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Peer reviewed

Apparitions of You and Me

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in partial completion of the certification requirements for the
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Abstract

Identity is depths beyond what human beings perceive when they look into a mirror-- rather, it is the rich history of time, people, environment, and matters of the heart that afflict and influence them from their earliest memories to their present moment. This collection of poetry, composed of three sections representative of significant periods of one's personhood, is meant to explore the nuances and complications of one's being both a product of their experiences and carrier of memories from those experiences. The first section is composed of poetry concerned with identity formation in the early memories of childhood, with familial influence rooted at its core. The second section is focused on the movement from innocence of childhood to the infatuations, love, and heartbreak that come with young adulthood. The third section is comprised of poetry that looks introspectively at the former two in order to inform an identity that does not abandon those experiences, but builds independently from them. This collection strives to clarify the immense influence memories and human connection have on the development of one's sense of self. It is in hope that this exploration of identity and one's relationship to its ever-transforming essence will provide better understanding of the significance in claiming one's own identity while, at the same time, valuing even the experiences which may haunt them.

Acknowledgements

This collection is the movement through many memories, people, and experiences that are both lovely and painful, euphoric and unsettling, peaceful and violent, and the intensity and inevitable lulling of every emotion I have ever felt. These poems demanded a constant inward reflection, but they also called upon the guidance, support, encouragement, criticism, and passion of many incredible people surrounding me.

I want to thank Amy Gerstler, my gracious and always thoughtful advisor on this project, for every word, every page of careful handwritten feedback, every cup of coffee, every kind email, and every comforting conversation that did more than help ease my nerves. This collection is my first complete work of poetry and she has been such a presence of empowerment and inspiration for every single word in this thesis. I consider it an absolute privilege to have been a student of hers and to have worked with her on this collection for the past year. She truly is a poet of both the heart and mind.

I would also like to thank Jayne Lewis for her fearless leadership of our program for the past two years. With every obstacle, she has handled herself with grace and has managed to put our needs as students front and center. She has always shown me such generosity, in both her feedback and guidance as an advisor and in her warm welcoming presence. I cherish having blueberry tea, discussing poetry together, while saying hello to her adorable dog. She has such a big heart, and this collection would not be complete without her unique eye.

My family is naturally a huge influence on the poems in this collection, particularly in the first section. My mama, Diane, is the biggest champion I have in my

life and without her I probably would not have my passion for writing. She has always encouraged me to pursue my passions and be my most authentic self. I look forward to the many coming decades of watching reality TV shows together, creating dramatic storylines for our cats, and the silly inside jokes we will doubtlessly make from it all. She is my constant source of comfort and fortitude whenever I am lacking. I hope she knows how much I love her and how much she means to me. My dad, James, is another constant presence of strength and support in my life that I can never fully express my gratitude for. He is such an example of perseverance in so many ways and I hope that one day I can match even half of the person he is. My sister, Erin, is one of the most important people in my life. We have been through a lot together over the years, and she has given me an ocean of memories and experiences that have helped shape me into the woman I am today. I am so thankful for her laughter and for the language we share as sisters. My twin brother, Jeremy, will forever hold a special place in my heart and in my sense of self that nobody else in the world will ever have in me. I love him immensely, and it is my sincere hope that he knows this. My aunt, Theresa, is also a force of guidance and encouragement and I am grateful for every piece of advice she has ever offered me. She has a beautiful heart and I am lucky to have her in my life. To my family, I love you all and I cannot thank you enough for the love and support you've shown me my entire life.

Adara, the closest person I have ever known to be my soul mate, has been by my side for all of the ups and downs of my journey to knowing my authentic self. All of the poems in this collection derive from real life experiences that Adara was there to help me through, and she has done so with humor and loyalty. I think of our days in Ireland often,

especially when it rains or I am sitting in a particularly artistic café. I love her and am thankful to her for being both my family and my best friend.

Lastly, I would like to thank Jan, who entered my life unexpectedly, but perhaps at the right time. My connection with him is one I have never known before, and I do not take for granted the pain and devastation I have felt previously in order to learn how to really love myself before meeting him. I thank him for being one of the best friends I've ever had, and for all of the moments we've yet to experience together.

This collection draws from the real experiences I have had with many people. I am thankful for every single person who has come into my life, even if they are no longer someone I know-- thank you for being a part of this journey. I hope you've also found yourself along the way.

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1 | child's mind

*Scars are souvenirs you never lose,
The past is never far.*

- "Name," J. Rzeznik

childhood is meant to be the easiest and perhaps most loving times in our lives. yet, so much of it is forgotten and difficult to parse. the lapses in piecing together a sequential childhood experience, scene by scene, is sometimes an ineffable phenomenon. it becomes all the more interesting, then, to look at the memories that do ring in loud and clear to us - whether it be a fight with our older sister, a trip to the grocery store that ended in us getting lost from our mother, or staying awake at night with the fear that the boogie man would come for us. there must be something significant in these moments since they have remained with us all this time. there must be some reason we look back on this specific selection and still feel something when we do. even if in just a small way, these memories we are able to recall from childhood seem to have resonated within us and have contributed to shaping us into the adults we become.

mama's bras

my sister adjusted the straps
so they hooked onto her ears
and she let the bulbous cups
cover her eyes like what we
imagined bugs to have
and she ran around the room
arms flapping at her sides
as she skipped over the shoes
and the sleeping cat, the sound
of that aging black fan spitting
behind us and vibrating every
bout of laughter that bubbled
up to my mouth.
i crouched down and dug
through the bottom
drawer, where they all lived,
big beautiful slingshots,
our mama's secrets
that she selfishly kept to herself.
and i found my favorite one,
sea green with lace embroidered
on the front, looking so playfully
at me that i slipped into it like a
backpack and paraded into
the middle of the room, star
of the show, my mama's secret
secure on my body as my sister
giggled and pointed at me, saying
"you're not even wearing it right!"
and the heat i felt prick my cheeks
accompanying the blur in my vision
was only worsened when the door
swung open to reveal our mama,
hands firmly planted on her hips,
demanding to know why we
were running around with what
she called the strangest word--

"her bras"

the universe my father built

the shiny clinks that spill off the rim of your mug:
sweet sugary tides i drink up each morning.
roasted coffee aroma fills the kitchen,
rings of hazelnut staining the countertop while we laugh
about one line from that seinfeld episode last night.
jack's tail flickers over his pink nose while the fan in the corner
breathes life from summer's world outside into our house.
in your flannel pajama pants, you pave a path to the couch,
while mama pads around in some socks that probably have more
life experience than i do; grandpa's clock sounds off
and every wall in these rooms seem to melt together until
the three of us are swimming in every little particle
that makes us--
and i watch jack work his way through a big, sleepy yawn
before stirring milk into my coffee, watching it swirl together
and become something close to perfect.

july and august smelled a certain way

summers at las lomas street
will always mean the most:
running upstairs to change
into bright bathing suits,
still grazed in beach sand,
before the public pool
got crowded, flip flops
smacking against our soles
and the sidewalk, weaving
through gumdrop seedlings
as we raced to the gates.
i always missed a spot
rubbing in my sunscreen,
and you always lost the hair tie
you brought with you for when
the desire to rocket it into
the water and watch me fetch
struck. we reeked of chlorine
when we drippingly trotted
back in towels to beg dad
to make us pb & j's, and
squirmed when he dipped
a jelly-smearred knife into
the peanut butter jar. the tv
talked behind us as mama
typed up her novel-length emails,
and me and you laughed loudly
enough for her to turn around
and bark *cut it out!*
so we'd speak to each other
in wordless expressions
and whisper-giggles, and then
crack up when once again
the clacking of the keyboard
stopped. mama's incense burned
and made our house smell like
christmas.

mississippi kisses

my first kiss lasted four mississippi seconds,
because that was the requirement to get into
the exclusive club the first grade girls
were running that year; our catholic school
blouses were grass stained and pen marked
as we pressed our lips together and listened
to the explosion of giggles that was the signal
for my first time letting another's mouth meet mine.
my best friend was taller than me
when we were six years old, so she
had to lean down and i had to stretch up
on my toes in our plea that these girls
with hands planted firmly on their hips
let us sit in the privileged part of the playground
with them during recess. the cost
was a four-second kiss, and since not everyone
counts the same, mississippi-time
was the only way we could do it.
when i rocked back onto my heels and heard
another burst of laughter, the leader
of the wolf pack pointed her tiny pink hand
at us and howled, "you're still not allowed in!"
before they trotted away in red-green plaid jumpers.
my best friend and i wiped our mouths
and cried, "no fair!" but we both knew
maybe we should have known better.
that same girl who was my best friend,
my first kiss, goes to the same college as me now.
sometimes we pass each other on campus,
and we exchange a quiet smile,
maybe a wave of the hand.

apple slices in the kitchen

the kitchen was always sparkling white,
or at least in contrast with the cherry stained
cupboards you open and closed, creaking
out a melody as i spun around on the lopsided
bar stool. you picked a red apple out from the fridge
and held it up, waiting for my excited plea
that you chop that baby up. and you did,
letting the apple bloom onto the cutting board,
red petals flowering against the white counter top.
i kept spinning in the chair, knees jittering, imagining
the first bite, crisp between my teeth, and how the
juice would trickle down my gums in that one gap
my lost tooth left, where the air always felt cooler.
you turned, water staining the bottom of your
gray t-shirt from when you washed the apple off
at the sink, and slid the full paper plate in front of me.
we each picked one up and crunched into it,
and i laughed when you went, "crisp!
that's the perfect word for it, huh?"
because it really was.

lexicon

sounds you made in your sleep
were what kept me quiet at night--
because i could roll over with my blanket
up to my chin, the fears of what i didn't
know gnawing at my brain, and hear
your own made-up language spit
from your tired lips and my heart
would even its beating,
i could let my breaths soften
to the gentle whistling of your nose,
the funny chewing of your mouth--

and you carried that calming ability with you
into the blueness of day. we'd chase the cat
around until you scooped her up into your arms
and spun, and i laughed so hard that i had to race
to the bathroom, hating that i was going to
miss the next part of your act,
because you always had something funny to say.

even when you ordered me to get you
a cup of water, or screamed down the stairs
that i was the one who fell and made the noise
that woke mom up, i felt this need
growing to be something you loved most,
something you cared about more
than anything else-- the one who
would be included in your stories, who would
sometimes draw out your laughter
and make the freckles scrunch on your cheeks--
and what a pretty face you have each
time you mumble a new word in your sleep,
and maybe i can reach out and grab it--

and part of it will belong to me, too.

egg lips

this morning, my mama,
clad in violet scrubs
and reading glasses
was on her way out, when
i insisted she give dad a goodbye kiss.
he drank from his mug
and kept his eyes on the t.v.
mama tip-toed over my legs
to peck dad on the head,
and when i asked why he didn't kiss
her back, he exclaimed, "i have egg lips!"
and gestured to his plate of breakfast
toast crumbs. the smeared ketchup
against the green-blue dixie logo
almost smiled at me while mama
slipped out the door. i found myself
floating into the day's clouds,
wondering about what they were like
when they were like me-- learning,
curious, still beginning their story
and keeping dog-ears on one another's
secrets. did they memorize every scar
they were shown, every dream that mattered?
i saw scenes of mama and dad,
back when they were diane and jim
and spent friday nights at the pizza place,
tossing philosophy over pepperoni
and laughing with a kind of buzz.
i looked over at dad now,
his horse-shoe haircut and graying chest
not the same 29 year-old kid
who showed up in a hawaiian print shirt
and long white socks-- but his chocolate eyes
are the same ones that looked into mama's
that night years ago when she first felt like
she had found something to hold onto.

30 minutes apart

"who's the older one?"
words we often heard,
when people found out
we were fraternal twins
and their hands would jolt to their mouths,
as if they had never heard of twins before.

my secret was that i loved it,
because it made me interesting.
he was usually judged the interesting one,
and it was like being linked to him
in this way made me worth while.

whenever i look into those coffee colored eyes
and remember how furious he got,
when in 6th grade someone called me a "bitch,"
my chest swells up with a fearful ache
that he is no longer my protector.

in this new world, he is the counterpart i don't have access to--
the first mirror i had to look into,
my first discovery of who i was supposed to be--
part of my identity has taken off,
cleaving "we" and leaving just "me."

color spreading

orange light laps onto the grass
while wild flowers lean towards
a stirring tire swing the size
of jupiter, at least in her mind.
glistening webs of dew hang
like a banner over cracked cobble
stone and a sliding screen door
that's been jilted from the railing
thanks to decades of people
waltzing and running through
and slamming it behind them
in the heat of summer or
an argument. she hugs a stuffed
husky to her chest and watches
an october sunset furl into the lap
of her grandma's backyard.
she doesn't know yet that one day
she'll curl her fingers into the palm
of her grandmother's cold hand
in a hospice room, or that she'll
feel guilt about never knowing
the right words to comfort
her mother. she doesn't know
that one day she'll worry
if her father will be with her
to walk her down the aisle
if he can't beat the thing so many
lose to, and she doesn't
know that while she's still young
she'll come up with no reason
to like herself. all she knows
is the day is falling asleep
into night, and she is excited
to join it in dreaming,
so that she can tell them
all about it in the morning.

broken

i am never happy with how i sound when i try to comfort others--
bullshit, that's what it all sounds like--

"i'm so sorry to hear that," "things will get better,"
"i'm always here when you need to talk"--

i can't reach down far enough to be real,
because when it's too real, i feel like an imposter,
undeserving of this person's confession-- why would they turn to me?

i remember a day when i was eleven years old,
and i had been making mistakes all morning, then spilled my plate
of microwaved spaghetti all over the new hardwood floors--
and mama yelled, "you're a nightmare today!"
and i ran up the stairs and got into the bathtub and cried.

i ask myself why that memory has stuck.
why is that one of the most prominent images floating around in my head
of my mama and i, the red mess on the floor, broken plate--
little shards of what felt like my voice.

and then i see the person in front of me, waiting eyes,
the nervous hands fumbling in a lap,
and my sudden recognition of the silence between us:
"i'm so sorry to hear that---things will get better---i'm always here when you need to talk"
followed by their polite smile, and my polite nodding...

i know when they go home,
my words will have meant nothing.

2 | girl in love

*Well I've been watching you for hours
It's been years since we were born,
We were perfect when we started,
I've been wondering where we've gone.*

- "Murder of One," Adam Duritz

love has no singular meaning. it takes shape in so many different lights, months, dreams, faces, and usually we can never predict its form or when we'll open our eyes to it. we can only draw from the first exposure to love's idea we've had growing up, whether it was what we wanted or not, because up to that point it's all we've known. the difference between a "first love" and a "right love," or a "long-term love" and a "fleeting love" has no bearing on the power each has to influence our ever-changing perspective of what love becomes. definitions and experiences culminate to revise or maintain our views on it-- and more often than not, we find the person we felt would forever cripple us by heartbreak from losing, while perhaps igniting a sense of curiosity in us when hearing their name or seeing them in the same used-book store, is completely estranged to the self we've evolved into since our ended time together. it can even be immensely difficult and conceptually so abstract to recall our former self who had trouble distancing their own sense of identity with that of the other person because of the love they believed they shared. it is this idea of what love between two people should be, and the blending of identities it sometimes causes, that interests and stirs within these poems.

'hello' had eyes

'hello' had eyes
each saturday afternoon
when i walked past the potted cacti
flanking your doorsteps
to ring the bell and the couch springs
squealed as you got up to
let me in

every dream had an apology
attached to its core because we
got into the bad habit of
gripping each other until our knuckles whitened
and your hand couldn't find a smooth path
along my jaw
like it once did

but that doesn't stop me
from wearing your t-shirt to sleep
at night

it's a joke for me to hear that goo goo dolls
song and not picture you moving your head in time,
or tapping your fingers along the keyboard,
your levi jeans that exact shade of blue you
always chose. and i could envision you yawning
while trying to sing the words, because
music makes you sleepy

you were the only one i ever believed in

the answer that can never be found

and even now, i still shiver
when i think about how wonderful
it was waiting outside your house
in my car, my coat snug around me
as i recalled you saying you loved me
in that first birthday card
and how heavy it all felt when i
saw your headlights fall over the driveway
and i knew things would
change

i wanted to write something meaningful

i wanted to write something meaningful
to someone other than me--
perhaps you,
even though i know i shouldn't be concerned.

it's hard for me to put things together
in a logical and significant order.
everything tends to press into one totality
until the sound of your name feels both
gravely intimate and stupidly foreign.

friends still ask me how you are,
and i tell them i wish i knew
and offer a quiet sentiment
about running into your mother
at the grocery store, and how she told
me you're still looking for work--
that your eyes look tired, but you're hanging
in there-- and i feigned a smile
and pushed my cart up in line
while she pretended to look at magazines.

something inside me still longs
for you, because for my entire adult life
you've been the one thing i knew how to love.

and yet i always loved you wrong,
didn't i?

you asked me who would win in a fight

your cheek found its place on
my shoulder, and i was glad
you were unafraid to say
whatever thoughts careened
into your mind, because when i
blurted out that sometimes i couldn't
believe you were a real person,
you only laughed and told me
you understood what i meant.
i felt as if i had stumbled up the stairs
without the lights on, hazy on some high,
and crawled into the tenderness of bed
to close my eyes and let my head
sink down into the pillow.

and as we stood in line at the grocery store,
and laughed at the mistakenly bagged
withered piece of spinach, i remember
letting my gaze settle on your face,
marveling at how i fell into knowing you,
and recalled that night you approached
me with the question, "who do you think
would win in a fight, a giraffe or a kangaroo?"
and i had knitted my brows at you, my
london fog tea heating the palms of my hands,
as you waited for my answer.
that spur of a moment drew
me into you, like an arrow clasping
the string of a bow, ready to take aim
and fire into something i thought
i'd never know.

when i let myself look at you

 it wasn't too late
for this to take form

 so easily
 it all conjures

pictures of you in gray
smoke over your face
like slow summer days

 fading still
 well, i too

like to write all these things
down, and i like to see
everything your soul brings

 waxing towards
 me asleep,

open eyes facing the window
because the moon's fire is alive
in every breath i've come to know

 from you
 lost, and sweet.

thoughts at 4:30 a.m.

if the shape of my hands
means anything to you,
i'd like to know, so i can
reach out and find a way
to make them also mean
something to me.

it's possible i only have this one
moment, beside you on this couch,

and if i miss that, what?

hanging out at his place

the apartment struck me as funny
because it resembled every boy's
college apartment i'd ever walked into--
the big, brown L-shaped couch,
the black table cluttered with trash,
beer bottles, pot, maybe a stray book or two;
and the sheepish mumble,
"it's a bit messy right now, sorry,
i have friends staying over"
when he and i both knew it was always this way.
the funny feeling lingering in my chest
was one i wanted to hold onto,
because i liked that he made me laugh.
i could let my eyes slide over to his,
me grinning absurdly,
and he would remark that my pupils
were always huge when i looked at him--
he liked that.

and i knew i could grow used to that smell
of strawberry vape, framing his face in a way
that made him look like a black and white photograph,
one i'd like to tack onto my wall
so i could wake up to it and remember our night
together. his cat curled up beside me,
and the way he stroked his hand along her spine
and said, "she's warming up to you" -- how
light that made me feel-- i could exhaust the memory
of him holding my head in his hands,
finger tips rough from playing chords, when he
told me i had a beautiful face--
 beautiful
was not something i'd heard for years.

when i woke up beside him,
entangled in his sheets, the soft line
of his mouth showing he'd been asleep
for some time, i knew something that i'd always
hoped i would some day--
and i thought about it the whole drive home
because rain king was the next track, and i knew him better.

you knew what the word "sonder" was

happiness has a face when i get to see him smile--
like the high from that old joint
that i smoked, sitting outside in the back,
while he cooked us steak and mashed potatoes in the kitchen.

"you don't seem real," the words always fell out
of my sleepy mouth as he kissed my face
and told me that i didn't know what i was saying.
truthfully, he was a makeshift soul who strolled straight into my dreams
one afternoon, the tv noise blurring out all the fear
that usually ate me alive.
i let him press his palm to my chest
so that my heartbeat could finally be LOUD.

it's 13 days 'til halloween,
and i see us dressing up in front of the mirror,
pretending for an evening
because the world will let us that day,
and as i pull mounds of tulle to my waist
and watch as he paints his eyes
i feel that thud again,
and this time his eyes flicker,
the coffee pot light blinking, the youtube song buffering,
and his lips sound out the words:

"i just realized right now that you're actually real."

a litany

it's noon, and i am thinking of you:
your hands, your smile, your gaze, your hair, your
self-described "chicken legs" that you still show off
with a quiet confidence in little 80s gym shorts that
i like to ask you to dance in; your laugh that you can't
control, your snoring, your puffs of vapor, your twitches,
your music, your padding around the kitchen while you cook,
your sweet moans, your kisses, your bed sheets, your
calluses, your filler word "fricken," your tendency to deflect when
things get too serious, the way you ask always on cue,
"wanna smoke?" , your scruffy chin, your tongue, your
voice that can't help but sing, your tattoo, the gap in your teeth...

she couldn't help but cry when laughing

ripples fanned out,
where your rubber rain boot
smacked the puddle, and the
black streets of grafton seemed
especially quiet that evening.

you had your camera in hand,
pointing it at crowded pubs
and colorful doors, the amiable
cats waving their tails at us from
beneath the shelter of archways,
and i had my hands deep in
my pockets, moving forward
like i was a roll of film
with no real
end to anticipate.

we spent many days like this
that summer, and your once
red-rimmed eyes were now
so lucid that as we laid our heads
down on the garden grass and looked
up at the shifting clouds, in the drizzle,
i had the thought that you were
the only thing i really knew
like the back of my hand.

the dublin winds yanked
my umbrella up and i felt
embarrassed and frustrated as i
fumbled to adjust it, and you
laughed so hard that your
eyes were raining, little photographs
of the sky, and when we finally
reached the coffee shop
and ordered our teas,
you were still wiping your eyes,
shaking your head and mumbling,
"i hate these damn umbrellas."

the lid to my breakfast tea wouldn't
stay on, so you did me the favor
of holding your umbrella over us both
while i tried to drink without spilling

and i knew then that i'd know you until i was up there
toeing the skyline, watching us
like little shadows stretched over cobblestone,
the movie we made that summer
forever reeling in my mind.

to the person who tried to break me

why is this one so hard to write...
i try to open up my chest and let the words fall out
but they beg me to leave them alone.

never thought it'd be a part of me,
didn't think i'd ever have this kind of story
that made me ashamed to look at my own mother.

should i address it to "you," or "him"?
never thought i'd feel sick to say a name.
didn't think i'd ever lie to my best friend about my night.

i woke up that next morning throwing up each blurry scene
--yes, this is to you now--
over me and touching me and handling me
like i was spare change,
a lucky coincidence you happened upon
in the downtown bar on your way to the parking garage.

my own voice was hideous to me
when it asked you to please stop--
always so polite, even when collapsing under pitch blackness.

there's no need to go into detail,
since you probably remember--
i just wanted you to know

you think this world is yours
but someday you'll look around,
and watch it all go up in flames.

here's to your memory

i celebrated 6 months without you
by peeing into a plastic cup at my school's health center,
with a pretty needle pricking a thread of blood
while i bit my lip to keep the tears away.

i thought of you the night before, wondering
what kind of thoughts crowded your mind lately ...
did you hear back about the job in chicago?
and were you still training for that marathon?
and i found myself needing to know
if you were taking good care of your tattoo,
the one you swore you'd never get,
and if you ever lie awake wondering about me.

needless to say, this little appointment
is not something i'd share with you--
but then there are a lot of things i never did share with you.

and though i think of us now without regret,
in its place is something like sorrow.

sweet soul

i had watched him all these years
with a glow of curiosity and affection--
each head-butt, each barely-audible mew,
each time he circled around my legs
in the kitchen and allowed me to scoop him
up in my arms just to dance.
i had watched that calico pattern
fade from his right eye, and witnessed
each day he scampered into the house
with a dry leaf stuck to his fur.
and he had watched me
cut my own bangs in the bathroom mirror,
cry over the boy who broke my heart,
burn cookies in the oven, beam
with pride at making my own way--
his were the little prints marking my windshield
that always made me laugh before starting the car.

sweet souls touch your heart.
he spent 15 years
curled up beside my bed when
he wasn't off being his own hero--
my sweet jack.

falling asleep in memories

piano keys look like
a row of dormant trains
in a black and white
film that ghosts made
and starred in before i
was born. my drunken
stupor makes mustard
on drive-thru fries taste
like the first time i went
down on him-- not what
i expected, but so gratifying
i'm hungry for more.

the popcorn ceiling above
our heads is sort of like
the snow from our cabin
trip last winter, when
we dived into the white
and spread our limbs, making
shapeless imprints that he
called "snow people."
"why not snow angels?"
i asked him. he laughed,
his cheeks red as stop lights,
"because they're in the sky,
and we're down here looking up."

we share the couch now
as the last people shuffle out
and i think of his hands
caressing the keys, so that
they'll become music
that lulls me to sleep,

the way song birds or angels
tuck in the stars.

first impressions.

pink pants, to match yours,
a t-shirt you called cute,
my hoodie and a sinking stomach
telling me to turn the car around
right then and not bother--
these are the things i had
wearing me down that first dinner.

you were my constant
forethought and afterthought,
and i poured myself
into your arms each thursday
afternoon you walked out to
meet me halfway, before
we climbed the steps of your
building, the chill of the fridge
grazing my skin while you
handed me a beer.
your bed was my daydream,
your smoke the clouds i fell through,
as the wrestling turned into ignition.

i think it was your silence
at the dinner table, our silverware
clinking against ceramic plates
of steak and potatoes, that
told me the light of us
was gone. i recall
the glare of streetlights
on the phantom rain's
blanketed streets as you
held me, and i almost felt
i'd open my eyes to
that initial sight of you--
fresh haircut, dark jeans,
the nervous chatter that
you had pink pants, too,
just like me.

i tried to stay clean

tonight has been two glasses of wine,
paging through old laments in diaries,
scrubbing peroxide into a red stain
on a white t-shirt that once belonged
to you--
and that rouge is like a photo
of your blushing cheeks,
that night you opened up
to me--
each word a drop of promise.

perhaps more sobering than seeing
that shirt would never be
completely spotless again,
is the understanding that--
in your eyes i had no color,
unworthy of the risk.

i took my innocence for granted

waking up with the feeling
that hammers are pounding my head,
the room is spinning beneath me,
too fast for me to reach out a hand
and slow it down with my breathing.
i am dropping things, seeing
little bursts of color in peripheral vision,
i cannot make sense of reality and dreams,
and as i finally gain enough energy, or
courage, to get up from bed and look
in the mirror, i remember
when i was younger, and things didn't look
as scary, or feel as painful,
as they do now.

3 | free

*and i ran back to that hollow again
the moon was just a sliver back then
and i ached for my heart like some tin man
and when it came oh it beat and it boiled and it rang...it's ringing
- "The Stable Song," Gregory Alan Isavok*

identity is a haunting thing for many people. it becomes muddied by reputation, assumed by stereotypes, questioned by the past, and made anxious by the future. it almost seems, at times, we spend so much time explaining ourselves and who we are, that we don't always remember to feel alive while we're still living. identity feels so much of a public performance now that we don't always look inward to meditate on our own intimacy between us and whatever we consider our identity, and its many parts, to be. this absence of connection to ourselves can become even more distanced when others step into the picture. when we fall in love, or return home to care for our parents, or meet new people who spark a fire under us, it can feel natural to see ourselves in them, and them in us. we can feel so close to them that we forget about ourselves or question parts of us we had always felt sure of. this blending of identities isn't necessarily good or bad-- as most things aren't just good or bad-- but is easy to overlook. many times, it is falling in love, caring for others, and meeting new people that help us to grow. other times, they halt us and have us looking around for where we left ourselves. these last poems illustrate the beauty in finding ourselves again after we've been lost. everything outside of us has scattered their seed within our minds, our bodies-- and different wildflowers, moss, cacti, trees, and sometimes weeds have bloomed. i've learned i can admire the flowers without having to tug out the weeds-- and that even the cactus can blossom in its own way.

i am free.

these thoughts come from the sky

the walk from my car to my door
makes me an acrobat. each footstep careful,
beneath the circus tent of the sky's
changing colors, the daydreams shooting
from my chest like cannonballs,
roaring like lions-- the tightrope strung over
the blurry space that exists between
reality and make-believe;
and this kaleidoscope-dome above me
demands my recognition that i am
just a small part of its design, unable to grasp
every depth or know any answers--
then i think of you,
and the coincidence that was us
meeting in this life...
and i feel i may have moved one step closer,
past that fog of imagination,
almost to the other side, where i hope
the door will be open.

february carries us

J's gaze is honeyed
steeping tea.
his hands own
piano keys,
they know the
music by memory.

J is nervous that i
chose to stand
next to him, but i
did so in hopes he'd
hold my hand, and
i am nervous too.

i don't need him.
i've fought hard
for myself, and won't
lose who i've become
to the daydream of us
i pick out during

dinners, like weeds
in a planter full of
roses. but i will
confess that i undress
the possibility
of him and i

down to its skibbies,
until i'm left blushing.
J doesn't hold my hand
at this light, but we
keep walking side by side.
the galaxy from inside

his lungs blooms into
the atmosphere again,
and i feel a warm touch
on my hand, melting
me like ice cubes
in a drink left out in summer.

a little bird hopped near my foot

school bus exhaustion ate the air,
similar to the way a lit cigarette bit
into my lungs. i only smoke at parties,
though those words have crept from
defensive honesty to avoiding eye
contact as i say them. a woman
was sitting near me at the same
bus stop and had hair like elbow pasta.
she was deeply entranced by easton
ellis, whose mind bore itself to her
on the pages in her lap. i felt
something watching her facial features
drip in concentration, and i think
i'd call that feeling resentment or envy--
whichever was softer and easier
to gulp down. i lost the ability to read,
surrendered it to a crashed
train of thought whose wheels were
still cranking in a mistaken perception
it was going somewhere. i don't
remember how to develop fixations
for a piece of fiction, taken from the
heart of a person who never
had me in mind. i prefer to blame
it on substance abuse, too much
intake of language and characters,
and it fried my brain-- but
i don't believe it.
the bus-breath summoned my
time to go, so i packed up camp
and walked to the doors. i hoped
for the woman to get on this bus,
too, but as i took my seat, she
kept hers on the bench, head down.
the doors flapped shut
like butterfly wings.

quilt

paintbrush in the sink
means jim is burning
the candle at both ends
in the garage again.
dryer full of wrinkled
clothes means jeremy
left for the night, never
saying where he goes.
comb full of cat hair
means diane sat in the back
cleaning fleas off buddy,
while mumbling her prayers.
sudsy razor in the shower
means erin forgot her
toiletries in a rush
to beat the clock, and
would come back
later to pick them up.
three-day old coffee
in the cup holder
of my car means
adara sat passenger
side singing sad
love songs on our
way to claremont.
white t-shirt with
a pink stain means
i still wear what
used to be jare's,
while i drink wine
and give myself
a rare moment in
time to miss him.
box full of kitchen
appliances and frames
collecting dust in
the corner of my room
means my dreams
5 years in the making
found an early tomb.

i still keep looking
for what i'll mean.

saturday afternoon around dinner time

my clothes crackle and hiss
with static as i sort through them
in the laundry basket. sasha
stretches beside me and i know
it's a good one because her
legs shake until she settles belly
up like jelly on a plate. sun
catches her whiskers and she
blinks open two blue eyes
and purrs. i plan on cooking
fish today, with some zucchini
and baby carrots-- i'll have to
check if there are any lemons
in the bowl. the smell of citrus
and roasted paprika will live
in my kitchen, and sasha
will come bounding down the steps
when she smells salmon--
she's got a bloodhound's nose
for meat. i watch her now,
twitching softly in a dream.
i gather my coats quietly and go
to the closet to hang them up.
sasha stays sleeping while i go
downstairs to make dinner for us.

both a weed and a flower

J is the first person
i've ever said the word
to-- out in the garden
with the blanket from
his car pulled around
my shoulders, and night
cloaked over the sky
like a t-shirt tossed
onto a lampshade.

i told him what happened
to me last summer
and watched his eyes
change. the tears
darted down my cheeks
like hummingbirds.

i felt J's arms
wrap me into silence,
my breaths stilling
like the last ring
rippling across water
from a skipped stone,
and when he looked
at me again, i was
a dandelion in his hand,
before the winds picked up

and i

scattered.

Afterward |

When I began this collection, my initial vision for it was poetry calling upon childhood experiences and relationships. I had developed an intrigue in this particular part of life due to the evanescent properties they possess. I found it more difficult than I had anticipated to actually draw on particular memories from my childhood years, with the exception of what felt like very insignificant memories. The memories I combed my mind for with the intention of finding something containing this great depth failed to turn up. Instead, I found a sudden image cannon-balling into my brain of me as a young girl crawling into the bathtub to cry. I remembered when I was a little girl at Catholic school being dared to kiss my best friend to join the girl's club during recess. The evenings when my older sister and I would look through our mother's closet in secret came to mind. All of these things, on the surface, appeared mundane and unimportant to me at a first glance. But they were recurring. So, I stopped and paid attention.

I realized that these seemingly inconsequential moments from my childhood had an immense amount to do with my perspective on relationships. The dynamic between myself and my parents, my sister, my twin brother, my friends-- they all shaped a certain idea I had about the way people see me and the way I should see other people. This thought created an enthusiastic curiosity about the specific moments that have informed my sense of identity. On the topic of identity, I knew that the people and surroundings one grows up in have a direct influence on the personality, perspective, and attitudes one comes to form in relation to themselves and others. However, I had always assumed that the little moments did not account for much of this. Now, I've come to believe they have everything to do with all of it.

I decided to create a collection of poetry that engaged with these seemingly insignificant moments and from them uncovered the influential power they had on my identity. While I did begin this exploration by sifting through those childhood memories, I realized quickly that a lot of my identity is still forming as a young woman. I began taking a look at some of my relationships in the interim of childhood and my present, and found that it was the stage of my life most influenced by the people around me. This stage of life, moving from the innocence of a child to an adolescent and climbing up to the years of my early 20s, held many relationships that I considered precious and, in ways, sacred. I entered into relationships with people I put onto a pedestal, and whom I needed to validate my worth. These relationships were beautiful when they first began, allowing me to feel things I wasn't sure I could possibly feel to such an extent. But when they ended, I felt my sense of self had collapsed in on itself as the tie to that person was severed. Even in moments of trying to encourage myself to pick up the pieces and look inward to see myself, I couldn't help but feel the phantom limb of that broken relationship haunting me in my day to day life. Throughout this collection, recurring images appear-- a sleepy gaze on your lover's face, clouds of smoke, a dinner plate of steak and potatoes, even a name. These are embedded in the collection with the intention of portraying an authentic portrait of moving through these relationships and their consequential affectation on my perception of myself. In this same vein, the poems in this collection are often written in a stream-of-consciousness and narrative style because they are rooted within real memories and experiences.

The relationships that contributed to my shaping identity did not suddenly vanish, even after I felt I left the pain from them behind. I remember sitting on my bed one day,

folding clothes from my laundry basket sitting on the floor, with my cat Sasha stretched out beside me. It was a lovely day outside, and my open window allowed a dewy orange light to fade in through the trees while birds chirped. Sasha was sleepily stretching her limbs and I was busy folding one of my blouses while I mused about what to cook for dinner. It was right then that I had this hard-hitting acceptance of an idea I had so badly wanted to believe in for many months following those ended relationships and my ended sense of self. I thought to myself: *I am finally happy on my own. I feel free.* I finally felt like I knew this instead of just striving toward it. I had this self-assured security in my own body, my own emotions, my own thoughts. I no longer needed another person to help me see myself as someone good or complete because I finally saw myself as complete on my own. It was a liberating and moving moment for myself, and it was mine alone.

The third section of this collection was the most special for me to write for this reason. However, it was also the most difficult to write. My exploration of identity was more entirely introspective in these poems and that was both invigorating and full of panic, just as most new beginnings are. As I was writing these poems, something important dawned on me: even in my newfound freedom, the ghosts of my childhood and former loves were not going to leave me. I could feel that they were no longer painful or in control of my perspective-- but they were still with me. The title of this collection, *Apparitions of You and Me*, comes from this notion. Even when we reach this space of liberation from the things that have haunted us, our pasts and the prominent memories that form these pasts still cannot be forgotten. Nor, should they, I've come to believe. Rather, they offer a relative perspective to grow from. They offer reflection of a time

when I wasn't as strong as I am now. I can look back on even my most throbbing memories, and even when I don't see good in that moment, I see good in the person I've grown into from that moment. And somehow, that's everything.