REDEMPTION OF A COMMON LIFE

A Thesis

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Master of Arts

by

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Director of Thesis

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Date
A collection of poems expressing the cycle of redemption found in an ordinary woman’s life as she grows from an innocent young girl to a confused adolescent and then to a woman at peace with herself. The first section, “Sweet,” uses simple themes and forms to illustrate the simplicity of a young girl’s mind and the hopes and dreams she believes are inevitable. These poems show the promise of life and the freedom children have living out of an unblemished identity untouched by others’ sin against them or their own poor decisions; the poetry is meant to spark a sense of nostalgia and fondness in remembering life before it was tainted by experience. The second section, “Fallen into Sour” addresses what happens to a young woman’s heart when she is mistreated and makes unwise decisions as she attempts to navigate her world of fallen dreams. The poems in this part are experimental in form to reflect the confusion of the woman in her chaotic world. Out of her mistreatment, she views the world from a skewed perspective and therefore experiments with
things that further damage her sense of identity and prevent her from remembering who she is under the years of living a rough life. Finally, “Unmasked” reveals how acknowledging one’s true self under the masks a woman wears to be accepted and find happiness can start to bring healing restoration. The woman experiences true love and redemption from her life of ugliness as she peels back the masks and allows herself to be loved for who she truly is—not who she wants to be or wants to convince others she is. The collection explains the cycle from naïve childhood to wise—though broken and mended—woman.

Accepted by: 

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Crystal Wilkinson, Chair

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Part I

Sweet
Tiny Claps

Big-kid-band-concert-bored,
but I can sing
along to *Jingle Bells*—
at least the chorus—
and then from Mommy’s lap I give
tiny claps
tapping my longest fingers together
to make a tiny sound
that no one can hear
except for Paco in my pocket
(who is probably asleep by now).
*Tiny claps, tiny claps* I whisper,
my middle fingers stretching toward the stage
in tribute to my sister and her violin.
Paco

Dweller of the mailbox
keeper of my secrets
audience to my stories
laugher of my jokes
mystery to my mother
conspirator to my schemes
scapegoat for my escapades
comforter to my tears
thief of my sister’s Barbie
tracker of fairies and elves
confuser of my siblings
solution to my little kid loneliness
Mister’s moustache

Fuzzy and gray and sticky
pulling the skin above my lip when I smile—
which I try not to do since this is serious business,
this business of tricking Daddy
into thinking I am someone else—
not his princess, but a Mister.

Debonair and sophisticated,
you turn me into a charmer of mommies,
a scarer of poodles,
a dignified midget with a Wiggles umbrella for a cane and a Lincoln log for a cigar.
You come with an English accent,
which strangely resembles Peppa Pig’s,
courteous manners, and a bow—
my right hand moving in slow circles by my bending waist.

Your power delights for hours
until after sticking you on the mirror,
my eyebrow,
and the poodle,
your glues ceases.
So I return to my day job of
Daddy’s princess.
My little pony

It is clear to me that you look better
with a chopped-off mane.
I don’t know why Olivia cried—
I dressed you in your pink tutu (the prettiest one) and put you back
where I found you.
You were worth the corner
and the lecture
and the dirty looks from Olivia.
I love you the way you are.
You are perfect to me.
Grover

Like Cookie Monster’s skinnier brother
with your soft fuzzy blue
and wacky laugh.
My heart thumps when you come on the screen
in anticipation of your wild antics
and unreasonable fears.
I think I am smarter than you,
so I feel confident and protective.
Not for babies, but those of us with sophisticated
humor and a tolerance of monster nakedness,
who need to learn the difference between M and N
and who appreciate the finer things—like your sexy
dance moves, your straggly arms jerking back and forth,
your head bobbing like your friends’.
You are super with or without your cape.
The charmed life

Pink plastic high-heeled slippers with purple jewels on the strap,
a wild pink boa for keeping my neck warm
and teasing the cat.
Clip-on earrings of dangling blue gems,
yellow tutu to show off my Ariel Underoos,
and a lovely Black Stallion horse
that is actually a purse
which doubles as a treasure holder for:
  strawberry lipgloss
  My Little Pony’s brush
  a beautiful silver gum wrapper someone accidentally threw away
  a Crazy Eight deck and
  one red Leepressonnail that I found in the library
or a carrier for Paco when he tires of my pocket.
Sweet moves

Booty-shaking, hip swaying,
shimmying moves—
you put Miss Jennifer’s heel-toe-heel-toe-shuffle
to shame.
You prove that I have skills
and am a natural star
who should probably be on tv—
and not just on home videos—
teaching the world to dance.
You ensure me attention from the millions
and millions of people at brother’s soccer game
who laugh and clap while I dance on the bleachers,
and laughter from a tired and moody Mommy.
I’m pretty sure you are the key to my dreams
of being a famous lady with three pink poodles
and a pool.
Hot Chocolate

Forbidden with your creamy
hyperactive-inducing sugar.
High in the cupboard—way
back where I can’t reach you even
when I’ve managed to sneak up onto the counter.
Even better with marshmallows
and chocolate sprinkles.
Oh, how I dream of you and wait for
the day I’m old enough to drink you every day.
Tabooed with your promise of keeping me up
and making me crazy
I would marry you if I could.
Grownup life

If Mommy is right, I will outgrow my plastic princess slippers and grow boobies like hers, finally able to embrace my wildest dreams— which, it turns out, cannot involve marrying Daddy or Paco— my ambiguous future.

You enchant me with promises of:

- my own black stallion to win races and approval and respect from the whole world,
- the ability to grow a baby and tv-kiss a man like this—"mmmmm, ohhhh, mmmmm."
- being able to read a chapter book by myself and ride my bike alone,
- the skills to make pancakes,
- my own tv in my bedroom and a real monkey I can keep in my backpack that will keep me company
- when I am having adventures in exotic places like Disney World and China.

I will probably open my own ice-cream shop for girls and animals only and become a famous veterinarian.
Baby Cheeses

You’re pretty weird, how you turned water into wine
instead of chocolate milk
and how you used mud to heal the blind man
instead of medicine like when I had an ear infection—
that stuff really works.
Or how you let those bad guys kill you when everyone knows
you could have just flown up to Heaven—you made your mom cry, you know.
Why did you let Judas be your friend if you knew he was going to be mean?
And why did you wear a dress? That’s probably why you never got a wife.

I think you should have had a cape and a mask
and beat up the soldiers who came to arrest you.
You should have sold your mud medicine for all the blind people
and given the crowds Happy Meals instead of fish and bread.
And taught all the disciples to walk on water—not just Peter. He turned out to be dumb in the end, anyway.

But I like how nice you were to Mary Magdalene and
how you brought Lazarus back after he died.
You were pretty cute as a baby, too—in your little manger with all the sheep.
It’s just too bad you never had your own Baby Cheeses.
Desire

I
"I wish," she said one afternoon
on her walk, "That a little bird
would stop to talk to me,
teach me to sing and
maybe to fly." Hugging her arms,
she carefully walked the line of her
life—the sidewalk in front of her house—
not looking forward, not looking back.
Her eye was on the hummingbird
dancing in the sky.

II
Laughing, swinging her arms now,
she twirled—
as little girls do—
her striped tights exposed, her shoe
flung off her tiny princess foot, her
sparkling crown from last
weekend’s party for Madison’s 4th birthday
askew,
hairclip slipping from her fairy-fine hair
curling around her Gerber-baby cheeks.

III

Suddenly she stopped, knelt
in the grass, her plump
hand shaking off a lump
of dirt from a fistful of dandelions
created simply for her
delight.
Daughter

You spin the world
with your sweet smiles and chubby
thighs, sticky hands patting
Daddy cheeks in delight and
naïve adoration, ignorant of his
ugliness and how he hurt your mother
and his deepest secret—
that he never wanted
you until he saw your bloodiness
and fell in love with your refreshing dependency
turning him into the man
he always wanted to be.

You are the reason Mommy gets up each day
so she can peek in on you in your
flushed asleep peace
and trace the line of your sweetness—
the softness cracking her hardness as she
wonders how to protect you from becoming
bitterness masquerading in heels and lipstick.
Bottled baby

If I could just put you in a glass jar
and keep you baby forever,
pickling your purity to preserve
the innocent pink of your helplessness
and giving me purpose for the pointlessness
of a life that would end hollow and void
were it not for the second chance of you.
Part II

Fallen into Sour
Changed

New parts and unexpected
urges challenging even the most grounded
of girls, causing you to second
guess who you are.
Eyeing each other—staring
you down to ensure
camaraderie in misery.
Running playing laughing attracts
stares of grownupmen
who smile wink say hello and would you like a cup of coffee?
These men—they know who you are
and there is no more wondering—
your identity crisis is placated by gifts and adoration
until you knows exactly whose you are.
This Time

Years of watching trying failing
as the other girls are affirmed in their
womanhood, preferred for their flirting
and affirmed in their femininity
as she stared at her lap biting her cuticles
repeating her mantra of
somedaymyprincewillcomeandlikemeformymind
while all the time knowing that until she
puts on the red lipstick and undoes one more button
and initiates—conversation—
no one will bother.

Her girlfriends gossip and laugh about their weekend dates
while she smiles and nods and convinces them
that her grades are worth the loneliness.
No one is convinced—they just don’t care.

Or at least want to be responsible for trying
once again
to get her to loosen up.

But this time she will do it, pucker on strawberry lip gloss
take off the keds
and borrow her roommate’s push-up bra,
tired of apathetic ambiguity.
Slippery Slope

One drink
One smoke
One look
One stroke
Two laughs
Two sighs
Two winks
Two lies
Hesitation
Elaboration
Deception
Capitulation
Unveiled

He was intrigued, of course,
though she didn’t mean to be mysterious.
She meant to be pure good virtuous.
Romantic.
Wearing white and the hope from doing it right.
He realized soon, of course,
though she didn’t see it herself.
She meant to be determined strong moral.
Honorable.
Cloaked in her morality trickery of salvation by principles.
This Is What It Feels Like to Become A Prostitute

How easily I could slip into believing that
this is all I’m worth.
It’s mostly true anyway.
The way his eyes popped when he saw me
and how he said if Brittany Spears is a 10
I am at least a 7—no, an 8!
How the whole date was planned around one
thing that I was too weak too tired too shamed too apathetic to resist.
And now I lie here, rolling
my eyes as he fingers my bra—
after all, he’s never seen one this big or fancy—
and make the mental jump into asking
him for compensation for my
time and also for putting up with an hour
of Chris Angel.
Which was 59:30 longer than I
had to put up with this schmuck.
At least he’s a democrat.
Going Green

She’d heard that not everyone got high the first time
and that it could make you hungry
and thus gain weight—which is the end of the world in this world—
so she instead basked in the smoke,
laughing as though she herself were the one puffing
on a joint instead of other things.
None of it mattered the next morning. She had learned
that the world is preserved—this world anyway—
by shared fear and common secrets
that would expose them all, so why bother
talking about it anyway?
She liked coming home smelling like their sin,
as though it were her secret,
pretending that she was an equal with them
instead of their pet.
What morality gets you

failure
shame
unreachable standards
a reason for your mother to yell at you
a reason for your father to not look you in the eye
a focus on behavior instead of on being
a ruler to be measured against your peers
self-hatred justification
a paper-thin mask to be worn in public to make sure no one knows the truth about you
a platform to look down at others
lip wrinkles from puckering so much
a false foundation for friendship
basis for spiting your lover
secrecy and fear when all you need is antibiotics
Song of the Paradise Hotel

clink, clink
puff    puff
knock, knock
giggle  giggle
crash—giggle—ohbabyyes
slurp, slurp
groanohbabyyes
gasp, GASP
smack thud
stompstompstomp slam!
pound, pound
sob, whine
muffles scratch rattle.
sigh. SIGH.
clink, clink
puff    sigh
puff, clink, puff, clink
sigh.
creak    sniffle    whimper
smooch, groan, kerplumph!
squeak, squeak, squeak
ohbabyyes.
The Irony of Being Good

She's accepted for her behavior
but will never reach the standard set
and is miserable in the meantime, singing the age-old
song—if only people knew the real me, blah blah blah.
Acceptance conditional, always on the verge of losing.
One-dimensional, boring, predictable.
When you’re bad, no one has expectations—
no one is let down
and eventually no one cares unless you find the one
who does. Who care bear you without your mask
because he threw his away a long time ago.
Firsts

Orgasm—age 13 after getting ideas from reading my aunt’s “Cosmopolitan”

Smoke—age 16 with my hip older brother

Drink—age 18 alone after school, bored, feeling neglected, wanting to get my parents’ attention by becoming a statistic

Vibrator—age 18 when alcohol didn’t do it for me

Sex—age 21 when I was straight-edge and refused to drinksmokewhatsoever—fucking my RA seemed a good alternative

STD—age 21 when I found out my RA was fucking my roommate, too

Intoxication—age 23 with my boyfriend—turns out he wasn’t drinking the bottle of wine with me after all

Abortion—age 24 with that same boyfriend—turns out he wasn’t loving me after all

High—age 28 at my bachelorette party

Affair—age 33 when my coworker was irresistible

Divorce—age 35 when we couldn’t work it out

Ironic, Pollyanna Redemption—still pending
The Traveled Road

She thought she took the road less
deided—the risk, road her mother warned her about and said
only “those kind of girls” went down.
Went down, straight to hell, or at least Jack’s Pub on Friday nights
or maybe down to the city where they did whoknowswhat
with whoknowswho.
She knows who and what now, but she is a sophisticated
version of “those kind of girls,” with a college degree
and an eight-to-five job and underwear
from Victoria’s Secret.
Now she knows that “those kind of girls” have no
choice what road they travel—
it’s all in your make-up. The genetic kind,
not the Covergirl kind.
No matter how many poems or philosophies
she knew,
she was destined to travel
that road.
Virtue

I wanted to be the girl songs are written
for—Jesse’s girl, sweet sixteen, a southern girl with the way they kiss.
I wanted to knock men out, be their muse, control my world
and theirs, too.

Songs aren’t written for the Cinderella types
anymore; the virtues of Maria and Miriam the Librarian are
not celebrated.

Virtues to be sung about are big butts,
hips that don’t lie,
ass hangin’ out,
and born that way.

I’ll keep my other virtues stowed away
for my gravestone.
Ode to G&T

The innocence and succulence of
your lime,
seeping its juices into
your glass,
preparing me for the bitterness of
your stream,
the shock of the chill against the warmth of
my tongue,
the dizziness and deliriousness of
my head,
the suckling of the chaser in
my mouth.
Melded

Each day I put it on, although for years I think I slept in it night after night, which makes sense since I was usually sleeping with someone whom I couldn’t trust to see me without it, so it stayed on for days, weeks, years? at a time. At first, my family begged me to take it off, but I insisted that they imagined it and had just never looked at me closely. And now I can’t tell where it ends and where I begin. Maybe I was right after all.
Part III

Unmasked
Penetrating the Cracks

- Years of polishing a perfected persona that fooled
  —mamas and sisters and aunties—
rubbing out wrinkles wreaking potential havoc
—but I, the only gatekeeper and housekeeper—
focused solely on sanding the surface
—no Heathcliffs or Darcys allowed—
egneclecting the nether regions and those not seen
against the risk of being:
  1. discovered
  2. uncovered
  3. known
  4. what Holden refused to name.

Layers of years of names of mine from you and me, daddy and Donna Reed
shame heaped on shame for who you said I am
becoming to no one.
Shame becomes hiddenness—a mask of murdered
dreams and simple things like an honest like of granny smith apples—
stuck and hardened, modge-podged to my face safe
from access until he spotted the crack and covertly
rappelled down, millimeter by millimeter.
Job Description for a Knight in Shining Armor

- See a girl across a crowded room
- Make mental note that Said Girl is the most beautiful woman you have ever seen
- Do whatever it takes to get Said Girl's attention
- Win Said Girl's trust by becoming her friend
- Convince Said Girl you truly love her for who she really is and not her looks despite the fact that she is the most beautiful woman you have ever seen
- Tell Said Girl who she really is
  - Tell Said Girl that the woman her exes and mother and boss insist she is an imposter
  - Point out Said Girl's amazing qualities that only a Knight in Shining Armor can see
  - Convince Said Girl that you are dependable and truthful
  - Affirm Said Girl in her identity as Wonderful
- Win Said Girl's love by treating her according to her Wonderful Personality
- Fight Said Girl's lies of the masks she wears to please others and that she has put on to protect herself
- Provide a safe environment for Said Girl to take off her masks and attempt to live out of her True Identity of her Wonderful Personality
- Trust Said Girl with who you really are, too
- Spend the rest of your life with Said Girl, reveling in the joy of honesty and true love
My Life Was Like a Zoloft Commercial

Waking up I wish my eyes had never
opened, yet another day in the well
of colorlessness and stick figures, their
mouths gabbing up and down with empty
sentiment and trite comfort, foreheads lined
with caterpillars' torsos moving in
response to me—my nods and tears and sighs.
Forgotten were nights of rollerskating
on Magnolia Street, high on the fumes
of the blossoms whose carcasses threatened
our smooth knees below our terrycloth shorts
and above our cotton knee-high socks.
Lost was loving my fro and dotting it
with plastic-bow barrettes and maybe
a feather hanging from a ribbon. Then.
I was alarmed to seven o'clock and
I saw the red of the digital screen,
the first color I had seen in years. I
smelled lavender from a sachet and heard
hummingbird zips and zings on the other
side of the screen. I thought I was dead. Then.
I recognized my deliverance like
the Israelites out of Egypt. How many mornings did they awake in the desert panicked, scanning the horizon for Pharaoh’s chariots, until they laughed at their fear and leisured in the sun, the manna melting on their tongues—the sweetness of freedom incarnate. Did the bleeding woman check below for spotting after touching the hem of God or did her faith keep her well? No matter—for today I notice the flavorlessness of fish sticks, and their odor taking over. I am actually annoyed at the fridge’s lack of tartar sauce; I am ready to live—to lick life raw and climb out of my well.
Forgiveness, Part I

The shame of how I hurt you has changed
who I am—a version of deranged
Me colors what I do, say, and think.
How I interact with others links
back to who I became once I broke
your heart and started hauling this yoke
of self-centered obsession with how
disgusting and ugly I am now.
Your love undid that—how trite it sounds
to credit Love and to say I’ve found
freedom in your forgiveness—you say
I am not defined in any way
by my actions. And so I can be.
Forgiveness, Part II

Like everyone else in America, I am entitled, victimized, and a result of my situation. I have a right to withhold from him, even though I will never see him or have the chance to tell him how he ruined my life. I wish I could slap him, now that I know how. This is what happens when you refuse to forgive someone:

- bitterness
- resentment
- depression
- inability to be happy for someone else
- joylessness
- self-pity wallow

and the worst one of all: becoming defined by that horrid action against me.

I refuse to allow him any more control over me or any role of importance in my life.

I forgave him so he can’t hurt me anymore—

I can escape an identity of something false, ugly, imposed by someone else’s violence.

And so I can be.
Richard Nixon

was long out
of office
by the time
I was born
and yet I
begged every
Halloween
for a mask
of his face.
Alluring—
his face was
to me, my
fingers held
up in peace
signs, although
I didn’t
know what that
really meant.
So I saved
my money—
since my mom
refused my
pleas—and bought
the rubber
likeness of
President
Nixon whom
I never
really knew.
Only that
he was in-
famously
bad. With his
face on mine
stealing my
innocence,
masking my
identity, I felt
raging shame
of being
R. Nixon.
I couldn’t
take the heat
of the man.
Or rubber.
What relief
to peel his
face off mine
and breathe air
unfiltered
by his mis-
matched nostrils
pretentious-
ly trying
to pass as
the real deal.
How sweet to
realize
that I am
not Richard
and never
will/can be.
I have taken to

wearing my tap shoes to the grocery store
sometimes with the petticoat from my wedding
but usually just jeans and my college sweatshirt.
I keep them in the car for unplanned trips
to Target or Starbucks or any place
the floor will accommodate the tappity tap,
shuffle kick of my dancing down the aisles
or in place while in line, my jazz hands
and smile shaking back and forth
(if my hands aren’t terribly full—sometimes
it’s a necessary jazz hand, singular),
my eyebrows up, remembering the good
ole days and creating the good new. When my dance is
done, I heel-toe to the exit, slow-clapping it out.
Lemonade Stand

I set up a lemonade stand last Saturday,
remembering how fun it was when I was ten,
and it was so much easier this time around—
I could drive myself to the store for the lemonade mix
and I didn’t have to borrow the collateral.
I am sophisticated now, so I thought of using real
lemons and the silver pitcher that was
a wedding present. I considered having a zero cent
price, but thought people might think me strange
if I were giving something away, like maybe I had spiked it
with poison to mimick the nebulous neighbors who were
sure to stick a razor in my Halloween candy,
so I stuck with twenty-five cents. I set up my stand in the front
yard by the sidewalk and people looked at me
like I was weird. Or special. But what did it matter?
In the end I made four dollars.
Rock Star Probability

Do my chances of becoming a rock star increase with my trite lyrics—love me for who I am, not what I do...experience the freedom of my love for you—since they are relatable and catchy, or should I go for hipster, with a children’s piano and rainbow xylophone in the background? Should I stick with folk since I am not 18 and need a bra with more support? It’s not the fame I’m after, but the means of communicating my unashamed ideas of love and life and blahblahblah. I have a hypothesis that turning on my web cam will automatically draw out the real me, whether I celebrate Sunny D and rum or the mystery of double rainbows. Will my bounceless bra and ukulele shoot me to stardom or will I be content with well intentioned shabby art?
Dear Oscar

You can come out of the stench of your life. I reach to you as one who has climbed out of a well and understands the slippery slope of being unknown or at least misunderstood. I heard that your neighbors—your so-called friends on the Street—tried to convince you to go on “Hoarders”. I get it—it’s not the stuff, it’s the relationships you want. You know, I’ve never even seen your legs.
Heaven

Someday I will be
exactly who I
was meant to be—no
scars, shame, selfishness.
Just me without the
burden this world
so I finally
can see clearly who
I am and who you
are. We can be in
love perfectly with
noses that smell how
lilacs really should.