

had become, seemed to be dying herself, before my eyes" (*Reader*, 49). Consider Gates's relationship with his mother as he portrays it in "Saved." How does his fear about her illness affect him? How does she influence his religious beliefs?

2. Although Gates "outgrows" the church he joined when he was 12, he vividly portrays in "Saved" the worship service at which he formally joined that church, even including the full text of the questions the minister asked him in the rite. Why do you think Gates included these questions in his memoir? What do his fervent response to them at the service and his subsequent behavior indicate about his emerging religious beliefs?

3. When Gates joins the Episcopal church, his father is pleased: "Daddy was delighted when I joined his church, but he didn't want to gloat for fear of jinxing things" (*Reader*, 65). How does this statement reflect the portrayal of Gates's relationship with his father in "Saved"?

4. Gates describes two significant aspects of his time at Peterkin, the Episcopal summer camp he attended as a teenager. First, he recalls the excitement of being in a stimulating and kind intellectual environment: "I felt I had died and gone to Heaven.... We drank ideas and ate controversy.... I feasted on the idea of learning about the world and being a citizen of it" (*Reader*, 62). And then, he recalls the ability of people at the racially integrated camp to maintain that community despite the racism that fueled hatred and riots: "But we overcame it: with difficulty, with perseverance, we pushed away the racial context and could interact not as allegories but as people. It felt like something of an achievement" (*Reader*, 64). How do these two elements of summer camp affect Gates's life back in Piedmont? How do the two places—Peterkin and Piedmont—interact in his religious development?

5. While *Colored People* ends with his departure from Piedmont to go to college, Gates at times includes comments in the book about later years. When he discusses prayer in "Saved," for instance, he says: "What I did feel was that God spoke His will to my heart if I asked what I should do in a given situation. I still ask, and, generally, I still hear. Sooner or later" (*Reader*, 54). Review the places in "Saved" where Gates refers to prayer. How does prayer seem to affect the course of his religious development?

Tobias Wolff

In *Matters of Life and Death*, his 1983 collection of new American short stories, Tobias Wolff explained the common characteristics of the authors he chose to bring together: "They write about fear of death, fear of life, the feelings that bring people together and force them apart, the costs of intimacy. They remind us that our house is built on sand. They are, every one of them, interested in what it means to be human."¹

This evocative description of other writers' work also represents the essential qualities of his own: two collections of short stories, a novella, a memoir (*This Boy's Life*, made into a film in 1993), and, most recently, an account of his experience as a lieutenant in the U. S. Army Special Services in Vietnam (*In Pharaoh's Army*, 1994). This is not to say that his vision of human life as driven by fear, or as a house built on sand, is essentially tragic. He evokes more laughter than tears, more an incredulous "Oh no, not again!" rather than King Lear's "Never, never, never, never, never!" And yet, although full of whimsy and surprise, with touches of humor that frequently catch the reader off guard, Wolff ultimately writes about serious business, "matters of life and death."

Often this entails the exploration of a loss of innocence, a crash course in reality. Complacency in particular always has its comeuppance. In "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke," for instance, a self-righteous man inadvertently saves his own soul precisely by losing the burden of his virtue: it is a relief in the end to be a sinner like everyone else. In "Sister" the lesson learned is more sad. A young woman realizes finally that there is never to be anyone who will protect her, no one else to reassure her "that everything was going to be all right."²

In other stories, it is the status quo itself that receives a challenge, as a character stands up in defiance of the way things are, in refusal of the powers that be. One thinks preeminently of Mary in the title story of the collection *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*. In a dramatic break with a life spent listening for what it was that other people wanted her to say, and hobbled by the particular caution that weighs down an academic community, she stuns a college audience by "winging it" without prepared notes,

by speaking her own mind at last—and in the end, by speaking nothing less than the prophetic word of the Lord.

This is not to say, however, that Wolff has any illusion about the frequency of true heroism. Indeed, many of his stories are about human betrayal, the denial of another person which he counts as “one of the original sins in the world.”³ In “Leviathan” a husband falls asleep when his wife is goaded into telling about the single moment in her life she is most proud of; in “Desert Breakdown, 1968” a young husband and father almost deserts his family for a fantasy of self-fulfillment, and then plans to return to them less as an act of loyalty than in a failure of nerve.

Wolff’s fiction is ultimately about the moral life, albeit as it is lived by people who would not be likely to think of their existence in such terms—soldiers, feisty teenagers, men on a hunting trip, estranged couples. Although he acknowledges having learned from a fellow Roman Catholic, Flannery O’Connor, how to move a story toward a moment of choice between good and evil, he also recognizes the great difference between her work and his own: “The choice O’Connor’s characters are presented with—or have forced on them—is an irrevocable one, a choice between salvation and damnation.” His work, by contrast, is mundane, his characters’ gestures more tentative, provisional, and ambiguous. Nor does he court the sublime or clothe his “matters of life and death” in the garments of mystery. Rather, “what saves people has as much to do with the ordinary responsibilities of family, adulthood, and work as it does these violent eruptions from heaven.”⁴

What also saves us is the imagination: our ability to conceive of the reality of someone other than ourselves, to transform negative experience into something positive, or even to lie. Wolff is especially interested in youthful liars, partly for autobiographical reasons (as he confesses in *This Boy’s Life*), partly because the misrepresentation of reality can also be a way to imagine a world that is more hospitable and more generous to our needs than the one that merely “is.” There is also a thin line between making up stories and storytelling, and in many of his works Wolff shows the office of liar and artist to be one and the same, with fiction sometimes telling a deeper truth than fact.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Wolff views fantasy as an unalloyed good or fiction as necessarily “true.” Some lies are destructive, others build community; they can be delusional as well as visionary. In “The Missing Person,” for instance, Father Leo suffers from a romantic notion of what his religious vocation means. He has always wanted to imagine himself a missionary laboring nobly within the “polar solitude” of Alaska, a man of God living “a life full of risk among people who needed him and were hungry for what he had to give.”⁵ In reality, he ends up the chaplain of a dubi-

ous convent that by all rights should close down, assisting a con-man fundraiser who has no scruples whatsoever about the truth: “He said that the convent helped orphans, lepers, Navahos, earthquake victims, even pandas and seals. There was no end to what he would do.”⁶ Leo is eventually deserted by his partner in a Las Vegas casino and pressed into service as a nightwatchman by a needy, manipulative woman desperate for company—even from the likes of him. The situation is ridiculous, not to mention highly irregular for a Roman Catholic priest. And yet in some real sense, Father Leo’s bedside vigil in Sandra’s hotel room, however comical, ends up being a realization of the missionary vocation he had always wanted. If only for one absurd night in Las Vegas, he has found someone who needs him and the little that he has to give. “‘It’s all right,’ Father Leo said, ‘I’m here.’”⁷

“The Rich Brother,” which concludes the 1985 collection *Back in the World*, picks up many of the themes found elsewhere in Wolff’s fiction, but it works them in a quite distinctive way. One reviewer called it a “small classic about family life in America, what’s left of it”⁸; Wolff himself says it is “as close to a fable as I’ve written.”⁹ It is, in fact, easy to see the story as an American retelling of the parable of the prodigal son, except that here there is no father to mediate between siblings; there are only “two brothers, Pete and Donald.” Wolff heightens the contrast between the two, making the one insufferable in his materialism, the other in his irresponsibility. Pete is the one who rescues, again and again, and Donald is the one who needs to be picked up and cared for, as one disaster follows quickly upon another.

The tension between such different souls finally reaches the breaking point when the gullible Donald “invests” the hundred dollars Pete has given him for food to buy a “share” in a phony Peruvian gold mine. This dumb giveaway of Pete’s hard-earned money is the last straw, a sign that Pete is forever stuck with a “prodigal” younger brother who is as much a squanderer as he himself is a man “who has finished his work and settled his debts, done all things meet and due” (*Reader*, 85). At the end of the story, he seems quite within his rights to drive away and leave his brother to fend for himself. And yet, how is he ever to answer his wife’s inevitable question, “Where is he? Where is your brother?” (*Reader*, 85).

For the reader who recognizes that this question is none other than the one God poses to Cain after his slaying of Abel (Genesis 4:9), the story assumes greater significance than a small classic about American family life. It becomes a quasi-biblical probing of tensions as old as Genesis, as venerable as the struggle between Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, or Joseph and his brothers. Furthermore, just as Old Testament Scripture shows God’s apparently perverse favor of the disadvantaged younger son over the traditionally favored elder, so too “The Rich Brother” raises questions about who

is last and who is first, who is wise and who is foolish. Or, as Pete wonders to himself, suddenly insecure about whether or not he has, in fact, won life's game by playing by the sensible rules, "What a joke if there really was a blessing to be had, and the blessing didn't come to the one who deserved it, the one who did all the work, but to the other" (*Reader*, 83-84).

Pondering this "joke," one recalls the "injustice" of those parables in which the last become first and the first last. Wolff doesn't force a conversion on his version of the prodigal's elder brother. But in the story's final paragraph it is clear that Pete's car is slowing down, getting ready for the U-turn that will turn him back to someone wearing a "Try God" T-shirt inside out.

Peter S. Hawkins

Notes

1. Tobias Wolff, ed., *Matters of Life and Death: New American Stories* (Green Harbor, Mass: Wampeter Press, 1983), xi.
2. Tobias Wolff, "Sister," *Back in the World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 91.
3. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, "An Interview With Tobias Wolff," *Contemporary Literature* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 15.
4. Lyons and Oliver, "An Interview with Tobias Wolff," 12.
5. "The Missing Person," *Back in the World*, 19.
6. "The Missing Person," 28.
7. "The Missing Person," 54.
8. Russell Banks, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* (October 20, 1985), cited by Marilyn C. Wesley, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 130 (Detroit, Washington, D.C., London: Gale Research, 1993), 321.
9. Lyons and Oliver, 12.

The Rich Brother

There were two brothers, Pete and Donald.

Pete, the older brother, was in real estate. He and his wife had a Century 21 franchise in Santa Cruz. Pete worked hard and made a lot of money, but not any more than he thought he deserved. He had two daughters, a sailboat, a house from which he could see a thin slice of the ocean, and friends doing well enough in their own lives not to wish bad luck on him. Donald, the younger brother, was still single. He lived alone, painted houses when he found the work, and got deeper in debt to Pete when he didn't.

No one would have taken them for brothers. Where Pete was stout and hearty and at home in the world, Donald was bony, grave, and obsessed with the fate of his soul. Over the years Donald had worn the images of two different Perfect Masters around his neck. Out of devotion to the second of these he entered an ashram in Berkeley, where he nearly died of undiagnosed hepatitis. By the time Pete finished paying the medical bills Donald had become a Christian. He drifted from church to church, then joined a pentecostal community that met somewhere in the Mission District to sing in tongues and swap prophecies.

Pete couldn't make sense of it. Their parents were both dead, but while they were alive neither of them had found it necessary to believe in anything. They managed to be decent people without making fools of themselves, and Pete had the same ambition. He thought that the whole thing was an excuse for Donald to take himself seriously.

The trouble was that Donald couldn't content himself with worrying about his own soul. He had to worry about everyone else's, and especially Pete's. He handed down his judgments in ways that he seemed to consider subtle: through significant silence, innuendo, looks of mild despair that said, *Brother, what have you come to?* What Pete had come to, as far as he could tell, was prosperity. That was the real issue between them. Pete prospered and Donald did not prosper.

. . .

At the age of forty Pete took up sky diving. He made his first jump with two friends who'd started only a few months earlier and were already doing stunts. They were both coked to the gills when they jumped but Pete wanted to do it straight, at least the first time, and he was glad that he did. He would never have used the word *mystical*, but that was how Pete felt about the experience. Later he made the mistake of trying to describe it to Donald, who kept asking how much it cost and then acted appalled when Pete told him.

"At least I'm trying something new," Pete said. "At least I'm breaking the pattern."

Not long after that conversation Donald also broke the pattern, by going to live on a farm outside of Paso Robles. The farm was owned by several members of Donald's community, who had bought it and moved there with the idea of forming a family of faith. That was how Donald explained it in the first letter he sent. Every week Pete heard how happy Donald was, how "in the Lord." He told Pete that he was praying for him, he and the rest of Pete's brothers and sisters on the farm.

"I only have one brother," Pete wanted to answer, "and that's enough." But he kept this thought to himself.

In November the letters stopped. Pete didn't worry about this at first, but when he called Donald at Thanksgiving Donald was grim. He tried to sound upbeat but he didn't try hard enough to make it convincing. "Now listen," Pete said, "you don't have to stay in that place if you don't want to."

"I'll be all right," Donald answered.

"That's not the point. Being all right is not the point. If you don't like what's going on up there, then get out."

"I'm all right," Donald said again, more firmly. "I'm doing fine."

But he called Pete a week later and said that he was quitting the farm. When Pete asked him where he intended to go, Donald admitted that he had no plan. His car had been repossessed just before he left the city, and he was flat broke.

"I guess you'll have to stay with us," Pete said.

Donald put up a show of resistance. Then he gave in. "Just until I get my feet on the ground," he said.

"Right," Pete said. "Check out your options." He told Donald he'd send him money for a bus ticket, but as they were about to hang up Pete changed his mind. He knew that Donald would try hitchhiking to save the fare. Pete didn't want him out on the road all alone where some head case could pick him up, where anything could happen to him.

"Better yet," he said, "I'll come and get you."

"You don't have to do that. I didn't expect you to do that," Donald said. He added, "It's a pretty long drive."

"Just tell me how to get there."

But Donald wouldn't give him directions. He said that the farm was too depressing, that Pete wouldn't like it. Instead, he insisted on meeting Pete at a service station called Jonathan's Mechanical Emporium.

"You must be kidding," Pete said.

"It's close to the highway," Donald said. "I didn't name it."

"That's one for the collection," Pete said.

The day before he left to bring Donald home, Pete received a letter from a man who described himself as "head of household" at the farm where Donald had been living. From this letter Pete learned that Donald had not quit the farm, but had been asked to leave. The letter was written on the back of a mimeographed survey form asking people to record their response to a ceremony of some kind. The last question said:

What did you feel during the liturgy?

- a) Being
- b) Becoming
- c) Being and Becoming
- d) None of the Above
- e) All of the Above

Pete tried to forget the letter. But of course he couldn't. Each time he thought of it he felt crowded and breathless, a feeling that came over him again when he drove into the service station and saw Donald sitting against a wall with his head on his knees. It was late afternoon. A paper cup tumbled slowly past Donald's feet, pushed by the damp wind.

Pete honked and Donald raised his head. He smiled at Pete, then stood and stretched. His arms were long and thin and white. He wore a red bandanna across his forehead, a T-shirt with a couple of words on the front. Pete couldn't read them because the letters were inverted.

"Grow up," Pete yelled. "Get a Mercedes."

Donald came up to the window. He bent down and said, "Thanks for coming. You must be totally whipped."

"I'll make it," Pete pointed at Donald's T-shirt. "What's that supposed to say?"

Donald looked down at his shirt front. "Try God. I guess I put it on backwards. Pete, could I borrow a couple of dollars? I owe these people for coffee and sandwiches."

Pete took five twenties from his wallet and held them out the window.

Donald stepped back as if horrified. "I don't need that much."

"I can't keep track of all these nickels and dimes," Pete said. "Just pay

me back when your ship comes in." He waved the bills impatiently. "Go on—take it."

"Only for now." Donald took the money and went into the service station office. He came out carrying two orange sodas, one of which he gave to Pete as he got into the car. "My treat," he said.

"No bags?"

"Wow, thanks for reminding me," Donald said. He balanced his drink on the dashboard, but the slight rocking of the car as he got out tipped it onto the passenger's seat, where half its contents foamed over before Pete could snatch it up again. Donald looked on while Pete held the bottle out the window, soda running down his fingers.

"Wipe it up," Pete told him. "Quick!"

"With what?"

Pete stared at Donald. "That shirt. Use the shirt."

Donald pulled a long face but did as he was told, his pale skin puckering against the wind.

"Great, just great," Pete said. "We haven't even left the gas station yet."

Afterwards, on the highway, Donald said, "This is a new car, isn't it?"

"Yes. This is a new car."

"Is that why you're so upset about the seat?"

"Forget it, okay? Let's just forget about it."

"I said I was sorry."

Pete said, "I just wish you'd be more careful. These seats are made of leather. That stain won't come out, not to mention the smell. I don't see why I can't have leather seats that smell like leather instead of orange pop."

"What was wrong with the other car?"

Pete glanced over at Donald. Donald had raised the hood of the blue sweatshirt he'd put on. The peaked hood above his gaunt, watchful face gave him the look of an inquisitor.

"There wasn't anything wrong with it," Pete said. "I just happened to like this one better."

Donald nodded.

There was a long silence between them as Pete drove on and the day darkened toward evening. On either side of the road lay stubble-covered fields. A line of low hills ran along the horizon, topped here and there with trees black against the grey sky. In the approaching line of cars a driver turned on his headlights. Pete did the same.

"So what happened?" he asked. "Farm life not your bag?"

Donald took some time to answer, and at last he said, simply, "It was my fault."

"What was your fault?"

"The whole thing. Don't play dumb, Pete. I know they wrote to you." Donald looked at Pete, then stared out the windshield again.

"I'm not playing dumb."

Donald shrugged.

"All I really know is they asked you to leave," Pete went on. "I don't know any of the particulars."

"I blew it," Donald said. "Believe me, you don't want to hear the gory details."

"Sure I do," Pete said. He added, "Everybody likes the gory details."

"You mean everybody likes to hear how someone else messed up."

"Right," Pete said. "That's the way it is here on Spaceship Earth."

Donald bent one knee onto the front seat and leaned against the door so that he was facing Pete instead of the windshield. Pete was aware of Donald's scrutiny. He waited. Night was coming on in a rush now, filling the hollows of the land. Donald's long cheeks and deep-set eyes were dark with shadow. His brow was white. "Do you ever dream about me?" Donald asked.

"Do I ever dream about you? What kind of a question is that? Of course I don't dream about you," Pete said, untruthfully.

"What do you dream about?"

"Sex and money. Mostly money. A nightmare is when I dream I don't have any."

"You're just making that up," Donald said.

Pete smiled.

"Sometimes I wake up at night," Donald went on, "and I can tell you're dreaming about me."

"We were talking about the farm," Pete said. "Let's finish that conversation and then we can talk about our various out-of-body experiences and the interesting things we did during previous incarnations."

For a moment Donald looked like a grinning skull; then he turned serious again. "There's not that much to tell," he said. "I just didn't do anything right."

"That's a little vague," Pete said.

"Well, like the groceries. Whenever it was my turn to get the groceries I'd blow it somehow. I'd bring the groceries home and half of them would be missing, or I'd have all the wrong things, the wrong kind of flour or the wrong kind of chocolate or whatever. One time I gave them away. It's not funny, Pete."

Pete said, "Who did you give the groceries to?"

"Just some people I picked up on the way home. Some fieldworkers. They had about eight kids with them and they didn't even speak English—just nodded their heads. Still, I shouldn't have given away the groceries. Not all

of them, anyway. I really learned my lesson about that. You have to be practical. You have to be fair to yourself." Donald leaned forward, and Pete could sense his excitement. "There's nothing actually wrong with being in business," he said. "As long as you're fair to other people you can still be fair to yourself. I'm thinking of going into business, Pete."

"We'll talk about it," Pete said. "So, that's the story? There isn't any more to it than that?"

"What did they tell you?" Donald asked.

"Nothing."

"They must have told you something."

Pete shook his head.

"They didn't tell you about the fire?" When Pete shook his head again Donald regarded him for a time, then said, "I don't know. It was stupid. I just completely lost it." He folded his arms across his chest and slumped back into the corner. "Everybody had to take turns cooking dinner. I usually did tuna casserole or spaghetti with garlic bread. But this one night I thought I'd do something different, something really interesting." Donald looked sharply at Pete. "It's all a big laugh to you, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry," Pete said.

"You don't know when to quit. You just keep hitting away."

"Tell me about the fire, Donald."

Donald kept watching him. "You have this compulsion to make me look foolish."

"Come off it, Donald. Don't make a big thing out of this."

"I know why you do it. It's because you don't have any purpose in life. You're afraid to relate to people who do, so you make fun of them."

"Relate," Pete said softly.

"You're basically a very frightened individual," Donald said. "Very threatened. You've always been like that. Do you remember when you used to try to kill me?"

"I don't have any compulsion to make you look foolish, Donald—you do it yourself. You're doing it right now."

"You can't tell me you don't remember," Donald said. "It was after my operation. You remember that."

"Sort of," Pete shrugged. "Not really."

"Oh yes," Donald said. "Do you want to see the scar?"

"I remember you had an operation. I don't remember the specifics, that's all. And I sure as hell don't remember trying to kill you."

"Oh yes," Donald repeated, maddeningly. "You bet your life you did. All the time. The thing was, I couldn't have anything happen to me where they sewed me up because then my intestines would come apart again and poison

me. That was a big issue, Pete. Mom was always in a state about me climbing trees and so on. And you used to hit me there every chance you got."

"Mom was in a state every time you burped," Pete said. "I don't know. Maybe I bumped into you accidentally once or twice. I never did it deliberately."

"Every chance you got," Donald said. "Like when the folks went out at night and left you to baby-sit. I'd hear them say good night, and then I'd hear the car start up, and when they were gone I'd lie there and listen. After a while I would hear you coming down the hall, and I would close my eyes and pretend to be asleep. There were nights when you would stand outside the door, just stand there, and then go away again. But most nights you'd open the door and I would hear you in the room with me, breathing. You'd come over and sit next to me on the bed—you remember, Pete, you have to—you'd sit next to me on the bed and pull the sheets back. If I was on my stomach you'd roll me over. Then you would lift up my pajama shirt and start hitting me on my stitches. You'd hit me as hard as you could, over and over. And I would just keep lying there with my eyes closed. I was afraid that you'd get mad if you knew I was awake. Is that strange or what? I was afraid that you'd get mad if you found out that I knew you were trying to kill me." Donald laughed. "Come on, you can't tell me you don't remember that."

"It might have happened once or twice. Kids do those things. I can't get all excited about something I maybe did twenty-five years ago."

"No maybe about it. You did it."

Pete said, "You're wearing me out with this stuff. We've got a long drive ahead of us and if you don't back off pretty soon we aren't going to make it. You aren't, anyway."

Donald turned away.

"I'm doing my best," Pete said. The self-pity in his own voice made the words sound like a lie. But they weren't a lie! He was doing his best.

The car topped a rise. In the distance Pete saw a cluster of lights that blinked out when he started downhill. There was no moon. The sky was low and black.

"Come to think of it," Pete said, "I did have a dream about you the other night." Then he added, impatiently, as if Donald were badgering him, "A couple of other nights too. I'm getting hungry," he said.

"The same dream?"

"Different dreams. I only remember one of them well. There was something wrong with me, and you were helping out. Taking care of me. Just the two of us. I don't know where everyone else was supposed to be."

Pete left it at that. He didn't tell Donald that in this dream he was blind.

"I wonder if that was when I woke up," Donald said. He added, "I'm sorry I got into that thing about my scar. I keep trying to forget it but I guess I never will. Not really. It was pretty strange, having someone around all the time who wanted to get rid of me."

"Kid stuff," Pete said. "Ancient history."

They ate dinner at a Denny's on the other side of King City. As Pete was paying the check he heard a man behind him say, "Excuse me, but I wonder if I might ask which way you're going?" and Donald answer, "Santa Cruz."

"Perfect," the man said.

Pete could see him in the fish-eye mirror above the cash register: a red blazer with some kind of crest on the pocket, little black moustache, glossy black hair combed down on his forehead like a Roman emperor's. A rug, Pete thought. Definitely a rug.

Pete got his change and turned. "Why is that perfect?" he asked.

The man looked at Pete. He had a soft ruddy face that was doing its best to express pleasant surprise, as if this new wrinkle were all he could have wished for, but the eyes behind the aviator glasses showed signs of regret. His lips were moist and shiny. "I take it you're together," he said.

"You got it," Pete told him.

"All the better, then," the man went on. "It so happens I'm going to Santa Cruz myself. Had a spot of car trouble down the road. The old Caddy let me down."

"What kind of trouble?" Pete asked.

"Engine trouble," the man said. "I'm afraid it's a bit urgent. My daughter is sick. Urgently sick. I've got a telegram here." He patted the breast pocket of his blazer.

Pete grinned. Amazing, he thought, the old sick daughter ploy, but before he could say anything Donald got into the act again. "No problem," Donald said. "We've got tons of room."

"Not that much room," Pete said.

Donald nodded. "I'll put my things in the trunk."

"The trunk's full," Pete told him.

"It so happens I'm traveling light," the man said. "This leg of the trip anyway. In fact I don't have any luggage at this particular time."

Pete said, "Left it in the old Caddy, did you?"

"Exactly," the man said.

"No problem," Donald repeated. He walked outside and the man went with him. Together they strolled across the parking lot, Pete following at a distance. When they reached Pete's car Donald raised his face to the sky, and the man did the same. They stood there looking up. "Dark night," Donald said.

"Stygian," the man said.

Pete still had it in mind to brush him off, but he didn't do that. Instead he unlocked the door for him. He wanted to see what would happen. It was an adventure, but not a dangerous adventure. The man might steal Pete's ashtrays but he wouldn't kill him. If Pete got killed on the road it would be by some spiritual person in a sweatsuit, someone with his eyes on the far horizon and a wet Try God T-shirt in his duffel bag.

As soon as they left the parking lot the man lit a cigar. He blew a cloud of smoke over Pete's shoulder and sighed with pleasure. "Put it out," Pete told him.

"Of course," the man said. Pete looked into the rearview mirror and saw the man take another long puff before dropping the cigar out the window. "Forgive me," he said. "I should have asked. Name's Webster, by the way."

Donald turned and looked back at him. "First name or last?"

The man hesitated. "Last," he said finally.

"I know a Webster," Donald said. "Mick Webster."

"There are many of us," Webster said.

"Big fellow, wooden leg," Pete said.

Donald gave Pete a look.

Webster shook his head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Still, I wouldn't deny the connection. Might be one of the cousinry."

"What's your daughter got?" Pete asked.

"That isn't clear," Webster answered. "It appears to be a female complaint of some nature. Then again it may be tropical." He was quiet for a moment, and added: "If indeed it is tropical, I will have to assume some of the blame myself. It was my own vaulting ambition that first led us to the tropics and kept us in the tropics all those many years, exposed to every evil. Truly I have much to answer for. I left my wife there."

Donald said quietly, "You mean she died?"

"I buried her with these hands. The earth will be repaid, gold for gold."

"Which tropics?" Pete asked.

"The tropics of Peru."

"What part of Peru are they in?"

"The lowlands," Webster said.

Pete nodded. "What's it like down there?"

"Another world," Webster said. His tone was sepulchral. "A world better imagined than described."

"Far out," Pete said.

The three men rode in silence for a time. A line of trucks went past in the other direction, trailers festooned with running lights, engines roaring.

"Yes," Webster said at last, "I have much to answer for."

Pete smiled at Donald, but Donald had turned in his seat again and was gazing at Webster. "I'm sorry about your wife," Donald said.

"What did she die of?" Pete asked.

"A wasting illness," Webster said. "The doctors have no name for it, but I do." He leaned forward and said, fiercely, "*Greed*." Then he slumped back against his seat. "My greed, not hers. She wanted no part of it."

Pete bit his lip. Webster was a find and Pete didn't want to scare him off by hooting at him. In a voice low and innocent of knowingness, he asked, "What took you there?"

"It's difficult for me to talk about."

✓ "Try," Pete told him.

"A cigar would make it easier."

Donald turned to Pete and said, "It's okay with me."

"All right," Pete said. "Go ahead. Just keep the window rolled down."

"Much obliged." A match flared. There were eager sucking sounds.

"Let's hear it," Pete said.

"I am by training an engineer," Webster began. "My work has exposed me to all but one of the continents, to desert and alp and forest, to every terrain and season of the earth. Some years ago I was hired by the Peruvian government to search for tungsten in the tropics. My wife and daughter accompanied me. We were the only white people for a thousand miles in any direction, and we had no choice but to live as the Indians lived—to share their food and drink and even their culture."

Pete said, "You knew the lingo, did you?"

"We picked it up." The ember of the cigar bobbed up and down. "We were used to learning as necessity decreed. At any rate, it became evident after a couple of years that there was no tungsten to be found. My wife had fallen ill and was pleading to be taken home. But I was deaf to her pleas, because by then I was on the trail of another metal—a metal far more valuable than tungsten."

"Let me guess," Pete said. "Gold?"

Donald looked at Pete, then back at Webster.

"Gold," Webster said. "A vein of gold greater than the Mother Lode itself. After I found the first traces of it nothing could tear me away from my search—not the sickness of my wife nor anything else. I was determined to uncover the vein, and so I did—but not before I laid my wife to rest. As I say, the earth will be repaid."

Webster was quiet. Then he said, "But life must go on. In the years since my wife's death I have been making the arrangements necessary to open the

mine. I could have done it immediately, of course, enriching myself beyond measure, but I knew what that would mean—the exploitation of our beloved Indians, the brutal destruction of their environment. I felt I had too much to atone for already." Webster paused, and when he spoke again his voice was dull and rushed, as if he had used up all the interest he had in his own words. "Instead I drew up a program for returning the bulk of the wealth to the Indians themselves. A kind of trust fund. The interest alone will allow them to secure their ancient lands and rights in perpetuity. At the same time, our investors will be rewarded a thousandfold. Two-thousandfold. Everyone will prosper together."

"That's great," Donald said. "That's the way it ought to be."

Pete said, "I'm willing to bet that you just happen to have a few shares left. Am I right?"

Webster made no reply.

"Well?" Pete knew that Webster was on to him now, but he didn't care. The story had bored him. He'd expected something different, something original, and Webster had let him down. He hadn't even tried. Pete felt sour and stale. His eyes burned from cigar smoke and the high beams of road-hogging truckers. "Douse the stogie," he said to Webster. "I told you to keep the window down."

"Got a little nippy back here."

Donald said, "Hey, Pete. Lighten up."

"Douse it!"

Webster sighed. He got rid of the cigar.

"I'm a wreck," Pete said to Donald. "You want to drive for a while?"

Donald nodded.

Pete pulled over and they changed places.

Webster kept his counsel in the back seat. Donald hummed while he drove, until Pete told him to stop. Then everything was quiet.

Donald was humming again when Pete woke up. Pete stared sullenly at the road, at the white lines sliding past the car. After a few moments of this he turned and said, "How long have I been out?"

Donald glanced at him. "Twenty, twenty-five minutes."

Pete looked behind him and saw that Webster was gone. "Where's our friend?"

"You just missed him. He got out in Soledad. He told me to say thanks and good-bye."

"Soledad? What about his sick daughter? How did he explain her away?" Pete leaned over the seat. Both ashtrays were still in place. Floor mats. Door handles.

"He has a brother living there. He's going to borrow a car from him and drive the rest of the way in the morning."

"I'll bet his brother's living there," Pete said. "Doing fifty concurrent life sentences. His brother and his sister and his mom and his dad."

"I kind of liked him," Donald said.

"I'm sure you did," Pete said wearily.

"He was interesting. He'd been places."

"His cigars had been places, I'll give you that."

"Come on, Pete."

"Come on yourself. What a phony."

"You don't know that."

"Sure I do."

"How? How do you know?"

Pete stretched. "Brother, there are some things you're just born knowing. What's the gas situation?"

"We're a little low."

"Then why didn't you get some more?"

"I wish you wouldn't snap at me like that," Donald said.

"Then why don't you use your head? What if we run out?"

"We'll make it," Donald said. "I'm pretty sure we've got enough to make it. You didn't have to be so rude to him," Donald added.

Pete took a deep breath. "I don't feel like running out of gas tonight, okay?"

Donald pulled in at the next station they came to and filled the tank while Pete went to the men's room. When Pete came back, Donald was sitting in the passenger's seat. The attendant came up to the driver's window as Pete got in behind the wheel. He bent down and said, "Twelve fifty-five."

"You heard the man," Pete said to Donald.

Donald looked straight ahead. He didn't move.

"Cough up," Pete said. "This trip's on you."

Donald said, softly, "I can't."

"Sure you can. Break out that wad."

Donald glanced up at the attendant, then at Pete. "Please," he said. "Pete, I don't have it anymore."

Pete took this in. He nodded, and paid the attendant.

Donald began to speak when they left the station but Pete cut him off. He said, "I don't want to hear from you right now. You just keep quiet or I swear to God I won't be responsible."

They left the fields and entered a tunnel of tall trees. The trees went on and on. "Let me get this straight," Pete said at last. "You don't have the money I gave you."

"You treated him like a bug or something," Donald said.

"You don't have the money," Pete said again.

Donald shook his head.

"Since I bought dinner, and since we didn't stop anywhere in between, I assume you gave it to Webster. Is that right? Is that what you did with it?"

"Yes."

Pete looked at Donald. His face was dark under the hood but he still managed to convey a sense of remove, as if none of this had anything to do with him.

"Why?" Pete asked. "Why did you give it to him?" When Donald didn't answer, Pete said, "A hundred dollars. Gone. Just like that. I *worked* for that money, Donald."

"I know, I know," Donald said.

"You don't know! How could you? You get money by holding out your hand."

"I work too," Donald said.

"You work too. Don't kid yourself, brother."

Donald leaned toward Pete, about to say something but Pete cut him off again.

"You're not the only one on the payroll, Donald. I don't think you understand that. I have a family."

"Pete, I'll pay you back."

"Like hell you will. A hundred dollars!" Pete hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "Just because you think I hurt some goofball's feelings. Jesus, Donald."

"That's not the reason," Donald said. "And I didn't just *give* him the money."

"What do you call it, then? What do you call what you did?"

"I *invested* it. I wanted a share, Pete." When Pete looked over at him Donald nodded and said again, "I wanted a share."

Pete said, "I take it you're referring to the gold mine in Peru."

"Yes," Donald said.

"You believe that such a gold mine exists?"

Donald looked at Pete, and Pete could see him just beginning to catch on. "You'll believe anything," Pete said. "Won't you? You really will believe anything at all."

"I'm sorry," Donald said, and turned away.

Pete drove on between the trees and considered the truth of what he had just said—that Donald would believe anything at all. And it came to him that it would be just like this unfair life for Donald to come out ahead in the end, by believing in some outrageous promise that would turn out to be true and that he, Pete, would reject out of hand because he was too wised up to

listen to anybody's pitch anymore except for laughs. What a joke. What a joke if there really was a blessing to be had, and the blessing didn't come to the one who deserved it, the one who did all the work, but to the other.

And as if this had already happened Pete felt a shadow move upon him, darkening his thoughts. After a time he said, "I can see where all this is going, Donald."

"I'll pay you back," Donald said.

"No," Pete said. "You won't pay me back. You can't. You don't know how. All you've ever done is take. All your life."

Donald shook his head.

"I see exactly where this is going," Pete went on. "You can't work, you can't take care of yourself, you believe anything anyone tells you. I'm stuck with you, aren't I?" He looked over at Donald. "I've got you on my hands for good."

Donald pressed his fingers against the dashboard as if to brace himself. "I'll get out," he said.

Pete kept driving.

"Let me out," Donald said. "I mean it, Pete."

"Do you?"

Donald hesitated. "Yes," he said.

"Be sure," Pete told him. "This is it. This is for keeps."

"I mean it."

"All right. You made the choice." Pete braked the car sharply and swung it to the shoulder of the road. He turned off the engine and got out. Trees loomed on both sides, shutting out the sky. The air was cold and musty. Pete took Donald's duffel bag from the back seat and set it down behind the car. He stood there, facing Donald in the red glow of the taillights. "It's better this way," Pete said.

Donald just looked at him.

"Better for you," Pete said.

Donald hugged himself. He was shaking. "You don't have to say all that," he told Pete. "I don't blame you."

"Blame me? What the hell are you talking about? Blame me for what?"

"For anything," Donald said.

"I want to know what you mean by blame me."

"Nothing. Nothing, Pete. You'd better get going. God bless you."

"That's it," Pete said. He dropped to one knee, searching the packed dirt with his hands. He didn't know what he was looking for; his hands would know when they found it.

Donald touched Pete's shoulder. "You'd better go," he said.

Somewhere in the trees Pete heard a branch snap. He stood up. He looked

at Donald, then went back to the car and drove away. He drove fast, hunched over the wheel, conscious of the way he was hunched and the shallowness of his breathing, refusing to look at the mirror above his head until there was nothing behind him but darkness.

Then he said, "A hundred dollars," as if there were someone to hear.

The trees gave way to fields. Metal fences ran beside the road, plastered with windblown scraps of paper. Tule fog hung above the ditches, spilling into the road, dimming the ghostly halogen lights that burned in the yards of the farms Pete passed. The fog left beads of water rolling up the windshield.

Pete rummaged among his cassettes. He found Pachelbel's Canon and pushed it into the tape deck. When the violins began to play he leaned back and assumed an attentive expression as if he were really listening to them. He smiled to himself like a man at liberty to enjoy music, a man who has finished his work and settled his debts, done all things meet and due.

And in this way, smiling, nodding to the music, he went another mile or so and pretended that he was not already slowing down, that he was not going to turn back, that he would be able to drive on like this, alone, and have the right answer when his wife stood before him in the doorway of his home and asked, Where is he? Where is your brother?

From *Back in the World* by Tobias Wolff. Copyright © 1981 by Tobias Wolff.
Reprinted by permission of International Creative Management, Inc.

Guides to Reflection

1. Discuss the clash of character types Wolff is constructing in his contrast between these two brothers.
2. Pete denies that he ever dreams about Donald, but only about "Sex and money. Mostly money" (*Reader*, 75). And yet we later learn that Pete, in fact, did dream about being blind and being taken care of by Donald. What might be the significance of this? Is it in any way related to the "ancient history" the two brothers share, the flip side of Pete's trying to hurt, perhaps even kill, Donald when the two were boys?
3. Webster is one of Wolff's more obvious liars. How does he function in this story?

Carol Bly

4. A biblically literate reader will recognize the way in which Wolff tells his story against the background of Scripture: Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, the two brothers of the parable in Luke 15, as well as Mary and Martha. How does the Bible enrich your reading of this story? Is it necessary to have these biblical subtexts in mind to enjoy or understand "The Rich Brother"?

5. In speaking about this story with interviewers, Tobias Wolff was willing to consider Pete's decision to return to Donald as "an intervention of grace"; but he also insisted that instead of being some kind of violent eruption out of heaven, it was "a natural psychological event" in Pete's life.¹ Discuss these distinctions between the spiritual and the psychological. How do they correspond to your own experience of grace?

6. Discuss Pete's conjecture: "What a joke if there really was a blessing to be had, and the blessing didn't come to the one who deserved it, the one who did all the work, but to the other" (*Reader*, 83-84).

Notes

1. Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, "An Interview With Tobias Wolff," *Contemporary Literature* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 12-13.

Carol Bly is a writer with a moral passion: she wants to reorient modern literature, to convince contemporary writers of short stories and novels that their work is crippled by a lack of ethical vision. Bly's urgent, challenging voice first found a vehicle in the essay form. Her "Letters from the Country" appeared in *Minnesota Monthly* throughout the 1970s and were collected in a book by the same name and published by Harper and Row in 1981. In these essays, Bly reported on rural life from her home in western Minnesota, often celebrating the natural beauty of Lac Qui Parle County, while also lamenting or lambasting the narrow blindness of its political, social, and religious life.

For the past 15 years, Bly's primary form of expression has been the short story rather than the essay, which she says is "3000% easier to write than a short story."¹ She has, however, augmented her two collections of stories, *Backbone* (1985) and *The Tomcat's Wife* (1991), with an extended essay entitled "Bad Government and Silly Literature" (1986) and a book on how to write stories titled *The Passionate, Accurate Story: Making Your Heart's Truth into Literature* (1990). Bly has also co-authored *Soil and Survival: Land Stewardship and the Future of American Agriculture* (1986) and edited *Everybody's Story: Writing by Older Minnesotans* (1987). Many of Bly's stories from this period are set in northern Minnesota, and some have been adapted for an American Playhouse film, *Rachel River*.

Bly's desire to reform contemporary writing comes from her conviction that "the world desperately needs public-minded literature"² in the tradition of Leo Tolstoy and Albert Camus. She believes that such a literature would bring an "ethical awakening"³ to American culture, whose government she sees as too often fostering "appalling foreign and domestic policy."⁴ Decrying the predominantly aesthetic interest of most writers now, Bly condemns "silvery little stories made up of shards of experience, quickly picked up, experienced by the reader the way a jogger sees the glitter of mica in clay."⁵ She says writers of such stories focus on small details—"grass from the mower blade, oil spitting in a pan, congealed eggs on one's plate"⁶—and give scant notice to moral issues in the characters' lives. At best, the stories