



## The Borderwalker

Carl Jung tells the story of the borderwalker. Jung describes ancient tribal life as a paradigm for modern social roles. He describes the borderwalker as the antecedent of the poet, by which he means any true artist, I believe. In ancient tribes, the borderwalker's job was to walk the border. He learned the border, knew it, marked it, checked it. It was a lonely and dangerous life, but his work was essential to the well-being of the tribe. When the borderwalker came back to the inner circle of the tribe, back home to the campfire, he became the quintessential storyteller. The borderwalker was relied on to describe what lay beyond the known territory of the tribe and to warn of any danger of invasion from other tribes. He was relied on to allay fears, and to energize the imagination of the tribe. He needed to be able to calm others, and to arouse them, with his language and his character.

His only true counterparts were the borderwalkers from other tribes. His ability to communicate with them was fundamental, equal to his ability to communicate at home. If he were untrustworthy, at either extreme, he could betray the tribe. When he returned from his circuit, back home from the ends of the world, his stories charmed, entertained, reassured, and informed his tribe. He needed to be able to describe the farthest regions, where no one else would go, in such a way that others would feel at peace in their universe, even as he astounded and intrigued them. The borderwalker needed to know when to return to the tribe and tell what he had seen and experienced.

After rejoining his community, his family, his tribe; eating, resting, renewing friendships, making love, and perhaps children, he needed to know when to leave and return to the solitary life he was required to lead. If he stayed in either part of his life, he was betraying the trust. He couldn't get too comfortable at home, and he couldn't become separated from home. He couldn't be satisfied being alone, and he couldn't become content in the group. Instead, he needed to be genuine at both. He was both solitary and social. He was the archetypal poet.

I read about the borderwalker around the time I began to realize I had betrayed the trust of my tribe. I had gotten lost in the wilderness, and when I returned, I could not be trusted. I saw people turn away from me. It was the shock of my life. Until I lost trust, I wasn't conscious of the true nature of my role as a borderwalker. I had to redeem myself, if I was ever going to be a poet, an artist, in the way I was born to be. I needed to regain that trust, for my own sake, if not for the sake of others.

*Borderwalker* appeared after twenty-two years of drinking, after seeing my spirit about to leave my body, after four years of sobriety, after a spiritual awakening that seemed to bloom and bloom some more, during a period my daughter called six months of grace. In that grace, I was able to re-experience, without fear, the horrors of alcohol, and to recognize the true occupant of my being, that which I don't call God but something more inclusive, more expansive than that. *Borderwalker* came out of events that occurred, and out of the absolute truth in which everything occurs.

Steve Brooks

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## The Voice of the Maniac

Nadine Cooper woke up with the voice of the maniac still clear in her mind. She looked around her room from beneath a lavender quilt. It was a little girl's room. It was a magician's tent. It was the boudoir of a princess. It seemed stupid and idiotic. Her eyes surveyed the charms and trinkets of her wishes, dreams, and hopes.

She had accumulated symbols of all the heart's occasions, of lovers and friends, of times and places. She had collected stones and jewelry and scarves and hats. She had photos and drawings and prints. She had dolls and teddy bears and animals in ceramic. She had copied or written out sayings of love and virtue.

It all seemed useless and pointless. She wanted to reject it, yet that made her feel like a child forced to leave home. She hated her surroundings, as she tried to leave them. The harder she hated them, the more she longed for them. Everything in the room represented the moments of her life when she felt the love she longed for, not only from others, but in herself. She had a big heart in a cage, a lion unreleased, unable to roam free in a natural world.

Nadine worked, on call, as a nurse. She had been an I.C.U. nurse. The intensity, not of the caring, but of the environment of crisis, had become too much for her to survive without extremes of behavior, without the use of drugs or sex, or without resorting to battlefield hardness. Her room, in all its beauty and fantasyland remove, had become a padded cell designed to keep her safe from harm. And it all seemed so useless.

When her friend Taran had invited her, and a couple of dozen others, to come along on a weekend migration up the coast, she had accepted quickly and easily. The purpose of the trip, ostensibly, was to go whale watching. Instead, it rained so hard the entire trip had become an exercise in overcrowding. Nadine brought her sketch pad, as did some others. They wound up sketching each other and drinking.

"My God," she thought, "there was so much drinking."

She drank, but she did not care for drunkenness. There were cots scattered about, in hallways, and in the larger rooms, and there were beds in the bedrooms, but the group tended to gather in the one large central room where the fireplace was. And there, they drank, and talked, and played music.

Walker Thompson was there, and Nadine knew him. She knew him to say hello. She knew him to have heard him read his poetry. She admired him. She

thought he was a wonderful poet. He scared her, but that was exciting. He seemed to be dangerous, but his poems were comforting. He wrote fierce poems, and he wrote poems that stopped time. His poems made it seem all right, for a while, to live in a terrifying and incomprehensible world. But he drank too much, and some of the time he seemed out of control, like a madman. Almost everyone liked him, except those who were jealous or threatened. At least, that's what she thought.

On Saturday night, he went crazy. At first, he seemed more serious than usual. He was usually serious, but he was funny and friendly too, like a good host at a party. Saturday night, he was deadly serious. He seemed obsessed by something. Finally, he said there was no one in the room, no one anywhere, who could hear his poems. He said he could write a poem that no one could hear, or a poem no one had the ability to hear.

He went off like a roman candle. He became louder and louder, ranging the big room, raging, like a preacher gone berserk, about the aloneness of the soul, about the virtual abandonment of the soul, about the cowardice of the human heart that would wrap itself in lies, games, and mindless mediocrity. He seemed to have gone into the desert. He was raging around the room, but he seemed alone. He seemed to be standing on a rock, in the middle of the desert, screaming at God.

He fell into a chair. He collapsed. Susanna Martindale took him to bed in her trailer. Since Susanna lived in her trailer, she brought it with her. Susanna was an old buddy of Walker's, and it didn't mean much to Nadine that she had taken him to bed. By that time, he was half-dead, an empty shell of himself.

The night had hurt her heart. She saw a crazed, lonely man. He was intense, powerful, frightening, but he seemed beaten. On Sunday, he became quiet, like a man facing death or suicide. People avoided him. It was the last day of the trip and half the people had already gone home, fed up, or disappointed by the rain.

Walker Thompson hadn't raped anyone, beaten anyone up, or smashed any furniture, but the place felt like a hurricane had blown through. There is usually a feeling of cleanliness after a good storm, and when the worst passes, it's possible to look around and assess the damage.

Something had happened, but the results weren't clear. There was emotional debris everywhere. Walker had stirred the pot, violently, and people were struggling to act as if nothing had happened, showing their anger, their disgust, or else their disapproval in some careful way. He had seemed to challenge every single person in the room to tell the truth of their lives of cowardice, loss, and isolation.

He touched some fear in everyone's heart, whatever their own fear might have been. On Sunday, the only one he could talk to was Nadine. He sat down next to her.

"What's your name?" he said, struggling to recognize her, looking deep in her eyes.

"It's Nadine," she said, trying to remember if they had ever been introduced.

"Nadine." He said her name as if he was testing a nugget of gold ore between his teeth, "I think you have another name."

She didn't respond. She sighed. She didn't know how to respond. She wished she did.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" He gave her a soft smile, without aggression, without demand.

"No."

It was true. There was no one she was seeing, or dating, or living with.

"No, I don't think so," he said, as if he was merely making observations, like remarking on the color of her blouse.

"Your boyfriend just died. I don't mean that harshly. You had a boyfriend in your dreams, and he's gone now." He sounded as if that might be a good thing.

"It's hard to talk to you," she said, wishing it wasn't.

"I bet it is." He knew he was sometimes inaccessible, even to himself.

"You mirror other people."

"I'd like to crack the mirror." He meant it. He was tired.

"It's bad luck to crack a mirror."

"I don't care about that." He had no memory of the previous night. His memory had gone blank, after he said no one could hear a real poem.

"Last night, you said you didn't think anyone could hear your poems."

"You could," he said, looking in her eyes for the simple truth, "if I could keep your name. I don't know if I can keep your name."

She rolled over on her side and pulled the quilt up tight under her chin.

"It's Nadine," she said aloud to herself and remembered the sweet, scared look of a child, abandoned and helpless.

She saw the look in the eyes of Walker Thompson, the man everyone admired, feared, envied, or dismissed as a fool or a bastard. She saw the look of a gentle spirit hiding behind his eyes, and she wished she could be with him, instead of the maniac who seemed to possess him.

She thought about the weekend, her work, her room. It all seemed useless. For the first time in her life, she started to feel how foolish she had been to think she could help anyone, including herself. It had been such a nice ambition when she was a young girl and concerned about broken wing sparrows and princess dolls with sad stories of cruel kings and evil queens. It had seemed noble and pure to become a nurse, to help people whose lives were broken. She found out she couldn't even help herself.

"God," she said all of a sudden, "please help me," and then she thought about the maniac. "I hope he's all right. He needs something to happen. He can't go on like that for much longer."

She looked at her room. "And I can't keep this up much longer either. If you've got any ideas, I'd sure be glad to hear them." She felt a lot better, just as soon as she stopped trying to figure it all out. She fell back asleep easily, for the first time in a long time.

## The Light in the Window

It was the light in the window that woke him up. He was sleeping like a child, like a man at peace, like a man who has slept for days after a cathartic bout with fever. His body and his spirit were drained. He had spent all his resources. But, for the moment, he was at rest.

The light came through the dusty plate glass window of an empty storefront on Center Street. It was the beginning of summer, and the nights were cooler than the days, but the days were warm. It was morning, and the sun was high enough to clear the trees and the rooftops. The sunlight had edged past the east corner of the south-facing window by inches. Because he was lying on a mattress close to the window, next to the street, the light hit him in the eyes before it lit much of anything else in the room. There wasn't much to see.

It was a small storefront that hadn't been used for ten years, in a town that hadn't bustled with commerce for twenty. That was a consideration when he first discovered his small corner of respite from a sea of troubles. It was a place where he could consider the taking up of arms and the laying down of arms.

He was a poet, and comparisons to Hamlet are not entirely false. Mallarme called poetry the language of crisis, and Walker Thompson had found the language, and he had assumed the crises. To be a poet, for him, was to enact some function, poorly defined, for the community of crisis. For all those who've ever felt, believed, accepted, denied, understood, defied, wallowed in or been overwhelmed by crisis, he was a spokesman, a talisman, a barometer, a lightning rod, a repository, an incinerator of that crisis, whatever it might be. He was the mouth on the lanced bite of the poisonous snake of life.

On that day, he was nothing. Of himself, in himself, by himself, for himself, he was nothing. He was not a channel of poetry's light in a dark pit of despair. He was in the pit. He was the pit. There was nothing new in that. It had become familiar to him. When he had fulfilled his function serving the community, there was nothing left for him. As much as he might believe he was a healer, there was no healing for him.

He lay in an unhealed heap, drawing his only nourishment from the sun, like a decrepit house plant that hasn't had light or water for a long time, root-bound and dried out, then moved, palest green, to the sun, and the sun beats down like a tidal wave on a parched and thirsty man, drowned by what he needs, unable to receive it.

He didn't think any of these thoughts. His thoughts were like the thoughts of the simplest of creatures. He might think *hot* and move toward it and then away from it. He might think *hot* and push off the blanket. He might feel an uncomfortable tightness in his feet and move them to relieve the feeling, but the thinking necessary to recognize that he still might have his shoes on, and that he might take them off, and then to carry out that process, would be too complex and wouldn't happen.

The other thing that drained him to the dregs was his regular, and occasionally severe, consumption of alcohol. He was a drinker and he drank a lot. Wine is poets' milk, they say, and Walker didn't deny it. It had been a couple of days since the poet had tasted much of his milk, and the deprivation he was experiencing was also familiar to him. It was a state he didn't fault. He'd come to expect it, as the inevitable balance of light and dark, of yin and yang, of joy and despair. His hang-overs had become, not merely punishment to be endured, or the price to be paid, but part of the path he had chosen.

During these periods, which had grown from a few hours to days at a time, he had trained himself to be attentive to its pains and horrors. He had tried to embrace the horrors. During these periods, his heart might stop. Then his lungs would stop. Then some wild force would jolt his body, and he would breathe again. He was afraid for the time when that wild force did not react.

He'd had a dream, twice, of faces, swarming around him, in a murky green sea, with the faces floating, themselves green, up to his face, silent, in warning or in welcome, greeting him and recognizing him. He had thought about the faces, and he had tried to place them, but he had never seen them anywhere else, not in books or in paintings, not in movies or in any other form. He'd begun to think they were the faces of the undead, that they were waiting for him to join them in their Sargasso Sea of Endless Despair and Agony. If that sounds melodramatic, it's because drama masks and exemplifies the reality that's even more terrifying than the safely dramatic.

At first, he was a boy growing up. Then he was a young man learning. Then he was a grown man trying to make sense and value of things. He stumbled onto the powers that are available to the gifted. He felt the enormity of those powers. He became fearful, because he was still a boy, innocent and eager, playing with hurtful giants.

He struggled to keep afloat his small boat of self. He began to spend more time bailing than he did sailing. Without his poor animal brain knowing it, the boat of his self had foundered. The oars were gone, the mast and sails were gone, the maps and provisions were gone. It was no use. He was shipwrecked.

## A Peaceful Man

At the same time, another man, of somewhat different gifts, was feeling the light of a new day. About a mile east of town, there was a rest stop beside the highway. It was a spot for picnickers who chose convenience over scenic beauty. A man had camped there for the night. He had risen and packed his gear on the carrier of his motorcycle. He was seated at the lone table, in a moment of quiet reflection and meditation. He seemed not to think of anything. He was a peaceful man. There was no agitation in him. He seemed pleased by his surroundings, as if he was the new owner of a New York penthouse or a California hacienda.

His eyes rested on his motorcycle, a gleaming red Harley. It was like a great, powerful, winged horse, the steed of a knight, or the stallion of a warrior. It rested on its stand, silent, patient, sure. The man and his motorcycle had ridden a long distance, and it had finally become clear to him that he was nearing his destination. He'd ridden for days, knowing there was something he had to do, a task, a mission, if you will. He'd been driven by the sense of something to be done, without knowing what that something was. He wasn't tormented or beset by his sense of purpose. Instead, it gave him a steadiness. There was, within him, a feeling of something yet to be done, something that was necessary. Knowing that, and trusting that it would be done, took the place of any anxiety he might have felt.

As he sat at the painted green picnic table on a sunny morning of early summer, he could sense that the time and place of his rendezvous was near. The intuitive trust he felt was something he depended on. There was no hurry to anything. He could luxuriate in every second, every moment, every minute. It made each hour feel like a weekend of magic. When the moment came to leave the rest stop, it too was a moment of bliss. He was like a dolphin swimming in calm, tropical waters.

Every cell of his body was tuned to the acceptance of his being. The completeness he felt, being in the world, had come to him only recently. He'd been satisfied with the spiritual life he'd been living, but this was more. Instead of being merely at peace, he had come to know contentment. The contentment he felt gave him new energy and a belief in the possibilities of living life as an ordinary human being. He would never cut himself off from his source, but the great adventure ahead lay in the continual discovery of the absolute magic of the ordinary.

He looked down at the dried, cracked, and peeling wood of the table top. He looked at the gray and brown wood beneath the faded green paint. He saw the splinters at the edge of a carved initial. He looked at the burrow in the wood as if he was looking at the Grand Canyon or at a small open wound in the flesh of his arm, without pain or blood.

A truck roared by on the two-lane blacktop. It was time to go. He got up from the table and walked over to his bike. He marveled. It was a fearsome machine. He wrapped his legs around it, broke it from its hobble, and fired it up. It roared with the confidence of its strength and readiness. It was so capable of its expected duties that it was beyond intimidating or being intimidated. It simply was. It was the kind of feeling he wasn't used to. He had been living in a world apart from the physical. To him, the motorcycle was a being of similar spirit, and he treated it that way. It, in turn, seemed to rise up within itself, like an alpha dog in a dog sled team, fulfilling itself by giving itself entirely to the task at hand, more fulfilled, the more that's asked of it.

The man, his mane of hair and new beard feeling the wind, rode powerfully, but easily, into the town of Winslow. As he rode past various locals, several of them waved at him, and some of them shouted out to him. At first, he assumed it was the courtesy shown to a stranger, or the kind of recognition he'd gotten used to, directed at his new motorcycle, but those who shouted at him called him by name.

"Hey, Walker, where'd you get the bike?" one man yelled.

Another said, "Well, lookee, lookee, the great Walker Thompson." and "Hey, Big T, where you been?" shouted someone from a passing truck. It was obvious he was being mistaken for some man named Walker Thompson.

"Hang on, Walker, don't fall off," one girl shouted, in a mocking manner, and then she yelled as the stranger passed, "Come on back. Gimme a ride, will ya?"

As he slowed into the quiet main street, the voices were fewer, and he wondered at the mistaken identity. At the same time, he appreciated the strange workings of the unknown. Something in the mistaken identity was part of his being in that town on that day. He was sure of it. He stopped and parked in front of a stretch of unoccupied, somewhat dilapidated buildings. The sidewalk was above a raised curb. He lifted himself to it with a high step. As he did, with his head lowered, he heard the voice of a man approaching him.

“Well, if it isn’t the man with a reputation. Shit, even a so-called artist has to pay the piper sometime,” the man said to him, sarcastically. The stranger turned to the man’s voice and looked at him. The man looked at the stranger’s eyes, and his expression changed.

“No, listen, never mind, I just want to say I heard you read some good stuff once. I really liked it. You take care, huh?” and he backed away, moving on down the sidewalk, smiling, respectfully.

“Yes, you take care, as well. Thank you,” said the stranger. He had thought to correct the man, but it seemed better not to. He turned and caught the reflection of his face in the dusty store window. He examined the face, his face.

Hearing his voice, Walker had raised himself to the window. Because of the cloudiness, or the glare in his eyes, or the intoxication, he saw only his face, his reflection. His reflection was playing tricks on him. His state of mind accepted the hallucination, even the fact of his image moving independently in front of him.

The stranger saw his reflection, and then he saw another face, a face like his but not his reflection. It was a scene, true to the stranger, that proved that reality was like a glass window. One could look at it as a mirror of oneself, or one could look through it, to the other side.

Both men were looking into a dusty mirror. Both men saw themselves, and both saw a man on the other side. Both men accepted it as true. Both men accepted the extraordinary as ordinary. Walker Thompson had come to an acceptance but he was not at ease with it.

The stranger felt confident with the miraculous. It amused him. Walker was so utterly overwhelmed that being overwhelmed was commonplace. It was so common to his experience to be afraid, that he accepted it. But nothing lessened the fear.

Then, an odd thing happened. As Walker managed to stand and face the stranger, their eyes met and held. A connection was made, like an electric conduit, like a free flow of current, and Walker felt stronger. Not cured but stronger. As he held the contact, he began to come alive. He began to feel it as a true thing. He needed to speak to this stranger, this other man, this alter ego, if that’s what he was. As a man accustomed to fear and to the extraordinary, and with new energy, it was not hard for him to gesture to the man.

“Come in ... come in here ... I want to talk to you.” He hooked his hand in a gesture, waved, and pointed to the door.

The stranger watched the bizarre puppet show behind the glass, as a man nearly identical to him, but gone slack like a rag doll on a string, waved him into the empty building. The ravaged countenance of his twin did not frighten the stranger. The assurance he felt deep in his heart made it no more frightening than going backstage between the acts of a fascinating drama. He approached the door calmly and eagerly, curious to see the rest of the play unfold.

## Angel Rider

Walker David Thompson was not well. He was not completely conscious. He was in a dream-like state, a trance, a grace period in his stupor. He was compelled to know the stranger who hovered near him like an apparition. He got himself off the mattress and over to the door, kicking an empty bottle of burgundy, his drug of choice, out of the way. He had managed to acquire a gallon of wine, and he had nursed it for four days. It's hard for a late-stage dipsomaniac, alcoholic, boozier, juicer, to nurse anything, but the bottle was big, and Walker was so debilitated he remembered the wine only when his blood supply of alcohol had sunk to nearly nothing.

The purgatory he had chosen for himself was as near to this world as the sidewalk was from the front door. But it might as well have been a million miles away. To have come upon him in his bleak cave of drained remorse would have been going to visit a man gravely ill, comatose, or severely injured, delirious, incoherent, or to be suddenly among drug-influenced witch doctors or shaman, speaking in tongues, possessed, looking near death, then up and dancing wildly.

Walker opened the door, and the stranger came in. Walker stepped back and stared. He laughed, still afraid, but in awe. He walked up to the stranger and put his hands on him. He touched him. He approached the stranger as if he was a curious object to be examined. He decided to see for himself just what this replicate creature was.

He put his big hand on the stranger's face and pushed it, like a blind man might do. He put his hand on his head and ruffled his hair. He put his arm around the stranger's shoulder and shook him, gently, firmly. He went away and came back again and balanced his body against the stranger. He looked in the stranger's eyes, looking for something, looking for essence. It was an odd act of faith, an act toward faith. He was testing the texture of the stranger, not in judgment, but in wonder.

"Who are you?" Walker asked the stranger. "Where did you come from?"

The stranger made a motion with his head and looked toward the street, and then he said, "I've been traveling for days."

"Where'd you come from?" Walker was asking simple questions. Nothing else seemed right.

"I've been living ... in the mountains ... high ... in the clouds ... I've been living in the clouds." He smiled at his metaphor.

"That sounds good," said Walker, and he meant it. His eyes looked into the eyes of the stranger, and he saw the lofty aerie among the clouds, not in pictures, but in the feeling of peacefulness.

"It **is** wonderful, but I've come down to earth ... and I'm glad I have. It feels good."

"It does?" He was happily incredulous. It felt as if the stranger had just given him a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers picked from the edge of the town dump, and he was the watchman of the dump.

"You've come down to earth? Well, this is my earth," he said, opening his hands to the shabby room, like an embarrassed peasant in front of visiting royalty.

"It is where you are, isn't it?" the stranger said, smiling.

"It is exactly where I am."

He paused, thinking of himself, and then of the stranger.

"Tell me what your name is. What is ... your name?"

The stranger turned quickly and thought about the motorcycle on the street.

"I ... am ... a ... Rider."

He remembered it as if he was remembering his name.

"You can call me Rider."

"Rider."

Walker said the name. He spoke slowly, deliberately.

"My name is Walker, and your name is Rider. That's too cute. Do you have any other name?"

The stranger thought quickly of some bikers he had passed the day before.

"You can call me Angel, if you want."

"Angel."

Walker tried that one out.

"I like Angel. Angel feels good."

Walker began to lose control, to lose contact.

"Listen. Angel ... do me a favor ... take my wallet ... get the address ... go to my apartment ... get me some things ... If anyone sees you ... you can say you're me ... Hell, I think ... you *are* me." He dropped to his knees on the mattress and then to his side, slowly, in a gradual collapse.

"Go ... go to my apartment ... there's food ... take a load off ... feel free ... do whatever you want ... mine is yours." His head dropped to the pillow made from his rolled-up jacket. He was falling into a restful sleep.

"Angel ... I like that name."

Angel Rider stood in the half-lit room and watched Walker Thompson sleep. "So *that's* it," he said to himself. He looked at the sleeping man, half corpse, half infant. Then Walker rose up all of a sudden.

"Angel, bring me some wine," he said, and fell back, lifeless again. He was like a windup doll that had sprung to life and spoken its recorded message. Angel smiled.

"Well, baby, I'll bring you your milk."

He leaned over and picked up, from Walker's hand, the wallet he was holding. He put it in his jeans pocket and went out on the street to his motorcycle. It was a beautiful, sunny day, in the high 70s, not a cloud in the sky.

## A Realm Beyond

Angel Rider stood for a moment on the tree-lined main street of Winslow, a small town of innocent beauty and no particular charm. Not a great tourist mecca, not an industrial center, not a major thoroughfare of any sort, it was a pretty, quiet, small town, like thousands of others.

The attraction of a town like Winslow lies in the very fact of its indistinguishable nature. It has no stamp to put on its citizenry. A town like Winslow is a place where souls congregate to live ordinary lives. Within the random range of whatever ten thousand or so who pass through the eye of a needle like Winslow at any one time, a remarkable variety of human beings can be seen, in all their glory and their humility, in their majesty and their ignominy. Without an overriding imprimatur like the major cities have, and without the anonymity that large cities provide, everyone in a small town is known for himself or herself. It's hard to hide in a small town, and it's even harder to change.

The man who stood on the main street of Winslow that sunny morning, was so changed from the one who had disappeared from sight, that it helped make the change more acceptable. On the other hand, the man who had exploded on Saturday night was an extreme of the man everyone had come to know. His behavior had become troublesome, but it was his role to be troublesome, and he had always brought it back home, back from the brink, in the nick of time, to the delight of those who loved the derring-do and the danger and lived it vicariously through him.

If people wanted, they could wander into the American Dream Café, also called the ADC, any night, or they could gather down the street in the bar called Blind Street, and watch Walker Thompson, called Walker, called Walker T, called Big T, called asshole, bastard, genius, fool, put his and everyone else's safe and sane life in danger. He nearly always did it gently, pushing the limits, testing reality, asking unlikely questions, telling stories, reading poems that seemed rational but broke out of the expected and the predictable.

And when he got drunk, it was exciting to watch him change colors and characters, to pull everyone else along in a crescendo of vitality. Sometimes, it would be less than entertaining, especially if he was depressed about something. But even when he was depressed, it seemed as if he was only showing what depression should look like. One guy said he was the man you loved to hate, and laughed, but Larry Parkin said no, he was the man you hated to love.

No one ever quite believed that Walker was the same as everyone else, so why should anyone believe that he had the same real feelings. Walker experienced everything in extremes. The extremes had confused him as well.

When he raged, in the lodge, in front of all those people, there were some who tried to accept it as more of the same. But that night Walker lost his saving grace. The magical consciousness, that had always brought him and everyone else back from the brink, was gone. He fell from the high wire, and there was no net.

Walker had been a magician, but he had lost the magic. He frightened those who watched him. He was a man of control, a man who defied death, a man who defied the conventions of life that keep us safe, a man who had taken others closer to the extraordinary than they would go on their own, and he had fallen. He had fallen lower than they could fall.

As high as he had been held before, his fall betrayed his admirers. He had said, "Look how high I can go. How high can you go?" Then he had fallen, and it made his flight seem false, like Icarus come back to town, his attempt made ignominious by his presence. If he dies, it's a tragedy. If he lives, it's a slap in the face. The worst part of his demise was his own participation in it. He had ripped off his own invisible clothing and paraded naked in front of the throng, despising them for their trust in his illusion.

He had said, "I'm not even a king, I'm a naked idiot."

He disappeared the next day, and everyone had tried to rewrite the history of the night. Some laughed it off, some declared it was only a bad drunk, some blamed the rain, some blamed themselves. No one had a good answer. But everyone had a changed image of Walker Thompson. The man who stood on the street next to his motorcycle was not just a different man, he was radically different, and only a radically different man could have stood in Walker's shoes that day.

If the man who lay on his mattress, bleeding from every pore, had emerged, the truth of his defeat would have been more than anyone would have wanted to accept. Instead, a reborn man stood in his shoes. Walker lay near to death, not in the sense of being about to die, but in death's proximity, near enough to smell it upon himself.

Angel Rider, in the other extreme, was as far from death as it is possible to get in bodily form. He was not merely healthy, he was in a realm beyond death. He carried no death in him. That pure state had lifted Walker long enough for the agreement to be struck. Angel would move about in Walker's life. And what was in it for Angel Rider?

Coming from the life of remove he had experienced, it was a way to be suddenly immersed in the life of the flesh, a way to understand the weakness of the flesh, a way to feel humility and gratitude, as only a wounded spirit can. He was beginning to understand humility and gratitude as gifts of feeling in the body. They seem to come of an acceptance in the body that one is a part of something larger than oneself. Some beings carry the gift of humility and gratitude unconsciously. Because they've never known a break from the whole, they are unconscious and at peace. When a man such as Walker Thompson comes to a crisis point in his feelings of separation, it is because the separation is finally unbearable.

For Angel Rider, it was a gift to be able to feel how blessed he was to live in a universe without separation. He was feeling the awareness of his serenity, thanks to Walker's lack of it. What was missing in Walker was natural to Angel. What was natural to Angel felt alien to Walker. They were a gift to each other.

There's a gift of spirit, and there's a gift of flesh. Spirit wants to come into the body, and the physical seeks the spirit. Poetry was Walker's spirit voice, but his life was physical. He was a carpenter, a dancer, a lover, a drinker, a chewer of tobacco, a singer of words. He was spiritual, and he was physical, and yet he was neither. He lacked the simple surrender that would have given him the awareness that his life was beginning to offer Angel. Walker was separate from his own joy. Angel had been separate from the sense of ordinary humanity.

The one thing Walker desired in his headlong pursuit of death was a new motorcycle. It was another gift yet to be given. Angel mounted the bike, checked the address in the billfold, and headed off toward a memory of cross streets he had passed coming into town. Angel Rider was looking forward to the unfolding mystery of the future. He liked the feeling of being an ordinary human being. It was a good feeling, and there were many delights in it.

## A Long Shaft in Clouds

As he slept, Walker had a dream. In the dream, a man came up to him, like a giant bird walking, its wings spread wide and full. He had an eagle face and soft, luminous eyes. Then for a split second, his eyes twinkled, and the man-bird stepped into Walker's body, face to face. As he did, Walker began to spin, and to fall. He fell, spinning, down a long shaft in clouds. He fell without fear. He fell for what seemed like miles. At the end, he fell out of the clouds like a bundle of laundry dropping out of a laundry chute, into a soft heap on the ground.

He looked around. He was sitting in the middle of a freshly plowed field. It was a beautiful morning. He was a new sprout in the rich earth. He was an alert young bird, hopping on the furrows. He was a child, basking in the warm sun. He looked across the field and saw a man standing by a motorcycle. In the same instant, he was the man standing by the motorcycle. He looked at the motorcycle, and they were old friends. It felt as if they had been traveling together on a long journey.

He stirred in his sleep and came awake. He remembered that a man had come into his cave. It was a strange man who looked like him. It had happened. Or not. He was overcome by a wave of nausea. It swept through his body from head to toe and back. The slightest movement increased the nausea. He lay as still as he could and looked at the open rafters. The sun had moved across the sky and was not on him, but his body heat was great. He was drenched in sweat. He couldn't keep a thought in his head. All he felt was illness in every cell. He needed to be wrung out. Vomiting was inadequate. He had vomited, perhaps days before. He couldn't remember. He felt that he was the sickness itself. There was no escaping it. It was not just in him, it was him.

It was the way he felt the day before. There must've been some wine. He couldn't be sure. He turned his head slowly, very slowly, and saw the empty bottle on the rough wood floor. He could not keep a feeling about it. He could not move. He felt as if he had been in that position forever. He could not imagine moving from it. The only comfort he felt was in not increasing his nausea. Finally, he was able to slip into a kind of sleep. Then, minutes or hours later, he would come to. Then minutes or hours later, he would slip into unconsciousness again, of a kind that has no center, without focus or comfort or meaning. He fell into a state like suspended animation, like an astronaut adrift and untethered to his spacecraft.

He drifted, without connection, for hours, days, years. Time, as an envelop for being, was lost. He was adrift in an empty universe, an eternity of absence, a space of neither good nor evil, an eternity of bloodless, mindless, lifeless vacuum, without feeling, without meaning.

Miracle is a word to describe the occurrence of something contrary to, or independent from, the laws of nature. Often it is only the occurrence of something within the laws of nature but beyond our awareness or our experience. At the moment when the tether that connected Walker to his life seemed most tenuous and least real, it cracked like a whip, like a bolt of lightning, like a whiplash of blue light in his dying body. It jolted him and convulsed his body. A howl rose in his body like the roar of a cornered beast and burst from his neck at the moment his body jolted. It came from deep within him. It broke his throat like a demon pulled from the womb of its dying mother and flung against the far wall to die. Walker's body threw itself against the wall, and he began to weep.

"Please ... don't leave me ... don't leave me. Please ... stay ... with ... me." His words went from a plea to a statement of reality. It was the most praying Walker had done since he was a child and prayed by rote. It was a prayer more like a cry in the dark than anything else.

When Angel Rider appeared to Walker, it was a great infusion of energy, a brilliant moment, but nothing would have given him back his life without something occurring in him that's called the will to live. Whatever it's called, it plunged him back into the singular misery of his reality. No miracle absolved Walker of being Walker. That work was his and his alone to accept or deny.

## The Kiss

Angel dreamed of a kiss. When he thought about anything sexual, he thought about a kiss. To kiss a woman fully, willingly, openly, mouth on mouth, face to face, made anything else that might happen, body to body, secondary and at the same time, primary. He had long thought it was the kiss that would electrify everything else. A real kiss would short-circuit all thought, as if the lips were the brains of the whole outfit. The brain was the brains of the mind, but the brain was best kept in its place as the recognizer and recorder. By no means should it ever be the director of one's life.

Angel was having trouble finding the address he was looking for. His thoughts were not on the task at hand. He was thinking about a kiss. It was a warm day and the breeze he caused, rolling down the side streets of Winslow, was as erotic as a tropical trade wind. He thought he'd better ask someone for directions, but how could he ask someone to help him find what was presumably his own address.

"Excuse me, I can't find my way home. Can you help me?"

Considering Walker Thompson's state of mind and considering his reputation, it shouldn't surprise anyone for him to ask such a question. Angel understood that Walker was well-known in Winslow and well-known as someone who needed to pay the piper. His present state of intoxication should be as well-known. And how would he explain the motorcycle? He thought he might say it was a gift from someone who didn't live in town.

As he was cruising along, he was mulling over these questions with great difficulty since his body was becoming increasingly self-centered. The motorcycle was moving more and more slowly. On Olive Street, he turned and caught sight of a young woman emerging onto the roof-deck of her apartment. She was blinking and stretching in the sunlight, her hair loose behind her, her body tan in a white T-shirt. Angel Rider rode his motorcycle into the back of a parked car. He was going slow enough not to cause damage, but it stopped him and shook him off the bike. The woman ran down the outside stairs of the deck and crossed the quiet, narrow street.

"Walker, are you all right? Are you OK?" she said.

"Yes, thank you, I'm fine," Angel blushed.

"Are you sure? You better come up for a minute."

She was surprised at her words. She knew who it was, but she looked twice to be sure.

"All right. That's a good idea."

Angel righted the bike and rested it on its stand. He dusted himself off, and the two walked back across Olive, to the deck stairs.

"Where'd you get that beautiful bike?" the woman said.

"My motorcycle?" Angel said, not knowing how to pretend. It was awkward, but it seemed necessary. It felt important to keep up the ruse as long as possible.

"It was a gift from a friend. He wanted me to have it ... to use it for a while ... for transportation."

"That's some transportation."

She tried to kid with Walker. She was trying to make sense out of this divine man who stood beside her.

As they mounted the steps, Angel noticed a mailbox at the bottom of the stairs. On it was a piece of tape with a name written on it.

It read, "**NADINE COOPER - 222 Olive.**"

"Nadine is a good name," Angel said, testing the water.

If it wasn't her name, he thought, he could be praising it just for itself.

"You didn't think so on Sunday."

The reminder brought her abruptly back to her senses.

"Maybe you don't remember. You said you thought I had another name."

"Ondine, perhaps," Angel ventured. She seemed like a water spirit.

"Nadine was my grandmother's name and now it's mine. It's not very popular these days, but it is mine." It was a name she'd taken a long time getting used to. When she was a girl, she thought it was stupid, and other kids teased her about it. Her pride and the love of her grandmother had gotten her to cherish it as she had gotten older.

"It doesn't matter what I thought on Sunday," he said. "Today, I think it's a good name."

She believed him. The way he spoke was without doubt. He was a man without doubt, and she felt no doubt, listening to him. They stood on the deck. Nadine motioned to a couple of chairs.

"Sit down," she said, in her clear, softly authoritarian nurse's voice. "Can I get you something? A glass of wine? A beer?"

He had a brilliant idea. He wanted to try something new.

“Do you have any iced tea? I think that would taste wonderful.” He spoke with childlike anticipation, hopefully.

Nadine looked at Angel Rider in shock.

“Sure. Yeah. Sure I do. I’ll be right back.”

In delighted disbelief, she went into the apartment, and Angel thanked his lucky stars. She was beautiful. She was graceful, relaxed, and womanly. She had an expressive mouth. He was embarrassed to be staring at her as much as he had. When he looked at her eyes, as beautiful as her everything else was, he couldn’t help but feel shy and awestruck, like a kid meeting a famous movie star. Nothing about it felt wrong, but it felt new.

When she came back with the iced tea, Angel tried another gambit.

“I don’t think I know you well enough to tell you what your name should be.”

Another shock. Nadine couldn’t believe what was coming from Walker’s lips. He was polite and respectful, gentle, and exquisitely shy. She had known some of those qualities from his poetry, but in person he had been more the opposite, dangerously bold and no respecter of people’s boundaries. He was Attila the Hun compared to this angel.

“That’s OK,” she said, dumbly. It would take some getting used to, this new Walker Thompson. She stared at him as he drank his iced tea. And that was another thing. He drank it as if it was the finest elixir ever concocted. He sipped it, admired it, and smiled at her in his pleasure.

She had heard about conversions before. It was true he’d disappeared for most of a week, and maybe a miracle had taken place. But it was odd to feel so safe with the man who had made her feel the most unsafe she’d ever felt. She stared. His eyes were clear. His hands were steady. His beard was trimmed. He was gorgeous. For a moment, a great heart-burst awakened in her chest. She had had a crush on him for a long time, but she had been wise enough to keep it hidden, around one of the more notorious lady-killers she had ever known.

She knew enough to stay back, even though, lately, he hadn’t been with anyone in particular. He had seemed preoccupied, even obsessed, with something. He had been like a man on fire, and she did not want to be burned up in any one else’s fire. But this man made her feel her own fire. Something about him warmed her. She felt safe and free. She had felt there was no room for her around him, he took up so much room by himself. But now she couldn’t help moving toward him.

She felt she was going to end up sitting in his lap, any second, if she didn't watch out.

"What happened to you, Walker? I don't understand. You seem like a different man."

"I am a different man. I don't know how to explain it. Everything is new. I thought I understood everything before, but I was wrong. In some ways I knew everything, but in other ways I didn't have any idea. I feel things differently, now. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She looked at him and shook her head. There was no doubt about it. Walker had truly become a new man.

"Whatever it is, Walker, it's wonderful. You look terrific. I'm glad. I was worried about you. I wasn't just worried, I thought you were going to die ... or get killed ... or kill yourself."

It seemed strange that she could have thought such things about the man sitting in front of her.

"What happened on Sunday, Nadine? I don't remember."

He wanted to find out about Walker, to know more, to learn what it was that was tormenting him.

"It wasn't Sunday," she said emphatically, "It was Saturday night. You were drunk. You were a maniac. You were like a crazed animal." She took a deep breath. She put herself back in the lodge and began to picture what had taken place, like she was watching a movie.

"At first, you were like a snake. You were coiled up and hissing in the middle of the room. Like you were about to strike. Then you were like a caged tiger, pacing back and forth, growling. Like you despised your cage and you wanted to be free. Like you didn't know how you got there, and you didn't know how to get out. Then you were like a rabid wild boar with fangs, a predator, like you were starved and desperate. Then you got hunched over like a cave man. You looked scared and wild, like you were being attacked by all the other animals. You looked like you had been on the run all your life. Then you stopped. I don't know how you did that, but you seemed to come back from some ancient jungle, a million years ago, and you went over to the table, just as calm as you please. You poured yourself a glass of bourbon, you stared out the window at the rain, you drank the bourbon, and you passed out."

Angel thought for a moment.

"I'm sorry. No one should act in such a harmful way."

"You scared everybody, including me. On Sunday, everybody there was still afraid of you. There are people out there who wish you were dead."

"I am. I mean I was." Angel thought about Walker until he was Walker.

They sat for a while and thought about the pictures she described. Nadine came back from the pictures and looked around at the deck. She looked at Angel Walker. She was beginning to see the connection between the two men she was just getting to know. She thought of something else.

"You're supposed to give a reading, tonight."

"Where is it? When?"

He didn't know what she meant by a reading, but he remembered the man on the street saying he had heard him read his poems.

"It's at the ADC ... after eight ... anytime, I suppose. It's open-mike night. Will you be all right? Do you want to do it?"

"I think so. I had better go back to my place. I have to pick up some things. I'd better look for the right poems to read."

He remembered to ask where he was going.

"I'm a little disoriented. Where's my apartment from here? It's 905 Dolores."

"It's only six blocks," she said, pointing east, not quite understanding.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm doing fine. Will you be there, tonight, Nadine?"

"If you want me to, I will."

"Yes. Good. That would be ... good ... to have you there ... to have someone there who ... I mean ... to be with you. I'd like that."

"So would I," she said. She looked in his eyes and she began to forget details.

"I should go, now." He stared in her eyes, and he stopped thinking about the reading.

"You should get some rest. But you don't need me to tell you what to do." She smiled at him, like a friend, like a lover. They stood, and they looked at each other. Angel's heart was pounding. He didn't plan on anything to say. He didn't think he was going to say anything at all.

"Right now, I would like to kiss you," he said, slowly.

And, wonder of wonders, she smiled. They kissed. They were joined. Their lips came together in the dappled shade and the sunlight. Their lips met in the slow motion that was in their own time, in that time that was theirs, in the motion that is suspended in time.

Nadine's heart was pounding, near to exploding. All her fears that kept her heart at bay had dissolved, and she had a thought she might die of a heart attack. Her heart was unused to that kind of exercise, but she couldn't be going to die, it felt too good to be dying, and if she was dying, then she would take it. It was the perfect moment to die, but she did not die. It was the perfect moment to live.

A cat climbed up and crossed the deck railing near them, stopped next to them, and meowed. The cat's meow punctuated the kiss. They stopped and pulled apart, almost grinning, laughing like sighing.

"That's Apollo," she said, "He always finds the sun, or the warmest place."

Angel reached out and caressed the cat.

"My heart feels good with you," he said to her. Their eyes met, again.

"I thought our hearts were going to touch, through our ribs," she said.

"I think they did. I better go. I have to. I have things to do," he said.

"I'll see you tonight," she said.

"Yes, see you tonight." He turned and made his way back to the motorcycle. He pointed at the back of the parked car, and she grinned at him from the balcony. She was holding Apollo in her arms. He started the bike and waved as he drove off down Olive Street.

"I was right," he said to himself, "I was right about kissing."

## The Blood of the Poet

Angel spent time in Walker's apartment, reading everything he could get his hands on, looking at every picture, holding the objects, sitting in the chair, embracing the aromas and textures of a man's life.

Walker's room was a museum of ideas and images, a place thick with the blood and the air of a poet. Angel could feel how much Walker had brought to bear on his being a poet. There was, in that room, a fearless abandonment of careful thinking. There could have been a sign over the door, *Abandon Restraints All Ye Who Enter Here*.

The bed was a pit of dreams, deep and soft, but the rest of the room was unforgiving. It was accepting without being kind. Angel's heart ached in Walker's room. It was not a room that was kind to the heart. It was a room that demanded a great deal of the heart, to take and bear all it felt, in a thousand ways, but it never said to the heart, "Here, this is for you."

The bed loomed as a place of collapse, where Walker could fall, in exhaustion. But even from the bed, the room was an overwhelming assault on the sensibilities. Everything seemed to have been brought there and kept there but not released there. Angel threw open the door and the windows, stood in the center of the room, and breathed deeply, in and out, like a bellows, cleansing the impacted air. The room had been shut up for almost a week, but Angel felt like he had opened a chamber in the tomb of a pharaoh. He marveled at the cache of accumulated treasures, but the compressed heart of the place gave him a chill. A shiver ran through him like an ancient soul being released. In a folder on a shelf, he found a few poems that appealed to him more than any others he found.

"I'll read these poems."

After a while, he thought, "He has courage. He's taken all this knowledge into the body, to live in the grief and pain of human history, and his only release is a few poems. It's not enough. He's taken upon himself the entire range of human emotion, and he's failed to protect and nurture himself. The way he is now is the result of that. He's done all this alone, and he's done it without relief. If he is not going to die, he has to find another way to live."

Angel got up, weary. He took a deep breath and let it out. "You've got the cart before the horse, my friend," he said to himself, as if to Walker. "You've crippled the horse and crashed the cart. And here's your instruction book." He picked up a full bottle of red wine.

There was one part of Walker that Angel could feel good about. It was the part that spoke in the poems. That wasn't the part that needed saving. That was the part that could do the saving.

## The American Dream Café

The American Dream Café was an oasis. When the fog came up in the valleys, it was a warm hearth on a cool night. It was a place, not work and not home, for people to gather. It opened at ten in the morning and closed at midnight. The owners, Keri Lynn and Mike, sold sandwiches, soups, salads, sodas, espresso, beer and wine. Every Friday night was open-mike night. It was a night for the patrons to show off their talents. Occasionally, professionals who were passing through would play the ADC.

Walker was a regular in the ADC. It was where he did a lot of his writing. It was his office. Most of the patrons were content to read, eat, play chess, drink, talk, survey the opposite sex, daydream, and be entertained. One night, Jamie Muller said to a table of regulars, "We know everybody in town. Hardly anybody new ever comes through the door, and we sit here, every night, waiting for the magic person to show up."

Walker's usual table was by the front door. On either side of the door were window-wells, with small tables in the recesses. It was a place for Walker to sit, half in and half out of the café. While everyone else busied themselves with pastimes of one sort or another, Walker listened to silence and wrote what he heard. It was rare for him to come to the ADC just to sit and chat.

It was just as rare for him to miss more than two nights in a row. He had been gone for seven days. Of course, his reputation had stood in his stead. Dan Carpenter spread the rumor that Walker had run around the lodge with his dick hanging out. Dan's dick hadn't hung out in years, but his libido did, and he could imagine no other circumstances.

By the time Nadine arrived, the café was nearly full, and Walker's absence was fuel for speculation. Somebody had seen him come into town on a flame red Harley. Others doubted it. Some offered the opinion that he had gone east, gone south, gone west, gone north, gone crazy, been put away, been arrested in a neighboring state, died, committed suicide, or any one of several other possibilities. None of these notions were spoken by people who had been at the lodge. Most weren't in the café. Jamie had been there and he said nothing. He seemed unusually quiet. He was a burly man who talked easily, and once started, incessantly. But not lately.

When Nadine stepped in the doorway of the ADC, she looked quickly around the place. Not seeing Walker, she caught Jamie's eye, and he nodded. She

joined him at his table. He had no idea she had been with Walker, or with Angel Rider, for that matter. He knew she had some feeling for Walker, but he'd never seen them together, and he was a gentleman not to presume what wasn't given him to presume. They talked about the evening and about the café scene. There was a singer present, at the back corner of the café, in an area set aside as a bandstand. Jamie and Nadine both paid polite attention to the singer.

As the crowd began to fill the place, as daylight faded to night, as the warm pool of light spread out into the street, the street turned cool, as the usual fog drifted lightly and silently into town. As people came to the door, as they met their friends, and as the speculation about Walker rose in proportion to the degree of misinformation and ignorance, Walker's illness hit a crescendo. He had probably been two days without alcohol, and his body had not been fed. He was a huddled, cringing, terrified mass in the corner of the storefront.

Angel went back to see Walker before going to the café. He needed to see if he was alive, to see if he was in agreement, to take his baby the milk he needed. When Angel came in the door of the empty store, it was a dark and dank corner of nowhere. Walker looked at Angel and did not recognize him. Walker didn't have a good picture of his own face, so the clean, healthy face of Angel Rider did not strike him as anything but vaguely familiar. He had dreamed that a strange man had visited him. At least he thought it was a dream. He slowly realized that the man standing before him had been the visitor, either in a dream or in some alternate reality, and his confusion was reasonable. But he still didn't understand it.

Angel handed Walker the bottle of wine and two sandwiches he'd found, still in their deli wrappers, in Walker's refrigerator. "Here, these are yours," he said, and smiled at the loose pile of rag and bone called Walker Thompson. Walker grabbed the bottle and tore off the cap. He drank a third of its contents and settled back against the wall. Images began to connect. He opened one of the sandwiches and ate it ravenously, along with more wine.

An amazing transformation took place in front of Angel Rider. As Walker came back alive, he remembered where he was, who he was, and what happened. It made him reflective. He didn't get drunk. He didn't get high. The sandwich and the wine gave him a small window of clarity. He stopped eating and put the bottle down.

"Something's going on here," he said. "You've taken my place. You're living my life, aren't you? Your name is Angel, and you have a motorcycle. You're on

some kind of journey, and I told you to tell people you're me. We must be long lost twins."

"We must have been separated at birth," Angel said. He spoke softly and clearly, as if he was speaking to a very ill man, but also to understand his own words.

"Did you tell people you're me?" Walker was still in a dream state, or in a state of mind that was at least willing to accept such incredulous propositions.

"Only one, so far."

"Who?"

"Nadine Cooper."

"Who? Nadine?"

"I met her. She's a friend of yours. She's a *good* friend."

"She is?"

Walker was gradually improving.

"She's the only one who would talk to me."

"You're supposed to read your poems tonight, at a place called the ADC."

"So what?" Walker said, confused. It was hard to fathom the relevance of anything that wasn't immediately in his path.

Angel continued to speak slowly, "When I was at your apartment, I found some poems."

"Then you're going to read them in my place," Walker said, conclusively. The idea came to him as if he had given birth to it.

"If you want me to."

"If I want you to? I couldn't read an eye chart up close. Go and read. Then come back and tell me about it."

It was strange to see a man move so awkwardly in his thoughts and then so rapidly.

"I will."

"How is Nadine? She despises me, right?"

"It's more likely she loves you."

Walker dropped back on his side.

"I don't feel so good." He raised up again. "I don't know who you are ... and I don't know why you're here ... and I sure as hell don't know what this is all about ... but you go and read my poems. Better you than me. And be nice to Nadine, OK? I think I'll just sit here and get my bearings."

"Be careful. You're right on the edge. You're precarious. You have good reason to live. Open your heart, if you can. Speak your heart. If you want to be heard, you will be heard."

Because of these peculiar words from this peculiar man, Walker remembered his dreams.

"I did," he said, startled by his memory. He wasn't clear about the details, but he remembered a few images and feelings.

"I had a dream about a cat made out of fire."

"That's Apollo. He's Nadine's cat. I'm sure you'll get to know him, too."

"This is very strange," Walker said, looking hard at Angel, to make sense of him, but the feeling inside him told him there was no reason to make sense of anything, and his brain was incapable. He had no choice but to accept, and it felt right.

"It is strange. For both of us."

Angel wasn't sure about anything, either. Everything that was happening to him was so far from his own experience that he had no recourse but to trust it and let it happen.

"How do you like being me?" said Walker. It was the first time he had ever thought of himself with any distance. He'd always felt distant from other people, but he'd never been able to see himself with any distance or perspective.

"I like being you. And you will too, some day."

"I doubt that," Walker said. He could only remember feeling regret, and he couldn't imagine it ever changing. He looked at his healthy double, and he still didn't get the possibility. He felt something more like envy. He might wish to be like Angel Rider, but he couldn't imagine that such a transformation was possible. He felt a kind of awe for the man he was near.

"Do you know the future?" Walker said shyly, curiously.

"I only know the other side of the present."

"I don't know any side of anything," said the beaten man, struggling to stay conscious.

"Did you find any good poems?"

"I found these." He showed the folder to Walker. The poet looked at them as he drank more wine. He was able to read them. When he finished, he looked up.

"I can't remember writing these. But that's happened before. Sometimes, I write something and, later, I can't remember writing it. It's the only way I've ever

been able to read my poems as if someone else wrote them. These are good. Did I write these poems?"

"You did."

"Go to the café and read these. I want you to. Absolutely. You have my blessing."

"And you have mine."

"Well, we're a couple of blessed souls then, aren't we?" said Walker, his eyes beginning to droop, his body beginning to drop back to sleep.

"That we are," said Angel Rider.

They smiled at each other, one gently, the other weakly. Walker waved Angel off and lay down, holding the bottle in one hand and the second sandwich in the other. He fell back asleep, still holding them. Angel put the cap back on the bottle, took the sandwich from Walker's hand and lay it on the floor beside him. He stood the bottle beside the sandwich. He covered Walker with a blanket he'd brought from the apartment and left the storefront.

## An Overwhelming Presence

It wasn't hard to find the café. It was the best lit, liveliest spot in town. Angel pulled his motorcycle to a stop in front and dismounted. The hero and the villain arrived at the same moment. Sally Munsey was on the sidewalk. She put her hands on her hips.

"Well, if it isn't the overwhelming presence, Walker Thompson."

Angel smiled gamely.

"I don't feel so overwhelming, at the moment," he said.

She replied, "You've got a lot of nerve, showing your face around here."

"I'm supposed to read tonight," he said to her, almost apologetically, but he believed something good was going to happen.

"You'd better do something pretty damn extraordinary," she said. She relented. "Everybody was really worried about you, Walker. I'm glad you're OK."

"I appreciate that," he said and went through the front door of the café.

As Angel entered the café, Dan Carpenter jumped up and started banging on his table. He was a cheerleader, shouting. "Gentlemen, start your engines. Let the games begin. It's ten o'clock. It's Walker Time. Wah-ker! Wah-ker! Wah-ker!"

He started a chant a few others joined, and most ignored. Ten o'clock was the time Walker always chose to become public. It was the time he'd chosen to begin drinking, but it wasn't the same time every night. Ten o'clock meant party time.

Angel looked around at the full café of happy humans and marveled at it. He nodded to anyone who spoke Walker's name or seemed to know him. His smile was shy, until he saw Nadine. He made his way to a chair next to hers. He held out his hand, and she took it. Angel sat in the middle of the crowd of strangers, many of whom seemed to know him, one way or another, and he was nearly overwhelmed. Jamie Muller looked across the table at Angel and shook his head. He leaned close to speak to Angel and said, "Everybody is an asshole, except you and me, and I'm not too sure about you. Good buddy, you should be dead by now, but I'm glad you're not."

Angel smiled, looked in Jamie's eyes, and greeted him as a friend. Angel and Nadine looked at each other like two happily dazed kids at a carnival. Both drew strength from the contact. Nadine looked at Jamie, back at Angel, and said, "Jamie says you can read any time you want."

"I'm the M.C., so it's up to you."

"Anytime is fine. I would like to read three poems."

Angel didn't know how to talk as Walker. He could feel the old way Walker was. He had taken Walker's ways into himself, but it didn't feel right to be the old Walker. It felt right to be himself. It felt right to be Walker by being Angel. Jamie looked at him.

"Are you sure you're all right?" He was truly puzzled. "You're not drinking and you're so quiet. I mean I've seen you quiet before, but you seem almost peaceful. I don't get it. You are the epitome of intensity, and yet you're serene."

"I guess you would say it's not the same old me," Angel said.

Jamie wasn't satisfied.

"You doing percs?" he said.

"Perks? I don't understand."

"Percodan. Downers. Drugs. You know."

"No drugs."

"No beer, no wine, no booze?"

"No."

"Did a bear shit in the Vatican?"

"Not that I know of." Angel was delighted at the image.

"Well, 'Walker'," Jamie said, a little sarcastically, "You never commence to stop amazing me. So you want to read three poems, huh?"

"I would like to. Yes."

"Well all right." Jamie waved at the girl singing and motioned her off. She finished her song and said thank you to the audience. Jamie stood up and said her name, thanked her, and everyone applauded. He walked up to the performer's corner.

"Now then, Ladies and Gentlemen, and the rest of you, I've prevailed upon the mysterious and sorely repentant, I presume, Walker Thompson, to read a few poems to us, tonight. Three poems, to be exact."

There were shouts and applause, boos and cat-calls.

Jamie waved his big, meaty hands and continued.

"Calm down, because I'm not sure this is the real Walker, coming up here tonight. He isn't drunk, and he's acting really weird, so let's see who this impostor is."

He stopped for a second, looked back at Angel Rider and said, "Nah, I mean, listen up for a change, and welcome back, Walker Thompson."

A remarkable shift took place in the café. As Angel stood and walked to the

microphone, his presence created a ripple effect of calming the rowdy café and drawing everyone's attention. The place became gradually attuned to his persona. As Angel stepped into the center of the light, one person was paying especially close attention.

On the other side of the window directly opposite, in shadow, stood the former Walker Thompson, in a narrow alleyway where the trash barrels were kept. He stood holding the nearly empty bottle of burgundy. He had made his way surreptitiously to the ADC to witness, as if posthumously, his farewell reading. At least it felt that way to him.

To Angel, on stage for the first time in his life, it was a birthing. He stood for a long time, silently looking at the people in the room, one by one, greeting them wordlessly as one clear spirit to another. And another. And another. On and on, around the room, until all were included in the circle of his light. Walker was outside the circle. Nothing had ever been so clear to him. He was outside the circle, and his heart nearly broke to see it.

## The Forces at Play

As Angel read Walker's poems to the people in the café, he read them slowly and deliberately. He spoke them. He told the truth of the poems. He let the truth of the poems speak through him, simply and undramatically. The truth of the poems swelled in him and carried him in waves.

"These three poems don't have titles, so I'll read one, then the other, and then the third. I'm happy to read them. I hope you'll be happy to hear them."

### One

I want to dig hands in my flesh,  
grab great bands of muscle and twist them,  
dip fingers in my blood and slow the flow,  
pull my limbs like a wet towel from the sink  
and squeeze out the filth of old pain, I want  
clean muscles, clean bones, clean blood.

My body is a rug with paths of abuse worn in it,  
with grime of neglect and denial ground in the pile,  
I'm in need of cleansing, wringer cleansing, sun  
in the backyard beating, I am furniture, sat on,  
sat in, damaged by too many cigarette burns,  
stains, vandal slices, vomit, I've taken into  
my shape the shapes of hurt and damage.

A human repository of ghosts and demons,  
I need exorcising, like a house, good in the wood,  
strong in foundation, full of history and use, open  
to the family of love, but tormented with specters  
that bang my doors, darken my windows,  
inhabit my rooms without right.

I want to move unafraid down every passageway  
from attic to cellar, and see the pain, name the pain,  
give succor to the pain, and have it be gone,

be gone from my muscle, be gone from my bone,  
be gone from my blood, be gone from my breath,  
so that love can take up complete residence, and  
know that I am its home and none other's, none  
other can own me, none other can live in me  
and call itself proprietor, none other but love,  
so that we are companion home and heart.

I am home in my heart, and my heart is home  
to my spirit, but I have been a house of death,  
and the old dead belong in the ground.

## Two

I can no longer trust my nature to rebel against  
the intrusions I allow upon it, I want to come clean,  
so the body at peace and at work is unblocked,  
past the petty triumphs of suffering, beyond  
the beaten and the strained in life.

I want to complete the sentence, exonerate  
the spirit, push back the stone of the confined room,  
admit my entire fear, and stand in front of the past,  
I no longer name myself by naming the enemies  
of my heart, I name myself, by naming my love,  
I enact myself, by enacting my love.

## Three

I'm astounded by the forces at play in my life,  
in my imagination, murder and compassion, all  
great loves, all wars, an embrace that becomes  
a kind of strangulation, that changes to tenderness,  
like a breath of air on the fine hair of a leaf.

I'm not surprised that all this happens, I know  
that all this happens, but what if it's more than me,  
and like a great pouring into a small vessel, the vessel  
is broken into spirit and made clear and not, like clay,  
into broken pieces of earthenware.

When Angel finished reading, he was quiet. The café was quiet. Everyone was breathing, better than before. Outside the window, in the alley, Walker turned to one side and put the bottle of wine on top of a barrel of bottles. He turned the other way and disappeared. Inside the café, Angel made his way back to the table where Nadine and Jamie sat. There was no applause. It was quiet for a long time. Then someone in the kitchen put some music on the sound system, and gradually people began to talk and move about. Nadine leaned close to Angel and kissed him on the side of his face. Jamie looked at the table-top and said nothing.

## The Flying Fish

Angel turned to face Nadine. "I have to go," he said, "I have things to do. The next time you see me I won't be the same. The Walker you have known is changing. So much has happened, and so much has yet to happen. It isn't easy. I care about you. I know that. Please don't worry. We're all changing. It seems to be happening too fast, but it will take time."

Nadine was startled. She didn't understand. The way he said, "We are all changing," was confusing, but she was still able to respond. "It's OK, if you have to go ... whatever you have to do ... I know you're going to be all right. Here," she said and put something in his hand. "Take this with you. This will keep me with you. I want to be with you. I mean, I want you to know I'm with you."

Angel looked at the object in his hand. It was a small totem on a neck string. It was a carved piece of wood. He put it around his neck. "I'll keep it around my neck, so you'll always know who I am. Wherever this goes, that's where I will be." She smiled at his meaning. He smiled at his other meaning. Neither of them knew the third meaning of his words. They kissed. It was a private kiss in a crowded café. It was a kiss apart from the social hubbub. It went unnoticed because of the coincidental distraction of everyone else in the room. For a brief eternity, they kissed and no one saw it. Angel left the café in a corridor of light other than the café light. He disappeared in light, as Walker had disappeared in shadow.

Nadine wanted to say goodnight to Jamie as soon as Angel left the café. Jamie noticed he was gone. "Where did Walker go? I didn't even see him go. That son of a bitch. That's typical. He blows in here and lays out a couple of poems, and he's gone. What a fuckedu[ son of a bitch." In his usual language, Jamie spoke almost wistfully.

"Goodnight, Jamie," Nadine said, not listening.

"Yeah, goodnight, Nadine. Hey, if you see Walker, you tell him that was some of the best stuff I ever heard him read. I mean really good."

"I will, if I see him."

"Yeah, goodnight."

When Nadine got home, she ran herself a bath. A bath had always been a good way for her to sort things out. Within half an hour, soaking in a tub, she could shed the superfluous and get down to what mattered. She lay deep in her tub, the candlelight flickering, a few petals from her rose packet floating, listening to Prokofiev, her ears below the waterline, her eyes below the waterline, her forehead

below the waterline, her head submerged, the warm water filling out her long hair like a Lorelei. She was overcome with fear. A sudden shock of fear forced her bolt upright. The image of a drowning child, submerged and lifeless, broke her out of her reverie.

She cried out, "NO!" She couldn't name the child. The feeling had come from inside, and yet the child seemed to be a boy. She felt as if she had been the one drowning, but it had not been her.

She thought about Walker and realized how afraid she was for him. She got out of the bathtub and dried herself off. She got dressed and sat in her chair. She looked around at her pretty room. She was glad for its comforts. If she had a child, she thought, she would make sure it had a gentle room like hers. It wasn't wrong to give real comfort to herself. It was right to take care in a difficult world. She remembered the things Walker said in his poems. She, too, wanted to come clean, and there was pain that couldn't be soothed by pungent oils. Finally, she'd sat long enough, and she reached for the phone. She called Walker at his apartment.

When Walker opened the door of his apartment, he walked into a changed world. He flicked on the light and looked around. He stood in the middle of the room and did a 360 degree turn. He felt like a man visiting the past by time machine. It was not in memory, that he looked at his life. He felt like a voyeur. He had the feeling of being a trespasser. The sense he had felt, since coming from the cafe was of living posthumously. He did not feel alive in any familiar way. He had passed into the gap between what was and what will be. He went on a silent tour of what was. He was tempted to replace the things he looked at, so no one could detect his having been there. When the phone rang, he was drifting in that nether world, a small craft adrift in a dead calm sea, examining the wreckage left afloat from a foundered life. The ring didn't make sense, for a long time. He picked up the phone, out of primitive curiosity.

"Hello," he said, tentatively.

"Walker, is that you?"

"Sort of. Who's this?"

"It's Nadine."

"Nadine? Oh. Nadine. Thank you for being at the café tonight. I'm glad you were there. I really am."

"You sound funny, Walker."

"Well, I'm looking at all these chronicles of disaster ... I mean my old poems. It's making me think about things."

"I got scared a little while ago. Are you taking care of yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told me that the next time I saw you, you might be different. I don't know. I got worried, the more I thought about it. Walker?"

"Yes."

"Walker ... I want you to know that ... I love you."

She spoke in a whisper that vibrated in the depths of her body.

"Nadine ... I want to make sure it all works out."

"What do you mean ... *works out*?"

"You should have what's best for you."

"I'm getting even more confused."

"It's going to work out. I promise. Anyway, I think I ... I love you, too." He tried to talk as if he was Angel. He tried to convince himself, and convince Nadine, that it was Angel Rider who was talking, but when he said, in Angel's place, that he loved her, he felt a twinge in his gut like he felt when he was a kid going over a rise on the highway in his dad's car. He'd forgotten he could have such feelings, but he was already determined on a course of action, no matter what. He had decided to leave. He had decided to give his life to Angel. His mind, such as it was, was made up. He thought it was the only way for everything to work out for everyone. He couldn't imagine any alternative.

"Listen, Nadine, don't worry. It's all going to work out. It is. I know it is."

"Walker, do you still have what I gave you?"

"What?"

It scared him a little, to be found out, not knowing what it was that she had given Angel.

"The flying fish. You put it around your neck. Do you still have it?" She needed reassurance. The connection between them was so new, she was afraid it could be broken. The talisman was a small way of showing the bond.

"Oh, sure, I have it right here," he said. He put his fist against his breastbone and squeezed tight, as if he had something in his grasp. The emptiness in his hand translated to the emptiness around his heart.

"I have to go," he said, quickly.

"I'll see you soon, I hope," she said, hopefully.

"Goodnight, Nadine." He hung up the phone and reaffirmed his plan. He spent the rest of the night putting things in boxes in the middle of the room. He was packing, as if he was going to be gone, for a long, long time.

## A Boy on a Bicycle

Angel went straight back to the store from the café. He expected to find Walker passed out next to an empty bottle and a half-eaten sandwich. He found the half-eaten sandwich but no Walker. He decided to try the sandwich. It was full of the strangest flavors and the most interesting textures. He could identify a dozen different parts of the Deli-Combo. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't particularly good, either.

He decided to wait for Walker. He didn't know where he had gone, but he had the feeling he would be back. He had said he would meet him and tell him about the reading. Angel was content to savor the evening, to feel all of the feelings that had come up within him. All the feelings were still in his body. It was wonderful to feel them and to know they didn't go away, right away. His feelings were a little bit like the Deli-Combo, only better. But he was troubled. The feelings he had, when he was with Nadine, were wonderful, but they were feelings he thought belonged to Walker. She believed he was Walker, and he thought she believed in Walker, too.

It wasn't right for him to have what was meant for Walker. He would have to become himself and not be only part Walker and part Angel. It was time to move on. It was exhausting to feel so much. He'd never known such a need for sleep before. He thought it must have to do with feeling so much. It would be good to sleep. He lay on Walker's mattress, and he fell asleep.

He had a dream. In the dream, he couldn't breathe. He felt cold. He couldn't see. His head hurt. Everything was black. Then he was swept up into the light. His lungs filled with fresh air. His chest filled up with air, like it was being pumped full. There was a sweet, acrid smell. He smelled wet leaves. He was lying on the ground. He was looking up at sunlight in trees. The sunlight blinded him. Then he saw two faces that made him feel wonderful.

He woke up holding the talisman that Nadine had given him. It was on a leather thong around his neck. He held it up and looked at it, in the moon-light from the street. The fog had lifted, and the night was clear. He looked at the carved, wooden shape of a flying fish. It was a fish with fins like wings. He fell back asleep and slept soundly, until he felt a presence nearby in the morning light.

"I've got a deal for you," he heard someone say.

Angel came awake to see a grinning Walker standing over him. Walker's grin gave Angel an uneasy feeling.

"Listen, Angel, I have seen the future, and it isn't me. I'm the past. I'm done here. I want to cut you a deal. You take my life, such as it is, and I'll trade you your motorcycle. I watched you, last night. I was there. I saw it all. You were everything I ever wanted to be. I'm not even sure you didn't write those poems. Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't, but I need to make a change. I need to get out of here. I put all my papers in some boxes, and I put the boxes in the closet. You can have my apartment. You can be king-for-a-day, every day, if you want. What do you say? You're the real poet. Nadine is crazy about you. She loves you. She said so. She's the best woman around here, anyway. Just let me take the motorcycle. If you want, I'll bring it back. No, I'll pay you for it. I have to get out of here. I've got some money. I know my life isn't worth shit, but it sure looks good on you. Is it worth a motorcycle? What do you think? Is it a deal?"

Angel watched a very unhappy man trying to solve his problems. He spoke calmly. "Take the motorcycle. Here are the keys. You can have the bedroll. Do whatever you need to do. But remember, even if you change your life, your life will still be yours. It will always be yours. I can't take your life away from you. It's your life. It doesn't belong to anyone else."

Angel said all he could, but it seemed to have no effect on Walker.

"Angel, I need to start over. I have to do something. I have to go away. I have to."

He was desperate, and Angel relented.

"Take the motorcycle. Ride it as far as you can."

"Thanks, Angel," Walker said, with a tired sigh and a kind of gratitude that made him calm, as if his problems were solved. As soon as he heard Angel agree, he was gone, without another word. He rode out of Winslow on Angel's motorcycle. Angel stood in the window and watched Walker ride away. Angel began to feel an underlying resolve. His journey was at an end. He was sure it was almost over. He was about to dissolve. He watched a boy on a bicycle pedaling down the street. A heavy sadness fell on him, and he longed to be free of it. The sadness he felt was all his own. It was a new feeling.

He wanted to be the boy on the bicycle, young and carefree, happy to be alive, happy to be a boy, at the beginning of a new life. He longed to be something human only, something other than what he was.

He thought of Walker's poems, and he spoke, outloud, with the deep conviction of his heart, from his sadness, his resolve, and from his desire, "I cannot live another man's life. I want my own life. I give my life, to do with what you will.

Whatever you want for me, that's what I want. I'm your child. My life is in you, and you are in me. Let my will be your will and your will be done." Angel's eyes closed, and he let loose a great sigh of surrender.

Immediately, in every sense of his being, he was falling, almost flying. He floated free, unencumbered, willing and safe in the arms of a loving parent, a child tossed in compassionate air by powerful hands.

## The River

At the edge of Winslow, a river ran, deep and wide in some places, narrow and turbulent in others. It flowed in a ravine below the bridge that carried the highway out of town. As Walker approached the bridge on his new motorcycle, the exhilaration he had been feeling changed to dread. The dream he had of escape could not hold. The very freedom he thought he was flying toward closed around him like the void he had felt in his nightmares.

He slowed the bike as he came onto the bridge deck. It was a familiar spot for locals to stop and look at the river gorge. The beauty of the scene was matched by tales of lovers leaping to their death on the rocks below. The motorcycle seemed to stop itself. There was no other traffic. He seemed enveloped in gelatin. He sleepwalked in viscous air, as he stepped toward the railing. He wasn't thinking. All his thinking has failed him. His escape had failed him. He couldn't go back. He couldn't go on.

He stared dumbly at the magnificent landscape before him. His glazed vision focused on a small figure below. It was a boy, flying through the air, at the end of a long rope, his naked body splashing down in a pool of backwater, where the river curved, before it passed under the bridge. The rope swing was not more than a hundred yards from him, but it seemed to him a scene in a movie, from long ago, a faint memory of a nearly forgotten experience.

The boy crawled out of the water and climbed back up the embankment and sailed out again. Walker stared hopelessly at the boy who seemed to be transported by his own delight. Walker's hands clenched in pain. The joy he witnessed cut deep in his heart. Over and over, the boy sailed out over the water, oblivious and free. A knot of grief compounded in his chest and broke from his throat as if a great fist had struck his swollen heart.

"Help me!" he cried out against the roar of the river and dropped to his knees, his chin just above the railing. "Help me!" and his eyes opened once again to see the boy at the peak of his long arc. The sun, glaring off the water, filled his eyes. Everything went white. He lost sight of the boy, as he let go of the rope. In the next instant, he saw the boy again but he was contorted in the air, as he tried to reverse his fall. Something had gone wrong. He had swung out too far. He was falling among the massive rocks that formed the bed of the river as it passed towards the rapids under the bridge.

The boy went into the water head-first, fighting back with his arms, his legs flailing. Walker was horrified to see the boy disappear under the water. He waited to see the boy reappear, but he did not. Walker waited to see, but the water had closed over the boy, and he didn't come up.

Walker burst down the wooded hillside, flying through the trees and the underbrush, his weakened body running nearly out of control, until, at the bank, he dove wildly into the water and swam raggedly to the spot where the boy had gone under. He pulled every last ounce of strength left in his once strong body into the effort. At the surface, above the boy, he took a deep breath into his aching lungs and dove.

He found the boy on the first dive, while nearly drowning himself, taking in water. He managed to pull the boy to the surface, to the bank, and then to the grassy hillside. On the hillside, he lifted the boy's head at the neck and cleared his throat. He blew life into the lungs of the drowned boy. He saw the boy cough and begin to breathe, as the blue faded from him and he began to recover.

"I'm sorry about the booze, kid," he said and fell back. He lay on the hillside. He lost consciousness. He passed out, as the boy came to. The two figures lay side by side on the soft ground, the boy struggling to breathe again, with the soaked and beaten wretched man unconscious beside him. The boy recovered quickly and touched the place on his head where he had grazed the boulder as he went under. It still hurt, but it wasn't so bad. He grabbed his lucky fish, a carved wooden fish, hung around his neck on a leather string.

He wondered where the man who saved him came from. He looked up at the bridge. He saw a red motorcycle and a woman standing next to it. And there was a car, parked on the side of the bridge, so the motorcycle must belong to the man. He thought that was probably right, but he didn't know why he thought that. He thought the man must have seen him from the bridge. He pulled his clothes on and checked to see if the man was all right. He looked awful, but he was still breathing. The boy smelled something funny. He smelled his own breath. It smelled like he'd had a beer to drink or something. And it smelled a little bit like throw-up.

The woman waved at him, frantically. He shrugged his shoulders and waved back. He sure was lucky. It must have been his lucky fish. He couldn't remember where he got it. He couldn't remember anything. Maybe he lost his memory when he hit the rock in the river. He couldn't even remember his name. His backpack had a name on it. The name was ANGEL written in big block letters.

When the woman got down to where he was, he thought he would ask her if that was his name. It was a pretty good name, but he thought his name should be Lucky, because he felt like the luckiest kid on earth, even if he couldn't remember who he was.

## The Face in the Mirror

Walker woke up in a hospital bed. He never felt better in his life. "I never felt better in my life," he thought.

"My life," he said. He didn't have an image of it. The sense of it was more than enough. He felt new. He felt alive. He looked at the details of a hospital room, designed for someone who was not in need of immediate care. It could have been a hotel room, with flowers in a vase, and a view of the pine trees. For a few moments, he had no idea who he was or where he was, and it didn't matter.

Slowly, images began to appear. A boy. A motorcycle. An angel? A sick man reading poems. Not a sick man, a strong man. A rendezvous in the sun with Nadine Cooper and her cat. All the images seem to occur as memories. He was swimming, he was drowning, he was riding into town on a motorcycle. He was kissing Nadine, he was dying, he was alive. He turned in his sheets. He sat up and looked in the mirror. He and the image in the mirror smiled at each other. They knew each other. They were friends. They were not one but two. They were one. Which one were they?

"Angel Walker," he thought, but the thought wasn't his. Whose thought was it? He saw himself, standing above himself. The images folded in and out of each other. He saw a boy in a man. He saw a man lifted out of a boy. Then he was the man lifting the boy. He seem to rise out of the fallen man. Walker was a man who had a dream of an angel, and Angel was Walker's name. He looked in the mirror.

"This is my dream," he said. "I wrote those poems, and I read them."

He looked back at the room. He saw himself as he had been, a man on a wine-soaked floor. A sadness came over him. As he sat up, on the edge of the bed, a gray shape, in the shape of a man, seemed to drop, to slide, to sink from his body to the floor beneath the bed he sat on. He stood, and the dark figure seemed to drain from his body, from his legs, from his feet, to the floor below, even to the ground beneath the building. He felt the pine needles beneath his bare feet. He looked in the mirror, again.

"Angel," he said, in recognition. He was happy to be who he was, whoever he was. He felt like a boy, he felt like a man, he felt like an angel, and there was no difference between them.

A nurse came in the room. "I see you're up," she said, cheerfully. "Would you like a visitor?"

"Who would that be?" Walker asked. He felt a sense of anticipation. He thought, "It's Nadine."

"Nadine Cooper. She used to work here. She's the one who found you. She's been here, off and on, since you were admitted, the day before yesterday."

"She found me?" He saw her, standing on the bridge, by the motorcycle. His lungs were full of water. He was drowned. He was saved. He was waving at her. Three days had passed, since then. He was clean-shaven. In another life, he would have been annoyed. How dare they shave his new beard. He smiled.

"I'd like to see her," he said.

He remembered the kiss, the touch of her hand, her kindness, her forgiveness, how she didn't laugh when he ran his new motorcycle into the back of a car. He found his clothes and pulled them on. He noticed the flying fish on a string around his neck. He remembered her giving it to him. He remembered not knowing what it was for.

"Walker," she said. "You're an angel. You still have the fish."

"Angel," he said, "do you remember him?"

"You saved his life. You're a hero. His name was Angel. He was drowning, apparently, and you saved him. You almost drowned, yourself."

"What happened to him? Where is he?"

"His father came and got him."

"His father?"

"A man. The boy ran to him. They were camping, I suppose. He was so glad the boy was all right. He started to scold him, but he couldn't. The boy was so sweet. Like his name. He said he was fine. They helped me get you into my car."

"What about the motorcycle? Is that gone, too?"

"Gone? Why would it be gone? It's in the parking lot. The cop, I bet you know him, nice man, Jim Krebs, had it brought here. He says he saw you on it, riding into town, last week. Where did it come from?"

"A friend. From out of town. From an angel. Like you, Nadine."

"Me? I didn't do anything." She flushed to think how much she cared for this new man standing before her.

"You don't have to do anything to be an angel," he said. He looked at a woman he seemed to know, better than he thought he did. How had he not known her before? How had he missed seeing who she was? He looked at her with new eyes. She wasn't an angel like Angel was an angel, but she was just as much an angel as he was. Where was Angel? Where was the line between the two of them,

the three of them? He thought of the boy named Angel. And the motorcycle. That was no dream. What was a dream? What wasn't a dream? He looked at Nadine. No time had passed. She was just as much an angel as anyone, and more, even if she didn't think she was. He began to be Walker, without being any less Angel.

"I have a story to tell you. You may not believe it," he said. He looked at her some more. "It was my heart, not my poems, I didn't think anyone could hear, in the cabin, last week. Last year. A lifetime ago. It was my heart."

"I know," she said. "You said I could hear you. I hear your heart, and you hear mine. You always have. When I quit my job here in the hospital, you told me it was a good decision, that it was good for my heart."

"I did? I said that? When?"

"Three months ago. You were drunk then, too."

"I remember. I forgot. I fell in love with you that night."

"For a minute or two," she said.

He shrugged. A brief moment, it had been a premonition from a prior lifetime.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I feel the same, only more, only better," he said.

They stood in the sunny room, and they looked at each other. What do angels look like, when they look at each other? They look like everybody else. And sometimes they kiss. And, sometimes, the love that is their nature, becomes the life they live, like angels in human form.