In considering how best to introduce these photographs, I found myself thinking that my standard, art-historical tools seemed somehow inadequate. In his films, photographs, paintings, and sculptures, David Lynch has consistently touched upon themes that at once integrate and transcend intellectualism. For this reason, I decided to tell a story and to ask a question to which I earnestly seek an answer: Have you ever seen yourself in a picture with someone and found yourself wondering whether that person is, or was, real?

Memory plays tricks, but sidewalks, restaurants, cafés, and other elements of the built environment are always there – perennially solid. Seeking such reassurance, I have come to define one of my most significant relationships through the places we went to together. Our time together was like a movie, played out in front of glorious backdrops that can so quickly be dismantled, recycled, and put away to gather dust. He and I will probably never see one another again, and yet still I wander through these spaces, believing, perhaps quixotically, that this will bring me closer to the memories of him that now return to me only in echoes. Of course, the role of the flâneur begets a fundamental estrangement; one can wander all day and never feel connected to a place.

Our first date began at a diner called Big Daddy’s, my favourite spot to frequent with college friends during a summer internship in New York. The walls are lined with every piece of clichéd Americana you can imagine. So much, in fact, that the only thing I remember with surety, among the visual flotsam and jetsam, is a signed picture of Tony Bennett. There is always a little stack of Trivial Pursuit cards at each table and the questions are impossibly difficult. This is the diner where I had my first gay crush, where I heard that Amy Winehouse had died, where I was when marriage equality became the law of New York.

Four years later, I sat across from the most handsome boy I had ever seen. I insisted that they make me a dirty martini, though it was definitely not a standard order in Big Daddy’s. I don’t recall what we talked about. I only know that we had a good time. At least, I think we did. I ordered tater tots (Big Daddy’s is famous for its tots) and a breakfast burrito. I paid the bill while he was in the bathroom and it felt flirtatious, even a little superior. He lived with his parents, after all, so it was an attempt to establish dominance as much as it was an act of affection.

We wobbled down to Washington Square, both so wasted that we started making out right by the arch. The world was spinning and I was convinced that everyone was watching, though I’m sure in retrospect that no one saw nor cared. I put my hand down the back of his jeans and felt his butt, while my other hand slid up his shirt and caressed a nipple. I thought how punk and how vintage New York it would be to hook up in the park. But I have a prudish demeanour and didn’t vocalise this fantasy. He said he had to return to Long Island and I all but begged him to come back to Brooklyn with me. He had to be up early, though, so he declined. It’s a mystery what exactly was said or how...
I got home, but I can still see the glow of the arch at the entrance to Fifth Avenue. A couple weeks later, we ate at an Italian restaurant across from the Brooklyn Academy of Music. I had gotten us tickets to see the Kronos Quartet, since he was getting ready to make applications to music school. He was a very talented composer, although I minimised his skill in order to feel like the accomplished one. After a couple glasses of wine, he asked me why I had no eyebrows, and I cavalierly explained that I had shaved them off prior to a suicide attempt, the summer after my senior year. It was — as my less sensitive friends like to remind me — a Britney Spears moment. As I relayed the story of my overdose and subsequent time in an asylum, he looked perfectly unperturbed. He was the only person outside my immediate family and a few friends from school who knew what happened in its entirety.

When we were finished, I walked him to the train. At the entrance to the station, a homeless man sat by the door. It was a simple glass door with a grimy metal handle. There were many entrances to choose from, but for some reason we made for the one farthest to the right, in the corner. He opened the door, stepping past the person huddled next to it, and suddenly I said, “Aren’t you going to kiss me?” He turned, and seemed to look past me. He approached slowly, and we exchanged a tepid smooch, but it didn’t matter to me. I could see out of the corner of my eye that the homeless man was watching, which had been my plan. All I wanted was for a third party to see. The man and I made eye contact. There was no judgment, only acknowledgment. I should at least have given him a dollar.

The next day, we met in Union Square, where our first date had begun. We walked back to Washington Square park, as if magnetically drawn there. Or perhaps we were just lazy. He told me that he needed something simpler, someone without so much emotional weight. The story of my attempt at suicide had broken him. He thought we should just be friends. As these words reverberated throughout my body, I watched a pianist play some classical piece by the park’s famed fountain. I could hardly hear the sickening rejection, because I was so entranced by the music. I wished I knew what tune he was playing. Before we parted ways, the boy with whom I had fallen in love said of the pianist, “He’s not even that good.”

The pianist often sets up in the very same place he did two years ago, with an overturned hat for tips. I don’t give him money, as his hat is generally brimming with bills, but I always listen with the intensity of a music aficionado, although in truth I couldn’t tell you the difference between Beethoven and Bach. I’m no longer in contact with anyone who met this boy, and have no confirmation that any of it actually took place. When I walk through the park, however, I feel assured that it happened. I remember what his skin felt like, the curvature of his lips. I remember how his glasses caught the light. I remember that music diffusing my sorrow.