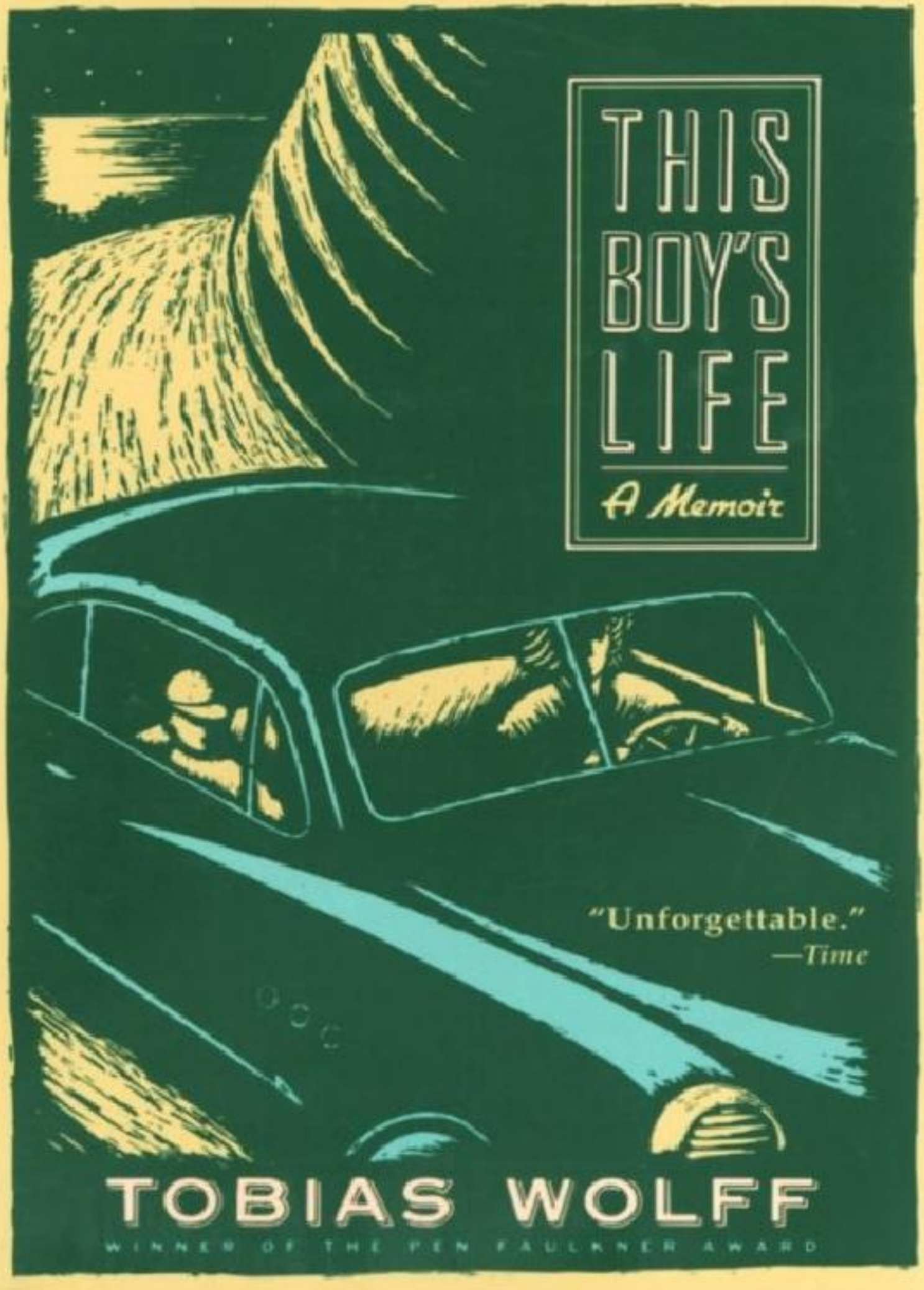
THIS BOY'S LIFE
A Memoir
"Unforgettable."
—Time
TOBIAS WOLFF
WINNER OF THE PEN FAULKNER AWARD

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# THIS BOY'S LIFE

*A Memoir*

Tobias Wolff

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*For Michael and Patrick*

I am especially grateful to my wife, Catherine, for her many careful readings of this book. I would also like to thank Rosemary Hutchins, Geoffrey Wolff, Gary Fisketjon, and Amanda Urban for their help and support. I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I've allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story.

My first stepfather used to say that what I didn't know would fill a book. Well, here it is.

*“The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is, no one has yet discovered. ”*

*OSCAR WILDE*

*“He who fears corruption fears life. ”*

*SAUL ALINSKY*

# Fortune

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

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

By the time we got there, quite a few people were standing along the cliff where the truck went over. It had smashed through the guardrails and fallen hundreds of feet through empty space to the river below, where it lay on its back among the boulders. It looked pitifully small. A stream of thick black smoke rose from the cab, feathering out in the wind. My mother asked whether anyone had gone to report the accident. Someone had. We stood with the others at the cliff’s edge. Nobody spoke. My mother put her arm around my shoulder.

For the rest of the day she kept looking over at me, touching me, brushing back my hair. I saw that the time was right to make a play for souvenirs. I knew she had no money for them, and I had tried not to ask, but now that her guard was down I couldn’t help myself. When we pulled out of Grand Junction I owned a beaded Indian belt, beaded moccasins, and a bronze horse with a removable, tooled-leather saddle.

IT WAS 1955 and we were driving from Florida to Utah, to get away from a man my mother was afraid of and to get rich on uranium. We were going to change our luck.

We’d left Sarasota in the dead of summer, right after my tenth birthday, and headed West under low flickering skies that turned black and exploded and cleared just long enough to leave the air gauzy with steam. We drove through Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, stopping to cool the engine in towns where people moved with arthritic slowness and spoke in thick, strangled tongues. Idlers with rotten teeth surrounded the car to press peanuts on the pretty Yankee lady and her little boy, arguing among themselves about shortcuts. Women looked up from their flower beds as we drove past, or watched us from their porches, sometimes impassively, sometimes giving us a nod and a flutter of their fans.

Every couple of hours the Nash Rambler boiled over. My mother kept

digging into her little grubstake but no mechanic could fix it. All we could do was wait for it to cool, then drive on until it boiled over again. (My mother came to hate this machine so much that not long after we got to Utah she gave it away to a woman she met in a cafeteria.) At night we slept in boggy rooms where headlight beams crawled up and down the walls and mosquitoes sang in our ears, incessant as the tires whining on the highway outside. But none of this bothered me. I was caught up in my mother's freedom, her delight in her freedom, her dream of transformation.

Everything was going to change when we got out West. My mother had been a girl in Beverly Hills, and the life we saw ahead of us was conjured from her memories of California in the days before the Crash. Her father, Daddy as she called him, had been a navy officer and a paper millionaire. They'd lived in a big house with a turret. Just before Daddy lost all his money and all his shanty-Irish relatives' money and got himself transferred overseas, my mother was one of four girls chosen to ride on the Beverly Hills float in the Tournament of Roses. The float's theme was "The End of the Rainbow" and it won that year's prize by acclamation. She met Jackie Coogan. She had her picture taken with Harold Lloyd and Marion Davies, whose movie The Sailor Man was filmed on Daddy's ship. When Daddy was at sea she and her mother lived a dream life in which, for days at a time, they played the part of sisters.

And the cars my mother told me about as we waited for the Rambler to cool —I should have seen the cars! Daddy drove a Franklin touring car. She'd been courted by a boy who had his own Chrysler convertible with a musical horn. And of course there was the Hernandez family, neighbors who'd moved up from Mexico after finding oil under their cactus ranch. The family was large. When they were expected to appear somewhere together they drove singly in a caravan of identical Pierce-Arrows.

Something like that was supposed to happen to us. People in Utah were getting up poor in the morning and going to bed rich at night. You didn't need to be a mining engineer or a mineralogist. All you needed was a Geiger counter. We were on our way to the uranium fields, where my mother would get a job and keep her eyes open. Once she learned the ropes she'd start prospecting for a claim of her own.

And when she found it she planned to do some serious compensating: for the years of hard work, first as a soda jerk and then as a novice secretary, that had gotten her no farther than flat broke and sometimes not that far. For the breakup of our family five years earlier. For the misery of her long affair with a violent