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A MEDITATION ON I, WE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN "ONLY WE CAN PULL"

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A MEDITATION ON I, WE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN
“ONLY WE CAN PULL”

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Allyson Elizabeth Jeffredo

June 2016

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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

In a society focused on the individual, how is community formed? As individuals predisposed to the built-in barrier of our body, our skin, how do we mediate between the self and the external? During this mediation on the barriers between our body, ourselves, and the outside world, how is consciousness simultaneously conflicted and built upon? What does it mean to be alive, to be a complex individual surrounded by a multitude of complex individuals? Can we, as a society, learn to focus balance the community and the individual? **ONLY WE CAN PULL** attempts to answer these questions through a series of first-person singular “I” poems, first-person plural “we” poems, and a range of second- and third-person poems interspersed throughout. The poems in this collection show language as a transformative force, able to shape consciousness, depending on the lens and distance through which one views a person, experience, or moment. In the hopes, **ONLY WE CAN PULL** is a sample-sized collage foregrounding the multiple, fragile paths that lead to the deceptively simple four-letter word “life.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the badass people (and animals) I know, I don't know (but have read about), wish I knew, and wish I could more resemble.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:
A MEDITATION ON I, WE, AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN
“ONLY WE CAN PULL”

David Shields and the Continuous Collection of Self

Writer and fellow collage enthusiast, David Shields, states, “Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it” (Shields 1). Identity, and the experiences that make up identity, is like all the different groceries filling one’s basket at WinCo: each item is individually wrapped (organically or inorganically), while, only together, can the whole purchase supply the nourishment one needs to survive until the next grocery outing. A carrot cannot nutritiously compensate for milk; each offer the body two different nutritious benefits that help complete our daily dietary needs that work only in conjunction. I believe identity is collected in a similar manner—as much as experience is based on unique, identifiable episodes and events, like the solitary carrot or gallon of milk, it is the culmination of episodes and events which makeup identity, like the combined nutrition one gets from a whole meal. Though, identity is not always as finely selected as a grocery trip: there are parts of identities we have helped in nurturing and parts we didn’t choose that still inevitably shape us. This complex exchange of hand-selected pieces of experience, such as a read book, and the wild, uncertain aspect of experience, like getting rear-ended, are what I feel piece

life, ourselves, and art together. The hand-selected portions of experience, the book again, is a way to rationalize, is the glue that sutures some sort of understanding to the unbeknownst whiplash of being rear-ended. Therefore, my genre-crossing, 71-page manuscript, *Only We Can Pull*, desires to show the fragile fibers fastening our selfhoods to think about what it means to be alive: our lives collages in constant collaboration with the world.

Fragility

Moments pile on top of moments, a messy collage of myself, as a person, as a half-white/half-Mexican woman, as an artist. Part of me hesitates to share or, more aptly, my poetry is not sure how. Saying, writing these memories and experiences out loud leaves them vulnerable, like a cool breeze on usually covered skin, at risk to be torn into too many interpretations, stretched into unfamiliar shapes that belong to the world and no longer to myself. My self has been constructed by these fragile instances. There are moments in my writing I once thought were thinking through misunderstandings. Now I think such near misses of misunderstandings indicate the incredibly delicate relationships we have with the world and one another. Relationships so brief and fragile. Every moment is always tinged with the reminder of how tenuous life is—too much pollution in the air, a snip into the wrong wire. These moments coalesce into *Only We Can Pull* in varying points of view: between the first-person singular “I” and

the first-person plural “we” intermixed with third-person and second-person perspective.

A Moment of Mirage

I always see: my dad in the soccer field of an elementary school, on his knees, leaning over an electrical box, electrocuted, possibly because he was on the phone with me.

The Youth Turmoil

When I was growing up, our house was permeated with a perpetual volatility. Never knowing when a misused word or face would send us, with my mom mostly, tumbling down a mountain. Sometimes we’d stop too quickly, continue through weeks in a bruised silence, other times would be drawn out and violent—hit and scraped while stumbling through cacti arms, stones. My dad’s accident built a new peak onto that mountain, then, tore it open; his death the distant eruption, my mom the inescapable lahar. This, my first lesson in pain, destruction, and love.

In the Dust

She was suicidal. My brother and I lassoed to the house with the lurid lingering we’d find her. Luckily the house was always filled with people. Still, their presence couldn’t dilute the sadness that made the air a living lament. My mom’s

sadness, my brother's and my sadness, created a dome and we were a pack of silent, wild dogs holding the perimeter, attacking anything foreign, even each other. No one taught us how to deal with pain; and the one that could have, our mom, was huddled in front of us, unavailable.

While Writing

If I don't write or art in some way, I get this unshakeable tick in my stomach counting down to some kind of combustion. It's not a choice; it is an endeavor I believe is important to the world and to my ability to function and to life. Stories are important to our being as they give us a sense of how to navigate through the uncertain world around us, explicitly or implicitly. Nevertheless, I am sometimes confused with the power of language to command, to manipulate fluid and non-conforming entities such as time, perception, and existence into characters on a page or into sound, a combination of the world, the body and the breath. Language acts like cardboard used to cut our experiences out of and create stencils of memories to shape and layer ourselves, our stories upon. My whole person is built around these memories presenting different kinds of fragile instances of living, of interactions and relationships, of emotions, and they inevitably find themselves informing the pieces in *Only We Can Pull*. My first poem, "Dust," focuses on a speaker who is struggling with loss, the fragility of life, and trying to come to terms with the shifting nature of existence when a loved one unexpectedly passes:

I envy his flight. How he disappears so surely. How he bounds.
From one phone call to his every particle utterly disguised. And I'm
hurt by this trick, this shift of being. Altering. From person to quiet.
A quiet so hard to read: Minute dust sings a fusion of songs, of
times when it was mountains & stars, drowning his small history out
(Jeffredo).

The speaker is trying to comfort herself with the idea that though our existence is fragile and uncertain, our energy and the dust of our bodies, will be recycled into something else like it has for eons.

The Comfort of Physics

The first time I considered biological repurposing—I once heard author David Mitchell call this “biological reincarnation”—as the poem “Dust” alludes to, was through performer and writer Aaron Freeman’s spoken word piece, “You Want a Physicist to Speak at Your Funeral.” I heard it around the time my dad died, during a moment of mortality, and found comfort in the adaptation of the strict and exclusive language of science. Freeman adopts this discourse to convey the scientific understanding of how our body’s energy does not disappear when we die, it is released, taking on another form, as Freeman says in the final sentence, “According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly” (Freeman).

When I read the end of Freeman's poem, ". . . not a bit of you is gone; you're just less orderly," the self-confliction of loving science and my catholic background melded peacefully together because, yes, your 'soul' (energy) is released and continues off somewhere into vast space to be repurposed into another form. Freeman's piece tangles the barriers of genre, discourse, and seemingly oppositional institutions (science and religion) through the colloquial style of spoken word. All the while, this poem maintains poetic authority to utilize scientific jargon in an accessible manner to give an almost religious touch to a scientific sensibility surrounding death. In this way, Freeman exposes fragilities and, at the same time, reinsulates them so they are not so fragile, in fact, he strengthens them.

The poem "Dust" alludes to this understanding of death and release as the character is turned to dust by the hot, desert sun, "Dehydrated, he folded like the golden grass. His body now rife with lightness, he collapsed in on himself like an impatient white dwarf urging to let go, urging for that vivid nebula glow. He turned to dust" (Jeffredo). Though, instead of energy, "Dust" is focusing more on the material aspect of repurpose. Everything we have seen was made by billions and billions of years of super nova explosions, which created all the dust we are made of and broken down to again. Essentially, we are all stars and all dust, which is touched upon by the end of the poem, "In the corner of my eye, I still catch glimpses of him. // He glistens between *I haven't seen you in years* and *Hurry, I have to go*" (Jeffredo).

Growing up in the Southern California desert of the Coachella Valley, dust is a big part of my life. The nomadic granules are found in every pocket, wrinkle, or orifice during a breezy day. I am attracted to the sands effortless ability to fit itself everywhere. I am also fascinated by, as seen in the poem, "Dust," the forms each sand grain and dust speck was at one time: each granule of sand is a miniscule reminder, is a ghost of what each particle once was. Hence, this poem begins the primary discussions of *Only We Can Pull*: how fragile life is and how we humans are so connected to the world around us, yet, sometimes, immune to the stretchiness of the muscles maintaining these connections.

Wisława Szymborska: To Witness Immortality

*There's no life
that couldn't be immortal
if only for a moment*

- Wisława Szymborska

Beauty, like death, can appear in a veil. At my dad's sermon, the church, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, was packed. People stood in the back and bled outside the doors onto the sidewalk. The priest began his sermon with the amiable gesture: *James is now seated with God*. The rest is blurred with frankincense. Until he asked for three people to come up to the podium and say a few words about my dad. I knew this moment was coming. Earlier, my mom looked at me with red, upset eyes and said, *If no one goes up, Allyson, you have no choice*. So, the whole time I tried to excavate some hidden courage within

myself to make the trip—25 feet easily mistaken for a hundred under that kind of pressure. I figured I could tell a story like the time my dad almost lit our house on fire with a firework or how he cried during the movie *Jack Frost*.

First, my Uncle Ricky, my mom's brother, went up to speak. Second, my dad's boss, Troy, approached the podium. But the third didn't come up as quickly. As the priest began to head up to the podium prepared to continue, my mom looked at me through slit eyes. I tried to stand up, my knees spinning quarters about to fall. At that moment, not a breath or cough could be heard until someone's footsteps thumped through the silent aisle. My dad's coworker, recognized as his arch nemesis, Ruben, walked up from the back of the hall. Most of us knew my dad and Ruben's mutual, undefined antipathy against one another. Yet, Ruben walked up to the podium with his blue-green work shirt, dirty jeans, clenching his hat to his chest and spoke for him anyway, *James is one of the hardest working men I know...* Even though they never got along and they were constantly at the brink of brawls, this man, unbeckoned, who looked so small at the podium, spoke.

Ruben

I don't think it will ever cross Ruben's periphery he would be an influence in my artist statement. During the church sermon, when Ruben walked up to the podium and said his name, my mind was in a can't-compute-overload. So much so, I can't remember what he said beyond that point. In my youth, it didn't make

any sense that someone would/could go out of their way to speak in such a stressful situation—I felt like I was going to puke all over the altar and I love my dad more than anything. At this point, most of my experience of how others should be treated was based upon the actions of the petty bastards (my family) I grew up with. People who would rather find excuses not to help one another than simply help because one should. I'm not even sure my dad would've done the same for Ruben and he was the most considerate out of all of us.

While Writing

This memory is recurrent—Ruben speaking for a man he didn't like, but whom he nonetheless respected—which perhaps more than any other moment, taught me how to read and appreciate every memory. Ruben's ability to see beyond his prejudices has remained an inspiration for me. It's easy to smother under sadness, to choke with hate and anger, but if one is paying attention, one can find a moment of beauty so grand one can live and shelter under it like a canopy on a cloudless day. Ruben unknowingly broke through the sadness I shrouded under since my father's death. Yet, my family doesn't even remember him speaking, which reminds me how valuable paying attention, being conscious, is.

Attentiveness is a not a gift, but a muscle one, especially myself, has to exercise. For example, in the 14th section of my poem, "Only We Can Pull," I'm watching my baby niece struggle to walk. Each time she tries, she's one step

closer to moving forward. In this poem, I'm trying to show how we still need the same care, love, and attentiveness for one another as we give to infants:

We want our bodies to dissolve. Our selves brought back with the fluidity. We'll feel light again like a newborn baby in our arms. The baby knowing only lightness until she finally crawls. Where she feels the weight of her body as she struggles to maintain her balance shifting between lightness and gravity—balanced on her right foot, right hand on the couch, her left foot swinging back and forth until her foot finds the strength, the precise muscles to make the step. If not, she falls: into our arms, onto the carpet, into the couch. Until one day, she's all balance. Her left foot finds the carpet, her right foot finds the carpet, repeat, and neither hand holds the couch. That's all we really want: our bodies to feel balance, our minds always conscious of gravity and we either know how to fall or let those worried hands catch us when we don't (Jeffredo).

Like babies, we are always learning how to do things better. Whether it be living or finding a quicker route to work, we're always searching for some kind of balance. Once a baby's "all balance," they have to find something else to work on, and we're no different, we're all in a perpetual state of work-in-progress. The exception is: there is no rough outline of "normal" expectations for our growth as an adult like there is when we're babies learning how to hold our heads up,

crawling, walking, talking, and so on. So, we can get lost in, or forget, what we should focus on, which is what I try to address in the last sentence of “14,” “That’s all we really want: our bodies to feel balance, our minds always conscious of gravity and we either know how to fall or let those worried hands catch us when we don’t.” This poem is trying to emphasize how we have to continuously maintain balance within ourselves and only we know what that looks like and only we can find it, no one else. Similarly, after much preparation, a baby makes those steps only when she’s ready. We can guide her at first, yet, eventually, she won’t need us that same way again, but she’ll need us in other ways. I think this is true our whole lives: as much as we have to be independent and self-reliant, we can still use one another’s help every so often. What we need help with will change over time, but we will always need the guidance of others in some way.

Finding balance and being aware, like the baby being able to stand on her own, is a key to help us unfold who we are, “our minds always conscious of gravity.” In this reference, I don’t believe “gravity” should be limited to merely the literal, physical gravity maintaining our place on Earth’s surface, but also a stand-in term for the many things our mind needs to be conscious of, such as our wellbeing and safety or the gentle feelings of people we’re close to. After each fall, the baby learns what she needs to focus on next time, which, when we’re not conscious of ourselves or others—as in saying something rude or unintentionally cutting someone off because we didn’t look over our shoulder—the next time an

instance like this comes up, we can be more aware of those around us and hopefully not repeat the mistake.

In the end, there are things we can do on our own in this world and there are things we have to learn to give help and receive help for, “either we know how to fall or let those worried hands catch us when we don’t.” A kid knows how to ask for help, when they don’t need help, and, even, when to give help. As people, I think this is a fundamental list we have to keep in mind when moving in and out of the world.

Being VS Non-Being

Ruben and my niece both exhibit what I have come to think of as small moments of beauties. This idea recalls novelist Virginia Woolf’s term “moments of being” from her memoir of the same title. Near the beginning of the memoir, Woolf describes her “moments of being” as a memory of being lost in a moment where she consequently undergoes a surreal experience; one in which she is physically held in place and consciously halts time, “There was the moment of the puddle in the path; when for no reason I could discover, everything suddenly became unreal; I was suspended; I could not step across the puddle; I tried to touch something...the whole world became unreal” (Woolf 78). The way this section is punctuated with semicolons between each obscure description leaves the whole scene with an after-taste of the limitations language yields over life. This excerpt can be read as the difficulties found in communicating “being”

through grammar; it is like trying to fit an inflated pool back into its box, it is fitting a huge concept—such as existence or “being”—into such a narrowly defined space of marks and white space of a page or into breath and sounds. So, Woolf’s memory is, in a way, enacting her understanding of “being” through the unrealized quality found in her grammar choice and use of language.

Equally or more illuminating of Woolf’s understanding of “being” are Woolf’s “moments of non-being.” Woolf describes “moments of non-being” as occurring more frequently and comprising most of our lives, “These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being” (Woolf 70). The moments we remember are always encased in a box with clear, protective bubble wrap of “moments of non-being.” Our days inevitably end as, “A great part of everyday is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done...” (Woolf 70). I understand “not living consciously” as being stuck in our own heads functioning although not interacting with the world.

Still, I myself am constantly guilty of “moments of non-being.” I have to remind myself to participate in, to be part of, the world: to go for a hike, to listen to others, to pay attention to my breath. Different exercises keep me from succumbing to the comforts of my mind. However, I find writing allows me to balance both states, being and non-being, in some ways. My poem, “Dialogues Between Self and Selves”—a title borrowed from William Butler Yeats’ poem, “Dialogues Between Self and Soul,” which features internal dialogue between

two different versions of the speaker. In “Dialogue Between Self and Selves,” I think something similar to Yeats’ first section is happening between Friend and the roman god of time, Janus. Friend is the interlocutor interviewing Janus and it’s hard to know whether Friend is actually speaking to Janus, someone they have confused for Janus, or him/her self. I suspect it’s the latter: Friend’s self is so foreign to them, they are unable to recognize their own voice and, therefore, experience the voice as manifested in this hallucinatory god, Janus. In this way, Friend is really interviewing him/her self, a dialogue between selves. For Friend, Janus is supposed to represent “being,” living consciously. Most of his answers subtly try to remind Friend to pay attention to what’s around them when Friend asks, “Do you ever feel lonely?” Janus answers, “*Only when I get lost in my heads and stop thinking about the world*” (Jeffredo). Friend is the part of me who is always asking questions I already know the answer to, yet is the part not paying attention, and Janus is the part of me that recognizes this and patiently tries to remind me of these answers.

The Arrival of Beauties

Inspired by Woolf’s term, “moments of being,” I began to analyze “being,” those moments I am conscious, into two different forms of fragility: moments of beauties and misunderstandings. My understanding of moments of beauties can be seen in the first section of the title poem, “Only We Can Pull,” “There are moments when beauties come into being—the unbelievably small feet of a new

born in your now grown hand, a salmon sky painted with cross-stitched contrails over a background of storm clouds—always or often where imbalance touches the border of another imbalance” (Jeffredo). I see moments of beauties as instants where everything that can go wrong with said instant is canceled out, where Murphy’s Law, “If anything can go wrong, it will,” has no precedence because this moment is plentiful with the power of awe, “imbalance touching the border of another imbalance.” There is a vast range of moments of beauties, and I encounter them mostly in occasions I let down my guard and appreciate what or who I’m interacting with. I find myself most perceptive to beauties when I am vulnerable, such as this poem growing out of how exposed I felt seeing my niece only minutes old and stepping back into the world immediately after.

Misunderstandings

It wasn’t late. I called my mom to tell her *Don’t worry, I’m on my way*. I walked up to the house, it was orange from the streetlight hovering in the dark. I unlocked the gate, unlocked the front door. As I came inside, my mom ran around the corner, her eyes wide with the usual drunk. Before my mom began to beat me, I saw my dad sitting at the computer. Not even glancing at me. I was cornered between the couch & the front door. Caught off guard.

Maybe my dad felt sorry for me and/or was finally fed up with my mom’s irrationalities. Either way, he intervened. My mom tried to hit him on the head

with a candleholder &, instead, got his shoulder. I don't remember who called the police.

Months later, after my dad died, my mom was on a spout of blame. Accusing me of being the one who had ruined her & my dad's relationship for causing so much conflict between them, they couldn't be happy. Although, eventually, I ended up fixing it by causing this last fight between them. In this rerouted stroke of anger, she brought up how I just had to tell her what to do when I said *Go to sleep*. When, in reality, I said, *Don't worry*.

While Writing

In *Only We Can Pull*, I write to think about what it means to be alive in the midst of our surroundings—our environment, both immediate and broad, our families, strangers—in an attempt to capture “the panoplies of life,” as Woolf reasons for why she doesn't remember anything specific about her mother. I attempt to write what it means to feel and experience and try to process what life means as a lonely individual. I try to process what it means to be a solitary person in an arena-at-capacity of so many other distinctly solitary individuals. This conflict of being a conscious, mindful person immersed in a conscious, mindful world is why I shift between the first-person singular “*I*” and the third-person plural “*we*.” I feel I am able to utilize a wider range of voices, in the hopes, the voices of the first-person singular poems will collect over the manuscript and

resonate as a chorus that becomes fully manifested in the “we” of the first-person plural poems.

For this reason, I attempt to capture an experience instead of merely alluding to one. In my poem, “Reverberations of Quiet,” I wanted to capture the disparaging difference between ages and generations:

we’re playing with the baby when my grandma calls
to say her neighbor’s been taken in the ambulance
con las luces apagadas, the lavender haze of dusk coats
its white and red body as it creeps down Cairo St. At 85,
she would think the ambulance’s strict silence meant death
after her other neighbor passed from pneumonia
the night before, death struts through the neighborhood
with his voice low—west to east, the same sidewalk
we stepped from the corner store each month after cashing
my grandpa’s social security checks—over the phone’s static,
she thinks the baby is yelling, but the baby’s now really laughing
thinking my *qué tristes* aimed at my grandma are spoken to her
as she’s learning how to be a person & my grandma’s half-forgot
(Jeffredo).

Iggy Pop sings, “Death is a hard pill to swallow” (Pop), and, in this poem, death begins as a pill not even a forethought by some and already possessed by others. In the first line, the generations between the grandma and the baby, the

“we’re,” are looking forward into the hopeful future as, “we’re playing with the baby.” Until the grandma’s call disrupts this immersion in new life when she drops-in her concern of death like a bomb, “her neighbor’s been taken in the ambulance / con las luces apagadas.” This perception of the silent ambulance equating death is a perception that can be attributed to age, of a grandma who has lived in the same neighborhood for some 60 years and watches the neighbors she grew up with begin to die around her. It’s uncomfortable to think about; it’s uncomfortable to write about. Though, it’s a natural cycle. I wanted to capture the difficulty of being in the middle of these two spectra points: new life versus aged life. Also, the difficulty of being in the in-between stage, as the speaker is, and watching age happen and remembering a time when age wasn’t so prevalent, “west to east, the same sidewalk / we stepped from the corner store each month after cashing / my grandpa’s social security checks,” when one knows their grandparents are old, but doesn’t really know what that means. The speaker is inevitably reminded of the close proximity of death surrounding her beloved grandmother while also dealing with the unintentional phasing out of her grandmother as she becomes a momentarily forgotten presence when the family is focused on the baby.

Answers

We must be our own proprietor of answers. Writing helps me sift, sieve-like, through the ether for these answers. As I mentioned earlier, I believe the

fragility of living is made up of moments of beauties as well as countless misunderstandings. Both can catch you when you are vulnerable, when it's difficult to keep beauties and misunderstandings from possessing you. Though, misunderstandings are more memorable, more poignant, than moments of beauties. Misunderstandings can also have many more drastic consequences, such as being unable to heal a relationship or unable to attain actionable consensus on the direness of global warming. As thoughtful people, sometimes we get distracted and spend too much time in our heads. We forget to listen to one another; we forget we have many more commonalities than differences; we forget our lives are not endless. These amnesias inhibit us on an individual "I" level and on a communal "we" level.

More than ever, I believe we need to come together for the sake of so many fragile existences. *Only We Can Pull*, tries to remind myself and my readers the need for one another in the face of how vulnerable language and interpretation dispose us to dangerous misunderstandings.

Hybridization

The hybrid style (mestiza) of *Only We Can Pull* began to form organically. It may have begun when I wanted to make the manuscript more accessible and, by doing so, more reflective of my own hybrid background.

My family has always been a family of story tellers, my grandma and my dad being the most influential. My grandma (mom's mom) is a Spanish speaking

Mexican immigrant and my dad was a white male who was born and ultimately died in the Coachella Valley. Despite their different backgrounds, they shared a similar approach to storytelling: make it meaningful, make it funny. I don't know if these characteristics were intentional or if these qualities merely came naturally for them. Either way, I take instruction from them and I hope to adopt meaning and humor into *Only We Can Pull*. Usually the interpenetration of humor and meaning appears simultaneously during the dialogue between Friend and Janus. Janus represents a lot of my dad's and grandma's attitudes, sarcastic at times and serious at others:

Do you have any regrets, Janus?

I learned when the ground was red you won't regret anything if you give everything you have. Sounds simple. Imagine telling that to a species so prone to passive. Where listening should have found its way into the Olympics. (Jeffredo)

One never knew what side my dad or grandma would present to them and I like that spontaneity in Janus as well, which is also reflected physically in his many faces (portrayed sometimes as 2, sometimes as 5). This spontaneity represents another fragility: where a calculated surprise is the key component of humor.

Both their sensibilities also feed into the other pieces of the manuscript. For example, my dad's pragmatic attitude found in scientific allusions such as, "Being: 80 milliseconds perpetually stuck in the past" (Jeffredo), or my grandma's fantastical sensibility—which is not unconcerned with truth as much as she is

speaking truth in a different style and manner—found in the piece, “Memento.” Drawing from my dad’s and grandma’s storytelling sensibility was a way for me to make the whole manuscript more dynamic, at the same time, further enacting the push for the “we” sensibility.

Gloria Anzaldua, Half-Breed/Mestiza

When I read Gloria Anzaldua’s *Borderlands: La Frontera*, after just the preface, *Borderlands* gave me this warm, vibrating jolt in my stomach, the jolt of recognition when someone speaks a language you never knew existed, but have always felt. Anzaldua writes about the nature of the half-breed, or the “mestiza,” which relates but is not limited to her home near the border, “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions” (Anzaldua). Which is what I have felt my whole life, being raised by my Spanish speaking grandparents while hearing racist slurs and remarks from my Anglo grandparents; or myself growing up in an agricultural, predominantly Hispanic area 85 miles away from the Mexico/US border looking white and never feeling truly white or truly Mexican. Anzaldua creates a language for me to at least begin to feel half-complete, “Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element...I have the sense that certain ‘faculties’—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened” (Anzaldua). I feel that “alien

element” rearing inside all the time, but to be reaffirmed that something positive occurs, the “activation and awakening of consciousness,” is unbelievably satisfying for our world is enlarged with every awakened consciousness.

Anzaldua’s language of consciousness seems to complete what I take from Woolf’s “moments of being.” Woolf speaks about being aware of the world in a context balancing between accepted reality and one’s alternate, more personal reality. While Anzaldua speaks about these realities more thoroughly by naming a specific awareness of the world, a ‘mestiza’ awareness, an awareness acknowledging different modes of intersectionality, which encumbers place, race, cultures, genders, and societal positions. An awareness I can identify with. At the same time, Anzaldua’s “mestiza” sensibility is not limited to the understanding of identity, but could be applied to the understanding of the hybrid nature and erratic use of syntax in *Only We Can Pull*. My sometimes erratic syntax—also found in Woolf’s grammar and syntax choices when she recounts a “moment of being”—can be attributed to Anzaldua’s “mestiza” sensibility as there are many borders of language that are simultaneously meeting, bridging, and restricting.

I briefly mentioned above, *Only We Can Pull* began to move between verse, prose poems, and flash fiction naturally, as did the shifts in grammar and syntax of the different pieces, “*Where is We? We: a tangled dream. Have left an impression bouncing off the edges. Yet refuse to step up and announce us at the door*” (Jeffredo). In the fragmented sentences and varying form and genre of the pieces found in *Only We Can Pull*, my half-breed nature undeliberately manifests

itself, singing right from my fingers onto the pages *Half-breed, Mestiza, you don't do things like normal*. This discourse glues another layer of collage onto my identity and poetics.

An Artist Mature

As I mature as an artist, I am able to be more conscious of the use of mismatched syntax, word choice, line breaks or lack thereof. I can use it when the sound and rhythm warrants it and I want to call attention to a certain consciousness, such as the piece, "When I First Felt Lonely,"

Hermit crabs of the first grade class scurried as all the children ran for the dry summer grass. Where the grass sloped separate from the concrete, a boy had buckles on his shoes I accidentally stepped on. Falling. Blank until I hit the earth. Sky quieted quickly. Not sure whether to laugh or cry. The boy stopped and felt sorry (I think). Maybe he suppressed a chuckle, while I felt the burn on my face settle like the dust onto my white collared shirt. I was the / floor-ridden, they the *theys* distinctly standing. Not too much above, but gloating (Jeffredo).

In this prose poem, the first six sentences move quickly with a certain rhythm, a specific kind of consciousness, one that is focused on the act of falling and unaware of the humiliation to come, "Where the grass sloped separate from the concrete, a boy had buckles on his shoes I accidentally stepped on. Falling." The

syntax begins to prefer the sound and rhythm of the line and becomes less concerned with rules. In the first six sentences, when telling the speaker's first experience of humiliation, the lines are fragmented to try and replicate what one's consciousness is like before one does something embarrassing, when one isn't ready for and is unaware of the forthcoming humiliation. The syntax structure and grammar acts as a signal for what the reader should give attention to. The syntax structure is also constructing how the reader pays attention to this specific moment.

In the next four sentences, "The boy stopped and felt sorry (I think). Maybe he suppressed a chuckle, while I felt the burn on my face settle like the dust on my white collared shirt..." the language becomes less disjointed to try and reflect what it's like when one becomes hyperaware of their situation after the initial humiliation. In this case, to reflect the embarrassment the speaker felt after tripping on the boy's shoes. I am not exactly sure what kind of effect the varying syntax has on my audience, but this is a technique that works on me as a reader. Something like verbing nouns and adjectives, "Blank until I hit the earth," grabs my attention and is unbelievably pleasurable to see the exploitation of the fluidity of grammar, of knowing I can change, distort, rearrange, something powerful like language.

While Writing: Vulnerabilities

Something about being an artist means we have to step up and be vulnerable. A statement of purpose doesn't give a shit about my disdain of self-speak, it wants to know why I do what I do. I talked to my mom recently about things I feel vulnerable about. One vulnerability being: "I don't feel Mexican enough to be able to identify with Anzaldua; she's using words only Ma [my grandma] ever speaks about." My mom's response was a laugh as she slurred, "What is Mexican enough?" Being an artist means every time a vulnerable moment tries to dam your words or art from flowing like water, one must check them and summon the courage to find a way to say what you really want said. It means telling myself, "No one has the right to tell me I am not Mexican enough," paradoxically, not even myself because I am what I am and as much as we define ourselves, we are only ever who we are. Our vulnerable moments are what let's others in and, logically, our bodies want to immediately protect us from the possible hurt or shame or resentment that might follow. If these sentiments do in fact follow something we, as artists, are being earnest about, it means what is said needs to be said and we have to find comfort in that.

Ambiguities VS Specifics and Audience

As a writer, I have come to realize the more specific a poem is, a fiction piece, any writing really, the more universal it becomes, words given to me by Professor Paegle. I found myself falling victim to ambiguity fairly frequently in

Only We Can Pull. There were two reasons for this: first, I wouldn't have to reveal vulnerabilities and, second, I figured the universality of my piece was purely dependent on how the reader interpreted it. I now believe this thought process was sorely misguided.

Desire to protect my vulnerability was giving way for ambiguity to blur any specifics and restricting my first poem, "Dust." The speaker of this poem began solely referred to as *he*, as this indiscernible character of the poem. All the while, Professor Paegle had been urging me to think about "audience." Specifically, who I wanted my audience to be. I had no idea. I couldn't even fathom an audience. Then, she said, "We're at a place in your manuscript where you have to go through and be as specific as possible" (Paegle). Professor Paegle was telling me to look for places not fully delved out throughout the manuscript; places using stand-ins, such as words or phrases instead of unique, powerful images. This is, I realize, how to find an audience, specificity or being vulnerable. Not trying to hide what you mean behind some obscure pronoun like I was doing with the pronoun *he* in the poem "Dust" (this in no way means every writer's pronoun usage means they are hiding something, it merely means I was hiding behind this specific use of *he*).

Another artist, Jen Wang, said, "It's important to find an audience, to know who your audience is. In most cases, I find it's usually myself." This really surprised me and gave me a whole different interpretation of audience, at the same time, relieved some of the pressure from fully knowing the specific *who* of

audience. So, I went through and totally remodeled the first paragraph of “Dust,” replacing most uses of *he* with *my dad* and trying to build the scene with as much specificity, either setting or image, in order to really let this poem say what it wants. Before:

The sunburnt field was empty. The sun keeping most people encased in their cool homes. But not him. With a wide-brimmed hat, a long sleeved button up, grass stained jeans and boots, he bent down in the field. Trying to keep the grass balanced between green and wrinkled. Instead, his body was electrified and desiccated by July’s noon sun like the golden grass. His body rife with lightness, he collapsed in on himself like an impatient white dwarf yearning for that something more, yet still afraid to let go. Until he turned to dust and scattered himself in an angry breeze. He no longer *he*. Indistinguishable from the rest of the dust.

After:

At first glance, the sunburnt soccer field was deserted—except my dad in the middle, quiet & kneeling in the faint, yellowed grass. Replenishing each blade with the callouses of his hands. Sun noticed this gesture. Unaccustomed to generosity in the desert, Sun became jealous with each gentle touch and the air shuddered with his heat. Layers of moisture began to peel from my dad’s aged-burnt skin. Dehydrated, he folded like the golden grass. His

body now rife with lightness, he collapsed in on himself like an impatient white dwarf urging to let go, urging for that vivid nebula glow. My dad turned to dust. Sun scattered him, feeling guilty, in an almost cool breeze. A question mark filling what was *his*, my dad no longer *he*. Indistinguishable from the rest of the dust.

After this editing, I still feel this poem needs work, there is a tone and idea I can't seem to get right. Even still, all of a sudden, with this specificity, when I read this updated version, I get all weepy, "A question mark filling what was *his*, my dad no longer *he*," because it hurts to read those words; it hurts to know someone can exist and not exist from one instant to another. Though, due to this hurt, I now know being vulnerable and specific is worth more if someone can identify, even briefly, with what I am trying to say and it feels good to share myself in that way.

Collage in Progress: Creative Writing for Children

Reflecting on my educational experience, it seems that academia allows many people not to participate in the real world; academia actually encourages one to hypothesize about the real world instead of placing one's self in it. We spend so much time learning and preparing to be educators, community workers, activists, and so on, only to hear, "The only way to learn how to teach is to do it." In this context, "teach," can be replaced with a number of social/professional titles. For this reason, I find school becomes an isolated place, where people do not get firsthand experience until later in their academic careers, if they get that

far—on a tangent, I believe postponement of hands-on experience should change: we should be involved in the community early on in our postsecondary education, in fact, it should be mandatory. For example, I did not get any actual teaching experience until my first year of the MFA program, at this point, I had already been in higher education for five years. Who knows how things would differ if I was able to get teaching experience while working on my undergraduate degree. Nonetheless, the experience I have gained up to this point is one thing I am grateful for: teaching creative writing and the arts to Elementary students. This learning experience has revealed a route for me to give back to the community through art, which becomes a collaborative collage in it itself by helping to cultivate creativity in others.

I have been leading creative writing workshops with Elementary School children for almost two years and I feel this is a space I want to be for the rest of my life. Every day I hold a workshop is always the best day of the week. In some ways, I believe our society believes the pinnacle of intelligence is held within the adult sphere, particularly the white-male sphere of academia. Conversely, working with these young students (who are predominantly Latinx/Chicanx) can amaze me in ways I am seldomly amazed by adults. If I can inspire and engage the students, their creations are so free and they even shed the polluted notions of being afraid to be wrong or being too self-conscious. When I encounter these anxieties among the students, it is not hard to override the anxieties of being wrong or feeling self-conscious by working with that student and encouraging

them. All the students need is positive reassurance and environment reinforced by myself and the students as a whole and they become unstoppable. Though, a worrisome problem I have met at the fourth grade level is having to push some students to be independently creative and not rely on the existing creations found in the entertainment they are so fond of, such as the Minions from *Despicable Me*, during the creative process. This requires more one on one time to reach deeper and help them explore their own imagination.

Working with young children is a continuous act of collage. The learning process becomes a group effort, where every student, myself and fellow teachers, are collaborating to make each lesson as fruitful and chaotic as possible. By chaotic I mean, as engaging, accessible, and enjoyable for all the students no matter the grade level. Recently, I taught a lesson on “Beauty” where I asked my students, “What is Beauty? What do you think “beautiful” means?” While brainstorming on the board—which really means all the kids thinking for a few seconds before blurting their thoughts and ideas—one student, a bright 4th grader enthusiastically answered, “My mother!” While another student, a 4th grade boy said, “Art!” As the kids were yelling out their answers, a 5th grader said, “Beauty is perfection,” and another student politely corrected, “What? No, nothing’s perfect, so everything’s beautiful.” There are many instances, such as this one, where I don’t feel the students need me, especially when they respectfully correct each other in such thoughtful ways. If they’re in an environment where they are empowered, which teachers like Will Beshears,

Larry Light, and Brian Zubak have all successfully built, the students realize how much their voice matters, how the voices of others matter, and how to speak to one another in a productive fashion.

I've been at Salinas Elementary School in San Bernardino since January 2016 and have had many interactions as the one above. At this school, the majority of students are considered "socioeconomically disadvantaged," meaning their families' income is at or below the poverty line, which is under \$24,000 for a family of four. Having worked at other, what I would refer to in contrast as socioeconomically "advantaged," schools, has unveiled for me the wide differences in attitudes and approaches to challenges between the students from underprivileged schools versus the students from more privileged schools (This is not to say one is more preferable than another. I have merely noticed the differences). The students of Salinas Elementary can have their difficult moments, yet, for the most part, their engaged, have a deceptively simple and smart perspective on the world, and unfortunately are not veiled from the atrocities of life. These kids are real, grateful, and hungry to learn. Teaching after school at Salinas Elementary School in San Bernardino makes me want to start a creative writing program at my former elementary school, Palm View Elementary, which is eerily similar in need. Having the opportunity to witness the Salinas students use creative writing to become more and more comfortable with language and, ultimately, themselves, reminds me what I'm doing is important and I don't want to stop.

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APPENDIX
ONLY WE CAN PULL