As memories seep from the conscious into the subconscious mind, they contribute to the larger store of information that, when amalgamated, coalesces into individual identity. Bernard Cooper recognizes the role memory plays in producing identity: he can scarcely “remember the days when [his parents] were” alive; he struggles to reconcile “growing middle-aged” and becoming “lost in the folds and bones of [his] body” with his desire to retain some semblance of a self undiluted by time’s slow, unceasing flow (347). Fumbling in the darkness of his aging mind, Cooper, in his essay “Labyrinthine,” sullenly confesses his uncertain memory and likens life’s journey to the windings of a maze.

Cooper’s reflections on aging reach their greatest emotional heights when he examines life from a child’s perspective. As Cooper recalls his “first maze among the pages of a coloring book,” we see too the innumerable future mazes that composed his childhood; the sense of impermanence and nostalgia this conjures is set alongside the transience of his parents’ memories as they age and eventually die (345). Memory, an impermanent faculty, changes constantly as we reconfigure and re-remember its parts.

Time’s continual advance and memory’s fallibility combine to make the past less certain. Nostalgia loses its authenticity; the memories that underlie it are invariably distinct from the “actual” event they refer to. Every time a fisherman tells the story of his biggest catch, the fish grows until the story-fish is a caricature of the real one. Of course, the storyteller is not a liar; the memory has just been recalled over and over and has re-solidified, slightly modified, after each retelling. Or imagine the children’s game “telephone,” applied across a wider breadth of time. The more time allowed for memories to consolidate, the harder it becomes to discern the line between fact and fiction.

We define ourselves by our past and our memories, but knowing that our nostalgia relies on a sketchy outline of reality calls into question our very idea of self. Knowing the “self” may entail knowing an idea of the self more than
knowing any concrete, immovable self. Imperfect memory and the progress
of time force us to ask how we can define “I” if it is based only on mind and
memory—both unreliable and mercurial information managers.

At nineteen, I have already felt the stab of impermanence that disturbs
the tranquil mind. Amidst the clamor of the summer before my arrival at New
York University, a time that I spent clinging to my friends and fretting over
our departures, contemplation overtook me. While in bed one night, I lis-
tened to musician EMA embroider her sonic landscapes with bleary-eyed
admissions and quiet confessions. How could the “I” of my youth continue to
exist apart from my friends and family? Would my being slip away or slowly
twist into a painfully contorted self, unrecognizable to my loved ones and
unable to retain their hard-earned affections? I, like Cooper, struggled with
time’s incessant and insistent progress, despairing for my family and friends,
for my fear of forgetting them or being forgotten, and for the fourth-dimen-
sional claustrophobia imposed by the flow of time.

Had I read Jim W. Corder’s “Aching for a Self” at that time, I might have
found some comfort. Corder attempts to explain how we construct the self,
particularly when we transpose the individual from person to paper through
writing. His work offers a coping mechanism for the realities of imperma-
nence Cooper describes: he defines the self as something communicated “not
as a collective essay,” in which every element of life and self finds a place on
the paper, “but as an anthology of solitary shouts, remarks, grunts and whis-
kers” (143). Corder advises his readers to revel in the “freedom” that such a
lack of clear delineation offers, a freedom that he sees as “the ground for
learning and writing and being” (144). Viewed this way, Cooper’s struggles
with “sett[ling] for sloppy approximations” of his past seem less burdensome
than unshackling (346). The memories misremembered or reimagined reveal
more of the self than those moments, if they exist, recalled with exact accura-
cy.

Whether welling up in prominent waves or washing away as waste, then,
my memories manifest meaning and identity only to a degree; the past con-
tains “Paul” only in the sense that “Paul” is a character concocted continuous-
ly by every person I meet. The identity of “Paul,” in fact, depends absolutely
upon the person describing him. Question my parents, my friends, my
employers; ask about my wide-eyed youth or my formative adolescence. The
information you glean will represent a “Paul” invented by the teller; howev-
er, these characters—these various “Pauls”—contain only infinitesimal
droplets of “I.” They have leaked from my being, staining the minds with
which they meet until they are canonized as “Paul.” “I,” though, is infinite and
unconstrained, a vast body subject to constant reevaluation and reformation, derived from every dream and thought, whether experienced or not. “I,” like Cooper, consists of much more than memory.

Corder would say that Cooper’s being is encapsulated not only in his recollection of events past but in the sum total of Cooper’s every action, thought, almost-action, and almost-thought, combined with the meaning Cooper creates or does not create from the “scraps”—the “words and pictures” that form his memory (Corder 140). Corder’s concept of freedom, then, relieves some of the burden placed upon memory in the formation of self; Cooper, indeed, ultimately endorses the same approach to self-making, albeit much more subtly, by sincerely recreating his childhood self through the process of recollection, despite declaring recollection to be “as unreliable as forecasting the future,” an act less of recall than of reimagining (346). Cooper effectively creates a self based on his uncertain memories and thus affirms Corder’s method of self-creation. In doing so, he implicitly reveals the importance of communication in self-making; thanks to its creation and publication, his entire narrative, a story based on (unreliable) memories, contributes to Cooper’s self. Not only do readers gain insight into his mind and thus better understand both him and themselves, but Cooper also creates a more revealing persona, like a sculptor chipping into a vast, boundless block of marble, revealing its hidden potential. Corder reminds us explicitly about the “freedom that speakers and writers have” since “no one knows for sure the next word they’ll say or inscribe” (144). Cooper and Corder, speakers and writers themselves, can manifest a wide assortment of selves through speaking and writing. They both realize on some level that the exact details of the past contain only a trifling portion of the self. There is more to this process of self-making.

Cooper’s somber movement from present to past prepares us for contemplation of our own pasts, a process that his essay inspires us to take up. He anticipates the punch of emotion we feel when we are forced to confront impermanence, both through our own experiences and as a result of his revelations of the transience of memory and identity. Cooper remains focused on his youth—his father returning “from work that night . . . his hat wet and drooping from the rain”—until he confronts his parents’ inability to remember the particulars of their past. There, the narrative shifts from the sheltered sheen of childhood dreams to the unadorned reality of “thirty years later” (346). And, indeed, the time he spends dwelling on his youth sharpens the blow of his wistful middle-aged cry for “Mother, Father,” which signals his recognition of the high labyrinthine walls impeding the movement of his
memory (347). Now, Father is gone, Mother is gone, and “it gets harder to remember the days when [they] were here” (347).

Cooper, on the surface, seems to lament his loss of “authority,” a property Corder assigns to “the definitive, the crafted, the finished” form of a text—or, in Cooper’s case, a memory (144). An “authoritative” memory, for Cooper, would not be subject to change or reinterpretation. But Corder’s paradigm delights in the very uncertainty authority eliminates, delights in Cooper’s parents’ inability to “recall the details” of their own pasts (Cooper 346). For Corder, “authority” is less important than “authoring or authorship, the process, the perpetual hunt for texts only to back off, to improvise, to try again . . . in a continuous and provisional self-making” (144). The author, to Corder, does not embalm his selfhood in a finished product, an authoritative text; rather, the continual process of expressing the self becomes a continual process of creating it. In other words, Corder believes that every possibility encountered, including those imagined but unrealized, collaborates to make “self.” Cooper acknowledges this collaboration both at the end of his essay, when he mentions the “long and convoluted” nature of life, and at the beginning of his essay, with his recreated childhood (Cooper 347). Cooper emphasizes the role of memory in the production of “self,” but if we consider his essay’s beginning in relation to its end, we see that, for Cooper, memory is important in self-creation less because of its certainty than because it informs behavior and beliefs. The difference between “authority” and “authorship” translates, in Cooper’s case, to the difference between a definitely accurate memory and the insights offered by the process of recollection itself. Cooper’s memory of his youth and parents, while not exact, still guides the beliefs he expresses at essay’s end and provides the initial impetus for him to write this essay.

Cooper, then, argues that self-making is an uncertain process, not a concrete relation of fact. In doing so, he aligns with Corder, who champions “authorship” as the answer to formulating personal identity, since authoring, as a process and not a product, implies the soon-to-be, the never-was, and every eventuality of being—and writing—that could possibly, at any point in life, spring into existence. Corder argues that authorship, including its products and potential products, constitutes one (perhaps the one) method of fully communicating “self” from person to paper. Though Corder concerns himself specifically with constructing the self through writing, his argument extends to Cooper’s broader search for selfhood. Corder, then, rapturously invites us to write and speak, to create from the “grunts, and whispers” an anthology capable of preventing us from “[losing] one another in the collec-
tive” (143). By Corder’s logic, Cooper alleviates his ache for selfhood merely by making the effort to create a self on paper. Although Cooper cannot “cure” his nostalgia for a past that probably never existed exactly as he remembers it, and although, as Corder says, “Nostalgics . . . can’t have what they ache for,” Cooper can and does construct a self based upon his ache (140). He cannot reclaim or recreate the past, but his nostalgia creates the self he displays in “Labyrinthine.” His nostalgia partakes of the unfathomable and kindles a dim flame of selfhood amidst a lifetime of possibilities.

Cooper navigates life’s labyrinth, recognizing that, even if we accept that the self is vast and infinite, every path, whether taken or left unremembered, contributes to the self. Every attempt at self-making gives voice to a particular facet of the infinite “I,” and over time, a unique identity evolves. Though his memories may be murky, their existence and their uncertainty convolve in the singular identity embodied in the person of Bernard Cooper.

WORKS CITED

