and he had chased it, finally knocking it unconscious with the racket. He brought the bat around so Alice could see. “Should we keep him?” he teased. “Yes!” Alice said, and then, hugging her shoulders, “No.”

Ruth pedaled faster. She saw Albert seated in the bleachers, waiting for Alice to cross the stage in her cap and gown; Albert leaning back in his desk chair, his papers and books in a heap, his black hair gone white, his shoulders no longer broad. She saw Albert climbing the old wooden steps of their home, his back bent, his legs stiff, his hands shaking. She did not see a small boy in swim trunks pedal his way through the grass toward Ruth and her bicycle. She saw Albert walk through the door of their bedroom, the sunlight brushing across the bed. She did not feel the boy’s bicycle coast alongside hers. She felt Albert’s hand on her cheek. She did not hear the scrape of the boy’s tire on the trail, the slow sound of him turning to pedal away. She heard the mattress’s soft sigh, the soft sigh of Albert beside her. She did not hear the silence the boy left behind him. She heard the sound of her own voice saying, Albert? She heard Albert reply, Ruth.}

A Figment of Your Imagination

Cynthia-Marie O’Brien

I am a figment of your imagination. You may laugh skeptically, and I admit there is much that would seem to prove I am anything but the product of an imagination. I am, of course, the result of a physical act between two human beings. But what I humbly suggest to you is that, while we are all flesh and blood, bruises and bones, hair and scalp, scars and scrapes, none of this can convey the essence of our being.

This essence—if it can be physically located—is hidden somewhere in the connections between the neurons in our minds, somewhere few of us have seen, and somewhere that, unless we are neurosurgeons, few of us can hope to ever physically access. Unlike the outer layer of ourselves which we see in the mirror all too often, and the outer layers of each other, which we see with our retinas, it is commonly agreed upon that the inner workings of our mind are found inside the cerebral cortex. Here is where the imagination works, in ways still mysterious.

I am a figment of your imagination because you cannot know me but through your own veil, which colors me the way oils do the shadows of a painting—always approximating, never exactly capturing the original. Your imagination is bursting with the figments of those created from incomplete renderings you collected when your mind photographed bodies and faces, cataloguing them accordingly in your forever or never scrapbook. Here are a few entries from my own scrapbook. They have been altered since they were entered, as thinking changes ideas, as memory erodes and enriches originality.

Once on the subway I saw a man singing for the spare change of strangers. I knew him to be tall, thin, high-pitched, and wearing clothes too big for his lean frame. I created him to be HIV-positive, a crack addict, homeless, and an only child of elderly, very proper parents living in a vinyl-sided ranch house in a suburb of Atlanta. The yard was tidy in the front and cozy in the back, with two chairs, never three, set out on bricks they called a patio.

Once on the street I saw a woman outside the Chase ATM asking for someone to please help her get something to eat tonight. She was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt and too-tight jeans. I created her arms to have track marks and her legs to be calloused from where too many men had
roughed her up. I created a cardboard box for her to sleep in, somewhere east of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. There was a daughter, too, who lived with foster parents in a just-right-sized apartment downtown, just far away enough that she never frequented this neighborhood, just close enough that they both felt the same breezes, saw the moon from the same angle, were rained upon on the same lazy afternoons.

Once in the mirror I saw my face, the same composite of Mom and Dad that I had always known—large dark eyes, pale skin, huge eyebrows—and I knew myself to be a patient in one of the world's best hospitals, about to be taken by gurney to an operating room to have a benign tumor removed from the left hemisphere of my brain. I created myself to be a young adult close to death; I created myself to be seeing that face for the last time, as I believed the surgery would indelibly alter me, and therefore the way the world saw me, forever. What I did not realize was that what I truly feared for was my imagination, my ability to understand and create the world. Would the doctors' tools pick and prod, would they mix the kernels of my essence, popping their delicate surfaces and rupturing their unique shapes?

When our imagination goes awry, that is when we lose our sense of self. It turns out the craniotomy, the brain surgery, did not physically harm my imagination. But it certainly did change it. For what is the imagination, other than the lens through which we peer out at the ether we call the world? Nothing I had experienced before that moment when I was on my back on the stretcher had made me feel so vulnerable and out of control. Of course, control is largely an illusion, but one that our minds rely on to make us feel safe. Of course, control is largely an illusion, but one that our minds rely on to make us feel safe.

When we stretch this rubber band too far, so that we cannot pull it back in, so that it breaks, this is when we have lost our sense of self. My imagination has perhaps never been as active as when I suffered from extreme depression, for my essence was lost and I was furiously searching for it, drawing the wrong shape again and again, unable to identify my own. All of this I blame upon my imagination, for it turned away from the confident, outgoing self I had long seen as myself and embraced the notion of a terrified failure, barely able to introduce myself to others. The sense of doubt of my own existence was so palpable, I could feel it crawling on my skin as if to ask, Is there anyone under there?

During this time, I frequently imagined myself being caught for all manner of wrongdoings, none of which I had never engaged in, such as kicking off the fire alarm in my apartment building, shoplifting at stores, misbehaving before the video camera in my elevator. My telephone ringing was a sign that a stranger was calling to tell me I was dying. The plots of books were terrifying; the deaths and misdeeds of characters portended my own. Television was nearly as bad, blasting my eyes and ears with images to fuel nightmares. Every night, I died anew. For one stretch, night after night, I was hurled out of an airplane into the dark, waiting waters of the ocean below. One peculiar evening, I was pursued through the halls of classrooms by assassins with sharp, poison-tipped pencils.

Once, I could not get out of my bed, not because of any physical infirmity, but because my imagination tricked me into thinking it was impossible to do so. It convinced me that if I did get out of bed I might walk the half block to Broadway and let a truck have its way with me. I called my brother on the phone and told him I was thinking about getting run over by a truck. He is thirty, but my brother still knows who's in charge in our family. He hung up and called my mother. By that evening, I was sharing a bed with her, something we hadn't done since I was a child. But I had become a child again that day, unable to place myself in context with my surroundings, unable to assess my abilities and limits, unable to satisfy my physical needs for food and sleep. Under the thick layer of my floral quilt, I had shelter covered quite well, though I feared the ceiling fan would collapse on me.

That day, it did not matter whether my legs were broken or not; in my mind, it was dangerous to move them and so I did not. Perception, accurate or not, is all we have. This reminds me of a night, some months earlier, when I was hunched over my keyboard late in the night, so late it was the morning. When I stood up to turn out the light and get into bed, the room suddenly began to move as though the floor were pitching and slanting beneath me. I was standing still, of course, and so was the building. The floor was as straight as the day it was installed. I immediately went to the mirror and what I saw was half of myself—I could see all of my face, but my left eye seemed to be shut or missing, neither of which was actually the case. I put my hand over my right eye. Nothing. Pitch darkness.
I considered closing my right eye, making the darkness complete, and going to sleep, but I feared that I might wake to find the darkness had spread and crystalized in both eyes, become permanent. In my slanted, off-kilter world, I pulled on a comfortable pair of pants over my pajamas and set off for the hospital, one block east and one block north. I do not remember much of the walk, except that by the time I reached the doors of the emergency room, my vision and my balance had returned. Exhausted, and wondering if I had imagined what had transpired, I wanted to turn around and return to my bed. But, feeling that I was teetering on the edge of something sinister, I feared the worst. A trip to the hospital could allay my concerns and offer a simple solution. Or so I deluded myself as I stepped up to the registration desk.

Nurses and aides quickly scurried around me; the attending physician came over. Soon, my body was under investigation for all sorts of ailments seemingly distant from my lapsed eye. I was taken upstairs, always an ominous sign. Sure enough, it was only a matter of time before the doctors explained I might have a hole in my heart. To determine this, a camera had to be inserted into my body through my mouth, down somewhere deep enough to get a view of the ventricles. I protested that my heart was fine, it was my eye that was the problem, but the doctors would have none of it. There was a quick spray of something meant to anesthetize my throat and down the camera dropped.

No, my heart was fine, just as I suspected. I was convinced the problem was in my brain. I imagined it to be an early sign of MS, but I was told that it was not. I was discharged without a clear diagnosis: I had become a medical mystery. Possible culprits were a rare type of migraine or a blood clot which had since dissipated. My imagination was left with plenty to chew on.

It is often in the darkness, as children, that we first encounter the frightening power of our imagination. Raised to be creative and original, I was taught that my imagination was like a power tool that I could plug in at will to do magical and wondrous things like write short stories, design Halloween costumes, and play make-believe. Only after my parents had left me alone in my room to sleep did I discover that my imagination could not be shut off. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the familiar furniture in my room transformed into dangerous objects and shadowy figures. Pulling the plug on frightening scenarios was beyond my powers.

I learned to protect myself from what I’d conjured by staying perfectly still, as though I would be invisible to anything that would seek to harm me. One evening, my parents left the door of my bedroom open and I could see all the way down into the den at the end of the hallway. There was an upright vacuum in the doorway with something draped over it. To me, as I sat cross-legged on my bed, the blankets pulled over my knees, the vacuum was some sort of witch wearing a shroud. I stared intently and steadily at the witch, thinking this would have one of two possible effects: I would disappear from her view, or I would stare her down. Either way, calamity would be avoided, though both would take place only within the confines of my imagination. I made no movement from the bed, but in my mind, I was responding to the threat.

So much of our lives is made up of these so-called imaginary events. These actions are in fact very real in the biological sense of occurring in our brains, but since they do not essay from the external world, they assume the dismissive mantle of imaginary, implying fantastical or nonexistent. But even that which we can see with the eye can be questioned with the mind, or made to have implicit meanings that are invisible to others.

Advanced brain scans intimate that we are beginning to read the imagination. But I suspect that our studies of the imagination will never fully master it, for they have the limitation of being conceived through the very mechanism they seek to study. This alone suggests that studying the imagination objectively is an impossible feat.

What, then, are we to do in this world of uncertainty in which our lives seem to be ruled subjectively by exhilarating leaps and crushing falls of the fickle imagination? For some of us, the answer is counterintuitive: we turn ourselves over to an even greater uncertainty, to another imagination, this one so large and impenetrable as to be comfortably in control in a way that we can never be. I am a figment of my own imagination.

There’s no other way it can be, and no other way I’d have it be. What joys and delights, what horrors and frights it can be bring me, all of these moments and moods giving the meaning an objective life could never share. Yet when I go to sleep at night, I take refuge in the thought that I am also ultimately a figment of God’s imagination. And this hypothesis fills me with relief and anticipation—relief that I am not boxed in by the ideas of my own limited imagination, but that I am created by a boundless imagination that can sense possibilities I could never conceive alone; anticipation that real life is ultimately not about the familiar places and people I can conjure, but about those I cannot yet even conceive.