed in a fiberglass tunnel with neon hearts and arrows. A fallen packet of Trojans lies near the row of Lucite cubes in which slack-jawed cranes try to pick up jewelry.

It seems journalistically irresponsible to try to describe the Hollow's rides without experiencing at least one firsthand. The Kiddie Kopter is a carousel of miniature Sikorsky prototypes rotating at a sane and dignified clip. The propellers, on each helicopter rotate at the same speed. My copter is a bit snug, admittedly, even with my knees drawn up to my chest. I get kicked off the ride, though, when the whole machine's tilt reveals that I weigh quite a bit more than the maximum 100 pounds.
and I have to say that both the little kids on the ride and the carny in charge were unnecessarily snide about the whole thing. Each ride has its own PA speaker with its own discharge of adrenaline rock; the Kiddie Kopter's speaker is playing George Michael's "I Want Your Sex." The late-day Hollow itself is an enormous sonic mash from which different sounds take turns protruding—mostly whistles, sirens, calliopes, heavy-metal tunes, human screams hard to distinguish from recorded screams.

Both the Thunderbolts and the Octopus hurl free-spinning modular cars around a topologically complex plane; the Thunderbolts' sides reveal further evidence of gastric distress. Then there's the Gravitron, basically a centrifuge—an enclosed, top-shaped structure inside which a rubberized chamber that spins so fast you're mashed against the wall like a fly on a windshield. A small boy stands on one foot tugging the Gravitron operator's khaki sleeve, crying that he lost a shoe in there. The best description of the carnie's tan is that they're somehow sinisterly tanned. I notice that many of them have the low brow and prognathous jaw one associates with fetal alcohol syndrome. The carny operating the Scooter—bumper cars that are fast, savage, underinsulated, a sure trip to the chiropractor—has been slumped in the same position in the same chair every time I've seen him, staring past the frantic cars and tearing up used ride-tickets with the vacant intensity of someone on a locked ward. I lean casually against his platform's railing so that my credentials dangle and ask him in a neighborly way how he keeps from going out of his freaking mind with the boredom of his job. He turns his head very slowly, revealing a severe facial tic: "The fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

The same two carneys as before are at the Zipper's controls, in the exact same clothes, looking up into the full cars and elbowing each other. The midway smells of machine oil and fried food, smoke and Cutter repellent and mall-bought adolescent perfume and ripe trash in the beer-swarmed cans. The very Nearest-to-Death ride looks to be the Kamikaze, way down at the western end by the Zykloon roller coaster. Its neon sign has a skull with a headband and says "Kamikaze." It's a 70-foot pillar of white-painted iron with two 50-foot hammer-shaped arms hanging down, one on either side. The cars are at the ends of the arms, twelve-seaters enclosed in clear plastic. The two arms swing ferociously around, as in 360 degrees, vertically, and in opposite directions, so that twice on every rotation it looks like your car is going to get smashed up against the other car, and you can see faces in the other car hurtling toward you, gray with fear and squishy with O's. An eight-ticket, four-dollar waking nightmare.

Then I find the worst one. It wasn't even here yesterday. The Sky Coaster stands regally aloof at the Hollow's far western edge, just past the Uphill-Bowling-for-Dinnerware game, in a kind of grotto formed by trailers and dismantled machinery. It's a 175-foot construction crane, one of the really big mothers, with a tank's traction belts instead of wheels, a canary-yellow cab, and a long proboscis of black steel, towering, canted upward at maybe 70 degrees. This is half the Sky Coaster. The other half is a 100-foot tower assembly of cross-hatched iron that's been erected about two football fields to the north of the crane. There's a folding table in front of the clothesline cordonning off the crane, and a line of people at the table. The woman taking their money is fidgety and a compelling advertisement for sunscreen. Behind her on a vivid blue tarp are two meaty blond guys in Sky Coaster T-shirts helping the next customer strap himself into what looks like a combination straitjacket and utility belt, bristling with hooks and clips. From here the noise of the Hollow behind is both deafening and muffled. My media guide, sweated into the shape of my butt pocket, says, "If you thought bungee jumping was a thrill, wait until you soar high above the Fairgrounds on Sky Coaster. The rider is fastened securely into a full-body harness.

Photograph from The State Journal Register.
that hoists them [sic] onto a tower and releases them to swing in a pendulum-like motion while taking in a spectacular view of the Fairgrounds below. The signs at the folding table are more telling: "$40.00. AMEX Visa MC No Refunds No Stopping Half Way Up." The two guys are leading the customer up the stairs of a rolling platform maybe ten feet high. One guy is at each elbow, and I realize they're helping hold the customer up. Who would pay $40 for an experience requiring you to be held up as you walk toward it? There's also something off about the customer, odd. He's wearing tinted aviator glasses. No one in the rural Midwest wears aviator glasses, tinted or otherwise. Then I see what it really is: He's wearing $40 Banfi loafers. Without socks. This guy, now lying prone on the platform below the crane, is from the East Coast. He's a ringer. I almost want to shout it. A woman is on the blue tarp, already in harness, wobblily kneeling, waiting her turn. A steel cable descends from the tip of the crane's proboscis, on its end a fist-sized clip. Another cable leads from the crane's cab to the tower, up through ring-tipped pitons all up the tower's side, and over a pulley at its top, another big clip on the end. One of the guys waves the tower's cable down and brings it over to the platform. The clips of both cables are attached to the back of the East Coast guy's harness, fastened and locked. The guy is trying to look around behind him to see what-all's attached as the two big blonds leave the platform. Another blond man in the yellow cab throws a lever, and the tower's cable pulls tight in the grass and up the tower's side and down. The crane's cable stays slack as the guy is lifted into the air by the tower's cable. The harness covers his shorts and top, so he looks babe-naked as he rises. The one cable sags with tension as the East Coaster is pulled slowly to the top of the tower. He's still stomach-down, limbs wriggling. At a certain height he starts to look like livestock in a sling. You can tell he's trying to swallow until his face gets too small to see. Finally he's all the way up at the top of the tower, his ass against the pulley, trying not to writhe.

I can barely take notes. They cruelly leave him up there a while, slung, a smile of slack cable between him and the crane's tip. I am constructing a mental list of the personal violations I would undergo before I'd let anyone haul me ass-first to a great height and swing me like high-altitude beef. One of the blond guys has a bullhorn and he's playing to the crowd's suspense, calling up to the slung East Coaster: "Are. You. Ready." The East Coaster's response noises are more bovine than human. His tinted aviator glasses hang askew from just one ear; he doesn't bother to fix them. I can see what's going to happen. They're going to throw a lever and detach the tower-cable's clip, and the man in sockless Banfi's will free-fall for what will seem forever, until the slack of the crane's cable is taken up and the line goes taut behind him and swings him way out over the grounds to the south, his upward arc almost as high as the crane's tip, and then back; and then forth, the man prone at the arc's bottom and seeming to stand on either side, swinging back and forth against a rare-meat sunset. And just as the cab man reaches for his lever and everyone inhales, I lose my nerve and disappear into the crowd.

9:15 P.M.

Walking aimlessly. Seas of fairgoing flesh, plodding, elbowing, looking, still eating. They stand placidly in long lines. No East Coast games of Beat the Crowd. Midwesterners lack a certain public cunning. No one gets impatient. Don't the fairgoers mind the crowds, lines, noise? But the state fair is deliberately about the crowds and jostle, the noise and overload of sight and event. At last an over-arching theory blooms inside my head: megacapitalistic East Coasters' summer treats and breaks are literally "getaways," flights—from crowds, noise, heat, dirt, the stress of too many sensory choices. Hence the ecstatic escapes to grassy lakes, mountains, cabins, hikes in silent woods. Getting away from it all. They see more than enough stimulating people and sights Monday through Friday, thank you, stand in enough lines, elbow enough crowds. Neon skylines. Grotesques on public transport. Spectacles at every urban corner practically grab you by the lapels, commanding attention. The East Coast existential treat is escape from confines and stimuli—quiet rustic vistas that hold still, turn inward, turn away. Not so in the rural Midwest. Here you're pretty much away all the time. The land is big here—board-game flat, horizons in every direction. See how much farther apart the homes are, how broad the yards: compare with New York or Boston or Philly. Here a seat to yourself on all public transport, parks the size of airports, rush hour a three-beat pause at a stop sign. And the farms themselves are huge, silent, vacant: you can't see your neighbor. Thus the urge physical to commune, melt, become part of a crowd. To see something besides land and grass and corn and cable TV and your wife's face. Hence the sacredness out here of spectacle, public event: high-school football, Little League, parades, bingo, market day, fair. All very big deals, very deep down. Something in a Midwesterner sort of actuates, deep down, at a public event. The faces in the sea of faces are like the faces of children released from their rooms. Governor Edgar's state-spirit rhetoric at the ribbon-cutting rings true. The real spectacle that draws us here is us.
My 1990 Camry's DNA was designed inside the metallic walls of the Toyota Multinational Corporation's headquarters in Tokyo, Japan; transported via blueprint to the North American Manufacturing nerve center in Hebron, Kentucky; grown organ by organ in four major assembly plants in Alabama, New Jersey, Texas, and New York; trucked to 149 Arsenal Street in Watertown, Massachusetts; and steered home by my grandmother on September 4, 1990. It featured a 200 hp, 3.0 L V6 engine, a four-speed automatic, and an adaptive Variable Suspension System. She deemed the car too “high tech.” In 1990 this meant a cassette player, a cup holder, and a manually operated moon roof.

During its youth, the car traveled little. In fifteen years my grandmother accumulated a meager twenty-five thousand miles, mostly to and from the market, my family’s house, and the Greek jewelry store downtown. The black exterior remained glossy and spotless, the beige interior crisp and pristine. Tissues were disposed of, seats vacuumed, and food prohibited. My grandmother’s old-fashioned cleanliness was an endearing virtue—one that I evidently did not inherit.

I acquired the old Camry through an awkward transaction. Ten days before my sixteenth birthday, my grandfather died.
He was eighty-six and it had been long expected, yet I still felt a guilty unease when I heard the now surplus car would soon belong to me. For my grandmother, it was a symbolic good-bye. She needed to see only one car in her garage—needed to comprehend her loss more tangibly. Grandpa's car was the “nicer” of the two, so that one she would keep. Three weeks after the funeral, my grandmother and I went to the bank, I signed a check for exactly one dollar, and the car was legally mine. That was that. When I drove her home that evening, I manually opened the moon roof and put on a tape of Frank Sinatra. My grandma smiled for the first time in weeks.

Throughout the next three years, the car evolved. When I first parked the Toyota in my driveway, it was spotless, full of gas, and equipped with my grandmother’s version of survival necessities. The glove compartment had a magnifying glass, three pens, and the registration in a little Ziploc bag. The trunk had two matching black umbrellas, a first aid kit, and a miniature sewing box for emergency repairs. Like my grandmother’s wrists, everything smelled of Opium perfume.

For a while, I maintained this immaculate condition. Yet one Wrigley’s wrapper led to two and soon enough my car underwent a radical transformation—the vehicular equivalent of a midlife crisis. Born and raised in proper formality, the car saw me as that friend from school, the bad example who washes away naïveté and corrupts the clean and innocent. We were the same age, after all—both eighteen. The Toyota was born again, crammed with clutter, and exposed to decibel levels it had never fathomed. I filled it with giggling friends and emotional phone calls, borrowed skirts and bottled drinks.

The messiness crept up on me. Parts of my life began falling off, forming an eclectic debris that dribbled gradually into every corner. Empty sushi containers, Diet Coke cans, half-full
packs of gum, sweaters, sweatshirts, socks, my running shoes. My clutter was nondiscriminatory. I had every variety of newspaper, scratched-up English paper, biology review sheet, and Spanish flash card discarded on the seats after I'd sufficiently studied on my way to school. The left door pocket was filled with tiny tinfoil balls, crumpled after consuming my morning English muffin. By Friday, I had the entire house’s supply of portable coffee mugs. By Sunday, someone always complained about their absence and I would rush out, grab them all, and surreptitiously place them in the dishwasher.

My car was not gross; it was occupied, cluttered, cramped. It became an extension of my bedroom, and thus an extension of myself. I had two bumper stickers on the back: REPUBLICANS FOR VOLDEMORT and the symbol for the Equal Rights Campaign. On the back side windows were OBAMA '08 signs that my parents made me take down because they “dangerously blocked my sight lines.” The trunk housed my guitar but was also the library, filled with textbooks and novels, the giant tattered copy of The Complete Works of William Shakespeare and all one hundred chapters of Harry Potter on tape. A few stray cassettes littered the corners, their little brown insides ripped out, tangled and mutilated. They were the casualties of the trunk trenches, sprawled out forgotten next to the headband I never gave back to Meghan.

On average, I spent two hours a day driving. It was nearly an hour each way to school, and the old-fashioned Toyota—regarded with lighthearted amusement by my classmates—came to be a place of comfort and solitude amid the chaos of my daily routine. My mind was free to wander, my muscles to relax. No one was watching or keeping score. Sometimes I let the deep baritone of NPR’s Tom Ashbrook lecture me on oil shortages. Other times I played repetitive mix tapes with
titles like *Pancake Breakfast*, *Tie-Dye and Granola*, and *Songs for the Highway When It's Snowing*.

Ravaging my car, I often found more than just physical relics. For two months I could hardly open the side door without reliving the first time he kissed me. His dimpled smile was barely visible in the darkness, but it nevertheless made me stumble backward when I found my way blushingly back into the car. On the backseat there was the June 3 issue of the *New York Times* that I couldn't bear to throw out. When we drove home together from the camping trip, he read it cover to cover while I played Simon and Garfunkel—hoping he'd realize all the songs were about us. We didn't talk much during that ride. We didn't need to. He slid his hand into mine for the first time when we got off the highway; it was only after I made my exit that I realized I should have missed it. Above this newspaper are the fingernail marks I dug into the leather of my steering wheel on the night we decided to *just be friends*. My car listened to me cry for all twenty-two-and-a-half miles home.

The physical manifestations of my memories soon crowded the car. My right back speaker was broken from the time my older brother and I pulled an all-nighter singing shamelessly during our rainy drive home from the wedding. I remember the sheer energy of the storm, the lights, the music—moving through us, transcending the car's steel shell, and tracing the city. There was the folder left behind from the day I drove my dad to an interview the month after he lost his job. It was coincidental that his car was in the shop, but I knew he felt more pathetic that it was he, not his daughter, in the passenger seat. I kept my eyes on the road, feeling the confused sadness of a child who catches a parent crying.
I talked a lot in my car. Thousands of words and songs and swears are absorbed in its fabric, just like the orange juice I spilled on my way to the dentist. It knows what happened when Allie went to Puerto Rico, understands the difference between the way I look at Nick and the way I look at Adam, and remembers the first time I experimented with talking to myself. I've practiced for auditions, college interviews, Spanish oral presentations, and debates. There's something novel about swearing alone in the car. Yet with the pressures of APs and SATs and the other acronyms that haunt high school, the act became more frequent and less refreshing.

My car has seen three drive-in movies. During *The Dark Knight*, its battery died and, giggling ferociously, we had to ask the overweight family in the next row to jump it. The smell of popcorn permeated every crevice of the sedan, and all rides for the next week were like a trip to the movies. There was a variety of smells in the Camry. At first it smelled like my grandmother—perfume, mint, and mothballs. I went through a chai-tea phase during which my car smelled incessantly of Indian herbs. Some mornings it would smell slightly of tobacco and I would know immediately that my older brother had kidnapped it the night before. For exactly three days it reeked of marijuana. Dan had removed the shabbily rolled joint from behind his ear and our fingers had trembled as the five of us apprehensively inhaled. Nothing happened. Only the seats seemed to absorb the plant and get high. Mostly, however, it smelled like nothing to me. Yet when I drove my friends, they always said it had a distinct aroma. I believe this functioned in the same way as not being able to taste your own saliva or smell your own odor—the car and I were pleasantly immune to each other.
In the Buckingham Browne & Nichols High School yearbook I was voted worst driver, but on most days I will refute this superlative. My car's love for parking tickets made me an easy target, but I rarely received other violations. My mistakes mostly harmed me, not others—locking my keys in the car or parking on the wrong side of the road. Once, last winter, I needed to refill my windshield wiper fluid and in a rushed frenzy poured an entire bottle of similarly blue antifreeze inside. Antifreeze, as it turns out, burns out engines if used in excess. I spent the next two hours driving circles around my block in a snowstorm, urgently expelling the antifreeze squirt by thick blue squirt. I played no music during this vigil. I couldn't find a playlist called Poisoning Your Car.

It may have been awkward-looking and muddled, but I was attached to my car. It was a portable home that heated my seat in winter and carried me home at night. I had no diary and rarely took pictures. That old Toyota Camry was an odd documentation of my adolescence. When I was seventeen, the car was seventeen. My younger brother entered high school last September and I passed my ownership on to him. In the weeks before I left for college, my parents made me clean it out for his sake. I spread six trash bags over the driveway, filling them with my car's contents as the August sun heated their black plastic. The task was strange, like deconstructing a scrapbook, unpeeling all the pictures and whiting out the captions.

Just like for my grandmother, it was a symbolic good-bye. Standing outside my newly vacuumed car, I wondered, if I tried hard enough, whether I could smell the Opium perfume again, or if I searched long enough, whether I'd find the matching umbrellas and the tiny sewing kit. My brother laughed at my nostalgia, reminding me that I could still drive
the car when I came home. He didn’t understand that it wasn’t just the driving I’d miss. That it was the tinfoil balls, the *New York Times*, and the broken speaker; the fingernail marks, the stray cassettes, and the smell of chai. Alone that night and parked in my driveway, I listened to Frank Sinatra with the moon roof slid back.
Tobias Wolff is probably best known for his short-story collections Back in the World (1985), in the Garden of the North American Martyrs (1981), and The Night In Question (1995) and for his novel The Barracks Thief (1984), which won the PEN/Faulkner Award in 1985. Wolff has also written two autobiographies. The first, A Boy’s Life (1989), won the Los Angeles Times Book Award for biography and was made into a movie (1993) in which Wolff was played by Leonardo DiCaprio. The second autobiography, In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War (1994), about his experience serving as a Green Beret in the Vietnam War, was a finalist for a National Book Award and a Los Angeles Times Award for biography. In addition to his fiction and autobiography, Wolff has also edited several short-story collections, including The Best American Short Stories. Wolff has taught creative writing at Syracuse University and is currently the Ward W. and Priscilla B. Woods Professor at Stanford University, where he also has directed the creative writing program.

In this selection from A Boy’s Life, Wolff tells the story of an experience he had when he was ten years old. He and his mother had just moved west from Florida to Salt Lake City, followed by Roy, his divorced mother’s boyfriend. “Roy was handsome,” Wolff writes, “in the conventional way that appeals to boys. He had a tattoo. He’d been to war and kept a silence about it that was full of heroic implication.” As you read, notice how the young Wolff is motivated, at least in part, by a desire to be the kind of self-sufficient man he associates with soldiers and cowboys.

On Being a Real Westerner

Tobias Wolff

Just after Easter Roy gave me the Winchester .22 rifle I’d learned to shoot with. It was a light, pump-action, beautifully balanced piece with a walnut stock black from all its oilings. Roy had carried it when he was a boy and it was still as good as new. Better than new. The action was silky from long use, and the wood of a quality no longer to be found.

The gift did not come as a surprise. Roy was stingy, and slow to take a hint, but I’d put him under siege. I had my heart set on that rifle. A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for itself and for the way it completed me when I held it.

My mother said I couldn’t have it. Absolutely not. Roy took the rifle back but promised me he’d bring her around. He could not imagine anyone refusing him anything and treated the refusals he did encounter as perverse and insincere. Normally mute, he became at these times a relentless whiner. He would follow my mother from room to room, emitting one ceaseless note of complaint that was pitched perfectly to jangle her nerves and bring her to a state where she would agree to anything to make it stop.

After a few days of this my mother caved in. She said I could have the rifle if, and only if, I promised never to take it out or even touch it except when she and Roy were with me. Okay, I said. Sure. Naturally. But even then she wasn’t satisfied. She plain didn’t like the fact of me owning a rifle. Roy said he had owned several rifles by the time he was my age, but this did not reassure her. She didn’t think I could be trusted with it. Roy said now was the time to find out.
CHAPTER 2: REMEMBERING EVENTS

For a week or so I kept my promises. But now that the weather had turned warm Roy was usually off somewhere and eventually, in the dead hours after school when I found myself alone in the apartment, I decided that there couldn't be any harm in taking the rifle out to clean it. Only to clean it, nothing more. I was sure it would be enough just to break it down, oil it, rub linseed into the stock, polish the octagonal barrel and then hold it up to the light to confirm the perfection of the bore. But it wasn't enough. From cleaning the rifle I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this, together with martial-looking articles of hunting gear: fur trooper's hat, camouflage coat, boots that reached nearly to my knees.

The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one. I set up a nest on the couch by the front window. I drew the shades to darken the apartment, and took up my position. Nudging the shade aside with the rifle barrel, I followed people in my sights as they walked or drove along the street. At first I made shooting sounds—kyool kyool! Then I started cocking the hammer and letting it snap down.

Roy stored his ammunition in a metal box he kept hidden in the closet. As with everything else hidden in the apartment, I knew exactly where to find it. There was a layer of loose .22 rounds on the bottom of the box under shells of bigger caliber, dropped there by the handful the way men drop pennies on their dressers at night. I took some and put them in a hiding place of my own. With these I started loading up the rifle. Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each other, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them, and at their absurd and innocent belief that they were safe.

But over time the innocence I laughed at began to irritate me. It was a peculiar kind of irritation. I saw it years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmed Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared. Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it.

One afternoon I pulled the trigger. I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill my little store of self-control was exhausted. I had to shoot. I looked up and down the street. It was empty. Nothing moved but a pair of squirrels chancing each other back and forth on the telephone wires. I followed one in my sight. Finally it stopped for a moment and I fired. The squirrel dropped straight into the road. I pulled back into the shadows and waited for something to happen, sure that someone must have heard the shot or seen the squirrel fall. But the sound that was so loud to me probably seemed to our neighbors no more than the bang of a cupboard slammed shut. After a while I sneaked a glance into the street. The squirrel hadn't moved. It looked like a scarf someone had dropped.

When my mother got home from work I told her there was a dead squirrel in the street. Like me, she was an animal lover. She took a cellophane bag off a loaf of bread and we went outside and looked at the squirrel. "Poor little thing," she said. She stuck
her hand in the wrapper and picked up the squirrel, then pulled the bag inside out away from her hand. We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time.

I blubbered again in bed that night. At last I got out of bed and knelt down and did an imitation of somebody praying, and then I did an imitation of somebody receiving divine reassurance and inspiration. I stopped crying. I smiled to myself and forced a feeling of warmth into my chest. Then I climbed back in bed and looked up at the ceiling with a blissful expression until I went to sleep.

For several days I stayed away from the apartment at times when I knew I’d be alone there.

Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. This much I understand now. But the man can give no help to the boy, not in this matter nor in those that follow. The boy moves always out of reach.

Connecting to Culture and Experience: Role Playing

Wolff shows us that he took great delight in playing the role of a soldier—looking at himself in the mirror dressed in camouflage and “striking brave poses” (paragraph 5). The word brave suggests that the young Wolff wanted to see himself as possessing certain traits, like bravery, that we often associate with soldiers. Another part of the attraction of playing soldier, he admits, is the sense of power he experienced holding a rifle.

With other students in your class, discuss the roles you played as children. What personal and cultural factors influenced the roles that you and your classmates imagined for yourselves? You might begin by comparing your own childhood imaginings with Wolff’s desire to play soldier. In addition to having firsthand experience with Roy, a soldier who impressed him with his masculine authority and power, Wolff grew up during World War II, when children were bombarded by media images of brave soldiers fighting heroic wars and lone cowboys bringing justice to the Wild West. What media images—from television, film, the Internet, and computer games—do you think influenced the kinds of role play that you engaged in as a child or young adult?

Analyzing Writing Strategies

1. Writers convey the significance of autobiographical events by telling how they felt at the time the event occurred and by telling how they feel now as they look back on the event. Skim paragraphs 7, 8, and 13, noting where Wolff expresses his feelings and thoughts about the event. Try to distinguish between what he remembers thinking and feeling at the time and what he thinks and feels as he looks back on the event. What impression do you get of the young Wolff? What does the adult Wolff seem to think about his younger self?
I Think I Can, I Think I Can

I was silenced with confusion and in disbelief. “You know why he won it, don’t you?” my coach whispered to me in response to my blank facial expression. Still in shock, I slowly shook my head from left to right. He laughed and said, “I thought you wouldn’t. Well, he won it because he wanted it.”

With trembling hands no larger than maple leaves, I hesitantly handed over Mr. Pooh, my comfort bear to my father. He gently nudged me through the gates to walk across the bright red and bumpy surface, brightly marked with nine white, narrow lanes. As my bony legs shivered with fear, I stood on the starting line, only a couple of inches over four and a half feet, as the wind blew straight through the knots of my two freshly braided pigtails. Small, weak, and afraid, I looked to the left of me at the tall muscular girls, towering over me. They’re overwhelming size didn’t help my nonexistent confidence. My eyes began to water as they looked down, snickering and pointing at me. I looked ahead and suddenly, my lane that extended around the track looked a lot longer. The sun got a lot hotter. My stomach got a lot tighter. There is a big difference between being nervous and being afraid. I was afraid. The official raised his gun, when he said “on your marks” I closed my eyes. He said “get set”, I took one big gulp and inhaled deep. He said “go” and as the other girls galloped ahead in front of me, I just stood there with my eyes
closed. I ran off the track and into my mother’s already opened arms and wept “Mommy! They were too big! I couldn’t do it!” She sweetly smiled at me and replied “How do you know that honey, you didn’t even try.” Trying to race against those girls was out of the question. At that time in my mind, no matter how hard I trained, no matter how often I practiced, my weak, malnourished body would always be too scrawny to beat anyone larger than I was. I was easily intimidated and petrified of competition.

Only a week after the race which I shamefully walked away from, my track team traveled to Florida for one of the biggest meets that I would ever compete in. Athletes from all of the country, even Puerto Rico and Jamaica were in attendance. This was a meet for the best of the best, a group which at the time, I didn’t include myself with. Unified with their ferocious warm up suits, my team poured into the meet, proudly decked out in our team colors as a sea of purple and white. I wasn’t intimidating, or fierce, or unified with the confidence in which my team encompassed. Feeling excluded, I trailed behind, with my jean shorts, my t-shirt, and Mr. Pooh tightly clutched between my arms and my chest, which was beating a hundred miles per hour out of fear as we entered.

Minutes after arriving, I made eye contact with a boy at the starting line, getting ready to begin his race. He reminded me of myself in the prior week. Half the size of his competitors, he stood only about 5 feet tall, with two twigs as legs. Compared to his competitors he appeared small, weak, but surprisingly not afraid. He was just ready. I was afraid for him though, I thought “look how small he is, he’s gonna get beat so bad.” Being the young and naive child that I was, I just knew that because of his appearance, there was no way that he could win that race. Not only did I not think that he had a shot of winning, but I believed that there was no chance that he could even potentially remain anywhere near his other opponents throughout the race. I judged
all of this off of his twig like legs and emaciated body. I made eye contact with him and gave him “thumbs up.” This was to assure and comfort him, that although he was going to lose and embarrass himself in front of everyone, everything would be alright. He smiled and nodded his head at me, acknowledging my gesture, and then immediately focused his attention back on the official as he shot the gun. Like in my race, after the official shouted “go”, his competitors galloped off in front of him, as he trailed behind them. Slowly but surely, one by one, he passed them up. Within seconds, this little bolt of thunder exploded down the final stretch leaving everyone at least 50 feet behind. The crowd stood and watched him cross the finish line, mesmerized with astonishment. They were first quiet, and then roared and cheered for the first place finisher. Everyone roared except for me. I was still confused and in disbelief. “You know why he won it, don’t you?” my coach whispered to me in response to my blank facial expression. Still in shock, I slowly shook my head from left to right. He laughed and said, “I thought you wouldn’t. Well, he won it because he wanted it.”

Though now standing a few inches over five feet tall, and tone, developed leg muscles, I was still towered by my competitors around me on the starting line. I looked to the tall muscular Jamaicans to the right and left of me. I admired their shoes, but there was nothing else special about them. The girls double my height in front of me has a very full and bouncy ponytail, but I didn’t notice anything else particularly special about her either. I took a deep breath, and I was ready to go. After I admired their shoes and bouncy ponytails, I paid no mind to my competition. The only mind I paid was to the fact that I was going to win this race. As the official said “on your marks” I squinted my eyes filled with fire. When he said “get set” I got down on my knees and clawed my nails into the red ground. The gun went, signifying my explosion.
Coming down the straight, my eyes were watering. My heart felt like it was about to protrude out of my chest. My mouth was begging my tongue for some sort of moisture, though it had none to offer. I saw her right in front of me. I had to win, and I had to catch her. My eyes begin to roll to the back of my head as I opened my stride up and picked up my speed to attach myself to her side. Our heavy breathes went in unison as we came around the curb, stride by stride. The crowd's roars were split. Though my legs and arms were heavy as tree trunks, as I saw her dying out, weaker than I, I cut my arms through the wind, motioning my legs to go faster. Though her legs were double the size of mine, and though her waist began at my head, that meant nothing. Before, it would have meant everything. Before, I probably would of given up and begin to jog. That day however, I was determined to win. My drive and determination was what aided me in pulling away from her in the final fifty meters of my race. That drive determination put that shiny gold medal around my neck.

The frail, puny little boy surging with his twig legs down to the finish line, taught me that the key to success in this sport is only ten percent physical and ninety percent mental. I soon learned that this doesn't only apply to the sport of track and field. This is also the key to achieve most objectives in life. In order conquer a goal, the physical act of succeeding is over powered by the importance of the mindset to want to succeed.
Speed

I remember the murky black of the night, pierced only by the two dim headlights projecting ahead, and the surrounding trees reaching out towards me. The car trembled and shuddered around me as I gripped the steering wheel tighter. As I watched the speedometer climb higher and higher, cresting 90, then 100, 110, finally approaching 120, I felt the terror begin to build inside of me, twisting itself into a knot in my stomach, but I did not stop. Through my all my fear, I kept the pedal pressed to the floor; I felt as though to lift even a centimeter would be to admit defeat. I was going to get there, and fast, that was all that mattered.

I remember this moment quite vividly, I was barely sixteen having just received my license, and I was driving a car with more power than an inexperienced driver should be given. I also remember that I was too focused on the mere speed that I was attaining to consider the possible implications of what it was doing. I was unprepared for the potential deer to step out of the shadowed trees and into my path, or the possibility of red and blue lights racing to catch me. My only concern was the speed. And, when I think about it, this was my only consideration throughout much of my childhood: how quickly I could progress, how fast I could learn new concepts, but most of all, how quickly I could grow up. When I was in middle school I exclusively hung out with my older brother and his friends, who seemed to reach beyond the normal monotony of the sixth grade. Being around them made me feel older the lowly eleven years old that I was, but when I had to go to bed earlier than them, or leave because I was too young for the movie they were watching, I was right back to being a kid again. I remember
distinctly having to come downstairs to take my vitamins before bed, dressed in my pajamas with small racecar print, and walking right in front of them, feeling the embarrassment, my cheeks red, as I was confined to my bed and they remained awake. I hated being a kid, being small, being talked down to, being ignorant, and being confined to the rules of others. I felt like no one listened to me and no one understood me when I was young, because you haven’t been alive long enough to know any better.

So then the only logical step became to speed the process along, to act more grown up and to take on new responsibilities, and, step by step, year by year, I inched ever closer to adulthood. But the funny part is that once you get there -- you get your first job, or you are about to graduate high school and go off on your own for years on end -- your perspective changes, just as mine did. I no longer want to push the pedal to the floor and feel that horrifying excitement of sheer speed, because I look around and I can’t recognize where I am anymore.

I understand now why so many people will tell you when you are young, “You’re only a kid once, take time to enjoy it,” and I sometimes wish I had listened better. I have sectioned all my time away trying to look more well-rounded and learned, either taking the most challenging course loads at school, or simultaneously working 20 hours a week, that I find myself with few opportunities to simply savor the moment. At the beginning of this school year, my senior year, I remember coming home late one night, around 11 o’clock, the physical weight of my bookbag almost equal to the burden of homework I had yet to do, to find my mom waiting to give me an ear-full about spending too much time working. As I stood there listening to her berate me, her fierce eyes locked deadlocked with my own, I remember thinking to myself: how did I get here?
But there is no time to stop anymore, because no matter how late I go to bed I will still have to wake up a 5:30 a.m. and make my hour long journey to school again.

I find now that instead of speeding up all I want to do is hit the brakes, to rewind time and make myself stop to think: where do I really want to go? That is the difference between children and adults, kids will run blindly into just about anything, they have no direction and therefore it’s easy to get lost, but adults have an end goal and don’t have to go faster to make up for lost time. However, that is also what ties youth and adulthood together: no matter what you are always moving forward. I no longer crave to be older, but in many ways I am not as grown up as I would like to believe. I still get lost, and I still occasionally get in too much of a hurry for my own good, but I have made progress. I feel for the first time in my life I know what direction I want to go. I look toward my future time at college with eagerness, not because it places me closer to the workforce, but because I am intrigued at what else I can learn throughout that journey, and at thoroughly enjoying every opportunity that comes my way thereafter. I have my goal and I am going to keep driving to get there, just maybe at the speed limit this time.