

*Twenty Years of Life: A Memoir, Written in Essays and Poems*

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Undergraduate Research Day

Mentor: Harry Umen

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Excerpt from: *Twenty Years of Life: A Memoir*

**Cecilia**

She taught me.  
*She* is the one who taught me.

I am a thief.

I am *the* thief.  
Stealing, owning nothing,  
belonging to no one.  
Yet, I twist and bend  
in the shadows;  
trying to make the perfect shape,  
but I am not that flexible.

I am reckless, half hearted,  
my pulse barely there.  
I am a zombie, half alive,  
yet I am decomposing,  
not eating, rotting and smelling.

I am what *they* made her.

A slut.

Not a hand hold, not a kiss, not romance.  
I am sex and dirty, never given the chance.  
I have become her for survival.  
I've become what I have feared,  
but I fear nothing.

I understand this is a dangerous way to live.

Because I am hopeful, yet useless.  
A scream among the noise.  
So I stay silent and pray.  
I *pray*. She taught me how to pray.

Why did she teach me such a useless talent?

This poetry excerpt is from *Twenty Years of Life: A Memoir, Written in Essays and Poems*. In this piece I am questioning my mother and how her past life influences me, now that I'm around the same age she was when she started living on the streets of Washington, D.C, the place where I was born. Living as she did led my mother to become addicted to cocaine and alcohol, which led her to start prostituting. This clearly ended in my conception.

I didn't realize until I finished the last essay of my memoir that the story I was telling was about my mom and me, and her influence on me, teaching me, inspiring me, supporting me, and loving me. It wasn't until I was editing each piece, which consists of both nonfiction essays and poetry, that I noticed that I had included my mother in almost everything that I had written. I love my mom and she is the one who gave me the strength I needed to write *Twenty Years of Life*.

The concept for *Twenty Years of Life* started in my nonfiction class last spring semester, during my junior year. That year was really bad for me. Not a lot of good came out of it, but during that class I was able to start figuring out the events that were happening in my very hectic life. Writing nonfiction was freeing in the most amazing way. I was able to be honest about the tragedies that were afflicting me. What's funny is that I never thought I would fall in love with creative nonfiction the way I did. To me, it sounded like reading someone's whiny diary and because of that I didn't find the idea of writing about myself so appealing.

My first submission was due and I wrote not about myself, but a story of a boy named Neariah, who had noticed my cut marks one morning and told me to take better care of myself. I was stunned, shocked, and speechless. I didn't know what to say to Neariah before he left, but I knew that I needed to say "Thank-you." By writing an essay called *Thank-you* and submitting it, I got a chance to explain—to myself and others—exactly what his words meant to me; and how

much someone's words can mean to anyone. After that first submission, it sort of took off. Soon I was writing essays all the time and I had to do my Honors 401 Thesis, which is how *Twenty Years of Life* came to be.

The themes that occur in the memoir are the same themes or events that have occurred in my life. This includes: self-discovery, depression, suicide, self-injury, drug and alcohol addiction, pregnancy, relationships, love, sex, and lastly sexual assault.

Because all of these very intense and life changing events took place around the same time last year, I broke. And while I've been broken before, this time around I wanted to heal. So, after I put myself in a very dangerous situation in June, after the end of my junior year, I realized that I didn't want to be reckless anymore. That maybe I wanted things to be different.

*"I don't know the exact moment I decided not to die. I guess it happened simultaneously when I decided not to be reckless anymore."* This is the first sentence from the title essay "Twenty Years of Life." It's a very "funny" sentence because I've always said that I know how to die. And I do. After nine suicide attempts, I have come to the conclusion of how to end things. I'm glad I never succeeded, but I've had this feeling of depression and suicide since I was three, around the time I was thrown into foster care. I had to grow up fast and these feeling grew with it.

By the end of last summer, before my senior year, I was twenty-three and figured if I had spent twenty years of dying, of living in the idea of death, then why don't I spend another twenty years of living, with the idea of life? *This* concept blew my mind. I never thought it would be possible for me to do that. But I dove in anyway and began to understand that there were a lot of things that I desperately needed to get over and let go of, in order to be happy. Especially to be happy with myself.

What *Twenty Years of Life* turned into, among many things, is a journey toward respecting me. Because of my assault and the past experience of being molested when I was four, I had never felt safe. That lack of safety was taken advantage of so much in my life, somewhere along the way I lost respect for me and my body. This is what the photography part of my thesis project is about.

*Twenty Years of Life* isn't just a written memoir, but a multimedia memoir.

I found my passion for photography when I was six. The afterschool program I was involved in taught us how to develop our own pictures. And while my interest grew, it wasn't harnessed until I joined the yearbook staff during my senior year of high school. From then on, I took photography a little more seriously, but it was when I took the digital photography class during my sophomore year of college that I realized I had an eye for it.

Photography is a beautiful way to tell a story. They say "A picture is worth a thousand words" so twenty really great photographs are worth a novella and that was perfect. I decided to explore this new way to tell a story, because that's what I do. I'm the storyteller. The photographs that I used for my panel discussion for Undergraduate Research Day were telling the story of strength, specifically body strength.

During my last fall semester, for my fine arts propaganda and visual culture class, I had to create an advertisement that sent a message, using one of the advertising styles during the WWII period. I choose late Dadaism, with influence from Caravaggio's *Death of the Virgin*. This resulted in my own version of Caravaggio's painting, entitled *Death of the V*, which would be used as an anti-slut shaming poster.

Slut shaming is the act of making a woman feel guilty for sexual behaviors that contradict "normal" gender expectations. Examples of things leading to slut shaming include a violation of

dress code by dressing provocatively, using birth control, engaging in casual sex, or having been raped or sexually assaulted.

Because this subject is so important and close to me, I decided to base my poster project on it. The model I used, during our initial photo shoot, also produced a series of really strong images of her body. It was empowering to watch and be a part of, as I saw my model find body confidence in taking pictures with just her bra and underwear on. [Note that my model and I are over the age of 18 and signed consent forms.] This led to Professor Umen, my mentor for my Honors 401 Thesis, to see these photos and ask if I could take more to be included in The SNHU Graphic Design 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Student Exhibit. I agreed to the challenge.

The theme that Professor Umen asked me to capture was lust, because the entire theme of the exhibit was The Seven Deadly Sins. I started looking over the photos I took of my *Death of the V* model and again I was taken by her body confidence. How much she trusted me, how much she trusted herself, and most importantly how much she respected herself. My model is a very strong young woman and at the end of the day she seems to know who she is, what she wants, and is working towards those goals. I find this quality in a person very inspiring.

Two out of the four photos I used during my presentation are of my model. What made these photographs so mesmerizing are the positions of resistance and force that my model posed in, which is what gives the photos an essence of body strength. They're provocative and intriguing. It was during the editing process that I realized a different definition for lust; this turned into the artist statement I used for the exhibit:

*The human body is sexy and fierce, which should always be depicted as strong and not an image that we should ever be ashamed of. Yet, it is still one that we are constantly afraid to show. Getting the chance to explore the body through the theme of Lust opens up the doors to*

*look closer at how we define beauty, sexuality, and self-image. In my photography I like to zoom in on the subject that I am photographing. Then building on the base idea of lust I turn it into a spectrum idea of self-love, self-respect, and self-confidence. Because to me, lust isn't just about sex, it's about the confidence to be sexy that makes lust such a powerful concept.*

When I finished the last essay, "Twenty Years of Life," I had finally figured out what all of this was about, "this" being the memoir, the photography, the unknown story I was telling. I had never been more proud of myself than I was by the end of that essay. This is where the concept for the last two photographs comes from.

"The Red Cup" is a representation of drinking/alcohol/that party life I lost myself in for the past two years. It was taken in the afternoon; it was raining. It was after my birthday party and I saw a red solo cup sitting on the windowsill and I thought: *that's my life*. I'm always on the edge, near an open window, with a drink in hand, wondering if I should jump. Sometimes the red of the solo cup was all I saw before I passed out for the night and woke up on a friend's floor, but not completely remembering how I got there. The photograph is a black and white picture of a red solo cup sitting on a windowsill; the main focus is the cup, which was selected to be the only colour in the picture.

The second photograph called "Me." It's a portrait, taken in my apartment bathroom on a Monday morning. In this photograph I'm in a nude coloured bra and panties set, and the focus consists of my chest, stomach, and thighs. My hands are crossed over my tummy, covering my bellybutton. It's a black and white photo that was enhanced with an unsharp mask, to bring out my stretch marks and my scars from cutting. It was a very intense and emotional photo shoot, but by late that Monday afternoon I had finished the title essay and the memoir essentially and finally "got it." It's remarkable how I don't feel like what that picture represents anymore. Like

if I could retake that picture now, I would stand with my arms spread at my sides, palms up to the sky and tell myself: “I’ve done good. Today, I’ve done good.”

I know that life is not easy. It’s not great, it can really suck sometimes, but it’s about finding the beauty in all that and accepting that sometimes life has its “is what it is” moments, but that doesn’t make it any less wonderful to be alive. At least to me, it’s one of the many insights I’ve gained because of writing *Twenty Years of Life: A Memoir, Written in Essays and Poems*. That and also remembering the ending quote I used for the memoir, from Jay McInerney’s novel *Bright Lights, Big City*: “You will have to go slowly. You will have to learn everything all over again.”