The Muse chooses to begin Homer’s *Odyssey* not with the hero’s voyage, but with an unheroic portrait of a moping, barely grown boy. Odysseus’s son Telemachus can do nothing but wish for his father’s homecoming, while reminding himself despairingly that his father may never return. For twenty years he has struggled to grow up in the shadow of his father’s memory, oppressed by his mother’s suitors. We see Telemachus in a pitiable light—discontented, but incapable of realizing what to do about his discontent. Finally, one evening, when the grand house of Odysseus resounds with the revelry of the suitors, Athena intervenes to give Telemachus the guidance and strength that his absent father cannot. Telemachus is weary with longing and shame, but because Athena sees his potential to reach the status of a hero worth remembering in story, she inspires him to travel in search of news of his father, saying: “Still, as you are not going to be either fool or coward henceforward, and are not entirely without some share of your father’s wise discernment, I look with hope upon your undertaking” (14).

Athena arrives at the feast disguised and is cordially greeted by Telemachus, but everyone else in the house insolently ignores her arrival. She hears the boy’s story as he makes her feel welcome, then advises him, “You are a fine, smart looking fellow; show your mettle, then, and make yourself a name in story” (8). Such storytelling was essential in Ancient Greek society, as a means of name-making for both teller and hero: the Homers gained a noble reputation for their talents, while their characters got a chance to “show [their] mettle.” Both character and listener, Telemachus clings to heroic tales of his father to maintain hope that one day he will find his father. His journey to visit Nestor and Menelaus invigorates him because of the stories he hears, even though he does not discover his father’s whereabouts. Through story, Athena seeks to unite Odysseus and Telemachus as father and son, and Telemachus, hearing these stories, grows from an awkward boy into a strong adult. Like children who read their favorite picture books even after the pages...
have ripped and the spines cracked, we cling to stories so as not to forget who we are—and to learn who we are to become.

But stories are still only shadows of reality. We cannot live our lives through the story of a distant hero. For twenty years, Odysseus is nothing more than a story to Telemachus.

Jim W. Corder, in “Aching for a Self,” explores the relationship between our selves and our stories, writing that he would “rather we emerged, not as a collective essay, but as an anthology of solitary shouts, remarks, grunts, and whispers” (143). He struggles with his existence as an individual because it is difficult to make himself fully known to a world that does not acknowledge him. He says, “Sometimes, late at night, I think that contemporary theorists have eradicated soul, selfhood, identity” (139). Our stories intertwine, and intertwine again with the lives of our readers as we merge together to create ourselves. But Corder also says, “Words won’t be things, and yet in words we long for the absolute presence of things” (139). Stories are real in their own way, but authorship is not about being “definitive”; it is about exploring what “remnants” of our world we can catch hold of and preserve in our words (144).

Telemachus, too, aches for a self. Heroes were immortalized through stories, the words of a bard, but they are also thus created. They could be acknowledged, known, and cherished” in the Greek world just as Corder asserts we all hope to be in ours (139). Telemachus at first plays the role of passive listener, but part of his discontent stems from not being a hero himself, not being “known,” not having the strength to fight off his mother’s suitors. Then Athena arrives, encouraging him to write his own story, to “make himself a name” and in so doing, dictate a narrative. Rather than living in his father’s shadow, Telemachus, with the aid of Athena, grows into an independent young hero as he ventures into the world, his hope of finding news of his father—and creating his own story—giving him newfound strength.

In “Transfiguration,” Annie Dillard also makes a journey in search of a self, but she discovers that she must leave herself behind to become something greater. She travels to the Blue Ridge Mountains, where, one night, as she reads by candlelight, she sees a moth burn in the flame, its body transforming into a second wick of the candle. The gold moth fascinates Dillard as it floats by; but as the moth’s life ends, it develops another form of beauty, gains another, greater purpose. Through the image of the moth, Dillard explores the commitment she must make to her passion. “How many of you, I asked the people in my class, which of you want to give up your lives and be
writers?”. “Is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?” (399) Moth, fire, and flame come together to form a metaphor for the passion of writing, which consumes the writer’s life just as the flame consumes the body of the moth. “The moth’s head was fire,” writes Dillard in awe (399). Through the death of the moth, Dillard comes to understand this passion: she gives up her life to writing, yet writing is what gives her life, the flame that sparks her heart. She has freed herself of the world to become its observer; as Corder says, “the hope of freedom makes the ground for learning and speaking and writing” (144).

“All things are an exchange for Fire, and Fire for all things, even as goods for gold and gold for goods,” as Heraclitus says. Telemachus, too, is consumed by responsibility and motivation—to be a writer or a hero you cannot go only halfway. When we first meet Telemachus, he is depicted as godlike, “sitting moodily among the suitors thinking about his brave father” (224). His “godlike” quality is as yet just potential, though; at first he does not act, does not justify his epithet by inventing himself, but sits dreaming of his father’s heroic return. But once Athena shows him what to do, he is able to begin that transformative journey in search of his father—to begin his own story by pursuing his own goal. Instead of being the passive listener, the dreamer, Telemachus becomes the actor. And his father becomes the inspiration for a story that is not his own: as Telemachus goes first to Nestor’s palace and then to Menelaus’s, his father’s presence becomes less and less visible. Helen, coming down the stairs of her husband’s banquet hall, recognizes Telemachus immediately: he looks so much like his father that she calls his name without hesitation (24). Though Telemachus is only recognized because he is Odysseus’s son, he is called by his own name. Following this moment of identification, he is summoned back to Ithaca; his presence, as a character and participant, is required if the suitors are to be expelled. Dillard must witness the transformation of the moth to remember the significance of writing a story; Telemachus, however, must make his own transformation to be worthy of a story, must will the destruction of his passive self to come into his own as a character.

This transformation begins because of Telemachus’s own action, his literal journey to Menelaus’s palace, but it can only be completed with the aid of another—Odysseus. As Corder writes, “The self is not unitary . . . but is created from and by groups, history, and social purposes”; we need the collective, each other, to create and preserve ourselves (143). Telemachus shows his heroism when he helps his father seek vengeance against the suitors—he protects his father with a spear, fending off assailants as Odysseus shoots...
arrow after arrow into the crowd of his attackers (152). But it is his father's presence that gives him confidence in his own strength and allows him to see himself as brave, as an individual. It is not Athena or Odysseus who saves Telemachus, as the boy in the beginning hoped; it is the boy who saves himself with their support. Athena's meddling in mortal affairs only enables Telemachus to make his own journey by telling him that he can (153). Odysseus on his own cannot expel the suitors to save the household, but his presence gives Telemachus the support necessary to cut into his mother's assailants—to rescue his mother rather than being rescued himself (152). This action, this rising up to the challenge, is the end and the culmination of Telemachus's story. Dillard talks about sacrificing her entire life to writing to embody the written word. In gambling on his new heroic self, Telemachus sacrifices his own passive comfort and even risks sacrificing his home by helping to start this battle. We, any of us, must take risks and make sacrifices to gain experience worthy of the written word—whether as writers or as characters.

*The Odyssey* shows us how stories that immortalize become immortal themselves. Corder feels that we bring meaning to our existence and discover ourselves by telling our own stories and remembering each other's, but he also confesses, “I still sometimes think that I am real, but my existence is in doubt” (139). *The Odyssey* suggests that perhaps the greatest gift of storytelling is the hope of assuaging this doubt. Stories sacrifice reality to create ideas of life—of heroes or anti-heroes—that we can use as tools to understand and make discoveries about our own experiences. By doing so, we affirm those experiences. Though we may question and doubt the significance of our lives, stories give us the opportunity to connect with others and help us see that we are not alone. Perhaps what we hope for and what we gain from hoping is affirmation of ourselves and the communicability of those selves. And though the stories may be immortal, they are not static. With each retelling, we hear a different meaning, learn a new lesson, because the story grows and changes with us. But we can also grow and change with the stories—whether we are Telemachus, creating a self to grow into the story, or the storyteller, telling a story to find a self. This transformation is how we search for affirmation. And we can only hope that somewhere, someone will hear and understand.

